



IV400 - May 2008

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12 December 2008



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Lebanon: Crisis not over

31 May 2008, by **Gilbert Achcar**



Il Manifesto: After the recent events, the situation today seems to confirm the victory of Hezbollah and its allies in the "first round." What do you think?

GA: What happened is very clearly that a change in the balance of forces that until now had remained hidden has now become explicit. Hezbollah and its allies have resorted to military means in order to take control of West Beirut. This included control of predominantly Sunni areas of the capital, Christians being in a majority only in East Beirut, which remained unaffected. Fighting expanded to other regions of Lebanon, but without the dramatic implications it had in Beirut.

It is above all what happened in Beirut that revealed a situation in which Hezbollah and its allies confirmed in

the face of the governmental majority that they are vastly superior militarily.

From this angle, it is a further blatant defeat for Washington, since the governmental majority is an ally of the United States, supported by Arab allies of the United States, like the Saudi kingdom and Egypt.

The Bush administration is accumulating defeat after defeat in the Middle East. It resembles a football team that has already clearly lost while its opponents continue to score new goals against it until the very last minutes of the game.

This last goal scored by Hezbollah and its allies, including Syria and Iran, confirms what has been clear since the 2006 war against Lebanon: namely, that the Bush administration is as much a disaster in foreign policy as it is in domestic policy.

In this situation, what is the role of the Lebanese army?

The attitude of the Lebanese army is determined by two major parameters.

The first one is that this army cannot play in any case an "interventionist" role in the conflict. It can only act as an "interposition" force — one could say that it is similar to UN Blue Helmets. This is because it is an army that reflects the composition of the population of the country and if it were to take an active part in the clashes, on behalf of one side or the other, it would rapidly split. It would produce anew a phenomenon well known in Lebanon: the explosion of the army.

The second parameter is that the head of the army is accepted by Washington and the other camp including Hezbollah as the future President of the Republic, and he is keen on cultivating this image of neutrality in the domestic conflict to safeguard the possibility of being elected.

These two parameters — the

composition of the army and the ambitions of its commander — result in the army being confined to a role of interposition.

In your opinion, is there a link between the general strike and the clashes that erupted on the same day?

No, honestly, I think that the general strike was a mere pretext. Moreover the social and economic demands for which it was called were very soon forgotten.

The strike had been supported as a move against the government, but the opposition in which Hezbollah is hegemonic does not refer to its demands.

Everything is focused, on the one hand, on the decisions by the government that ignited the explosion and, on the other hand, on political negotiations about the future of the institutions between the opposition and the parliamentary majority. I specify "parliamentary" because it is the majority in parliament, but probably not in the country.

In the West many describe the action of Hezbollah as a coup d'état, comparing it with the action of Hamas in Gaza in June 2007. Many Western observers argue that the goal of Hezbollah is to establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon: What is your comment?

Let me begin from the end: No, I do not believe that the ultimate goal of Hezbollah is to establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon. That is absurd.

It is more serious to ask if this is a "coup d'état" and if there are similarities with what Hamas did in Gaza. In this respect, I would say that there are points in common, as well as important differences between the two situations.

Let's start with the differences. Gaza, first of all, is geographically isolated from the rest of the Palestinian territories, while Beirut is the capital of Lebanon, well-connected to the rest of the country. Secondly the population of Gaza is homogeneous with regard to its religious sectarian

composition, and therefore seizure of power in Gaza was possible and Hamas did it.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah knows perfectly well that it cannot take power. It has explicitly stated this since its official foundation. It indicated that there are no conditions for establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon, because it is a multi-religious and multi-sectarian country. Hezbollah is mainly concerned with controlling its own sectarian community.

What happened recently in Beirut was not a "seizure of power" by Hezbollah. It was, very obviously, a military action against the opposite camp, a "seizure of territory" by Hezbollah and its allies, for the most part forces closely linked to Syria. Even Hezbollah is linked to Syria, of course, but it is primarily linked to Iran, as is well known.

Hezbollah itself asked the army to deploy in the areas it conquered militarily, while repeating that it had no intention of taking power. However, it stated repeatedly that it wanted to reveal the balance of forces and show who is stronger.

At first, Hezbollah presented its action as a defensive move. It said: The government declared war against us in deciding to dismantle our telecommunication network and displace the military officer in charge of the airport's security, a man close to the opposition. Hezbollah interpreted these decisions as a further signal of the intention to attack it not only politically, but also militarily. It reacted then as we have seen.

But, looking at what it did and the scope of the action, no one can pretend that it was a defensive action, unless one means "preventive defense." Hezbollah launched a military offensive that went far beyond what was necessary to revoke the decisions taken by the government against it.

From this point of view, there is one point in common with Gaza, namely that in Gaza too the action of Hamas was a preventive move against what

was being prepared by [Muhammad] Dahlan, the faction of the Palestinian Authority most closely linked to Washington. This faction, helped by Washington, was indeed preparing an action against Hamas, which then opted for a preventive move.

The difference is that in Gaza Hamas went far beyond the dismantling of Dahlan's forces. It simply suppressed the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the Gaza strip. But Hamas could also rightly claim to be the elected government in the Palestinian territories. In Lebanon, even though Hezbollah did not seize power, as I said and repeat, I think that it went in its military action far beyond what was necessary.

Today, after this action, Hezbollah's image as a military force that has always defined itself as a resistance movement and was therefore different from the militias that existed and still exist in Lebanon, this image on which Hezbollah based its legitimacy has been heavily damaged. This is because Hezbollah did use its military force, in alliance with groups most of which are agents of Damascus and real gangs with no political legitimacy whatsoever, unlike Hezbollah. Starting with Amal, Hezbollah's closest ally, an organization that is much closer to a sectarian militia than to a resistance force.

Hezbollah joined its military force with these allies, in an action aimed at seizing control of West Beirut, including predominantly Sunni areas. From that moment on, Hezbollah appeared as a force that uses its weapons in the Lebanese sectarian conflict. This has already aggravated the sectarian polarization and one must strongly fear that what some media predict will become true, namely: the "Iraqization" of Lebanon. This expression refers to the situation in which Shiite forces that became dominant in Iraq after the U.S. invasion had to cope with a sectarian war launched by Sunni forces, a very bloody war that has included suicide attacks, car bombs, etc.

I fear that this could also happen in Lebanon in the near future and that Wahhabi and Salafi factions, such as those acting in Iraq, might enter the

fray in Lebanon against the Shiites, reinforcing the religious and sectarian war dynamics that were unleashed anew by the recent clashes. Until now this was avoided in Lebanon precisely thanks to Hezbollah's image and the sort of "peace agreement" between communities that has existed since the end of the civil war in 1990. Indeed, the fact that Hezbollah appears as a defense force oriented against Israel led to a situation where even extremist Salafis of bin Laden's type could not attack the Lebanese Shiites because that would have been extremely unpopular in the Arab world.

After what happened, Hezbollah's image has been changing, although not completely yet. But it must be said that the recent events have strengthened the propaganda through which Washington's allies — the Saudi kingdom, Egypt and Jordan — have been trying, in particular since the summer of 2006, to discredit Iran and Hezbollah using the sectarian argument, until now with little impact.

And this is the most dangerous aspect.

In this situation, can Israel seize the opportunity to intervene?

I believe that Israel is unable, in part because of its internal crisis, to embark again on a military action as large as that of 2006 in Lebanon. Not because of the presence of UNIFIL (the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon). This is definitely not what could prevent Israel from invading Lebanon if it wanted to do so. An Israeli intervention would not be stopped by NATO troops. The true obstacle is represented by the strength of the resistance that Israeli troops have already met in Lebanon. Already in 2000 they had to withdraw from the last part of southern Lebanon that they occupied since 1982. This is what deters Israel from considering a new land invasion. So I believe that the Israelis, in order to take revenge for the humiliation they suffered in 2006, are considering more narrowly targeted attacks. The assassination of Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's military leader, some time ago was perceived by Hezbollah as a signal.

This, I believe, also played a role in

the recent events. Namely, the fear of an Israeli targeted operation, including a commando operation, whose goal would be to decapitate Hezbollah. This is indeed why Nasrallah no longer appears in public. He did it on few occasions immediately after the summer of 2006, but he knew then that Israel was still in a state of shock from the defeat it suffered. Nasrallah knows that he is threatened and that Israel, at the earliest opportunity, will try to assassinate him.

On the other hand, nobody calls for an Israeli intervention in the Lebanese conflict. Even Washington does not want one, because it would seriously embarrass its allies.

The Lebanese government majority also does not want Israel to intervene.

Moreover, the United States itself cannot go beyond bombing from its naval and air forces. It is in such a tight spot in Afghanistan and Iraq that it is hardly imaginable that it would open a new front, with a new land intervention. Especially such a difficult front, as shown by the resistance capacity of Hezbollah in 2006.

Hezbollah feels under threat nevertheless and sees an accumulation of worrying signs; including the declarations by Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi and his minister of Foreign Affairs about changing the UNIFIL's mandate.

These statements were interpreted by Hezbollah as revealing an intention to implement what appears to be Washington's initial plan — namely, a combination of Lebanese troops, the army and its allies, and NATO forces present in Lebanon that would clash with Hezbollah. As Hezbollah knows very well, this is the scenario designed by Washington.

But even though Hezbollah's action was an act of preventive defense in this context, it has exceeded the limits, in my opinion, and created a situation that, in the medium term, could prove dangerous and harmful. It is quite possible that what just happened will be seen by history not as an isolated episode, but as the first

round of a new war in Lebanon, although there could be more or less long periods of truce between successive rounds. This is because accumulated grievances and tensions are strong, while on the other hand it has been demonstrated that the coexistence between Hezbollah's military force and a Lebanese state sovereign on its territory is almost impossible.

Hezbollah is a state within the state, which has confirmed on top of that its ability to impose its conditions on the state, whereas in the past it could appear as a "state of resistance" against Israeli invasions, invasions that the state, precisely, is unable to counter, as it is also unable to defend the people of southern Lebanon.

How do you interpret the fact that Michel Aoun has not taken part in the conflict?

Yes, he stayed out of the clashes. I think that he has no interest in joining them. If Aoun intervened there would be a clash between Christians. He knows that he could easily be defeated militarily by Samir Geagea, the leader of the hawkish rightwing Lebanese Forces. Besides, Geagea today is probably more popular in the Christian areas and Aoun has no interest in moving the conflict into these areas.

The interesting thing, however, is that Geagea himself did not enter the fray. I think this is because public opinion in the Christian regions is very much hostile to any kind of clashes within its areas. They want to stay away from clashes, as happened this time. People see the advantages of preserving peace. Extending the conflict into Christian areas would have dealt a blow to Geagea's popularity. I think that he has waited also because he knows that if clashes were to break out in the Christian areas, they would not remain limited to these areas. In such a case, Hezbollah would give support to Aoun and this would have put the whole country to fire and plunged it deep into civil war.

If the present dynamic continues to worsen, and there is a strong possibility that this might happen in the long term, it would become hard

to imagine the conditions for a political settlement. If conditions deteriorate, we could witness another civil war in Lebanon, the explosion of the army, aid and intervention from regional and international powers in support of each camp.

What role does Syria play?

Syria fears the spread of the Lebanese sectarian war inside its territory: in northern Lebanon there are already conflicts between Lebanese Alawites and Sunnis. This represents a risk for the Syrian regime, because it is ruled by Alawites, a minority group in Syria, a country whose population is overwhelmingly Sunni. If a sectarian conflict were to break out in Syria, it would lead to the end of the present regime. But for now, the regime has things firmly under control.

On the other hand, it is sufficient to read the many comments in the Israeli press saying that neither Israel nor Washington can resolve the problem of Hezbollah. No need to mention Europe. As for Arab troops, I think that they would find it difficult to deal with the situation without an agreement with Damascus. Therefore, the only solution is to talk with Damascus. In Haaretz and other Israeli newspapers one can read reproaches made to Washington for preventing the Israeli government from talking with Damascus. Consider also the recommendations of the "Iraq Study Group" of Baker-Hamilton, in which negotiations with Damascus are an important element. Syria can interpret all this as indications in its favor.

Therefore, it is clear that Syria will put everything on the negotiating table, requiring: 1) the revocation of all threats against it, especially the international Special Tribunal investigating Rafik Hariri's assassination, and 2) a change of stance toward it and the acknowledgment of its tutelage over Lebanon. One should not forget that Damascus intervened two times already in Beirut, in 1976 and 1987, the first time in order to rescue Washington's allies after Syria had supported the enemies of the United States from outside. The second time was followed by clashes between

Syrian troops and Hezbollah. There may be a third time.

One cannot rule out that the Syrian regime may be "implored" to intervene again militarily, whether directly or indirectly, i.e. by sealing off the ways through which Iranian help for Hezbollah passes through Syria, since for both Israel and Washington, the Syrian regime is less worrying than the Iranian one. Israel does not have a problem with the Syrian regime: Israel's border with Syria is the quietest.

These are, of course, elements of the complicated Middle Eastern equation, of which Lebanon is an integral part.

Postscript

(The above interview was conducted on May 13. Since its publication in *Il Manifesto* was postponed for many days, the following comment was added on the agreement reached by the various Lebanese factions and signed in Doha (Qatar) on May 21.)

1. As was emphasized in most serious comments, the Doha agreement is no miracle solution to the new Lebanese conflict, but at best an agreement opening an interim period during which the two opposed camps will continue their confrontation by other means, while new armed rounds will remain possible in the more or less distant future. The intermittent 15-year Lebanon war (1975-1990) was studded with agreements of this kind. It is to be feared that it is the case again, unless regional/international dealings kill in the bud the new civil war dynamics that have been set in motion. The possibility of a change in Washington's Middle East policy, as a result of the forthcoming American election, is, incidentally, one of the key factors underlying the Doha truce.

2. The Doha agreement is nothing more than a new compromise on the distribution of institutional positions between socially conservative political-sectarian forces — essentially between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, with Lebanese Christians being split between the two camps. The new-old electoral law agreed upon, which goes back to a smaller division of constituencies, is such that it will

reinforce the sectarian dynamics that have rebounded in Lebanon during the last few years. It stands at the exact opposite of the demand by the Lebanese left of elections on a proportional basis with Lebanon as a single constituency, in order to favor political cleavages and multi-sectarian forces.

3. The parliamentary majority, allied with Riyadh and Washington, accepted the opposition's main demand — veto power within the government — when the opposition finally imposed on the ground, with arms, this veto power that it could not obtain through the peaceful mobilization that it launched since December 2006. Given that there is less than one year left before the next parliamentary election, the current parliamentary majority estimated that an interim government ruling by consensus is acceptable in exchange for guaranteeing that the current parliament will elect, for six years, a president of the republic whom it approves, the commander of the Lebanese army, Michel Suleiman. This is all the more important given that the current majority is definitely not sure that it will remain so after the parliamentary election scheduled for 2009. In that sense, a major loser of this agreement is General Michel Aoun, whose foremost ambition was to become president, the reason for which he played a key role in blocking the election of Suleiman in the wake of the agreement on the latter's name between Washington and Damascus at the end of November 2007.

4. The Doha agreement was the result of intensive bargaining between Washington and Riyadh, on one side, and Damascus and Tehran, on the other. The emirate of Qatar — on the territory of which is located the principal command center of U.S. forces in the region (previously located in the Saudi kingdom) and which maintains cordial relations with the Israeli state, while maintaining equally cordial relations with Damascus, Tehran and Lebanese Hezbollah — was the perfect broker for this mediation. The revelation on the very same day when the Doha agreement was signed of ongoing negotiations between the Olmert government and the Syrian government seems to me to confirm

May 1968 and the Vietnam War

29 May 2008, by **Jean-Michel Krivine**



Vietnam demo February '68
Berlin.

Admittedly, Vietnam won the war and its combat, incredibly difficult, played a crucial role in the flowering of the explosions of protest which took place in the world at the end of the 1960s. Contrary to the forecasts of Marxists (even Trotskyists), capitalism did not do too badly in the years after the Second World War, and thanks in particular to the arms race caused by the Cold War, it managed to transform technology, increase the productivity of labour, considerably improve the average standard of living in the developed countries, while unemployment remained very limited.

However the system of educating young people did not evolve correspondingly, and the dominant values remained those of the bourgeois society of the pre-war period. Student youth became rebellious. In the absence of big class struggles in the imperialist countries, it was the upsurge of the colonial revolution which inspired it, convinced it that Marxist ideas should not be rejected and that the USSR no longer had much to do with socialism.

After the victory of the Cuban Revolution on its doorstep, the United States pulled out all the stops to stop the contagion and to dam the rising revolutionary wave everywhere in the world, and in particular around China. During the 1960s there was a whole series of coups d'état, more or less fomented by the CIA, (Indonesia, Congo, Brazil, Dominican Republic), and after the defeat of France in Indo-China, the Americans hastened to take the place it had left vacant in South Vietnam and to finance (and therefore

control) the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. By its terrorist and dictatorial methods this regime provoked the rise of a popular resistance which the local Communists organised through a National Liberation Front (NLF), established in 1960. In spite of the billions of US dollars that were liberally granted to him, Diem was so incapable and discredited that his American protectors organized his assassination on November 1, 1963. His replacements were no more fortunate in their war against the NLF, now largely supported by the North. Faced with the risk of a complete collapse of their ally and a takeover of the South by the Communists, President Johnson decided to intervene militarily.

Following a provocation at sea (the "Gulf of Tonkin incident"), in August 1964, the 7th US fleet started to bombard the North-Vietnamese coast. Then swarms of B-52s (the biggest bombers of that time) left their bases in South Vietnam to bomb the North, getting closer and closer to Hanoi. At the same time tens of thousands of US infantrymen arrived in the South. Their numbers were to increase to half a million.

The American war was truly criminal and proves once again that you can have a relatively democratic regime on the domestic level and behave in an inhuman and terrorist way with respect to people considered as "inferiors": massacres, napalm, anti-personnel fragmentation bombs, defoliants, were very widely used, while the majority of the buildings in the North were razed to the ground (except for those in Hanoi).

In the face of this, the way in which the Vietnamese people, strictly organised by the Communist Party (whose official name was Party of the

Workers of Vietnam), were able to resist the escalating aggression and finally make it inoperative, gave an amazing example which inspired not only other national liberation movements but also sectors of youth and of the workers' movement in the developed countries.

Here I want to recount some personal memories. In November 1966 there was held the first meeting of the International Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, otherwise known as the Russell Tribunal, from the name of the famous English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who agreed to sponsor it. Its goal was "to establish without fear or favour of anyone the whole truth about this war". Twenty-six witnesses from various countries were sent to Vietnam. As a surgeon, I was able to stay from February 17 to March 23, 1967 in North Vietnam. Then, with my colleague Dr. Marcel-Francis Kahn and the film maker Roger Pic, from 16 to 30 September, 1967 in the liberated zones of the South, not far from Tay Ninh. As I was still a member of French Communist Party (PCF), (although I was already a Trotskyist....) and as the PCF was judged very severely by the Vietnamese Communists because of its half-hearted support for their struggle (and for only paying lip-service to support for the Russell Tribunal), the Vietnamese who were in charge gave me an unhoped-for chance: to take me down below the 17th parallel (the line of demarcation between North and South). From this enthralling expedition I drew two dominant impressions.

First of all, the brutality of the US bombardments knew no limits. After having left the capital, I was able to see that until we reached the 17th parallel, not a single building had

been spared by the United States Air Force. In particular, I was able to investigate the use of fragmentation bombs and napalm, as well as the bombardments of hospitals. I was taken to all the provincial hospitals and to several district hospitals. They were all marked with big Red Crosses and were generally located outside the towns. All of them had been bombarded on several occasions and razed to the ground and I brought back tiling from an operating theatre that was covered with puddles of napalm. The same applied to schools and houses. In the South we questioned many witnesses who told us in detail about the shelling, bombardments and defoliations carried out by the Americans and their protégés.

But at the same time we were able to witness the formidable élan of the population to resist and drive out the invader. I was able to observe admiringly how life was organized underground in the most bombarded zones of the North: the schoolchildren studied in the trenches, their heads covered with straw hats thickly woven to protect them from the fragmentation bombs; the decentralized hospitals functioned in basements and the underground operating rooms were lit up with bicycle headlights; the stores and the meeting rooms were underground. We circulated at night in the command car and, just like all the lorries using the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" to reach the South, the only light we had was one small bulb fixed under the engine.

On each side of the road there were white sticks every ten metres, and the lamp made it possible to see that we remained between the sticks, therefore on the road. There were teams who took care that this road remained usable. A popular mobilization was essential to lead to such a result. The more so as it was also necessary to check at regular intervals the lanterns which were also placed along the road. When the banana leave which covered them was replaced by a red leaf, that meant that there were planes overhead (which we could not hear because of the noise of the car engine) and that we had to stop and extinguish the small bulb under the engine. It was often the

young girls of the villages who looked after these lanterns. In every domain the entire population was mobilized in this way, and in spite of their overwhelming technical superiority, the Americans had met their match.

A journalist from *Le Monde* who had first of all been on an American aircraft carrier said me one day at this period: "When they sent me afterwards to North Vietnam, I went there with the idea that they had had it. You cannot imagine the arsenal of technical means and sophisticated apparatuses that are at the disposal of the American army. But after staying here for some time, I changed my opinion. It is the entire population that fights, that is organised and motivated. Against that, the Americans will be powerless".

May 1968 in France was sparked off by the Vietnam War. On March 18, 1968, a hundred militants had attacked the Parisian office of *American Express* in the Opera district (breaking the windows, burning the American flag). The police arrested Xavier Langlade, the person in charge of the defence guard of the JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth), who was a student at the Nanterre campus. Arrests of high-school students took place in the following days. Nanterre erupted. The students demanded their release and occupied the high-rise building which dominates the campus.

The arrested students were released, but the agitation was no longer to be stopped and it spread from Nanterre to the Latin Quarter. It should be mentioned that previously there had already been many anti-war demonstrations in Belgium, in Germany, in Japan and especially in the USA, where the losses of the American army gave future conscripts no desire to fight. In France several movements organised by what were then called the "grouplets" developed actions that were sometimes spectacular, with the slogan "The NLF will win!" which contrasted with the timid "Peace in Vietnam!" of the PCF, lost in the meanderings of peaceful coexistence. The Trotskyists took an active part in the National Vietnam Committee (CVN), in the movement "A Billion for Vietnam", in the Franco-

Vietnamese Medical Association. The Maoists organised the Rank-and-File Vietnam Committees (CVB). Everyone contributed to making people aware that the generalized and organized fight of a whole people can drive back an adversary a hundred times better armed. In 1975 Saigon fell to the People's Army and then Vietnam was reunified. What followed turned out to give decidedly less cause for enthusiasm.

In the years of the fight against the war, the slogan: "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh! Che, Che, Guevara!" was taken up and chanted during all the demonstrations, to the great displeasure of the Vietnamese Trotskyists who were, certainly, present in all the campaigning committees but, knowing how the Vietnamese Communist Party (PCV) had systematically exterminated the Trotskyists in 1945, wanted a more critical support.

And, in fact, we saw that after having victoriously concluded its exemplary struggle, the PCV very quickly set itself to building a society in every way comparable to those of its counterparts of "really existing socialism", with its single party, its bureaucrats at every level, its "special" stores and hospitals, its hundreds of thousands of political prisoners "to be re-educated", its omnipresent political police. The NLF and the Alliance of Democratic Forces, which had insisted for years on their willingness to open out to the "third force" [Vietnamese who were neither for the Americans nor the Communists] and their desire to establish a multi-party democratic regime, found themselves put on the sidelines. Practically all the key positions were occupied by "Northerners" or by people who only owed their power to the confidence that they inspired in the "deciders" from the North and not to the local population.

Disappointment resulted in the exodus of the "boat people" but it also affected many "friends of Vietnam" who had entertained many illusions during the war. To understand the extent of their bitterness it is enough to refer to the *Memoirs of Laurent Schwartz* [1] who was one of the

principal organizers of the CVN and of the Russell Tribunal and who had the opportunity in 1968 to meet Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong and to give a lecture to the trade-union and political cadres of Hanoi: "The Vietnamese officials knew very well that I had been a Trotskyist, they put that aside; as for me, I was not unaware that they were Stalinists and didn't have too many illusions about the political regime which would be established after the war; all the same, I hoped for something better than what happened".

How should we interpret such a fiasco?

The explanation is not simple and gave place, at the time, to sharp controversies in the Fourth International. The majority considered that the PCV was, certainly, of Stalinist formation and therefore had strong tendencies towards bureaucratization, but it remained resolutely optimistic because of the exemplary combat which the PCV was leading. For the majority, what we were faced with was a partially empirical revolutionary leadership, capable of evolving under the influence of the mobilization of a politicized population, as the broad democracy at the base, in contradiction with the vertical centralism, testified . [2] This point of view was opposed, for a whole period, by a minority (primarily in the United States) for whom the PCV was just a nationalist party with a peasant base, equipped with a petty-bourgeois Stalinist programme of revolution by

stages (first of all the bourgeois revolution...).

Only the pressure of the masses had forced it to go beyond the limits that it had set. The Vietnamese Trotskyist Group in France saw things differently again, and, a posteriori, its point of view appears as the most lucid. Admittedly, the PCV had been formed in the Stalinist mould of the Third International, like its Chinese counterpart, but like the latter, it always knew how to manoeuvre to defend its national interests without upsetting its superiors too much. It was erroneous to present it as a petty-bourgeois party pressured into action by the masses in revolt. This pressure existed neither in 1941, when a few dozen hunted militants took the daring decision to begin the armed struggle and created the Viet Minh, nor in the 1960s when the North was devastated by bombing and the South strangled by the US army, the police and the mercenaries of the puppet regime. The PCV knew how to be a fighting leadership, linked to the masses, fiercely determined to win power and to keep it. But to do what? As the Mexican Zapatistas of Chiapas have pointed out, the leaders of a victorious armed struggle are not the most fitted to build a democratic civil society in times of peace. All the more so since the Stalinist gangrene was already corroding North Vietnam at the height of its exemplary struggle.

How can I describe my bitterness when I learned in 1991, on reading Georges Boudarel's book [3] that in the middle of the escalation of the

war, in 1967, while I was in the midst of this heroic population, the leadership of the PCV threw in prison, without any trial, between one and two hundred old militants, at the time of the "Hoang Minh Chinh affair", accused of Khrushchevite "anti-party revisionism".

Chinh spent 16 years of various internments without any decision by a court and was under house arrest until his death in February 2008. He has still not been rehabilitated. It was subsequently learned that Ho Chi Minh's own secretary (from 1945 to 1954) was part of the same batch, without the honest Uncle lifting his little finger to save him . [4]

So what we were dealing with was a bureaucratized workers' party, certainly of Stalinist formation, but differing from the standard Stalinist parties (such as the PCF) in the sense that it placed its own interests before those of the USSR. It could brilliantly lead a war of national liberation (like its Soviet counterpart during the Second World War) but proved itself incapable of breaking from the Stalino-Maoist mould to build a new society in times of peace.

At present Vietnam is following in an overall sense the evolution of China and the cult of the dollar has replaced that of Stalin, but political power is still firmly in the hands of the cadres of the PCV.

It is fortunate that in May 1968 even those who were most pessimistic had not imagined such a trajectory...

The rise and fall of the left opposition

29 May 2008, by **Jan Malewski**



It all started with the announcement on January 16, 1968 that on the stage of the National Theatre of Warsaw there would now only be two

performances of Forefathers' Eve, a play by Adam Mickiewicz directed by Kazimierz Dejmek. Twenty years later Adam Michnik wrote that if in Russia they had banned Pushkin, in France Victor Hugo, or in Germany Goethe, the reactions would perhaps have

been less strong. But for Polish national consciousness it was an insult. They were censoring the masterpiece of Polish literature and the symbol of the struggles for freedom and independence. (1) [5]

On February 29 the Warsaw Writers'

Union voted a resolution against the censorship. At the University of Warsaw 3,000 signatures were collected for a similar protest. On January 30, at the end of the last performance of the play, a demonstration marched through the streets of the city. For the radicalized students, as well as for part of the intelligentsia, the time had come to stop the increasingly repressive course of a regime that was unceasingly restoring the order that had been shaken by the revolutionary wave of 1956.

Brought to power in October 1956 by the democratic Left of the party, Wladyslaw Gomulka had very quickly put a stop to the democratic ferment in the factories and the press: the workers' councils were brought under control and the press that expressed the demands of the Polish October was liquidated. But the door of freedom remained half-open for intellectual circles and it was only in 1962 that the discussion clubs started to be closed (the best known of them, the Club of the Curved Circle in Warsaw, was closed on February 1, 1962) and the censorship became more interventionist in publications with limited print runs. In 1964 an open letter of 34 intellectuals asserting the "right to criticism" and protesting against the limitation of print runs marked the divorce between the intelligentsia and the leadership of the party. Its authors were put on the black list.

At the same time the left communist opposition within the young intelligentsia and among students was repressed. In March 1965 Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski were condemned for having written and diffused an Open Letter to the PUWP (2) [6] and in January 1966 it was the turn of three other militants, Kazimierz Badowski, Ludwik Hass and Romuald Smiech, condemned as Trotskyists for having helped with the publication of this letter. Drawing the balance sheet of the Left of October 1956, Kuron and Modzelewski wrote then: "The only possibility of developing the revolution [in 1956] was the formulation of a proletarian class programme of class and the organization around it of a movement fighting against the power of the

liberal bureaucracy. At this decisive moment, not only did the Left not propose such a programme and organize its own party, but it continued to lend support to the liberal bureaucracy. All the enormous authority that the militants enjoyed in their own circles was transferred to the new leadership."

Consistent with such a balance sheet, the left militants formulated a programme of struggle for a democracy of workers' councils, articulated among other points with a reduction of working time and the independence of the trade unions. In spite of the repression of 1965-1966, this current continued to develop among students, reinforced by intellectuals, qualified by the bureaucracy as "revisionists" (in particular the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, expelled from the party in 1966, the economist Wlodzimierz Brus and the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who used Marxism to make a critical analysis of People's Poland). In 1968 this current provided the student revolt with the majority of its organizers.

The student mobilization

The student movement started when two left students, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, were expelled from the University of Warsaw for having informed the correspondent of *Le Monde* of the protests against censorship. On March 8 a general meeting of students at the University of Warsaw was attacked by club-wielding police and Kuron and Modzelewski were again imprisoned. On March 9 the Polytechnic School of Warsaw joined in the movement. On March 11 a demonstration faced up to the police in the centre of the capital, while the students of Cracow joined the movement, soon to be followed by those of Gdansk, Lodz, Lublin, Poznan, Wroclaw, Torun and Katowice. "There is no bread without freedom!" was the slogan of the protesters. Strikes with occupation of the universities and the polytechnic schools took place between March 15 and 23. Student committees appeared and formulated demands.

The reaction of the regime was one of great brutality: thousands of students

were expelled, hundreds were arrested, and several dozen were condemned. The universities were deprived of the little autonomy that they had and purged of a number of critical intellectuals. But the repression did not stop there: the student revolt was used as a pretext for an in-depth purge of the apparatus of the party and state, getting rid of those who had manifested democratic sympathies in 1956 and of a large number of the old cadres who came from the pre-war PCP. An anti-Semitic campaign conducted by the regime - a campaign that had been started in the apparatus by the fraction of the "partisans" led by the Minister of the Interior, Mieczyslaw Moczar, several years before, but which reached its apogee in 1968 - led to a wave of emigration, evaluated at 20,000 people between March 1968 and July 1969 (8). 8,300 members of the PUWP were expelled, including 14 ministers and 80 high-ranking civil servants.

Like the students, the bureaucrats referred to 1956, but with an extremely different tonality. Thus, Edward Gierek, member of the political bureau, said during an official meeting on March 14 that the vile scum which had appeared on the surface of the October events eleven years ago had not been completely eliminated from the current of our life and he threatened to "break the bones" of the "revisionists, Zionists, lackeys of imperialism".

Official anti-Semitism

The accusation of "Zionism" was the principal ideological "justification" of repression. For years the reactionary bureaucratic current which appeared in 1956 under the name of the "Natolin group" had drawn from the traditional anti-Semitic arsenal of the Polish Right arguments aiming both to drive competitors out of the apparatus of the competitors and to build a base in the most frustrated social milieux.

In June 1967, after the Six Day War, this current received unexpected support from Gomulka himself. During the Sixth Congress of the trade unions the First Secretary of the party declared: "Since the Israeli aggression against the Arab countries found support in the Zionist circles of Jews,

Polish citizens, I want to declare the following: we did not prevent Polish citizens of Jewish nationality from going to Israel, when they wanted to. We consider that all Polish citizens can have only one fatherland - People's Poland". He did not hesitate to say that the Zionists constituted a "fifth column", which was removed from the text made public after the intervention of Edward Ochab, who until April 1968 chaired the Council of State.

Gomulka had thus not hesitated to accuse of Zionism those who, contrary to the Zionist doctrine, had decided to live in Poland! The equal sign placed between Jew and Zionist was in this manner given legitimacy by the principal leader of the country and the way was opened for an anti-Semitic campaign. This campaign was immediately launched publicly in the press controlled by the Moczar fraction. In March 1968 Jewish-sounding names of oppositionists were given prominence in the scurrilous articles justifying the repression, thousands of openly anti-Semitic (but unsigned) leaflets were distributed and Moczar spoke during education sessions of the traditional "Jewish cunning".

Analyzing the turn of the bureaucracy in 1968, Adam Michnik wrote that if October 1956 can be considered as an attempt by the Communists to sink roots in the Polish democratic tradition, then March 1968 was an attempt to sink roots in the [anti-Semitic] tradition of the Black Hundreds. The search for national roots is natural for a regime saddled with the complex of dependence on a powerful neighbour, but - Michnik continued - by choosing a given historical tradition, you also choose your political allies. (3) [7]

The repression and the anti-Semitic wave of 1968 achieved their goal: until 1974, the capacity for opposition of the Polish intelligentsia was crushed. The repression of the Prague Spring in August 1968, in which the Polish army took part, although it provoked widespread indignation, did not give rise to significant protest movements. The regime managed to get through the great strike of December-January 1970-1971 without a junction taking

place between the intellectual opposition and the workers' struggle.

Transformation of the bureaucracy

The party in power itself was deeply transformed. Although the Polish Stalinist regime lacked social roots - the Polish CP was liquidated by Stalin in 1938 and the Stalinists only played a secondary role in the anti-Nazi resistance - the liberalization of the regime after 1956 had modified the relationship between the PUWP and the population. The party recruited massively and the few years of economic development which followed nourished the aspirations of its cadres. The normalisation after 1956, the economic stagnation which accompanied it and the blocking of the possibilities of social advancement diverted these aspirations towards a fight for positions.



With the beginning of the 1960s a significant layer of intermediate cadres, indifferent towards the official ideology or disappointed by it, felt blocked by the petrification of the structure of the regime. Expressing the aspirations of the nouveaux riches, sharing all the myths and the prejudices of the petty bourgeoisie, this layer identified naturally with the fractions of Gierek (the economic apparatus) and Moczar (the police apparatus, nationalist and anti-Semitic). The anti-intellectual hatred of these fractions entered in resonance with the dissatisfaction of the intermediate cadres, frustrated at not benefiting from the development of the country and the stabilization of the regime, which they regarded as their work. In March 1968 these layers unreservedly supported repression.

They were the ones who replaced the victims of repression. The phenomenon in the university field is well-known: 13% of docent (4) [8] owed their promotion to their attitude in March 1968. As Ireneusz Krzeminski would later write, those who aspired to strengthen the power of the PUWP were able to win a new generation avid for positions and

honours. Reclassification affected in practice all the apparatus of leadership, including, of course, the layer of the managers of the economy. (5). [9]

Commenting on this phenomenon Andrzej Szczypiorski wrote ten years later that for the Polish Communists the years 1967-1970 were a morally difficult period. All their social and political conceptions crumbled. Under the banner of the party, which they had created and at the head of which they had directed the transformation of the country for a quarter of a century, elements for whom everything to do with communist ideology was, in fact, hateful, were able to express themselves. (6) [10]

For his part Jerzy Szacki wrote that a new generation arrived in power then - not only younger, but also representative of other experiences and with a quite different ideological training a from the generation of the PCP which was retiring or emigrating. It was completely a-ideological. When it was comfortable, it defended so-called Marxism against revisionism (this was one of the greatest mystifications of March 1968!), but it had no scruples about at the same time stretching out a hand towards the arguments of the far Right of the pre-war period. When it was profitable to do so, it rejected Stalinism, but that did not prevent it from reviving the Stalinist campaigns against "cosmopolitanism" or drawing from the technique of propaganda the worst Soviet models, that is, the "Moscow Trials" of 1937. When it was comfortable, it followed the slogan "enrich ourselves!" of the 1970s, and subsequently performed other ideological contortions. In March in Poland, communist ideology was buried. Its place was occupied by the techniques of domination, manipulation and propaganda, more or less effectively applied. (7) [11]

Mutation of the Polish opposition

Especially, the repression of the movement of 1968 led to a profound mutation of the Polish opposition and to a lasting divorce between the living forces of the rebellious intelligentsia and Marxism. In March 1968 the

student movement was above all a democratic movement. Its demands, which we find again in subsequent revolts, were however formulated in a language marked by Marxism. When it defended itself against bureaucratic repression, it naturally compared this repression to Fascism and claimed for itself the communist tradition. The conjunction of repression - which disorganized the networks of the Marxist opposition - , the anti-Semitism expressed by the officially communist regime and the promotion within the apparatus of careerist and incompetent layers, put an end to this culture of opposition.



Later Michnik told how he and his friends, called the "commandos", took a fresh look at Communism. The slogans of their contemporaries in the West, their revolutionary speeches and their scorn for the institutions of parliamentary democracy seemed to them to be stupid and dangerous, because in their opinion they could lead to totalitarian consequences. And yet they had been on the same path shortly before, seeking a "true socialism", studying Marx, rejecting conservatism and the Church. In the student meetings they sang the Internationale... I do not want to

generalize; the majority of this generation was different. They were "red". However in March the attitude of the party in power led them to seek the hidden values of conservatism and the moral qualities of the Church. It was this Church, which they did not esteem, which took up the defence of the students, through the letter of the bishops and the voices of the Catholic deputies in the Diet. (8) [12] When Michnik and its comrades left prison in 1969-1971, they taught this new course to those who were joining the opposition. One of them, Rafal Zakrzewski, remembers that when he met the "March" oppositionists after their ideological transformation, they had already given up "revisionism", left Marxism behind and forgotten the quotations from the classics. What happened in March was the Polish variant of the end of the "century of ideology", of the belief in the possibility of a transformation of "real socialism" and in communist ideology, which you could take seriously by finding its authentic values. (9) [13]

Thus the two oppositional currents which converged in the course of the 1960s - the young revolutionary Marxists and the reformist communist intellectuals - drew from their experience of 1968 the same conclusion. These currents, joined later by others, more conservative,

which during the 1960s had not played an active political role, determined the political and ideological character of the Polish opposition. In the course of the rising revolutionary wave of 1980-81 their language and their convictions were dominant within Solidarnosc, even when the dynamics of this movement escaped their control, posing the question of power and formulating a programme in terms closer to those of the oppositionists of before March 1968, and even of 1956. The coup d'état of General Jaruzelski (who in April 1968 had become Minister of Defence) in December 1981 confirmed in the eyes of the majority of the population the validity of the lesson which these opponents had drawn from 1968.

So in March 1968 the Polish post-Stalinists laid the first ideological foundations of capitalist restoration, rehabilitating a tradition of the Polish Right and breaking the communist vanguard. The paths of the radicalisation of the revolts of 1968 in the East and the West, which had converged in the course of the 1960s, diverged.

This article was first published in the weekly magazine of the independent trade union "Sierpień 80" (August 1980), Trybuna Robotnicza (Workers' Tribune) n° 11 (74), March 13, 2008.

A breach has been opened, now let's widen it!

26 May 2008, by **Jan Malewski**



Paris, May '68. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, bottom right

The old world, established by the Yalta agreements between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, this world which had allowed the establishment or consolidation of authoritarian regimes and strong and stable states, both East and West with the collaboration of the Communist and social

democratic parties, and had repressed the aspirations to self-emancipation that the Russian revolution had raised, cracked everywhere.

Despite some defeats "the crushing of the student revolt in Yugoslavia, Poland and Mexico and the "normalisation" of Czechoslovakia " the year 1968 sounded the death knell for the stability of the authoritarian regimes. It opened a period of renewal of anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic resistance, with the appearance of a

new left, critical and radical, in the capitalist countries and a dissidence which would distance itself from Marxism, identified massively with the out of context quotations embodied in the wooden official language of the countries of "actually existing socialism".

The proletariat returns

In the 1960s a new generation, which had not known the exhaustion of the

Second World War and the disappointments of uncompleted "liberations", emerged on the political and social scene. The rejection of colonial wars (Algeria, Vietnam and so on) radicalised it. It was not satisfied with self-limitation, either in the name of the dangers of defeat, always possible, and of "fascism" (a very present fear inside the older militant generations), or in the name of the hope still incarnated by the idealisation of "actually existing socialism". Playing on these fears and dreams, Stalinism, cast out of the governmental institutions of the capitalist world during the Cold War, had succeeded in some more developed countries in maintaining a powerful working class identity, veritable counter-societies with their symbols and culture, opposed to capitalism and attached to the myth of the Soviet Union, while muzzling it and cutting its claws. Elsewhere, this role was played by social democracy, capable of redistributing the crumbs from the long period of growth in the context of the "Fordist" compromise.

For the traditional workers' movement, it was time for peaceful coexistence and the peaceful road to socialism which would surely come (and would be better than the Soviet experience because it would be "French" or "Italian" and therefore more civilised and less "Asiatic").

The Cuban revolution, which the imperialist blockade had not yet succeeded in subjecting to the demands of the Kremlin, had indicated another road. The assassination of Che Guevara in 1967 in Bolivia, instead of signifying the impossibility of struggle against an omnipotent imperialism, was perceived as an example to follow, a symbol of a consistent struggle for justice, equality and liberty, an example of genuine revolutionary commitment by somebody who, as leader of a victorious revolution, minister and statesman, had died weapon in hand in the distant mountains, thirsty, starving and sick, but trying to create "one, two, many Vietnams!", while the Kremlin hierarchs sat in their soft chairs, inviting the leaders of the Communist parties to rest in the Crimean sun.

In spite of the triumphant press releases of the US army of occupation in Vietnam, the FLN, which should have been liquidated (on their account) numerous times, launched the Tet offensive at the very time that the US announced that it had dropped more bombs on Vietnam than it had on Nazi Germany during World War 2. And the imperialist military police could not even defend the US embassy in Saigon! And then in Paris, the students "a small minority of the population" resisted the powerful Gaullist state and mounted the barricades! And the repression, instead of quenching the fire, lit the reflexes of solidarity!

Breaking with social-democracy and the pro-Moscow CPs, a new Marxist left, present above all in the student movement, appeared in the course of the 1960s. It was reduced and divided. The idealisation of the "cultural revolution", envisaged above all though its anti-bureaucratic dimension led a significant part of those who challenged the "mausoleum Marxism" of the Kremlin towards the dead end of Maoism. The Trotskyist organisations, despite the reunification of the Fourth International in 1963, remained weak and divided. In France, for example, there were some hundreds of activists on the divided revolutionary left, some thousands if you added those of the Parti socialiste unifié (PSU), compared with hundreds of thousands in the Communist Party and tens of thousands in the old SFIO (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière - French section of the workers' international, the ancestor of the Socialist Party). In the trade union movement far left militants were virtually absent. The role played by these small groups in the unleashing of May 1968 is all the more impressive.

Anti-bureaucratic revolts

In the countries of actually existing socialism there were the somersaults of de-Stalinisation, a profound transformation of the mode of bureaucratic domination which, from the time of Stalin, rested on the uncertainty of the future of each member of the social élite, capable from one day to the next of losing

their privileged place at the whim of the leader and ending their career in the labour camps. Between a quarter and a third of the Soviet population then suffered this form of forced and unpaid labour. The revolt in the camps at the announcement of Stalin's death obliged the bureaucracy to retake control of the apparatus of repression and management of the camps, capable of terrorising society from top to bottom and supplying it with a labour force according to its growing needs.

De-Stalinisation meant the end of this form of terror and an attempt to guarantee the domination of the bureaucratic elites in a less bestial manner, in other words the social stabilisation of a society by definition unstable, because it was not based on new relations of production. From 1956 in Poland and in Hungary the abandonment of brutal terror (but not repression) opened up the main contradiction of this type of society: the unstable marriage of state ownership, presented as collective ownership, of the means of production and their private management by an illegitimate elite, incapable of guaranteeing the realisation of social needs, because of its privileged status, cut off from the masses.

In Hungary the brutal repression which followed the Soviet military intervention in November 1956 crushed and atomised working class spontaneity for a long time.

In Poland, normalisation was slower, based on the division between the workers "rapidly brought into line and repressed" and the intelligentsia which benefited, for a time, from greater intellectual freedom. In March 1968 this normalisation came to an end and it the student movement rose up against the liquidation of the last spaces of freedom. Isolated from the workers, it was brutally suppressed.

In Yugoslavia, which since the break with the USSR had followed a non-Stalinist road and where the working class enjoyed a limited autonomy at the level of the enterprise through self-management, the regime also decided to put an end to the enlargement of this autonomy when the students in June 1968, demanded

political liberties which threatened the position of the dominant bureaucracy.

In China, where the Mao faction had played with fire in the inter-bureaucratic conflict which followed the break with Moscow, by leaving the student youth to settle accounts with the privileged layers in the first phase of the Cultural Revolution "with an often incredible brutality as witnessed by the public lynching of local leaders, forced to make self-criticisms before being liquidated "the army had already suppressed the autonomy of the Red Guards.

In Czechoslovakia where the Communist Party leadership had put a brake on liberalisation and de-Stalinisation after seeing their results in Poland and in Hungary in 1956, the lock had been released. The Prague Spring began, restoring hope in a socialism with a human face and again publicly challenging the Stalinist counter-revolution. The military intervention by the Warsaw Pact countries on August 21, 1968, which the Dubcek leadership of the CP would support to guarantee "normalisation", put an end to this hope.

The role of the apparatuses

If in May-June 1968 the deeply conservative apparatuses of the old workers' movement could not prevent the generalisation of the strikes, they were powerful enough to negotiation on the back of the longest general strike in the history of France to atomise the factory occupations and block the self-organisation of the workers. The general strike was not equipped with its own leadership, elected in general assemblies and centralised through local, regional and national committees. Thus , in the highly industrialised region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, "there were elected strike committees in only 14% of cases, strike committees including non trade unionists in only 23% of cases, strike committees recallable to general assemblies in only ... 2% of cases" (see Jacques Kergoat, "Sous la plage, la grève," in A. Artous, D. Epszajn, P. Silberstein (dir.), "La France des années 1968", Syllepse, Paris 2008, p. 71). Tailism, the delegation of tasks to "specialists" (trade union full timers and political

leaders) and confidence in them still reigned.

The experience of the strike of May-June and its result "gains beyond what was achieved in 1936 and the Liberation whereas the strike was longer and more massive " would open the first breaches, in particular among young workers, in the hegemony of the Communist Party and of the trades unions under its control.

During the 1970s the revolutionary groups, strengthened after 1968 " thus the French section of the Fourth International saw its forces grow tenfold from 1969 " would strengthen their presence in the trade unions, pushing the latter towards struggles, favouring experiences of self-organisation and trade union unity, challenging the traditional division of tasks whereby only the full timers were active and could negotiate. Among youth, on the other hand, in France at least, the old left would lose its hegemony. The PCF would be henceforth incapable of taking the head of youth mobilisations " in 1973, during the big movement against the Debré law, a member of the French section of the Fourth International was one of the spokespersons for the movement.

But the weight of the traditional apparatuses remained important. Thus in France, the PCF, then the new Parti socialiste, would be capable of coming out of 1968 strengthened, by also recruiting numerous youth. It was only under the pressure of the neoliberal offensive and in capitulating to it that the apparatuses of the old workers movement would weaken and be won to social liberalism. Moreover, the parties originating from Stalinism passively witnessed the implosion of "actually existing socialism" and the restoration of capitalism and where they decided to react " in Italy for example " they sought to preserve their apparatuses by integrating themselves into the bourgeois state institutions and dumping their ideological baggage " or they turned inwards on themselves and on an ideology which borders on religious attachment (the Portuguese CP or the Greek KKE).

Rebuilding an authentic workers

movement

Forty years after 1968 the workers' movement is, then, profoundly worked. Its bureaucratic apparatuses, attached above all to their own self-preservation, have let defeats accumulate when they have not actively organised them - from this point of view the destruction of the bastions of steelmaking in Europe, and in France in particular, because it took place under a government with socialist and communist participation, was exemplary. The patient construction " with a great investment of far left activists " of new trade unions in southern and Eastern Europe, has not compensated for this weakening. So far as the political left is concerned, in the East in particular, there is a vacuum. In Western Europe we also observe an open space, as witnessed by the small electoral successes of the non-institutional left. But forty years after 1968 what was at the heart of the workers' aspirations " rejection of authoritarianism and the demand for democracy, the need for equality and the conditions allowing its self-realisation, rejection of capitalism and its wars " remains a burning actuality. The world of 2008 is more brutal, more unequal, more famished while being much richer than the world of 1968. What led to the general strike in France in May-June 1968 is still present. A single spark can still start a prairie fire.

What has changed is the capacity of control of the apparatuses. The relationship of forces has changed " not with capital, which dominates and strengthens its authoritarian domination, in particular by building the absolutist para-state institutions of the European Union " but inside the workers' movement. The Stalinist millstone no longer exists, and nor does the hegemonic control of social democracy. Some potentially alternative trade unions have made their appearance. New left parties are beginning to appear to the left of social democracy. And the imperialist control of the world is cracking again, above all in Latin America " a radical nationalist new left governs in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Certainly, the revolutionary forces remain weak, including in Latin

America. The anti-capitalist movements seek a strategy, oscillate and can collapse. The illusion that it is possible to change the world by employing the bourgeois state institutions still remains largely dominant.

It is in such a framework that the idea of a new anti-capitalist party emerges. A "new party" that has nothing in common with the Stalinist conception: a democratic organisation, not dominated by bureaucrats, having no other interests than those of the exploited – the proletariat, the wage earners, the working class, who today make up the immense majority of the

world population – and capable of indicating to them the best means of building their struggles and their victories, which the old "parties" have not done.. An "anti-capitalist party", which says loud and clear that it rejects the system where capital dominates, that it fight for another society, egalitarian and democratic, founded on a collective responsibility for its management.

The construction of such a party is on the agenda not only in France. The manner of building it will undoubtedly differ – the national histories, the national relationships of forces differ. In Poland for example, the initiative of

building the Polish Party of Labour (PPP) has been taken by an alternative and combative trade union. In Germany the weakness of the revolutionary forces has left the initiative for the occupation of this political vacuum to left reformist forces. It is probable – even if it is not desirable – that certain attempts will not succeed, or not immediately and that in some countries the new formations, in the image of the ex-PSU in France, will only be transitory.

But the space exists for the construction of new anti-capitalist parties and that is the main difference with 1968.

Wave of solidarity forces regime to retreat on cyclone aid

22 May 2008, by **Mark Johnson**



Photo: Mark Johnson

With the Burmese regime continuing to deny the true extent of the catastrophe, and army factions vying to appropriate as much of the aid as possible, food, clothing and money gifts from private Burmese citizens probably represents over 80% of the aid actually received by victims of the cyclone, which killed over 30,000 people when it hit southern Burma on May 2nd, with a similar number thought to have since died of injury, sickness, hunger and exhaustion.

A large amount of foreign aid is blocked at Burma's borders, because western countries insist that their own development charities supervise its distribution, rather than Burmese troops, as the regime proposes. But, though you wouldn't know it if you depend on the western media for your news, aid from Europe and North America is only ever a small part of the total resources deployed in response

to any natural or man-made disaster. In Burma, as elsewhere, western aid is often an expensive and clumsy system, which ignores local traditions of philanthropic and social activism, and can even distort them, with its sudden inflow of easy money and impatient, arrogant "experts".

Fortunately, while (or perhaps because) Burma has an unspeakably bad government, its people have maintained a very strong tradition of social and cultural solidarity. The regime initially tried to confiscate spontaneous local aid for cyclone victims, placing roadblocks at the gates of Rangoon to intercept the hundreds of cars carrying food, clothing and money down into the delta region. But in the face of massive public anger – and a wave of solidarity that was in any case able to find inventive ways past whatever physical and administrative blocks the regime created, the junta backed down at the end of last week.

The result was felt immediately. On Sunday 11 May, the roads from Rangoon

down towards the first delta ports were virtual solid columns of cars.

With most offices and workshops closed on that day, families, groups of friends and companies pooled their resources to provide aid, well aware that their government is doing almost nothing to help.

This solidarity, of course, has its limits. The most important limit is geographical and logistic: individual and small groups don't own and can't afford to hire the four-wheel drive vehicles or boats that are needed to get help where it is most needed - in the isolated delta areas more than one hour from Rangoon. Nor could this small-scale aid deal with the health-related emergency in the delta, or the need to rebuild river transport and rice paddy irrigation systems that have developed over centuries, but which were washed away overnight.

Like all kinds of aid, there is also a terrible time constraint - a second

wave of deaths, from disease, hunger and exhaustion, is expected in coming weeks, unless a much greater amount of aid can be delivered to a much greater number of people. Foreign aid agencies have a crucial role to play, and can provide much-needed expertise in civil defense and disaster relief. Even foreign military may be needed, as only they have access to the helicopters, light planes and ship-born water purification systems that are needed to support people in the more remote areas of the delta.

Interestingly, international media and donors have largely ignored local dynamics of philanthropy and solidarity. And yet, here is a story about huge amounts of aid actually being delivered, and about the regime backing down and relaxing restrictions following public pressure.

There are at least two reasons for the apparent western disinterest in the wave of Burmese solidarity. Firstly, this story contradicts the black-and-white picture of Burma that dominates in western media. And secondly, it contradicts the image of western donors and charities as the main, the only, the essential element in response to this and other disasters. Acknowledging that local people here - as in almost every other catastrophe - provide most of the aid, most of the volunteers, and most of the pressure on local regimes for positive change, would make it harder for European foreign ministers to exploit the Burma story to present themselves as champions of human rights and humanitarianism themselves in their national media, while they continue to support the opposite of humanitarianism in Iraq and other

countries. A more realistic presentation of the central role of Burmese civil society in aid would also be inconvenient for the fundraising campaigns of the biggest western aid charities, who systematically present themselves as the essential element in any crisis resolution.

Fortunately, some smaller foreign solidarity outfits have chosen to distribute what cyclone disaster funds they can raise through groups of local volunteers, some loosely or less loosely linked to opposition and student-based groups, or to those parts of the Buddhist religious community that have been key in recent pro-democracy agitation. This kind of small scale linkage is likely to grow rapidly, now that the situation for local activists in Rangoon is improving.

Capitalism, Agribusiness and the Food Sovereignty Alternative

17 May 2008, by **Ian Angus**



Venezuela's action is in the finest tradition of human solidarity. When people are hungry, we should do our best to feed them. Venezuela's example should be applauded and emulated.

But aid, however necessary, is only a stopgap. To truly address the problem of world hunger, we must understand and then change the system that causes it.

No shortage of food

The starting point for our analysis must be this: there is no shortage of food in the world today.

Contrary to the 18th century warnings of Thomas Malthus and his modern

followers, study after study shows that global food production has consistently outstripped population growth, and that there is more than enough food to feed everyone. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, enough food is produced in the world to provide over 2800 calories a day to everyone "substantially more than the minimum required for good health, and about 18% more calories per person than in the 1960s, despite a significant increase in total population. [14]

As the Food First Institute points out, "abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today." [15]

Despite that, the most commonly proposed solution to world hunger is new technology to increase food

production.

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, aims to develop "more productive and resilient varieties of Africa's major food crops ... to enable Africa's small-scale farmers to produce larger, more diverse and reliable harvests." [16]

Similarly, the Manila-based International Rice Research Institute has initiated a public-private partnership "to increase rice production across Asia via the accelerated development and introduction of hybrid rice technologies." [17]

And the president of the World Bank promises to help developing countries gain "access to technology and

science to boost yields.” [18]

Scientific research is vitally important to the development of agriculture, but initiatives that assume in advance that new seeds and chemicals are needed are neither credible nor truly scientific. The fact that there is already enough food to feed the world shows that the food crisis is not a technical problem – it is a social and political problem.

Rather than asking how to increase production, our first question should be why, when so much food is available, are over 850 million people hungry and malnourished? Why do 18,000 children die of hunger every day?

Why can't the global food industry feed the hungry?

The profit system

The answer can be stated in one sentence. The global food industry is not organized to feed the hungry; it is organized to generate profits for corporate agribusiness.

The agribusiness giants are achieving that objective very well indeed. This year, agribusiness profits are soaring above last year's levels, while hungry people from Haiti to Egypt to Senegal were taking to the streets to protest rising food prices. These figures are for just three months at the beginning of 2008. [19]

Grain Trading:

Archer Daniels Midland (ADM). Gross profit: \$1.15 billion, up 55% from last year

Cargill: Net earnings: \$1.03 billion, up 86%

Bunge. Consolidated gross profit: \$867 million, up 189%.

Seeds & herbicides:

Monsanto. Gross profit: \$2.23 billion, up 54%.

Dupont Agriculture and Nutrition. Pre-tax operating income: \$786 million, up 21%

Fertilizer

Potash Corporation. Net income: \$66 million, up 185.9%

Mosaic. Net earnings: \$520.8 million, up more than 1,200%

The companies listed above, plus a few more, are the monopoly or near-monopoly buyers and sellers of agricultural products around the world. Six companies control 85% of the world trade in grain; three control 83% of cocoa; three control 80% of the banana trade. [20] ADM, Cargill and Bunge effectively control the world's corn, which means that they alone decide how much of each year's crop goes to make ethanol, sweeteners, animal feed or human food.

As the editors of *Hungry for Profit* write, “The enormous power exerted by the largest agribusiness/food corporations allows them essentially to control the cost of their raw materials purchased from farmers while at the same time keeping prices of food to the general public at high enough levels to ensure large profits.” [21]

Over the past three decades, transnational agribusiness companies have engineered a massive restructuring of global agriculture. Directly through their own market power and indirectly through governments and the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organization, they have changed the way food is grown and distributed around the world. The changes have had wonderful effects on their profits, while simultaneously making global hunger worse and food crises inevitable.

The assault on traditional farming

Today's food crisis doesn't stand alone: it is a manifestation of a farm crisis that has been building for decades.

As we saw in Part One of this article, over the past three decades the rich countries of the north have forced poor countries to open their markets, then flooded those markets with subsidized food, with devastating results for Third World farming.

But the restructuring of global agriculture to the advantage of agribusiness giants didn't stop there. In the same period, southern countries were convinced, cajoled and bullied into adopting agricultural policies that promote export crops rather than food for domestic consumption, and favour

large-scale industrial agriculture that requires single-crop (monoculture) production, heavy use of water, and massive quantities of fertilizer and pesticides. Increasingly, traditional farming, organized by and for communities and families, has been pushed aside by industrial farming organized by and for agribusinesses.

That transformation is the principal obstacle to a rational agriculture that could eliminate hunger.

The focus on export agriculture has produced the absurd and tragic result that millions of people are starving in countries that export food. In India, for example, over one-fifth of the population is chronically hungry and 48% of children under five years old are malnourished. Nevertheless, India exported US\$1.5 billion worth of milled rice and \$322 million worth of wheat in 2004. [22]

In other countries, farmland that used to grow food for domestic consumption now grows luxuries for the north. Colombia, where 13% of the population is malnourished, produces and exports 62% of all cut flowers sold in the United States.

In many cases the result of switching to export crops has produced results that would be laughable if they weren't so damaging. Kenya was self-sufficient in food until about 25 years ago. Today it imports 80% of its food – and 80% of its exports are other agricultural products. [23]

The shift to industrial agriculture has driven millions of people off the land and into unemployment and poverty in the immense slums that now surround many of the world's cities.

The people who best know the land are being separated from it; their farms enclosed into gigantic outdoor factories that produce only for export. Hundreds of millions of people now must depend on food that's grown thousands of miles away because their homeland agriculture has been transformed to meet the needs of agribusiness corporations. As recent months have shown, the entire system is fragile: India's decision to rebuild its rice stocks made food unaffordable

for millions half a world away.

If the purpose of agriculture is to feed people, the changes to global agriculture in the past 30 years make no sense. Industrial farming in the Third World has produced increasing amounts of food, but at the cost of driving millions off the land and into lives of chronic hunger “and at the cost of poisoning air and water, and steadily decreasing the ability of the soil to deliver the food we need.

Contrary to the claims of agribusiness, the latest agricultural research, including more than a decade of concrete experience in Cuba, proves that small and mid-sized farms using sustainable agroecological methods are much more productive and vastly less damaging to the environment than huge industrial farms. [24]

Industrial farming continues not because it is more productive, but because it has been able, until now, to deliver uniform products in predictable quantities, bred specifically to resist damage during shipment to distant markets. That’s where the profit is, and profit is what counts, no matter what the effect may be on earth, air, and water “or even on hungry people.

Fighting for food sovereignty

The changes imposed by transnational agribusiness and its agencies have not gone unchallenged. One of the most important developments in the past 15 years has been the emergence of La Vía Campesina (Peasant Way), an umbrella body that encompasses more than 120 small farmers’ and peasants’ organizations in 56 countries, ranging from the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil to the National Farmers Union in Canada.

La Vía Campesina initially advanced its program as a challenge to the “World Food Summit,” a 1996 UN-organized conference on global hunger that was attended by official representatives of 185 countries. The participants in that meeting promised (and subsequently did nothing to achieve) the elimination of hunger and malnutrition by guaranteeing “sustainable food security for all people.” [25]

As is typical of such events, the working people who are actually affected were excluded from the discussions. Outside the doors, La Vía Campesina proposed food sovereignty as an alternative to food security. Simple access to food is not enough, they argued: what’s needed is access to land, water, and resources, and the people affected must have the right to know and to decide about food policies. Food is too important to be left to the global market and the manipulations of agribusiness: world hunger can only be ended by re-establishing small and mid-sized family farms as the key elements of food production. [26]

The central demand of the food sovereignty movement is that food should be treated primarily as a source of nutrition for the communities and countries where it is grown. In opposition to free-trade, agroexport policies, it urges a focus on domestic consumption and food self-sufficiency.

Contrary to the assertions of some critics, food sovereignty is not a call for economic isolationism or a return to an idealized rural past. Rather, it is a program for the defense and extension of human rights, for land reform, and for protection of the earth against capitalist ecocide. In addition to calling for food self-sufficiency and strengthening family farms, La Vía Campesina’s original call for food sovereignty included these points:

- Guarantee everyone access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.
- Give landless and farming people “ownership and control of the land they work and return territories to indigenous peoples.
- Ensure the care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds. End dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized production.
- Oppose WTO, World Bank and IMF policies that facilitate the control of multinational corporations over agriculture. Regulate and tax speculative capital and enforce a strict Code of Conduct on transnational corporations.

- End the use of food as a weapon. Stop the displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants.
- Guarantee peasants and small farmers, and rural women in particular, direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels. [27]

La Vía Campesina’s demand for food sovereignty constitutes a powerful agrarian program for the 21st century. Labour and left movements worldwide should give full support to it and to the campaigns of working farmers and peasants for land reform and against the industrialization and globalization of food and farming.

Stop the war on Third World farmers

Within that framework, we in the global north can and must demand that our governments stop all activities that weaken or damage Third World farming.

Stop using food for fuel. La Vía Campesina has said it simply and clearly: “Industrial agrofuels are an economic, social and environmental nonsense. Their development should be halted and agricultural production should focus on food as a priority.” [28]

Cancel Third World debts. On April 30, Canada announced a special contribution of C\$10 million for food relief to Haiti. [29] Ending that cash drain, immediately and unconditionally, would provide essential resources to feed the hungry now and rebuild domestic farming over time.

Get the WTO out of agriculture. The regressive food policies that have been imposed on poor countries by the World Bank and IMF are codified and enforced by the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture. The AoA, as Afsar Jafri of Focus on the Global South writes, is “biased in favour of capital-intensive, corporate agribusiness-driven and export-oriented agriculture.” [30] That’s not surprising, since the U.S. official who drafted and then negotiated it was a former vice-president of agribusiness giant Cargill.

AoA should be abolished, and Third World countries should have the right to unilaterally cancel liberalization policies imposed through the World Bank, IMF, and WTO, as well as through bilateral free trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA.

Self-Determination for the Global South. The current attempts by the U.S. to destabilize and overthrow the anti-imperialist governments of the ALBA group â€” Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada â€” continue a long history of actions by

northern countries to prevent Third World countries from asserting control over their own destinies. Organizing against such interventions “in the belly of the monster” is thus a key component of the fight to win food sovereignty around the world.

More than a century ago, Karl Marx wrote that despite its support for technical improvements, “the capitalist system works against a rational agriculture ... a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system.” [31]

Today’s food and farm crises completely confirm that judgment. A system that puts profit ahead of human needs has driven millions of producers off the land, undermined the earth’s productivity while poisoning its air and water, and condemned nearly a billion people to chronic hunger and malnutrition.

The food crisis and farm crisis are rooted in an irrational, anti-human system. To feed the world, urban and rural working people must join hands to sweep that system away.

Historical Failure of the Capitalist Model

17 May 2008, by Ian Angus



Mexico food price protest

In Haiti, where most people get 22% fewer calories than the minimum needed for good health, some are staving off their hunger pangs by eating “mud biscuits” made by mixing clay and water with a bit of vegetable oil and salt. [32]

Meanwhile, in Canada, the federal government is currently paying \$225 for each pig killed in a mass cull of breeding swine, as part of a plan to reduce hog production. Hog farmers, squeezed by low hog prices and high feed costs, have responded so enthusiastically that the kill will likely use up all the allocated funds before the program ends in September.

Some of the slaughtered hogs may be given to local Food Banks, but most will be destroyed or made into pet food. None will go to Haiti.

This is the brutal world of capitalist agriculture â€” a world where some people destroy food because prices are too low, and others literally eat dirt because food prices are too high.

Record prices for staple foods

We are in the midst of an unprecedented worldwide food price inflation that has driven prices to their highest levels in decades. The increases affect most kinds of food, but in particular the most important staples â€” wheat, corn, and rice.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization says that between March 2007 and March 2008 prices of cereals increased 88%, oils and fats 106%, and dairy 48%. The FAO food price index as a whole rose 57% in one year â€” and most of the increase occurred in the past few months.

Another source, the World Bank, says that that in the 36 months ending February 2008, global wheat prices rose 181% and overall global food prices increased by 83%. The Bank expects most food prices to remain well above 2004 levels until at least 2015.

The most popular grade of Thailand rice sold for \$198 a tonne five years ago and \$323 a tonne a year ago. On April 24, the price hit \$1,000.

Increases are even greater on local markets â€” in Haiti, the market price

of a 50 kilo bag of rice doubled in one week at the end of March.

These increases are catastrophic for the 2.6 billion people around the world who live on less than US\$2 a day and spend 60% to 80% of their incomes on food. Hundreds of millions cannot afford to eat.

This month, the hungry fought back.

Taking to the streets

In Haiti, on April 3, demonstrators in the southern city of Les Cayes built barricades, stopped trucks carrying rice and distributed the food, and tried to burn a United Nations compound. The protests quickly spread to the capital, Port-au-Prince, where thousands marched on the presidential palace, chanting “We are hungry!” Many called for the withdrawal of UN troops and the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the exiled president whose government was overthrown by foreign powers in 2004.

President René Prével, who initially said nothing could be done, has announced a 16% cut in the wholesale price of rice. This is at best a stop-gap

measure, since the reduction is for one month only, and retailers are not obligated to cut their prices.

The actions in Haiti paralleled similar protests by hungry people in more than twenty other countries.

- In Burkino Faso, a two-day general strike by unions and shopkeepers demanded "significant and effective" reductions in the price of rice and other staple foods.

- In Bangladesh, over 20,000 workers from textile factories in Fatullah went on strike to demand lower prices and higher wages. They hurled bricks and stones at police, who fired tear gas into the crowd.

- The Egyptian government sent thousands of troops into the Mahalla textile complex in the Nile Delta, to prevent a general strike demanding higher wages, an independent union, and lower prices. Two people were killed and over 600 have been jailed.

- In Abidjan, CÔte d'Ivoire, police used tear gas against women who had set up barricades, burned tires and closed major roads. Thousands marched to the President's home, chanting "We are hungry," and "Life is too expensive, you are killing us."

- In Pakistan and Thailand, armed soldiers have been deployed to prevent the poor from seizing food from fields and warehouses.

Similar protests have taken place in Cambodia, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Honduras, Indonesia, Madagascar, Mauritania, Niger, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Thailand, Uzbekistan, and Zambia. On April 2, the president of the World Bank told a meeting in Washington that there are 33 countries where price hikes could cause social unrest.

A Senior Editor of Time magazine warned:

"The idea of the starving masses driven by their desperation to take to the streets and overthrow the ancien regime has seemed impossibly quaint since capitalism triumphed so decisively in the Cold War.... And yet, the headlines of the past month suggest that skyrocketing food prices

are threatening the stability of a growing number of governments around the world. when circumstances render it impossible to feed their hungry children, normally passive citizens can very quickly become militants with nothing to lose." [33]

What's Driving Food Inflation?

Since the 1970s, food production has become increasingly globalized and concentrated. A handful of countries dominate the global trade in staple foods. 80% of wheat exports come from six exporters, as does 85% of rice. Three countries produce 70% of exported corn. This leaves the world's poorest countries, the ones that must import food to survive, at the mercy of economic trends and policies in those few exporting companies. When the global food trade system stops delivering, it's the poor who pay the price.

For several years, the global trade in staple foods has been heading towards a crisis. Four related trends have slowed production growth and pushed prices up.

The End of the Green Revolution: In the 1960s and 1970s, in an effort to counter peasant discontent in south and southeast Asia, the U.S. poured money and technical support into agricultural development in India and other countries. The "green revolution" — new seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural techniques and infrastructure — led to spectacular increases in food production, particularly rice. Yield per hectare continued expanding until the 1990s.

Today, it's not fashionable for governments to help poor people grow food for other poor people, because "the market" is supposed to take care of all problems. The Economist reports that "spending on farming as a share of total public spending in developing countries fell by half between 1980 and 2004. [34] Subsidies and R&D money have dried up, and production growth has stalled.

As a result, in seven of the past eight years the world consumed more grain than it produced, which means that

rice was being removed from the inventories that governments and dealers normally hold as insurance against bad harvests. World grain stocks are now at their lowest point ever, leaving very little cushion for bad times.

Climate Change: Scientists say that climate change could cut food production in parts of the world by 50% in the next 12 years. But that isn't just a matter for the future:

- Australia is normally the world's second-largest exporter of grain, but a savage multi-year drought has reduced the wheat crop by 60% and rice production has been completely wiped out.

- In Bangladesh in November, one of the strongest cyclones in decades wiped out a million tonnes of rice and severely damaged the wheat crop, making the huge country even more dependent on imported food.

Other examples abound. It's clear that the global climate crisis is already here, and it is affecting food.

Agrofuels: It is now official policy in the U.S., Canada and Europe to convert food into fuel. U.S. vehicles burn enough corn to cover the entire import needs of the poorest 82 countries. [35]

Ethanol and biodiesel are very heavily subsidized, which means, inevitably, that crops like corn (maize) are being diverted out of the food chain and into gas tanks, and that new agricultural investment worldwide is being directed towards palm, soy, canola and other oil-producing plants. This increases the prices of agrofuel crops directly, and indirectly boosts the price of other grains by encouraging growers to switch to agrofuel.

As Canadian hog producers have found, it also drives up the cost of producing meat, since corn is the main ingredient in North American animal feed.

Oil Prices: The price of food is linked to the price of oil because food can be made into a substitute for oil. But rising oil prices also affect the cost of producing food. Fertilizer and pesticides are made from petroleum

and natural gas. Gas and diesel fuel are used in planting, harvesting and shipping. [36]

It's been estimated that 80% of the costs of growing corn are fossil fuel costs "so it is no accident that food prices rise when oil prices rise.

By the end of 2007, reduced investment in the third world, rising oil prices, and climate change meant that production growth was slowing and prices were rising. Good harvests and strong export growth might have staved off a crisis "but that isn't what happened. The trigger was rice, the staple food of three billion people.

Early this year, India announced that it was suspending most rice exports in order to rebuild its reserves. A few weeks later, Vietnam, whose rice crop was hit by a major insect infestation during the harvest, announced a four-month suspension of exports to ensure that enough would be available for its domestic market.

India and Vietnam together normally account for 30% of all rice exports, so their announcements were enough to push the already tight global rice market over the edge. Rice buyers immediately started buying up available stocks, hoarding whatever rice they could get in the expectation of future price increases, and bidding up the price for future crops. Prices soared. By mid-April, news reports described "panic buying" of rice futures on the Chicago Board of Trade, and there were rice shortages even on supermarket shelves in Canada and the U.S.

Why the rebellion?

There have been food price spikes before. Indeed, if we take inflation into account, global prices for staple foods were higher in the 1970s than they are today. So why has this inflationary explosion provoked mass protests around the world?

The answer is that since the 1970s the richest countries in the world, aided by the international agencies they control, have systematically undermined the poorest countries'

ability to feed their populations and protect themselves in a crisis like this.

Haiti is a powerful and appalling example.

Rice has been grown in Haiti for centuries, and until twenty years ago Haitian farmers produced about 170,000 tonnes of rice a year, enough to cover 95% of domestic consumption. Rice farmers received no government subsidies, but, as in every other rice-producing country at the time, their access to local markets was protected by import tariffs.

In 1995, as a condition of providing a desperately needed loan, the International Monetary Fund required Haiti to cut its tariff on imported rice from 35% to 3%, the lowest in the Caribbean. The result was a massive influx of U.S. rice that sold for half the price of Haitian-grown rice. Thousands of rice farmers lost their lands and livelihoods, and today three-quarters of the rice eaten in Haiti comes from the U.S. [37]

U.S. rice didn't take over the Haitian market because it tastes better, or because U.S. rice growers are more efficient. It won out because rice exports are heavily subsidized by the U.S. government. In 2003, U.S. rice growers received \$1.7 billion in government subsidies, an average of \$232 per hectare of rice grown. [38] That money, most of which went to a handful of very large landowners and agribusiness corporations, allowed U.S. exporters to sell rice at 30% to 50% below their real production costs.

In short, Haiti was forced to abandon government protection of domestic agriculture "and the U.S. then used its government protection schemes to take over the market.

There have been many variations on this theme, with rich countries of the north imposing "liberalization" policies on poor and debt-ridden southern countries and then taking advantage of that liberalization to capture the market. Government subsidies account for 30% of farm revenue in the world's 30 richest countries, a total of US\$280 billion a year, [39] an unbeatable advantage in a "free" market where the rich write

the rules.

The global food trade game is rigged, and the poor have been left with reduced crops and no protections.

In addition, for several decades the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have refused to advance loans to poor countries unless they agree to "Structural Adjustment Programs" (SAP) that require the loan recipients to devalue their currencies, cut taxes, privatize utilities, and reduce or eliminate support programs for farmers.

All this was done with the promise that the market would produce economic growth and prosperity "instead, poverty increased and support for agriculture was eliminated.

"The investment in improved agricultural input packages and extension support tapered and eventually disappeared in most rural areas of Africa under SAP. Concern for boosting smallholders' productivity was abandoned. Not only were governments rolled back, foreign aid to agriculture dwindled. World Bank funding for agriculture itself declined markedly from 32% of total lending in 1976-8 to 11.7% in 1997-9." [40]

During previous waves of food price inflation, the poor often had at least some access to food they grew themselves, or to food that was grown locally and available at locally set prices. Today, in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, that's just not possible. Global markets now determine local prices "and often the only food available must be imported from far away.

Food is not just another commodity "it is absolutely essential for human survival. The very least that humanity should expect from any government or social system is that it try to prevent starvation "and above all that it not promote policies that deny food to hungry people.

That's why Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was absolutely correct on April 24, to describe the food crisis as "the greatest demonstration of the

historical failure of the capitalist model.”

What needs to be done to end this crisis, and to ensure that doesn't

happen again? Part Two of this article will examine those questions.

Aid and Hypocrisy

9 May 2008, by **Mark Johnson**



The greatest responsibility rests with Myanmar's military government, which failed to warn the population of the cyclone, and has still not mounted an effective disaster response programme. The country's huge army and police forces were completely absent from the streets of Yangon (formerly Rangoon) until two days after the cyclone hit - leaving most of the city's four million inhabitants wandering desperately through knee high water, trying to contact family members and find something to eat or drink, suddenly deprived of electricity, telephone or drinking water.

Only the City of Yangon was able to offer some services to the urban poor - with a fairly efficient free distribution of drinking water. The semi-governmental Myanmar Red Cross also provided some assistance and advice. But overall, the disaster response has demonstrated once again that Myanmar's junta is arrogant, out of touch and parasitical, and completely unable to meet the basic needs and rights of the population. International media and humanitarian charities have rightly condemned this failure to protect.

But the behaviour of Myanmar's business and middle classes - the main supporters of the pro-western opposition around their symbolic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, has shown that they are completely unfit to take charge of the country, despite their undeniable popular support. Commercial enterprises large and small jacked up the prices of all essential commodities by 200 to 400%

immediately following the cyclone.

With most of Myanmar's 50m inhabitants - small farmers - living on less than 1 EUR per day, this callous profiteering will have a terrible effect on nutrition, particularly for the very old and the very young - already most at risk from the secondary effects of the cyclone, like malaria, dysentery and water-borne diseases.

One of the few public policies that does help the country's poor - the provision of government-subsidised petrol and oil, would be abolished if Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-western National League for Democracy took power.

Western interests have also exploited the cyclone to advance their own agenda - opening Myanmar to western investment on the same unequal terms as in Cambodia, and imposing a more malleable government that would revoke recent agreements giving China access to Myanmar's ports. French foreign

minister Bernard Kouchner suggested on 6 May that western powers should invoke their global 'right and duty to protect' and deploy military-civil aid missions without the consent of the Myanmar government. US officials -

coordinating the hundreds of aid workers and journalists now massed in Bangkok waiting for the green light, have started circulating widely exaggerated estimates of the number of victims, in order to marshal the humanitarian charities and journalists behind the US's aggressive plans for regime change.

Not that many of the private aid agencies and charities need much

persuading. Closely linked to missionary groups that have been working in the Burmese border region since British colonial times, and expecting to receive tens of millions of dollars of easy money when the Myanmar junta caves in, most of the aid industry is unable to distance itself from great power interests in the region.

A smaller number of international solidarity campaigns are going against this depressing general pattern. Buddhist groups across Asia have found ways to channel support through Myanmar's monasteries and temples - where many of the cyclone victims have taken shelter. Others have linked to émigré and underground student and pro-democracy groups, not all of whom have been fooled by the US charm offensive and dollar largesse towards the émigré circles.

The coming weeks will not just witness a struggle to aid the hundreds of thousands of people made homeless by cyclone Nargis, and the millions now slowly starving thanks to the combination of regime incompetence, US-led sanctions and local profiteering. We are also witnessing a struggle to redefine the contours of Myanmar politics, possibly including the collapse of the country's foul military rulers.

**Marc Johnson was in Yangon when cyclone Nargis hit. He is currently engaged in aid coordination efforts in neighbouring Thailand.*

High School students mobilise massively against attacks by Sarkozy Government

9 May 2008, by **Alex and Yoann**



Everything started with the Sarkozy government's announcement of the elimination of 11,200 high school teacher jobs during the next year. In doing so, they have gone one step further in their policy of frontal attacks on education rights and of reducing public expenditure. Consequences will include the elimination of optional subjects (arts, Latin, foreign languages) and increases in student-teacher ratios and in teachers' working hours.

The first to mobilise were the teachers. On 18 March, responding to the call of the SNES, FO, Sud and CGT unions, thousands of teachers went on strike and demonstrated in Paris. There were around 2,000 on the demo, accompanied by 3,000 high school students who gave the first sign that a mass youth movement was rising again.

Since then, the dynamic of the teachers' struggle has been overtaken by that of the students, who have started organising themselves and taking the initiative. Methods of action reflect the experience acquired by French youth during the recent strikes: blocks and strike pickets,

speeches during the lessons in order to interrupt them and to be able to mobilise for massive demonstrations in Paris.

In contrast to the other movements, this time it is the high school students in the most working-class areas that have taken the initiative and have formed the majority of the demonstrators. In this way, massive demonstrations and the capacity of organization of the French students' movement have begun to converge with the combativity and radicalization of the youth from the Paris suburbs.

From these beginnings, the movement has spread like wildfire. First in Paris, where hundreds of high schools have gone on strike spontaneously, overwhelming all political organizations and trade unions. But not only in high schools: the movement has reached dozens of middle schools (11 to 15 years), which have also blocked lessons and have massively mobilised for demonstrations. These demonstrations have brought together up to 50,000 people in Paris twice a week.

But the movement is not only in Paris. In Toulouse, Lyon and Grenoble, the mobilization has also achieved a historically unprecedented scope. On 18 April students in Paris started their

holidays which are two weeks long. It is therefore the turn of high schools in the provinces, which are coming back from holidays now. And they have got started quickly. On 22 April, 15,000 students demonstrated in Tours, 2,500 in Toulon, 500 in Lille and 3,000 in Strasbourg. These actions will give a push to the movement in Paris when the holidays finish there.

To achieve this level of activity, it is also essential that the movement organises itself and adopts democratic structures. Coordination is beginning between the high schools that are in struggle, with the first national meeting taking place in April and the next one on 3 May.

6 May is the key date: the teachers' unions are thinking of calling a General Strike on education, and FO (Force Ouvrière - Workers' Force) is even thinking of the possibility of calling an inter-sectoral strike.

Update: Teachers' Unions FERC-CGT, SGEN-CFDT, UNSA-EDUCATION, SUD EDUCATION have called a strike on 15 May. May promises to be a month of action.

**An expanded form of this article first appeared in [Revista Corriente Alterna](#). The translation of this extract is by [Socialist Resistance](#).*

Respect and the England-Wales local elections

6 May 2008, by **Alan Thornett, Nick Wrack**



Respect campaigns in East London

The most immediate catalyst for the collapse of the Labour vote was the abolition of the 10% income tax rate (ie Labour attacking a large part of its core base), but looming large behind that is the economic crisis the credit crunch, rising fuel and food prices set against continuing low wages for a big section of society. Added to this was Brown's inability to spin the New Labour project in the way Blair could do it.

All of this raises the prospect of a further electoral disaster in the European elections in 2009 followed by a drubbing in the general election of 2010 and the possible election of a Tory Government.

Against this background what are the prospects and possibilities for building a left-wing alternative to New Labour's neo-liberal policies. What is the terrain and what can be achieved?

Firstly, nothing in the general political situation has fundamentally changed since the launching of Respect in 2004. Large numbers of traditional Labour voters remain alienated, disillusioned and demoralised by the right-wing policies of New Labour. Some seek solutions in a "change" and vote for the Tories. Many more abstain, casting a plague on both parties. Such is the nature of party politics in Britain today, and the media coverage, that the rivalry between the main parties has become one of presentation and personalities.

Ideological differences have been left far behind as all the establishment parties support neo-liberalism to the hilt. Differences are miniscule, reflected by petty point scoring. In these circumstances voters can cast a vote for the opposition in order to register their dissatisfaction without, in fact, registering a vote for any fundamentally different policies.

At the same time, there is widespread anger at rising prices and the budget attacks on the poorest. There is opposition to privatisation and a fear

about the future of the health service and education. The war and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, although receding as an issue, remains of concern for millions.

Of course, not everything flows in the same direction. Fears about crime and the issue of immigration are factors used by the press and politicians to drum up support for right-wing views.



In general, however, disillusioned working-class voters and the progressively minded sections of the middle class will not swing to the Tories. Some may be tempted by the social liberalism of the Liberal Democrats but most will withhold their votes unless and until they see a serious, viable, alternative. When the threat arises of a Tory win most of these will vote once again for New Labour with heavy heart and holding their noses whilst doing so. This was a significant feature of the Livingstone vote in the London Mayoral election. Such an attitude will be played upon by the right-wing trade union leaders to argue against "rocking the boat", arguing that New Labour has to be supported to keep out the Tories.

In these circumstances, there are possibilities for building a left-wing alternative to New Labour but it will not be easy or swift. We may not like where we are starting from but every journey has to start from where you are.

The first point to register about the performance of the left parties in the recent elections is that they confirm that there is the basis of support for such a project. Although the experience was very limited, with only a few handfuls of good results outside of London, the results demonstrate that where consistent and patient work has been invested, support can be obtained for left-wing candidates.

Respect's results confirm this. In Birmingham Sparkbrook, Respect's Nahim Ullah Khan won 3,032 (42.64%) and became Respect's third councillor in the ward. Elsewhere in Birmingham, Respect polled 25% in

Springfield, 17% in Nechells and just under 5% in Moseley and Kings Heath.

These are extremely significant results. They indicate the possibilities of obtaining very good votes in elections and demonstrate that it is possible to win. They augur well for Respect's prospects in the city at the general election.

In Manchester's Cheetham Hill ward Kay Phillips polled 14.4% following an energetic campaign that built serious links with the local communities. In Moss Side Respect polled 5.8% and in Wigan 6.7%. In Bradford Manningham ward Respect won 7.5% and in Walsall 7.6%. Of course, these are very few wards contested but are small indications of what can be obtained in the first instance if there were forces to contest more widely.

A few of the results for the Left List also demonstrated the same potential for the left. They received a very good 37% and 25% in Preston and Sheffield respectively to 12% and 10% in Manchester. It is worth mentioning that the result in Preston and Sheffield are the products of work over a long period of time with a commitment from the core activists to the building of a broad electoral left alternative; a completely different approach from that of the SWP leadership.

In London the most impressive result was the vote for Hanif Abdulmuhit in the City and East constituency. Here, Respect came third, polling 26,760 votes (14.59%), an increase of 7,085(36%) against the background of a polarisation of the vote between Labour and Conservatives. This was a tremendous vote, beating the BNP and consolidating Respect's position in its east London stronghold.

Across London Respect's vote did not fare so well. Respect did not stand any candidate for Mayor or in any other constituency apart from City and East. Respect polled 59,721 (2.43%) in the London-wide list, a disappointment to the many Respect supporters who had hoped to win at least one seat on the Greater London Assembly by obtaining the minimum 5% required.

Notwithstanding the high profile of George Galloway this was always

going to be difficult in the circumstances. However there is no doubt that the response to Respect's campaign, albeit limited by a lack of resources and any real presence in large swathes of the capital, confirmed the potential to build outwards from the success in east London.

This was not a bad result in the circumstances. There was a massive polarisation in London around the Mayoral election which no doubt squeezed smaller parties. Perhaps more importantly, the war no longer featured to anything like the same degree as in 2004. Although Respect has a broad array of policies covering the breadth of the issues facing the electorate it is probable that most people still see Respect as the anti-war party. This needs to be addressed. What exactly is Respect and what does it stand for? There is no doubt that the split in Respect damaged the party's prospect, both in terms of voters seeing Respect as damaged goods and weakening the party's ability to campaign across London.

We did not have a Mayoral candidate, which meant that we did not get an entry into the booklet which went to every household in London. Nor did we have an election broadcast.

Unfortunately, with the exception of Newham and Tower Hamlets, Southwark, and some pockets in North London and elsewhere, Respect does not exist as an active force with an organisation on the ground. This is a consequence of four years of neglect, compounded by the split last year. The lesson of last year's Southall by-election demonstrated again in these elections, is that Respect cannot expect to get significant support unless it carries out regular, consistent work in an area.

Respect was not able to overcome these difficulties. It shows that Respect has to be built across the capital, with branches in every borough, if we want to become a real force in London. The vote in City and East, however, demonstrates that we can build in other areas by developing an active base carrying out regular and consistent work within the local community. Of course, our priority

areas are Tower Hamlets and Newham in the east where we have to continue to build and consolidate, but no national party can be built on the basis of support limited to two or three areas.

The London results

Neither the victory for the Conservatives, nor the election of a BNP member to the London Assembly, contradict the argument that there is a need and a realistic possibility of building a left-wing alternative to New Labour. In fact, the election results demonstrate the need for such a party more than ever. The neo-liberal policies of New Labour will lead some to try out the Tories and will even drive some working-class whites into the arms of the racist and fascist BNP. A party espousing policies that benefit working-class people, rather than big business is the only way to cauterise that flow.

An election is only a snapshot of political developments and these results should not be seen as a generalised move to the right. Given the absence of any authoritative left-wing party it is not surprising that many voters plump for the "other" party in the hope that things may improve marginally.

But the vast majority of traditional Labour voters still vote Labour or abstain. There is a sizable proportion of working-class voters, especially newer immigrants in low paid jobs, who no longer have any allegiance to Labour.

Notwithstanding the election of Johnson and the election of one BNP member to the GLA, the London elections show that the situation is much more complicated - than simply being a reflection of a shift to the right.

Livingstone's 1st preference vote increased by 208,336. His combined 1st and 2nd preference vote increased by 340,358. While there was massive discontent with New Labour's policies and with Livingstone's own performance, the fear of Johnson winning drove Livingstone's supporters out in massively increased

numbers.

Unfortunately, this increased turnout for Livingstone could not match the increased Tory turnout, which added over half a million votes to their 2004 result. Following the election of Cameron as leader the Tories have cynically repositioned themselves towards the centre ground of politics to increase their appeal particularly to a new generation which did not know Thatcherism.

Alongside this the selection of Johnson as Mayoral candidate has seen a confidence returning to the Tory supporters, especially in the suburbs. Livingstone appeared jaded, grey and on the back foot in the campaign and the Tories scented a huge scalp. They turned out in force to take it.

This produced a fairly narrow Tory victory for Mayor. This shows that, notwithstanding the increasingly personal nature of political contest in Britain, there was still a clear left-right contest taking place. Voters for the most part understood this. No matter the serious concerns that many on the left would have with Livingstone, it was clearly understood that Johnson had to be beaten.

Whilst the vote for Livingstone went up in the inner city areas it could not compensate for the doubling of the Tory vote in some of the suburban constituencies. The Mayoral election was overwhelmingly a class vote. There was a clear ideological aspect to the vote, fuelled by the massive attacks on Livingstone led by the Tory-supporting Evening Standard. It was understood that the multicultural nature of London and its public services were seriously at risk. Johnson's victory will demonstrate very quickly how justified that fear was. It was a huge victory for the Tories and a defeat not only for New Labour but also for all those to its left - particularly when taking into account that the BNP are now on the Assembly.

Part of a wider trend

New Labour's defeat came directly out of the New Labour project itself. It is part of a wider and more fundamental picture involving the direction of

social democracy at the European level. Over the last two decades European social democracy, without exception, has abandoned its traditional roots and adopted the full neo-liberal agenda. Now, one after another, these parties are suffering the backlash from this and falling into disarray. Italy is the most recent example where social democracy, after a disastrous period of coalition with a centre right Prodi administration, has collapsed and now we have a Berlusconi government and a fascist mayor of Rome. France is another example of a centre left government opening the door to the right, bringing Sarkozy to power. In Germany at an earlier stage it resulted in the election of Angela Merkel.

Right across Europe social democratic parties have moved to the centre ground and the ideological difference between them and the centre-right parties has disappeared. Politics are reduced to sound-bites and spin. In Britain, New Labour comprehensively rejected its traditional electoral base and, initially, successfully reached out to middle England - to win three elections with such support. But such support can disappear as fast as it comes. Unless governments rest on ideologically-based core support they are continually vulnerable to the latest twists and turns of the political situation or stunts pulled by their opponents.

Does this mean the end of new Labour? No. It might mean the end of this particular phase of New Labour in the sense that they are heading from office at a rate of knots. But any idea that they might draw the conclusion that the neo-liberal path has been

wrong and that they should now turn back towards some kind of old Labour model is unlikely to materialise.

This will become clear enough when the new policy review is published in the next week or two. They are more likely to conclude that they have not gone far enough and the way to get their voters back from the Tory Party is to embrace the market even more.

The response of the left to all this right across Europe should be clear enough. The need to build broad parties of the left, based on broad socialist policies, designed to embrace all those looking for a political alternative could not be more sharply posed. This is not an easy project. It requires determination, élan, openness, patience and consistency. But it has to be done.

The way forwards after the election

The basis for a broad pluralist party of the Left clearly exists, despite the current divisions on the left and despite a reduced vote in the London elections. If we take the very good results in Birmingham and East London, along with some of the other results outside of London and the 3.6% won by the various left parties on the London list, there is clearly the basis for a much bigger party of the left than has been built up until now. Respect therefore has a two-fold task in the post election situation: to consolidate the important and central bases in Birmingham and East London and start to extend outwards into other areas with the objective of establishing a national spread for the organisation.

This requires a rapid turn back from election work to party-building work through patient but energetic and lively local activity together with strengthening our national profile. We need to recruit and consolidate new members and build branches where they don't yet exist. The structures of Respect must be strengthened. The paper should be utilised to win more supporters and sympathisers. We should begin to prepare for a conference in the early autumn which can consolidate the organisation and reach out to others.

We must renew our approach to all those people in the communities with whom we have been working during the election but also find new areas to work in. We must reiterate our commitment to reach out to and work with all others on the left who want to build a left alternative - the young people of the environmental movement, those opposing racism and islamophobia, and local community activists.

This also means approaching trade unionists and other sections of the left to argue for a regroupment broader than Respect, which can reflect the full potential available to the left and which can more adequately address the crisis of working-class representation. We should participate in initiatives like the "Convention of the left". Forging links with serious organisations on the left will not come easily or quickly, but we must show ourselves committed to the project of working with others to build a bigger, united left-wing party. In the meantime, we work to build our support in an open and inclusive way.

Italian elections - a first response

1 May 2008, by Lidia Cirillo



Gianni Alemanno - new neo-fascist mayor of Rome

A L'encontre: It is not necessary to be a specialist on Italy to note the marked victory of the right at these elections, even if the exit polls initially

created illusions...

Lidia Cirillo: Indeed, the victory of the coalition led by Berlusconi - Party of Freedom, Northern League and

Movement for Autonomy - is clear. It has an advantage of more than 9% of votes over the Democratic Party (DP) of Walter Veltroni (ex-mayor of Rome) and of Italy dei Valori (led by the former judge Di Pietro). The result is indubitable: 46.5% against 37.7%, according to the results available and quasi-final as of Tuesday morning.

This victory is all the more significant and alarming in that within this right wing coalition, the Northern League, this racist party, not only obtained very good results in "its" traditional areas (Veneto-Friuli), exceeding 25% sometimes, but was also strong in Piedmont, Lombardy, areas where the so-called traditional left had a strong base.

In the industrial areas of North, the Northern League captured working class votes and roundly defeated the Left Rainbow (Sinistra Arcobaleno), therefore especially the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) of Fausto Bertinotti, who was the president of the Chamber during the last government of Romano Prodi.

Sinistra Arcobaleno (Rainbow Left) obtained 3.2% of the votes to the Senate and 3.1% in the Chamber. At the time of the last European elections in 2004, without having in its ranks the Democratic Left - a faction which split from the DP - the forces present in this new formation had together gained some 11% of the vote.

The present result shows the retreat of these forces - especially the PRC and the more reduced Communist Party of Italy (PCDI) - in working class areas, in areas which were at the end of the 1960s, during the 1970s and until the 1980s, the centres of working class activity and mobilizations. These areas have certainly experienced social transformations, but the wage-earning class has not decreased there at the sociological level and its living conditions have been degraded.

The Northern League, in these areas, has made a breakthrough which made it possible for Umberto Bossi to say that it was the "new working class party". That symbolizes the vertical fall of Sinistra Arcobaleno and the forces which made it up, more specifically, I repeat it, PRC. With

these results, these forces have been expelled from the Chamber and the Senate.

It is then not only a victory of the right in general, but also of this chauvinistic right faction, "northernist" and racist. It is an important new fact. Also the fascist formation Storace (La Destra-Fiamma Tricolour) in various cities - inter alia in Rome - obtained results going from 2.1% in the Senate to 2.4% in the Chamber.

A first conclusion: the overall political framework is serious, not to say threatening and dangerous.

How should we consider the result of the Christian-Democratic operation led by Casini, who split from Berlusconi?

Lidia Cirillo: In the results for the centre right and centre left - to employ the fashionable terminology - it is necessary to take into account the results of the UDC (Union of Christian Democrats and Centre Democrats) of Fernando Casini. It is a force which also will count. Probably it will not be aligned simply with Berlusconi, but it will support various measures relating, inter alia, to reactionary Catholic "values".

That is also an element to bear in mind in the new landscape drawn by the elections. In the two chambers, there are only right wing forces, whether the right of the PDL, with the strength acquired by the Northern League, or whether it is the DP, with its reference to Obama, a kind of Democratic Party, certainly in an Italian context.

These elections mark a historical change: the "left", such as the PRC is out of Parliament. How should we understand it?

Lidia Cirillo: As for Sinistra Arcobaleno, it seems clear that its days are numbered. The PCDI (Communist Party Italy) of Diliberto has already packed its bags; the Greens will follow. The PRC is in the most total confusion. Thus, one of its spokespersons, Franco Giordano, insisted on Monday evening on the TV that it is necessary "to build a house of

left", with a "program corresponding to the needs of the situation". It is a wooden discourse which you must have heard on behalf of the Socialist Party, or some of its sectors, in France.

There are at least two elements which explain the defeat of Sinistra Arcobaleno. The first, the PD gained the votes of the left, those which Sinistra Arcobaleno sought. The PD did not gain among the right wing electorate, as it had sought to do through adopting the least conflictual profile possible in this campaign. Therefore, PD took votes from the Left rainbow.

But the responsibility for this redistribution of the votes also falls on Sinistra Arcobaleno. Indeed, when you seek to convince the "people of left" - to employ this formula - that the only way to fight the right and the employers is going into government, it is logical that the citizens vote for those who seem able to go there, with the most probabilities and more "capacities to govern".

Secondly there was the abstention rate of 3%; that is to say 1.5 million voters abstained. However, certainly, among them, proportionally, those who had in the past voted for components of Sinistra Arcobaleno represent a great number.

We (Sinistra Critica), were not able to reach them, which is linked not only to our novelty (we have existed only since December 2007, in the strict sense of the term), but also with the very strong scepticism which exists among wage-earners. Many have lost confidence, after the political line followed over a whole period, by a political force calling itself "communist". They do not find it easy to again give their confidence to an emergent organization. Nothing abnormal in that, in the present context marked by a whole history of disillusionment.

Among an active and radicalized layer of employees or of young people there exists - and that is more than understandable - the idea: "They say this or that but, once in Parliament, they all do the same thing".

This attitude also continues within the framework of a certain milieu linked to capital which targets "the political caste", in order to create a revised institutional framework more favourable to counter-reforms. It is necessary to know this, even if the two elements mentioned should not be confused in any manner.

Berlusconi won, but don't obstacles remain to the construction of politico-official institutions more suitable, to employ the language of employers, "to take Italy out of the ditch"?

Lidia Cirillo: Admittedly Berlusconi appears more Confindustria-compatible than in the past. But he must deal with difficulties within the dominant bloc. The vote for the Lega, even if the latter has a capillary presence in North, is more a protest vote than a vote which would reflect - let us say, to be brief - a working class organization.

The degree of disorganization of the "workers' movement", of the working class at the trade-union and political levels is very large. Consequently, Berlusconi, in five years - because he has a clear majority in the two chambers (Senate and Parliament) - can inflict new blows leading to a disaster. The CGIL has members who vote Lega, in some numbers in the North. It is thus not a workers' resistance to support from the Lega for counter-reforms which poses the principal problem to Berlusconi.

On the other hand, contradictions within the dominant bloc remain. The

declarations of the new leader of Confindustria, Emma Marcegaglia, as of Monday evening, express the urgent feeling among dominant fractions of Capital on the need to implement "deep reforms". At the same time, there exists the feeling among certain leaders of the right that social mobilizations can re-appear. They also look at France. Therefore, the strategy will be concocted with more precision, in the weeks to come.

Moreover, we note: the severe economic crisis; possible popular reactions; the taking into account of clientelist interests, as much for the Lega as Berlusconi; all that makes me think that the situation for a political line conforming to the interests of the dominant fractions of Capital, in terms of timing, is still to be tested.

You are a member of Sinistra Critica, how do you judge the results for this organization in formation, for "any young person", since you were in the PRC still in 2007 and broke clearly with the "party of Bertinotti"?

Lidia Cirillo: As Sinistra Critica, we obtained the following results: 0.416% in the Senate, with 136, 396 votes; and 0.459% in the Chamber with 167, 673 votes. Flavia D' Angeli got a good reception: by her youth, her direct speech; above all among young sectors, employees and students; that does not mean that these people voted for Sinistra Critica, because some wanted to vote "usefully" or to abstain. Franco Turigliatto [ex-

senator, who voted against the proposals of Prodi] developed an very political and educational argument and was recognized by a layer of workers with whom he had worked for a long time. The results indicate it. What shows through in the first results: we get more votes where we are present and carry out work. It is a vote which reflects a political and trade-union activity, carried out by militants for a long time, sometimes.

The Communist Party of Workers (PCL) led by Marco Ferrando [Trotskyist current] obtained 0.55% of the votes in the Senate, that is to say 180,454 votes; and 0.571% in the Chamber, or 208, 394 votes. Its results are more "homogeneous" on the ground, because the PCL and Marco Ferrando were more known, at least in certain areas. For the remainder, it is still too early to carry out an assessment.

What is obvious can be expressed in a formula: long term work in the various social mobilizations is a precondition to reaffirming an anti-capitalist and Communist perspective, while working out a programmatic and theoretical reflexion which takes into account the features of the present historical period and, also, the political dynamics of the last decade, in an open way. It is to this that I devote myself - as a member of the leading circle of Sinistra Critica - in various contributions on the topics of feminism, of "Leninism today", or the crisis of politics.

*** Interview by Charles-Andre Udry for the site of "A l'encontre".**