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Globalisation

Marxists and the new anti-capitalist movement

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV333 - July 2001 -

Publication date: Monday 16 July 2001

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From Seattle onwards, the whole planet has been shaken by a mobilisation of a breadth seldom witnessed before. Not since the time of the fight against the war in Vietnam have there been so many meetings in such a short period of time, capable of influencing the international political framework.

A new phase

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/genoa1-2.jpg>]

Anti-capitalists at Genoa

Even if for the moment the movement involves only a consistent nucleus of vanguard forces, it is nevertheless likely to extend on a broader scale. Although it is a new phenomenon, the movement born at Seattle is the heir to the situation created on a world scale following the struggles and movements against neoliberalism which arose during the 1990s.

The most universal of these is perhaps the Zapatista uprising of January 1, 1994 which, starting from identity-based and specific demands - the rights of the indigenous peoples - began to speak a "global" language, putting world neoliberalism in the dock.

It is not by chance that the revolt of the EZLN coincided with the coming into force of NAFTA, the free-trade zone uniting the United States, Mexico and Canada, which marks a significant stage in the economic integration between these countries. Zapatista leader Marcos speaks a language heard and understood everywhere in the world, proof of the affirmation of the new climate and the new political sensitivity.

A little later, in Europe, the impact of the great French movement of 1995, which pushed back the Juppé plan and opened the way to the victory of Jospin, was felt in Amsterdam in June 1997 with the first European March for a Social Europe, organised by the network of European Marches.

The following year in Birmingham, Jubilee 2000 - a campaign for the cancellation of the Third World debt, born in Great Britain between 1996 and 1997 and involving trade unions, NGOs, movements of women and refugees - succeeded in bringing more than 70,000 people to the annual G-7 meeting.

Between 1998 and 1999, ATTAC was created in France, and quickly became an instrument of participation and organisation of the world movement (with the birth of "sections" in dozens of countries, in particular Italy) while José Bové has set up Via Campesina (created in 1993, but now able to organise nearly 60 million peasants on the world scale) which will play a decisive role in several struggles in the Southern hemisphere.

After Seattle

These diverse elements found in Seattle a symbolic element of fundamental identification. From this moment, there was a common cement (slogans and forms of mobilisation), a common definition of the movement (a pluralist movement composed of youth, trade unionists, ecologists, women, and activists), and a form of organisation of the

movement (the internet, also on the international level) which were shared by all and considered effective.

Thus, it is not by chance that the movement has "migrated" throughout the world. The stages are symbolic: after Seattle (November 1999) and Washington (April 2000), there was Millau (June 30, 2000, solidarity with José Bové), Melbourne (September 11, against the World Economic Forum), Prague (September 26, once more against the IMF), Seoul (October 10, against the Asia-Europe summit), Nice (December 6-7, against the European Union summit), Quebec (April 2001, against the launching of the FTAA), Gothenburg (June 2001, against the EU summit). This list includes only the "institutional" events, against the summits of institutions and bodies, and against existing or future international agreements.

Over the same period, dozens of other events, demonstrations, and struggles have taken place in all the corners of the world. Quoting from memory: the World Women's March Against Violence and Poverty, the strikes and marches in Latin America, the various demonstrations on May Day (particularly combative in Great Britain with the role of movements like Reclaim the Streets and Globalise Resistance), the Zapatista march earlier this year, struggles against layoffs in France, the demonstrations in Japan against US bases, and others again.

The mobilisation in Genoa in July 2001 during the G-8 summit represents only the next stage of a more general and broader movement.

Of course, it is too early to say that we are on the eve of a new 1968 - and in any case analogies are never perfect. But the extent of the mobilisations, the heavy presence of young people, the ceaseless expansion of the critique of neo-liberalism, whether on the planetary level or with more depth in various sectors of society, indicate a possible cycle of more sustained struggles.

Above all, there is a possibility that the negative period opened by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, marked by the definitive collapse of Stalinism as an organised state form, with the defeat and disillusion of the left which followed, but also with the total victory of capitalism in its most aggressive form - is starting to unravel.

Admittedly, the defensive aspect of the current struggles, the aggressive nature of the neo-liberal policies and the weakness of the anti-capitalist left do not allow us to consider the period of defeat as finished. But the situation is no longer what it was only ten years ago, when ideologists like Francis Fukuyama defined capitalism as 'the best of all possible worlds'.

The financial crises of 1997 and 1998, the current stagnation in the United States and Japan, the contradictions facing Europe, and even the contradictory nature of Berlusconi's victory in Italy - with a majority in parliament, but not in the country - show that the framework is extremely unstable and uncertain.

Meanwhile, a new generation, which does not carry the weight of the defeats of the past or the old ideological incrustations, and does not feel the influence of Stalinist "camp" politics, is asserting itself.

We witness a "return to politics" following a crisis of the left, in particular, the social democrats and Stalinists. Both have failed. Now they are unable to interpret the new struggles that exist, or to represent them, organise them, or offer them any hope. The new struggles need a politics which are not immediately perceived as old or archaic.

As might be expected, the global movement faces major contradictions. However, these contradictions do not prevent a linear development, an expansion on the international scale and a progressive widening to involve new sectors.

Despite the diversity, there are unquestionably some general characteristics: the movement's attempt to define itself by rediscovering an internationalist tradition which seemed lost; a contradictory but real relationship with the old labour movement; and a generalised mistrust of all organised political forms, but linked to the desire for an overall alternative.

A global vision

The movement as it exists today denounces the damage wrought by neoliberalism on the international scale: but on the other hand many of its components are born out of specific instances or problems.

It is often about a "rough" anti-capitalism based on experience. In good part it is also the fruit of the presence of movements and a significant group of militant intellectuals.

People like Riccardo Petrella, Susan George, Walden Bello, Naomi Klein (whose book "No Logo" is already an international success), Pierre Bourdieu, Eduardo Galeano, Bernard Cassen, Michael Loewy, Samir Amin, Charles-Andre Udry, to name the most well known, are, and are perceived, as part of the movement. These people take an active part in the mass movement and play an essential role in the formation of consciousness.

This capacity to maintain an overall vision is demonstrated by the importance accorded to forums of discussion like Porto Alegre. In these forums, thousands of people can take the general pulse of the situation, develop a global vision of the state of the struggles, and discuss problems and paths to follow.

But there is also the stimulus to develop global alternative responses: participatory democracy, has been a fundamental contribution from Porto Alegre to the "people of Seattle", which would not have become the symbol it is without the World Forum.

But the conferences also help us to find, after decades, a new internationalism, which is no longer in the name of solidarity with a people in struggle or a revolution in progress. Instead the unifying element, which allows the creation of true international structures - such as ATTAC, Via Campesina, and the Women's March - and a radical anti-neo-liberalism, is emerging from the current process of the internationalisation of capital.

The role of the trade unions

The workers' and labour movement has accompanied the mobilisation since its symbolic birth at Seattle. The role of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations), a trade-union federation with 13 million members and some sectors -like the Teamsters (lorry drivers) - able to bring the country to a halt, has been very significant.

This is the product of the internal turn marked by the election of Sweeney to the presidency in 1995, and the subsequent ability of the AFL-CIO - which remains very moderate and sometimes marked by nationalist protectionism - to grasp the importance of new forms of struggle in the workplace (as with the creation of Jobs with Justice, organising temporary workers, the unemployed, students).

This maturity is found especially in the trade unions of the American continent: the Brazilian CUT was heavily

involved in Porto Alegre, while the ORIT (a regional organisation connected to the ICFTU internationally) gave its support to the Forum's closing appeal.

On the European level, the situation is very different. There have been contacts between the various expressions of the social movement - like the demonstration in Amsterdam in June 1997, which led the European Confederation of Trade Unions (ECTU) to organise its own mobilisation in Luxembourg in November of that year. But one cannot compare these links with the links in America.

In Prague in September 2000 the mobilisation against the IMF and the World Bank saw a significant participation from northern Europe, Italy, Spain and Greece, but it was primarily composed of young people, with an almost total absence of trade-union forces.

The turning point was Nice, in December 2000, during the European summit. This time, at the initiative of the most radical component, in particular the French - SUD, ATTAC, the Euromarch Network, the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR), but also the Italian COBAS and European alternative trade unionism in general - a united demonstration took place there with the ECTU.

This unity was established despite the ECTU having slogans (support for the Charter of European Rights) contrary to those of the other demonstrators (and also contrary to the dominant feelings in its own contingents, as various newspapers and trade-union leaders have revealed).

Despite the contradictions, Nice has shown that the relationship between the traditional union movement and a movement of a new type, composed primarily of young people opposed to neo-liberal globalisation, is possible. The support of the FIOM-CGIL (metalworkers' federation of the Italian CGIL) for the Genoa demonstration in July against the G-8 is very significant from this point of view.

The anti-political risk

Mistrust of political parties is another characteristic, although less marked, of the current movement. This mistrust has a healthy side - it's enough to look at the role of certain parties in the Anglo-Saxon world. And an understandable side, considering the damage caused by the social democratic parties and the disasters generated by Stalinism. On the other hand, sometimes it is unjustified and can lead to a generalised inward-looking approach.

The mistrust is obviously the product of a political climate since the historical defeat symbolised by the collapse of the Berlin Wall. From that moment, references to tradition, historical identity, origins ceased to exert fascination, attraction and interest - to be replaced by mistrust, or by stepping back.

It is clear that when the movement expresses itself on the political level it displays divergent orientations. On the international scale, for example, one can distinguish three broad political lines:

- the first is definitely radical, with an anti-capitalist vision of globalisation;
- another seeks above all a dialogue with the supranational institutions with the aim of reforming them;
- and a third is a more protectionist current, which seeks to defend the powers of nation states as a counterweight to the excessive power of the multinationals.

These are closely related orientations, not yet reasons for division. They often echo the positions of specific parties and political movements.

It is obvious that the political line is neither homogeneous, nor definitive. Indeed, a more fundamental sentiment makes the movement very jealous in guarding its independence on the organisational and analytical level. This is good, provided that the relationship with the parties does not become a source of division and dissension. It is obvious that this depends to a large measure on how the parties behave.

The problem cannot be resolved with schemas inherited from the 20th century. Far more than in the past, the parties will have to become part of the movement as such, and build links as equal to equal with the other participants, while demonstrating at the same time their social and political usefulness.

Basically, the political parties will have to establish for themselves a legitimacy that, otherwise, nobody is disposed to recognise in advance. At the same time, they must demonstrate in the field of ideas and political programme that they can offer valid and decisive solutions to the problems of the movement.

Of course, we speak here of the parties of the anti-capitalist left. They may not be a great quantitative or qualitative force, but they must seize this moment to reestablish themselves in the medium term.

The movement needs this to happen, because it needs a radical and "visionary" response to go forward. The left also needs it, if the left itself is to emerge from its crisis and build a new project.

The opportunity of Genoa

At Genoa, we will see all this, and other things also. Let us speak initially about the Italian situation. The anti-globalisation movement came a little late to Italy, with the exception of some "pioneers" who sensed the new climate developing in Europe (the role of the COBAS in the Euro Marches), or youth organisations like the Young Communists or the Social Centers, which have created some international links and some local initiatives, and some NGOs which have always had links to world networks.

But the Italian "movement" has rooted itself and grown. The March 17 demonstration in Naples marked a significant stage in this process, while showing that the anti-globalisation struggle could bring together forces who are able to see the link between their own material conditions and a general vision of the world.

After the first international experiments - Amsterdam and Cologne, but then Prague and Nice - Naples marked a turning point in terms of its breadth and mass participation.

This has also been the experience in the preparation for Genoa. Hundreds of social political and trade-union organisations will participate in the Genoa Social Forum.

Here is the essential basis for a project of opposition to the Berlusconi government.

Here also, there are inevitable divergences, even the same battles for political influence, with a similar range of views to that which exists on the international level - from the more "moderate" to the more radical.

Build the movement, build the party

The Communist Party of Refoundation (PRC), in particular through the Young Communists, has played an undeniable leading role during this new phase. From participation in the Forum at Porto Alegre to the material construction of initiatives on the ground, the PRC has known how to connect to a living reality, to support it with conviction, but also to maintain an intelligent dialogue with it, without prevarication or the old-fashioned fight for political control.

For the first time since its birth, the party is in a real relationship with a powerful mass movement and for the first time it has to face a new and delicate problem.

If it has avoided "partyist", and self-proclamatory behaviour, it has often fallen into the opposite error, by adapting to the positions and behaviour of the movement, or rather some of its sectors. It has become more difficult to maintain the necessary balance between the construction of the movement and the construction of the party, without thinking that one excludes the other.

The problem is not simple: but precisely because of that, it is a theme that has to be discussed seriously, without simplifications or exorcisms.

Certain "tasks" flow from the events of July, but also the post-Genoa period:

1) To work to widen the movement, to build it and consolidate it. The movement has already shown that it exists, it has shown its potential and stated its objectives. Now it must grow, strengthen itself, reach wider sectors of the population, of the workers' movement, vast layers of young people and so on.

To do this, there are certain essential conditions, including a guarantee of the pluralism of its components, and the legitimacy of various positions - but also a unity based on ensuring adequate space for discussion and mobilisation.

It is necessary to continue and to reinforce the experiment of the Genoa Social Forum, building Social Forums in the image of Porto Alegre, but on a national and local scale. The movement must go beyond structures for coordination, towards a form which can better stimulate participation.

2) To do that, it is fundamental to formulate a clear political agenda, a platform of struggle, a declaration of intent. If we are entering a new phase, one of its components is that resistance is not enough any more.

The new generations demand solutions, ideas, realisable projects, which one can demonstrate and debate. The "ritualisation" of the counter-summits is likely to ossify a movement which has much more potential and scope for action.

Overall demands must concretise the process underway, going to the heart of the contradictions engendered by neo-liberalism - the conflict between labour and capital, the exploitation of the Earth, the commodification and oppression of women, the imposition of "flexibility" on a whole generation, war and hunger, and so on.

3) The necessary link - between the global and the local, between daily questions (unemployment, wages, pensions, schools, information, culture and so on) and the global policies decided at international summits - becomes central.

The example of the sackings at Danone is significant: in this case, the precise relationship between the operations of a multinational and the impact of its decisions on the local level have been made clear to all.

4) The construction of a stable relationship between the workers' movement and the new forces in movement and their capacity to link up is every bit as decisive.

Once again, the case of Danone is an illustration: the dismissals by a profitable company were immediately perceived as a very serious injustice. The workers had recourse to a traditional and always effective weapon: the strike. But thousands of citizens resorted to the weapon of the boycott to show solidarity and to take part in a struggle they considered their own.

5) To give an anti-capitalist and radical face to the movement. The anti-globalisation movement is a "pluralist" movement which finds its common roots in opposition to neoliberalism, and this is good. It is a movement which is still on the ascendant and beginning to assert itself.

Nevertheless, inside it, various orientations are already visible, with different objectives. It is thus useful and right that a class and anti-capitalist orientation continues, opposed to profit and exploitation, and aiming to revolutionise the relations of production.

Of course, this should not be approached in a sectarian, dogmatic, or doctrinaire way, but as part of the concrete construction of the movement, respecting its tempos and forms.

6) To construct base units of the movement does not mean to underestimate or ignore more concrete chances to form part of a more general international movement, if they appear. New structures on the world scale already express this need and this potential. ATTAC is one. Its imminent launch in Italy constitutes a very significant experiment.

Of course, building ATTAC cannot substitute for trade unionism in its traditional or newer forms; even less can it substitute for the party, which on the contrary should start again in this new context.

7) The active construction of the party represents a necessary and essential consequence of what we have affirmed up until now. The party is not a counterweight to the movement: nor is it a transitory structure which has to draw aside when the impetus of the movement accelerates. It is an essential place of collective development and planning of social intervention. It is what remains when the tide ebbs; the revolutionary party is a basic project on a longer scale.

Today the Party of Communist Refoundation aims to build itself through the struggles of workers and the fight against globalisation; this means it must respect these struggles and their base, but maintain a consciousness of its own contribution and the necessity for its own existence.

There are two areas where this approach will be applied: the redefinition of the concept of public interests and public services in opposition to the neo-liberal absolutism of profit, but also, in the light of the failures of 20th century, in opposition to the experiments of the supposedly "actually existing socialist" Stalinist bureaucracy on the one hand, and social-democratic statism on the other.

Starting from the experiment of Porto Alegre, but going beyond it, a communist and revolutionary reading of participatory democracy - as an instrument of direct democracy, of rank and file participation - can play a fertile role in

the process of Communist refoundation.