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France

Charlie Hebdo – And now what? The events, their impact and the issues at play.

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“So you no longer want to hear about classes and their struggles? You’ll get the plebs and disjointed multitudes. You no longer want peoples? You’ll get packs and tribes. You no longer want parties? You’ll get the despotism of public opinion!”

Daniel Bensaïd, *Éloge de la politique profane* (In praise of lay politics)

While it is too early to ascertain all the consequences of the events of recent days, we should nonetheless take stock of what has happened. We have experienced something historic. First and foremost because of the strength and size of the demonstrations that took place on the weekend of January 10th and January 11th. Never before have more than five million people simultaneously taken to the streets across the country.

Whatever the confusion in the minds of participants, their reaction and behaviour showed that the demonstrations were a tremendous expression of fraternal feeling. Participants chatted amongst themselves and helped one another move along amidst the crush of the masses of people who had gathered. Some scenes on the short-lived afternoons of the 10th and 11th brought back memories of the demonstrations of 1995 or even 1968, with solidarity as the dominant theme.

With almost five million people in attendance, workers accounted for a large share of the ranks of marchers, with many young people as well. The demonstrations had a popular character and took place in city centres, but also in many suburban areas as well. While not specifically “social and trade-union movement” or “social struggle” in nature, they showed that society as such was mobilized. While such an assessment is open to debate, it appears the gatherings brought together “the people of the Left”. Within this fraternal outpouring against barbarism and terror and for democratic freedoms and free expression, we should also note the presence of placards and symbols against all forms of racism –anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim racism. In a similar vein, the repeated chants of “We are all Charlie” should not be misinterpreted. In taking up this slogan, the millions of people in attendance were not expressing their support for the magazine’s editorial line. A large majority of those chanting “We are all Charlie” were more or less familiar with the magazine but didn’t actually read it.

“We are all Charlie” burst out as a cry of human solidarity against the murders. It captured a range of opinions. The idea of a “working-class Charlie” was even put forward – in order to link solidarity with the murdered journalists with the need to mobilize in defense of social rights. The formulation is open to debate, but the idea is a correct one in that it seeks to inject social and democratic content into the anger and sadness.

This is the groundswell from French society that has been expressed since January 7th and anti-capitalists should be part of it, engaging in dialogue with the millions of people who have been involved. These were not reactionary demonstrations. The dominant themes were not support for cross-party national unity or the law-and-order and anti-democratic measures announced by the government. Society went into action, spontaneously, and with a great deal of confusion, but in a progressive direction all the same. This is the starting point for our thinking and it’s in this framework that we must assess the problems that now confront us.

Problem number one: cross-party national unity. We were right to decry initiatives aimed at creating cross-party national unity, whether with (leader of the right-wing UMP and former president) Nicolas Sarkozy or (leader of the far-Right FN) Marine Le Pen. It was even more justified to denounce the “international satraps” who joined French President François Hollande in his operation in favour of French imperialism and the various imperialist coalitions. It is a huge scandal that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Gabonese President Ali Bongo, Hungarian Prime

Minister Viktor Orban and other freedom-killers were invited to the march. No joint appeals should be issued with Hollande, the Socialists or the UMP; no marching together with them at the head of the demonstration; no common organization for such initiatives; and no “presidential” roundtables to cap it all off. From this angle, it should be noted that (former Left Front presidential candidate and leader of the Left Party) Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Left Front (Front de Gauche) initially provided cover for the Hollande operation, but backed away on the afternoon of the 10th when the whole matter was becoming altogether too compromising. As for us, we were right to voice these criticisms, but we should have given more sustained priority to solidarity with the millions of demonstrators. After all, people were not fooled. They took to the streets, but not to support political operations and manœuvres. What they take away from the marches will not be the presence of a cordoned-off handful of blood-stained world leaders, but rather the involvement of millions of ordinary women and men.

Problem number two: the mobilization of Arab-Muslim youth. Tens of thousands of Franco-Algerian, Franco-Moroccan and Franco-Tunisian people were present in the marches, with a large number of flags from the countries of the Maghreb, among others. But the majority of them were not. Charlie Hebdo’s editorial “line” kept a number of them away, as did the feeling that the authorities have a double standard when it comes to punishing hate speech (with the anti-Semitic Black comedian Dieudonné M’bala M’bala sentenced and racist author and commentator Éric Zemmour not). The low level of mobilization in Marseille is an indicator of the uneven character of the marches. There is a real danger of a major split within working-class opinion, and one of our priority tasks has to be to fight to ward off this threatened split. The first way to do this is by fighting against austerity policies and their impact on the poorest and most disadvantaged living in suburban areas. We also have to fight for equal rights, most notably for foreigners’ right to vote in elections. Revolutionaries have to lead the fight against Islamophobia, and all racist acts must be denounced. We have to defend the right of Muslims to practise their religion, and we have to defend mosques when they are attacked. The workers and democratic movement must stand by their side. This starts with tangible demonstrations of solidarity, through support to children in the schools, for example. The Arab-Muslim population must be defended against any type of aggression when it is attacked simply for being Arab or Muslim.

This anti-racism also applies to the fight against anti-Semitism. More than ever, and however difficult it may be, we have to stress the difference between the Zionist policies of the state of Israel and the Jewish population. We must defend the Jewish population against any type of aggression, when it is attacked simply for being Jewish.

Third problem: the government’s attempt to use the events to beef up its “anti-terror” legal arsenal with draconian laws along the lines of the Patriot Act pushed through by the U.S. government after 9-11. The stakes here are very high. Terrorism can’t be defeated with attacks on fundamental freedoms. Working-class and democratic organizations must come out firmly against any government measures of this sort. This means refusing to participate directly or indirectly in the upcoming meetings on the “security pact” put forward by the Socialists.

Fourth problem: avoiding a “clash of barbarisms”, between imperialist barbarism and that of organizations like the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda. Imperialist barbarism and its dictatorial supporters in situ oppress millions of people daily around the world. This is the fertile ground on which fundamentalist and terrorist organizations prosper. They feed off of international interventions – such as the ones led by the USA and other Western powers in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Iraq; or alongside regional powers such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Often, the growth of these fundamentalist organizations was initially funded and encouraged by Washington or by states such as Pakistan. Now, however, they are pursuing their own policy and their own strategy of confrontation.

We must never forget one basic truth: the terrorist violence of these fundamentalist movements is directed first and foremost against people in Muslim countries. They attack all freedoms and all fundamental rights. They play a major counter-revolutionary role – against the progressive aspirations of the “Arab springtime”, for example. They mete out levels of terror reminiscent of fascist movements in the 1930s. They are enemies of humankind. Our comrades in Pakistan characterize some of them as religious fascisms, a label which is certainly open to debate. But these forces

must be fought, at a time when they are carrying out an increasing number of barbaric acts from Paris to northern Nigeria. We must fight them in each of our countries, but also through international solidarity – by fighting against imperialist wars; by supporting progressive movements resisting the fundamentalist offensive against KobanÃ©, against Aleppo and in Pakistan; and by defending victims of their intolerance wherever they may be.

Fifth problem: our weakness and the overall weakening of the working-class movement in its historic bastions, especially in Europe. Capitalist globalization has plunged our societies into an endless downward spiral of social crises. Casual forms of work are spreading and taking on extreme forms. Neither the “left of the Left” nor the trade unions are in a position to provide a radical response to the radical attacks of globalized capital. In such conditions, fundamentalism (of all religions) and the new far-Right (xenophobic and racist) is laying claim to the ideological ground of radicalism. We need a broad international anti-fascist and anti-fundamentalist resistance front, but also an activist Left capable of providing a radical alternative to capitalism. To achieve this, such a Left has to be rooted among those sectors hit hardest by job insecurity. This is not the case today, and this is one of our Achilles’ heels.

On top of all these problems, there are specific things about the political situation in France that have to be kept in mind. Will President Hollande – in Bonapartist fashion – manage to use this crisis to raise himself more or less above the fray of party politics and his own Socialist Party to come out on top in the 2017 presidential elections? In keeping with his cross-party national-unity operation, will he manage to pursue his austerity agenda, thereby worsening the socio-economic condition of millions of working people? Will he manage to contain the Right and far-Right, who have been marginalized by the events of recent days?

The dynamic of social mobilization that we have seen over the past few days also points to another possibility. The indignation and democratic aspirations on display could take on a social character – through struggles and mobilizations for the right to dignity, against social injustice, against all forms of oppression, and for equal rights. These battles can be waged together to overcome the division that gives so much strength to those who rule over us.

Anti-capitalists must do everything in their power to deepen the democratic resurgence that we have just witnessed.

*Article written for **Viento Sur** (Spanish State). Translated by [ESSF](#).*