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Pakistan

A look at the experience of the LPP and the Pakistani Left

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In the course of a two-week stay in Pakistan, I was able to take part, on January 27-28, 2010 in the Fifth Congress of the Labour Party Pakistan (LPP). This organization, founded in 1997, has developed remarkably over the last few years: in terms of numerical growth (today it has more than 7,000 members), geographical spread (it is now present in all the provinces of the country) and social roots (among peasants, workers, womenâ€™s!). This development is all the more significant as not so long ago, the principal historical core of the LPP was still only a small political small group (â€™s struggleâ€™) of Trotskyist origin, present above all in Punjab, which was joined, for the foundation of a new organization, by a handful of cadres of the Communist Party, especially in Sind.

The dynamism of the LPP contrasts with the inertia of the traditional Left in a country which has experienced a succession of military regimes, which is torn apart by the confrontation of Sunni and Shiite religious fundamentalisms, and which has been destabilized by the war conducted by NATO in Afghanistan and by the murderous actions of the Taliban. The experience of the LPP is particularly interesting.

A historically weak Pakistani Left

Two partitions In 1947, the workersâ€™ movement was weak in the provinces of the British Indian Empire which make up present-day Pakistan. The partition of the country and the gigantic migrations which accompanied it (12 million displaced persons, under terrible conditions) cut the Left off from its bastions in the sub-continent (such as Bengal). Two decades later, the war of 1971 led to the rupture between West Pakistan and East Pakistan. This second partition also weakened Pakistani Communism. In fact, the Left then was at that point better established in what became Bangladesh, in particular because large Hindu populations had remained there instead of migrating to the Indian side of the border. In a more general way the traumatic partitions of 1947 and 1971 led to successive waves of intercommunal xenophobia and racism (including anti-Bengali racism in Punjab) which were very unfavourable to progressive movements.

In 1947, the Indian Communist Party accepted the principle of partition. Consequently, its members in the Muslim communities went to Pakistan, and vice versa, giving rise to two Communist parties: Indian (CPI) and Pakistani (PCP). They hoped then that the Muslim references of the new state would remain more cultural than religious. This hope was initially encouraged by the secular conceptions advocated by the â€™s founding fatherâ€™ of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah; but it could not resist the progressive Islamization of the country.

Repression The Communist Party quickly became the object of repression. It was banned for the first time in 1951 and again in 1955. However, in 1951, it probably only had (in West Pakistan) some 200 members. To reconstitute itself, it merged into various regroupments and took part in the creation in 1957 of the National Awami Party (NAP, National Peopleâ€™s Party). The PCP had neither the solid programmatic framework nor the organisational coherence to survive such â€™s entryistâ€™ experiences unscathed. The Communist activists found themselves in a subordinate position in relation to leaderships that were nationalist, reformist and often bourgeois.

The Sino-Soviet Conflict The Pakistani communist movement had to face further problems. The Sino-Soviet conflict caused deep splits in its ranks, as it did in many other places. But the political crisis of the Left in Pakistan led to a particularly serious situation of paralysis. In India, a first split in the (pro-Soviet) CPI gave rise to a party which wanted to be independent of both Moscow and Beijing - the CPI-Marxist (CPI-M). Then a second wave of splits saw the

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emergence of a Maoist far-Left, known as the Naxalites (from the location of a peasant insurrection in 1967) and engaged in armed struggle. Although deeply divided, the Indian Left kept significant forces.

Things turned out very differently in Pakistan. Considering the prestige of the Chinese Revolution, the influence of Maoism became important. However, as from 1965, Beijing gave the military regime its support against India, itself allied with the USSR. Under these conditions, not only did Pakistani Maoism not have the radical character of its Indian counterpart, but it even supported for a time the dictatorship of General Ayub Khan, in the name of the progressive character of its foreign policy.

The Soviet bureaucracy was allied with the Indian state and the Chinese bureaucracy with the Pakistani state that is, with two states which were at war with each other. The Pakistani Communists paid a very high price for this deadly game.

The missed occasion of 1968-1969 The Pakistani communist movement had also inherited the strategic vision of the CPI, of Stalinist origin, the stageist : waiting for a bourgeois-democratic revolution before which it would be vain to propose a socialist perspective to popular struggles. Very weak on the organisational level, it was also politically and ideologically powerless when an immense wave of workers', peasant and student struggles erupted in the country in 1968-1969, creating for several months a kind of situation of social dual power. The Pakistani Communists neither wanted to nor knew how to seize the occasion.

The occasion was, however, all the more important as 1968 was the year of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, of the student barricades and the general strike in May in France, of the Prague Spring and of many other struggles in the world. American imperialism would not have found it easy to intervene militarily in Pakistan if that had been necessary.

The PPP Under these conditions, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), formed in 1967, was able to capitalize on the wave of social radicalisation, winning the 1970 elections. It received the support and the adhesion of many progressive milieux and many trade union cadres, encouraged by the socialist rhetoric and the economic measures advocated by its leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Thus, when the PPP came to power in 1972, Communists were included in the government. Reforms, sometimes radical, were indeed implemented (nationalizations of key sectors), but that was nothing exceptional at the time. Since the Bhuttos themselves were representatives of a big feudal-capitalist family in Sind, it was vain to hope that they would attack the established order, and the left wing of the party proved incapable of breaking the control that this clan exercised over the PPP.

When workers took to the streets in May-September 1972, the government decided to drown this popular movement in blood: the resulting repression left dozens dead in the port and industrial metropolis of Karachi. Bhutto had already supported the war against the Bengalis in 1971, as well as repressing the Baluchi people. In 1973, he introduced into the Constitution, for the first time, an Islamist definition of the Pakistani state, a decision that was fraught with consequences. Although disillusioned, the Pakistani Left proved unable to present an alternative to the PPP.

The road was open for the growth of radical religious currents of the far-Right. In 1977, the coup d'état of General Zia Ul Haq installed a new military dictatorship and initiated the process of systematic Islamization of the country. After Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged in 1979, the PPP once again took on a progressive coloration in the eyes of the trade-union and progressive activists who were resisting the dictatorship. The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was born in 1981 with the participation of all the wings of the PPP, right, left and centre.

The 1980s: from the âEurosoeStruggleâEuros group to the LPP

âEurosoeStruggleâEuros was born in 1980; at that time its founding nucleus was living in exile in the Netherlands. It belonged to the Trotskyist current organised around the British âEurosoeMilitantâEuros, whose principal leader was Ted Grant (Isaac Blank): the Committee for a WorkersâEuros" International (CWI). In every country its sections employed entryist tactics, for example in the Labour Party in Britain. In Pakistan it was in the PPP, given the hopes that the working class placed in this party and taking into account that, faced with the military dictatorship, the fight for democracy was the most urgent task of the moment.

In 1986, after eight years of exile, the leading nucleus of âEurosoeStruggleâEuros returned to live in Pakistan, publishing the monthly magazine Mazdoor Jeddojuhd ("WorkersâEuros" StruggleâEuros). It was very quickly confronted with a situation of generalized crisis of the traditional Pakistani Left. The illusions in the PPP were again dissipated after the coming to power of Benazir Bhutto in 1988. The implosion of the USSR created a deep feeling of despair, of absence of perspectives, in quite broad layers. Twice orphaned (from the PPP and from the âEurosoesocialist campâEuros), the parties of Stalinist origin lost most of their militant forces. The beginning of the 1990s was a period of ideological reaction, encouraging the development of fundamentalist movements.

Class independence In this context of generalized political and ideological confusion, the group which would found the LPP maintained its socialist programmatic course. In 1991 it ended its entryist policy, judging rightly that the working class was going to take its distance from the PPP. In order to build an alternative, the perspective of the creation of a workersâEuros" party by the trade unions was launched in 1993. For this purpose, Jeddojud Inlabi Tehrik (JIT, Struggle Revolutionary Movement) was set up the following year. It addressed a fundamental question: the political independence of the working class. As we have already noted, through alliances with various bourgeois forces, the traditional communist organizations had abandoned this terrain, eroding their identity and finding themselves systematically in a subordinate position within the nationalist fronts, blocs and parties.

The project which gave birth in 1997 to the LPP can be firstly defined in this way: to take up again the fight for class independence, in its social, political and programmatic dimensions. By doing this, the militants who came from the âEurosoeStruggleâEuros group were able to win to this project trade-union cadres and members of the PCP who did not accept that their party no longer talked about socialism.

The break with the CWI The break between what became the LPP and its origins came in two stages. The CWI split in 1991, one of the key issues being whether or not to end entryism. Ted Grant and his supporters were in a minority, but had the support of the majority of âEurosoeStruggleâEuros. The minority in Pakistan founded Young Fighters in 1992 to lay the basis for an independent organization, and JIT the following year, whose success paved the way for the launching of the LPP.

The final break with the CWI came in 1997-98 because of the opposition of the international leadership to the launching of the LPP, and more broadly to the idea that national sections could determine their own tactics.

The influence of the âEurosoeMilitantâEuros current seems to have been for a period very real in Pakistan, Ted Grant being a reference for intellectuals and journalists. One of the members of parliament of the PPP belonged to their organization. But it is quite difficult to measure the cohesion and the implantation of an entryist current: if it does not conquer the leadership of the party in which it operates (which happens only in exceptional cases), the moment of truth comes when it engages in building an independent organisation. Through putting off this moment and because of divisions (this international current experienced several successive splits), it seems that with the exception of the LPP, the groups coming from the âEurosoeMilitantâEuros in Pakistan have lost their substance and the hey days for them seems to be over.

A precarious situation At the end of the 1990s, the LPP was still in a very precarious situation. Ideological confusion on the left was then at its peak. No longer being able to turn to Moscow or Beijing, forced to recognize that there is not, within the Pakistani ruling classes, a "Eurosoenational bourgeois" dynamic, progressive intellectuals came to hope that the "Eurosoemodernization" of the country would come thanks to capitalist globalization, under the direction of the World Trade Organization (WTO). While systematically seeking to encourage alliances around concrete political issues and terrains of struggle, the LPP thus had to undertake a rather solitary political combat.

Constancy in the struggle

If the LPP has been able to develop as it has in recent years, it is obviously because there existed a space for democratic and social resistance. By its success in 2006, the World Social Forum in Karachi, in which I was able to take part, was a concrete incarnation of this space, in which there were to be found democratic, social and political movements - a space of liberty in a country living under a military regime, feeling the pressure of religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, it was not easy to seize the occasion to bounce back politically. How did the LPP do it?

Defending its right to exist First of all, the LPP refused to let itself be paralysed by repression. The majority of its leaders (including its women leaders) were arrested at one time or another under the Musharraf dictatorship. Its trade union and peasant cadres can be threatened with death by the henchmen of the landowners and capitalists - and some have been killed, or imprisoned by a police force under orders. In the North-West, they can be the target of the Talibans (three militants have already been assassinated). Up until now, the LPP has nevertheless succeeded in preserving its political space, its right to exist, answering repression by democratic mobilization and refusing to be driven into clandestinity. In the same way, its women militants have not given in to the rising pressure of fundamentalism.

Sense of initiative The LPP has also demonstrated very great capacity for initiative. It has helped in the work of unionising particularly oppressed sectors of the working class, such as the workers in the brick-kilns, which are often installed in a rural environment. It has given unconditional support to peasant struggles, in spite of certain "Eurosoeworkerist" reservations. It has initiated or taken part in many feminist struggles, with the aim of really meeting the needs of the popular sectors. It organised an intense solidarity campaign after the earthquake which devastated Kashmir in 2005. It has been fully involved in the process of the social forums, both in Pakistan and on the international level. It plays an active role in the antiwar networks on both sides of the Indo-Pakistani border and against the war in Afghanistan. It mobilized all its forces when the Lawyers' "Movement" initiated the showdown with General Musharraf in 2007. It extended its intervention as far as the Swat valley, in the middle of the conflict between the army and the Talibans, and mobilized in favour of the populations of "Eurosoeinternal refugees" , displaced by the war.

A small anecdote will serve to illustrate this sense of initiative. A delegation of the LPP took part in the World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya in 2007. Seeing that the organization of the forum was largely in the hands of big corporations (!) and that the restaurant prices were unaffordable for most of the participants, the LPP members bought supplies in the local markets, set up a makeshift stall and sold every afternoon an "Eurosoeanti-capitalist curry" which was a big success. So with a membership which remains extremely limited, the LPP covers a broad range of activities and responds quickly to political events.

Political constancy The LPP has also shown great constancy in its political orientation. Looking for the "Eurosoe lesser evil" , progressive Pakistani circles have very often tended to swing from one position to another depending on the circumstances. Faced with the ineffectiveness and corruption of the parliamentary regime,

many of them gave more or less open support to the army, as in 1999 at the time of Musharraf's coup only to later place their faith in clientelist civilian parties to replace the dictatorship of the army. In the same way, they can support the military offensive against the Taliban after having shown a great deal of tolerance towards the fundamentalist movements in the name of anti-imperialism.

The LPP has always refused to choose between two evils: between the corruption of the clientelist parties and the military regimes, between the army and the religious fundamentalists, between NATO and the Taliban! There is, moreover, much complicity which link these formally opposite poles.

By maintaining against wind and weather its line of neither the army nor the fundamentalists, neither NATO nor the Taliban, the LPP has more than once found itself relatively isolated among left organizations (it currently encounters much criticism because it continues to denounce the exactions of the army instead of keeping silent in the name of the Taliban danger). But by doing this, it traced in the long term an indispensable line of class independence without which there can be no possible rebuilding on the left. That is what is most important.

Courage Let us put it simply. You need courage to multiply political initiatives in a country like Pakistan. Not the courage of underground work or the armed struggle, but the courage of working openly on the hottest political and social frontlines. Such as going to demonstrate their solidarity with Christian villages attacked by the Islamists. Such as taking sides with the peasants of an army farm, subjected for three months to a total blockade by the army (the AMP had eleven members killed between 2002 and 2009). Such as the women activists who defy the fundamentalists and their moral order. Such as deciding to organize in the frontier conflict zones.

A new stage

In the last few years, the LPP has experienced an important regional extension and reinforced its social implantation. In so doing it is transforming itself, and that is what makes this experience particularly interesting.

Struggle was at the outset an ideologically compact nucleus of activists. Although still small, the LPP presents today certain features of a mass party. Similarly, the original forces of the party were mainly based in Punjab. Although unequally, it is now present in the whole country. As a consequence, the diversity of Pakistan is reflected in the party.

Party and movements The LPP is attempting an original experiment with regard to the relationship between parties and social movements. It joins with peasant associations and with trade unions in initiatives which combine social demands and a political message in a way that is not very common in France. This was for example the case with the great popular meeting in Faisalabad which was held just after the congress of the LPP (see the insert below).

However, the LPP refuses to reproduce the organic relations that are so common in South Asia between parties and their mass organizations. It does not possess a trade-union or peasant wing. If, in its eyes, only a common front between left parties and social movements can ensure the strengthening of struggles, this alliance must take place in a transparent fashion, respecting the independence of the social movement. Already in 1994, JIT supported the formation of the Pakistan Workers Confederation (PWC), just as the LPP supported the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), founded in 1998. More recently, it helped with the establishment of Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (AMP, Punjab Peasants' Association), in particular in farms owned by military institutions, Then, in 2003, it facilitated the links that were established between the 22 rural organizations which formed the Pakistan Peasant Coordinating Committee (PPCC). In the same way it supports in Faisalabad the Labour Quami Movement (LQM, National Workers'

Movement).

From 1993, JIT had decided to aid, with the support of institutions, trade unions and social-democratic organizations in Sweden, the development of popular social organizations: schools intended for working children, centres of support to the trade union movement, campaigns for peace. In Pakistan, the Labour Education Foundation (LEF) played a driving role in these initiatives, in particular from the year 2000. That same year, the LPP supported the formation of Women Workers Help Line (WWHL) and of the National Student Federation (NSF) then, in 2003, of the Progressive Youth Front (PYF). The LPP and its predecessors have taken part in many unitary coalitions: from 1991, the Pakistan Anti-War Committee and, in 1992, the Joint Action Committee for People's Rights (JAC), Lahore), and also, in 2005, the Anti-Privatization Alliance. They also took part in various experiences of left political coalitions in 1997, 2006, and still do so today.

This short summing-up of their history shows an unquestionable political continuity between the period of the Struggle and that of the LPP: commitment to the strengthening of social movements, on all terrains. It also shows what is new: the growing weight of trade unions and peasant associations compared to the associative structures and NGOs of the early period, with a qualitative leap at the beginning of the 2000 decade. This process is still underway. A new women's association is due to be launched in the near future at a federal level (whereas the WWHL was formed in Punjab). The rebirth of a radical student movement is still in the early stages. As for the trade union and peasant movement, it remains divided and very unevenly implanted depending on the sectors and regions.

New members Today, recruitment to the LPP is much less ideological than in the past: it depends above all on the activities of the party, both political (various campaigns, the fight against the Musharraf dictatorship) and social (support to struggles). Thus not only the cadres, but also the members of the trade unions and peasant associations join it, giving it its popular base. The presence of trade union, peasant and women leaders was very noticeable during the congress of the LPP.

This popular recruitment to the LPP (still uneven depending on the region: in some places, there is still only a handful of members) is a source of strength. But recruitment to the party often remains fluid. The number of cadres who are educated on the theoretical level is limited. The LPP does not want to slow down its expansion: you have to strike the iron when it is hot. But it will be necessary for it to be able to combine expansion and consolidation, which is easier said than done.

Federalism In another significant innovation, at its last congress the LPP no longer elected a national committee, but a federal committee. Pakistan is a puzzle of provinces and as it develops the party must take more account of this. For the first time, the 140 delegates came from all the provinces: Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan, Gilgit Baltistan, Sareiki Waseeb, Pukhtoonkhawa (North-western) and Kashmir. The intention is to establish an independent party in Pakistani-occupied Kashmir the Labour Party Kashmir the Kashmiris in the meanwhile remaining members of the LPP. In an indication of this situation, the discussions during the LPP congress sometimes took place between provincial delegations.

Punjab remains the strongest base, with 3,500 members. But the Pashtun North-West is the region where the LPP has recently grown most quickly (2,000 members) with the help of a small Afghan organization. Sind, where there are a good many cadres who come from the PCP, is the third-largest province by the number of members. The federal committee has 31 members, including 9 women.

It is all the more important to take account of the national realities and sensitivities of Pakistan in that the Punjabi elite to a large extent dominates (along with the Pashtuns) the army and the administration, which feeds the resentment of the other provinces. Historically, however, the basic structures of the LPP and its partner associations are also

located in Punjab. The present geographical expansion of the party is contributing to better balancing its implantation, but this process is still far from being completed.

From one stage to another A first stage has been at least partially completed over the last ten years. The LPP is not a bigger version of "EurosoeStruggle" Euro . It is a party qualitatively broader both in its composition and in its political profile: moreover it defines itself as "EurosoeMarxist" Euro and not specifically "EurosoeTrotskyist" Euro (even though the programmatic heritage of an anti-Stalinist Marxism remains obvious). Especially, its relationship with society has started to change.

Of course, a new stage of construction is beginning while at the same time the preceding one is not yet fully completed. The LPP will face new problems and will have to solve new difficulties. Nothing is definitively won, but the road that has been travelled is already full of lessons. We must take this experience into account in order to understand them.

On the leftâEuro!

During my first stay in Pakistan, participating in the Karachi Social Forum of Karachi gave me a glimpse of Pakistani progressive forces and various social movements, such as the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF). However, during my subsequent visits, in 2006 (to Lahore, Rawalpindi, Murdan and Kashmir), and this time on the occasion of my second visit (to Lahore, Faisalabad, Kasur, Okara and Gujranwala), it was by the LPP - my "Eurosoesister organization" Euro - that I was (very warmly) welcomed. Even though I had the occasion to meet representatives of other currents, I did not really have time to give a proper description of the state of the Pakistani Left - nor even to visit the LPP in all the provinces. So I do not claim to present an exhaustive tableau of the situation and I will avoid drawing peremptory "Eurosoeconclusions" Euro Euro!

It seems however that the turn in the situation which the recent development of the LPP expresses is starting to be felt more widely. The illusions in the "Eurosoemodernising" Euro role of globalization and the WTO are being dissipated by the capitalist crisis. Marx and Marxists are attracting a new readership. The old strategic differences that separated Stalinist, Maoists and Trotskyists are in the process of being overcome. Several groups coming from the traditional Left have just formed together the Workers Party of Pakistan (WPP) - hoping that this regrouping will last longer than some of its predecessors.

The breadth of the Lawyers" Movement and the mass mobilizations which accompanied it, before and after the fall of Musharraf, were really exceptional. Social struggles like those of the textile workers in June 2008 in Faisalabad and the peasants of the military dairy farm in Okara are also remarkable both by their duration and by their ability to face up to repression. The convergences which are taking shape between peasant associations and trade unions - a convergence which ensured the success of the meeting in Faisalabad, shortly after the LPP congress "Euro" have very great potential. The long march of the Awami Tehreek (People"s Movement) in Sind expresses the dynamism of regional movements. The rejection of both the Talibans and the army which is becoming stronger in the North-West shows that there too, a space exists for an independent left policy, while NATO"s intervention in Afghanistan is becoming bogged down. A new wave of radicalisation seems to be taking shape in the student milieu. In this country, subjected to very strong Islamist pressures, the range of women"s resistances to "Eurosoenormalization" Euro and the role that women play in many social struggles (from fishermen to peasants) are impressive. I would certainly not like to claim that the situation in Pakistan is good! But a breach has opened which can enable a radical Left, consistent in its engagements, to reconstitute itself on a scale without precedent in this country.

Internationalists!

The LPP makes very great efforts to concretize its commitment to internationalism. Over and above the activist networks and campaigns (social forums, antiwar movementâEuros!), it has forged important links in Sweden, maintains multiple political relations and takes part as a permanent observer in the life of the Fourth International. It wanted there to be as big a foreign presence as possible at its congress and at the mass meeting which followed it. Only six activists answered its call - and three of them had to abandon the voyage, since they did not obtain visas: a North-American and two Indians. So there were three of us present - an Afghan, an Australian and myself - which was too few. In 2006 already, international participation in the Karachi WSF was well below the level that would have corresponded to what is at stake in Pakistan and this part of the world. At a time when US imperialism conceives âEurosoeAfpakâEuros as a single theatre of war, it is time for us to become aware of the importance of the combat that is being undertaken by our comrades of the LPP and the Pakistani Left. And of the threats which hang over them. We have already had to conduct campaigns of solidarity to protect them from repression, and we will have to do so again in the future, and to help them to build their party in a country where there reigns such great poverty.

It is increasingly difficult for Pakistanis to obtain visas to go to Europe. It is easier for Europeans to go to Pakistan. The stay there is enthralling, because Pakistan, theatre of war, is also Pakistan, theatre of struggles. This is an invitation to make the trip.

Pakistan

Pakistan was founded in 1947 with the bloody partition of the British Indian Empire. In the beginning it comprised West Pakistan (the present Pakistan) and East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh). The split between these two countries, separated by the breadth of India, occurred after the war of 1971.

With 180 million inhabitants (in 2009), Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world and the second biggest Muslim country, after Indonesia. The population is estimated to be more than 70 per cent Sunni and 20 per cent Shiite, with small minorities: Muslim (Sufism, AhmadisâEuros!), Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsees (Zoroastrians)âEuros! In this federal state situated at the crossroads of many cultural influences, the weight of the provinces, regions and nationalities is very great, with in particular Punjab and Sind on the Indian border; Kashmir under Pakistani administration and Gilgit (in the Himalaya range) on the border between India and China; the Pashtun North-West, the tribal zones, on the Afghan border; Baluchistan on the Iran-Afghanistan border.

Allied with the United States and China, Pakistan occupies a key geopolitical place at the point where the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia meet. It is very directly implied, at its Western border, in the war in Afghanistan. On its Eastern border, the question of Kashmir maintains a situation of latent war with India. Like the latter, it is equipped with nuclear weapons.

Largely agricultural (cotton, rice, sugar cane), the country exports especially textiles and food products. In addition to textiles, industry covers the sectors of manufactured goods, chemicals, mines and the iron and steel industry, the building industryâEuros! The weight of the service sector is important. In the countryside social relations often still have particularly brutal and unegalitarian âEurosoefeudalaEuros features.

Pakistan has experienced a process of Islamization âEuros" which began especially at the end of the 1970s - and a succession of clientelist parliamentary regimes and military regimes. Islamabad is the capital, Lahore the best known historical centre and Karachi its port and industrial metropolis.

A big worker and peasant meeting

The congress of the LPP was followed on January 29, 2010 by a big popular meeting in Faisalabad (the biggest centre of textile production in Pakistan) with nearly ten thousand participants, the big majority of whom were workers and peasants, with a significant number of women present. It was jointly called by the LPP, the National Workers' Movement (FQM) and the Peasant Association of Punjab (AMP) around two central demands: the right to social security for all the workers of the industry; the right to land of those who cultivate it, particularly in the military farms which are owned by military institutions. Most of the participants arrived in their contingents, marching in with many red flags; those who came individually were rare: the LPP has only recently established its presence in this city and, especially, people hesitate to go to such political meetings for fear of bomb attacks.

The contingents came from Faisalabad and its suburbs (the trade-union contingent, including textile workers) and from rural districts around Lahore, Okara, Delapur, Renala Khurd and Kulyana. It was very important that workers and peasants were together in this way, in a common initiative. The presence of Afghan, Australian and French speakers gave it an internationalist dimension, under the historical slogan: "Workers of all lands, unite!" The meeting affirmed its solidarity with the Pashtun populations who are victims of the confrontations between the Talibans and the army, and also with the Baluchis, who have suffered atrocities at the hands of the army. This feeling of solidarity was expressed in many of the slogans: "The sufferings of each are the sufferings of all", "Equal rights for women", "No to discriminatory laws". The slogans were also markedly radical: "No to the IMF and the World Bank", "Down with American imperialism", "Down with capitalism and feudalism", "Asia is red", "Our strategy is the struggle", "Revolution is our road". Chants stressed the fight against war and for social demands: "Give peace a chance", "No to the drone attacks and to religious fundamentalism", "Stop violence", "Land or death", "Trade union rights, our human rights".

Many representatives of associations, movements and unions were on the platform, as well as various left currents. The meeting really made an impact. It re-occupied the Dhobi Ghat esplanade, the traditional political meeting place which had been abandoned for several years out of fear, in particular of suicide bombers. A whole range of detailed resolutions were adopted on this occasion, in defence of the rights of peasants, workers and women - so many concrete commitments made for the coming struggles.

Poetry

Poetry plays a very important part in popular culture in Pakistan. Thus, meetings are introduced and rhythmized by poems sung or recited, which are very much appreciated. This happened at the mass meeting in Faisalabad, but also at the LPP congress.

The poets are fully-fledged speakers. Thus, during the LPP congress, a poetess sang about the oppression of women: "We who give life to every value/We are ourselves without value/We who are called paradise/We live in hell". In the same way the women delegates gave voice during the congress to many feminist slogans.

The mass meeting was called jointly by trade unions and peasant movements and by the LPP. As is the custom in Pakistan, the opening speech by the LQM included the reading of a verse from the Koran; not so the opening speech of the LPP: the political Left refuses to do that. The woman vice-president of the LQM, Sumina Sarwer, intervened wearing a light shawl. Bushra Khaliq, a woman leader of the LPP, spoke bareheaded - and received an ovation from

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the popular assembly (she is an excellent speaker).

To be the guest of the LPP is not a restful experience. You have to give greetings to a congress, to intervene in a mass meeting, to address a meeting of lawyers, to meet NGOs, to affirm your solidarity with peasants engaged in a struggle against the army, to attend a meeting on the role of trade unions with weaving loom workers, to discuss the world situation with left intellectuals, to tell students about 1968, to be interviewed by journalists, to talk about feminism in a town meeting and to refuse, regretfully but for lack of time, invitations to go to Murdan, Islamabad, Multan, Karachi.