IV385 - January 2007

Empire’s Island in a Sea of Struggle

27 January 2007, by Jeffery R Webber

In Forrest Hylton’s excellent book, *Evil Hour in Colombia*, we learn that prior to becoming President, Uribe passed two fruitful years as governor of the department of Antioquia. Under his guardianship, the anti-guerrilla militias, known as Convivirs (Rural Vigilance Cooperatives), displaced approximately 200,000 peasants (p.93). In the banana export-enclaves of the same department, the homicide rate took suggestive turns corresponding to Uribe’s presence as governor: “in 1995, it doubled to 800; in 1996, 1,200; and in 1997, 700. In 1998, the year after Uribe’s departure, it dipped to 300” (p.94).

Life for Colombia’s poor majority is a million miles from that of the affluent minority…

In her brutally compelling summary of Uribe’s meaning for contemporary Colombia, sociologist Jasmin Hristov writes: “Uribe’s re-election signifies: 1) The continuation of a system characterized by unequal, exploitative, alienating and exclusionary social relations; 2) The aggrevation of the country’s subordinate position in the global capitalist hierarchy; 3) The consolidation of US imperial (military and economic) presence; 4) The legalization of illegality, a fusion of the legal and the illegal in such a creative way, that the government can claim the paramilitary no longer exists, when in reality it has profoundly penetrated the very fabric of state institutions and the national economy; 5) The initiation of a new phase of the model: the unified Colombian para-narco-state; 6) The invigoration of social struggles.” [1]

Contemporary Colombia clearly ranks as one of the most difficult settings in which to wage resistance for social justice. At the same time, the abundance of injustice demands such resistance. It is widely known, for example, that Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. In its 2006 Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) reports, “Colombia as usual ensured that the death toll was highest in the Americas, with 70 deaths, a significant reduction compared to last year’s total of 99, but still an appalling indictment of the government’s failure or lack of good will to protect its workers.” [2] Since 1991, more than 2,000 labour leaders have been killed. Ninety-seven percent of the homicides against unionists have been perpetrated by military and paramilitary actors, with three percent being carried out by guerrillas and other armed actors. [3]

Terror and Displacement

According to Hylton, three million people have been displaced in the twenty-first century in Colombia (4). Two million of those were displaced from mining regions, dominated by transnational capital intent on dispossessing Colombians of their natural resource wealth. [4] The size of the internally displaced population - to adopt the common euphemism - is second only to Sudan, with Afro-Colombians constituting a majority of the displaced, and the indigenous population disproportionately featured amongst these internal refugees (6). The overlapping paramilitaries and official armed forces have meted out state terror, political violence, and massacres, taking 3,000 to 4,000 lives annually during the 1990s. According to William Avilés, “Human rights activists, political leaders on the left, trade unionists and the peasants perceived to be supporting the guerrilla insurgency represented the vast majority of these victims.” [5] The central guerrilla actors, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and the, much smaller, National Liberation Army (ELN), have contributed atrocities of their own. But these pale in comparison to the brutality of imperially-backed Colombian state, and para-state terror. (Table I helps in understanding this dynamic).

Table I. Share of Responsibility for Non-Combatant Deaths and Forced Disappearances

	1993	1997	2000
Guerrillas	28%	23.5%	16.3%
Security Forces	54%	7.4%	4.6%
Paramilitary	18%	69%	79.2%

Source: William Avilés. 2003.

"Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low Intensity Democracy," Journal of Latin American Studies 38: 403. Derived from the Colombian Commission of Jurists.

Sixty four percent of the population lives below the poverty line, 23 percent in absolute poverty. Just under 2 percent of the population owns roughly 53 percent of the land. [6] Eleven million of the country's 43,593,000 citizens do not meet their basic food requirements. [7] Adequate health care, education, and employment are the exclusive perks of the privileged elite.

Such a setting is conducive to simplistic explanations which reinforce the interests of the powerful. Hylton points out, "In policy-making circles in Washington and Bogotá, it is often argued that Colombia suffers from a culture of violence, as if Colombians had an innate propensity to shed one another's blood. As commonly presented, this is an ahistorical and tautological explanation of why, in contrast to neighbors characterized by centre-Left governments and popular mobilization, Colombian politics are characterized by high levels of terror" (8).

Uniforms of the right-wing paramilitary death squads look remarkably official…

If we are to attempt to transcend and counter the racist "explanations" on offer from Washington and Bogotá, Evil Hour in Colombia will prove an invaluable guide. Forrest Hylton is one of the most serious, enlightening, and committed commentators on Latin American affairs today. In the interest of full disclosure, he is also a friend and comrade. His new book demonstrates a deep and penetrating understanding of the sociocultural, economic, and political post-Independence history of Colombia. Moreover, it is a powerful indictment of the imperial practices of the US state.

History from Below… and Above

Evil Hour begins in 1848 and takes us to 2006, highlighting historical continuities and novel developments alike. Hylton often compares Colombia's politics to those of its neighbours, as well as in relation to the impositions of the US state, particularly with the onset of the Cold War and, more recently, Plan Colombia. The aim of the book is to clarify the historical depth of the contemporary civil war against the current trends of official amnesia.

Hylton also aims to provide a social history from below, unlike the existing "historical syntheses," which, "give short shrift to radical-popular movements, emphasizing instead actions of elite groups, the two political parties [Liberals and Conservatives] they dominated, and the rise of the nation state" (7). He shows a particular sensitivity to the popular struggles of Afro-Colombian and indigenous movements, as well as the racism and oppression under which they continue to live in the contemporary scenario. In so doing, however, he does not omit class struggle from the story, but instead illustrates the profoundly racialized character of that struggle, as waged from above and below.

Here is one passage, spanning from 1860 to 1950, which captures these dynamics nicely: "As the coffee frontier was settled in the late nineteen and early twentieth century, sectors of the peasantry identified with whiteness and capitalist progress secured property rights and political incorporation into one of the two parties through networks of patronage and clientelism. The majority of peasants, as well as Afro-Colombian and indigenous reserves, had precarious claims to property rights, limited incorporation into the two parties, and lived under threat of violence and/or dispossession. When reforms from above coincided with mobilization from below in the 1860s, and again in the 1930s, landlords launched reactions in the countryside, mobilizing clients to protect racial-ethnic privileges, political monopoly, and the rule of property. These movements of counter-reform, like the radical-popular movements to which they responded, were locally and regionally organized. This reflected the nature of landed wealth, political power, and authority in Colombia - fractured and mostly rural through the 1950s" (9).

While Hylton therefore spends a significant portion of the text focusing on the processes of social history as seen from the bottom, he does not neglect the interaction between popular struggles from below, the erratic development and shifts of capitalism in Colombia, and the exploitative and oppressive tactics directed from above through the synergies of the state, paramilitary, bourgeoisie, and imperialism. To my mind, Hylton's methodology overcomes the problems of simple histories, written exclusively "from below," identified by the Canadian Marxist historian Bryan D. Palmer [8].

"The central claim of this book," Hylton writes, "is that to understand the Colombian civil war today, it is necessary to appreciate the multiple layers of previous conflicts and the accumulated weight of unresolved contradictions" (7). A good reason for historicizing the current context, too, is the fact that the "culture of violence" thesis becomes so patently absurd in the process. Hylton, points out, for example, that until the close of the nineteenth century, Colombia, rather than standing out for its mass violence, was in fact distinguished by its relative non-violence in comparison to countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina. If we take history seriously, furthermore, we will understand that, while today Colombia stands out as a beacon of reaction in amidst a hopeful - if contradictory - wave of popular struggle in Latin America, between the 1840s and 1870s the relationship between Colombia and the rest of the continent was precisely the inverse. For Hylton, these earlier popular struggles from below constitute part of the popular historical memory which is threatened with erasure by state terror and enforced amnesia. Nineteenth century revolts also help point to alternatives for renewed traditions of social struggle in the bleak contemporary setting.

Hylton demonstrates how during the "Age of Capital" (1848-75), "oppressed racial/ethnic groups and classes

fought to claim places in the new republic," forging "political traditions that challenged slavery and ongoing processes of conquest." In bringing life to these struggles, Hylton helps to steer "us away from static, ahistorical images of a united, all-powerful landed oligarchy, ruling over a hapless, dependent peasantry, revealing more complex local and regional dynamics" (15). Again, according to Hylton, in "any search for a more peaceful, democratic, and equitable future, Colombians can look back to a political culture that featured ample channels for subaltern participation, from the 1850s through the 1870s" (22).

Coffee Capitalism, Reaction and Rebellion

Chapter 2 discusses the rise of coffee capitalism in the late nineteenth century, and the role of clientelism and repression as elite tactics for controlling would-be insurgents from below. Beginning in 1880, "the Regeneration initiated five decades of reaction" turning back the tide of "radical-popular democratic participation that a heterogeneous coalition of rural workers, provincial middle-class lawyers (tinterillos), and urban artisans opened up after mid-century." Hylton discusses the origins and implications of the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1903), and the geography of the rise of coffee capitalism, centred in Antioquia. Conservative power meant reactionary rule, but forces of opposition also began to flourish.

The growth of urban labour was a product of capitalist development, and ideologies of socialism and anarcho-syndicalism were taking root. In 1926, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) was formed, breaking the political monopoly of the Liberals and Conservatives. The PSR helped organize "proletarian struggle in the multinational export enclaves of the Caribbean and along coffee frontiers" (29). 1928 featured the November-December banana workers' strike against United Fruit near Santa Marta, immortalized in Gabriel García Márquez's novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude. In 1929, "the PSR's 'Bolsheviks of Líbano' rose up in a failed insurrection in northern Tolima; the first explicitly socialist rebellion in Colombia...." Traditions of revolutionary party formation and mass action were being formed: "Indian peasant rebellion spread after 1914, organized labor struck the capitalist enclaves in oil and bananas after 1925, and a wave of multiethnic peasant land takeovers swept across the coffee frontiers from 1928. Radical-popular movements achieved greater independence and autonomy from the two parties than in the past, through direct action and the formation of revolutionary left parties" (30).

Liberal Politics, 1930-1946

Hylton then charts the "Liberal Pause" from 1930 to 1946. In particular, he brings out the character of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, and the social forces inspired by his "cross-class, multi-ethnic, and anti-elitist" nationalism (31). Gaitán was a figure brimming in contradiction. On the one hand, there was the "importance of gaitanismo's message of class struggle for rural proletarians, tenants, and sharecroppers excluded from property ownership... and the majority of urban workers outside the sphere of organized labour...." (35). On the other hand, Gaitán was wedded to the Liberal Party, and because he persisted in this ugly marriage he was unable to meet the demands of his constituency.

Gaitán was assassinated in 1948. While populism was taking off in much of the rest of Latin America in the 1940s, "In Colombia, it saw an aggressive Catholic counterrevolutionary assault on organized labour and radical peasant movements" (38). Said counterrevolution took the form of la Violencia, a period of "concentrated terror" in which some "300,000 people, 80 percent men, most of them illiterate peasants" were killed, while 2 million more were forcibly displaced (39). La Violencia (1946-1957), annihilated the legacy of Gaitán's nationalist populism and closed the door on "the chance of mass-based independent class politics beyond it" (48). In place of populism, traditions of wider, bolder, and indiscriminate state terror were introduced: "It was during la Violencia that the precedent for the bloody resolution of the agrarian question, through terror, expropriation, and dispossession, was established. Forms of cruelty that became widespread in late twentiety-century Colombia were institutionalized in Latin America's most regressive historical development at mid-century. They persisted as part of the cold war counterinsurgent repertoire, helping prepare the ground for endemic Left insurgency" (49).

The National Front

The National Front (1957-1982), was spawned from an agreement between the Liberals and Conservatives to share power at all levels of government while alternating the presidency between them. The Left was locked out, and coffee capitalism rebuilt out of the ashes of la Violencia. Anti-communism was the domestic doctrine unifying Liberals and Conservatives in Colombia, reinforced by the Cold War internationally. Protest from popular movements was effectively criminalized through state of siege legislation.

It was out of this poisonous environment that Left insurgencies were born in the 1960s and 1970s. The FARC, the most important guerrilla group, was officially named in 1966. It's "early success was the subordination of insurgent organizational goals to demands and movements of frontier smallholders, tenants, and rural labourers" (57). The ELN also emerged in this period, devoted to the foco theory of Argentine revolutionary, Ernesto "Che" Guervara. According to Hylton, the ELN's middle-class, university-based leadership, "was convinced that, given the size of Colombia's peasantry, and its recent history of armed popular mobilization during la Violencia a small band of mobile guerrillas - in place of the working class and the peasantry - could trigger an insurrection that would lead to socialist revolution" (57). Finally, in 1967, the Maoist People's Liberation Army (EPL) was formed, believing that "in rural 'Third World' countries like Colombia, the peasantry, led by a vanguard party, would play the leading role in making socialist

revolution" (58).

In urban Colombia, where a majority of Colombians lived by this stage, a new group, M-19, was formed in 1974. For M-19, the "goal was not the overthrow of capitalism or the Colombian state, but the opening up of the existing political system to electoral competition; in this, M-19 was similar to Castro's M-26 movement in pre-revolutionary Cuba" (62). In the cities of this period, activism and protest emerged centred around demands for basic services in the urban peripheral slums. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the crushing of these forms of dissent, under the iron-fisted reign of Liberal President, César Turbay Ayala. State-sanctioned death squads proliferated. Left insurgencies began to thrive as other forms of opposition were shutdown.

Important changes in the structure of the economy provided the material basis for these developments: "A major economic shift toward rent, speculation in land and urban real estate, and cocaine exports heralded the death of the coffee republic. By moving the productive base away from manufacturing and coffee exports, toward extractive export enclaves and coca frontiers, the multinational corporations, the narco-bourgeoisie, and technocratic politicians in charge of 'modernizing' and 'reforming' the Colombian state created the necessary conditions for guerrilla resurgence. Accelerating state and parastate repression provided sufficient conditions" (66).

The Electoral Left and Paramilitary Repression

In 1982, Conservative President Belisario Betancur opened a peace process with the Left insurgencies, "out of which a broad electoral Left, tied to the largest guerrilla insurgency, emerged as the first national-popular expression since gaitanismo" (67). Toward the end of 1985, the Patriotic Union (UP) was formed by the FARC, with the PCC as a "civilian front designed to help consolidate a power base within the formal political system prior to laying arms down" (72). The UP attracted supporters from a broader pool than the FARC. Its active militants, "worked for peace, social justice, and 'revolutionary change' through the electoral arena. In their commitment to finding a democratic path to revolution, they were similar to the Chilean UP of the 1960s and 1970s - and, if anything, more doomed" (72).

The Cattle Rancher's Association (FEDEGAN) played a leading role in orchestrating the paramilitary destruction of popular forces which were raising new demands during this period. "This meant," Hylton points out, "death to landless peasants, indebted smallholders, rural proletarians, and the urban movements for homes, services, and public education" (71). By 1987-1988, when the paramilitary forces had come into their own, homicide had become the leading cause of male deaths (75). In this context of official peace processes and political opening, accompanied all the while by paramilitary terror, the fate of the UP was predetermined: "… two years after its foundation, 500 UP militants, including presidential candidate Jaime Pardo Leal - who had won more than any Left candidate in Colombian history in 1986 - had been assassinated" (73).

In a late-twentieth-century, Colombian version of the processes of "primitive accumulation" that defined the bloody rise of capitalism in seventeenth and eighteenth century England, in the late 1980s, "paramilitaries erased the broad Left from the electoral map, reinforced clientelist political controls, and began to acquire vast landholdings, chiefly through massacre and expropriation" (78). Paramilitaries became increasingly integrated into the cocaine economy, and successfully penetrated the Liberal and Conservative parties, the various institutions of the state - including the military and police -, as well as legal sectors of the national economy.

The 1990s - Paramiltaries, Imperialism, and Neoliberalism

The 1990s brought with it growth in the numbers of and geographic territory controlled by the Left insurgencies, even greater growth in paramilitaries, imperial hubris in the form of the US "war on drugs," and brutal neoliberal economic restructuring, which fueled all these developments.

César Gaviria was elected President in 1990. Educated at Harvard, Gaviria launched a fierce neoliberal assault on the popular economy. He "slashed the public sector workforce and set about privatizing health care and social security, establishing the autonomy of the Central Bank, liberalizing the currency and financial sector, reducing tariffs and import quotas, increasing turnover taxes, and flexibilizing labor. Oil exploration contracts were signed with the multinationals on even softer terms than before" (82). The concomitant collapse in traditional agricultural crops in the face of incredible rises in food and other imports made the narcotics industry an attractive choice for many dispossessed, unemployed peasants.

Under pressure from the US state's cynical foreign policy shift to "democracy promotion," [9] according to William Avilés, "Colombia's transnational elite exerted greater efforts to limit the state's direct participation in repression in exchange for a more subdued and indirect role. What actually occurred in Colombia was the privatization of repression, whereby the responsibility for persecuting individuals and communities with suspected sympathies for the guerrilla movement was in large part shifted to private groups of armed civilians."" [10] On this score, Avilés's account seems more plausible than Hylton's.

Hylton suggests, "The US and Colombian governments turned a blind eye to the increasing reach of the paramilitaries, focusing instead on eliminating Left insurgencies by strengthening the Colombian military and police" (96) [11]. Stressing the confluence of low-intensity democracy promotion, neoliberal restructuring, and paramilitary and military terror, Hristov persuasively contends: "It is not a mere coincidence that the implementation of the neoliberal project has been accompanied by: enhancement in the capacity of the state's security apparatus and

paramilitary groups; expansion of violence and human rights; and subjection of social movements to various extermination tactics." " [12] Paramilitary numbers doubled between 1997 and 2000 (95). Their terror tactics built upon preexisting high levels of political violence. Almost unfathomably, "In 1991, nearly 4,000 homicides were the cause of 42 percent of all deaths in Medellín, which had a rate of 325 per 100,000, more than five times higher than non-Colombian competitors like Rio, and eight times higher than São Paulo" (81-82). Increasingly, paramilitaries were responsible for waging violence against the Left, broadly conceived, as Table I illustrates.

If they couldn't match the paramilitary expansion rate, the central guerrilla insurgencies nonetheless grew in size in the 1990s. In 1978, the FARC held only 17 fronts in peripheral regions. By 1994, on the contrary, "it had 105 fronts and operated in 60 percent of Colombia's 1071 municipalities" (89). Two years later, the ELN could boast "4,000 and 5,000 combatants, extensive urban militias and support networks, and a presence in 350 municipalities. Protection rents, extortion, bank robbing, and kidnapping provided their chief sources of income" (89).

The Guerrillas

Hylton argues that the type of growth enjoyed by the FARC and ELN during this period was paradoxical: "During the 1990s, the two remaining insurgencies, the FARC and the ELN, exhibited the fundamental paradox of an increasing political delegitimation, accompanied by startling organizational growth" (86). Uncharacteristically, Hylton does not probe this paradox sufficiently. While we learn anecdotally about sectors of middle-class Left intellectuals distancing themselves from the guerrillas, such as Gabriel García Márquez, who along with others invited the FARC and the ELN to lay down their arms in 1992, the extent to which the "political legitimacy" of the guerrillas amongst the peasantry is at odds with peasant expansion in guerrilla numbers is not sufficiently explained with supporting evidence.

Hylton is an incisive and fierce, but also realistic, critic of the FARC. The following passages are representative:

- "Until recently, FARC violence unfolded according to predictable, if ruthless, rules that could guarantee 'order' and 'stability' on the frontier, whereas narco-terror led to 'chaos' and 'unpredictability,' particularly where coca paste prices were concerned. In those frontier regions of the south and southeast colonized by peasants fleeing political violence and agrarian crisis in the highlands, the FARC took up tasks the state had failed to perform" (88),

- "As they expanded [in the 1990s], the FARC and the ELN underwent processes of bureaucratic rationalization - the principal aim of each organization was to consolidate and project itself" (89).

- "The FARC's ideology would be best described as ossified, militaristic Marxism mixed with progressive creole liberalism. It was the authoritarian social democracy proper to a tributary statelet based in the countryside and small towns" (98).

- "... by raising kidnapping, extortion, and selective assassination to new, atrocious proportions, in 2001-2, the FARC - and, to a much lesser extent, the ELN - helped the rise of a 'strong-hand' ruler like Uribe" (100).

- "The FARC's tactics, represented for many by the cylinder bombing of a church in Bojayá, Antioquia, in April 2002 - which incinerated 119 Afro-Colombian men, women, and children - made them far more disreputable than they had ever been before" (100) [13].

- "Compared to the Nasa in Cauca, the Peace Community of San José, or Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities in the Chocó, the FARC and the counterinsurgency have impoverished, militarist visions of democracy, security, autonomy, and sovereignty" (136).

Hylton does not lose perspective, however: "Insurgent attacks on and intimidation of Afro-Colombian communities and indigenous reserves - however representative of the degradation of Colombia's armed conflict - pale in comparison to the percentage of human rights violations committed by the paramilitary AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia).... Though insurgencies depend on terrorist tactics like bombings, kidnapping, selective assassination, and extortion, little is gained in understanding by applying the 'terrorist' label. To blame the bulk of the country's problems on the insurgency - fashionable [in] academia and the media - is to put the cart before the horse. It overlooks the fact that throughout modern history, state terror has provided the 'oxygen' without which insurgent terror 'cannot combust for very long'" (3). [14]

Moreover, Hylton provides invaluable insights into some of the reasons underlying FARC's successful recruiting in the 1990s, in a context of neoliberal dispossession and paramilitary and military terror. To this end, one more lengthy quotation is deserved: "Lacking extensive transport and distribution networks, the FARC was in no position to compete with the AUC in international markets. But it offered food, clothing, employment, high-tech weaponry, a cell phone, and a monthly salary to impoverished rural youths who did not want to be government soldiers, peasant soldiers, spies, or paramilitaries. The average age of FARC combatants was nineteen, and they were paid $90 per month" (89-90). Hylton points out, "Another element contributing to guerrilla growth was the breakdown of the rural family as a cultural-economic unit capable of sustaining and protecting its members. Neoliberalism in the midst of escalating warfare had created a generation of rural youth, without future horizons or personal security: the FARC and the ELN offered the possibility of both. Since options were exceeding limited for young women in the countryside, to a much greater extent than the ELN, the FARC offered opportunities for the exercise of political-military power, especially to those lacking secondary school education. Many uneducated young women in rural areas preferred the guerrillas to the prospect of displacement, unemployment, or prostitution" (90).

Imperialism and the Uribe Phenomenon

Under the American administrations of Clinton and George W. Bush, the US provided over $US 4 billion in "aid" over five years to the Colombian state by way of Plan Colombia. The ostensible aim of the mission was to up the anti in the "war on drugs." However, an imperialist war - "America's Other War" [15] - on guerrillas and innocent civilians, best describes the plan in practice. The fact that 80 percent of this "aid" was explicitly directed to the military and police ensured that this would be the outcome. The US provided helicopters, tanks, planes, radar, satellite communications, and training to the Colombian military, all of which were employed against the FARC (101).

The reality of Colombia as the heartland of reaction in a sea of popular Latin American movements has not escaped American officials. Uribe's plan of "democratic security" in Colombia is seen from Washington as a stabilizing force in an Andean region of failed states, indigenous insurrection, toppled presidents, and radical populism. Colombia, moreover, is the US's third largest source of oil from Latin America after Venezuela and Mexico, and many of its probable reserves remain uncharted. "At stake," with Plan Colombia, then, "was control of Colombia's future oil reserves - thought to be located in FARC territory - and the containment of Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian revolution" (102). For the majority of Colombians on the ground, their geopolitical importance proved a curse: "Along with increasing land concentration, expropriation, and dispossession, aerial fumigation under Plan Colombia has been an enormously costly and destructive endeavor, causing widespread respiratory and skin infections in the civilian population, especially children and the elderly, killing licit and illicit crops, and poisoning rivers and soils" (118).

The last four chapters of Evil Hour brilliantly examine the contours of Uribe's Colombia, a brief portrait of which was provided at the outset of this review. While, for Hylton, "The current moment is surely one of Colombia's darkest," he grounds his hope in Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and peace community resistance: "Surveying the Colombian past, we might draw hope from the fact that, time and again, radical-popular movements have arisen to demand self-determination in a more peaceful, equitable, and just polity" (136).

Ambiguities and Absences

What's missing from Evil Hour? On many levels the question is somehow unfair. Hylton has packed an amazing amount into 174 pages already. Nonetheless, in a text rooted in history from below, I would have expected more attention to labour union struggles and the obstacles they face in the contemporary political context. I also would have liked to learn more about multinational corporate complicity surrounding the violence of extractive resource industries, in a country so rich in natural resources. Greater attention to this aspect of capitalist imperialism would have rendered a more complex perspective on the role of imperialism in contemporary Colombia, I expect.

Of course, as Hylton points out, the US is the major external player in the country, but many companies based in other core capitalist states are implicated in the exploitation of Colombia's mineral and oil wealth, and they are backed by the imperial strategies of their respective states, as well as by the might of Colombian paramilitary and military forces. This is dramatically so in the case of my own country, Canada, for example. In terms of ambiguities, terms such as "national-popular," "radical-popular," "social democratic," and "populist" are employed too loosely. The particularities of disparate movements, parties, currents, and epochs become somewhat blurred as a result. These criticisms are easy to fire-off, however, and should not take away from the great strengths of the book overall.

Hard Rock cafe at Atlantis Plaza, Bogota - for the rich and middle class only...

A more serious lacuna in Evil Hour does need to be addressed, however: that is, the question of strategy. This is not a book that purports to be an objective, analytical report, by an uninterested and dispassionate observer. The failing strategies of the FARC are clearly rehearsed in its pages. And a preference is made for the traditions of struggle encapsulated in contemporary and historical resistance in the Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, as well as, more implicitly, for recurring traditions of urban popular struggle rooted in mass movements and power from below. However, we do not actually learn very much about the ideologies and practices of the contemporary Afro-Colombian and indigenous struggles, and even less about their limitations in the current setting. The problem manifests itself, as I see it, in the last quotation offered above, in which Hylton relies on drawing hope that "time and again, radical-popular movements have arisen" and therefore that they might do so again, rather than rising more decisively to the pro-active challenge set by French Marxist philosopher Daniel Bensaïd in an important recent essay: "We need to be specific about what the 'possible' world is and, above all, to explore how to get there."

After the defensiveness of social resistance and class struggle throughout much of the world in the 1980s in the face of neoliberal advance, the current upturn in struggle in Latin America has witnessed a "return of politics." Bensaid notes, "Witness the polemics around the books of Holloway, Negri and Michael Albert, and the differing appraisals of the Venezuelan process and of Lula's administration in Brazil."

He goes on to distinguish between "models" and "strategic hypotheses": "Models are something to be copied; they are instructions for use. A hypothesis is a guide to action that starts from the past experience but is open and can be modified in the light of new experience or unexpected circumstances. Our concern therefore is not to speculate but to see what we can take from past experience, the only material at our disposal. But we always have to recognise that it is necessarily poorer than the present

and the future if revolutionaries are to avoid the risk of doing what the generals are said to do - always fight the last war."

Very few observers based outside Colombia know the dynamics of the country's last wars and popular struggles, as well as its current conjuncture, better than Hylton. Even fewer are revolutionaries, as Hylton is. Many would benefit from his strategic hypothesizing.

Evil Hour is a vital contribution to our understanding of Colombia in a comparative and historical perspective. Activists and scholars alike are indebted to its insights.

Footnotes

[1] Jasmin Hristov. 2006. "Uribe and the Paramilitarization of the Colombian State," New Socialist 59 (Winter): 14-15

[2] ICFTU. 2006. Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights. Available at: http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223986&Language=EN. (Accessed on January 19, 2007).

[3] Francisco Ramírez Cuellar. 2005. The Profits of Extermination: How U.S. Corporate Power is Destroying Colombia. Translated by Aviva Chomsky. Monroe, Main: Common Courage Press: 86-87.

[4] The Profits of Extermination: 84-85.

[5] William Avilés. 2006. "Paramilitarism and Colombia's Low-Intensity Democracy," Journal of Latin American Studies 38: 380

[6] The Profits of Extermination: 82-83

[7] "Uribe and the Paramilitarization...": 14.

[8] Bryan D. Palmer. 2003. "On Peter Linbaugh's and Marcus Redicker's The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic," Historical Materialism 11,4 (December).

[9] See William I. Robinson. 1996. Promoting Polyarchy: Globalizaton, US Intervention, and Hegemony. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[10] Paramilitaries and Colombia's Low-Intensity Democracy": 381.

[11] Emphasis added

[12] Uribe and the Paramilitarization of the Colombian State": 14. Emphasis added.

[13] This point lacks citation in the text. It would have been useful for readers to be directed to further material.

[14] The internal quotations refer to an interview with Mike Davis. Jon Wiener. 2003. "Mike Davis talks about the 'Heroes of Hell'," Radical History Review 85: 227-237.

[15] Doug Stokes. 2005. America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia. London: Zed Books.

Reproductive Rights Today

27 January 2007, by Dianne Feeley

In 2006 opponents of reproductive rights moved on several different fronts:

- In March the South Dakota legislature passed a law, subsequently signed by Governor Mike Rounds, banning abortions in the state. In defiance of the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, the law included no provision to protect the health of a pregnant woman. It stated that life begins at conception and called for possible felony charges against anyone performing an abortion.

- Last summer the Jackson Women's Health Organization, Mississippi's lone remaining abortion clinic, faced two waves of anti-abortion protests.

- By a lopsided 65 to 34 vote, the Senate passed a bill to make it a federal crime for any adult to take a pregnant minor across state lines for an abortion without her parents' consent. The House of Representatives passed an even stricter version last year, so if the two houses can agree on a compromise bill, President Bush stated he would gladly sign it.

- On August 1, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced its plans to make the morning-after pill known as Plan B available over the counter for women 18 and older. This is the first time the FDA ever proposed a separate age status for a non-prescription drug. Plan B, which contains concentrated amounts of the hormone progestin, is the most common form of emergency contraception.

Available in some European countries for more than 20 years, Plan B can prevent a pregnancy within 72 hours of intercourse, but is most effective within the first 24. As an over-the-counter drug with an age restriction, chances are that it will only be available where pharmacists are present.

- On November 8 the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in Gonzales v. Carhart and Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood. Both cases address the federal anti-abortion legislation signed into law by George W. Bush in 2003. The law outlaws a

procedure used in abortions beyond the first trimester, where the woman's health is at serious risk or the fetus has been diagnosed with serious anomalies. Although all three federal district courts that have considered the law have ruled it unconstitutional, the Supreme Court agreed to consider it.

Fighting Back

In each case supporters of reproductive freedom have organized to oppose these actions.

– Immediately after passage of the South Dakota ban on abortion, 38,000 people signed a petition to place the issue on the November ballot. Voters then rejected the ban 55% to 45%. Planned Parenthood, which is the lone abortion provider in the state, reached out to supporters of women's rights nationally, urging women to hold fundraisers, and, through their website and email put supporters in touch with each other. I attended a potluck fundraiser one sunny Sunday afternoon in the Detroit area. Ten of us raised over $600; nationally thousands of dollars were raised and set.

– The Jackson clinic gathered a network of supporters to defend the right of women to seek abortions. The Mississippi Reproductive Freedom Coalition kicked off their reproductive freedom summer with a rally of 300. After finding a suspicious package, the police asked them to disperse, but they left with style - turning into a protest march around the nearby governor's mansion.

– Letters to the editor in hundreds of newspapers across the country have debated the issue of criminalizing adults who aid pregnant minors, with the vast majority pointing to the reality that most teenagers do tell at least their mothers. The handful of those who don't have good reason not to tell- they may have seen what their parents did to an older sister and want to shield themselves from abuse.

– A proposal for parental consent legislation was defeated in California by a 54% to 46% margin, despite heavy voter outreach by the Catholic Church. Cardinal Robert Mahony taped a sermon urging parishioners in the Los Angeles archdiocese to turn out a yes vote. Oregon voters also defeated a similar proposal while an incumbent attorney general, demanding access to patient records from abortion clinics, lost a re-election bid in Kansas.

– The federal law outlawing one abortion procedure is based on incorrect and unscientific findings, does not use medical terms and is so imprecise it could amount to a ban on 10% of all U.S. abortion procedures. It allows no exceptions, maintaining that the procedure is never medically necessary. Physicians, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists disagree. Women who have undergone such procedures also disagree, and have movingly testified in Congress and through the media about the situation which led to their needed D&X.

– Medical professionals and networks of reproductive rights supporters have opposed the FDA's age restriction on Plan B.

Sex Miseducation

Years ago the right wing decided the best way to attack sex education was to demand that such programs teach abstinence as the only effective birth control method. They insist that condoms lead to venereal disease while abortion raises one's risk of breast cancer and infertility.

Despite the lack of any evidence for such claims, several states have legislated these sex "education" programs. For many young women, especially in conservative states like Mississippi, there are few alternative sources for birth control information.

Although U.S. educational policy is decentralized, the priority set by federal funds has a big impact on local school boards. Although in 1999 fully 65% of all school districts mandated sex education programs that combined discussion of abstinence with safe sex practices, today one-third of all students receive abstinence-only programs.

What changed? In 1996, Congress passed Title V of the Social Security Act. This act mandated that order in to receive federal funds, sex education programs had to present abstinence as the only "effective" method against pregnancy or disease.

Combined with the Bush administration's encouraging faith-based organizations to take over sex education programs, studies reveal that the programs present "false, misleading or inaccurate information" about condoms, or contain claims such as "sex outside of marriage increases risk of mental illness, depression and suicide."

In 2006 Washington earmarked $206 million to promote abstinence-only education. Not only are these programs out of step with the evidence about how to teach sex education, but they are out of step with reality. U.S. teenagers are more likely to become pregnant than their European peers, and more likely to be infected by HIV and gonorrhea. The rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are particular threats for African American, Latina and poor women, all of whom have less access to health care.

Restrictions on Abortion

Since the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion, the right wing has sought to prevent hospitals from performing the procedure, restricted clinics with a range of regulations and harassed medical personal both at the clinics and at their homes.

On the federal level, the government excludes abortion from medical coverage for women in the military, denies the procedure to most women receiving public assistance and, both at home and abroad, has defunded family planning programs that provide abortion services.

Given that abortions are not available in over 90% of all the counties throughout the United States (and never have been), women in rural areas are forced to travel several hours to a clinic. While 35% of women between 15-45 obtain an abortion at some point in their reproductive life, one third live in the counties where there are no clinics.

Lack of access means a woman is unable to obtain the abortion as early as she would like in her pregnancy

cycle. It can even mean a more expensive second-semester abortion, raising the possibilities of medical complications.

In 1992 the Supreme Court placed significant restrictions on abortion rights. In Planned Parenthood of Southeast Pennsylvania v. Casey the court ruled that states had the right to pass laws that don't recreate an "undue burden." Supporters of women's rights and their opponents both saw the case as a setback - the right wing was hoping for overturning legal abortion, while most supporters of women's reproductive freedom realized the battle over which restrictions would be considered "undue" had just begun.

Anti-abortion restrictions are not only imposed on U.S. women. For at least half of the period since the Roe v. Wade decision, Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush have imposed a "global gag rule" on all U.S. government family planning assistance (1984-1993 and from 2001 until today). Foreign nongovernmental agencies receiving U.S. funds must not provide information about abortion to pregnant women, provide legal abortions or advocate in support of legal abortion.

While the policy is promoted as being anti-abortion, it prevents organizations receiving U.S. funding from providing contraceptive information to places where abortions are performed. Congress could override administration policy, but never has.

Within the last year approximately 500 anti-abortion bills were introduced in state legislatures and a couple dozen were signed into law. More have been introduced this year. All this harassing legislation has an impact on clinics; there are now approximately 10% fewer clinics than a decade ago.

Today 32 states and the District of Columbia prohibit the use of state funds except when federal funds are available; 46 allow individual health care providers to refuse to participate in an abortion, and 43 allow institutions to refuse to perform abortions. Twenty-two states require parental consent for a teenager seeking an abortion. Only two states require the signature of both parents; most provide for an additional mechanism whereby the teenager can seek a bypass.

Eleven states require parental notification; seven others have passed legislation but it is permanently enjoined. (In 2000, 95,000 women 18 or younger had an abortion.)

Twenty-eight states mandate a woman must be given "counseling" before an abortion that includes: the supposed link between abortion and breast cancer (three states), the ability of a fetus to feel pain (four states), long-term mental health consequences for a woman (three states) or the availability of services and funding should the woman decide to carry the pregnancy to term (26 states).

Twenty-four states require a one-day waiting period. This is a particular problem for women traveling any distance - recent statistics indicate that 25% of the women obtaining abortions travel more than 50 miles; 8% travel more than 100 miles.

In 2003 Congress passed, and President Bush signed, a law that outlawed abortion providers from using one abortion procedure: dilation and evacuation. In most D&Es, the fetus is dismembered or comes apart while on the uterus. But one form occurs when the fetus is extracted intact from the womb. Because the head is too large to come out of the uterus, the physician then compresses it, killing the fetus.

Known as an intact D&E, or a D&X, many physicians see the procedure as less traumatic for the woman than dismantling the fetus within the uterus. At this stage the fetus is not viable, and in any case a deformed fetus, lacking most of its brain or spinal cord, couldn't survive.

By labeling this procedure as a "partial-birth abortion," anti-abortion activists make the point that such a procedure is a slippery slope to infanticide. They see banning D&X procedures, just like imposing parental consent laws, as hot-button issues that can win public support for ending abortions through extending more and more restrictions.

In South Dakota, immediately after voters turned back the anti-abortion law, State Representative Roger Hunt (R) stated that it was too early to predict the next steps abortion opponents might take. "We're going to take it one day at a time," and then announced that the state's health department was going to consider regulations on abortion clinics. (The state's only clinic is operated by Planned Parenthood in Sioux Falls.)

Leslee Unruh, campaign manager for the Vote Yes for Life on Six, felt that they had succeeded in altering the anti-abortion's rhetoric by emphasizing that "abortion hurts women." She felt that "They are never going to win, and we're never going to quit," stating that similar anti-abortion campaigns would take place in West Virginia and Texas.

Clinic Blockades

These institutional strategies accompany the right wing's in-your-face actions at clinics. Twenty years ago they were able to mobilize week-long protests of several thousand; supporters of women's rights organized counter pickets.

The radical right didn't just picket. They attempted to "save" women from abortions, stalked medical personnel, traced the license plates of any cars going to the clinic, and put out wanted posters.

In the end Congress was forced to enact legislation protecting the clinics, but not before the murders of three doctors performing abortions - Drs. John Britton (Florida), Barnett Slepian (Buffalo, NY) and David Gunn (Pensacola, FL), and Gunn's escort, James Barrett.

This summer both Operation Save America (descendent of Operation Rescue) and Oh Saratoga picketed the Jackson Women's Health Organization, which stayed open throughout. They attempted to disrupt services at two local churches, destroyed and burned pages of the Qu'ran as well as a gay pride flag at a local church.

The protesters, ranging from 25-100, brought their signature blown-up fetus photos. Operation Save America protesters also targeted the neighborhood of the clinic's gynecologist, Dr. Joseph Booker. They went door to door, telling his neighbors that Booker was "a baby killer." Throughout the protests Dr. Booker, a 62-year old African American, had a police escort. But like other abortion providers, he took it all in stride.

Restricting the Emergency Pill

The right wing has made emergency contraception, like abortion, a battleground. The right opposes it because it represents a "slippery slope." Some even claim it works the same way an abortion does and therefore is "taking a life."

In December 2003 the FDA's advisory panel voted 28-0 that Plan B was "safe for use in a nonprescription setting," voting 23 to 4 in favor of granting it over-the counter-status. But following the 2003 vote, Dr. W. David Hager, a Christian conservative and Bush appointee to the panel, stated his fear that if Plan B were freely available, it would increase sexual promiscuity among teenagers.

In May 2004 the FDA denied the drug manufacturer's application, citing some of Hager's reasoning. Two months later the manufacturer reapplied for permission to sell it to women ages 16 and up. When, in August 2005, the FDA announced it would delay making a decision, Dr. Susan F. Wood, director of the Office of Women's Health at the FDA, resigned in protest.

In response to this foot dragging, the Morning-After Pill Conspiracy, a grassroots coalition of feminist groups, has been engaged in civil disobedience. Over 4,000 women have signed a pledge to distribute the pills to those who need them, period.

Annie Tummino, lead plaintiff in a suit filed against the FDA stated, "If you're old enough to get pregnant, you're old enough to decide that you don't want to be pregnant."

Following the FDA's decision to allow Plan B to be sold without a prescription to women 18 and old, the National Organization for Women is launching an Emergency Contraception Campaign to make sure that the decision is fully implemented on the one hand and to push to eliminate the age requirement on the other. (See "Access: Reclaiming Our Options One Pharmacy at a Time," by Pat Reuss and Jan Erickson, National NOW Times, Fall 2006)

The Morning-After-Pill Conspiracy has also pledged to campaign for unrestricted access. They have organized speak outs and civil disobedience actions, including a protest on the steps of the FDA building in Rockville, Maryland.

The Radical Right Agenda

According to a 2006 study by the Guttmacher Institute, there are 6.4 million pregnancies a year in the United States, 3.1 million of which are unintended and 1.3 million that end in abortion.

In the seven years since the last such study, the overall unintended-pregnancy rate (about half of all pregnancies) has remained unchanged - but women below the poverty level were four times as likely to have an unplanned pregnancy and five times as likely to have an unplanned birth. The ultraright, however, has a one-size-fits-all solution: poor women who aren't married should be encouraged to get married!

While most of the right-wing's rhetoric against women's bodies revolves around restricting access to abortion and attacking lesbians and others regarded by the right as sexually deviant, their agenda is much larger. They seek to reestablish the "traditional family" as they imagine it so that "values" and "stability" will cover over the social and economic problems that confront Americans today. That ideology just isn't in synch with reality.

Just before Thanksgiving, President Bush appointed anti-birth control activist Dr. Eric Keroack to oversee the nation's family planning program. Keroack served as medical director to a number of "crisis pregnancy centers," facilities that give misleading information to pregnant women. The appointment of Dr. Keroack symbolizes the radical right's agenda for women.

Sources:

Guttmacher Institute (www.guttmacher.org), Morning-After-Pill Conspiracy (www.mapconspiracy.org), National Organization for Women (www.now.org), Planned Parenthood (www.plannedparenthood.org), "Reversing Courts: The Impact of 'Faith-Based' Sexual Health and Family Planning Policies At Home and Abroad," AnneMarie Murdock (www.contemporaryfamilies.org), SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Care Collective (www.sistersong.net/reproductive justice.html).

This article first appeared in Against the Current.

The Leadership Succession Bears the Mark of Continuity

27 January 2007, by Jean Castillo

Fidel with brother Raul

For the present generation of Cuban adults socialism is synonymous with shortages, bureaucracy and vertical and authoritarian power relations. How did we get there after the victory of a revolution whose slogans of social justice and national sovereignty were taken up and implemented by millions of Cubans for more half a century?

Over the last 15 years the revolutionary process has marked time. With the collapse of the Soviet Union Cuban had to adopt itself to an international context with no safety net. That led to radical changes in the way people behaved, to a recomposition of social norms, to a turning upside down of the social pyramid: with the development of tourism prostitution returned and jobs as waiters or taxi drivers became much more lucrative than those of teachers and doctors.

Almost the entire population could not live on their salaries alone. With the exception of the"remesas" - the money sent by exiles - there remained few alternatives ways to survive in a situation of shortages of everything. The Cuban expression "invent, resolve, find the way out" [1] has today become "steal, corrupt, bribe".

So what legitimacy can the revolutionary process still lay claim to today, when the foundation of values on which it rested is eroding as the double morality [2] infiltrates Cuban society and we can see the return of certain capitalist values?

In this context, the leadership of Fidel Castro functioned in spite of everything as a compass. So when the historic leader handed over power, without however completely abandoning the conduct of affairs, and reserving for himself the possibility of returning, the Cuban population, for a large part disoriented, decided to wait.

What popular base has the revolution today?

When you walk through streets of Havana, away from the tourist quarters, what is first of all evident is fatigue, discontent, disappointment. If you risk asking a question the reply is invariably followed by the refrain "ah, it's not easy" or the slightly more dynamic "it's the struggle, comrade" [3]. The daily struggle, not the revolutionary struggle. Because to succeed in obtaining the food and products that are necessary for an ordinary life, not a luxurious one, is a real battle everyday. Certain things are only available in foreign currency, such as oil, whose price varied between 2.10 and 2.30 CUC . [4] a litre in the summer of 2006, whereas the salary of a state employee is on average 15 CUC a month.

The government knows thi,s but refuses to increase wages for fear of setting off an inflationary spiral. So the majority of Cubans live according to their old national maxim "the state pretends to pay me, so I pretend to work". So we can only wonder at the figure of economic growth (11.8%) that was announced by the Cuban authorities for the year 2005 [5]. Since income from work has become symbolic, the Cubans "find a way" to survive in some other way.

This economy of poverty leads to a loss of ideological references and to a certain recomposition of socialist norms. There is an anecdote circulating according to which a pupil explained to his history teacher during an examination that he lived at present in a socialist regime, since there was poverty, whereas before the fall of the Berlin Wall Cuba was capitalist; we lacked nothing.

To be able to live when the salary alone cannot cover the needs of families, Cubans are forced to take time off work to go and look in the streets for the resources that are necessary to survive, or else to steal and corrupt in their own workplace, which is sometime an important source of revenues. The workers in cigar factories, oil refineries, building enterprises, daily steal a not negligible part of their production. Thus an ordinary worker in a cigar factory estimated in June 2006 his daily gains at 1500 Cuban pesos, whereas the monthly salary that the state pays him for his work is around 400 Cuban pesos. The gains of foremen and factory managers are, thanks to their functions, considerably more than that.

To try and deal with the situation the government is fighting on the terrain of ideas. In 1999 there was launched the "battle of ideas" whose main objective is to bring back into the arms of the socialist fatherland, with its collective ideals, the sheep who have strayed onto the road of capitalism and triumphant individualism.

However, two serious mistakes undermine this campaign: it does not confront the real economic problem which is the source of the disillusionment of Cubans in relation to socialism, and it was launched by the veterans of the revolution, the old leaders of the revolutionary army, not very suited to mobilize on a large scale and in a lasting way around themselves hundreds of thousands of young people. As long as the problematic relationship between consumer prices and wages has not been resolved and there has not been any renovation of the bureaucratic and dogmatic functioning of the regime, no political attempt will be able to really convince Cubans that there exists a valid socialism, one that is synonymous with neither poverty nor repression.

"Socialism" or "communism" have become symbols of authoritarian, bureaucratic and vertical systems. It is worrying to see that as in the former Soviet Union, the deviant practice of functionaries at the highest level has made possible the amalgamation between a kind of regime, from its economic and political choices to its objectives of social justice, and certain dogmatic and repressive practices against everything that is not in the defined political line.

Cuban youth is today responding to the hyper-politicization of public space (advertising hoardings on the roads, media, compulsory meetings at work and where people live) by a marked disinterest in politics. As for the Cubans of the previous generation, when you ask them to define themselves politically, they say that they are above all "Fidelistas". It is

respect and admiration for Fidel Castro, as the historic leader of the national social transformation, which makes of these Cubans people who "conform" to the ideology that is promoted by the authorities, and not their attachment to a system of "socialist" ideas, values, and practices. That is why the spectre of his coming disappearance is preoccupying for the survival of the regime. The leading elites understand this well and ceaselessly repeat that the passage of power to Raul Castro backed by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) is perfectly legitimate and that it is taking place in the greatest revolutionary continuity.

The government's strategies at a time of unrecognized political crisis

The Cuban regime has been built since it came into existence on cycles of opening and closing, of the greatest tolerance followed by the harshest repression. Since 2003 a repressive cycle has clearly opened, with first of all the launching of a campaign against illegal minor trafficking and commerce at the beginning of 2003, then the arrest of the 75 dissidents in the spring of that year. Since then we can see a recentralization of the economy, the putting in place of mechanisms of social control, reinforced with the creation of the corps of social workers which is made up of 28,000 young Cubans and the unleashing of the campaign against corruption in 2005.

On the economic level the partial opening up to the market and the right for 150 trades to exercise more or less freely their profession have been put into question. In fact, the licenses which give people the right to exercise their profession are not always renewed, and few new licenses are issued. The frequency of control checks is constantly increasing, although sometimes one can question their effectiveness, given the common practice of collusive transactions among Cubans, in other words exchanging favors: the boss closes his eyes to the fiddles of his subordinates provided they reserve a share for him. Since almost all Cubans make part of their income through illegal trade, it is not in their interest to denounce anyone else because behaving in that way could easily turn against the informer.

The economy continues to be dual: in the national currency, the Cuban peso, for the commodities that are sold at a low price, in convertible pesos (in US dollars until the end of 2004 at which time the dollar was withdrawn from circulation in favor of the new peso) for trade in foreign currency. It seems probable that in time the government's objective is to fuse these two systems into one, with a single currency. But the present strategic choices do not seem to confirm that. In reality the priority that is given to tourism and the service economy (biotechnologies, high-quality medical services, welcoming Latin Americans in particular for simple surgical operations that are not accessible in their own countries) goes along with a territorial and social segmentation of Cuban society.

The spaces that are given over to the market economy are conceived of and function as enclaves within the Cuban national economy. Some neighborhoods on the outskirts of big cities have become the new centres for receiving Latin Americans who are waiting for the medical services promised by operation Milagro [6] These places are consciously cut off from the centres where the rest of the Cuban population lives. They are well away from the town centre and are difficult to reach by public transport. In the same way the tourist centres have been planned from the beginning as enclaves, most often on the coast, and run in such a way that the contacts between foreigners and Cubans are kept to the strict minimum.

However, these policies have not been crowned with success. More and more foreign tourists, students, journalists, and businessmen mix with Cubans in the cities and particularly in Havana, which has made possible the development of prostitution, gambling, and new forms of petty crime. Part of Cuban youth no longer works and waits for the "yuma", the foreigner, who provides their livelihood. Many workers of other generations have made similar choices: they leave their job in the public administration as a teacher, doctor, lawyer, or nurse to become a waiter, a taxi driver, a guide in museums or in town, professions that are much more lucrative because they are paid in foreign currency.

To stop the inexorable exodus of qualified professional people towards the market sector (both formal and informal) of the Cuban economy the government has launched big projects to repair the two sectors that have been the most damaged: health and education. These are "maestros (teachers) emergentes" and "infirmieros (nurses) emergentes". "Emergentes" can be translated as emergent, but also as urgent. So these programmes have become in Cuba the object of endless jokes about the real urgency of training teachers and nurses in the face of the extreme shortages that the country is confronted with. Given short training courses directed towards the most concrete aspect of their profession, these young people, who have been quickly accorded their diplomas, do not have the same degree of knowledge as their predecessors on the job, and Cubans complain of the worsening public service in hospitals and schools.

Bandages on wooden legs, these programmes can therefore only be very short term solutions and can in no case replace a real questioning of the way the nation's human resources are distributed across different sectors. If the population is waiting, the dominant impression one gets is that the government and the top civil services are also waiting and do not dare to launch real programmes to renovate the project of social transformation that was at the origin of the Cuban revolution. Such programmes are however indispensable in order to safeguard the social gains that have been won over nearly half the century.

A controlled passage of power

When on the evening of July 31st 2006 the news was announced of Fidel Castro's illness and consequently the passage of power to his brother Raul, the Cubans of Miami invaded the streets of their city for a big spontaneous party. On the island of

Cuba the streets were deserted and silent. In the following days very few people risked touching on the subject in a public conversation, whether in the office, on the building site, or at the bus stop. Deprived of the slightest information concerning the health of their head of state, closely controlled by the police, state security and the army, reinforced for the occasion by tens of thousands of reservists, people were in fact excluded from the process of political decision-making that governed the passage of power.

So the Cubans decided to wait. Paradoxically, whereas Cuban public space is extremely dominated by ideology a part of the Cuban population, which we cannot measure exactly, seems very depoliticized. Because they know that they will not be consulted, because they know that they will have no influence on the strategic choices that are made in the name of the nation by leaders disconnected from the realities of precarious daily lives. The passivity that is linked to depoliticization is worrying because it could in time make possible a capitalist restoration almost without resistance, as was the case when the Soviet Union became Russia again.

Invoked everywhere, the Cuban people therefore has no real existence anywhere. Mythified, encouraged, harangued by the leading cadres of organizations and of the government, the Cuban people is in reality fragmented, discouraged, tired, engaged in a short term battle with daily necessities and less and less in tune with the grandiloquence of the speeches of the leaders about the "revolutionary sacrifices" that have to be made for the future of the nation. Faced with this popular disaffection for the regime and its highest representatives, at this extremely delicate and dangerous moment, the moment of the passage of power (for the moment officially provisional) between Fidel and Raul Castro, the government is firmly insisting on continuity. Continuity between the two Castro brothers, the continuity of the revolutionary paradigm and its values, the continuity that is ensured by the role of the PCC as a political vanguard.

In August meetings of support to Fidel were organized everywhere, invariably closed by interventions of militants wishing the "Comandante" a speedy recovery. Changes had already taken place from the month of July on the institutional level: the party was put forward again, after having been for decades a framework for approving decisions rather than making political proposals. Its permanent secretariat has been reactivated. In public spaces placards praising the party as the only legitimate heir of the revolutionary process have appeared.

Political continuity is therefore the present political programme of the heirs designated by Fidel Castro in the proclamation that was read by his personal secretary on July 31st 2006. It is certainly obvious that it is not in the interest of the leaders to propose radically reforming the regime while the historic leader of the revolution is still alive. It is legitimate that they should take support from the fragile status quo that exists at the moment. But this position can't be maintained for very long. Inside the country Raul Castro does not have the charismatic authority that his brother has.

Abroad he doesn't have the same political status as him either. So it will be much more difficult for him to face up to the pressures, whether they come from Cubans living on the island who seem to want a change, certainly progressive, which will make it possible both to engage more freely in trade and to obtain civil and political freedoms while maintaining the revolutionary social gains: or from the international community and the Cuban exile community, who are pushing for a systemic political change which would in time give birth to a new neo-liberal capitalist society on the Western model.

When Fidel Castro was finally unable to lead the Cuban delegation to the Non-Aligned Summit that was held in Havana in mid-September 2006, the speculation about his state of health and the supposed "transition" which will take place in Cuba were widespread. It is certain that the historic leader of the revolution is weakened. It seems difficult to imagine that he will ever take back his positions at the highest level and cancel the delegation of power, although it is still provisional, to his brother Raul.

It is however very premature or already obsolete to talk of a Cuban transition. It is obsolete because for 15 years now the analysts have thought they could see a "transition" in Cuba without anything fundamentally changing. It is premature because you cannot project political schemas that were created during the regime changes in the South American cone or during the passage from really existing socialism to democracy and the market economy in Eastern Europe, onto Cuban reality.

There exist in Cuba progressive forces who are trying to make the ossified structures of a socialism that was inherited from the Soviet Union evolve towards a socialism that can combine all civil, political and social freedoms and maintain an economic model whose objectives are social justice and real participation by the citizens. These forces are weak. There does not exist in Cuba an independent trade union force or social movements that speak with a voice distinct from that of the government in the public space. All the mass organizations [7] without exception are in reality para-state organizations, which function more as transmission belts for the orientations that are decided at the highest level than as structures in defense of the interests of their members.

Some members are trying to renovate their internal functioning from below, since they are unable to change the practices from above. Others are trying to build within these unavoidable structures, to which all Cubans are supposed to belong, spaces for reflection on the revolution as a political process. What is involved is small groups who are not formally organized, we should really speak of a loose network which is more or less elastic depending on the period.

These groups do not of course constitute a strong dynamic for renovation in the real sense of the world in Cuba, but they are fighting

within their own reality to safeguard the revolutionary conquests at the same time as reoccupying the political spaces that have been in part confiscated by a certain leading elite enjoying new privileges since the fall of the Berlin wall. It is on these forces that we have to take a chance, so that the island is not once again transformed into a banana republic or into an annex of the United States, economically dependent, politically dominated, and socially unjust.

Footnotes

[1] In Spanish, “Inventar, resolvar, alcanzarse”.

[2] Publicly supporting revolutionary values so as not to have problems with the authorities, while at the same having pactices that are far removed from these values (theft, lying, embezzlement, corruption, etc.).

[3] “Aah, no es facil”. ‘Es la lucha, companero”.

[4] CUC is the convertible peso. 1 CUC = 0.85 euros

[5] Granma, official press organ of the PCC, Deecmber 22nd, 2005.

[6] Literally, “Operation Miracle”, whose aim is to restore sight to those who are wholly or partly suffering from cataracts, by means of an operation that is simple, but expensive in the other countries of Latin America.

[7] These organizations are : the CTC (Cuban Workers’ Confederation); the FMC (Federation of Cuban Women); the CDR (committees in Defence of the Revolution); the ANAP (National Association of Small Farmers); the FEU (Federation of University Students); the FEEM (Federation of Middle School Students); the Pioneers (primary school pupils) and the UJC (Union of Young Communists).

The Democrats’ Domestic Agenda

24 January 2007, by David Finkel

Barring a Bush veto, the minimum wage - which ought to be doubled immediately, then indexed to the inflation rate - will be raised in two steps with great fanfare, from $5.15 to a whopping $7.25 an hour. This won’t touch the crisis of the working poor in this country, but it will certainly create important opportunities for posturing and speechifying with the approach of The Most Important Presidential Election of Our Lifetime in 2008.

(This raises the question - have you ever heard any pundit or major political figure declare an election to be “the second or third least important in our lifetime”? But let’s not digress.)

Some kind of legislation will probably come forward to enable Medicare to bargain for drug prices. This reform may even reduce pharmaceutical profits from obscene to merely grotesque. The rational solution of universal single-payer health care isn’t on the radar screen. Forty to fifty million people in the United States will remain without any health coverage.

Some communities are standing up to resist the Wal-Mart plague, resentful that local hospitals must provide tax-funded emergency-room care for workers who don’t earn enough to buy into the company’s health plan. Don’t expect serious support from Congressional Democrats on that score, however, as Wal-Mart has shrewdly diversified its political investment portfolio to include both capitalist parties.

Democrats and Republican “moderates” have promised some kind of ostensible immigration reform. They’ll aim to cut out the more lunatic right-wing schemes of rounding up millions for summary deportation, which helped produce a large Latino voting swing away from the Republicans.

The brutal raids on immigrant Swift meatpacking workers shows how much the Bush regime cares about that - and the Democrats’ silence on this racist atrocity shows how much they intend to do about it. The government has broken its previous records for cynical manipulation by charging people not only with immigration violations, but “identity theft.”

The Congressional “moderates,” after many compromises and concessions, may produce an onerous “guest worker” program - combined with employment and social service restrictions that force undocumented immigrant workers deeper into the informal economy. The result? Those who can’t get “guest worker” status will become permanent “criminals,” adding still another layer to the multi-tier stratified U.S. labor force.

In the name of assisting the embattled American worker, Democrats will engage in some degree of protectionism. China is always a handy target, since its monumental abuses of labor and human rights don’t have to be invented. But as Au Loong-Yu shows in his article in this issue, protectionism by powerful states has nothing to do with international workers’ solidarity.

Further, of course, China-bashing affords a convenient cover for doing nothing about the wave of union-busting bankruptcies, anti-strike injunctions, or National Labor Relations Board rulings that strip workers, who may sometimes perform duties as “supervisors,” of union rights.

Expect Little or Nothing

We're likely to see some showy Congressional investigations of some of the Bush regime's most flamboyant abuses of power - perhaps, for example, Donald Rumsfeld's personal approval of torture, since that's now out in the open and Rumsfeld is safely gone - but no serious consideration of closing Guantanamo, where basic rules of due process have been officially abolished.

There will likely be some interesting new light thrown on war profiteering by Halliburton, Bechtel and other Bush-Cheney cronies. But don't hold your breath for penetrating Congressional scrutiny of ongoing secret detention, interrogation and "extraordinary rendition" (international kidnapping). Don't expect Congressional Democrats to get all worked up over the physical torture and mental destruction of U.S. citizen Jose Padilla, let alone hundreds of foreign detainees held without charges.

Barack Obama is Hillary Clinton's main competitor for Dem nomination

Most of all, there's absolutely no Democratic toleration of the I-word (impeachment), as the Pelosi-Reid leadership has made abundantly clear. Michigan Representative John Conyers, ready and eager to submit Articles of Impeachment when Democrats were out of power, has been silenced since the election. It's hardly accidental that as of mid-December, Pelosi had not announced what should be Conyers' automatic appointment to chair the House Judiciary Committee.

What's even worse, the most appalling crises in our society will remain untouched by the incoming Congress.

- Eighteen months past Hurricane Katrina,the alleged reconstruction of New Orleans is a bureaucratic and corrupt failure as massive as - well, as Iraq. Tens of thousands of African-American citizens of the city remain without housing or the assistance promised to them. Public education (as Christian Roselund shows in this issue) is effectively destroyed. Government policy is to finish the work that the hurricane began - to make the city uninhabitable for its Black poor majority.

- Environmental destruction and violent climate instability aren't just looming. They are well underway and, without drastic changes in global energy policy and economic priorities within two decades or less, will become catastrophic well within this century. With the incoming Democratic majority, it's true that the key House and Senate Committees will no longer give platforms to global-warming deniers. This is a very long way from translating into action or even effective pressure on the Bush regime.

- It's not only the income gap between rich and poor that's widening in the United States. Racial injustice remains the fundamental social reality of the United States - closely related and central to the crises of the cities, of education and public health.

Voters in Michigan - particularly male white workers hit by job losses and plant closings, and deeply fearful of their own families' future - voted almost 3-2 to ban affirmative action by state universities and agencies. This vicious initiative (packaged by its backers as the "Michigan Civil Rights Initiative"!) is a warning that racism remains alive and virulent beneath the official fiction of legal "equality."

African Americans in Michigan were rightly angered when state Democrats, while opposing the initiative, put no serious resources into the struggle to defeat it.

The Democratic Party, as voting results prove beyond any doubt, owes not only its Congressional majority but its survival as a national political party to the loyalty of its African-American base. What it gives in return is a sad indictment of capitalist politics, and an illustration of the desperate urgency of an independent political direction. To discuss those prospects would take us far beyond the squalid prospects of the new Congress.

- This article first appeared in Against the Current

The Iraqi Debacle

23 January 2007, by Gilbert Achcar

Gilbert Achcar. I think that there is something here that must be clarified regarding the polls. What seems undisputable is that there is an overwhelming majority of Iraqis asking for a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Naturally, few wish that the coalition troops evacuate the country all of a sudden in a precipitous manner, within say a few days, in the absence of agreement between the major Iraqi forces. That is because, in the present conditions, it could just leave the way wide-open for an all-out civil war in the country.

But, at the same time, the great majority of Iraqis see that the very presence of these foreign troops is fueling the deterioration of the situation: it has fueled the growth of the insurgency for a long time, and now it is fueling the civil war itself. The sectarian strife is being constantly fueled indeed by the presence of U.S. troops and by the political behavior of the occupation authorities.

This is why people who want these troops out believe that this is one of the key conditions for restoring peace in the country — if that is still possible

at all. Setting a deadline for the coalition troops' withdrawal, a timetable, would create favorable conditions — so many people believe — for speeding up the political process: it would allow the Iraqis to get to some kind of political agreement and find ways to stabilize the situation and reverse the sectarian war dynamics that have been unfolding.

This view is actually shared even by a major part of the establishment in the United States. When members of the establishment say: "We should set objectives, we should warn the Maliki government that if this or that is not achieved, we will withdraw our troops," that is indeed an acknowledgment of the fact that the very prospect of the departure of coalition troops from Iraq would put strong pressure on the Iraqis to reach a settlement.

But that is precisely what people in the antiwar movement have been saying for a long time, that the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops is one of the main conditions for any serious attempt to get out of the nightmarish situation that is unfolding in Iraq. It is only one of the major conditions, of course, and is not sufficient by itself. No one is saying that if the troops withdraw or a timetable is fixed, a miracle will occur and everything will become fine in Iraq. But, there is one thing that is obvious, at the very least, and that is that the presence of these troops is fostering the deterioration of the situation.

Paradoxically, the troops are actually providing a cover for various sectarian forces to launch their sectarian attacks, because they know that the presence of coalition troops prevents, to a certain degree, massive Iraqi retaliation and provides them with some impunity with regard to their sectarian opponents. We are in that situation. To go back to your question, a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition troops is what the overwhelming majority of Iraqis want and what various anti-occupation Iraqi forces have been demanding for a long while now. That is what the Shiite Sadrists are demanding and fighting for politically and, on the Sunni side, that is what the Association of Muslim Scholars has also been demanding for a long time.

Q. How do you judge Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki? Are his disagreements with Washington carefully staged to give him popular support or are they indicative of a genuine divergence of interests?

GA. Staged? I do not think there is anything "staged" here because Maliki is not exactly the kind of actor with whom you would take the risk of engaging in any theater performance, especially if it co-stars George W. Bush! No, I think that there is a genuine divergence of interests at stake. They share some goals or, to put it more accurately, Maliki believes that he shares some goals with the U.S. administration. He believes that Washington shares his plan for building up the Iraqi official forces and letting the Iraqis gradually take control of the situation in their country.

This has been a stated goal of the Bush administration for a long time and the Maliki government obviously buys into this claimed purpose of the occupation, though not without some degree of skepticism. (They complain for instance that the bulk of Iraqi armed forces are not yet under their control and that these forces are not equipped with the needed weaponry.) But beyond that, there are many divergences among them: Maliki is a member of the Shiite coalition in Iraq and the permanent pressure of the Bush administration for more concessions to the Sunni side, or to former Baathists, are not to their liking.

In the same way, when the Bush administration exerts pressure on Maliki not to hamper a crackdown on Sadr's militias, that is also not to the taste of a prime minister who actually counts on Muqtada al-Sadr as an ally of his own Dawa party within the Shiite Coalition. One should not forget how Nuri al-Maliki was chosen for his post, after a fierce political fight within the Shiite coalition pitting his party against the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) who was supporting its own candidate, Adel Abdel-Mahdi. The fight was actually between the Dawa party's Ibrahim al-Jaafari and the SCIRI's Abdel-Mahdi. Jaafari was supported by Sadr and strongly opposed by Washington. A compromise — face-saving for both Washington and Sadr — was reached eventually, giving the position to Maliki, who is Jaafari's second-in-command. So Maliki still relies on the Sadrists and needs their support, if he is not to be pushed aside and replaced by Abdel-Mahdi.

Another area where there is obvious disagreement between the Bush administration and what Maliki represents is, of course, the issue of the relation to Iraq's regional environment — above all the attitude towards Iran. Maliki represents a coalition of forces that are very close to Iran. It is only natural that they do not share the views that prevail in the Bush administration, whereby Iran and Syria are designated as the regional villains, the main enemies and main source of trouble.

There are obvious differences therefore between Maliki and what he represents, on the one hand, and Washington on the other hand. That is actually why you hear so many complaints about Maliki and calls for removing him, in Washington and within the establishment. In the same way, you had strong complaints against his predecessor, Jaafari, which led the United States to fight harshly against the renewal of his mandate when it expired, after the December 2005 elections opened the way to forming a new government.

To be sure, there is a certain degree of collusion between Maliki and the U.S. occupation, and on that score, of course, there is a clear difference between the collusion that Maliki is engaged in and the hostility to the occupation of his allies in the Sadrist current. But despite this collusion, there is no total convergence of interests and Maliki is not just a "puppet" as he is depicted by some. That is excessively simplistic a characterization for such a complex situation.

Q. The Bush administration has been pushing hard for the Iraqi National Assembly to enact a new

oil law. Press reports seem to indicate that the law will be extremely lucrative to foreign oil companies. Is the Iraqi legislature preparing to turn the economy over to multinational corporations?

GA. "Turn the economy over to multinational corporations" would also be an exaggerated statement. We still have to see what the final draft of the law that will be submitted for parliament's approval looks like. True, there have been some hints in the press about successive versions of the draft, but no report claimed to know for sure how the final document will be phrased. One thing seems certain: whatever law they pass will open the way for agreements with foreign companies.

That is for a simple and obvious reason, however: it is that Iraq by itself does not have the technological and financial means at present to repair and, even less so, to develop its oil infrastructure and production. The real issue is the kind of conditions or concessions that are going to be made available to foreign companies. We will have to see if there is going to be a real and proper debate about this issue in the legislative assembly. So all this is still an open question and, of course, there are forces fighting against granting any major concessions to foreign oil companies at the expense of Iraq's interests. The Federation of Oil Unions (previously General Union of Oil Employees) has been waging campaign after campaign against any disguised privatization of oil production and for maintaining and enhancing the gains that they do have nowadays, especially the participation of workers representatives in the management of the industry.

We shall see what happens when the final draft gets to the Parliament. Then after that, we shall see how any law, whatever law it is, will be implemented — for instance, with which foreign companies and under what conditions. Because then there will still be a wide margin for choice: will Washington be able to impose its own companies, or will the Iraqi government try to diversify its partners in the oil sector, including Russian, Chinese and — why not? — Iranian companies? This also remains to be seen.

Q. A recent Pentagon report has said that Muqtada al-Sadr's militia is more of a threat to the U.S. military than is the insurgency and Newsweek has termed al-Sadr "the most dangerous man in Iraq." What do you make of these claims?

GA. They are definitely correct. They are correct for one obvious reason. Not that Muqtada al-Sadr and his forces are doing more harm presently to the occupation troops than, for instance, some of the Sunni "insurgent" groups, as they are called. That is not the problem, although there are military actions undertaken continuously by the Sadrists against the occupation. The real issue is not purely military, but a combination of political and military considerations. Sadr is a formidable enemy of the occupation because he is very popular. He is the only force with a radical anti-occupation stance to enjoy massive popular support and have the ability to organize this support — moreover a support in the majority community, 60% of the Iraqi population, the Arab Shiites.

Add to that the fact that Muqtada al-Sadr entered into an alliance with Iran that increased very much the threat that he represents in Washington's eyes. That is why he is seen by the U.S. establishment unanimously as "the most dangerous man in Iraq." He definitely is that man. That is also why they will try by any means to get rid of him. He knows perfectly well that he is a priority target. He tries to protect himself, knowing that if they find a way to assassinate him, they will not hesitate to do so. His militias, the Mahdi Army, are also a major target.

One of the main goals of the Bush administration's so-called "new strategy" for Iraq is to try to foster a division within the Shiite coalition and create a coalition of forces that would include the Kurds, some Arab Sunni forces and those Arab Shiite forces willing to collaborate with the occupation. They wish to isolate Sadr so as to open the way to a crackdown on his militias. What remains to be seen is whether the other Shiite members of the Shiite coalition will agree to that scheme. For the time being, they do not seem to be trying to ostracize the Sadrists. The main reason is probably Iran, which has powerful leverage over these forces, especially the SCIRI. Tehran is vigilant; it is exerting strong pressure in order to thwart the scenario that Washington is trying to implement. Iran is working intensively to maintain the unity of the Shiite coalition and prevent any clash between Shiite forces, or a situation whereby the Sadrists would be left in isolation facing the occupation.

Q. How would you assess Muqtada al-Sadr?

GA. First of all, Muqtada al-Sadr is, of course, a Shiite Islamic fundamentalist and very much so — just look at the "moral order" his followers impose in areas under their control. However, that is not his main single characteristic because there are many other brands of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq and, for instance, all other major components of the Shiite United Iraqi Coalition are also Islamic fundamentalist forces.

In reality, the distinctive feature of Muqtada al-Sadr's current is the fact that it is a populist brand of Islamic fundamentalism. His populism translates, on the one hand, into a hard-line opposition to the occupation reflecting the aspirations of broad sections of the masses, especially in Baghdad where the occupation is faced most directly, and in some areas of the south. On the other hand, Sadr's populism is expressed in the fact that his movement tries to speak for the masses in their protest against their very poor living conditions. They speak and organize against the lack of public services, against all such shortcomings, while making sure to always blame the occupation — and not Maliki's (or before him Jaafari's) government — as bearing responsibility for the miserable conditions. It is through championing such demands as well as through its radical anti-occupation stance that the Sadrist current was able to build, in a matter of a couple of years, an impressive force.

At the beginning of the occupation, in the first months, Sadr's was a small

group and some tended to believe that it would remain negligible. But after a few months, it started growing until you had the clashes with the occupation in 2004. The Sadrist current was already acknowledged to have become a serious threat to the occupation, and it continued to build itself after that period mainly through political means, achieving a very strong presence in the country. It is believed to be the most popular militant current among the Shiites.

The sectarian anti-Shiite attack in Samarra in February 2006, almost one year ago, was a major turning point in the Iraqi situation and very much precipitated the slide into sectarian war. The Mahdi Army, that is the militias that claim allegiance to Muqtada al-Sadr, or at least major sections of the Mahdi Army, took part in the sectarian retaliations that occurred in reaction to the Samarra attack. In the year elapsed since then, sections of the Mahdi Army have been deeply involved in the sectarian war.

In the eyes of their community, they appear as defensive forces protecting the Shiite areas against incursions by Sunni sectarian forces. But in Arab Sunnis' eyes, they appear as a Shiite sectarian force and are accused of conducting sectarian crimes, reprisals, mass killings and so on. To be sure, this has greatly affected the credibility that Sadr enjoyed in 2004 and 2005 as a non-sectarian, Iraqi Arab nationalist force opposed to the occupation. His image is now reduced to that of a sectarian Shiite force, an armed wing of the Shiite community. This, of course, has badly affected his own political project, which was to build his leadership as a cross-sectarian Iraqi one.

Q. Some accounts have suggested that some members of Sadr's Mahdi Army are no longer under Sadr's control. Does this seem to you to be the case?

GA. I do believe that that is perfectly true. Sadr's Mahdi Army is quite different from the SCIRI's Badr organization. The latter is a quasi-military organization that was built and trained in exile in Iran, when Saddam Hussein was still in power, and which came back to Iraq after the U.S. invasion. It is an organization with a strong command structure, military-like centralization and functioning, whereas the Mahdi Army is a ragtag army that has developed under the occupation, almost from scratch. As I mentioned, it built itself at the beginning by raising the banner of the fight against the occupation, before it got involved in the sectarian war. But it has grown under both political conditions and grown impressively, without any preset organization or command structure, or whatever. It has been developing in an almost mushrooming manner over the last year. It is therefore very, very difficult to control it.

Muqtada al-Sadr does not have any appropriate structure for exerting real control over such an important force and, as a consequence, there are whole sections of the Mahdi Army that are actually beyond his control. They refer to Muqtada al-Sadr as a political symbol, a political leadership. They bear his name, but they are not involved in any pyramidal hierarchy that would be anything close to the military structure of the Badr organization. So, yes, in that sense, there are sections, if not most of the Mahdi army, that are beyond Muqtada al-Sadr's direct control. He retains political influence, to be sure, but that is not the same as control over armed forces, especially when you get in the heat of battle, or retaliation, or reprisal.

Q. Is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani still the most influential figure in the country?

GA. The reply to this question is somewhat similar to what we have just talked about. That is, if Muqtada al-Sadr himself cannot really control the "army" that claims to be his, then how could anyone expect Sistani to exert any real control over the whole Shiite population? If we mean spiritual influence and even political influence in the broad sense, he is still influential and respected. But it is clear that the situation got out of his own control too when the country started drowning into sectarian war one year ago, after the Samarra attack. That was not only a defeat for Muqtada al-Sadr's political project but in a sense it was also a major defeat for Sistani who had been instrumental until then in preventing an all-out explosion of the situation and especially in preventing massive reprisals by the Shiites.

He had issued many fatwas and statements, going as far as saying that even if thousands of them were killed in sectarian attacks, Iraqi Shiites should not get into reprisals and be attracted to the logic of the sectarian war, falling thus into a trap. But, whatever influence he commands, Sistani can just exert it through proclamations and religious, spiritual authority. There is a point when the situation gets so bad that such type of influence is neutralized: it does not work anymore and that is exactly what happened. The Samarra attack was the "straw that broke the camel's back" — the single event that completely turned the situation.

Of course, it built on a long accumulation of events preceding it: so many sectarian attacks against the Shiites, so many suicide attacks, car bombs and all that, killing hundreds after hundreds of Shiites and therefore creating a very deep resentment among them. Until Samarra, the Shiites were still able to control themselves at the mass level, although there was, to be sure, a lot of sectarian reprisal going on through various channels, one of them being the Ministry of Interior when it came under the control of the Badr organization. But the Samarra attack just made this accumulation reach the point where control was no longer possible, whether spiritual influence by Sistani or political control by Muqtada al-Sadr over his own troops.

Q. Has the sectarian violence in Iraq passed the point of no return? Is all-out civil war inevitable?

GA. That is difficult to tell. One can only hope that it is not the case and in order to verify that, the only possibility, as I said already, is to set a timetable for the withdrawal of coalition troops, which would compel the major Iraqi forces to try to find some sort of modus vivendi, some way of living together pending a future lasting settlement. Other than that, it is very difficult to make any prognosis. Let me repeat that no one can safely

predict whether there is still a way out of the situation without an all-out explosion or not. The only established fact is that the presence of U.S. troops is not helping in preventing the worst outcome, and the longer it stays, the worse it is getting anyway. Ever since the occupation started, there has been a steady deterioration of the situation. And it is certainly not the so-called "surge" that George W. Bush has just announced that will magically reverse this trend!

Q. Who do you think would have the upper hand in an all-out civil war?

GA. That also depends on too many factors. It is a very complex situation. In order to give any kind of answer to this question, you have to try to guess "what kind of civil war, of whom against whom?" Because it is not so simple, it is not just Shiites vs. Sunnis. You also have the Kurdish factor. And, among the Shiites as well as among the Sunnis, there are important divisions. If you had an all-out war, whom would it exactly pit against whom is quite hard to tell. In terms of sectarian/ethnic areas, you would naturally see the completion of the "cleansing" that has been occurring for the last couple of years.

Beyond that "cleansing," the war could turn from one of maneuver to one of positions, more or less stabilizing a partition of the country. Shiites would find little incentive to try to invade Arab Sunni areas, let alone Kurdish areas, and Arab Sunnis would have to acknowledge the fact that they stand no chance at beating the much more numerous Shiites backed by Iran. The spot around which a protracted war could go on for a longer period is Kirkuk: the Arab Sunnis and the Kurds being roughly equal in number, they would fight fiercely to get hold of, or recover, this oil-producing area, which is the only important oil area that any of the two communities could reasonably see as within its reach.

U.S. policy

Q. The U.S. occupation of Iraq has obviously been a disaster, even from the point of view of U.S. elite interests. There is a lot of second-guessing going on now trying to explain how this catastrophe came about. Was it wrong to disband the army and order de-Baathification?

GA. Was it wrong? It depends for whom! From the point of view of U.S. imperial interests, from the point of view of U.S. control over Iraq, the Bush administration made only the wrong choices all along, ever since it decided to invade the country. One could argue, from that angle, that the decision to invade the country by itself was a major mistake. However, one could still say that there could have been efficient ways for U.S. imperial control to be imposed over Iraq through military intervention, ways that involve a serious attempt at cutting a deal with major segments of the Iraqi Baathist state apparatus. That was possible, it was envisaged and even prepared, but discarded briefly before the invasion.

There was indeed a possibility from the viewpoint of U.S. imperial interests at least to try to run Iraq through major chunks of the Baathist apparatus, but without Saddam Hussein, and to get in this way what they are most interested in — that is, major influence over the country, control over its oil production and exports. Therefore, from that angle, yes, disbanding the army and de-Baathification was a deadly mistake. But, was it morally wrong? Was it wrong from the point of view of Arab Shiites' interests? This is why I said that "Was it wrong" depends on "For whom?" De-Baathification — except for its excesses — was certainly not morally wrong, because the Baath was such a terribly murderous dictatorship. The rest is a problem of calculation depending on which interests you are putting in the balance. Seen from the angle of Arab Shiites' interests, thoroughly dismantling the Baathist state apparatus was definitely an indispensable condition for achieving real majority rule in Iraq.

Q. Do you think that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq will lead to even worse sectarian violence? Will withdrawal lead to the victory of either Baathists or Islamic fundamentalists?

GA. Victory of Islamic fundamentalists is something you can already take for granted. The Baathists no longer have enough clout for them to be able to achieve control of the situation again — probably not even in the Arab Sunni areas alone. From what one can gather from Iraqi sources, it does not seem like there is any longer any major control exerted by the Baathist apparatus, in a centralized or organized way. Remnants of the Baathist apparatus, for the most part, have split into various groups that do not claim any allegiance to Baathism. Actually, to a certain extent, it seems that al-Qaeda has achieved more force in Iraq than whatever remains of the loyalist apparatus of the "Saddamist" Baath. Now, that brings me back to your question about all-out civil war. What you would get would be the de-facto split of the country: the country will be divided into different areas based, on the one hand, on sectarian or ethnic differences, and on the other hand, probably, on different political forces.

That is, you will not have a homogenous Arab Sunni area, but various Sunni forces controlling segments of the area and clashing among themselves, with a similar pattern on the Shiite side. The two major Kurdish forces clashed violently some years ago, and could very likely clash again. This is the most likely outcome of an all-out war. It would resemble the kind of situation that prevailed in my own country, Lebanon, after 1975, when the country was not only split into two broad camps, but fell under the control of various warlords and sub-entities inside each camp — a pattern repeated later in Afghanistan. A neologism was invented to describe this situation: "Lebanonization." Iraq, indeed, runs the risk of complete "Lebanonization."

Q. The U.S. has seized and detained Iranians in Iraq and has been accusing Iran of meddling in the country. The Bush administration has charged that

some of the sophisticated explosive devices being used against US troops in Iraq come from Iran, with training provided by Hezbollah. What do you think Iran is up to? Are Iran-backed Shiite groups engaged in military encounters with U.S. forces?

GA. Yes, definitely. Iraqi Shiite forces are waging a resistance fight against the coalition troops. If you visit the websites dedicated to the Mahdi Army or the Sadrists, you will find a long list of military operations against occupation troops as well as complaints about media blackout. They complain that the media do not report resistance actions in Shiite areas, but only actions taking place in Sunni areas. There is definitely a resistance struggle in the Shiite areas, mainly through "IEDs" (Improvised Explosive Devices) and the like, more than through direct frontal attacks against occupation troops, although you can also read about the latter kind of actions. Now, to believe that Iran is helping this in some ways makes sense — it is not absurd at all. One would very much understand why Iran would have some interest in backing this, provided its backing does not appear too openly. Iran resorts very likely to what in the United States is called "covert action," a kind of action of which the U.S. is very much a specialist, as you know. What would Iran try to achieve through that? On the one hand, of course, it is definitely in Tehran's interest that U.S. troops remain stuck in a quagmire in Iraq at a time when the U.S. administration is trying to put Iran in a corner, exert strong pressure on it, threaten it with military action, and so on.

On the other hand, Iran is engaged in a regional struggle with Washington and there are two aspects of that. One is defensive, since it is Washington that is on the offensive, targeting Iran, speaking of regime change and all the rest. It is not Tehran that is trying to force regime change in Washington, but the reverse — although you might say that Tehran is interested in hastening the political defeat of the Bush administration, but that is not exactly the same kind of "regime change"! The other aspect of the Iranian regional struggle, which could go beyond the defensive, is that Tehran is interested in extending its influence in the area to form a kind of buffer zone, or a protective area of friendly states. It has also an interest in the economic field; if you recall, when I was speaking about oil, I said that the Iraqis could also cut deals with Iranian oil companies, because Iran has some means in that regard, though nothing comparable to what Western oil companies have. There is finally the ideological factor that should not be belittled: both the Islamic fundamentalist dimension, appealing to all brands of Islamic fundamentalism, whether Shiite or Sunni, and the sectarian dimension. By the latter, I mean Shiite sectarian solidarity, which extends beyond Iraq and Lebanon to the oppressed Shiites populating the oil producing areas of the Saudi Kingdom, as well as to those who constitute the oppressed majority in Bahrain, and many other Shiite minorities in the broader Middle East. If you put all these factors together, you get an idea of the set of incentives and motivations that stand behind Iranian actions in the area.

Q. What do you see as the likely consequences of various policy proposals that have been put forward:

(a) Bush's "surge," adding some 21,000 more U.S. troops

(b) the Baker-Hamilton committee recommendations;

(c) the Peter Galbraith-Joe Biden-Leslie Gelb proposal to divide Iraq into three separate countries.

GA. The main aspect of the "surge" is not the 21,000 additional U.S. troops. If it were only that, it would actually be almost ridiculous, because when you already have over 130,000 on the spot, adding 20,000 and believing that they will qualitatively change the situation would be completely nonsensical. The so called "surge" is actually part of a general maneuver through which the Bush administration, as I said already, is trying to set up a coalition of Iraqi forces including the Kurds, with some of the Arab Sunni and Shiite forces, in order to isolate the Sunni extremist insurgency, on the one hand, and Muqtada al-Sadr, who is regarded as the main enemy, on the other hand.

The Bush administration is trying to do all that without what constitutes the most important and "original" element in the Baker-Hamilton proposal, which is to seek some accommodation and regional engagement with Iran and Syria in order to get their help in stabilizing Iraq under U.S. suzerainty. This is precisely why I believe that this strategy, Washington's current one, has no real chance of success. In substance, the Bush administration is actually accelerating into a roadblock. They are showing themselves as completely stubborn and unable to draw any real lessons from their own experience.

Now, let me turn to the Baker-Hamilton recommendations. They are based on the kind of scenario through which the United States left Vietnam. That consisted, under Nixon, in engaging the Soviet Union and China, after acknowledging the depth of the quagmire in Vietnam and the huge difficulty faced there by the United States, greatly complicated by the deteriorating front at home. Against this general situation and adversity, the Nixon-Kissinger administration, in the most "realist" manner, decided to engage with the sponsors of the Vietnamese resistance and to try to play one against the other.

They sought to drive the wedge further between China and the Soviet Union, which is a strategic maneuver that the supporters of the Baker-Hamilton line would also like to seek to implement. That is, they would like to try to detach Syria from Iran and cut different deals with each of them, playing on the possible contradictions between the two regimes. This would make more sense than Bush's all-out confrontationist stance from a position of weakness. It would be a more rational strategy given all the odds faced now by the U.S. in Iraq. But then, like in Vietnam, there is absolutely no guarantee of success. It might well help the U.S. disentangle from Iraq, but it cannot guarantee any long-term control by the U.S. over Iraq. It could just lead, like in Vietnam in 1975, to a total loss of the country in the short or medium-term.

As for the proposals to divide Iraq into three parts, in the present conditions at least such proposals would surely be denounced by major sections of the Iraqis as an imperialist plot to partition the country, as there were so many of them in the modern history of the Middle East. Besides, the most serious problem here, from the point of view of U.S. imperial interests, is that it would end up creating a Shiite state in southern Iraq. A Shiite state which would naturally control the most important part of Iraq's oil because it is in the Shiite areas in southern Iraq that the bulk of Iraq's oil reserves lie.

This would create a huge problem potentially for the United States, because such a Shiite state — by the very dynamics of regional politics, let alone the fact that the most important Iraqi Shiite forces today are close to Iran — would ally itself with Iran and stand in opposition to the Saudi kingdom. In light of what I mentioned about the Shiite-populated oil producing areas of the Saudi kingdom, this would lead to a scenario worse still for Washington's interests than whatever there is now. But, in the first place and in any case, trying to implement this idea of three separate entities would actually entail an all-out civil war: instead of being an outcome of such a war, it would then be a source of it!

All these proposals only show that the U.S. design for control over Iraq is very, very seriously compromised at present. That is why you have so many articles blaming the Bush administration for having messed it up completely and being responsible for what looks already as probably the most important defeat for the U.S. imperial project, at least in recent history.

Q. What do you think Washington will do next?

GA. For this I have no answer because I do not believe that the members of the Bush administration themselves know what they will do next. They are trying to navigate on sight, refusing to acknowledge that the ship is sinking.

Q. To what extent has the antiwar movement had an impact on policy or policymakers?

GA. This is a question that, for the U.S., you are in a better position to answer than I am, for you live there. However, if we look beyond the United States at the other countries involved in the war, we have seen that the antiwar movement has made a real difference. I am thinking of Spain and of Italy, and other countries where the antiwar movement has led to their withdrawal from the "coalition of the willing." Moreover, the decisive contribution of the Iraq war issue to Tony Blair's loss of face is well known. In the United States, as long as the Bush administration was able to get an electoral majority, it could more or less ignore the pressure of the antiwar movement, especially since the movement, except for few peaks, could not maintain its activities at a high level in a sustained manner. Still we have seen that the protracted political campaign against the war and the revelations of what is going on in Iraq have led to the rejection of the Bush administration and the Republican majority in the last election.

By this, I am not trying to say that the present congressional majority is antiwar — far from it. Nevertheless, they were brought to their present majority by the rejection of Bush's policies: both his foreign policy as embodied in his Iraqi adventure and, of course, his domestic policy as exemplified by the Katrina disaster. The fact that today you have such a very strong division in the establishment on the issue of Iraq is also a testimony to the importance of the antiwar movement and its pressure, which gets more effective when facts tend to confirm its stance in an undisputable manner — and that is the case in Iraq.

Q. What should the antiwar movement be calling for now?

GA. The same that it has been, and should have been, calling for from the beginning. That is "Out Now": in the United States, a request for ending U.S. involvement in Iraq. It means demanding that the U.S. administration decide to leave Iraq and set a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. troops in a period not exceeding few months. That would meet the demand of the majority of the Iraqi population, as well as the wishes of the majority of the U.S. population.

Interviewed by Stephen R. Shalom and Chris Spannos for ZNet on January 18, 2007, and edited by Achcar.

The China Advantage

22 January 2007, by Au Loong-Yu

There are seven great advantages of China. First, she has a more developed and balanced industry than many developing countries, a result of China's much faster growth rate in manufacturing than India's since the 1950s. In 1980, when India and China were more or less equal in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, China already enjoyed a powerful advantage in manufacturing. An Indian economist Pranab Bardhan remarked that "compared to India, Chinese were better 'socialists' during the planning era, and better 'capitalists' during the reform era." [1] Second, China's very strong and effective state machinery has been an effective tool for mobilizing resources for modernization. Despite the ascendancy of faith in the free market as the only reliable tool of development, the truth is that the modernization of Korea and Taiwan has always been state-led. China only adds one more example, despite the

fact that the state since the 1980s accounts for a smaller share of economic activity than during 1949-79. China is able to pour huge sums of state money into developing new industry, new EPZs (Export Processing Zones), great infrastructure etc, with which few developing countries can compete. The same goes for the degree of social control exercised by the Chinese state.

Third, the sheer size of China - a huge country with a population of 1.3 billion - greatly magnifies the advantages of effective state-led growth and sophisticated manufacturing. It produces the benefit of economy of scale. She builds huge EPZs out of nothing; now China houses two-thirds of the world's total number of EPZs workers. This advantage helps China to build three basic manufacturing clusters, each with its own specialization. The first is the Pearl River Delta (including Hong Kong as the main channel for export), which specializes in labor intensive manufacturing, production of spare parts and their assembly. The second is the Yangtze River Delta, specializing in capital intensive industries: cars, semiconductors, mobile phones and notebooks, computers etc.

The third cluster is Zhongguan Cun, Bejing, the Chinese Silicon Valley. Here the state directly intervenes to make possible the collaboration of colleges, enterprises and state banks to develop the Chinese IT industry. [2]Meanwhile state colleges are also turning out huge numbers of college graduates - comparable to developed countries. In 2002 China had 590,000 college graduates majoring in science and technology, whereas Japan had 690,000 one or two years earlier, and Thailand only 10,000. [3]

Land Reform and Nationalism

China's fourth great advantage is the legacy of land reform. China's land reform is generally recognized as much more successful than India. China already out-competed India as far back as 1980 and even earlier in all human development indicators: literacy rate, daily calorie intake, death rate, infant mortality rate, life expectancy, etc. [4]

When Western and Japanese media repeatedly praise the quality of Chinese labor (better educated, more willing to learn, disciplined), especially those rural migrants as compared to India's, it never occurs to them that a contributing factor to this achievement is the great transformation in land reform earlier, and the collective provision of rural infrastructure and education that followed - not anything related to the later market reform.

Quite the contrary, with the dismantling of the commune and the return to family farming since the 1980s, the burden of paying for their children's education is now shifted to the peasants. The erosion of the past social progress is happening swiftly. The only remaining conquest of the past social transformation in the rural sector are small pieces of land to which farmers are entitled, providing a certain degree of social security for rural households, and thus a kind of safety valve for the sharpening class contradiction since the market reform took off.

The fifth element of China advantage is deep-rooted nationalism. The dominant Han ethnic group accounts for more than 90%, of the country, whereas the Indian dominant ethnicity only accounts for one-fifth of that nation. This probably gives Chinese nationalism a greater coherence than India: Indeed, this factor helped to give rise to the People's Republic of China (PRC), and impelled her once to dare defy the United States and USSR simultaneously. China's contemporary history of anti-colonialism makes her sensitive both to foreign domination and confident to defy it if necessary.

At the end of the 20th century, facing a rapidly enlarging market share for foreign companies, influential factional leaders in the Communist Party already called for a more autonomous model of capitalist development. After the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 during the U.S./ NATO war against the Serbian regime, and the surge of foreign direct investment (FDI) in China's domestic market, mistrust of U.S. and foreign investors has grown, and calls have intensified for more state-led growth in high-end products and less reliance on FDI-dependent growth. Which future direction China may take is still not clear.

Atomized Labor, Harsh Repression

The sixth advantage of capitalist China is her absolutely atomized labor in face of an absolute state. The 1949 revolution was a genuine mass mobilization of peasants for modernizing and democratizing China. While the modernizing task did achieve something significant, the latter - building democracy - failed miserably. Instead we have a bureaucratic state free of all popular control, and ruling arbitrarily.

In the early period of the PRC, the workers, although hailed as the leading class, did not even have the liberty of choosing jobs or occupations or the particular "Danwei" (in this case, a factory), let alone the freedom to form trade unions or free elections. [5]

This contributed to their absolute fragmentation. No layer of activists and organizers ever formed. Union cadres, under repeatedly purges, have long been transformed into an absolutely pro-management layer of officials.

Thus, long before the Communist Party changed its course in the 1980s, the relationship of forces between state and labor was entirely unfavorable to the latter. That is why the Communist Party could safely change its course without fearing too much an organized resistance from below. Deng Xiaoping actually tested his strength in the 1989 TiananMen crackdown, where workers were singled out to be suppressed harshly. One may argue the massacre practically laid the social foundation of turning China into a great sweatshop.

Prasenjit Duara, an American scholar, recently remarked that "the Communists made the work force

docile and organized labor to be a managed entity that could be continuously mobilized. A Marxist might see China under Mao as producing the conditions of capitalism. [6] While there is still much debate on the character of the regime between 1949-79, there is less doubt as to the characterization of the present regime.

Shanghai skyline is witness to massive growth

Last but not the least, China has a unique advantage in the big leap forward to embrace global capitalism, namely the unique factor of having Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan as her door to the world. The three areas have provided immense support to Deng market reform from the very beginning to the present, from ideological resources to financial and managerial personnel. Hong Kong acts as the chief financial center for China, raising billions of dollars for mainland corporations every year. Neither Russia nor India possess such advantage. [7]

"What is the 'factory of the world' anyway? It is simply using our own resources to produce low-end products at the expense of polluting ourselves and what we get in return is only a small profit." This looks like China bashing from some overseas Chinese dissidents, but it is not. The speaker was Pan Yue, the deputy director of the government's environmental protection department. [8]

Pan's colleague Yang Peng is even more radical: "The West robbed the world (in the colonial period), now we are robbing ourselves: the cities rob the rural, the power elites rob the powerless. And when all public resources are robbed to the last penny, there we enter a period when the alliance of the elites split among themselves." [9]

There are built-in crises in the Chinese model, of course. [10] It is possible for the model to blow up in the near future, though the opposite case cannot be totally ruled out. In either case, this model spells disasters for Chinese as well as Asian working people.

Supporting Chinese Workers

China's model is no model for labor. China's suppression of workers rights, embrace of fiercely export-oriented growth, and cutthroat competition enhance the profitability of business classes in both Chinese and other countries, at the expense of working people across the world. It is the duty of the world labor movement to oppose the ruling elites inside and outside China. It is particularly urgent because today Chinese labor is still in bondage and cannot even make its voice heard.

We need to do this independently, however, on the terrain of labor and social movements, the mobilization of union members - not along the track of trade policy as defined by governments and Trans National Corporations, whether this be trade protectionism or trade liberalization.

Until recently, mainstream labor organizations in developed countries tended to see trade policy of governments and big business as a bus which could give labor a free ride back to welfare states with job security. It appears especially so to union leaders when the bus is going in the direction of trade protectionism. Eventually this route leads nowhere near a welfare state.

Soon the next bus is coming, heading for Free Trade Agreements. Amazingly, labor leaders shake their head but then decide to jump on, hoping that once on board they can show the driver a map called a "labor clause," hoping to convince the driver to change course. As usual the driver nods and smiles, but at the end of the day the bus drives where the boss wants to go, and the security of jobs is nowhere in sight.

It is time to stop conceiving trade policy of the ruling elites as a bus which can give labor a lift. Appending labor rights to Free Trade Agreement like NAFTA, or the European Union's social clause, has proved to be a failure in defending jobs. It will not succeed for WTO either. Nor is attaching labor rights to trade protectionism a genuine alternative: It is simply not the responsibility of labor to help their own bosses to out-compete bosses in other countries in this global market.

Trade protectionism imposed by developed countries against weaker ones only serves to enhance world hegemonic powers, which are responsible for so much poverty in their homes and all around the world. We need a different yardstick for developing countries, however, recognizing their right to decide their own policy, including the right to protectionism against hegemonic powers.

Even in developing countries trade protectionism is not necessarily pro-labor, and in fact not necessarily effective as a development tool. Between the1950s and '60s , many developing countries pursued protectionism and import substitutions. At that time jobs were somewhat more secure than now. But the ultimate fading out of this model is not accidental: The worldwide recession in 1974 ended the relative self-reliance model of capitalist development for developing countries.

Precisely because of the limitations of trade protectionism, labor in developing countries needs to avoid making labor rights an appendage of protectionism. We have to judge protectionist policy case by case, subjecting it to the scrutiny of the interests of small farmers and workers. Even when labor supports a particular protectionist policy, it must maintain independence and not allow itself to be used by the ruling elites to pit workers in different countries against each other.

This is doubly true for Chinese labor activists. We are for protecting the livelihood of Chinese small farmers against the onslaught of TNCs and the WTO. But it will be a different matter to protect the domestic market share of local manufacturers, as called for by some mainland nationalistic academics, as if this would benefit labor. Quite the opposite, foreign

capital and domestic employers alike know no bound in exploiting Chinese workers.

Therefore, we argue for these principles:

1) The paramount task for labor in every country is to oppose the neoliberalism in their own country, and first and foremost hold their own bosses responsible for plant closures.

2) Labor, inside and outside China, must come to understand that they need to unite internationally to reverse the global race to the bottom, and do it by independent mobilization rather than putting all hopes on trade policy of their respective governments.

3) Labor outside China should support Chinese labor struggles, but in the language of the labor movement, not of trade policy or the narrow nationalism of elites.

4) Chinese workers should fight for their own rights independently, regardless of whether this may make Chinese employers more or less competitive in the world market.

This article first appeared in Against the Current. The author's recent interview 'Alter-Globo in Hong Kong' is downloadable at New Left Review. See a collection of his articles at ESSF - wait a couple of seconds while tiny url connects you.

Footnotes

[1] Quoted from Industrial Growth in China and India, A Preliminary Comparison, by R. Nagaraj, Economic and Political Weekly, May 21, 2005, Mumbai, India.

[2] Kuroda Atsuo, Made in China (Tokyo: Toyo Keizai Inc, 2001), Chinese edition, 2002, Taiwan.

[3] China Statistical Abstract 2004, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 178. Also see Kimura Fukunari, 21 & 189.

[4] Peter Nolan, Transforming China Globalization, transition and development (London: Anthem Press 2004) 118.

[5] Andrew Walder's Communist Neo-Traditionalism Work and Authority in Chinese Industry gives very interesting account as to the authoritarian regime in plant level.

[6] "Ted C. Fishman, "The Chinese Century," New York Times, 4 July 2004.

[7] For more discussion of China unique development please refer to the author's article, ibid.

[8] Quoted from http://business.sohu.com/20050719/n226363226.shtml.

[9] Quoted from http://www.liuhongzhi.com/news/show_article.asp?id=00001325.

[10] The author discussed this in his article on the rise of China, ibid.

The Nairobi Social Forum

19 January 2007, by Jean Nanga

The underhand dealings of Africa's leaders

Successive conflicts, the AIDS drama, a rate of infant mortality that is still very high, malnutrition and food shortages, a low rate of access to drinkable running water and to electricity, a still massive illiteracy, the massive and hazardous exodus to the countries of the capitalist centre and so on, all give the image of an Africa which is the victim of its exteriority to globalisation.

Some experts have not hesitated to speak of a suicidal, masochistic drive on the part of Africa with regard to the opportunities offered to "develop" itself in the manner of Asia. To such a point that the generous donors from the West have lost interest, weary of seeing what is supposed to have succeeded elsewhere fail in Africa. Thus, they have chosen to ensure a minimum servicing in the area of aid and leave the African peoples to the incompetence of their leaders, with whom they are supposed to share suicidal practices, like corruption.

The underhand dealings of the African governing elites are not a fad, they are a fact. The democratisation of the 1990s has not eradicated the oligarchic virus. Much to the contrary, being neoliberal in character, it has instead developed the obsession with enrichment, including its illicit form. Fortunes are being made or increased, whether in the post-Mobutu or the post-Houphouët-Boigny eras, to cite these major figures of sub-Saharan oligarchism. Heads of state like Dos Santos (Angola), Sassou Nguesso (Congo), Biya (Cameroon), Bongo (Gabon), although not classed by "Forbes" among the possessors of the biggest world fortunes, have accumulated as much as some multinationals through embezzlement of funds and other public property, commissions in the attribution of strategic markets and so on.

But they have also invested, as much in their countries as elsewhere (banking, real estate, mining, oil sector and so on) thus becoming veritable capitalists, unusual only in the public source of their primitive accumulation. Even Mobutu was not

only a hoarder of money. His fortune was placed not only in numbered bank accounts in the so called democratic countries, but also invested in real estate and in the form of shares in companies outside of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). Thus we see the constitution and consolidation of a class of local hucksters developing in Africa.
Recently, for example, Idrissa Seck, former prime minister of the Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade, stated, after the dropping of a lawsuit, that he had enriched himself by drawing on the coffers of the Senegalese state to become an entrepreneur in real estate, in Paris in particular. In South Africa, the arrival of the ANC in power has allowed some its leaders and those of its trade union ally, COSATU, to become heads or owners of private companies, in the name of "black empowerment", a so-called positive discrimination which amounts to putting a little more colour in the South African bourgeoisie.

These governing elites are thus, as entrepreneurs, attached to the neoliberal organisation of the world economy, hence their indifference to the consequences of globalisation on the people. They tolerate the "fight against poverty" of their peoples only when it is not incompatible with their individual and class interests.

Corruption: a relationship

Without wishing to deny the reality of the phenomenon of corruption and its harmful impact on African societies, where adults and children die in the absence of not being able to oil the machine of corruption in the public care centres, the criticisms made here and there smack rather more of a moralism informed by racist considerations on the immaturity of Africans than of politics. Indeed, it is most often the minor forms of corruption which are targeted rather than those which determine the big economic and social, and thus political, orientations of a country.

And the African continent is not alone in suffering from the latter forms of corruption. It is rather the victim of a culture of corruption linked primarily to the system which has been imposed on it before being chosen by the elites formatted by the said system. It is enough to reject the fraudulent image of capitalism and its democracy propagated by economists and political scientists supportive of the dominant order, and relayed by media of the same stripe, in order to realise the structural nature of corruption in the capitalist system.

The orientation of the decisions of the US Congress by private capitalist interests is the norm rather than the exception, inasmuch as the deciders can also be economic entrepreneurs much more interested in laws and public projects to finance than by control of the realisation of the said projects financed by public money.

The cases of corruption in the political class, sometimes at the summits of the state, in the societies of the centre are enclosed in a quasi-pact of silence or, failing that, benefit from a guarantee of being forgotten as shown by the succession of French "affairs". This forgetfulness often has consequences for human lives in the societies of the periphery, as is the case for example of the Elf affair in France, with thousands of deaths in the Congo which remind us that the most harmful corruption for African societies is that which links the economic and political powers of the centre with the governing elites of the continent.

This seems to have been discovered by the NGO Transparency International, which previously had for a long time put the accent on the corrupt rather than the corrupters. "The big exporters compromise development by dubious practices abroad… In the economically weakest African countries, for example, those questions have designated French and Italian companies as being most frequently at the origin of these practices". (Summary of Report on Index of Corruption of Exporter Countries 2006).
No western country is given a 10/10 mark by this NGO. In some countries, this foreign corruption is even encouraged and fiscally covered by the law, because it is necessary to compete with others. Thus the exceptional character of the inquiry carried out by Britain's Africa All Parliamentary Group, denouncing British multinationals, although no action has resulted from it. [1]

The crusade against corruption waged by the World Bank thus smacks of a diversion, from the viewpoint of the struggle against structural social injustice. Its sole real concern was to establish the rules of competition between imperial powers. The US is sometimes blocked in its expansion on the African market by certain complicities built up in the course of history between African elites and their equivalents in the European multinationals, of which the consequence is the attribution of markets through negotiation.

This crusade against corruption has then a variable character. Thus, it is not surprising that the recourse to sanctions for backsliders in the area of corruption has been criticised by the French and British ministers in charge of cooperation. This rivalry is further exacerbated by the arrival of China on the African market. As the French foreign minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, has put it "as this century begins, Africa has become a strategic stake of the first order". [2]

Africa again a strategic focus

The officially sanctioned economists have their figures to prove Africa's virtual exclusion from the world economy, the project being to integrate it therein. Africa's GDP only represents 1% of the world total; its share in world trade is 2% (against 8% in the 1990s); its share of foreign direct investment is around 1% of the world total. But the use of these figures starts from the erroneous postulate of an equitable exchange between different partners.

The recent deal concerning copper in the Democratic Republic of Congo can serve as example: "The US company Phelps Dodge [3] has shares in the biggest mining project in Katanga. In Tenke Fungurume the most important reserves of copper of the world, still not exploited, are located… around 18

million tonnes of copper and 1.5 million tonnes of cobalt, which would yield around 100 billion dollars, according to the prices of recent years. Tenke Mining is part of the Lundin group based in Geneva.

Whereas Phelps Dodge has a shareholding of 57.75%, Gécamines has only 17.5%. Gécamines has received 15 million dollars in all from Phelps Dodge. How is it that a mine whose reserves are worth 100 billion dollars is sold at such a derisory price?" [4]

As was the case during the period linking the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th, Africa has since the end of the last century again become a strategic focus for the different capitalist imperial powers. In its report for 2006, the World Bank tells us on the one hand that "the increase of income per inhabitant in Africa is currently equivalent to that of other developing countries" [5] - which is unhappily only an average excluding great inequalities of real income and the very unequal division of wealth between the social classes - and on the other hand that "the productivity of the best African companies is comparable to that of their competitors in Asia (India and Vietnam) for example".

Foreign direct investment has increased, neoliberal reforms are well underway. The International Finance Corporation has praised Africa's progress: "Globally, the most popular reform in 2005-2006 has consisted in facilitating the formalities of creation of enterprises. Forty three countries have simplified them, and have thus reduced the costs and the time periods The second most popular reform, implemented in 31 countries, has been to reduce the amount of taxes and steps necessary for the payment of taxes". [6] Thus, foreign companies made a turnover of 200 billion dollars in Africa in 2005.

Great Britain has been doing rather well, according to the British NGO Christian Aid. From July 2005, date of the G8 summit at Gleneagles, to July 2006, financial flows from Great Britain to sub-Saharan Africa were 17 billion pounds sterling (of which 1.35 billion was contributions; 6.8 billion direct investment; 7 billion imported commodities). But financial flows from sub-Saharan Africa to Great Britain were 27 billion pounds sterling (1 billion in repayment of the debt from Nigeria; 4 billion in profits of British companies; 4.5 billion in imports of commodities; 17 billion in capital flight). [7]

This is the picture which justifies the words of the French foreign minister: "It is a continent whose average growth is henceforth durably superior to world growth and is triple the European growth rate. In 2006, according to the IMF, the growth of sub-Saharan Africa will exceed 5% for the ninth consecutive year. The investors are moreover not ignorant of this, when international and financial flows to the African continent have doubled in the past three years… France does not intend to disengage from a continent which is near to it, and with which it has for such a long time had privileged relations". The recent bombardments (December 2006) of villages under the control of Central African and Chadian rebels by the Mirages of the French army are another confirmation of this.

US expansion

However things are not as simple as in the past. For the end of the Cold War has involved a redistribution of the cards between imperial powers. Thus, jealous of its hegemony in the capitalist camp, the US has undertaken to strengthen it in the world in general. They were in no way absent from Africa, contrary to a fairly widespread opinion, as evidenced by the given to Mobutu in Zaire or apartheid in South Africa, or significant investment in countries like Nigeria or Liberia.

In the latter country, the permanence of the economic presence of the US is symbolised by Firestone/Bridgestone, which benefited from a concession (a half million hectares) for the production of rubber for 99 years in 1926, prolonged for 37 yeas in 2005. The working conditions of the workforce (men, women, children) remain practically unchanged since 1926, to such extent that this enterprise is currently the subject of a complaint filed in the US by the Labor Rights Funds for "torture" and "forced labour". [8]

The events of September 11, 2001, preceded by two bombings - in Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania and Nairobi, in Kenya - against US embassies also served as pretext for US expansion in Africa. Thus, G. W. Bush took over the bilateral policy set up by his predecessor, Bill Clinton, the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), entering thus into competition in the area of the so called preferential market with the European Union's Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), initiated under another name in the 1970s. Since oil and cotton are not the exclusive preserve of the former British colonies, which share a common language with the US, the latter has also penetrated the former French and Portuguese colonies.

Thus, they do not hide their will for hegemony on the continent. In this design, their absence of a colonial or neo-colonial past allied to an effective propaganda apparatus can make it seem that the AGOA and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) are different from the scams traditionally proposed by the imperial powers. Thus, under the cover of the "struggle against poverty" the US is financing within the framework of the Millennium Challenge Corporation projects relating to the deepened neoliberal restructuring of the African economies, from which they hope to be beneficiaries, in the manner of recent agreements (October 2006) signed with Mali and Benin.

Concerning the first, "the most important element of the agreement is the Alatona irrigation project [234.6 million dollars] which should increase agricultural yields and food production while improving the land regime" and even "strengthen the property rights of the poor". Moreover "the Alatona project will introduce innovatory techniques in the area of credit and management of water, as well as reforms seeking to realise part of the potential of the Office of the Niger as locomotive of growth in the rural areas of Mali". [9]

It is this agreement that the Malian

government, guided by the World Bank, is trying to sell to the poor peasants of Mali. This small peasantry is conscious of the aggravation of its situation promised by these "reforms". Moreover, numerous peasant families are already victims of it, to the profit of local private capital, often accumulated in the state apparatus. Moreover, among the innovations envisaged which are supposed to improve the yields of the cotton producers of West Africa, there is obviously genetically modified seeds, already experienced, with co-financing from multinationals, in the countries of the sub-region.

The offensive for the use of genetically modified seeds is led first and foremost by the university elites, through the financing of research on this basis. Education budgets having been strongly reduced, numerous researchers enter this breach to escape the breadline. Their talents are sought by multinational firms (Monsanto, DuPont with the US Rockefeller Foundation; Bayer of Germany; Syngenta of Switzerland and so on) for salaries which are individually profitable but very damaging socially.

Kenya, for example, is one of the laboratories for the US offensive against the small African peasantry, the goal being to create food dependency, even through famine. The same neoliberal themes are found in the agreement concluded in February 2006 with Benin, to "increase investment and private activity by improving the land regime, access to financial services and the legal apparatus as well as by suppressing obstacles to trade in the port of Cotonou". [10] The bilateral "cooperation" of the US government strengthens the agricultural policy of the international financial institutions inside of which it is hegemonic.

The "struggle against terrorism" helps and this expansion is accompanied by a military presence in Kenya, on the oil-producing coasts of the Gulf of Guinea, in the Indian Ocean where, in addition to the base at Diego Garcia, they have obtained from the government of Djibouti a coexistence with the French traditional base. The US oil interests in Algeria also benefit from an apparatus of protection.

French hegemony in this Sahelian zone is challenged by the "Trans-Saharan Initiative of Struggle Against Terrorism" and the African Centre of Study and Research on Terrorism which associates ten Sahelian states with the US. With the Combined Join Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), the national security of the USA is assured in Africa.

The last manifestation of this hegemonic will in the area is US military involvement, through the Ethiopian state, in the Somali conflict against the Union of Islamic Courts, accused of belonging to the nebulous Al Qaeda. Ineffective logistic support is accompanied by diplomatic action through resolution 1725 of the UN Security Council on the deployment of a force in Somalia.

The version adopted on November 6, 2005 does not contain the provisions most expressive of US imperial will US, but there can be no doubt about the latter's wish to control the Somali subsoil. Silence on this motivation is a well-respected rule among analysts of the Somali crisis, who thus give credit to the lying justification concerning the US "war on terror". Thus, according to Eunice Reddick (director of the office of East African affairs at the State Department), "in this unstable context, the objectives of US policy in Somalia remain clear: to fight the terrorist menace, support the establishment of an effective governance and of political stability, to respond to the humanitarian needs of the Somalis and promote regional security". [11]

The same is true of the Sudan where, despite the structural racism of the US, its investment in the sending of an intervention force to Darfur, under the banner of UN-NATO, is supposedly motivated by the humanitarian desire to put an end to the "genocide" of the "black" population by the "Arab" militias in the service of the Khartoum government. [12]

Nothing to do with the obsession with controlling African oil - US imports of the latter began in 2005 to be higher than those coming from the Near East and the proven reserves have been revised upwards. African Americans in the US establishment contribute to this patriotic mystification from which they also hope to profit. Racial identity is thus put in the service of the Corporate Council on Africa, composed of crusaders for imperial expansion like Boeing, Cargill, Citigroup, Coca-Cola, Exxon, General Motors, Halliburton, Microsoft, Mobil, and so on, the main beneficiaries of the neoliberal version of gunboat diplomacy in this period of sharp inter-imperialist competition.

European imperialism

The presence of Europe in Africa has long been more visible than that of the US because of the colonial past of France and Britain in particular. Their national policies - often divergent until the Saint-Malo Accords for a joint diplomacy - of reproduction of colonial domination are accompanied by the construction of a "European" partnership with the African, Caribbean and Pacific states in the context of the EEC.-ACP agreements - of Yaoundé, of Lomé - currently the EU-ACP Cotonou agreement, establishing a preferential market.

This cooperation has not allowed the "development" of Africa, maintaining it in the production of raw materials useful for Europe, rather than favouring the setting up of infrastructures building its economic autonomy, which would have been a challenge to the international division of labour inside the world capitalist economy.

So as to be more in conformity with the passage to neoliberalism and the rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the European Union proposes Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), for free trade, whose consequences will be catastrophic for the small peasantry, the small local units of production and local finances: competition between subsidised products imported from the European Union and local products; suppression of customs duties, and so on.

The situation in rural areas will undoubtedly worsen, indeed, "despite

its importance, agriculture has for some decades undergone a crisis whose main cause is the unjust measures of the Agriculture Agreement inside of the WTO. Taking account of the weakness of agricultural incomes, very few rural households manage to cover their food needs 7 months out of 12 and many do not even reach 4 months". [13]

The African governing elites, for the moment, drag their feet over these EPAs, on the one hand because they could lead to social revolts, on the other hand, and above all, because their own interests as local economic entrepreneurs, having invested in agriculture particularly, could be hit. Beyond the signatory states, the consequences of these free trade agreements will affect the non-members of the ACP group, on the one hand with regard to the sub-regional integration of the African economies, on the other because of the project of continental integration represented by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

Meanwhile, the EU, without claiming to oppose the hegemonic project of the US in Africa, deepens its autonomous presence, and defends the image of European power, including on the military terrain by ignoring the existence of NATO. It should be said that it benefits from the experience of the French tradition in this area. The aggravation of the crisis in the Ituri, in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in 2003, has thus been the occasion for a first European military intervention outside of Europe. The European Artemis mission, in support of the Mission of the UN in Congo (MONUC), has been clearly been identified as an intervention of the French Army with regard to the compositions of troops and command.

The general elections in the DRC, in 2006, gave Europe the chance for a truly multinational military deployment: 20 of the 25 EU states provided the 1,500 soldiers of the military mission, without counting those already positioned in Gabon. On the other hand, this time, if the European Force (Eufor) cannot do without the African experience of the French Army, it has nonetheless had to take account of the architecture of European construction in the sharing of responsibilities.

Thus, command has been shared between France and Germany, with a French general as commander in the DRC and the installation of the headquarters of the Force in Potsdam. Each of the two states supplied the 1/3 of the troops, the last 1/3 being shared between the 18 others: a first European return, but also a first return of the German army in Africa since the colonial period, which has led to debate in Germany.

Unlike the French military expeditions in Africa, the German participation in Eufor was decided after a parliamentary debate. Prime Minister Angela Merkel presented the mission as being motivated exclusively by support for the democratic process and the concern to avoid a resumption of the war which would cause an influx of migrants into Europe. [14]

This idea was taken up by the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinemeier, in response to a question from the magazine "Focus": "from the viewpoint of security and strategy we act because we know that failing states end up becoming exporters of troubles, terrorism and serious refugee problems. Our objective consists in preventing these dangers.". [15]

There could be no question of motivation by material interests. An opinion not shared by his colleague at Defence, Franz Joseph Jung, who says frankly enough that "stability in this region rich in minerals is a benefit for German industry" and Eckart Von Klaeden, who says: "There is significant subterranean wealth there for security, like uranium and beryllium. They can fall into the wrong hands.". [16]

Thus, Europe and the US articulate in the same way the relationship between the military and the economic, what Leopold II called "the sharing of the cake" and what some specialists in "post-conflict" situations call "economic return on military investment", valid for all the interventions, from Kosovo to East Timor.

It was in order to have a bigger share of the cake that Europe forced the hand of the UN to obtain the Congo mission, without having first discussed it with the Congolese state or the African Union. To the great chagrin of South Africa also, where the post-apartheid state has not broken with the imperial ambition on the continent dreamed of by Cecil Rhodes. Given their involvement in the outbreak of war in Congo from 1998-2003, through Rwanda, Uganda and a part of the Congolese opposition, transformed for the episode into an armed opposition, the US seemed poorly placed to obtain such a mission. Nonetheless, being absent from the ground has in no way ruled them out of a "sharing of the cake".

Having undoubtedly drawn the lesson given in the US to his paternal predecessor (Laurent Désiré Kabila) as head of the Congolese state. [17] Joseph Kabila has not ceased to play the card of the candidate of equilibrium between different imperialist appetites, which seems to have succeeded with regard to the outcome of the last presidential elections.

The interest of the main imperial powers in the DRC will increase with the publicity now given to its oil reserves. The US seems to have already displayed interest in Congolese oil, sending a signal to the regime in Kinshasa between the two electoral rounds. By presidential decree of October 30, 2006, Bush froze the shares of the heads of the last pocket of armed rebellion and their accomplices, like the arms and precious stones trafficker Viktor Bout, long a US protégé, whose misdeeds were shown on screen in "Lord of War". It also shows awareness of the increasing complexity of inter-imperialist competition in Africa, with the arrival in the arena of China, which does not seem ready for a position of imperial power subordinated to the US, as is Europe.

Chinese imperialism?

A spectre seems to haunt western imperialism in Africa. It is not

unhappily the African movement for global justice. It is China, this hybrid country, led by a party still nominally Communist and deaf to calls for the respect of human rights, but with one of the most impressive rates of capitalist economic growth, propelling it to fifth world ranking in terms of its GDP. A performance which involves a significant consumption of raw materials, beyond the resources offered by the Chinese soil and subsoil.

Thus it has turned towards the African continent - which seems decidedly to be an obligatory passage for all imperial ambition - without even attempting to show discretion, like Japan for example, or indeed China itself during the Cold War. Yet it has created a capital sympathy among consumers of Chinese products, characterised by their accessibility for the poor in these times of drastic lowering of purchasing power in African societies, from the Cape to Cairo. Even if Chinese traders are accused, by small local traders, of unfair competition by offering cheaper commodities than those imported from Europe or indeed some African countries and the Chinese practice of exclusive use of its own workforce in its worksites is denounced.

Among states, very few manifest indifference towards the economic boom of this country still supposedly of the South, which seems to wish to share its fruits with the African countries which are necessary to it so as to realise its ambitions as a world power. A demonstration of this was the Africa-China Summit of November 3-5, 2006 in Beijing, a culminating point in the relations of "cooperation" recently established, very different from those of the Maoist period.

For growth, China needs wood, cobalt, cotton, copper, steel, manganese, oil, platinum, uranium and so on. All this can be found in Africa and is already being imported by China. This obviously does not leave the imperial powers, who have had exclusive control of these resources for more than a century, indifferent. The ogre-like appetite of the Chinese economy has, for example, already produced a rise in oil prices, which certainly doesn't displease the Western oil multinationals. Nonetheless, the Chinese bulimia could disturb the imperial order.

What seems to annoy these defenders of the western imperial order is the practice by the Chinese state and enterprises of another possible model of exchanges within the capitalist framework, called by the Chinese authorities "common development" or "shared development". In the area of aid, preferential loans, debt cancellation, market opening, support for agriculture, education (infrastructures and training), or health (infrastructures and anti-disease programmes), China (state and enterprises) has already shown in a very short time that it is resolved to do very much more than the western powers. Demonstration is thus made though agreements and exchanges with China that with a little will, it is possible in exchange of raw materials or at lower cost to give Africa certain infrastructures (railways social housing, bridges, roads, hospitals and so on) which it is cruelly deprived of, as well as to purchase African goods at prices which are considered equitable.

Thus, the results of the Beijing Summit are not unrelated to the low participation of African heads of state (17, as against 48 in Beijing) in the "European Days on Development", in Brussels, two weeks later. Something concrete emerged from the first, like for example the obtaining by the Ivory Coast of 3 billion francs CFA. Whereas Afro-European summits usually end with announcement, promises which are unfulfilled or subject to conditions which trample on the internal sovereignty of the states.

At the European "Days" Ugandan president Yuweri Museveni told his European "partners": "Do not force the people to do what you want them to do". The Chinese state has only one demand, the non-recognition of Taiwan by its African partners, apart from that the principle of non-interference is applied: "We respect the free choice of each of their road of development, we attach a high importance to the concerns of each". [18] Which allows some states, like Angola, to escape, relatively speaking, from the grip of the international financial institutions.

Moreover, in the name of the same principle and its own practice in the area, the Chinese state does not concern itself in any way with respect for "human rights" or "good governance" by its partners. This non-interference makes it the ideal partner for African autocrats-oligarchs, often appalled by the hypocrisy of Western use of blackmail on "respect for human rights" to strengthen their domination/exploitation while feigning sensitivity to the pressure of the associations.

Yet this Chinese pragmatism by its cynicism and indifference, can only disfavour the real democratic movements in Africa who do not adhere to the reproduction of the capitalist and neo-colonial order. Worse, Afro-Chinese co-operation could resemble Franco-African cooperation, in supplying not only arms to autocratic regimes, but also in participating in army training. The French press has already raised the question of support to the Chad rebels by China during their advance towards N'Djamena, which could smack of disinformation (outside the arming of the rebels) to justify the real participation of the French army in the combat on the side of the Chad army. China, it should be recalled, is part of the club of the major arms merchants, all permanent members of the UN Security Council.

This principle of non-interference is accompanied in the name also of South-South solidarity with often unfailing support to regimes confronted with the antipathy of some western power. For example, at the UN Security Council, resolutions proposed by the French state against the regime of Laurent Gbagbo in the Ivory Coast or the US against the regime of Omar El Béchir in Sudan are exposed to the threat of the Chinese veto if they are not revised in a more moderate version acceptable to China.

Its support for Gbagbo is explained by its interests in the Ivory Coast, where oil enterprises do not hide their ambitions. Moreover, to get round the embargo, the regime of Gbagbo can supply itself in Chinese weapons, to the great chagrin of French companies

who had exclusivity in these different sectors. If his regime can escape the financial asphyxia so much desired by the Chirac government, it is also thanks to that. Nonetheless, French capital in the Ivory Coast remains dominant and the operating account of the Ivorian state at the French Treasury remains the most significant of the West African sub-zone of the franc CFA.

But, it is not excluded that in case of electoral victory, Laurent Gbagbo would rely on cooperation with China as the basis for his neoliberal nationalism, at the expense of the traditional French supremacy. Like the oligarchic regime of El Béchir in Sudan, where Chinese support, based on oil operations, favours strong growth which attracts more investors (from France, the Gulf, India and so on.) and allows him to stand up to the US, which suffers from not controlling the oil, although China, the main imperial beneficiary of Sudanese oil is one of the main supports of the US Treasury (1,000 billion dollars).

The Chinese march towards the realisation of its global ambition is accompanied, for the moment, by an official conception of cooperation according to "the correct principles of sincere friendship, of equal-to-equal treatment, of mutual support and of common development". [19] But it remains despite all motivated by capitalist interest which ends by limiting generosity and maintaining if not increasing inequality, as shown by the internal situation of China which does not escape "the historic law of combined and uneven development".

As Chinese capital reaches the summits of the world economy and produces a capitalist class and a middle class - very much in the minority among the 1,400 million Chinese - there is pauperisation of the peasants, the withdrawal of free access to public services, the abandonment of certain regions to themselves, the repression of social demands and so on. [20]

Moreover, if it is not reined in, Chinese adhesion to the religion of growth risks not only quickly exhausting certain natural resources of the African countries, destroying for example the so-called protected forests in Gabon for oil exploitation, but also constituting a serious ecological threat. The Chinese state, together with the US and some others, bears the chief responsibility for the threat currently facing the planet and is the least disposed to commit itself to fighting this threat. Its friendship for Africa cannot be effective without awareness of the floods experienced, in a kind of irony, by Kenya, host country of the conference on climate change - a conference from which no real programme of struggle emerged.

An Africa that struggles

Imperialism is not dead. It has become neoliberal. But as the features of the child remain in the traits of the adult, it remains recognisable. Africa remains a capital place of supply in natural resources necessary to capitalist growth at the price of the destruction of human lives, of the production and reproduction of poverty. This poverty has made Nairobi an area where gang violence develops, recruiting in the milieus of uneducated youth, without a decent job or a hope of finding one. A phenomenon familiar to the South African or Brazilian economies, and indeed the US with an evident ethnic/racial aspect.

At this neoliberal stage, Capital profits from the misery of Africa, developing a business from the images of poverty and misery. The tendency is even to promote charity as the horizon of solidarity. With, in the role of profane messiah, Mr. Bill Gates, who, with regard to his personal fortune, is the biggest beneficiary of the neoliberal order. And it is Africa that he has chosen as scène of representation of his generosity - rather than the zones of poverty in which millions of his US compatriots live - not only concerning AIDS, but also in financially supporting the Rockefeller foundation in its campaign of subtle imposition of genetically modified seeds on African agriculture. This continent thus seems condemned to the assistance of international capital. The responsibility of this latter being covered by the undeniable corruption of the African ruling classes.

Yet, as elsewhere, with less visibility and less effect for the moment than in Latin America, there is an Africa which struggles against neoliberalised neo-colonialism. Activists in the struggle against privatisation and for social justice in South Africa. the actors in the Social Forum in Niger, the peasants of the Office of the Niger, the employees of Gacilienne (a subsidiary of Yves Rocher) in Burkina Faso, the radical activists of Swaziland forced underground, the militants of Woman of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), the trades unionists of the Union of Kenya Civil Servants (UKCS), or the Aviation and Allied Workers Union (AAWU)... the flame of struggle for the defence of social, cultural and political rights, the emancipation of the workers, the peoples who are victims of capitalist exploitation and various oppressions is not extinguished.

Despite the desertion of numerous anti-imperialists, anti-neo-colonialists and anti-capitalists of yesteryear and their integration, or attempted integration, by the neo-colonial regimes and the various institutions won to the perpetuation of the imperial order. For some of these the critique of the neoliberal order serves as a trampoline to the integration into this criminal order.

From the 1st World Social Forum (WSF) to the Polycentric World Social Forum (PWSF), this flame has become progressively visible. At the PWSF in Bamako, the small peasants of Mali, victims of the institutions of Bretton Woods, of multinational seed companies, of European anti-immigration policies and of the Malian government came together. Understanding of the dramatic situation of the African public debt and the social consequences of its repayment have ceased to be the concern of a small handful of individuals.

Peasants, in the majority on the continent, have set up regional networks to resist neoliberal attacks against small agriculture. Women's networks have been set up and show a great dynamism at each meeting. Youth organisations, conscious of the murky future which neoliberal

capitalism holds for them, try to recreate the revolutionary Pan-Africanism symbolised by Amilcar Cabral and Thomas Sankara.

The voice of the trade unions is heard, but much less than would be necessary to change the relationship of forces between Capital and Labour, which is more unequal under the neoliberal regime. The victims of the policies of the capitalist centre and its periphery against the free circulation of persons, subcontracted by the African states, try to coordinate. Ecologist organisations are emerging in reaction to the plunder of forests, the pollution of coastlines by oil and the depredations in mining areas (gold, uranium and so on).

But these different struggles still suffer from a weak establishment of continental networks of the different organisations of the same sector, although they are often confronted by the same multinationals, whether it is Bi-Water, Suez or Vivendi for water, Chevron-Texaco, Shell, Total for oil or Anglo-Gold for gold. Chinese enterprises like Zhonging Telecommunications Ltd (ZTE, which has demanded a monopoly situation from Benin) have become competitive with western telecommunications in the acquisition of state telecommunications and should not be neglected.

A greater participation of trade unions and national trade union federations in the dynamic of the social Forums could favour the coordination of responses. That implies above all a clear demarcation from the campaign of promotion of a so-called responsible trades unionism, of "social partnership" with the employers and the governments.[Mouhamadou Tidiane Kasse seems to credit the idea of "the construction of a partnership with the governments and the multinationals" as one of the stages of the dynamisation of the African trade union movement (See "FSM 2007: l'heure de sortir des sentiers battus pour les Africains " - available on: http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2190.]].

In the case of the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) - which has recently joined the African Social Forum - this has led to internal frictions between certain federations or sections and the leadership, accused of privileging its tripartite alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist party in power. Moreover, it is under the influence of this education in "responsibility" - which accentuates the bureaucratic and egoist interests - that the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC, originating mainly from the Zimbabwean trade union movement), while opposing the attacks of the autocratic regime of Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) on workers and other impoverished layers, seems to be moving to the right. That should worry the Labour Party of Nigeria, recently created on the model of the MDC, by, among others, Adam Oshiomole, president of the powerful Nigeria Labour Congress union federation. [21]

Contradictions of WSF sharpened in Nairobi

Moreover, this African movement for global justice suffer from the financial heteronomy of numerous associations and social movements. For even in the struggle against the system, money remains a necessity. And a great part of the movements of the South in general, of Africa in particular depend on their partners in the western world, the charity organisations and states of the North, indeed multinationals presented as partners for the development of Africa.

This has an impact on the definition of their projects for global justice both in the local and international fields. Thus, for example, in a great part of the movement there prevails still the reductionist conception of an opposition between on the one hand civil society, considered positive in itself and on the other (political) society, negative by essence.

This is a conception promoted also by the International Financial Institutions and which explains the hostility to the participation of political organisations in the dynamic of the WSF. This translates in practice as an opposition to the open presence of the radically anti-neoliberal, in other words anti-capitalist, political organisations, The WSF in Mumbaï, the ESF in Athens thus become what it is necessary to avoid in the future.

The WSF in Nairobi could be the theatre for an offensive by the NGOs who are partisans of the addition of a social dimension to globalisation, a charity-based movement for global justice, through the participation of associations that they support financially in Africa in particular, in the Third World in general.

With the development of poverty and misery, religion has become once again "the opium of the people". The Islamophobic campaign orchestrated by the US neoconservatives and relayed in Europe, in the name of a very selective secularism, tends to cover the reactionary offensive waged by the Christian churches in the world in general, in Africa in particular. Kenya is one of the African societies where, alongside the traditional Christianities (Catholic and Anglican) and traditional, indeed fundamentalist, Islam proliferate Christian fundamentalisms: the Pentecostalists, the born again, "brothers and sisters in Christ" of G. W. Bush and millenarian televangelists, who surf on the poverty developed by the system that they co-manage.

For example, it is unsurprising to find the anti-capitalism of Caritas, a charity organisation as its name indicates, statutorily established in the Vatican [22]: "Caritas Europa considers the World Social Forum (WSF) as being a permanent world process, which groups together in an open meeting place the social movements, networks, NGOs and other bodies of civil society opposed to neoliberalism and to a world dominated by capital or by any form of imperialism". [23] Has it passed bag and baggage into the camp of Christian liberation theology?

Is this the sign of a radical progressive change of the Pontifical Justice and Peace Council, at the very time when the Vatican state is led by the former head of the Sacred Congregation of

the Faith (an inquisitorial body, charged with among other things the clerical repression of the liberation theologians), Cardinal Ratzinger, alias Benedict XVI? One of the most influential members of the said Pontifical Council is none other than Michel Camdessus, former director general of the IMF, former adviser of Nicolas Sarkozy at the French ministry of the economy and finance, and said to be a member of Opus Dei.

Such a participation of reactionary Christianity, dressed up in anti-neoliberalism, is a threat to the gains of the feminist and LGTB movements. In Africa homophobic and anti-feminist prejudices remain fairly developed inside the movement for global justice Onyango Oloo, of the Kenya Social Forum, has drawn attention to the persistence of male supremacy in the dynamic of the WSF, during the preparation in Nairobi: "Of the seven commissions of the WSF Organising Committee, one alone is chaired by a woman despite the fact that women constitute nearly half the members of these commissions". [24] Yet the movement for global justice should be one of the main spaces of real education against phallocracy and for gender equality.

Beyond that, the movement is in no way immunised against the penetration of neoliberal values, as shown, for example, by the operation led against Babel (a translators network which is free because it supports the movement) to the profit of commercial translation networks. Democratic access to the debates will thus be subordinated to the financial resources of the workshop organisers, with an exclusion of languages other than those ordinarily practiced in the leading bodies of the "international community" The use of Swahili at the WSF 2007 could be without a follow-up. This episode should prompt the movement to pay more attention with regard to the integration within it of neoliberal values.

This 2007 edition of the WSF could favour the development of a permanent Pan-African solidarity in the fight against neoliberalism, current phase of capitalist globalisation. From Cape Town to Tunis, the rich diversity of peoples (Arab, Berber, Chinese, European, Indian, "black" and so on) of the continent, could organise, for example, the struggle against the Pan-African declaration of neoliberalism represented by NEPAD, for an alternative pan-Africanism, emancipatory, egalitarian, socially just and ecological And, so far as humanity as a whole is concerned, the consolidation of the dynamic of the global justice movement can favour the emergence and development of a new internationalism, whose effectiveness will depend on the capacity to democratically draw the lessons of internationalisms past and present. [25]

But this goal can only be attained in a dialogue or a permanent debate between the anti—neoliberal social movements and the anti-capitalist political organisations, in a democratic spirit of mutual cross-fertilisation. Which implies a refoundation of politics, no longer sacrificing the interest of the majorities or exploited and oppressed minorities on the altar of electoral interests, not diluting the strategic in the tactical, in other words a transformation of the radical political organisations.

Footnotes

[1] "The Other Side of the Coin: The UK and Corruption in Africa", March 2006, available at: www.africaappg.org.uk.

[2] Session of October 5, 2006

[3] One of the biggest copper producers in the world.

[4] Kurt Pelda, "Wie Kongo-Kinshasa seine Bodenschätze verschleudert. Undurchsichtige Verfahren bei der Erteilung von Bergbaukonzessionen»", "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", Samstag/Soontag 19/20, August 2006, p. 29 (translation M. J.)

[5] Press release number 2007/115/AFR

[6] Press release, "Doing Business 2007", Washington D.C. September 6, 2006

[7] Christian Aid, "UK profits from sub-Saharan Africa despite aid and debt pledges", 05.07.06

[8] Robtel Neejai Pailey, "Modern-day slavery in Liberia", 2006-02-02. Available on: http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/31756.

[9] Charles W. Corey, "Le Conseil d'administration de la MCC approuve un accord avec le Mali". Available on: http://usinfo,state.gov/xarchives/display.html/utils.

[10] Press release of press services of the US representative for foreign trade, "Entretiens entre Mme Schwab et quatre ministres africains du Commerce", October 27, 2006

[11] Bruce Greenberg, "Des africanistes discutent des enjeux sécuritaires de la Somalie", "Washington File", October 10, 2006

[12] Jean Nanga, "Darfour: les enjeux du conflit meurtrier", "solidarities", October 19, 2004

[13] Babacar Ndao, of the Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et des Producteurs Agricoles d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA - Network of Peasant Organisations and Agricultural Producers of West Africa), "Libéralisation des produits agricoles et injustice sociale", November 21, 2006. Available on: http://www.pambazuka.org/fr/category/comment/38423.

[14] See the articles by Raf Custers: "L'Union Européenne veut et obtient une force militaire au Congo" (April 8, 2006), available on: http://www.indymedia.be/en/node/2014; "Patrons allemands partisans d'une guerre des matières premières" (May 7, 2006), available on:

http://www.indymedia/be/fr/node/2375.

[15] "Le monde entier peut y perdre", interview given by the federal minister of foreign affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, to the magazine FOCUS on the questions of the Congo, Afghanistan and Iran, July 9, 2006

[16] See Bruce Greenberg, op.cit.

[17] Laurent-Désiré Kabila came to power in 1997, after a war against Mobutu's army, with the support of the US, via the Rwanda of Paul Kagame and the Uganda of Yuweri Museveni. He was assassinated in 2001, when confronted with a war against his former allies who had produced internal armed oppositions

[18] Hu Jin Tao, "Discours d'ouverture du Sommet Sino-africain", Beijing, November 3, 2006

[19] Idem

[20] "Alternatives Sud", "Le miracle chinois vu de l'intérieur. Points de vue d'auteurs chinois", volume 12 -April 2005. Richard McGregor, "China's poorest worse off after boom", "Financial Times", November 21, 2006

[21] Danielle Obono, "Unions lead popular resistance", IV 376, March 2006

[22] Article 5 of the Additional Protocol to the Statutes of Caritas Internationalis, May 16, 2002

[23] Caritas Europa at the World Social Forum 2007

[24] Onyango Oloo, "Équilibre du genre au sein du Forum Social Mondial - Nairobi" available on: http://www.pambazuka.org,/fr/category/comment/37892.

[25] See Michael Lowy, "Towards a New International?" IV 348, March 2003

Sri Lanka: Stop support for this genocidal war

19 January 2007, by Yamuna Bandara

The defence budget has been raised by 45 per cent to $1.28 billion. Western governments, including the USA and Britain, help this country politically, economically and militarily.

The country is Sri Lanka, once hailed as the pearl of the Indian Ocean, now reduced to the teardrop of the Indian subcontinent.

Following a war that waged for nearly two decades the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) signed a ceasefire agreement (CFA) in 2002. With Norway as a facilitator, the parties started negotiations in the same year. The first round of talks was held in the Norwegian capital of Oslo.

The ensuing agreement signed by both parties stated that they "agreed to explore a solution founded on the principle of internal self-determination in areas of historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking peoples, based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka".

Since the last colonial rulers, the British, left Sri Lanka in 1948, this Indian Ocean Island has been ruled by the majority Sinhalese. Tamils today are nearly one fifth of the total population. While Sri Lankan Tamils dominate the North and East of the country, Tamils of Indian origin brought to the country by the British rulers for slave labour in the plantations live in the central up country. Muslims are the second minority in the country with a significant concentration in the East.

After tolerating many decades of racial discrimination by the majority Sinhalese governments The Tamils of the North and East rebelled in an armed uprising in the early eighties. The main trigger point was the state sponsored pogrom that massacred thousands of Tamils living in the Sinhala dominated south. Over 50 Tamil Tiger suspects held in a state prison in the capital Colombo was killed in one night. The Tamil militants came to the conclusion that enough is enough, took arms in the struggle for a separate homeland within the North and East.

The leftists in Sri Lanka were in the forefront of fighting for the rights of the minority nations from as early as 1935. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) was at the helm of these struggles. They had a respectable following among the Tamils of the North and the East as well as Tamil workers in the up country plantations.

However, the LSSP entered a coalition government in 1964 and abandoned the struggle for the minorities as well as the workers. Not only the Tamils but also the Sinhala youth were disillusioned. The Sinhala youth took up arms in 1971 in an abortive uprising while the Tamils followed suit at the end of the decade.

At the beginning several Tamil groups were fighting the Sinhala state. Nearly a decade later the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the Tamil Tigers became the major force fighting for the Tamil cause with Velupillai Prabhakaran as their formidable leader. From a hit and run guerrilla

force it has developed into an army of conventional nature with its dreaded Sea Tiger navy and Black Tiger suicide squad.

Since it's inception in 1977, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) that broke away from the LSSP, has campaigned for the Tamil peoples right for self determination. Several of the party's leading members along with other left wing leaders were assassinated in the late eighties by Sinhala racist forces. This was in a campaign to safeguard a limited power sharing arrangement in the form of provincial councils introduced by the bourgeois government at that time.

After many battles with successive Sri Lankan governments as well as the Indian army, the LTTE was able to liberate a major part of the North and a sizeable area in the East. The Tamil Tiger administration as well as its police force, courts and military is based the Northern Vanni region with Kilinochchi as its headquarters. The A9 highway that leads to the northernmost city of Jaffna held by the GOSL runs through Tamil Tiger controlled territory and is manned by state and rebel checkpoints.

From a strong military position the LTTE unilaterally declared a ceasefire on Christmas Eve 2001. The United National Party (UNP) led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, the champion of neo-liberalisation, reciprocated leading to the signing of the CFA. The major western power dealing behind the scene was Norway.

The CFA accepted the reality that the Tamil Tigers are in control of a de facto state. While the major opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by President Chandrika Kumaratunge was highly critical of any dialogue with the Tamil Tigers, Sinhala right wing extremists led by red-clad Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Buddhist Saffron robed Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) took to the streets calling for war.

With Norway as the facilitator, the western powers helped the warring parties to start negotiations. The first round of talks started in 2002. With the progress of talks, the donor countries pledged an aid package of $ 4.5 billion linked to the "progress of the peace process". To oversee the funds UK, USA, EU, Norway and Japan were appointed donor co-chairs.

Trincomalee, Sri Lanka's largest natural harbour is situated in the North eastern part of the country. This is part of the Tamil homeland. It also has a massive oil tank farm presently under the control of the Indian government. This is en route for the US Pacific command for the Middle East.

Strategically, the Trincomalee harbour and the oil tank facilities is an important location with regard to the US military war against the Middle East. Ironically, that part of the world is not "stable" enough for the US to be operating especially with Sea Tigers operating in the area. So the US wants a no-conflict zone in Sri Lanka.s North Eastern seas, and the .peace. process it wants to impose is analogous to that Bush wants to impose on the Palestinians.

After six rounds of talks, in 2003 the Sri Lankan government had a meeting with the donors in Washington which excluded the Tamil Tigers. The Tamil Tigers suspended talks saying that any cash involved in the Sri Lankan scenario should be a matter to be discussed with both parties. The Sri Lankan government responded that it was a "sovereign nation".

Anton Balasingham chief negotiator and ideologue of the Tamil Tigers wrote to the prime minister saying "deprivation of the Tamils of the northeast in the macro-economic policies and strategies of the government have seriously undermined the confidence of the Tamil people and the LTTE leadership in the negotiating process".

The Tamil areas of the country were the most affected by the 2004 Asian Tsunami. Foreign agencies and shocked public in other parts of the world sent millions of dollars to governments in the affected regions. Tamils who sent aid meant for the North and East saw them being stopped in custom warehouses.

In order to get much needed aid, the LTTE proposed a joint mechanism (PTOMS) in order to have a working relationship with the government. The president whose alliance came back into power in 2004 April stopped the PTOMS coming into effect. This move was backed by the JVP and the JHU. The Tamil Tigers sent delegation after delegation to Colombo to where all their appeals went unheard. The Tamils were left to perish in poverty and desperation.

Prior to the elections in 2004, a group led by the Tamil Tigers Eastern Commander Vinayagamoorthi Muralitharan, alias Karuna, broke away calling for an East separated from the North. The call for Tamil homeland even before the inception of the armed struggle has been a united North and East.

Later on Ranil Wickremasinghe's UNP went public to say that the split was engineered during the "peace talks". So much for "confidence building". It is no secret that the Sri Lankan military is operating together with the Karuna faction. In November 2006, both the UN and the Human Rights Watch accused the GOSL of recruiting children for the Kauna faction in the east.

The Karuna faction and the army had a major hit in February 2005 when they killed the LTTE Eastern political wing leader E Kaushalyan along with Former Tamil parliamentarian Chandranehru Arianayagam, in government held territory. Up to date no culprit has been found.

Western powers including the UN issued statements calling both parties to come back to the negotiating table. When the Foreign Minister Laxman Kadirgamar was killed in Colombo in August 2005 the EU imposed a travel ban on the Tamil Tigers. There was scant response from the left to the ban.

In 2005 November, President Mahinda Rajapaksa came to power mainly with the help of the JVP and the JHU. The Communist Party and the LSSP also supported him. His battle cry was a "Unitary Sri Lanka", which opposed any power sharing deals with the Tamil Tigers.

Violence that had been only sporadic

during the previous three years escalated. The Mahinda Rajapaksa regime was preparing itself for war. The killing of unarmed Tamil political activists rose to new heights.

Tamil parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham was gunned down on Christmas Eve while he was attending mass. Witness saw the killers go into a Sri Lankan Army camp nearby.Before even a month had passed, V.Vigneswaran, President of the Trincomalee District Tamil Peoples' Forum who was to fill Pararajasingham's vacancy was also murdered.

Though no action was taken by international powers against the government that was implicated in both civilian murders, when the LTTE retaliated by launching a suicide attack against the Army Commander inside the Army headquarters itself, the EU imposed a total ban on the LTTE.

The GOSL responded to the attack against their military leader by bombing the LTTE held East by air. Since then, they have given priority to this campaign to oust the Tigers from the east. Air raids and shelling are part of the Tamil people's day to day life today. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have fled the area. Many brave the Palk Strait to neighbouring India to live as refugees.

Once an air raids hit a school in Sencholai killing more than 60 children while shelling by the SLA killed over 50 in a refugee camp in Kadiraveli in the east. The town of Trincomalee is today a city of refugees. With the blessing of the judiciary, the GOSL has already started dividing the Tamil homeland in the North and the east.

Meanwhile, the government has closed the main supply routes to the LTTE held North and East. While over a half a million Tamils in Northern Jaffna have been forced to live in imposed poverty where a massive military presence have occupied their land naming it a High Security Zone (HSZ), thousands are fleeing the eastern town of Tamil Tiger held Vakarai to escape the ever present shelling, air raids and non existence of essential items. No aid agencies or media are allowed to that region.

The so called "International Community" is silent. In the meantime, over two thousand mainly Tamils has disappeared within a period of eight months in the government held areas. The NSSP leadership, campaigning against these disappearances and attacks on Tamils, have received death threats from state sponsored Sinhala racist forces.

The most recent assassination was of Tamil parliamentarian Nadarajah Raviraj who was gun downed in the capital Colombo in broad daylight. He was a popular politician among the Sinhala majority, who told in Sinhala why the Tamils are oppressed because they are Tamils. He joined hands with the left and progressive forces of the Sinhala dominated South to campaign against disappearances and the atrocities committed against Tamils by the state and its paramilitaries. Thousands of anti-war demonstrators in Colombo protested his killing.

Maintaining that the ban on the Tamil Tigers was brought upon by the "actions of that organization", the EU in a statement on May 31 2005 calls upon the LTTE "to amend its violent course and return to peace talks".

While warning the Sri Lankan government against extrajudicial killings and sponsoring paramilitary groups, the EU only "calls upon the Sri Lankan authorities to curb violence in government held areas". This is while accepting that the LTTE is not the only party responsible for the violence rocking the island.

However, the EU that banned the LTTE in Europe for "their involvement in terrorist acts," has not taken any action against the Sri Lankan government led by Sinhala supremacist backed president Mahinda Rajapaksa's government for not acting effectively "to put a stop to the culture of impunity and to clampdown of all acts of violence in areas controlled by the government".

This conveys the message that the EU is aware of the government's sponsoring of armed gangs to launch a proxy war against the LTTE and Tamil civilians. Nevertheless, the EU is content by issuing a warning.

Almost half a million of Tamils roam the EU. They have been thrown out of their homeland due to their allegiance to the Tamil cause. They comprise a significant bulk of the European working class. Goaded by the US, the European global masters have labelled the Tamil militant leadership a "terrorist organization". The "International Community" that they believed to have a human face, have abandoned them in the onslaught of the governments terror campaign. The left in Europe and across the world must listen to their voice and defend their right to self determination.

Socialist Resistance, together with the NSSP, the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International have launched a petition taking up these questions and demanding that the ban on the LTTE is lifted. International Viewpoint is happy to promote that initiative.

Trade unionists, civil liberty campaigners and other progressive forces should join together to defeat these anti- Tamil actions world wide as well as in Sri Lanka itself. It is time to rise against the global support extended to a state hell bent on launching this genocidal war. Sign the petition at http://www.petitiononline.com/ntwsdtp/petition.html

Hugo Chavez: "For a new United Socialist

Party of Venezuela”

17 January 2007, by Hugo Chavez

“So Hugo Chavez invites the country, his followers, all revolutionaries, socialists and patriots, men and women, the Venezuelan youth; I invite the workers, housewives, professionals and technicians, nationalist businessmen, I invite the indigenous peoples of this country, the young people of this country, the women of Venezuela, I invite them all to build a united political party…”

“Do you remember the huge effort we made in the Battle of Santa Inés? [1]”

“And after that I asked everyone not to wind down the UBEs, the Electoral Battle Units, and the Patrols. But they didn’t listen to me and in almost all the country the effort was lost… They only kept going in a few places.”

“Well, now, we must not let the same thing happen again with this great victory of 3 December, and the battalions, the platoons and the squads [2]…”

“So the first thing I ask you to do - I’m sure you already have but go back and check it… update it; if you don’t have a computer to hand, or a typewriter, then do it by hand - is make a register, do a census, of all the militants, activists, sympathisers, friends, and so on, in each area corresponding to each battalion, each platoon, each squad…”

“So, listen carefully all you commanders of (electoral) battalions, platoons and squads! I’m giving you these suggestions for action starting today do that we can build from the bottom up this United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), because these squads, platoons and battalions are going to be the basic national structure of this PSUV, its structure across the country.”

“How would we look before history if tomorrow or the day after we made a so-called party, a front, and it turned out that that here on this platform appeared… the same old faces as before, the same leaders of the parties, which had just got together and that was the party? No, that would be a terrible deception!”

“Of course all those who are close to me are free to choose. That even goes for my own brother Adán, for everyone. For the MVR (Fifth Republic Movement), the PPT (Fatherland for All), Podemos (For Social Democracy), the PCV (Communist Party), the MEP (People’s Electoral Movement), the UPV (Venezuelan Popular Unity), for Uncle Tom Cobbley and all… I leave them all at liberty.”

“The parties that want to maintain their existence can maintain it, on their own; but of course they will have to leave my government.”

“With me I want just one party to govern, one party. Because every day there are more parties, a whole flock of parties.”

“Let us not divide the people.”

“Let’s unite them more and more…”

“Look, in these books there is a part of the history. In this one by Marta Harnecker - which I recommend - we can see what happened with the parties of the left in Latin America, with one or two exceptions. They copied the model of the Bolshevik party; because of course the Bolshevik model was relatively successful in the birth of the Soviet Union in October 1917.”

“As we know, there was a big debate that divided the revolutionary movement, between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, and in the end… the party that managed to lead or encourage that people into the revolution was the Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.”

“Later this suffered a deviation, that was the Stalinist deviation that Lenin was unable to avoid because he was ill and he died very young. Lenin died within a very few years and that ended up being an anti-democratic party and that marvellous slogan which said: “All power to the soviets!” ended up being “All power to the party!”, and that deformed, in my modest opinion, almost from the beginning the socialist revolution that gave birth to the Soviet Union - and just look at the result 70 years later…”

“When the Soviet Union collapsed, what worker came out to defend (this process)? This was supposed to be the regime or the system of the workers, and the workers never came out to defend it. Pretty strange, huh? And this happened because it was taken over by an elite, it became a regime of the elite that could not build socialism. We here are going to build Venezuelan socialism, the Venezuelan socialist model.”

“For this new era we need to create the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. That’s what I propose. Let all these currents of the Venezuelan left come and help build this from below. That’s why we need to carry out a census of all the squads, platoons and battalions.”

“You know that from the beginning we have to be very strict on the question of morality, of ethics, and this depends on you because you are the ones who know the people in your community. There must be no room here for thieves or those involved in corruption…”

“This United Socialist Party will of course be the most democratic party in Venezuelan history. That’s right, the most democratic; it’ll be opened up for discussion, across the board.”

“The grass-roots members will elect genuine leaders. That’s why you need those registers. We’ve had enough of candidates being selected just by someone pointing a finger at them. [3] And often of course - although not so much at local or state level - it’s been my finger that’s done the pointing. Certainly, I’ve always tried to be fair,

when I've been asked to make decisions about candidates."

"But it's better if they come from the bottom up, from the grassroots. Let it be the people who take the decisions, just as it has been written in this Constitution here for the last seven years, but which we have never fulfilled. It's high time we did. The time has arrived..."

"Now the party should not be born with electoral aims - even though it will be able to engage in electoral battles like those we have already fought. The party needs to go beyond the purely electoral, and that's why this is a good time for it to be born, when we have no elections coming up in the immediate future. This [is the] Socialist Party..., and in fact I would say that from the bottom up we should call them socialist battalions, socialist platoons, socialist squads."

"We have to encourage and engage in the battle of ideas. It's no longer the electoral battle, though no doubt we'll have to engage that too in the coming years. This is the battle of ideas over the socialist project, and for this all of you need to study a lot. You need to study a lot, read a lot, discuss a lot, organise round tables, organise square tables, organise meetings of the socialist squads, of the socialist platoons. Yes, read! And those of us in the command posts who have been promoting this process so far, and who will continue to promote it, we have to spread a lot of information, leaflets and so on."

"Mariategui, the great Peruvian thinker... of the early 20th century, said that our socialism had to be an heroic effort of construction..."

"And one of the fundamental roots of our socialist project, according to Mariategui, and I repeat it here today - and not because he said it but because I am convinced by seeing it so often confirmed in reality; indeed I saw it today when I gave out the awards to our indigenous brothers all the way from Capanaparo, from Tronador, from Barranco Yopal, and there from the Amacuro Delta, where we won almost 100 percent of the vote, so all the more reason for me to believe it - these indigenous peoples are bearers of the socialist seed in our land, in our nation, in our America."

"They lived in socialism for centuries. And still if you go and visit our brothers the Kuivas, where I won 100 percent of the vote, in one of the many municipalities where I won 100 percent of the vote in Carabalí, there on the banks of the Capanaparo they are still living in socialism today..."

"And so we have to socialize the land, that is another aspect, we cannot just talk about socialist morality..."

"Transforming the economic model is fundamental if we want to build true socialism. So we have to socialize the economy, the system of production, create a genuinely new system - and we're working hard at this, but of course we are only beginning to visualise the way forward, hence the Zamoran funds [4] and the Nuclei of Endogenous Development..."

Footnotes

[1] The campaign to win the Recall Referendum in August 2004.

[2] The names given to the different levels of grass-roots organisation that grew up to organise the 2006 election campaign.

[3] "Dedocracia".

[4] For land reform.

After the elections: A new party for the Venezuelan revolution

17 January 2007, by Stuart Piper

A fortnight later, he spelt out the first big step in this direction - the formation of a united political party, to replace the dysfunctional coalition of party apparatuses that has supported him so far. And he said he already had a name in mind, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, or PSUV. [1]

He was addressing representatives from the grass-roots campaigning bodies that had organised his election campaign in neighbourhoods across the country - 11,000 'battalions', 32,800 'platoons' and 3 million 850 thousand 'squadrons', according to his figures. These, he told them, should not allow themselves to be disbanded. Instead they should meet again, draw up a register of their members, and become the basis for this new united party of Venezuela's socialist revolution.

This is a move of huge importance. In principle, it is one revolutionaries inside and outside Venezuela should surely support. It has long been clear to many of the best Bolivarian militants that a gaping hole exists in the middle of their movement. Between the consistently inspiring leadership of Chavez himself and the explosion of local activity and self-organization among the mass of the Venezuelan people, there lies a dangerous absence of effective, national organisation.

The lack of strong, well-structured social movements has only begun to be remedied by new trade union or peasant organisations like the UNT or the Frente Campesino Ezequiel Zamora. (Venezuela never had anything equivalent to the landless movement in Brazil, the indigenous movement in Ecuador or the multitude of social and union movements in Bolivia.)

On the other hand, the so-called parties supporting the process - most gravely Chavez' own MVR, but also for the most part the PPT, Podemos, the Venezuelan Communist Party and several smaller organisations - have utterly failed to act as the democratic, collective organisers of political debate, decision-making and action. Instead they have largely functioned as bureaucratic (and sometimes corrupt) machines to organise the distribution of electoral offices, posts and favours (very much like the traditional parties of Venezuela's pre-Chavez Fourth Republic).

A truly effective, plural and democratic, mass political organisation for revolutionaries is therefore badly needed. Several of Chavez' closest advisers have been talking about this for at least the last two years. Several attempts have been made by smaller currents of Venezuelan revolutionary socialists to bring together their own forces and open the way towards a mass revolutionary party. The launching of the PRS in July 2005, involving mostly trotskyist currents from the Moreno tradition, was one. The Frente de Fuerzas Socialistas, involving Utopia and the Socialist League, was another. But without the direct backing of Chavez himself, these were destined to remain minority initiatives.

Chavez' own comments on launching this initiative are also encouraging. His insistence that it must be the most democratic party Venezuela has ever seen, built from the bottom up, inviting all the currents of the Venezuelan left to join; his insistence that it must not be dominated by electoral concerns, nor by the existing leaders of the existing coalition parties, and his critique of the way the Bolshevik Party in Russia came to suffocate rather than stimulate a battle of ideas for socialism - he recalls how the marvellous slogan of "all power to the soviets" degenerated into a sad reality of "all power to the party" - all these point towards precisely the kind of mass, democratic, revolutionary, political organisation that is needed.

But there are also big risks. Not for the first time in the Bolivarian revolution, serious and necessary questions are being asked about how far the reality of this new party will live up to the expectations. These questions are of two kinds. Firstly, who exactly will be in this party, if, as seems is already underway, most of the main existing parties immediately dissolve into it? And will it really be able to break with the structures and culture of bureaucracy, paternalism, even corruption, that have too often acted as a break on the revolution's most radical initiatives (including, for example, workers' control and thorough-going local participatory democracy) ?

Even before Chavez' keynote speech, leaders of the PRS and the UNT like Stalin Perez Borges made clear their concerns about the way the new party was being prepared. He pointed to comments by some 'moderate' Chavista state governors and MVR dignitaries to the effect that "everything was already decided", and to negotiations behind closed doors between the main political machines on how to carve up the new party. Stalin Perez said that trade union and other social movement activists, political currents and intellectuals would be calling for a United Forum of Democratic Discussion where all the grass-roots forces in favour of deepening the revolution could discuss exactly what kind of party they want to build, and how.

The second kind of question overlaps with the first, and points to a paradox at the heart of the Bolivarian process. Chavez' own vision of the new party may be in the best and most radical, democratic mould. But the decision to move in that direction was taken, and announced, by him, and apparently by him alone. Now this may be the only way to break through the logjam of inertia imposed by the MVR and other party establishments. But does it put in jeopardy precisely the kind of radical socialist democracy that it aims to promote?

As the prominent left-wing Venezuelan intellectual Edgardo Lander - one of the main organisers of the 2006 World Social Forum in Caracas - has put it: "The form taken so far by this limited public debate is extremely worrying, especially if we assume that this may anticipate the form to be taken by the debate on Socialism in the 21st Century. ...What future can be expected, in terms of pluralism and democracy, for a party whose creation is announced by decree in this way? Is a democratic, plural, polemical debate on the future of the country possible, if some of the basic choices are announced as decisions that have already been taken before the debate has begun?"

Footnotes

[1] See the following article which reprints key parts of the speech.

Abortion referendum in Portugal

16 January 2007, by Alda Sousa

Portugal still has a restrictive law concerning abortion. Up to 1984, abortion was considered a criminal offence and women who had had an abortion could face up to 8 years in prison. Ten years after the Portuguese revolution a small change was introduced into the penal code. If a woman asked for an abortion when she became pregnant as a consequence of rape, in case of probable birth defects or serious illness of the child to be or in case of danger to the women's health, abortion was no longer to be considered as a crime.

But abortion on women's demand up to 10 weeks of pregnancy was only discussed in Parliament much later, in 1998. Although the proposal won by one vote, both the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party agreed that the issue should be resolved by a referendum and not by Parliament.

The referendum took place in June 1998. The right wing parties called for a NO vote, the hierarchy of the Catholic church waged a terrorist campaign, showing images of foetuses as if they were nearly full-term babies. The Socialist Party was split between its youth (and most MPs who called and campaigned for the YES) and the prime minister, Guterres, who declared he was against changing the law.

Only 31.9% voted, a massive abstention for Portuguese standards: The NO had an extremely narrow majority, 50.07% NO, 48.28% voted YES. Thus, the law did not change.

At that time, one of the main and strongest arguments used by the right was that, in spite of abortion being considered a criminal offence by law, no women had yet been put to trial.

This has no longer been the case since then. We have seen the unbelievable. Women (mostly working class women), in some cases also their partners or other relatives, have been brought to trial in three places: Maia, Setubal and Aveiro). So far, the women have not been convicted, although the Aveiro trial is still waiting for a final sentence after the appeal.

The question put to referendum now is exactly the same as in 1998: "Do you agree with decriminalisation of abortion when requested on women's demand, up to 10 weeks of pregnancy, and performed in an authorized clinic?"

There are a lot of differences now with the situation we faced in 1998.

First, the only political party clearly campaigning for the NO are the Christian Democrats. The Social Democrats (liberal) argue that each of their members or MPs are free to take their own position, and the Socialist Party is engaged, this time, in the YES campaign, with the personal involvement of the prime minister Socrates and several members of cabinet.

Second, although the NO has been able to mobilize the conservative country and the church is still doing an aggressive anti-choice campaign, several pro-choice movements have been set up; these are very active and will have legal right to take part in the campaign: one brings together feminists and several leading Catholics; another ("doctors for choice" has brought together, for the first time, many physicians, other health professionals and researchers; another is mostly addressing the youth and, besides artists (singers and actors), has also young members of the Social Democrats, Socialists and Left Bloc; another one has main cultural and political figures, amongst whom over one hundred MPs from Social Democrats, Socialist Party and Left Bloc. The Communist Party decided to create its own movements, with no one else's involvement. Also, 17 out of the 24 Portuguese Members of European Parliament have called for a YES vote

Besides that, the Left Bloc is having its own campaign as a party, with hoardings all over the country and hundreds of thousands of leaflets, in a campaign aiming at direct contact with the population, and centred on the question of the trials: PUT AN END TO WOMEN'S HUMILIATION. As a matter of fact, this is the only argument the NO is unable to answer: how to end the trials, while keeping the present law.

During this coming month, we will have the most difficult campaign since the formation of the Left Bloc. A lot is at stake.

The victory of the NO would mean a return to a medieval society.

The victory of the YES will not only mean a huge victory for women' rights, but also the possibility of the first victory for the working class, after so many years of defeats. This could also start a new era of a different mood for the workers and the left.

More details (in portuguese) at the Left Bloc website.

Trade Unions: Left needs New Year resolution to stiffen fight for new leadership

16 January 2007, by Greg Tucker

For the sad fact is that the gap between top and bottom has widened as working class organisation has been allowed to wither. Instead of looking at remuneration committee reform, as Barber does, the TUC would be better off getting its own act together.

Despite new "rights" to recruit members granted by the New Labour government and new "organising" drives by the unions to exploit them, overall membership of unions has barely risen. Historically, over 5 million union members have been lost, and the proportion of the workforce covered by collective agreements is woefully low (under one third of workers, less than half of previous figures). Official figures for industrial action are at their lowest for a century.

This is not due to some abstract change in society, nor can it be put down merely to the industrial defeats

and law changes of the 1980s. It is a direct result of the path followed by the TUC. For instead of confronting the challenges laid down by Margaret Thatcher, the TUC bowed down before them.

Whilst, in the political arena the Labour Party was moving ever rightward, first from social democracy to a form of social-liberalism under Neil Kinnock, and then into pure neo-liberalism under Blair, the TUC itself undertook an ideological metamorphosis, shying away from organising solidarity action, dropping even the token campaigning against unemployment it had taken up in the early 1980s.

It adopted a three pronged approach: at the political level, accept the changes in the Labour Party and keep quiet, in the hope that sooner or later a Labour government would be elected; at an industrial level, embrace the concept of partnership in the hope that stronger businesses might eventually reward their workers; and for individual members offer better personal services (credit cards, discount shopping etc.) in place of grass roots organisation.

The position that this bankrupt strategy has left us in demands a root and branch rebuilding of our movement.

First responses

The election of a set of more militant general secretaries in a series of unions over the last five years was the first expression of a general recognition of this need for change. But it has become clear that, with only two or three exceptions, the so-called "awkward squad" is not even that gauche.

While one or two smaller unions have begun to build themselves on the basis of a more militant perspective, the larger unions have responded by proposing mergers and by investing in a recruitment strategy which seems to aim more at using their numerical strength to hegemonise existing organised sectors at the expense of other unions rather than strengthen their existing organisation or organise (or reorganise) unorganised sectors.

Even where organising moves do seem more positive, as with the cleaners campaign organised by the "T & G" (Transport and General Workers' Union) , it is not clear how much of the left rhetoric and use of militant methods is not in fact covering over new forms of "partnership" and single union deals at the exclusion of others.

Breaking with Labourism

What is called for is a more fundamental break with Labourism, political and industrial. It is necessary to develop alternatives to each of the TUC's bankrupt three strategies. At the political level, the wait for a Labour government soon became, when we had one, a wait for a second term (when Labour would have a freer hand!) and has now become a wait for a second Prime Minister.

But of course, Gordon Brown will be no different to Blair. Indeed, it is clear that most of the current domestic policies that have been so disappointing to the trade union leaderships are actually Brown's not Blair's. Over and above whatever level of success the left-wing candidate, John McDonnell, may achieve in his challenge for the Labour leadership, the battle inside the unions has to be centred on building a serious political alternative.

The conference on political representation called by the RMT (Rail, Maritime and Transport) union a year ago was an important first step. But the RMT has failed to develop the initiative. Instead they have followed the line of their general secretary Bob Crow; that the first stage is to revitalise the industrial grass roots of the trade unions, and only then would it become possible to build a new political force. Having been bitten by the bad experience with Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party in the early 90s,
Crow's position is perhaps understandable. But it is still wrong. Despite the good work the RMT has been able to do with its parliamentary group - far in advance of what was ever achieved in the days when the union was allowed to affiliate to the Labour Party - the failure to develop the discussion has proved costly.

The RMT has moved backwards - right-wingers blocked with supporters of Tommy Sheridan to cut off the union's affiliation to the Scottish Socialist Party.

We have to open up the discussion on what sort of political alternative is needed inside the trades union movement. The RMT should also be pushed to restart its debate, as was formally agreed at its last annual conference.

The organising committee that came out of the (Respect-led) Organising for Fighting Unions conference has an important role in promoting the discussion we want. It is planning to hold a series of rallies around the country and as well as promoting practical campaigns it should be stressing the need to build a broad socialist political alternative.

It is not enough merely to proclaim the need for a new party to the left of Labour. It is important that we have a living example of such an alternative, so despite all the problems that go with its current conception we need to build Respect as best we can.

But at the same time we need to recognise that for many people Respect cannot be THE answer, and we must therefore be prepared to be flexible in putting together a new party. If we are to overcome suspicions about acting as outriders for predetermined (revolutionary) dogmas we need to build a framework which encourages genuine cooperation without entrenched ideological position- taking.

For that we need to build an avowedly socialist party, going beyond being a coalition between (revolutionary) socialists and others, with a clear socialist programme and a democratic structure which encourages the ability to learn and develop and build its own independent leadership.

Rebuilding in the workplace

At the industrial level the TUC's "partnership" ideology has gone hand in glove with a fatalism which argues that if you don't cooperate with the bosses they will just outsource (privatise, contract out, move abroad etc.).

Of course, however much partnership has been entered into, companies have gone ahead with their plans in any case, whatever the impact on their worker-partners.. But this climate of fatalism allied to the deadening effect of the anti-union laws does mean that the industrial situation is extremely difficult.

It would be wrong to invent a movement or struggle which does not exist, and we should be wary of those who over-glamourise. We cannot just call struggle into existence - the movement will only respond when it is ready. But there will always be some struggles, and we need to encourage the green shoots that do exist.

On the one hand we continue to see a number of small local disputes breaking out. Often these have been led by groups of workers with little or no experience. It is vital that we build a system of solidarity which can rapidly respond to their needs, giving practical assistance in fighting their immediate bosses and in overcoming the dead hand of their own union bureaucracies.

In this task both the Organising for Fighting Unions structure and the nascent National Shop Stewards Network have a role to play. On the other hand, we face, particularly in the public sector, a series of national issues, over pensions, privatisation and cuts, which need to be faced up to. It is clear that the existing union leaderships, whilst having to appear to oppose these attacks on their members, with few or no exceptions have no desire to enter into any of the necessary battles.

We have to fight to turn the rhetoric into action, whether through immediate internal fights inside the unions over pensions and privatisation, or by supporting broader campaigning, as in defence of the National Health Service (NHS). The anti-union laws clearly present an obstacle to this, as much because they centralise power in union leaderships as because they frustrate the taking of timely action. But the experience of postal workers and others shows that organised workforces can take action outside the legal framework - and that even within it a committed union can take effective action.

It is important that the anti-union laws are fought, with the Trade Union Freedom Bill an important propaganda part to such a campaign. But it can only be a part. For some the Bill is a way of highlighting their supposed powerlessness and a way of avoiding confronting the existing laws. But no amount of good work in parliament can escape the simple fact - that the anti-union laws will only be done away with when they have been broken industrially.

It is of course not possible to isolate the political and industrial fronts from each other. We need to promote a fightback at all levels - building anew a grass roots movement across the unions, building a fighting culture in each union, which means fighting for control of each union and demanding organisation at the top, with serious left coordination at the level of the TUC.

Credit card trade unionism and the personal service culture of the TUC played on the clear difficulties in maintaining grass roots organisation, under an offensive from the bosses. But we should not exaggerate the problems that exist.

The biggest problem was that union leaderships were not prepared to invest real power in their members. A strong local shop stewards movement needs to be consciously built. In a climate of defeat this is no easy task. Only a real upsurge can present the basis for building a movement to approach those of previous generations. But that does not mean we do not have concrete tasks we need to take forward now.

The National Shop Stewards Network presents a forum for discussing how to proceed and for developing our movement. We need to encourage cross-union coordination between existing grass roots bodies, shop stewards committees etc. aiming to build a network of activists capable of delivering practical solidarity action. At the same time this means pushing to improve the conditions in each union for the development of independent grass roots activity. As Barry Camfield of the T&G said (cynically) at the RMT conference, "we need to change the centre of gravity towards shop floor representatives". Through this practical experience we have to fight for workplace reps to recognise the need to look beyond their own immediate concerns.

The two committees established at the RMT and Respect led conferences have started to work. The National Shop Stewards Network committee is looking to organise its conference in May next year. It wants to engage with the existing trades councils movement as a valuable cross-union resource in building for the conference around the country over the intervening months.

As well as producing propaganda outlining the practical benefits a network can bring it has recognised the importance of building active solidarity actions now, particularly in the face of the number of key national developments in the civil service and wider public sector around job cuts, attacks on pension rights etc. in the new year.

The Organising for Fighting Unions committee also wants to promote practical solidarity and is aiming to organise a series of regional rallies in the coming weeks. The basis exists for organising the OFU at a local level around work on the aims of the OFU charter - promoting existing campaigns around NHS etc, as well as the planned trade union delegation to Venezuela.

The National Shop Stewards Network, whilst aiming to be a rank and file body, is necessarily operating within an official framework, reliant on official trade union support in the first instance. It needs rapidly to develop wider support and sponsorship to give

it an independent financial and organisational base.

In the opposite sense, Organising for Fighting Unions is effectively reliant on the trade union base of the SWP. Question marks arise over how the regional rallies will be organised. We need to fight for an inclusive practice. Again, the real solution to overcoming the perception of domination is to build the OFU at a broader level, involving the wider forces of Respect and beyond.

Whilst they have different remits and distinct objectives, the two bodies need to be seen as complementary. It would be tragic if what was to develop was two mutually antagonistic fronts, a union-based caricature of Respect and the Campaign for a New Workers Party.

The OFU has to be more than a cheerleader for the SWP and/or Respect's immediate concerns. It has to engage in broader practical work and debate. We should be in favour of setting up local groups where that does not cut across existing organisation of trades councils etc. Such local OFU committees should also see as a priority building for the NSSN conference.

The NSSN needs to be taken up through existing bodies at all levels where we can. We should also look to set up conference mobilising committees, with OFU support.

It has been argued that, in the absence of a real new radicalisation in the trades unions, the National Shop Stewards Network cannot succeed. And that we have to rely on the forces that have emerged in recent years - through the anti-war movement, represented by Respect.

It is true that the Network will be limited by the lack of a real upturn, but that does not negate the need to build such a body and the valuable role it can play. At the same time others have argued that it has to address immediately the question of political representation.

But to force the issue would threaten its basis at this stage. We have to have more confidence that political questions will be thrown up, around the issue of the anti-union laws, building opposition to them practically as well as around the Trade Union Freedom Bill campaign, for instance, which will provoke a debate for which the Network can be a natural forum.

But having said that, those who write off the Organising for Fighting Unions initiative, arguing that only a modest approach based on the existing level of syndicalist consciousness will succeed, are equally wrong. They may be right to point out the sectarian problems of a lot of previous and current organisation of the trade union left and to point to the need to adopt modest but meaningful demands and not impose one's own shibboleths on "broad" organisations: but they are wrong to think that this is sufficient.

There has to be a challenge, not just to the bosses/government agenda but to the everyday trade union way of thinking and doing things. We have to make the argument to link the "industrial" and the "political". We need to understand the limitations imposed upon us - but engage in the process of building a solution, as part of a general plan to rebuild the trade union movement.

*This article was written for **Socialist Resistance**, a monthly newspaper published by British supporters of the Fourth International and other socialists.*

Putin steps up attacks on dissidents

14 January 2007, by Patrick Scott

The origins of the murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and the Russian President Vladimir Putin could not be more diverse.

Politkovskaya was a child of the Soviet bureaucracy, born in fact in New York as the daughter of two Ukrainian diplomats to the United Nations. When the Soviet Union still existed her place as part of the ruling bureaucracy was all but assured but even with its collapse she was better placed than most to jump ship and become part of the new Russian capitalist class. But rather than do any of this she chose to carve out a career for herself in Russia as an investigative journalist. A journalist who through her writings exposed the political reaction and corruption that underpinned post soviet Russia.

If Politkovskaya was born into the Soviet bureaucracy then Putin became its adopted child. Though originating from more humble circumstances Putin was recruited to the KGB (the Soviet secret police) in the 1970s shortly after graduating from university. As a KGB officer Putin would have had first hand practice of carrying out the political persecution and repression of dissidents and has admitted as much in interviews published in First Person, his biography.

Putin only resigned from the KGB in August 1991 during the failed putsch against the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Though a part of the ruling bureaucracy albeit as a relatively minor functionary he had clearly come to realise that the political winds of Russia were now blowing in the direction of capitalist restoration.

The political liberalisation that preceded (in the form of Glasnost) and was to continue after the fall of the Soviet Union can be seen as a means of sugaring the very bitter pill of capitalist restoration in Russia. This for example is in complete contrast to China where the ruling Communist Party has maintained its monopoly of political power in the transition to a capitalist economy. But today in

Russia even this has barely been able to sweeten the very bitter pill of a neoliberal capitalism. A very tiny minority had been able to buy state owned enterprises at knock down prices to form the new capitalist class whilst the vast majority of the Russian working class were forced into grinding poverty. This has reflected itself for example in mortality rates, where life expectancy especially for men has actually declined in Russia over the last decade or so. Given that things are hardly likely to get better the likelihood is that Russia's new bourgeoisie will come to demand an evermore authoritarian state and one day possibly even one that will dispense with even the formal trappings of bourgeois democracy.

All his forms the political background to the writings of Anna Politkovskaya and other internal critics of the existing regime in Russia. In commenting on the current Russian situation Politkovskaya herself had remarked that Bush and Blair's 'war on terror' after the events of September 11 had been of enormous help to Putin. Putin and others were now more able to openly use similar racist and islamophobic arguments alongside greater Russian chauvinism to justify Russia's occupation of Chechnya. Similar arguments that Bush and Blair had used as a pretext for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Given that the Chechen people are almost overwhelmingly Muslim the Chechen resistance was now increasingly portrayed as Russia's home grown branch of the Islamicist 'axis of evil'. Similarly as Politkovskaya also pointed out the abuses in Abu Ghraib prison, Guantanamo Bay, revelations of the use of torture, CIA secret prisons etc were also used to justify any number of human rights abuses against the Chechen people. Not least the tens or even hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths in the First and Second Chechen Wars. After all the argument was that if the 'democratic' west was trampling on human rights of Muslims then it was OK for Russia to do the same against the Chechens.

In 1999 a series of bombings of Russian apartment blocks over a period of two weeks killed over 300 people. The bombings were blamed on Chechen separatists and were used to justify the invasion of Chechnya in what became the Second Chechen War. In the book he co authored Blowing up Russia: Terror from Within the now murdered Russian political exile Alexander Litvinenko argued that the 1999 bombings had in fact been orchestrated by the FSB (Federal Security Service, successor to the KGB) to justify the invasion and reoccupation of Chechnya. This also facilitated Putin's election as Russian President in 2000, as the 'hard man' who could deal with the rebellious Chechens. Whether true or not Litvinenko's allegation cannot be dismissed out of hand. Firstly as a former officer in the FSB Litvinenko would have been better placed than most to understand the political psychology of his former working colleagues. Secondly Litvinenko himself was not the first or only person ever to make this allegation. Others both inside and outside Russia having arrived at the same conclusion given that there was an abundance of circumstantial evidence pointing to FSB involvement in the bombings.

Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko were not the first political opponents of Putin to have been murdered for their journalistic activities. Politkovskaya is in fact known to have been the thirteenth journalist murdered in Russia since Putin's elction in 2000. Unlike her twelve murdered predecessors Politkovskaya's murder only attracted attention in the west because she was far better known. Her books having been published in the west as well as her having written for liberal western newspapers such as The Guardian in Britain. The message sent out from Russia though is clear, anyone who attempts to expose the political subterfuge and corruption in Russia today could well end up paying for it with their own lives. The recent murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London by radiation poisoning has shown that this principle also applies to Russians in exile.

There are though weapons other than political murder that are being used to stifle dissent. One example is a law recently signed onto the Russian statute books by Putin has that been clearly designed to restrict the activities of NGOs. The new law requires all non profit organisations to register with the newly established Federal Registration Service. Furthermore they will also be required to supply full details of their membership, financial records including sources of finance as well as records of all meetings. This law has actually attracted the opposition of religious leaders. Given that theoretically at least the law now requires priests to supply the names and addresses of everyone who attends their congregations, the dates of these congregations etc as churches are now legally deemed to be non profit organizations! The point is that the law is so extensive that strict compliance with the letter of the law is virtually impossible. This will give the Russian government carte blanche to take action against any NGO or campaigning organisation it considers to be troublesome.

Palestine: risk of civil war

14 January 2007, by Michel Warschawski

"Abu Mazen [Abbas] must be strengthened!" is the new slogan which, in the Israeli consensus, substitutes for a strategy. Raised by Condoleezza Rice during the visit to Washington two months ago by the Israeli Prime minister, Ehud Olmert, it has been fulsomely endorsed by Israeli politicians accustomed to doing the bidding of the Empire.

Hamas fighters fire at Fatah supporters

But it is one thing to say “yes, boss!”, entirely another to give a content to this slogan. Until now, the “strengthening of Abu Mazen” has amounted to a resounding kiss, followed by a dinner at Olmert’s residence and a cheque for some hundred thousand dollars. The kiss embarrassed the Palestinian president, the meal wasn’t bad and the dollars... in any case belong to the Palestinians, and were withheld illegally in the coffers of the Israeli treasury.

Even the liberation of some hundreds of Palestinian detainees - the only measure that would have been appreciated by the Palestinians of the occupied territories - has not been conceded by Olmert, transforming the kiss into the most compromising clinch for the Palestinian president, whose brand ’image is already sufficiently degraded and who had no need for this hypocritical mark of friendship in order to be accused by some of his own party activists of becoming, if not a collaborator, at least a puppet in the hands of the Americans.

The strengthening of Abu Mazen is aimed at weakening the Hamas government, massively elected and still supported by the majority of Palestinians. To do that, it would be necessary to show the Palestinian people that, unlike Hamas, Abu Mazen could obtain a freeze on settlements - to which Israel committed itself in the roadmap, nearly five years ago! - and, in the framework of rapid and effective negotiations with Israel, to put an end to 40 years of occupation. But that is obviously not in the programme of the government of national union of Olmert and Amir Peretz.

How can one hope to strengthen Abu Mazen, when the settlements continue in an accelerated fashion and, in contrast to the time of Ariel Sharon, are boasted about by Olmert and Peretz, who have both announced the reconstruction of a settlement in the Jordan valley? This declaration provoked the ire of the US State department, which wants at any price to give the impression that if things are not improving in Israeli-Palestinian relations, at least they are not getting worse. How does it strengthen Abu Mazen when he is given some hundreds of thousands of dollars, while the Prime minister, Ismaïl Haniyeh, is prevented from bringing in several billion dollars which Iran has just donated to the Palestinian Authority?

The Algerian strategy

Weary of the impossible (under current conditions) task of trying to weaken Hamas through strengthening of Abu Mazen, some close to the US president and the CIA, on the one hand, and the Israeli secret services, on the other, prefer the Algerian method of 1992, of overthrowing the legitimate government by force, even if it foments a civil war. This is the background to the bloody confrontations in Gaza in recent weeks between the militants of Fatah and Hamas, for which Fatah bears the entire responsibility. Fatah, or rather a current within Fatah, that could be called the “Algerian current” or the “eradicator current” is encouraged by Washington and Tel-Aviv and is ready to overthrow Hamas to regain power... and its emoluments.

As the Algerian case has shown, such manÅ“uvres will only boost the popularity of Hamas, inasmuch as the self-styled knights of democracy and secularism who dream of overthrowing the legitimate government, like Muhammad Dahlan, the former security chief in Gaza, have a rather sulphurous brand image, in contrast to Hamas who nobody can accuse of embezzlement or corruption. Yasser Arafat will go down in history as someone who ready to sacrifice his own freedom to prevent a fratricidal war between Palestinians and counter the combined pressure of Tel-Aviv and Washington. Mahmoud Abbas has nether the stature nor the prestige of the founder of the PLO and even if it is unjust to accuse him of trying to foment a civil war, he is attempting to satisfy the White House by trying to destabilise the legitimate power so as to impose a government which would give veto power to those precisely who the voters wanted to punish.

A constitutional situation which creates, de facto, a dual power - that of the Legislative Council and that of the president, both elected by universal suffrage -gives a legal opening to the manÅ“uvres of Abbas. But, in the eyes of the majority of Palestinians, they smell of a shady deal with Bush and Olmert.

An eloquent balance sheet

In 2006, the Israeli armed forces killed 660 people in the occupied territories and in Israel. Among them, 322 were taking no part in hostilities at the time of their death, and 22 died as a result of targeted assassinations. The Palestinians have killed 17 Israeli civilians and six soldiers.

In November 2006, Israel held 9,075 Palestinian prisoners, of which 738 are in administrative detention, without indictment or judgement. [1]

Footnotes

[1] Source: B’Tselem, Israeli centre for information on human rights in the occupied territories.

Ethiopia: unknown revolution, uncertain future

14 January 2007, by Lea Terbach

Reading the programme of reforms promised by the "revolutionary coordination committee" (the "Derg", from the Amharic word meaning "Committee of Equals"), constituted by the armed forces, police, and the national guard and chaired by an obscure major, Mengistu Haile Mariam [1] one is seized immediately by the inherent necessity of revising the history of the French Revolution, the genesis of the Communist Manifesto and the complexity of the October Revolution. The project was to totally smash the feudal dynasty through an unprecedented mix of modernisation and repression.

Two years passed before the "natural allies" of countries in revolution, the USSR and its satellite states, came to its aid, less through ideological deference to the class struggle and proletarian internationalism than through strategic concerns on the shores of the Red Sea.

In Europe, revolutions in Third World countries have been of great interest to governments and peoples. There would be books, articles, support committees, many would visit to breathe the revolutionary air.

The Ethiopian revolution has not exerted this fascination. It remained in the shadows, away from all curiosity. Was this because of its singularity? Can one give credit to "a revolution installed by a military junta"? Mengistu would repeat several times that "you cannot invent class consciousness, our task, for we soldiers, is to render the people objectively militant, the Party will only be born from above". A curious revolution that attacked as its main target the militants who had been to the forefront in combating the feudal monarchy, the trade unionists and the students. An entire generation of intellectuals would be annihilated.

Ethiopia is the second biggest country of East Africa in terms of geographical density and population. It is located at the summit of the highlands of Abyssinia, dominating the Horn of Africa (which comprises Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia). Situated at the fringe of the Arab world, Ethiopia has been officially Orthodox (Coptic) Christian since the 4th century, although 50% of its population is Muslim. Peopled by numerous ethnicities - the Amharas (the dominant ethnic grouping until 1991, when a new regime dominated by Tigrayans came to power), the Tigrayans, the Oromos, Afars, the Issaas and the Somalis. These lands also sheltered the Jewish Falasha (exiles) tribe, distant descendants of Jews captured during expeditions from the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum to Yemen in the 6th century; pariahs among the pariahs, they emigrated to Israel in two successive waves (1984 and 1991).

Ethiopia repelled European attempts at colonisation and from the end of the 19th century, Emperor Menelik amused himself by signing and countersigning agreements with France, Italy and Britain, without ever endangering his sovereignty. Decades later, a man with sombre eyes, enveloped in a black cloak, mounted the tribune at the League Of Nations, to ask for aid from the international community faced with the invasion of the Italian fascist army "If you do not react, your turn will come soon" he announced prophetically. He was met with silence.

This was the genesis of the myth of the emperor Haile Selassie, crowned in 1930, legendary defender of the Christian faith, henceforth judged to be progressive although he was no more than a fervent nationalist. A myth which concealed the ostentatious luxury of his court and the millions of dollars placed in Swiss financial centres, while the country was swept by famine. This contradiction would subsequently lead to the final destruction of the three thousand years old empire. Thus when the dynasty of the Salomonids collapsed, the revolution that followed seemed incomprehensible to everyone except Ethiopians.

Most of the exiled intelligentsia were sympathetic to Marxism-Leninism and tried to situate the ills of Ethiopian society within the matrix of socialism. Inside Ethiopia, the dominant elite was proud of a prestigious past that prevented it from recognising that the present had nothing prestigious about it. Meanwhile, the dominant Amhara elite extorted huge sums in taxes from the peasantry or subjected them to supplementary forced labour.

The luxury of the court concealed the extreme poverty of its subjects, 90% of them peasants. The illiteracy rate was 90%. Peasants struggled daily to survive (in 1960, an Ethiopian peasant had the same standard of living and the same tools to work his land as his European equivalent of the Middle Ages). Revolts here and there were stifled, only to recommence elsewhere, witnessing to the raised consciousness of these peasants and a rejection of fatalism. Slavery was theoretically abolished in 1966, but peasants still had to submit to the landowners, the religious brotherhood, and the local state functionaries.

Economically, Ethiopia was an agricultural country. Politically, land ownership formed the essence of the legitimacy of the regime. Thus, society, economy and politics were undeniably linked to land ownership. The empire perpetuated an enormous disparity in rights between the owners of land and those who worked it, a disparity which would remain immutable for centuries. While other countries progressed, some even outside of the so-called developed zones, Ethiopia remained timeless, cultivating structures, modes of life and thought foreign to the modern world.

The army as guardian of the empire

The granting of land in the different regions had always obliged the beneficiary to enrol in the army or to recruit men, so the army was formed from a multiplicity of groups ready to face any threat, its hierarchy originating from the caste of the nobility. Haile Selassie remained faithful to the ambition of his predecessors, that of basing imperial preponderance on the nuclei of the provincial nobility to ensure the unity of his empire and to checkmate any notion of autonomy.

On the eve of the revolution, the army had around 40,000 men. More than any other institution, it was the private property of the emperor and the object of all his attention. With the forces of internal security, it absorbed a considerable part of the state budget. Unlike the rest of Ethiopian society, the army was open to foreign influence. The US supplied weapons and officers were trained in US schools. Moreover, Israel trained elite troops involved in repressing the oldest liberation struggle on the African continent, in Eritrea.

The attempted coup in 1960 led the emperor to change strategy to ensure the loyalty of the army. 70% of the officers were of Amhara origin, 10% were Tigrayan or Eritrean, the rest coming from the largely Muslim Oromo grouping. The Emperor, obsessed by the possibility of a coup, stirred up rivalries between the units of the army by moving them to various strategic points. Thus the imperial guard was stationed in the capital, where it was under surveillance. The second regiment was stationed in Eritrea, and the third in the Ogaden region, two regions where liberation fronts, fighting respectively for Eritrea and for integration into Somalia waged a merciless struggle.

In the pre-revolutionary period, the privatisation of the land acted as a factor in the monetarisation of the economy. Until then the motor of modernisation had come from the reinvestment of the surplus drawn from levies. To bypass these structural obstacles, which were the cause of immobilism and economic stagnation, the emperor attempted an agrarian mini-reform, giving lands to some individuals and to members of the Coptic clergy. He also allocated large areas of land to foreign companies for the cultivation of cotton, coffee, cereals and vegetables, a way of supplying internal consumption and increasing exports. When lands were not subject to inheritance, usufruct was transmitted from generation to generation, essentially for the Amhara grouping.

If this practice weakened the monarchy, it also allowed it multiple speculations. This growth of the mercantile economy through the privatisation of the land went hand in hand with the development of mechanised agriculture and the creation of paths of communication, often built with Italian financial support. The emergence of a mercantilist economy had implications for society as a whole.

The most remarkable change was the appearance of a lumpen proletariat. In the Ethiopian case, this phenomenon was the result of the privatisation of land, agrarian mechanisation in the North and demographic growth in the South. The urban economy could not absorb this migration, creating an army of poor in the urban centres.

As for workers and employees, who represented barely 1% of the population, they were concentrated in not very developed industrial zones. Wages were one Ethiopian dollar per day, without any social security or any project of trade union organisation. However, in relation to the situation of the peasants and the unemployed, they appeared privileged.

The first Ethiopian strike broke out during the construction of the Franco-Ethiopian railway in 1947. It was the first sign of a wave of workers' struggle linked to a certain industrial take-off, and to the influence of the Eritrean trade union movement, which was much more advanced because of its links with the Italian Left, with demands centred on recognition of trade union rights.

From the 1960s onwards, a decree on labour relations ratified the right to form trade unions while forbidding it to civil servants. The right to strike was only authorised for each sector, without relations between them, after two months, notice. The first confederation of workers was created in 1962 under the name of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions. Numerous manoeuvres were employed to impose a leadership in line with imperial designs, singularly cooperative with the employers and very influenced by the US model. Members of the federation came from two very different sectors, workers in the nascent industrial sector and employees in banks, transport and insurance as well as civil servants who received a wage very much higher than that of a worker. On the one hand, an educated petty bourgeoisie, on the other a minority working class living below the poverty level. The federation, even with 900 affiliates, was deeply apolitical. The gap between affiliates and leadership prevented it from playing a significant role as the imperial regime began its decline.

If the different components of Ethiopian society could allow the emergence of a new bourgeois class, social reality assumed that wealth and power remained in the hands of the same court aristocracy. This emergence did not take place because there was a social chasm between the state functionaries and the higher circles of the nobility, even if, in order to create a semblance of cohesion, the emperor granted favours to commoners who homogenised within the regime's institutions. The dialectical relationship between the right to land ownership and the exercise of power remained immutable.

We should also mention the student movement, which represented the most radical and most organised opposition sector, and which would become the central target for the military junta's repression. Its importance was apparent at three determinant moments - during the attempted coup in 1960, in the big demonstrations for agrarian reform in 1965, then later when the imperial guard repressed a student meeting on

the university campus in 1972, more than a thousand students were arrested and sent to forced labour camps. Their ideology openly embraced socialism and their key demands were “land to those who work it and self-determination for the different ethnic groupings”.

If the student movement was at the centre of the opposition, it had its weaknesses. The conviction that radical change would rescue Ethiopia from its lethargy was not enough to build a homogeneous movement that could overcome the socio-political cleavages that divided it. The student mass was composed of a minority originating from the largely Amhara elite, without great material problems, and a majority of modest origins.

The creation in 1968 of the Pan Ethiopian Socialist Movement inside the union of Ethiopian students gave birth to the first clandestine movement, known as Meison. The majority of its adherents were studying in European universities and were under the influence of the European Communist Parties. This movement subscribed to an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle so as to accomplish what it considered as a priority task - recruitment, training and mobilisation. Divergences among some of the cadres of this group led a year later to the creation of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The latter advocated a transition to armed struggle. Accused of being inspired by armed struggles of the Guevarist type in Latin America, they split and in 1971 the Revolutionary Organisation for the Liberation of Ethiopia was founded. Initially a small grouping, it received solid support from the Eritrean Liberation Fronts and the Palestinian fronts.

Finally the student movement, faced with everyday repression, maintained its position as a fierce adversary of the regime, building relations with the trade unions and successfully infiltrating the leading apparatus of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Union, while making contacts with non-commissioned officers in the armed forces. Student struggles occupied a strategic space between an opposition that was radicalised and centralised and the oppositions on the periphery like the Eritrean and Ogaden opposition fronts.

The Eritrean question

As a political entity, Eritrea had its origin in the 4th century, when the kingdom of Axum dominated the Red Sea, and its decline began in the 7th century when the Arabian Peninsula was conquered by Islam, cutting the kingdom of Axum off from the Red Sea. For some centuries, a fierce struggle took place with Arab invaders coming from the coast or from the interior of Sudan, for Ethiopia was determined to maintain its domination over the seas off the Eritrean coast. In 1557, the Turks occupied Eritrea, in 1856 they gave way to the Egyptians, followed by Italy. Thus Ethiopia was deprived of its opening to the sea. This last colonial occupation led to a political awakening, with the creation of political parties and an advanced trade unionism, which rejected the feudal structures of its metropolis.

An Italian colony since 1890, in 1941 Eritrea came under the control of the British, who advocated its annexation by Sudan or its integration into Ethiopia. At the end of the Second World War, the international decisions concerning its future opened a political space for the nationalist organisations. The Christian population, influenced by the arguments of the Church, advocated reattachment to Ethiopia. The Muslim population supported an international mandate status that would lead to a future independence. From the 1950s onwards, for reasons linked both to the specificities of the region and the tropicalisation of the abstract notion of the “Cold War”, the United Nations proposed a federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This federation corresponded in fact to an annexation by Ethiopia.

From 1961, the Eritrean Liberation Front, the first to fight for total independence, received aid from certain Arab countries concerned about Christian Ethiopia, which was moreover supported by Israel and exercised an influence on the Red Sea. This Front led to hostility between Christians and Muslims, with the latter drawn to the Arab world and identification with Egypt and Sudan. These contradictions would give birth to another rival Front, which took form and weight from 1972 under the name of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front.

The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 had repercussions on the conflict. The intervention of the USSR (which previously had supported the Eritrean resistance) on the side of Ethiopia changed the situation completely, with the Ethiopians forcing the ELF into Sudan and provoking its break-up, while the EPLF withdrew to the north where it fought a fierce struggle with financial help from the diaspora.

The reconciliation in 1975 of these two Fronts allowed a consolidation in order to pursue the total war that had been declared by Ethiopia from the end of the 1970s. With the “Red Star” campaign the Ethiopian army mobilised around 300,000 men, supported by unprecedented Soviet logistics and by Cuban troops. Finally, in 1993, Eritrea became independent. Nonetheless, it had to deal with the wounds from nearly 30 years of war, the discontent of the Muslim population and an armed opposition that condemns the totalitarian practices of president Isaias Afeworki, today revealed as a typical African dictator in the pay of the United States.

The collapse of the Stalinist military regime

The collapse in May 1991 of the Stalinist regime led by Mengistu turned another page in Ethiopia’s tormented history. The collapse of the regime stemmed from the struggle of the guerrilla movements, essentially the Eritrean Liberation Front, allied in 1975 to the Tigray Liberation Front, which fought in the region of the same name situated between the Amhara heart of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Without demanding independence, they fought for participation in the Ethiopian government.

The EPLF had long abandoned its Marxist references, but the TPLF identified with Albanian socialism, and thus an autarchic Stalinism. After the defeat of the Ethiopian army, abandoned by its Soviet allies, against a background of perestroika, the TPLF undertook the creation of a broader organisation. In line with the frontist tradition, it brought together a range of organisations supposedly representing all ethnic components, including Afar (OPDA), Oromo (OPDO), Amhara (EPDM) organisations and the Organisation of Former Officers, all grouped under the rubric EPDRF. The only genuine organisation here was, however, the TPLF (the Tigrayan minority represent only 7% of the population of Ethiopia), the other organisations regrouped in the EDRPF had no roots among the peoples represented. A conference held in London, supported by the United States, granted power to the EPDRF.

Ethiopia was now governed by a former Tigrayan resistance fighter - Melles Zenawi, of Stalinist and pro-Albanian background, who transformed the EPDRF into an apparatus of power. Legislative elections granted it the legitimacy that it previously lacked. Its policy of regionalisation raised hoped for an autonomy that has ultimately exacerbated existing ethnic tensions, and endangered an already fragile national unity. If no democratic opening figures in the plans of the government, the risk is that Ethiopia could sink deeper and deeper into the practice of the single (ethnic) party, with the danger of the state collapsing and the ethnic groupings abandoned to a fate of endless struggle.

In this new configuration, the ethnic problematic conceals the debate on the economic and political nature of this regime which was preceded by centuries of feudalism and then by a dictatorship. All the more so in that the Mengistu regime had in its latter days undertaken a process of economic liberalisation involving the restoration to the peasants of land that had been forcibly transferred to collective farms. Land ownership remained nationalised under the transitional government of Melles Zenawi, state farms and properties remained, while the economic programme stressed the necessity of a withdrawal of the state from direct management of the economy. Five million people currently remain totally dependent on international food aid.

The conference held on July 26-August 1, 2003, in Maryland (USA) for the creation of the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) saw 15 oppositional organisations forming a united front. The main forces involved are:

- The Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF). Of socialist inclination, this movement fights for the self-determination of the Afar population in Eritrea and in Ethiopia and for the constitution of an Afar identity localised in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. It has in the past armed the Djibouti FRU guerrillas.
- the Pan Ethiopian United Party
- The Pan Ethiopian Socialist Movement (Meison). The first clandestine student movement before the revolution, of weak significance today. Marked by a significant Marxist influence. It participated in the government between 1975 and 1977, before becoming the victim of the "red terror" unleashed by the Mengistu government.
- The Council of Alternative Forces For Peace and Democracy
- The Ethiopian Democratic Union Party
- THEADISO or Renaissance of the Democratic Union. A movement of weak significance, created in London in 1975, implanted in Amhara traditionalist sectors. In 1976, it benefited from the aid of the Sudanese authorities who allowed it to set up training camps on their territory; it has also received financial aid from Saudi Arabia. Today it is only a political movement.
- MEDHIN, or Ethiopian Salvation Democratic Party. This party was founded in Washington in 1992 by the former minister of foreign affairs of the Mengistu government. It is an ultra-nationalist group with an Amhara base benefiting form the support of US conservative groups, as well as the Ugandan and Kenyan regimes and former high-ranking soldiers from the Mengistu era.
- Ethiopian National United Front (ENUF).
- Federal Democratic Unity of the Ethiopian People's Party.
- The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) founded at the beginning of the 1970s. Originally a far left movement, it participated in the overthrow of the monarchy before launching a guerrilla war against Mengistu's Stalinist government. Faced with the "red terror" of which it was the chief victim, it renounced urban armed struggle in favour of rural actions. Following the execution of its main leaders, it broke up into several factions and ceased its military activities. Since 1991, it has been one of the main opposition forces inside the EPRDF. In contrast to the 1970s, it would seem, at least officially, that it does not enjoy external support. Some of its members are still exiled and others are implanted in zones controlled by the army. However it remains a solid opposition front that could play a significant role in the events to come.
- The United Democratic Front of the People of Gambella
- The Oromo National Council
- The Oromo People's Liberation Organisation
- The Democratic Coalition of the Peoples of the South of Africa
- The Tigrayan Alliance for Democracy

Ethiopian opposition has mass suppoprt in capital

In its final declaration, the UEDF said its aim was "to set up a pluralist system while drawing lessons from the experiences of the oppositionists on the formation of fronts". They have not elaborated further on the strategies to follow in order to overthrow the current regime The front is led by a council of 30 people, or two representatives of each organisation, and is open to any opposition organisation adhering to the principles of the Front.

The novelty is that since the liquidation of the bipolar order, ideological references seem to have lost all connection to a structured international framework. In these alliances nationalist, religious or ethnic themes intermingle. This is one avatar among others in the difficult

adaptation of the African continent to a process of democratisation which is highly destructuring.

Conditioned by centuries of feudalism, victim of totalitarian regimes, prey to political banditry, this is the situation of Ethiopia today. The regime of Melles Zenawi has not opened a breach in the democratisation of the country or settled the ethnic problems, it has imposed the Tigrayan ethnic grouping at the summit of the state, to the extent that members of the Copt clergy originating from this group act as political cadres and exclude other forces.

The great powers only see the Horn of Africa as a strategic zone. Since 9/11 the will of the US to co-opt Ethiopia to control terrorism has borne fruit. Moreover, numerous connections have been opened up between the Arab world and the Horn of Africa. Migratory exchanges have developed, with Yemeni traders selling their produce in Ethiopia while Ethiopians emigrate to Saudi Arabia. There are also cross-frontier ethnic connections; Sudanese and Somali ethnic groups are established in Ethiopia and liable to be manipulated in the latent conflicts with Sudan and Somalia.

The active presence of the Arab League in the Horn also creates contradictions among the Muslim population. The US, which supports Eritrea while deploring its totalitarian regime, says that the regime is the sole force countering the possibility of an Islamist wave endangering the security of Israel and creating regional instability. These concerns have mounted following the creation of an "Eritrean Islamic Jihad". Sudan, object of much attention, is an Islamic state strongly implicated in the jihadi current. Djibouti, although having strong connections with France, has also become a US enclave for the surveillance of all the Islamist movements.

Somalia, a country without a state since 1991, after the US intervention and the fall of the government of "socialist orientation" of Siad Barre, with seven million Sunni Muslims, is engaged in peace negotiations currently taking place in Kenya. Many problems are emerging, starting with the difficulty of disarming the rival factions armed by Ethiopia, Eritrea and some Arab countries. Religious representatives have begun to make themselves heard, which has awakened the attention of the US, which claims that the Al-lttihad Al-Islami Front and a good number of sheikhs are linked to Al-Quaida.

To say the least, the future remains uncertain.

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Footnotes

[1] Mengistu is described in his biography as the son of a slave, aged barely 34 and taking revenge on a kingdom of aristocrats.

Poland's pro-choice movement: a long and winding road ahead

14 January 2007, by Katarzyna Gawlicz

"Perhaps those who draft such laws in their quiet offices would shudder if they heard the instances of young women's deaths, of severe and irreversible illnesses that are a result of the current callously maintained state of affairs. And if you added to this the indirect consequences: suicides, infanticides and other disasters it would then be clear how correct were those who labelled that law: 'the greatest crime of the criminal law'."

Pro- and anti-choice demonstrators clash

These words were written in 1930. They could as well have been written today. Tadeusz Boy-Zelenski, their author and one of the first proponents of what we would nowadays call reproductive rights, was condemned and ridiculed for his ideas.

Present-day supporters of the right to legal abortion are accused of supporting the 'holocaust of innocent, unborn children', while women still undergo back-street abortions, often risking their health or even life. Every year the police register several dozens of instances of infanticide or abandoning of babies just like in the 1930s. Poland has managed to travel back in time.

Current regulations concerning access to abortion date back to 1993 and were introduced under strong pressure from the Roman Catholic Church, with personal backing of Pope John Paul II. Sadly among those who initiated this restrictive law were former activists of the oppositional Solidarity movement. They received strong support from the medical community.

The law was introduced even though

1.3 million people signed a petition demanding a national referendum on the plans to restrict access to abortion. The referendum never took place. Ordinary citizens, including women, were left out of the debate.

The law permits an abortion only if pregnancy constitutes a threat to the woman's life or health; if there is a high probability that the foetus is severely damaged; or if pregnancy is the result of a criminal act. Although women are not punished for having illegal abortions, anyone who assists them in obtaining one may be sentenced to up to 3 years in prison.

However, no matter how strict the law sounds in theory, pro-choice activists emphasize that it is even more stringent in reality. Women who are legally eligible to have an abortion are often refused it.

In a country with a population of reproductive-age women of around 10 million, no more than 200 legal abortions per year are performed. Doctors abuse their "right" not to perform an abortion on the grounds of conscientious objection and say no to abortion even to women with severe health problems.

In one case a woman with serious vision impairment and degeneration of the retina was forced to give birth and, as a consequence, almost completely lost her sight. Another woman, suffering from poor circulation and oedema, can now hardly walk. Equally common are refusals to do prenatal examinations which might lead to women finding they have the right to legal abortions.

There is also the much-publicized story of a woman who had one child suffering from a rare genetic condition and, when pregnant again, she was refused the tests and gave birth to another child with exactly the same disability. She brought the case to the court and won partial compensation from the hospital.

At the same time having an illegal abortion is not a problem - as long as a woman has enough economic, social and cultural capital to decipher the secret code of gynaecologists' newspaper adds ("Gynaecologist: full service" or "Bringing back your period"), have contacts with people who know where to get an abortion and can pay anything between â‚¬370 and â‚¬1,000.

Clearly, abortion has become a class issue, and so has the right to make a choice about one's life. This right is a privilege of a small minority of women, as - according to the Central Statistical Office - 60 per cent of households in Poland live at or below the so-called social minimum of â‚¬200 per month.

Still, it is estimated that 80,000 to 200,000 illegal abortions per year are performed - with no control over their quality or the conditions in which they are carried out: sometimes without anaesthetic, usually by the most dangerous curettage method. There have been cases of women dying as a result of an illegal abortion, but also of women dying because they were refused not only an abortion but also any medical help (as this might have posed a risk to the foetus) or because they tried to induce an abortion themselves, e.g. by injecting washing-up liquid into their uterus.

Such facts, however, have rarely been brought up in public debates. The language in which abortion is discussed - if it is discussed at all - has been appropriated by the opponents of the right to choose. Calling themselves 'pro-life,' they accuse women who have abortions of murdering 'conceived', 'unborn' or simply 'children' and portray these women as criminals.

The language of the abortion debate is a distorted language of morality or even human rights (as in: every person has the right to live, beginning with the most innocent ones) and nationalism, in which women themselves are entirely invisible, not to mention being granted any rights - including the right to live.

This became very obvious when one of the parties of the now-ruling coalition, the right-wing League of Polish Families, submitted a proposal to amend the Constitution of Poland so that it ensures the protection of the life of every citizen from the moment of conception. If accepted, such a clause would in practice mean that abortion would become illegal under all circumstances, even when a pregnant woman's life is in danger.

At the same time, those who are against abortion do nothing to help women avoid it: they actively - and, unfortunately, successfully - oppose any attempts to introduce subsidized contraceptives and make sure that schoolchildren are taught in 'Preparation to family life' classes (the Polish equivalent of sex education) that contraception does not work.

Moreover, the Parliament has recently started working on a project to further restrict already largely limited access to oral contraception (by requiring that a note "harmful to your health" be placed on packages, just as it is with cigarettes).

While the most influential representatives of the 'pro-life' movement care very much about 'unborn children', they seem far less interested in those who have already been born, and such issues as the poorly functioning adoption system or the high level of children's undernourishment never attract a lot of their attention. And their support for death penalty as well as - as it is the case of some politicians of the now-ruling coalition - Polish troops' involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan renders their care for life even more dubious.

But in fact no one has any doubts: it is not life that is at stake here. At stake is the need to control women so that they reproduce in order for Poland to remain strong and carry out its mission of saving Europe from the 'civilization of death'. However pathetically such a nationalistic language inspired by the Roman Catholic church may sound, it has taken over people's consciousness.

As one seriously ill woman forced to give birth to a child and then put him up for adoption said, "in Poland the rich, who can afford children, rule. They want Poland to grow at the expense of others. Mothers should give birth and raise children, and if they cannot raise them, they should give them away. They don't think at all what it means." Taking pride in the

Polish nation's alleged high moral standards does not prevent the anti-choice activists and politicians from depriving women of any sense of dignity and ability to make independent moral decisions.

Questioning the status quo requires breaking a huge social taboo. But more and more women and men have been doing it in recent weeks. A national demonstration to legalize abortion took place at the beginning of November. Before this there had already been three public gatherings of women, who, facing hatred and accusations of being murderers, admitted during an 'abortion coming out' in front of the Parliament building that they had had an abortion. These actions are to be continued. Significantly, feminist pro-choice activists get more and more support from the so far male-dominated and male-oriented left-leaning trade unions and other labour movements.

Meanwhile, special parliamentary commissions are still working on further restrictions to the access to abortion and contraception. It is vital that the pro-choice movement both in Poland and internationally lets them know that they should reconsider their ideas.

Sign the English-language open letter at www.federa.org.pl/signatures

This article was firstly published in Socialistisk Information n° 213, December 2006, monthly magazine published by Socialistisk Arbejderparti (SAP, Danish section of the Fourth International). Examples of women who fell prey to the existing anti-abortion law come from Contemporary Women's Hell. Polish Women's Stories by Federation for Women and Family Planning, www.federa.org.pl/english/pieklo_ang.pdf

The Politics of the "Surge"

13 January 2007, by Phil Hearse

At the edge of Sadr City

On January 12 Tony Blair made a speech on board a British navy ship in which he justified the four wars to which he has sent British troops, and called for the public to accept that Britain was a 'war fighting' nation not just a 'peace keeping' nation. He also declared that Britain's commitment to such wars would last "for a generation". The disconnection between the growing unpopularity of the war and its main protagonists commitment to it is striking.

So what is really going on? Is Iraq really a massive defeat for the United States and Britain? And why are Bush and Blair seemingly impervious to the massive unpopularity of the war? Let's first look at the events which would suggest that the war is turning into a political and military disaster. These include:

- The scale of Iraqi civilian deaths is becoming undeniable, with the journal of the British doctor's association, the Lancet, claiming 600,000 have died.

- US troop deaths have crossed the symbolic 3000 threshold, although this is an historically low figure given the length of the conflict.

- November's mid-term elections enabled the Democratic Party to win majorities in both houses of the American Congress, a defeat that led directly to the humiliating sacking of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, until then a key member of the administration.

- The Iraq Study group report (the 'Baker Report') commissioned by Bush himself was open that Iraq was a disaster and proposed major changes in US policy.

- The dreadful events at the hanging of Saddam Hussein, turned by the Iraqi government into a sectarian lynching, led to widespread criticism and reinforced the widespread concern that the Iraqi security forces are infiltrated by, and in the case of Interior Ministry troops, actually controlled by Shi'ite militias.

There is no doubt that these events have led to the war becoming hugely unpopular in the United States, with a clear majority critical of Bush. In Britain this is not so much of a concern for Blair, because the war always was hugely unpopular, and - partly as a result - Tony Blair will leave office in the next three or four months anyway. But is the war really a disaster? Has America lost? Is it a real military defeat and political disaster?

This can only be measured against American war aims, and cannot be assessed on the basis of temporary popularity or otherwise. In an important recent article John Bellamy Foster [1] sums up US war aims as follows: "(1) control of Iraqi oil reserves (the second largest in the world), (2) "geopolitical gains" (or greater domination of the vital Middle East oil region), and (3) strengthening of U.S. global hegemony as a result of this new oil imperium." Achieving these aims does rely on eventually stabilising Iraq, but the present mayhem in the country, amounting to a 'low intensity' confessional civil war between Shi'ite and Sunnis, does not mean that this project is definitively defeated. Since 2004 the US has been building 14 huge military bases and the world's largest embassy from which it hopes to control Iraq and dominate the Persian Gulf, but not do day-to-day fighting, which it hopes can be transferred to Iraqi government troops.

Military-political domination of the region is a general objective, but control of the oil (and the oil routes supplying Europe and Japan) are crucial. And exploiting the economic potential of the Iraq oil fields is an

immediate priority. The Iraq Study Group Report's Recommendation 63 states: (1) "The United States should encourage investment in Iraq's oil sector by the international community and by international energy companies," and (2) "The United States should assist Iraqi leaders to reorganize the national oil industry as a commercial enterprise, in order to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability." In other words, the Iraqi oil industry is to be privatised rapidly and its resources controlled by international, mainly US, oil companies.

Contrary to what much of the media reported in early December, the Baker report did not call for ending the Iraq conflict as soon as possible, It called for American day-today involvement in the war to be scaled down, and it sought a way out of the stalemate while keeping the 'spoils of war' - political-military control of the region and above all control of the oil.

In fact, the original call for the 'surge' in US troop numbers in the short term, in a fruitless and badly conceived effort to crush the sectarian militias, came from the Baker report itself.

However the main question remain to try to establish a modicum of security without which exploitation of the oil fields will be impossible. That in turn depends on finding a political settlement which key representatives from the three main confessional (or in the case of the Kurds, national) groups can be drawn. It is here that the US is up against the results of decisions it has already taken, particularly its decision to do everything possible to unleash sectarian conflict.

Rumours indicated that the US sponsored conference of community leaders held in Amman at the end of last year had openly discussed the break-up of the country into three - a Shia southern state which would in effect become a protectorate of Iran, a northern Kurdish state and a Sunni state based in the west and centre of the country.

Such a scenario is fraught with dangers for the United States. In the first place, there are giant oil field in all three regions, but aside from the giant Kirkuk field in the Kurdish area, the biggest are around Basra, Rumaylah, Majnun and Halfaya in the Shi'ite south. Controlling the oil in a pro-Iranian Shia statelet would be very difficult and prone to being immediately turned off at a moment's notice by Tehran. In addition a hugely strengthened Iran is a political-military disaster for the United States and Israel and would give a huge boost to pro-Iranian groups like Hizbollah in Lebanon.

In turn Turkey would furiously oppose giving statehood the Kurdish region adjoining its own Kurdish areas in the south east of the country. None of the states in the region want an independent Kurdistan which could act as a beacon for Kurdish minority in their own country.

The responsibility for the ethnic conflict in the country lies squarely with the United States itself. Already in 2004 the Pentagon was talking about another 'Phoenix operation', a replica of the Vietnam campaign of assassination against alleged or suspected supporters of the Communist insurgency. The US gave the go-ahead to the Sadr Brigades, linked to the Interior Ministry and controlled by leading Shi'ite clerics, to start a campaign of assassination against Sunni insurgents and their sympathisers. This campaign had the full backing of Iran. It was this, with its grisly daily toll of murdered Sunnis found with their hands tied and shot in the back of the head, that unleashed the Sunni car bomber against Sadr City and other centres of the Shia population.

The United States unleashed this carnage consciously to disrupt the possibility of a growing unity between Sunnis and Shi'ites against the US invasion. During the first bloody battle of Fallujah in the Spring of 2004 there had been an enormous outpouring of sympathy for the insurgents, and Shi'ite men in the south and Baghdad queued at mosques to give blood and material aid for the Sunni. Walden Bello at the time wrote "Fallujah is the beginning of an new Iraq" and foresaw a growing nationalist revolt in which Sunnis and Shias would fight together. Through the Shi'ite militias, the United States and Iran collaborated is disrupting this project, aided it has to be said by the more sectarian forces among the Sunni insurgents.

Now the US has decided that the power of the Shi'ite militias is an obstacle to creating a unified, pro-US, government. The Sorcerer's Apprentice is preparing to fight the monster he created. It appears that a key objective is to defeat the Mahdi army, controlled by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, in its Sadr City stronghold in Baghdad. According to Guardian commentator Jonathan Steele , "This could produce a civilian bloodbath of colossal proportions, dwarfing the massacres in Fallujah in 2004" [2] . Reports indicate the US in considering turning Baghdad into a series of gated ghettos, with US troops guarding access. American troops will then 'work through' each district to 'clear' them of insurgents. This overall plan is a blueprint for hand-to hand gunfights through the capital, with hundreds of deaths of both combatants and civilians.

The fact that this is even a possibility is down to the Democratic Party in the United States. Although constitutionally the US president is 'Commander in Chief' of the armed forces and can do want he wants with them, in practice the Congress could cut off funding, making continued occupation impossible. There is absolutely zero possibility of the Democrats doing that. After all, most of them voted for the war. While they were very happy to ride the wave of disenchantment with the war to score gains in House and Senate elections last November, in fact they only called for a 'change in direction' of the war, largely undefined, and not its ending. Neither do the vast majority of Democrats in the Congress oppose the 'war on terror' or the profligate use of US militarism to ensure the position of US capitalism. The ceremony of assumption of the position of Speaker of the House by Democrat Nancy Pelosi was a stomach-churning event, in which Democrats and Republicans went to extravagant lengths to promise one another the maximum of bi-partisan political co-operation.

Whatever the immediate outcome of

the ‘surge’ in US forces in Iraq, in the longer term there is no likelihood of a complete US pull-out from Iraq or the Gulf region in general. Writing of the Baker report, John Bellamy Foster comments:

“Indeed, the bipartisan "realists" envision something more like a partial withdrawal and redeployment of U.S. forces than a complete withdrawal from Iraq. Here it is important to recognize that despite the report’s insistence that "all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq" by early 2008, this is understood as still leaving a large role for U.S. troops: in the areas of "force protection," as "units embedded with Iraqi forces, in rapid-reaction and special operations teams, and in training, equipping, advising . . . and search and rescue" . . . as well as intelligence and other support operations — all of which are included in the Iraq Study Group Report recommendations. Indeed, the plan offered by the Iraq Study Group would involve multiplying by as much as five times the number of U.S. troops embedded in Iraqi forces for an indefinite period.

Further, we are told that "a vital mission of the U.S. military would be to maintain (indefinitely) rapid-reaction teams and special operations teams. These teams would be available to undertake strike missions against al Qaeda in Iraq when the opportunity arises, as well as for other missions considered vital by the U.S. commander in Iraq." The U.S. would also continue to train the Iraq police forces, while moving the "police commandos" of the national police (paramilitary death squads originally promoted by the United States) into the Iraqi Army, where the United States would have greater control over their counterinsurgency operations.

In case there should be a misunderstanding about the continuing U.S. military role in Iraq, the report explicitly states: "Even after the United States has moved all combat brigades out of Iraq we would maintain a considerable military presence in the region, with our still significant force in Iraq and with our powerful air, ground, and naval deployments in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, as well as an increased presence in Afghanistan" (italics added). These forces would be available to support the Iraqi government, block the disintegration of the country, fight terrorism, train equip and support the Iraqi troops, and deter foreign aggression. In short, they would be available for all conceivable military missions necessary to control Iraq and to limit its "sovereignty" to that of a subservient neo-colony.”

War fighter not peace keeper. Blair in Afghanistan

What is being tested out in Iraq of course has a decisive military aspect, but above all the Iraq adventure highlights the new political demands of the United States on the other capitalist states. The US demands the right to decide the military, political and economic order in strategically key areas of the world, untrammeled by either the United Nations and international law. Alongside these unilateral rights, the US state demands that other states adhere to the diktats of multilateral bodies that it controls - the World Trade Organistion, the IMF and the World Bank. To pull this project off - not exactly world government, but at least world domination and invigilation - demands a minimum threshold of credibility; without it other leading states will feel less pressure to get in line with US demands. Today that means above all the credibility of the ‘war on terror’, and that in turn is being sorely tried in Iraq. As numerous commentators have said, a defeat in Iraq will have much more serious consequences than the defeat in Vietnam.

While most of the attention is on Iraq, the spectacularly under-reported colonial war in Afghanistan is also going badly. British troops who are doing much of the fighting against the Taliban in Helmand province are making little headway. According to official figures the NATO troops killed more than 4000 people last year, including more than 1000 civilians - not surprising when military attacks are launched on rural villages and towns suspected of being centres of Taliban support. British Brigadier Richard Nugee, spokesperson for NATO forces, said January 2 that NATO was killing ‘too many’ civilians, which raises of the question of how many would be the right number. Helpfully for a leader of a party profiting from anti-war feeling, Hillary Rodham Clinton suggested January 12 that there be a ‘surge’ in the number of troops in Afghanistan (although she opposes it in Iraq).

Although the United States has largely sub-contracted Afghanistan to Britain, failure there will be another chapter in the failure of its ‘war on terror’.

Go to information about Jan 27 Washington demonstration

Go to information about February 24 London demonstration

Footnotes

[1] At MRzine.

[2] The Guardian, 12 January

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