

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1681>



Europe

The crisis in Europe and the role of anti-capitalists

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV413 - June 2009 -

Publication date: Saturday 27 June 2009

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights
reserved

We are not yet at the stage of building a European anti-capitalist party, far from it, the organizations each have their place, their history, their activity, but we are moving towards an anti-capitalist pole on a European scale, which has its particular profile, takes its own initiatives, has its own exchanges of views.

- Compared with the summit attained by the business cycle in 2006, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted in the last quarter of 2008 by 1.7 per cent in the United States and by 1.9% in the euro zone. According to the estimates of the United States Federal Reserve in 2009, US GDP will further contract by between 1.9 and 2.7 per cent, and in the euro zone it will fall even more sharply, by between 2.2 and 3.2 per cent. That gives us an idea of the extent to which the world capitalist crisis is seriously affecting the heart of the European Union. However, faced with the crisis, the reactions of governments are quite different between the United States and the European Union: the implementation of the Obama plan would be equivalent to 5 per cent of US GDP in 2009, whereas there is no real anti-crisis plan on a European scale, the national plans are on a much smaller scale and, moreover, partially divergent. How do you explain this difference?

François Sabado: I believe that the first point to be underlined, at this moment when in various different scenarios for a way out of the crisis are being discussed, is that we are sinking deeper into this crisis. The figures which you have just mentioned indicate an economic crisis which is deepening both in the United States and in Europe, where it has its own singularity and characteristics, but I think that we tend to over-estimate the effects of Obama's plans on the economic crisis in the United States. According to the winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, Paul Krugman, the Obama plan, which exceeds 5 per cent of GDP for 2009, will scarcely succeed in doing more than reducing by half the probable scale of the recession. It is thus necessary to situate this plan in relation to the depth of the crisis in the United States: it will contain it but not reverse the tendency.

The European stimulus programmes are at the very least, under-dimensioned: they amount to 1.3 per cent of GDP in Great Britain, 1 per cent in France, 0.8 per cent in Germany, 0.1 per cent in Italy. The 400 billion euros that supposedly exist for a European pseudo-plan gaily confound new investments, advances on projects already decided, and even some expenditure that is already part of the national budgets. When they speak about the new expenditure which would supposedly amount to 200 billion euros – 1.5 per cent of European GDP -, including 30 billion euros coming from community financing, the remaining 170 billion coming from national budgets, we can easily see the limits: the European stimulus programme is nothing more than a collection of disparate national plans that each state had already more or less decided, dressed up in a European garb. The crisis thus underlines an element, which is that economic policy in Europe has become, during the crisis, more national than it was before the crisis broke out. Besides, this is logical, because the instruments of intervention are primarily national.

The European singularity of the crisis lies in the fact that the nature of the European Union and its structures do nothing but aggravate it. The combined absence of economic integration and of democracy in the process of building Europe limits political initiative. The dogma of "free and unfettered competition" makes this situation even more worrying. The policies and structures implemented since end of the 1980s by the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Lisbon have been submerged. The criteria of the Stability Pact have exploded. The budget deficits exceed the fateful 3 per cent. The national debt has taken off. The single European market is experiencing protectionist tensions. The plans to support national industry, such as the French "automobile" plan, take precedence over the coordination of an industrial policy. Areva signs agreements with the Russian nuclear agency and forsakes a European project with the other German nuclear group, Siemens. The euro is holding up... but monetary tensions are accumulating. The core of the financial system of the United Kingdom is affected. The Baltic States are in the red. Last December

Germany itself had difficulty obtaining a loan from the banks. The need for capital is considerable. Greece, Ireland, the Ukraine and Spain risk bankruptcy. Rescue plans are being prepared in case the crisis suddenly worsens. That is where the IMF, called to the rescue, has a role to play in this situation. In short the management of the crisis adds to the crisis because, unlike in the period of the establishment of nation-states in the 18th and 19th centuries, which resulted from the development of the capitalist market and from formidable democratic aspirations which were contained and even broken by the incipient bourgeoisie, the European Union was based neither on a European capitalism nor on a democratic momentum. There was no European capital as such. Capitalist globalisation intervened, amalgamating the principal European companies with international multinationals, often dominated by North American capital or capital from emergent countries. The ruling classes took hold of the single European market in order to conquer new market shares in the globalized world, rather than building an economically, socially, and politically integrated Europe.

- The different countries of the EU are not for the moment affected by the crisis in the same way and at the same rhythm: in Ireland and in the Spanish state bankruptcies doubled in 2008 compared to the previous year, whereas in the whole of the continent their average rate of increase was 11 per cent; in the United Kingdom, in Spain and in Ireland the level of household debt and the real estate crisis are comparable with those in the United States, which is not the case in France or Italy; the Hungarian and Latvian economies have for the moment only avoided bankruptcy thanks to the intervention of the IMF, and the governments in Riga and Budapest fell following mobilizations against the adjustment plans imposed by the IMF and the European Union... Do you think that these differences will accentuate or that in fact the worsening of the crisis will lead to an equalization of its effects on a continental level?

François Sabado: I think that the crisis will rather accentuate the differences. We can see that the structure of the economy in Europe, at any rate now that there has been the enlargement of the EU, is heterogeneous and that what decides policy today is the defence of the interests of each ruling class, of the capitalist classes of each country d' Europe in the world market and the international division of labour. The German economy, for example, is trying to preserve its particular place, in the production of industrial equipment, by undergoing the contraction of world trade today and suffering from its stronger dependence on exports. But if the German economy holds up, it is obvious that that will give it a strong basis to start up again and to defend its particular place on the international level. On the other hand, countries like Austria - which is very exposed because of its investments and especially the loans granted to the countries of Central Europe -, or Spain, which is especially committed concerning the debt of the countries of Latin America, do not have the same interests because of their different positions on the world market. So the crisis will tend to give rise to divergent reactions and thus to worsen the particular characteristics of each state. Coordination is in fact the structural weakness of the European economy. The policies are national policies; faced with the crisis the interventions are national. There is no coordination on a European scale, whether it is in banking, industry or regarding social policies.

The existence of the common currency has, it would seem, initially protected the small economies with a very important banking sector which is seriously affected by the crisis - Belgium, Luxembourg or Ireland, for example - from monetary collapse as a result of a speculative attack, such as that which affected Iceland. That has led certain countries - Denmark, the Czech Republic and even Iceland - to want to join the "euro zone". At the same time the criteria of the Stability Pact - as you said - have exploded and in the majority of countries the budget deficits have already exceeded the fateful 3 per cent limit, or will exceed it in 2009. David Mc Williams, an Irish economist who was a leading executive of the Swiss bank UBS, even went so far as to write, in connection with the Irish economy: "Either we declare ourselves unable to pay our debts, or else we pull out of the euro. (...) And the same thing could happen to Spain, Italy or Greece" (Daily Telegraph, January 19, 2009). Is the euro zone in danger of breaking up under the blows of the crisis or, on the contrary, could the euro emerge reinforced as a reserve currency, through the creation of a kind of European Treasury Secretariat? In that case, what would be the price that the bourgeoisie would try to make the workers pay?

François Sabado: I do not believe that there is a risk of the break-up of the euro zone. The euro has, all the same, made it possible to hold up in the face of the crisis. The problem now, faced with this crisis, will be the questions of solvency or liquidity. From this point of view the international economic arsenal which is in the process of being set up following on the meeting of the G20, with in particular the role of the IMF as a central element, is aimed at saving countries which are in danger of collapsing. And doing so with a fairly clear calculation of a policy combined with re-launching inflation – they have to spend money - and of reduction of the share of wages, of social budgets, of public services and a worsening of working conditions. In short, the choice will be to maintain the euro, and I have difficulty seeing Greece, Italy or Spain leaving the euro zone, because that would add to the economic crisis an enormous social and political crisis in relation not only to European construction but even to the international place of these countries. But in order to defend the euro, which nevertheless makes possible a certain European cohesion, compared to both the dollar and the Chinese yuan, the cost will be terrible, involving a combination or a succession of policies of inflation and austerity in relation to wages, public services and social budgets.

- The massive rescue of the banks and the capacity of the capitalist states to inject hundreds of billions of euros into them have, in the space of a few days, made the arguments served up over two decades about the impossibility for the state to deal with the “deficits” of public services lose all credibility. The interventionism of the state in favour of capital has appeared in broad daylight, and everyone can see it. Neoliberal ideology has thus lost much of its legitimacy and, for want of anything better, the ideologists are unearthing Keynesianism, presented by some people as a possible rebirth of the “Welfare State”. Is such a turn envisageable?

François Sabado: Keynes is back in fashion, at least in speeches -as for actions and policies, that's a different matter. We are in a situation where we are between what has already happened and what is yet to come. What has already happened, in the sense that the neoliberal model is in open crisis. Today no government any longer identifies, from the ideological point of view, with neoliberalism. They all talk about combined solutions, about the reintroduction of policies of state intervention, accompanied by an injection of social policies... But what we do not yet have, perhaps because the crisis is still being underestimated, is an alternative model.

The European bourgeoisies are tending rather to turn their collars up, to wait until the crisis passes, to hold on to the main criteria of the economic policies that they have had until now, while waiting for the economy to start up again. But it is obvious that there is more state intervention in the economy - in the rescue of the banks, the policies of industrial and financial concentration and reorganization. This is a change compared to the ultra-liberal discourse about “less and less state” of Reagan and Thatcher.

It should not be forgotten that it was the state itself which privatised and deregulated. This was a new configuration of the capitalist, bourgeois state. We should not confuse speeches and reality: there has never been “less state”, but there was less of the social policies of the state, less economic and financial regulation, with the aim of re-formatting economic and social relations. The state never disappeared. Today it is there to save the system. In no case – this is a notable difference with the reconstruction of states after the Second World War - to rebuild a “social state”. There is no re-launching of public services, no re-launching of social security, no re-launching of demand according to the traditional Keynesian criteria. That is why I think that the discussion on Keynesianism doesn't have much sense.

To appreciate the Keynesian character of a policy, if we take as a point of reference the economic policy of the United States in the second half of the 1930s, or that in Europe in the post-war period; we can see that the current measures fall far short of that. Another example – we have already spoken about it a lot- is that of the tax havens and the G20. We went from a black list to a grey list, made up of those who agreed to collaborate, but it there was no eradication of tax havens. However it is a quite a simple measure: it is enough to close all the banks that are domiciled in tax havens, and to do so with an authoritative administrative intervention on the part of states. Why did that not take place? Because the tax havens are integrated into the management of the financial circuits of the multinationals. We have recently seen denunciations of three big French groups - Michelin, Elf-Total and Adidas -

which had a good part of their placements in these tax havens. So if you attack the tax havens, you attack a whole part of the policies of the multinationals which recycle their capital there, which have policies of looking for tax advantages through these offshore centres and which operate in this way. This is a concrete example of the interpenetration between industrial and financial capitalism. It is because there is such interpenetration that you cannot attack financial capitalism without attacking the hard core of the multinationals, the capitalist system, in other words the search for maximum profit. We can really see there the limits of all the proclaimed intentions or declarations about this or that turn in economic policy. There is a limit which is fixed by the type of relations built up by capitalism over the course of the last thirty years.

Finally, although there were the theories of Keynes, we have to bear in mind that the choices of the economic policies of governments were never the result of ideological debates or theoretical constructions. It was power struggles which imposed political changes. And let us never forget that the real “Keynesian” re-launch took place, unfortunately, following on the terrible destruction of value that had taken place and the production of goods for the war, that it was a question of reconstruction, and what is more, of reconstruction on the basis of the arms industry.

- In a recent interview (reprinted in International Viewpoint 411, April 2009), the American Marxist economist Robert Brenner insists on the fact that the policies aimed at absorbing the shock of the capitalist crisis which have been implemented since the Second World War, both the Keynesian policies of the 1950s, 60s and 70s and those based on indebtedness and financial speculation which followed, prevented the “purging by the crisis” of the surplus capacity of industrial production, thus preventing a new rise of the profitability of investments in manufacturing industry and pulling the rate of profit downwards. According to him, capitalist solutions – which means measures aimed at raising the rate of profit - to the present world crisis necessarily involve such a “purging” of surplus production capacities, in other words the liquidations on a very large scale of the least profitable industries, by mass unemployment and a significant fall in labour costs, therefore of direct and indirect wages. This would be very far from the “Welfare State” but to impose such a defeat on the working class, capital, in particular in Europe, would have to base itself on an authoritarian intervention by the state, as you in fact said. In your opinion are democratic conquests threatened?

François Sabado: First of all, concerning the appreciation of Robert Brenner: there is a point that has to be underlined, which is that if we are talking about the surplus capacity of industrial production, where is it located? If we are talking about surplus production capacities in the imperialist centres, his thesis is well-founded, but there is an additional element to be taken into account, which is that there has been a political change of historical dimensions: the restoration of capitalism in Russia, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and above all in China. If we base our judgement on the whole of the planet, if we take into account the so-called “emergent countries there” - in Latin America or India - with these new markets, these new territories open to capitalism, can we speak of surplus production capacity? . Moreover, this is one of the questions that is posed by China: won't the capitalist dynamics of this country be able, not to get world capitalism out of its crisis, but to contain it, to limit it. What is certain, what we have already seen, is that there is no decoupling. The crisis in the imperialist centres, given the dependence of the emergent countries on exports, has led to a fall in the rate of growth, including in China, but within certain limits, because China still has a relatively high growth rate and we can see the attempts that are being made to build a domestic market. Will that be sufficient to re-launch the economy or at least to contain the crisis?

But of course the current crisis is a massive destruction of value, we can see that in sectors like the car industry, as well as sectors that depend on it, the suppliers of industrial equipment, subcontracting, etc. We also see it in other sectors, like real estate, services... there is a massive destruction of this surplus capacity. It is taking place, with what it implies from the point of view of social attacks, because the question is: who pays for this crisis? There is unemployment; there are wage cuts, in particular, in a series of countries, in the public sector... In this situation the level of the crisis is such that the bourgeoisie is trying to contain it with a series of economic rescue measures - subsidies to the banks, measures concerning short-time working, etc. - but if the crisis deepens, and that is one of

the most probable assumptions, it can lead to much stronger attacks and that will be accompanied by authoritarian measures. Furthermore, we can see in a series of countries the rise of authoritarian, xenophobic, reactionary right-wing currents which are indeed in favour of using harsh methods. Such a policy of confrontation would inevitably be accompanied by authoritarian measures.

- The measures that capitalist institutions are taking are aimed at making the workers pay for the crisis. As you said, in a series of countries they are cutting wages, in particular in the public sector. In Ireland the government has decided to reduce by 7 per cent the wages of public sector workers, the Latvian government cut them by 15 per cent in January, in Hungary the adjustment plan envisages the suspension of the payment of the thirteenth month in the civil service... The current president of the European Central Bank, Jean-Claude Trichet, invited at the beginning of March European governments “to continue on the path of audacious budgets, in particular as regards wages in the public sector”. Even though the Hungarian and Latvian governments fell faced with mobilizations against these attempts and in Ireland we saw a very strong mobilization – 120,000 demonstrators on February 21 – the measures that were decided on continue to be applied. How can the workers defend themselves against these attacks?

François Sabado: A series of the measures that have been taken constitute considerable attacks. Attacks on this level have not yet affected countries like France. The social and political situation in Europe is rather uneven.

If we take as a reference point the crisis of 1929, there is a relationship between the brutality of the crisis and the violence of the social confrontations of the time. We saw then confrontations between revolution and counter-revolution, between revolutionary movements produced by the shock waves of the Russian revolution and counter-revolutionary movements related to the rise of Fascism and Nazism. The slow pace of deepening of the present crisis – unlike in 1929 there is no generalised collapse, the crisis is being contained with enormous social and economic costs - produces slower movements, both on the level of the attacks of capital and on the level of social resistance. Compared to the 1930s, where we had these abrupt turns and very sharp, very concentrated confrontations, today things are more “in slow motion”, at less rapid rhythms. That produces a more contrasted situation. Already in certain sectors there may be fear, there may be anxiety, but we do not have situations of demoralization, of workers who are demoralized by defeats. In these first months of the economic crisis we have not had in any country a situation of working-class defeat; on the contrary we rather have social resistance, although with great unevenness. Firstly, in a series of country we are seeing social and political polarizations: on the one hand social resistance, people who engage in struggles, on the other hand there is a rise of reactionary, xenophobic and racist currents. In Britain with reactions in certain strikes around the theme of “British jobs for British workers”, in Italy, with the very particular authoritarian government of Berlusconi, who was helped by the rise of the Northern League and of xenophobic nationalist currents... and we can have in certain countries a rise of fascist or para-fascist organizations. There is no mechanical relationship between economic crisis, class struggle and radicality, things are more complicated than that.

Now in a series of country there have been important strikes, days of action, there were the explosions of Greek youth at the end of 2008 and also big mobilizations - at the beginning of the year in Portugal and in Italy, with also the days of action in France, of which the last three were important... I think that the French situation remains rather exceptional, on the level of radicality, of social force, but it is part of an overall situation where workers have a capacity for resistance, linked to social systems which, even though they have been to a considerable degree dismantled, remain a quite significant safety net, and there is a series of conquests of the workers' movement, institutional and organisational, which means that there are elements of resistance. The key question is how, around an emergency programme – centred on the defence of jobs, banning of lay-offs, wages, the defence of public services - to unite millions of workers, the unemployed and young people, in order to inflict sufficient retreats on the governments on these questions, in other words to impose a series of emergency measures. Whether that will be possible remains an open question, we will see in the coming months. In any case that is the first step: to unite around an emergency programme that is social, democratic and also ecological, because all these questions are

bound together, faced with the crisis.

- How is social democracy reacting?

François Sabado: The crisis overdetermines all of European politics today. It will provoke changes and perhaps upheavals in the situation of the Left and the workers' movement. But the policy of social democracy remains in its social-liberal framework. The social democratic leaders, like the leaders of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), generally supported the rescue plans for the banks, while considering them insufficient and asking for guarantees from the banks. Generally, they use references to Keynesian policies, especially when they are in opposition, in order to incorporate them into neoliberal policies. But it even happens that people like Antony Giddens, the theorist of the "third way", beloved of Tony Blair, reject the theses of Keynes which, according to him, have become null and void with capitalist globalisation. In short, in order to manoeuvre and resist in the face of the crisis, the socialists can "give a left twist" to their positions. But their basic positions, synthesized in the Manifesto of the Party of European Socialists (PES), confirm their support for the type of European construction that has been deployed over the last couple of decades, in particular with the European treaties, especially the latest one to date, the Treaty of Lisbon.

The socialist stimulus programmes, presented by the Dane Rasmussen, president of the PES, remain hazy. They can be summarized as follows: increase in investment, support for existing jobs, paying attention to the social costs of the crisis, solidarity with those who are in difficult situations, regulation of finance. But they remain within the framework of the results of the five European Councils of Heads of State which have met since the summer of 2008. They are characterized by a series of dead ends: on public services, the European minimum wage, the harmonization of social rights, measures to block plans for lay-offs. It should be said that the French Socialist Party, although this is not much publicised, only demands an increase in the minimum wage of 3 per cent, in other words a monthly increase of 30 euros net, whereas the workers of Guadeloupe and Martinique obtained an increase of 200 euros. So the French Socialists are a long way short of that. The European social democratic parties in fact differentiate themselves from the European plans by criticizing their insufficient scale and their projected rhythms but not their finalities or their objectives. In fact their reference point today is Obama's stimulus programme. Their policy is one of exerting pressure on European governments so that they support the proposals of the IMF. And the leaders of the ETUC joined the PES in their criticism of the European stimulus programmes: insufficient scale and not enough financing. However, stimulus programmes which do not reorganize banks into a unified public service under popular control, which do not propose to undo privatizations, which do not re-launch public services, which do not radically call into question the existing treaties, in short this whole policy, which accepts the present distribution of wealth, which accepts the present relationship between wages and profits, which does not call into question the structure of property, may temporarily improve the situation of this or that sector of the working class, but it will not settle either the crisis or its effects in the main European countries.

- How do you explain this alignment of social democracy, even when it is in opposition?

François Sabado: The absence of an alternative of the PES to the policies decided by the European governments, the European Commission, the European Union, is related to historical, structural, modifications of social democracy. Over the last two or three decades we have seen a very high level of integration of the leading layers of social democracy, of the social democratic apparatuses, on the trade-union as well as the political level, into the type of capitalism that has characterised Europe for thirty years. A very strong integration of the social democratic leaders at the highest echelons of the state into the political, financial and economic elites. With the passage from traditional social democracy to social-liberalism, these leaders are more sensitive to the policies and decisions of the ruling classes and the elites of these ruling classes than to the interests of the trade-union bureaucracy or even to those of the bureaucracies of the social systems, as they had been in the post-war period, up until the 1960s. This is a change of the centre of gravity of the social democratic apparatuses. Their proposals do not even amount to a radical Keynesianism, just a call for including small amounts of Keynesianism, ersatz Keynesianism, in liberal policies. This

is related to the socio-economic dependence of their apparatuses, political as well as trade-union, on the type of capitalism that has modelled European societies over the course of recent decades.

That does not mean to say that the social democrats have become traditional bourgeois parties, although in certain countries the process has gone very far. The evolution of the communist parties into formations linked to the Second International, then into the Democratic Party in Italy, is related to this process. If there were substantial alliances between social democracy in crisis and parties of the centre, it is obvious that the process could be greatly reinforced. The crisis is revealing even more this structural change in social democracy. Whereas we might have thought that towards liberalism it could have adopted a framework of traditional Keynesianism, it has been seen that the ruptures are limited and that its left turns were quite limited. Although modifications of the situation can still push this or that sector to have such and such a policy, because the political relationships with the history of social democracy, in France for example or in the countries of Northern Europe, which have a social democratic tradition, means that we are not dealing with traditional bourgeois parties.

- Do you think that the parties situated to the left of social democracy, for example those regrouped within the European Left Party, can appear as an alternative to social democracy?

In France, for example, both the Communist Party and the Left Party accuse social democracy of having a double discourse, on the one hand loudly denouncing Sarkozy and on the other accepting the framework of the Treaty of Lisbon. We can turn this criticism against these same Communist parties and various left parties, because on the one hand there are quite radical declarations, for example on wages or lay-offs in companies making a profit, because these are demands that they have taken up, but on the other hand they always keep their politics within the framework of political, electoral and institutional agreements with the social democratic parties. The key question for all the left reformist parties in Europe is that they have radical demands, but that their existence is subordinated to their place in democratic parliamentary or quasi-parliamentary institutions, and that is what determines all the rest. And to be in these institutions, to have elected representatives, they conclude agreements which imply disavowing or watering down their radical demands. So they keep their demands for electoral campaigns and when they get down to the serious business, governing at various levels, they take part in coalitions with the social democrats and they apply the policy of their allies. Their force of "transformation" is historically and politically limited by their electoral strategy, their strategy of alliances. There can be some room for manoeuvre, as long as these parties do not have to take on governmental or quasi-governmental responsibilities, but that is quite rare, because even when they are not in the national government, they now nevertheless, with the way political institutions function in the principal countries of Europe, in particular on the level of regions and departments or the equivalent, have responsibilities for administering affairs with the social democratic parties.

- In April, meeting in Strasbourg the day before the demonstration against NATO, the European anti-capitalist left adopted a social and democratic emergency plan. What are the principal tactical and strategic differences between the European anti-capitalists and the European Left Party?

François Sabado: I believe that the first point to be taken into account is that something important happened at this meeting in Strasbourg, something which is the expression of a deeper process: the combination of the crisis, of social resistance and of the rightward evolution of the social democratic parties creates a space for all the forces of the radical left, in the broad sense. In this space there is a political struggle between the consistent anti-capitalists and forces which, as I said before, have a policy of combining on the one hand programmes which can appear as posing demands, and on the other their policy with respect to social democracy. The key question today in Europe is the attitude adopted in relation to the processes of social transformation, to the questions of government and power: do you situate yourself in the framework of alternating governments or of a political alternative? The European Left Party, essentially composed of the Communist parties, are on a logic of government and of seeking agreements with the social democrats to govern together. The anti-capitalists are on an independent position. That does not mean that they reject any governmental perspective, on the contrary, anti-capitalists want to change things, therefore they want

their ideas to triumph, they want these ideas to come to power, but that implies social, economic and constitutional transformations. That implies new workers' governments, based on new institutions precisely linked to social crises, to processes of self-organization, of exceptional mobilizations of the workers and the peoples of Europe. And not agreeing to govern within the framework of respecting capitalist and liberal policies. So this is a key question which separates for example the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Die Linke, which are the two main organizations who represent different political lines in Europe. Die Linke is the product of two elements: the radicalisation in West Germany of sections of social democracy, of the trade union movement and of youth, and on the other hand the mutation of the former ruling party of East Germany into a left reformist formation. In East Germany in particular there is a very strong tradition of being the ruling party, which today leads Die Linke to govern Berlin, in particular, along with social democracy. This is a profile, an orientation, a fundamental strategic choice of a programmatic nature, which consists of limiting its policies to the horizon of a return to the Welfare State, of a return to certain equilibriums of what they call the "social market economy". We have another perspective, of rebuilding the workers' movement and of building the social movements with a perspective of a rupture with capitalism. Today that means understanding that what is at stake is to build something new in Europe. That implies very clear independence with respect to the old leaderships of the traditional Left which has been incorporated into the traditional game of institutional politics.

In Strasbourg what was important was that all the significant forces of the anti-capitalist left in Europe were present, with the exception of the currents of the left opposition in Germany - there were the comrades of the ISL and the RSB, two revolutionary organizations, but there was not the main part of the left currents in Die Linke and of the extra-parliamentary left. But all the others were there: the Portuguese Left Bloc, the Polish Party of Labour, Syriza and Entarsia from Greece, the British revolutionary left - the SWP and the SP, the Socialist Party of Sweden... and a whole series of other organizations. So we were able to advance towards an action programme, a social democratic and ecological emergency programme, and especially we were able to reaffirm an independent political perspective with respect to social democracy. There are forces within the European anti-capitalist left which are also in the European Left Party, because of their history, because of the history of the different countries, the level of the class struggle in these countries, and also because of political choices - which can be discussed and which are debatable - but overall, all the forces which were present in Strasbourg are on an orientation of rejection of any participation in governments with social-liberalism, with social democracy. It is very important that there is this type of regroupment in Europe. Now the question is how we continue on the level of action - in Strasbourg we took part in a common demonstration and we discussed joint initiatives; on the level of discussions, I think that the question of the crisis will be a key issue and it will be necessary to regularly check one another's points of view. In Strasbourg, for example, there were two important discussions: on international policies, in relation to NATO and to military questions and, especially, about the economic situation and how each organisation is developing an orientation in relation to this crisis. And then there is a very important thing, which is that there are different experiences in different countries, and that has implications on how we formulate demands, on the political relations in each country, on the practical experiences of struggles, in short there was a discussion from which we all learned a lot. And an important element confirming that is that for the first time on this level, it seems to me, with the European elections we have quite a high level of cooperation between the organizations. For example the NPA, with Olivier Besancenot, will take initiatives along with the Left Bloc in Portugal, with the Anti-capitalist Left in Spain - which is standing in an election for the first time and was able to obtain more than 18,000 signatures to be able to do so, with the comrades of the Polish Party of Labour, with the Belgian comrades who are standing a list in French-speaking Belgium and also with the comrades of Socialistiska Partiet (Socialist Party) who also have a list in Sweden. And then there are a series other common initiatives where the NPA will be represented, in Britain, in Greece, in Switzerland, even beyond the elections. So there is a situation of strengthened co-operation between various organizations. We are not yet at the stage of building a European anti-capitalist party, far from it, the organizations each have their place, their history, their activity, but we are moving towards an anti-capitalist pole on a European scale, which has its particular profile, takes its own initiatives, has its own exchanges of views. And that is something new in the political situation in Europe today.

Paris, May 4, 2009

The crisis in Europe and the role of anti-capitalists

Interview conducted by Jan Malewski

* François Sabado, member of the National Political Council of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA, France), is a member of the Executive Bureau of the Fourth International.