IV402 - July 2008

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12 December 2008

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Zapatero: left in form, right in essence

31 July 2008, by Joan Guitart

Zapatero with Polish prime minister Kaczy?ski (right)
Image: Wikimedia Commons

On May 25 the Spanish newspaper "Pùblico" published a dossier on Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. In the dossier a cartoon showed a conversation in a café between a man of "progressive" appearance and prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero; the man says "what a disaster if Berlusconi's example spreads across Europe!". Zapatero responds: "yes, how can we do the same thing in a way that looks left wing?" This cartoon is a perfect illustration of the political methodology of the Spanish prime minister, confirmed by the criticisms made of Berlusconi by several of Zapatero's ministers while Spain itself is employing a policy of increasingly tough repression of so-called "illegal immigration".

Zapatero was elected general secretary of the PSOE in July 2000. He won a very narrow victory (41.6% of the vote against 40% for his main opponent José Bono, who subsequently became minister of defence and who is currently president of the parliament). He was until then a deputy without great implantation or influence, which finally worked in his favour: his victory was the result of an image of renovation and a skilful (and exempt of scruples: among his main allies was a corrupt current of the Madrid PSOE) playing on the internal divisions in the PSOE apparatus, in open crisis since the victory by an absolute majority of the Partido Popular (PP) led by José María Aznar at the general elections which had taken place some months before, on March 12, 2000.

Until the opening of the Iraq war, the PSOE led a fairly weak opposition in Parliament with little relationship to the social mobilisations which emerged against the increasingly right wing policies of the government; it should be said however that these mobilisations were not significant, except at certain very precise moments: in particular during the general strike of June 2002, controlled by the largest union federations, the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (UGT), and in the case of the mobilisations against the oil slick after the wreck of the tanker "Prestige" off the coast of Galicia.

Zapatero took the initiative in June 2002 of negotiating with the PP a "law on parties" justified by arguments like "the struggle of democrats against terrorism", but which has been used since then against any manifestation of dissidence in the Basque country, qualified by definition as forming part of "ETA's periphery". Dozens of social activists, without the least relation with the terrorist actions of ETA, have been imprisoned thanks to this law, which the PP has found useful in criticising the supposed weakness of the Zapatero government in the struggle against ETA and its "concessions" to Basque nationalism.

But the threat of a second Gulf war began to take shape and to generate an enormous opposition in Spain. The PSOE understood the depth of the rejection of the war and the possibility of strengthening the opposition to the PP government; on the other hand the massive but unstructured character of the movement meant there were no risks of it spreading out of control.

When on March 16 Aznar joined the "Azores three" alongside Bush and Blair, a month after the huge

mobilisations of February 15 against the war, the rejection was very large, but it expressed more a "public opinion" than a social movement. In these conditions, it was easy for the PSOE to be its "political expression" and the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq became the major issue for Zapatero at the general elections of March 2004.

As is well known, these elections took place in the emotional climate of the horrible massacre of March 11 in Madrid and under the effect of a public rebellion against the shameful manipulation of the facts by the PP government. An electoral majority for the PSOE signified above all the possibility of throwing the PP out of government; that is what Zapatero based his electoral victory on.

Cloudy ideology

Zapatero started from a position of weakness in the PSOE apparatus; his basic support was among the "second level" leaders without any weight in the traditional party families. For this reason he would affirm a very strong personal leadership by creating a social base of support identified, beyond the party, with his person starting from which he has succeeded in establishing his control over the apparatus in the medium term. He won this social base firstly through the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and immediately after through the different "societal" reforms (gay marriage, gender equality, law on dependency and so on) which had a big popular impact at low budgetary cost.

The control of this social base was a significant objective of Zapatero's policy, by revitalising thus the party structures in terms of feminism, local organisations, youth organisations and so on and by seeking subordinated relations of collaboration with the world of ecology or the NGOs, through political agreements without great breadth and a skilful use of public subsidies. The institutionalisation of the big union federations, the CCOO and UGT, meant there was no point in having a specific policy towards these latter, particularly the UGT given its privileged relations with the PSOE.

Zapatero has promoted a vaporous ideology inspired by the most moderate ideologues of "republicanism", in particular Philippe Pettit. The function of this ideology was purely ornamental, for statements and speeches; Zapatero loves the flattery of the personalities of the "neodem" media intellectual sphere (from the entourage of the US Democratic Party and in transit to the latter from European social democracy, his electoral programme for 2008 benefitted from a "committee of sages" formed by Pettit, George Lakoff, Joseph Stiglitz, Jeremy Rifkin among others, whose work seems to have mainly involved being photographed with the prime minister).

With this ideology, and still in ornamental fashion, but at the international level, Zapatero has promulgated the "alliance of civilisations" as an alternative to the "clash of civilisations" of Huntington and the US neoconservatives. The proposal, which has drawn support from the secretary general of the United Nations, Erdogan's Turkish government, Ayatollah Khatami and Tony Blair, has generated little more than costly international meetings which have not won the expected media echo.

Finally his programme for government rests, beyond the "societal reforms", on three pillars:

— reform of the statutes of autonomy, attempting to update the state pact arrived at during the Transition (the project has been called the "second Transition") and in this way to form a framework for a medium term alliance between the PSOE and the Basque and Catalan nationalist parties essentially;

— the solution of the so-called "Basque conflict" by negotiation with ETA;

— the continuity of a strictly orthodox neoliberal economic policy.

Promises and realisations

To develop a critique of the main themes of Zapatero's policy would go beyond the limits of this article. But I will sum up several facts:

— Zapatero ordered the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq immediately after having been named prime minister. This decision has given him a capital of credibility that still brings him dividends. But this was the first and the last significant divergence of his foreign policy in relation to that of the United States. In Afghanistan or the Middle East, in Colombia or Mexico, Spanish diplomacy has acted with a strict "Atlantic discipline".

The strengthening of the political and military commitment to NATO has been accompanied by the support of numerous public funds for the arms industry, thus continuing the policy developed by the Aznar government: currently Spanish arms companies owe 26,000 million Euros to the state.

— On March 22, 2006, ETA announced a new truce ("permanent ceasefire"). A representation at the highest level of the government and the military organisation would lead to negotiations which had greater perspectives of success than their precedents, above all because at this time ETA was very weakened by repression in France and Spain. The government accepted significant proposals from ETA, such as the ratification by state institutions of decisions which would be taken by the autonomous institutions of the Basque county. It amounted of course to a pure negotiating tactic: without any doubt, the government, if that happened, would make a "reading" of the agreement which would have eliminated the least aspect leading to the right of self-determination of the Basque people.

In practice, the government made no significant gesture of relaxation during the negotiation process, for example, in the area of prison policy towards ETA's c. 500 prisoners. Finally, a brutal bombing by ETA at Madrid airport on December 30, 2006 interrupted the de facto truce and the perspectives of negotiations for a long period. The government has recuperated and strengthened the traditional anti-terrorist policy, very similar to that of the Aznar government, while ETA has resumed armed activity. Effectively the "Basque

conflict" currently lacks a political horizon.

— Zapatero undertook publicly to support any proposal to reform Catalonia's statute of autonomy which would have been approved by the Catalan autonomous parliament. But the proposal for reform of the statute, approved at the end of September 2005 by a very large majority of the Catalan Parliament, was considered as "unconstitutional" and led to a political and social conflict throughout the entire Spanish state. "Anti-Catalanism", a basic component of the most reactionary Spanish nationalism, used in good part by the PP but also with significant support inside the PSOE, re-emerged. After significant changes to this draft reform, in the sense of transforming it into a purely technical change without political importance, the text was approved in Catalonia by a referendum in which less than half the electorate participated.

— Since then, the "second Transition" has been thrown in the dustbin and Zapatero has disputed with the PP the standard of Spanish nationalism, presenting the PSOE as "the structuring force of the unity of Spain" and as guarantor of constitutional orthodoxy faced with Catalan and Basque national demands.

— Some of the societal reforms carried out by the government merit support, for example the legalisation of gay marriage or the legal reforms in relation to "gender violence".

— But others have had more purchase in the media than in reality. For example the government has presented the law of aid to dependent persons as a "social revolution". In reality, in the best of cases, the new legislation will grant subsidies to some 40% of dependent persons, who will be responsible for 33% of service costs. On the other hand this aid will not lead to any improvement in public health services which are subject to a very serious pressure seeking privatisation, especially in the autonomous communities led by the PP.

— The economic policy of the Zapatero government has remained in the framework of neoliberal orthodoxy and has not significantly corrected Spain's "social underdevelopment".

The share of wages in national income reached in 2006 a historic level of 46.4% of GDP, or a fall of 3.2 points in ten years; the operating surplus increased by 0.2% to 45.1% and net taxes on production and imports, essentially borne by the workers increased by 2.9% to 11.5%. On the other hand taxation represented in 2007 41% of GDP, or four points below the European average; Spain is 15th in this area among EU countries. Despite this, Zapatero maintains a policy of tax cuts, with a specifically stupid argument: "lowering taxes is left wing"; his immediate objective is to eliminate taxes on wealth and all this at a time when according to the Bank of Spain's "family financial survey", the gap in average income between the poorest 20% and the richest 10% of the Spanish population went, between 2001 and 2005, from 1:12.03 to 1:17.4.

On the other hand, projects for reform of Social Security inspired by the policies of privatisation developed by the World Bank are underway. The Social Security Reserve Funds, which have accumulated a wealth of 40,334 million Euros, can now invest on the Stock Exchange, not only on the public debt as was the case until now (at a fixed rate), but also on income at a variable rate.

It is not astonishing that the 35 biggest Spanish companies registered profits of 24,508 million Euros in the first quarter of 2007, or 34% more than during the first six months of the previous year. Between 1999 and 2006 Spanish companies increased their net profit by 73%, or more than double the EU average (the EU of 15, that is without the new members) but wage costs have increased by only 3.7%, or five times less than the EU average (18.2%). We understand better why Zapatero was the preferred candidate of Spain's employers at the last general election.

– Returning to the initial theme of this article, it is in his immigration policy that "the management of appearances" by Zapatero is the most obvious. For example, the government is developing a policy of externalisation of frontiers with the African countries from which a very small part of the "illegal immigration", barely 1%, originates. The firmness of the immigration policy is enveloped in the politically correct language according to the rule of appearances. Thus, Spanish naval patrols intended to block the boats which come from the African coasts receive the official name of "Noble sentinel" while the straitjackets imposed on immigrants who resist are called "immobilising restraint garments". The subsidies to African governments to buy their services as frontier guards are called "cooperation in development". In this respect the Zapatero government is proud of having substantially increased the quantity and quality of official development aid. It is true that there has been a considerable increase in relation to the management of the PP, but the quantitative increase, to 4,200 million Euros in 2007, should be put in relation to the subsidies to the Catholic church (5,060 million Euros) and the money the immigrants remit to their countries (more than 8,000 million Euros). The qualitative improvements are limited to certain aspects (contributions to the non financial international institutions of the United Nations system, subsides to certain NGOs and so on) while the processes of integration of private enterprises in the management of cooperation funds thanks to the "public-private alliances" is strengthened.

Strengths and weaknesses of Zapatero

In conclusion, three factors have contributed decisively to support the action of the Zapatero government since 2004:

— A prolonged period of strong economic growth, of the order of 3.5% per year, based on a dizzying growth of the property sector and massive indebtedness in mortgage credits; more than 70% of Spanish families devote more than 40% of their income to the payment of mortgage credits on their housing, But the economic crisis is already seriously affecting this growth. The effects of it will be considerable and very dangerous

without a social and political response.

— The aggressiveness of the opposition of the PP, supported by the hierarchy of the Catholic church and powerful press groups, frequently expressed by massive social mobilisations in which the presence of the far right and a renascent social Francoism has been obvious. Fear in the face of the PP's threats, in particular of its possible return to government, was an important card in Zapatero's hands. But after its electoral defeat, the PP has entered a very deep crisis; in these conditions, its threatening character is weakened and thus also the use the PSOE can make of it.

— The concrete absence of a left parliamentary opposition, given that Izquierda unida [1] has simply been a lobby, politically subordinated to the PSOE, constituted of professional politicians without political influence or social credibility, at the mercy of the socialist establishment. But after the elections IU has gone into a terminal crisis. Perhaps it can maintain a weak institutional presence in certain Parliaments and municipalities, but neither it nor its currents will have any significant social influence.

In these conditions a fourth factor can play a much more important role than in the preceding stage. It should be recognised that the Zapatero government has benefitted from the weakness of the social movements and organisations and the alternative left, which has no longer had an autonomous significant existence since the failure of the unification between the MC and LCR [2], more than 15 years ago.

In accepting the fact that the point of departure of the social movements and the alternative left is very modest, is it possible that a joint revitalisation, because it can only take that form, would have a significant short term influence on the anaemic political situation in Spain?

I think that one can reasonably hope that in the not too distant future the efforts and experiences already gone through — among other organisations and currents by Espacio alternativo — raise this possibility.

Footnotes

[1] Izquierda unida (IU, United Left) was founded in 1986 as the electoral alliance of the Spanish Communist Party and several small left groups. At the 2008 elections it obtained only 3.8% of the vote and 2 deputies

[2] The Movimiento comunista (MC), of Maoist origin, et la Liga comunista revolucionaria (LCR, section of the Fourth International), fused in 1991 but split a year later. The current identifying with the Fourth International joined Izquierda unida, organising an anti-capitalist pole, "Espacio alternativo" and continuing publication of the review "Viento Sur".

The Bolivarian Revolution at the crossroads

24 July 2008, by Fernando Esteban

After thirteen electoral victories in a row, the defeat in December was a body blow for the whole of the Bolivarian Left. For the first time in ten years, the Venezuelan people had expressed its disapproval, in spite of the widely-recognised gains of the revolution.

The gains of the revolution

In a country which is the fourth world exporter of oil and which has the greatest oil reserves in the world, oil is a very powerful financial weapon. The profits generated by PDVSA (the state oil company) make it possible to finance the "missions" of the revolution. Among the most important are those concerning education:

- The Robinson mission aims at teaching illiterates how to read and write.

- The Ribas mission trains graduates.

- The Sucre mission gives access to the university to students that the former republic had excluded. To this end, a Bolivarian University has been established and located all over the country. It functions parallel to the traditional Venezuelan universities, of which the best known are the Central University of Venezuela (in Caracas) and the Andean University (in Merida).

These educational missions are extremely successful. The students, of all ages, are very numerous, so much so that the centres where they operate are being multiplied. This enthusiasm can be explained partly by the methods of teaching that are used. The courses are given on video cassette and a teacher is there to help the group, which is always quite small. There is no place here for the system of evaluation and sanction. Everything is done to encourage the student's progress. And the results speak for themselves: in October 2005, UNESCO officially proclaimed Venezuela "a territory freed from illiteracy".

Another of the best known missions is "Barrio adentro", which is a medical mission. In the framework of an agreement with Cuba, nearly 15.000 Cuban doctors are today employed by the Venezuelan government. Access to health has thus become completely free. Installed in doctors' surgeries, all built on the same model, these doctors treat the population, but at the same time they inform and make people aware of the rules of hygiene and contraception. They also keep many statistics up to date, in order to

observe the evolution of the medical situation of the population. It is clear that progress is being made, and the whole of the population, in particular in the barrios, has seen its living conditions improving, largely thanks to these doctors.

We could also speak about the Mercal mission, which markets food products at low prices. Created for all Venezuelans, it addresses itself more specifically to the poorest sectors of the population.

We could futhermore mention the Piar mission which aims at improving the living conditions of children, or "Vuelvan Caras", the purpose of which is to develop co-operatives of production, or Guaicai which works to restore the rights of the indigenous peoples and communities of the country. Chavez often repeats that "to fight against poverty, it is necessary to give power to the poor". The missions are there for that… to help the needy populations of the barrios, those who took to the streets at the time of the coup d'etat in 2002 to put Chavez back in power.

Lastly, how can we speak about the gains of the Bolivarian revolution without evoking one of the essential reforms of the process: the law on land and fishing. Just eight families in the country own between them more than 150,000 hectares of land. That represents roughly the equivalent of eighteen times the surface of the capital of Venezuela, where more than 4 million people live. Furthermore, these immense landholdings remain most of the time uncultivated, whereas they are located in the most fertile areas of the country. It should be stressed that some big landholdings, such as for example the liquor-producing Santa Teresa company, established in the valleys of Aragua, do not have any documented title to the land that they occupy. The law has made it possible to launch a process of more equitable distribution of land resources, by regularizing the division of the land among peasants through the National Land Institute. It has encouraged the construction of rural population centres equipped with basic services, giving their inhabitants access to health and education, in order for them to have a better and more dignified life. The law protects the poor peasants and encourages the formation of co-operatives and other associative forms of production, by supporting them financially and technically and by creating at the same time the conditions of their economic viability, through establishing the necessary means of transport and marketing of their produce.

Again on the lost referendum

So we might be astonished that in spite of these well-known gains, Hugo Chavez lost the referendum last December. All the more so in that in the president's proposal we could find in particular:

– recognition of popular participation through the Councils of Popular Power (such as, for example, the Student, Peasant Councils, etc.), and through workers' associations, co-operatives, community enterprises;

– strengthening of the right to work, including the creation of a fund of social stability for workers, allowing them, with the help of the state, to take advantage of wide-ranging rights concerning retirement, pensions and paid holidays;

– the reduction of the working day from 8 to 6 hours, and from 40 to 36 hours a week;

– recognition of the specificities of the indigenous groups and the groups descended from forced African immigration, guaranteeing the exercise of their rights and special attention from the law;

– the creation of a state productive economic model, based on the values of humanism, co-operation and the preponderance of social interests over private interests. The state promotes and develops specific forms of companies and economic units based on social, communal or state property, social production and distribution, mixed enterprises between the state and the private sector, creating the best conditions for the realization of the socialist economy.

All these social gains would make you think that the popular classes would mobilize to once again vote massively in favour of the proposals of Chavez. However that was not what happened, quite the contrary. The referendum was more a defeat of the Venezuelan president than a victory of the opposition. If we compare the results with those of the last presidential election, won by Chavez with 61,35% of the votes, the opposition stagnated, with 4 million votes, whereas Chavez lost 3 million votes. The abstention was 45 per cent. In the final analysis, it was by only 200,000 votes that the constitutional proposal was rejected.

Most of the Western media were quick to salute the wisdom of the Venezuelan people. For them, the explanation of this failure was simple, linear, and came down to two points: the refusal of a "Cuban-style" socialist model and the refusal to allow Chavez the right to stand for the presidency indefinitely. Admittedly, article 230 of the new Constitution proposed a lengthening of the presidential term to 7 years, with the possibility of standing again immediately and indefinitely. Such a proposal is obviously not satisfactory. But to conclude from it that Chavez wants to make Venezuela a dictatorship, as the media said, is to forget a little too quickly that this same system is in force in France and in other European democracies without it posing the least problem for these right-thinking media people. Besides, they even quickly forgot to point out that Venezuela really is a democracy, since Chavez recognized his defeat and congratulated his opponents on the evening of the results.

The reasons for the defeat are undoubtedly to be looked for elsewhere.

Reasons for the defeat

First of all, by aiming to broadly satisfy the population, the proposal did not in the end satisfy anyone. The renewal of the presidential mandate was clearly there to satisfy the moderate wing of the Bolivarian process, the wing that wants a

Chavism without socialism. It could not however satisfy the most radical wing of the process. So we saw personalities like Orlando Chirino, a member of the leadership of the country's main trade-union confederation, the UNT, officially come out against the proposal. On the other hand, the entire social aspect of the reform, which we outlined above, was unacceptable to a new Bolivarian bourgeoisie which does not want socialism. From this point of view, it was highly symbolic that General Baduel, an old associate of Chavez, came out strongly against the reform.

Furthermore, there was very clearly a problem with the method chosen by Chavez. The Venezuelan president worked on a constitutional reform, consulting only a group of friends selected by him and gathered around his own person. Over and above the reform proposals, Chavez thus made disappear by decree the original formula of this revolution: that of a popular, revolutionary, democratic process of a constituent nature. The maximum that was obtained was the kind of open discussion that there was around the constituent assembly of 1999. At a moment when the context made it possible to go much further, to undertake a reform by establishing spaces of dialogue and power all over the country, Chavez threw down a challenge to the entire Bolivarian and revolutionary movement, forcing it to be with him or against him. There was a possible way out of this, making the model of reform proposed by Chavez a working draft for a great many constituent spaces organized all over the country, seeking perhaps their approval but gaining a model of legitimacy and a concretization of constituent and revolutionary democracy. In fact, the reform almost faded into the background because in the campaign Chavez personified the referendum to the point of transforming it into a plebiscite. The line was: "To vote No is to vote for Bush, to vote Yes is to vote for Chavez".

In the face of that the opposition developed a highly effective campaign. Through advertising spots on television, but also by going into the popular quarters, it ceaselessly explained that with the reform and "the arrival of socialism", the state would be the owner of all private goods and could seize in an absolutely legal way anyone's house or car. Exploiting people's fears by explaining that socialism would take from those who had little or nothing, this line of argument was extremely successful .

Lastly, the primary reason for this failure was undoubtedly the rise of a certain contestation within the Bolivarian camp. The desire to identify the Bolivarian revolution with the sole figure of Chavez, the way in which the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) is being constituted, without much consultation, and then the way in which they tried to impose the reform, explain this disaffection. Abstention was high because the proposal of Chavez, both in its form as and in its essential contents, did not offer practical democratic and counter-hegemonic perspectives. As Sebastien Ville and François Sabado wrote in Rouge n° 2230, "this defeat is a response to the degradation of the relations between the government and the most combative sectors of the Bolivarian revolution".

It is utopian to think that in the Latin America of today, it is possible to impose socialism from on high. The challenge is to build a radical democracy, opposed to the present status quo but pluralist in terms of actors and popular ideologies. Faced with this first setback, there are strong temptations for the moderate wing of Chavism to impose a new reform that would reduce the socializing or socialist aspects, explaining that they were the cause of the defeat on December 2. So what is at stake for the social movement is to keep the process moving forward. And from this point of view, there are fortunately some positive points.

The nationalization of SIDOR

First of all, there is of course the very recent nationalization of SIDOR. After three months of a determined strike and of struggle, on Wednesday April 8, Hugo Chavez finally intervened and agreed to renationalise the most important iron and steel plant in the country, which had been privatized in 1997 by President Caldera.

At the heart of the debate was the denunciation by the workers and the UNT trade union of the violation by SIDOR of Venezuelan labour legislation. Completely ignoring the collective bargaining agreement, the management of Ternium-SIDOR, a company owned 20 per cent by the state, 20 per cent by the workers and 60 per cent by the Italo-Argentinian consortium Techint, had maintained for 15 months a situation of absolute wage insecurity for the 15.000 workers, including 9.000 who had no contracts. Not only did the management refuse until now to implement the wage increases voted legally in a general assembly by the workers, but on the contrary it sought to impose a reduction of the workforce, wage cuts, modifications of work contracts in the direction of greater insecurity, as well as a downward revision of the pensions paid to former employees.

Worse still, whereas the fact of having 20 per cent of the capital enabled the workers to appoint one of the co-presidents, the management categorically refused to recognize the validity of this vote. Hitherto protected by Jose Ramon Rivero, the Minister of Labour, the management of the firm thought it could count on the fact that it benefited from foreign capital to continue flouting Venezuelan law. Whereas Rivero never sought to negotiate and on the contrary preferred to impose a trial of strength on the workers, as he had previously done last August with the comrades of the UNT in the public sector, he has just been repudiated in a scathing fashion by Chavez.

On April 4, the UNT trade union organized a referendum where two questions were put to the workers of the factory: first of all, did they or did they not agree with the proposal that the employers had made at the negotiating table; then, whether they wished to continue the strike and the negotiations. In spite of three months of struggle, the workers answered No to the first question by 3,338 votes to 65, and Yes to the second by 3,195 to

97. On Monday April 7, weary of the workers' resistance, the government decided, in the person of Vice-president Ramón Carrizales, to convene new negotiations. Negotiations to which the minister Jose Ramon was this time not invited. Under the constant pressure of 600 workers guarding the factory permanently, it took less than 48 hours to resolve the crisis.

The fall of Rivero

This struggle led in addition to the fall of Jose Ramon Rivero. It was not the first time that the comrades of the UNT had clashed with him. On August 15 last year, the trade-union representatives of the UNT, workers in the Venezuelan Ministry of Labour, had an appointment with the director of his cabinet, Lennina Galindo, in order to present their draft of a national collective agreement for the whole of the workers of the public sector. On their arrival, they were told that she was in a meeting with the minister Jose Ramón Rivero. So the trade-union representatives decided to wait. At the end of the day, someone came back to see them to tell them that by order of the minister, Lennina Galindo was not authorized to receive them.

The trade unionists, furious, then decided to occupy the Ministry until they were received. Forty-five people, men and women, thus continued to wait. Initially, the director of his cabinet and the vice-minister were sent to convince the recalcitrant workers to leave the Ministry. Then, understanding that he could not avoid a confrontation, the minister ordered the doors to be closed, but also for water and electricity to be cut off. Six days passed thus, without any change in the situation. Fire-fighters were prevented from entering, all contact was prohibited with the employees of the ministry who, out of solidarity, vainly tried to forward get food to them.

Deprived of water, food and medicine, faced with this serious lack of respect for the elementary rights of the human person, the courageous trade unionists nevertheless remained in place. The minister then called on the army to evacuate them. Soldiers came to the scene, noted the occupation, but decided not to intervene. Furious, the minister then decided to use purely and simply gangster methods, by calling in roughnecks from the neighbourhood. Promising each of them 50,000 bolivars (approximately 15 euros), he asked them to forcibly make these trade unionists leave, presenting them as anti-Chavist oppositionists. A violent evacuation of the ministry ensued, with the trade unionists being driven out by thugs armed with revolvers.

But the funniest part of the story was not in the evacuation itself.

In fact, these trade-union comrades were all members of the C-CURA and Marea Socialista currents of the UNT, and many of them were Trotskyists. And at the time as the evacuation was taking place, this same minister was making an inaugural speech on the occasion of the first official homage paid by the Bolivarian Republic to… Leon Trotsky! Such are the methods of Rivero.

Finally, at the time when he was ousted, Rivero was trying to set up a new trade-union confederation, directly in competition with the UNT, and which would have followed his orders. Although this project seems to have been frozen with the departure of Rivero, nothing indicates that it will not be taken out of the closet one day by the right wing of Chavism.

The internal manoeuvres in the PSUV

The right wing seems for the moment more preoccupied by the PSUV, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the new party bringing together the old MVR (Movement for Fifth Republic) of Chavez, and part of the Venezuelan Communist Party, of PPT and of Podemos. During March, the election of the leadership took place.

The first stage consisted of designating the members who had the right to vote. Out of 5 million members, only 80.000 could vote, without anyone knowing on what criteria this choice was based. In a second stage, Chavez announced on live television a list of 70 names from which it was necessary to choose the 35 people who were going to make up the national leadership. Lastly, in the third stage, once the 35 members of the national leadership had been elected, Chavez designated on live TV the members of the political bureau. There you can only find members of the government, and there are no representatives of the social or trade-union movement. The vote of the delegates in each battalion (base organisation) proceeded without there being any control of the results.

In spite of the way the bureaucracy arranged this election, there remain political spaces within the PSUV. Thus for example, when there was the election of the 35 people who were to make up the national leadership, a list drawn up by the government was circulated, indicating the names for which it was necessary to vote. Unfortunately for those thus designated, the 80,000 grand electors did not follow instructions and voted freely. Which undoubtedly partly explains Chavez taking matters in hand directly by nominating the political bureau. In the same way, comrade Gonzalo Gomez, a member of Marea Socialista, succeeded in being elected a delegate, in spite of the opposition of the bureaucracy.

Admittedly, learning how to work within the big machine that the PSUV is, is extremely complicated. Nevertheless the assiduity and the sharpness in the political struggle that the comrades of Marea Socialista, above all Stalin Perez, have shown, is making it possible for them to win a hearing. These small day-to-day political victories validate a posteriori the choice of going into the PSUV and calling for a Yes vote at the time of the last referendum. Inversely, the positions of the comrades of C-CURA and Orlando Chirino on these two principal points, tend to put them off the political field.

The next electoral

deadlines

In this context, the municipal elections in November look like being very complicated. There is a strong chance that the Chavist camp will lose quite a few towns and cities, which would weaken the process a little bit more. At the time when the revolution seems to be looking for its second wind, the problems of daily existence are coming to the fore again. Galloping inflation (20 per cent per annum), insecurity, the problem of refuse disposal, unemployment, corruption are elements which contribute to weighing on the process and which will play a preponderant role at the moment of putting a voting paper in the ballot box. Admittedly, these problems did not start with the Bolivarian revolution and are inherited from the former republic. However, the Chavists must be able to respond to questions relating to living conditions at the same time as proposing a project for another society.

For ten years, the revolution has continued to be unceasingly attacked by the capitalist bureaucracy, which forces it to solve the strategic problems of industrialization and nationalization, of the development of agro-industry in the countryside, and especially of private banking which still controls public finances and the rates of interest and borrowing (which is about 32 per cent). If the Bolivarian camp does not grapple with these problems, the towns of Ciudad Guyana (the most important iron and steel basin of Venezuela), of Puerto Cruz (an oil town), of Valencia (the main industrial city in the country) and even Caracas, the capital, can be lost, which would lead to a halt in the revolutionary process.

So it is more than ever important to defend the Bolivarian process. Of course it makes mistakes, even takes condemnable decisions such those that we have described above, and we will not cease to condemn them. Nevertheless, it is worth repeating with force that the Bolivarian revolution remains by far, and in spite of its errors, the most interesting phenomenon existing on the planet today. On it depends the equilibrium of the entire Andean and Caribbean region. If a fatal blow was dealt to it, the Bolivian and Ecuadorian processes would crumble. The Cuban experience would end. In spite of undeniable gains which have benefited the most underprivileged layers, the bureaucratic heaviness of the state apparatus as well as the continental context weigh enormously. That is why it is important to follow and support the Venezuelan social movement. Admittedly, it remains weakened and divided. But it is its capacity to unite which will make it possible to give a second wind to the revolution and will radicalize a process which is still and always too dependent on the sole figure of Hugo Chavez.

Italy must free Tamil human rights campaigners

15 July 2008, by Fourth International

Europe's leaders co-operate with Tamil oppression
Image:tamilnation.org

The Italian government has arrested over thirty Sri Lankan Tamils from all over the country. These arrests took place after the Tamils participated in the "Pongu Tamil" (Tamil Awakening) rally held in Milan.

The rally held in Piazza Argentina in Milan that highlighted human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan government waging a war against the Tamils was also addressed by Burani Vainer from the Association of Democratic Jurists. The arrests were made after the Sri Lankan diplomatic made a complaint to the police authorities that the rally was organised by supporters of the banned Tamil Tigers. Although police have told media that the Tamils were arrested under suspicion of "extortion" no one has yet been produced in court. The Italian government has not made an official statement on the arrest of a large number of non-Italians on their soil.

We see these arrests as a move to undermine the legitimate demand of the Tamil nation for Self Determination and to suppress the Tamil voice against atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan government.

While strongly protesting the arrest of a group of people exercising their democratic right to demand justice we call upon the Italian government to provide access to adequate legal redress for the arrested Tamils and to make their release speedy. We also request the Italian authorities not to hand them over to Sri Lankan authorities from whom they have fled from prosecution in Sri Lanka.

We also call upon all Socialists, Anti-war and progressive forces to unreservedly oppose this repressive act of the Italian Autorities. We reaffirm our call for the lifting of the ban on the LTTE in Europe, which victimises the Tamils.

* Belgium, Socialistische Arbeiders Partij / Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire

* Britain, International Socialist Group

* Denmark, Socialistisk Arbejderparti

* France, Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire

* Germany, internationale sozialistische linke, Revolutionär Sozialistischer Bund

* Netherlands, Socialistische Alternatieve Politiek

* Sweden, Socialistiska Partiet

Characteristics of the experiences underway in Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia

9 July 2008, by Éric Toussaint

Second, we find supposed "left" governments that implement a neoliberal policy and support the national or regional bourgeoisies in their projects: Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Nicaragua and the government of Cristina Fernandez Kirchner, from Argentina's Peronists. They are governments that implement a neoliberal policy that favour grand capital, covered up with some social assistance measures. In effect, they make it a bit easier to swallow the neoliberal pill by applying social programs. For example, in Brazil poor families receive a bit of help from the government, which assures them popular support in the poorest region of the country.

Some of these governments are attempting to improve their relations with Washington, especially with the establishment of free trade agreements with the United States. Chile signed one and Lula, in Brazil, is also seeking an agreement with Washington around a series of political issues. But at the same time great differences of opinion persist between the government of Lula and the United States. These differences include defence of the interests of the Brazilian bourgeoisie in agriculture and a series of industrial sectors, especially those that export, who do not accept the protectionism of the United States.

In the third category of countries we find Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, which are confronted by the active opposition of important sectors of the local capitalist class and Washington. Cuba is, by itself, a fourth category.

The importance of popular mobilisations ...

Regarding the countries that make up the third category — Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador — we have to point out that we can only understand the politics of these countries if we take into consideration the powerful popular mobilisations that have marked recent history.

In Ecuador, four right-wing presidents were sent home between 1997 and 2005 thanks to the mass mobilisations of the population.

In Bolivia, important struggles emerged against the privatisation of water in April 2000 and towards the end of 2004. The mobilisations around the issue of gas, in October 2003, overthrew and forced then president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to flee to the United States.

Venezuela, since 1989, has seen important mobilisations that inaugurated the mass social struggles against the International Monetary Fund that spread across the globe through the 1990s. Even more spectacular were the enormous popular mobilisations of April 12, 2002, spontaneous manifestations against the coup attempt to overthrow Hugo Chávez. These mobilisations directly achieved the return of Hugo Chávez to the presidential palace of Miraflores on April 13, 2002. These mass popular mobilisations are a decisive factor in the existence and survival of the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador.

... and the democratic adoption of new constitutions

The second important point is the revision of the constitution. In Venezuela in 1999, during Hugo Chávez's first term, a new democratic constitution (drafted up by a constituent assembly) was adopted by referendum. This constitution, which continues to be in force, has guaranteed more cultural, economic and social rights to the majority of the Venezuelan population. Furthermore, the actual constitution established a democratic mechanism that allows the recall of all those in elected posts at all levels (including the president of the republic) halfway through their term.

The adoption of a new constitution in Venezuela, subsequently inspired the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador. Bolivia adopted a new constitution in 2007, and in Ecuador, the Constituent Assembly elected in September 2007, is drafting a new constitution which will be submitted to a referendum in September 2008.

These are effectively profound reforms! These democratic political changes being implemented in these three countries have not only been systematically been silenced in the mass media of the most industrialised countries and in others, but furthermore the media has orchestrated a constant campaign of attacks with the aim of presenting the heads of states of the three countries as repulsive populist and authoritarian leaders.

The experiences of these three Andean countries, regarding the adoption of new constitutions, are very rich. They should be an inspiration for the peoples and political forces of other countries. We only have to compare the situation of Europe, with the absence of any democratic procedure

for the approval of the constitutional treaty.

Contradictions

Of course, the experiences underway in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador also have contradictions and important limitations that should be analysed. In Ecuador, the reform process underway is mobilising broad social sectors. The current president, Rafael Correa, was elected at the end of 2006, by a large majority, without having a political party or parliamentarians behind him. Despite the strong opposition from the right and all the mass media – in Ecuador there is no public state television or radio station – Correa won the referendum to convoke a Constituent Assembly with 82% of the vote. This political movement, which Correa had constructed along the way through 2007, achieved more than 70% of the vote in the elections for the Constituent Assembly. If we add on top of this his allies, he has the advantage of a majority of more than 80%.

At the moment in Ecuador, the social movements are permanently invited to the Constituent Assembly, with the aim of better taking into consideration their proposals. In this way, the new constitution can be elaborated by a broad majority of the population. Therefore it is a very open and very interesting process. We will know the definitive results by the end of July, when the Constituent Assembly has adopted the project of the new constitution in order to afterwards submit it to a referendum at the end of September. It is probable that the text that will be presented to voters could be criticised over diverse aspects (the absence of right to abortion or the absence of prohibition on genetically modified organisms, for example).

In Bolivia, the process of revision is being carried out in the midst of a much more conflict. The party of President Evo Morales, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), clearly won a simple majority in the Constituent Assembly (55%), but did not have an absolute majority of two-thirds. This complicates the situation. Finally, the new constitution was adopted in December 2007 despite the obstructions, sometimes violent, placed by the right and the dominant classes. As a consequence, the situation is extremely polarised, given the very aggressive mobilisation by reactionary sectors. The right moved into action with a racist campaign and the threat of a territorial separation of the eastern part of the country, where they control the situation. This reactionary revolt has been able to halt, until now, the holding of the referendum over the new constitution.

The return to public control of natural resources

A third important point: the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have taken measures to strengthen the public sector and gain control of their natural resources. In Venezuela, the state took control of the large oil company, PDVSA, that although publicly owned favoured private interests and declared the majority of its profits in the United States. It was a very hard battle. The capitalist class organised a coup in April 2002, followed by a shutdown that paralysed the company in December 2002 and January 2003. Venezuela's gross domestic product sunk in the first months of 2003, but the government finally regained control of the situation with the support of the majority of the people.

Last year, the Venezuelan state also took control of an important oilfield, the Faja de Orinoco. In Venezuela, the state produces two-thirds of petroleum, and a third is by the large petroleum companies. However, currently the petroleum is exploited in the framework of the new negotiated contracts in which the state collects more rent than previously.

We have to add other nationalisations: the production and distribution of electricity, telecommunications (CANTV), a steel factory (SIDOR, which has 15,000 workers), the cement sector and some companies involved in food production. Not to forget the agrarian reform, aimed at handing land to those who work it.

Bolivia nationalised oil and the production of gas in 2006. Evo Morales sent the army to take control of the oilfields, but the multinationals continue to be active there, given it is they which extract the oil and gas. Clearly, the state is the property owner of natural wealth, but it is the large multinationals that exploit the petroleum and gas.

Strategic agreements

Here is the strategic importance of the agreements between Venezuela and Bolivia, which would allow Bolivia to strengthen a public petroleum company to extract and refine oil and gas. Bolivia does not have a refinery; the ones that Ecuador have are not sufficient. Bolivia and Ecuador export petroleum and import fuel and other refined products. Here as well, we can see the importance of the strategic agreements between Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia to strengthen the autonomy of the latter two.

What Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have in common with the second category of countries (Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina) is a determined policy of social assistance programs. It is not about purely and simply rejecting these measures, but it is totally necessary to promote the creation of jobs, sharply increase wages and guarantee more social and economic rights for workers, peasants, artisans, petty traders, pensioners and other social sectors. Venezuela and Bolivia have advanced in this direction but there is still much to be done.

Ecuador: Will Correa suspend the payment of part of the debt?

Ecuador launched an important initiative regarding its public debt. Rafael Correa created, in July 2007, the Integral Auditing Commission of the internal and external public debt (CAIC). It is a commission of 12 members from the social movements and NGOs in Ecuador, six members from international campaigns for the cancellation of the Third World debt (I am part of the commission as the representative of Committee for the Abolition of the Third World Debt, CADTM) and four representatives of the state (the ministry of finance, the Accounts Tribunal, the anti-corruption commission and the general treasury).

What is interesting is that there is no talk about representatives of civil society (which includes bosses' associations, for example), but rather delegates from social movements such as the Indigenous movement (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) and other radical social movements in Ecuador. Correa's idea, and that of a sectors of his government, is to avoid repayment of a large part of the public debt.

If Correa achieves his goal, it would signify a direct confrontation with his own national bourgeoisie, because it is the Ecuadorian bourgeoisie which gains the most from the repayment of the bulk of the public debt. It would also signify a confrontation with international financial markets and with the World Bank. The rightwing of the government and the large financial groups, not to say the World Bank and the governments of most industrialised countries, are exercising strong pressure in order to convince Correa to do nothing. He should make a decision by the middle of July 2008, when the CAIC hands over its report. There is nothing certain about it, and there is the possibility that Correa could decide to avoid this confrontation.

The strategy of the United States and the local capitalists: confrontation and separation

The strategy of the United States and the local capitalist class is clearly orientated towards confrontation: the coup against Chavez in 2002, the Venezuelan bosses' lockout in December 2002 and January 2003, and the campaigns by the mass media in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela against the government.

But the fundamental issue is a new strategy of dividing up country. The capitalist class of Bolivia is organising the eastern part of the country to split off. What the mass media calls la media luna (the half moon), with Santa Cruz as the principal economic centre. The large landowners and the owners of export companies (particularly of transgenic soya) are inciting the population to declare independence in defiance of the national state. They habitually resort to racist actions. We have to affirm, without ambiguities, that the population of this rich region does not constitute a nation that would have the right to national self-determination. The government responded to the right by saying it is willing to concede more autonomy to the regions but not separation, and in this case they have reason on their side.

In Ecuador, the economic centre is found in Guayaquil, on the Pacific coast, while Quito – which is also important in economic terms – is the political capital, situated 2800 metres above sea level in the Andean ranges. The capitalist class of Guayaquil wants to declare its independence under the leadership of its rightist mayor.

In Venezuela, the governor of the western state of Zulia (which borders Colombia) has been brandishing the threat of separation.

All of this constitutes, without a doubt, a premeditated continental strategy of Washington that aims to support the local bourgeoisies in a process of breaking up countries that are passing through left experiences.

Reminiscent of Katanga

It is reminiscent of the policy of Belgium, the United States and other powers with respect to the province of Katanga, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Let us recall that the Western capitals supported the separatism of Katanga against the Congo's Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. When the pro-West dictator Mobuto took power (after the assassination of Lumumba, who was taken by force to Katanga and handed over to his worst enemies), the great powers stopped supporting the separatists.

I think it is an important issue because some on the left consider these divisions of countries as an irrefutable expression of the right of peoples to self-determination.

In the Bolivian case, it is clearly the reaction of the local capitalist class against the rights of the Indigenous majority of the nation. As if it wasn't enough, they utilise racist and reactionary language. The mayor of Santa Cruz, Percy Fernández, commenting on the adoption of the project of the new constitution by the Constituent Assembly, declared on December 9, 2007, that: ``In this country, soon it will be necessary to pain oneself and wear feathers in order to exist!'' Since then, his supporters have organised attacks against the Indigenous people who, we should recall, constitute the majority of the population of the country and who for centuries have been victims of domination at the hands of Europe and its descendents.

Multinationals attack

The strategy of Washington and certain European capitals includes moreover another aspect. The conflict between the multinational ExxonMobil and Venezuela's state oil company PDVSA, the disagreement between Occidental Petroleum of the United States and PetroEcuador, a public company in Ecuador, the disagreement between Telecom Italia and Bolivia, etc. The large multinationals (without forgetting Petrobras from Brazil) oppose the decisions of the three leftwing governments to restore public control over natural resources. These multinationals have utilised the tribunal of the World Bank (ICSID) to resolve disagreements concerning investments. They have also resorted to tribunals dealing with trade issues, in London, Amsterdam or New York.

There exists the risk that in the next few months a conflict could explode over a contract between two Latin American countries: the president-elect of Paraguay, Fernando Lugo, who will be inaugurated in August 2008, declared that he would revise the one-sided contract imposed by Brazil on this country when both lived under military dictatorships (the contract over Itaipú, which dates back to 1973). Effectively, while the price of energy is sharply rising, Brazil pays a ridiculously low price for electricity produced in Paraguay. Paraguay and Brazil have completely different economic weights and Paraguay has good reason to demand the revision of the contract or its termination.

These types of conflict situations demonstrate the necessity for Latin

American countries to pull out of ICSID, as Bolivia did, and create a Latin American organisation for resolving litigation between states and multinationals (from the North or South), or between Latin American states. Of course, in this last scenario, it is necessary to first seek a bilateral agreement before resorting to a multilateral solution.

Trade agreements between peoples

In opposition to the free trade agreements that some Latin American countries have signed with the United States and the European Union, it is worth highlighting the new agreements that have been signed between the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba.

We have to cite, for example, the 20,000 Cuban doctors who voluntarily work in Venezuela to provide free health care, predominately in the poor barrios, and the 40,000 operations for cataracts and other eye problems which Venezuelan citizens benefit from for free in Cuban hospitals. In exchange, principally in the form of barter, Venezuela provides oil to Cuba. The same types of agreements exist between Venezuela and Bolivia.

In conclusion, the experiences underway in these countries are very different to the caricatures and negative images that the majority of the mass media presents. The processes underway are complex and sometimes contradictory; retreats are possible, even probable. Perhaps the governments will not be able to go sufficiently far enough in their political and social transformations in favour of the people.

The destabilisation orchestrated by the local dominant classes and Washington could slow the processes. With Colombia's aggression against Ecuador in March 2008, it is clear that Bogotá and Washington are willing to utilise the guns of war against the regimes in Quito and Caracas.

One aspect to highlight, which we have not been able to analyse in this article, is the weakness of the producers' control over the entire production process (what is traditionally called in the workers' movements, workers' control and self-management).

Translated from the Spanish version by Federico Fuentes for Links, the International Journal of Socialist Renewal.

Call for mass blockades against the racists' conference in Cologne

7 July 2008

Invited by the self constituted citizens' initiative â€žpro Köln“ up to 1000 right-wing extremists of different shade (from the classic Neo-nazi to rightist-conservatives) want to spread their propaganda against people with other origin ore religion
under the smokescreen of a pretended critique on Islam.

â€žpro Köln“ is a extreme right-wing organization, who is operating for years with racist policy in cologne and even supraregional. Many functionaries and members of â€žpro Köln“ were in neo-nazistic Parties or groupings like the â€žNPD“, the â€žRepublikaner“ and the â€žDeutsche Liga für Volk und Heimat“. Recently â€žpro Köln“ agitated against a new mosque in Cologne-Ehrenfeld and searched with a racist and ultra-right-wing propaganda for voters.

For the gathering in September representatives of ultra-right-wing Parties from Austria (FPÖ), Belgium (Vlaams Belang), Italy (Lega Nord), the USA (Robert Taft Group), Great Britain (British National Party), Spane and Hungary want to come. Furthermore the international known leader of the extreme right-wing Party â€ž Front National“ (FN), Jean Marie Le Pen, shall appear in Germany in cause of the congress. With their international baiting-conference â€žpro Köln“ has two ambitions. The collaboration of extreme right-wing organisations in whole europe should be enlarged. Also â€žpro Köln“ wants to start the hustings of the Nordrhein-Westfalen (NRW) local elections in 2009.

We will not tolerate such a international racist gathering and we will not allow, that â€žpro Köln/pro NRW“ is able to practise their racist propaganda in the local elections undisturbed. That's why we are calling to impede this conference!

We can only realize it, if as many people as possible block their venue on this days together and obstruct the passage of the rightists. In spite of all differencies of our political view, we all have this ambition. We will subtend our resoluteness against them and we will be incalculable because of our similarities and our diversity. With the tool of civil disobedience we will defy â€žpro Köln“ and their entourage..

Get participated on the mass-blockades around the venue!
No pasarán!

Organisations

* [a2] - Hamburg
* Agenturschluss Köln
* AKKU - Antifaschistische Koordination Köln & Umgebung
* Aktion 3.Welt Saar
* Alternative Lebenshilfe- Yasamevi (ALY) e.V.
* Alternative Liste (AL) der Uni Köln
* Antifa Bonn/Rhein-Sieg
* Antifa Cafe Köln
* Antifa KOK Düsseldorf & Neuss

* Antifaschistische Aktion Leverkusen [AALEV]
* Antifaschistische Linke Münster
* Antifaschistisches Aktionsbündnis Nürnberg
* AStA der Katholischen Fachhochschule NW, Abteilung Köln
* Attac Bonn
* Attac Jugendnetzwerk - â€žNoya - Network of Young Altermondialists“
* Attac Köln
* Attac Rhein-Sieg
* BezirksschülerInnenvertretung (BSV) Köln
* BezirksschülerInnenvertretung Rhein-Wupper
* Büchertisch-Projekt "Counter-Information"
* Bundesausschuss der Studentinnen und Studenten in der GEW
* Bundeswehr wegtreten!
* Bündnis "Kein Raum für Rassismus!" - Heinersdorf (Berlin)
* Dachverband der aktiven Fanclubs des 1. FC Köln e.V.
* Deutsche Journalistinnen- und Journalisten-Union in Ver.di Köln (dju Köln), der Vorstand
* Deutscher Freidenker-Verband (DFV) e.V Landesverband NRW
* Deutscher Freidenker-Verband (DFV) e.V. Ortsverband Köln
* DGB-Jugend Köln
* DIDF- Jugend
* DIDF Köln
* â€žDie Linke“ Bonn
* â€žDie Linke“ im Kölner Rat
* â€žDie Linke“ KV Rhein.-Berg.
* â€žDie Linke“ Landesverband NRW
* Die Stunksitzung - Alternative Kölner Karnevalssitzung
* DKP Gruppe Köln-Innenstadt
* DKP Kreis Köln
* DKP queer
* Europäische Märsche gegen Erwerbslosigkeit, ungeschützte Beschäftigung und Ausgrenzung
* FelS (Für eine linke Strömung) Berlin
* Flüchtlingsrat Leverkusen
* â€žFront deutscher Äpfel“ NRW
* geblockt!
* Grüne Jugend Köln
* Gruppe soziale Kämpfe Berlin
* Hit & Run Shows
* Hochschulgruppe Die Linke. SDS
* Initiative Bahnbogen Ehrenfeld e.V.
* in:takt e.V.
* Internationale Sozialisten
* Internationale Sozialistische Linke (ISL)
* Interventionistische Linke [IL]
* Jugend- Aktions- und Projektwerkstatt (JAPS) Jena
* Jugendclub Courage Köln e.V.
* Junge GEW Köln
* Junge Linke Köln
* Juso Hochschulgruppe an der Uni Köln
* Kampagne â€žKein Bock auf pro Köln“
* Kampagne â€žmehr als ein 1:0“
* KEAs e.V. - Kölner Erwerbslose in Aktion
* Kein Blut für Öl
* Kölner Friedensforum
* Kölner Netzwerk - Kein Mensch ist illegal
* KPD/ML - Roter Stern
* Kreisverband Die Linke. Köln
* Kulturausbesserungswerk - Autonomes Zentrum für Kultur und Politik
* Kulturbunker Köln Mülheim e.V.
* Kulturvereinigung Leverkusen
* kumm-erus-(Team)
* LandesschülerInnenvertretung NRW (LSV NRW)
* LAUF Leverkusen, (Lebenswert, Aktiv, Unbestechlich, Fortschrittlich - überparteiliches Wahlbündnis)
* Linksjugend [’solid] - Köln
* Linksjugend [’solid] - NRW (Landesverband)
* Marxistisch-Leninistische Partei Italiens (PMLI)
* MeineFresseClub- Köln/Bonn-Münster
* â€žMittendrin e.V.“
* MLPD Kreisverband Südliches Rheinland / Kreisvorstand
* Multikulturelles Zentrum Trier e.V.
* â€žNetzwerk Buntes Pulheim“
* â€žNetzwerk für eine kämpferische und demokratische ver.di“
* Netzwerk Linke Opposition
* North East Antifascists [NEA] Berlin
* Ökologische Linke Köln
* â€žÖzgürlük Ve Dayanisma Almanya - Freiheit und Solidarität Deutschland“
* Papyrossa Verlag Köln
* Pa|kt - Perspektive anti|koloniale Gegenwart (Berlin)
* queergestellt!
* Redaktion Neue Rheinische Zeitung
* R.A.S.H. Cologne
* Rheinisches JournalistInnenbüro
* RSB/IV. Internationale (Rhein-Ruhr)
* SALZ - Köln
* SAV - Sozialistische Alternative
* Schüler gegen Rechts Köln
* SDAJ Köln
* SDAJ NRW
* Sozialistische Jugend Deutschlands-Die Falken, Kreisverband Köln
* Sozialistisches Forum Rheinland
* SSK Salierring
* Stiftung W., Wuppertal
* Varnhagen Gesellschaft e. V., Köln
* Verband Deutscher Schriftsteller in ver.di (VS), Landesverband NRW
* Verband Deutscher Schriftstellerinnen und Schriftsteller in ver.di (VS), Bezirk Köln
* Verein EL-DE-Haus Köln
* Verein Naturfreundehaus Köln-Kalk e.V.
* Verein Streitkultur Köln
* VVN-BdA Kreisverband Düsseldorf
* VVN-BdA Kreisverband Köln
* VVN-BdA Landesverband NRW
* W.Erk-Theater Leverkusen
* Werkkreis Literatur der Arbeitswelt e.V.
* Wohnen + Leben e.V Köln
* www.nextsteffi.tk
* zosamme e.V.

Individuals

* Bahri Gülsen, Mitglied der Bezirksvertretung Innenstadt
* Christian Bechmann, Mitglied des Vorstands des Bürgerzentrum Köln-Ehrenfeld,
Mitglied der Geschäftsführung der â€žKölner Elf“
* Christine Lehnert, Abgeordnete der Rostocker Bürgerschaft, SAV Rostock
* Claudius Cassemayer, Sprecher, â€žDie Linke“ KV Rhein.-Berg., Bergisch-Gladbach
* Prof. Dr. Erol Yildiz, Universität Köln
* Gerd Brust, Mitglied im Rat der Stadt Köln, Die Grünen
* Heinrich Pachl, Kabarettist
* Jörg Frank, Mitglied im Rat der Stadt Köln, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
* Jürgen Becker, Kabarettist
* Karin Richert, Künstlerin
* Karin Schmidt, Mitglied Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, ehem. Bezirksvertreterin in Kalk
* Kathrin Henneberger, Bundessprecherin der Grünen Jugend
* Klaus Blees, Mitarbeiter Kompetenzzentrum Islamismus der Aktion 3.Welt Saar
* Klaus der Geiger, StraÃŸen- und Klassikmusiker
* Klaus Reuschel-Schwitalla, Sprecher, â€žDie Linke“ KV Rhein.-Berg., Leichlingen
* Kirsten Reinhardt, Mitglied der Bezirksvertretung Ehrenfeld und

Fraktionsvorsitzende Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
* Lucy Redler, â€žBASG und SAV , Berlin"
* Marc Treude, Mitglied des Rates der Stadt Aachen, â€žDie Linke“
* Dr. Martin Stankowski, Stadthistoriker, Journalist und Autor
* Prof. Dr. Norbert Finzsch, Anglo-Amerikanische Abteilung d. Historischen Seminars Universität zu Köln
* Özgür Demirel, Mitglied der Bezirksvertretung Kalk
* Özlem Demirel, Mitglied im Rat der Stadt Köln
* Peter Kleinert, Journalist
* Petra Wilke, Bezirksvertreterin und 1. stellvertretende Bezirksbürgermeisterin, BV 4, Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
* Roland Schüler, Geschäftsführer Friedensbildungswerk Köln
* Sahra Wagenknecht, Abgeordnete im Europaparlament, Linksfraktion
* Sevim Dagdelen, Mitglied des Bundestags â€žDie Linke“
Integrations- und Migrationspolitische Sprecherin der Bundestagsfraktion â€ž Die Linke“
* Stefan Peil, Vorsitzender Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, KV Köln
* Susanne Franke, Schalker Fan-Initiative (gegen Rassismus) e.V.
* Thies Gleiss, Mitglied im Bundesvorstand â€žDie Linke“
* Ulla Jelpke, Mitglied des Bundestags â€žDie Linke“, Innenpolitische Sprecherin der Bundestagsfraktion â€žDie Linke“
* Ulla Loetzer, Mitglied des Bundestages â€žDie Linke“
* Wilfried Schmickler, Kabarettist
* Prof. Dr. Wolf-Dietrich Bukow , Universität zu Köln
* Yesim Yesil Bal, Mitglied der Bezirksvertretung Ehrenfeld

Contact details

Visit the website of the local alliance or campaign:
http://www.hingesetzt.mobi/cms/

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Die Linke, one year on

6 July 2008, by Thies Gleiss

Die Linke has 72,000 members. It is represented in the Bundestag by 53 deputies; there is not a single big capitalist country where a party explicitly identifying with the left is so well represented. These deputies have been elected by more than 4 million people, and in terms of the old imperialist countries, only the Japanese CP exceeds this score. In the Länder of the east, it is a party with a broad implantation; at the local government level in many areas it is the force that counts, which “exercises responsibility”, and whose power and implantation eclipses all other parties. In the Land of Berlin, Die Linke participates in government with three ministers (senators). In the western Länder, the party has experienced success in all the provincial elections but only in Lower Saxony has it succeeded in attracting more votes than in the federal elections of 2005. For Germany as a whole, the party has 185 regional deputies, 5,561 municipal councillors, 179 mayors, 3 Landrat (elected directors of General Councils) and 59 liaison officers of various types.

A space open to the critique of capitalism

The entire left outside of Die Linke, the social movements — in first place the trade union movement — and a growing number of intellectuals and scientists today look at the new party and are obliged to take account of this new left force in their elaboration and their manner of posing political problems.

At the level of political ideology, Die Linke occupies a terrain abandoned for some years. It has opened the space for a discourse which allows the critique of capitalism and even the demand for socialism. In this sense Die Linke reflects the already old polarisation between the winners and losers from the offensive waged by capital and the parties at its service to restore the rate of profit; it is a reflection of the aggressive “class struggle from above” of all the European governments and employers’ organisations, the reflection of violence, militarisation and growing material insecurity which affects all sectors of society.

On the sociological level, Die Linke represents in part a model of class party supposedly historically transcended, which has shown itself capable of conquering in a very short time a quite considerable stable electorate among the victims of the current policy and among the organisers of social and political resistance. Hence Die Linke clearly represents more than a protest party, on the contrary it is clear that its electoral success does not come from temporary gains from those who would otherwise abstain, but that they are obtained in spite of a rate of participation which does not cease to fall. It mobilises firstly a part of the traditional proletarian electorate of social democracy, which explains why it is above all the SPD which is challenged by the new party, both in terms of membership and voters.

All these factors lead us to consider the emergence of Die Linke as a positive event from an anti-capitalist and socialist perspective. But as always the dialectic means that with progress forces develop which hold it back, which are satisfied with what has already been won, and in the same way there are partisans and members of Die Linke who are not sufficiently conscious of this progress and who are in fact incapable of understanding that only the pursuit of the evolution to the left and the radicalisation of the party

can lead to success.

Structural characteristics

3,000 members have joined the party since its official formation in June 2007. Around a third of the 12,000 members claimed by the WASG (Social Justice and Work Electoral Alternative) have not accompanied the unification with the Linkspartei-PDS (2), have resigned or have ceased to pay their dues and have thus been removed from the membership lists
.
Nearly three quarters of the membership live in the eastern Länder, a quarter in those of the west. In the east, Die Linke organises almost exclusively the victims of the reintegration of the former GDR into capitalist Germany. Two thirds of them have a university degree but have long since retired. In the East, the average age of members is more than 65. The party has won new members there but loses more, essentially because of their deaths.
.
Nearly half are women, whereas in the west men dominate more than in the other parties, but the average of 41% over the country as a whole remains presentable. The membership gained since the creation of the party has been almost exclusively male in the west and as a whole the new members are 85% male, 5% under 30, and 1% under 20.

In the west the members are divided into two groups: the new victims of capitalism, those in insecure work and the unemployed on the one hand, and on the other wage earners, among whom those who have experience of higher education represent a large minority. Die Linke is a workers' party which is the specific product of modern capitalism, with a particular contingent of victims of the liquidation of the GDR.

The party is made up of around 2,000 rank and file organisations in the east and 260 in the west. They are nearly all based on administrative subdivisions and correspond to localities. There is only one workplace group. Male-female parity is on the statutes for internal and external elections but is rarely respected at the local level. It is implemented carefully but with difficulty at the regional and intermediary level and at the summit of the party — the two male co-presidents [1] are well known. At the federal level and in the regional parliaments this rule is regularly ignored under the pressure of male cliques. If the electoral lists for different parliaments are broadly parity-based, this is not the case for the assistants to the elected representatives and the party full timers.

The party's administrative apparatus comprises 77 fulltime posts at the head office and 160 for the regional offices. It is financed essentially by state subsides under the party financing rule and by the dues of the parliamentarians. The average contribution is around 7 Euros per month. Moreover, most of the public expression of the party goes through the parliamentary fractions, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and their public financing. It is then certainly not wrong to consider that the existence of Die Linke depends at a level of 80% on state money, of which there is no need to be ashamed — it has nothing to do with presents from big companies and slush funds — but which should be constantly borne in mind. .

Parliamentary swamp

Left activists who wish to durably change the relationship of forces inside society through this type of organisation should try to take into account these structural brakes on each campaign, each action, to transcend them in practice. But this it is not what happens. There is no effort at basic transformation of the structures by extra parliamentary actions, the setting up of workplace groups and the increasing of the share of financing coming from the dues of members and the gifts of sympathisers. It is not then astonishing that Die Linke is becoming parliamentarised at a very rapid pace. All the activity today turns almost exclusively around electoral campaigns. The party members are divided into two parts, a great number of paper members who can be mobilised at best during the electoral campaigns, and on the other the activists who group around the elected representatives. This phenomenon is accelerated by three characteristics that no other party presents in such a striking fashion:

— In the first place an underlying submission, perceptible above all in the ex-PDS, which yearns to be accepted and taken seriously by the capitalist enemy. The wish expressed by Gregor Gysi to see inscribed on his tomb "And yet we were nice" is a telling anecdotal evidence of this…
— Second a fear of the media which is almost clinical. One of the 77 full timers at the central office is regularly occupied in sorting out the "good" and "bad" press articles and calculating the percentage of each.
— Thirdly, an authoritarian structure reflected in an allegiance to the presidents, a tailism which is a little sickening and a frenzy for centralisation on the part of the apparatus which ends up in smothering the creativity and imagination, and thus the living potential of the party.

These "qualities" as one can see at nearly every party meeting, are embodied by the old cadres of the PDS in the east and by the old guard of the SPD in the west, trained in the bureaucratic structures of the SPD and the unions. The weight of these elements increases and does not fall, most of those who join now share this approach which is moreover helpful to the increasing number who seek a post or a career.

It remains the fact that Die Linke regularly receives the support of 10% of voters and that it is also a party which on all the big questions and mobilisations, from the anti-war movement, via the march on the G8 summit, actions against the neo-Nazis and challenges to democratic rights, to support for trade union and workplace struggles — with the exception of the train drivers strike led by the GDL union [2] — has until now energetically supported the anti-capitalist forces of this country and has allowed them to go further than would have been possible if it had not existed. But it is also a party whose whole structural weight leads to the loss of this progressive role, which channels its own forces and smothers them, and which threatens to sink

straight into the parliamentary swamp, undoubtedly as minority member of a coalition government.

This process can only be stopped by having an extremely clear consciousness of the weight of the structures as described here, and thanks to the violent and frequent pressure of struggles and social mobilisations. If only one of these two elements is present, things could continue as now, but if both are missing things will go badly.

Footnotes

[1] 2. Oskar Lafontaine, former secretary general of the SPD, and Gregor Gysi, former secretary general of the PDS

[2] 3. This union is not affiliated to the DGB

New anti-capitalist party gets underway!

5 July 2008, by François Duval, Ingrid Hayes

The agenda of this meeting was in two parts. The first part, a discussion in plenary session allowed the participants to measure the scope of process underway and for some sixty delegates to speak about their local experiences, their struggles, their questions. As it was a first meeting this stage was inevitable and despite the length the delegates listened attentively.

The second part of the agenda was work in commissions on different themes: internationalism, feminism, ecology, workplaces, local neighbourhoods, casualised work, name for the new party, website, youth, LGBT, common statement of the meeting, organising the process. Written reports will be produced by each commission, all of which worked in a very constructive way with a lot of people attending.

The latter two, on the common statement and organisation of the process, reported on their conclusions to the whole meeting at the end because they were responsible for bringing proposals for the next stage of the process. The adoption of a common statement means that the appeal for a new party no longer comes from the LCR alone but from the constituent process itself (read here).

The other commission discussed at length the next stages of the process, membership and finances, the tasks of the provisional national committee and its composition.

Three dates were agreed: the responsibility of the new party for one day during the LCR's traditional summer university which will be devoted to the question of the new party, a new national meeting of the committees in the autumn, at the end of October or beginning of November, and a founding conference at the end of January 2009. Not too soon in order to leave time for the process which is still in full swing to develop, not too late because we have to move forward. The founding conference itself is only a stage and not a finishing point.

In the perspective of the national meeting and congress it seemed important to concretise involvement in the process and to start to deal with the question of finances. This is why the commission proposed the issuing of founding membership cards, with a flat rate contribution up to the congress and a variable rate according to income afterwards. This will make it possible to have a clearer idea of the number of people involved and to move towards a system of representativity in national meetings on the basis of numerical reality.

However this proposal rejects any idea that we are closing the door and simply organising the people already involved, the constituent process is open until th congress. It is not intended to adopt a rigid form of structure implying that the last one in closes the door behind him or her but to think of the hundreds and thousands of people who are going to join the process before the founding congress.

It was also decided not to give any indication about intermediate forms of structure between the local and the national: the committees will do as they think appropriate for their political needs. It would be out of the question to impose any form of departmental or regional structure from above on to a process that is moving at a very different pace in different places.

The other important question was that of the provisional national committee, formed to progressively take over the tasks taken on up to now by the LCR national leadership. This is a decisive stage which it was possible to move into given the dynamic demonstrated by the national meeting. The type of committee – no system of mandates given the very recent creation of most of the committees – is transitional and representative of a process which is still developing.

Responsible for coordinating and stimulating the process from now until the next meeting, this committee has work to do. In particular it has to ensure the circulation and the distribution of information and prepare the congress which could be organised around three documents: one on functioning, a first programmatic document (even if not everything will be decided at the congress and the discussion will continue on a number of questions), and a document on the political conjuncture which indicates the orientations of the new party in the current situation.

The composition of the national initiative committee provoked a lot of debate and discussion. But we reached broad agreement on the candidates which we can schematically say are in four groups. The majority component is the representatives of committees, non-LCR except for two exceptions. There will be about 35 once all the discussions have finished, 25 are sure for the moment. Three observers represent the Faction of Lutte Ouvrière and Gauche Révolutionnaire, wo have indicated that the are for the moment ready to participate in the process but reserve judgement on wht wll be the final outcome of their participation. The LCR is represented by its Political Bureau of 21 members, there are also the two LCR representatives of committees. The youth committees are represented by six people, three members of the LCR or JCR, three who aren't. There should be as many women as men in the committee.

The NPA in figures

by François Duval

There are today throughout the country between 300 and 400 committees some of which are still being created. The process is therefore still in full development and this wll be the case at least up to the autumn, undoubtedly up to the congress in fact. It is is difficult at this stage to say how many people are involved given that many committees are only just beginning to stabilise.

But at this first stage the balance sheet is way beyond our initial hopes and that where the process is already wel under way the relationship between the numbers coming from the LCR and the overall ratio is 1:3. There are about 35% women overall. Most committees have been formed on a geographical basis but there are also forty-odd youth committees and some committees based on sector or workplace are developing.

Some 250 people from the Paris regional undertook the practical tasks necessary to make sure everything ran smoothly. They are to be congratulated for their efficiency.

A new political factor emerges

5 July 2008, by Pierre-François Grond

Obviously the road is still long; there are still many who are sceptical and whom we will have to convince and bring along in the dynamic created. The discussions have only just begun, we now have to take on the heavy task of discussing the programme, of democratic functioning and defining the activity of the new party. But the most important fact was the seriousness of this varied assembly which - despite the different routes that had brought individuals or committees to this point - understood what was at stake and the responsibilities we now have. Because this national coordination meeting did not take place in an anodyne political situation but in one where the challenges that face us are very clear.

We are confronted from the government's side with a team that is determined to hit hard. It has decided, despite the discontent, despite the unpopularity of its policies to continue with its counter-reforms and even speed up the pace. Thus he list of law adopted or being adopted at this period provokes shivers and indicates a perspective of generalised social and democratic regression. We should make no mistake. If this pace continues, if this project is implemented then whatever the unpopularity of this project it will have reshaped French society and changed the relationship of forces in favour of the MEDEF [employers' organisation].

The creation of the NPA (new anti-capitalist party) thus takes place first and foremost in the context of the extreme urgency of fighting back against Sarkozy [French president] and Parisot [leader of the MEDEF]. Of the strikes and united-front mobilisations to defeat the government. If the NPA committees can help to initiate, give confidence, indicated the markers for the struggle, help to building the united-front structures, this new party will have shown its usefulness. We have to build a real opposition to the UMP (the rightwing governmental party), replace an inadequate left, incapable of really leading the opposition to the right's programme.

Because we have to learn the lessons of a year of collapse of most of the trade union leaderships and the SP faced with Sarkozy's attacks. Many, many people have the impression that they have been led from pillar to post during the series of one-day strikes earlier this year. On how many questions has the SP shown how incapable it is of leading the opposition? And the race for nomination as presidential candidate for the 2012 elections is just shows an indecent fight between personal ambitions. The SP has just set up a special group to monitor the npa and Besancenot. When will it set one up to mobilise against the right?

In the current context of multiple crises the most urgent is both the fightback and the collective definition of a social project which breaks with a system that is more and more intolerable for more and more people. The economic crisis is already upon us: the collapse of the stock markets, rise in energy price, drop of dollar, inflation and recession in a series of key countries. There are all the ingredients for a generalised capitalist crisis despite the reassuring and pacifying words of one of the pilots of the globalised economic world, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, director of the IMF.
The financial experts are not mistaken and governments and economic

deciders are getting worried. The food crisis, the ecological crisis, the European crisis are other aspects of this crisis which show the dead end which the capitalist system leads us to. So many fundamental questions which feed the stubborn determination of contemporary anti-capitalism, of socialism for the 21st century. The institutional, governmental left has chosen to accompany the system, to fight about posts rather than the class struggle.

Our own project turns its back on this management left which accompanies regression. Because this is the precondition for changing the relationship of forces on the left. The soft left has never proved its capacity to really defeat the right and change life for the better.

Many people are looking for an overall, resistant and anti-capitalist alternative. Former members of political parties, trade-unionists, youth and older people, ecologists, feminists, social activists, and of course thousands of women and men who have never before taken the step to join anything.
It is now, we think the moment to take sides, to join on of the hundreds of committees which exist in France, to forge hope through the number we are and the content of our discussions.

Nobody today, after seeing the number and diversity of people at the national meeting, can accuse the LCR of simply wanting to create a bigger and better LCR. But it must grow still further on the base of the policies decided in Saint-Denis. Because we need all the strength and energy possible to succeed in the major challenge that is the creation of a new party.

Victory of the right, suicide of the left

5 July 2008, by Salvatore Cannavò

Sinistra Critica founding conference

This cycle has ended with a significant strengthening of the conservative and racist right, the weakening of the political project which emerged from the end of the PCI and the policies followed by the majority of its successors (the Left Democrats (DS) and subsequently the Democratic Party), as well as the division of the class-based anti-capitalist left, its exit from parliament and its deep confusion.

Conservative stabilisation

Berlusconi returned to power after a low profile electoral campaign, centred on the faithlessness and bankruptcy of the Prodi government and its alliance. His victory is mainly due to the political poverty of the Union, its leading “democratic” group and to the errors of Bertinotti and the Rifondazione leadership, as well as the limits of the mass movement.

But Berlusconi also won through his own merits, the right wing consciousness that he represents and that allows him to predict a long phase of right wing governments, a political stabilisation that has not been experienced since the time of the old Christian Democracy. The new attitude of the prime minister, moderate and open to the opposition — immediately after the vote of confidence in Parliament, Berlusconi took the initiative to meet Veltroni, the leader of the Democratic Party — shows the power he possesses on the basis of his electoral strengthening: overall the right obtained a million more votes than in 2006. A strength which allows him to reduce to silence a weakened parliamentary opposition which is moreover quite disposed to collaborate with him. Thus the head of government can try to present himself not only as the political representative of his own camp, but as a statesman, capable of leaving his mark on the history of the country.

The strength and merit of Berlusconi is based on the political formula, new and dense, of the centre right — the Popolo della Libertà (People of Liberty, PdL), a new party situated between Forza Italia and the ex-fascist National Alliance, allied in the north with the League led by Bossi (which scored 8.3% in these elections) and in the south with the Movement for Autonomy, a formation which already governs Sicily — which he has built and which he wishes to cement with a social reference block. It is an alliance of different interests, in part popular and present among working class layers, which he amalgamates with a reactionary and in part xenophobic tone.

Against globalisation

The Italian right has thus defined a precise profile which we have characterised — with a wordplay which is in itself worrying — as “national-social”. It amounts firstly to an economic programme, drawn up by the new Finance minister, Giulio Tremonti — his book “La paura e la speranza” (“Fear and Hope”) has enjoyed great success — whose central axis is the critique of “mercantilism”, namely the uncontrolled and intolerant role of the market as absolute value in the name of a public intervention to defend the national economy and preserve the standard of living of the weakest. The formula put forward by Tremonti is “long live the market, but if the market doesn’t do it then the state intervenes”. He spells out a new role for national states in the era of dominant globalisation. It amounts to a politics which rests on the fear engendered by international competition among workers in small enterprises, frightened by the wave of cheap Chinese imports and starting to think that the unified Europe is a swindle.

It is not by chance that the public presentation of this economic orientation was concentrated, during the electoral campaign, on the crisis around the sale of the airline Alitalia. Whereas the Prodi government, wishing to respect all the directives of the European Union, was ready to sell it to Air France, Berlusconi stressed the reaffirmation of "Italian" ownership of the company. In sum, this is a moderated neo-nationalism, taking account of the role of the EU — nobody inside the centre right wants to break up the Union — but firm on the preservation of the national role and thus perceived by many workers as more "protective". The first measures of the Berlusconi government are the abolition of taxation on first housing, the suppression of taxes on overtime — which will worsen conditions for workers, but which is perceived right now as allowing increased purchasing power — and at the same time the announcement of an increase in taxation of the very high wages of the big managers, banks and oil companies. A populism "ben trovato" which chimes in perfectly with the other, more significant. warhorse the right has chosen to straddle: the struggle against illegal immigration and the centrality of law and order.

In recent days we have seen images that we thought we would not witness again: Italian citizens assaulting Roma camps, setting fire to huts and chasing women and children. This happened in Naples, largely at the initiative of the Camorra but with the support of the citizens and above all without a word of real condemnation from the government, or even from the "democratic" opposition (or from the Church of Pope Ratzinger). An obvious sign of the general climate, rooted in fear of the economic crisis, the turn to identity-based politics and the internal weakness of the workers' movement.

The right is thus gathering around itself a vast front from elements of the working class to small entrepreneurs, from the retired to employees scared of immigration or criminality (which is nonetheless constantly falling in Italy, with a safety rate in the cities, above all Rome, which is very high in comparison with European cities), and among significant sectors of youth, who have had enough of the left and its various articulations.

Defeat of the left

This is the second factor explaining the electoral result, a factor as important as the Berlusconi's ability to understand the Italian social dynamic. The Italian left (for convenience we include here the part of the ex-PCI which today forms the Democratic Party, although it no longer has anything in common with the left) has essentially committed suicide. Fifteen years after the liquidation of the PCI and after having twice been in government, it has not succeeded in validating its strategy, becoming politically isolated but above all cut off from significant sectors of the workers' movement, constantly attacked and betrayed in the course of the decades of choices made to support Italian business and the dominant capitalism.

The strategy of occupying the "centre" of the political scene, the neoliberal turn — which the Democratic Left accomplished by leapfrogging social democracy and directly joining the "third way" of Blair and Clinton — have finally led its party, the Democratic Party, heir of the majority of the PCI and Christian Democracy, to "only" 33% of the vote. All studies show that the centre electorate moved more to the right, directly to the PdL of Berlusconi or the Udc of Casini (which originates from a right wing minority of the old DC), formerly allied to Berlusconi and today the second force in the parliamentary opposition with 5.5% of the vote. Only 2 to 3% of the voters of the left followed the Democratic Party. The decision to defend and represent directly an Italian capitalism in crisis — Italian industry is based primarily on small companies which generally vote for the right — has favoured the right which at the end of the day is more to the taste of the Italian bourgeoisie. The PD has thus found itself without credible allies to return to government. The heirs of the PCI are forced into a new "crossing of the desert", despite their open shift towards the positions of the Italian bourgeoisie.

The neoliberal strategy of the PD has thus above all favoured the right, allowing it the terrain of representation of the most regressive popular interests and moods, whereas for its part it governed with its eyes fixed on banking policy (there is not a single leader of a big Italian bank who is not linked in some way to the PD), favouring Fiat or the Confindustria (the Italian employers organisation) and dismantling local public services. With such a policy and a left linked to the power of the big Italian enterprises, it is logical that a significant part of the popular vote shifted to the right, as witnessed by the success of the Northern League. Moreover, in government the centre-left has made every tactical error possible. No measure, no decree symbolically innovative or breaking with a gangrenous social situation; the support given by Veltroni to Berlusconi, when the latter was in political difficulties; an internal battle where all blows were allowed; no taking into account of what appears today as the privileged theme of public opinion: the privileges of parliamentarians, the high salaries, the waste of public administration.

The centre left could rest only on a sort of "neo-frontism", a sacred union against the right, without social content and which ended up actually favouring the right.

In this context the choice of the class conscious left, and in particular the PRC, proved disastrous. The results of these elections oblige us to note the end of Communist Refoundation. An end that we predicted as Sinistra critica last year, in declaring our exit from the PRC and the birth of our political movement. An end marked by various factors: the inability to carry out the historic mission of the PRC, namely the refoundation of a class based and alternative Communist Party opposed to the PD; an internal political caste encrusted in an institutional perspective, with the proliferation of careerism and the struggle for positions; the arrogance and narcissism of a leading group, Bertinotti at the head, believing power justified everything. But in the end what weighed most in this case was a strategic error: the idea that it was possible to build a class based Communist force in alliance with

Italian capital. Bertinotti called this possibility "the dynamic compromise", a picturesque variant of the "historic compromise" which ended like its predecessor in defeat for the party which defended it.

In government the PRC was wrong on everything: it voted for the war; it organised a big demonstration against insecure work only to then vote for the measures of the government against which it had just demonstrated; it expelled Turigliatto [1] demonstrating thus that it was more royalist than the king; it took the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies and thus took responsibility for the politics of the majority, which a left electorate sincerely attached to class values and interests could not forgive. But it has above all committed the error of thinking that supporting the government was a possible strategy, that the Italian centre left was "permeable" to the social movements and that its nature rendered plausible a project of "Grand reform" of the country. All these errors were signalled in their time by those who, like us, had a correct reading of the relationship of forces between the classes, understanding the stagnation of the struggles in the big factories and workplaces — it is enough to follow the renewals of the main collective contracts — and explained it exhaustively.

Rifondazione closed its cycle with the illusion of associating the two opposed parties, the government and the social opposition, through an unrealistic compromise, and believing that the electoral reward would be sufficient to replace a non-existent social base, that nobody inside the leading group had attempted to build during the past fifteen years, since they were too concerned with ensuring an electoral place of honour.

We are thus faced today with a situation of great regression, above all at the activist level because of a widespread demoralisation. The immediate responses from the main people responsible for the catastrophe confirm this analysis. The PRC is preparing its congress amidst internal tensions, with some — faithful to Bertinotti — proposing its transcendence to found a "rainbow" left which would take up on its own account the organic alliance with the Democratic Party, while others — the former Democrazia Proletaria [2] and the former followers of Cossutta [3] — clinging to the organisational defence of the PRC without however advancing another strategic project. It is then a settlement of accounts among the apparatus, in which the stakes are the logo and cash of the party.

At the same time the PdCI — the party founded by Cossutta when Bertinotti had broken with the first Prodi government, led today by Diliberto — propose an identity based project, "unity of all Communists", without strategy or political project other than the deployment of red flags and the shaking of hammers and sickles. And all wish to stick with the same leaders who have been there for the last fifteen years and who are responsible for the current collapse. Even the new internal opposition in the PRC is led by the sole Rifondazione minister inside the last Prodi government, who now emerges as an opponent of Bertinotti.

This situation of retreat is fed by a stagnation of social struggles (with the exception of areas of revolt on the environmental front and the battle against ecological devastation) and a rapid realignment of the big union federations — the CGIL, CISL and UIL — on the collaborationist line of the Democratic Party. The confederated unions have integrated the "social agreement" that they have immediately re-proposed to the new right wing government. So a new Government-Union-Confindustria agreement is trailed. It should limit the prerogatives of national collective bargaining — that is negotiation centralised at the level of the branches — to the profit of enterprise level agreements. It should also link all pay increases to productivity increases. The Berlusconi government needs this agreement to definitively seal its legitimacy, because until now the unions have practiced "social agreements" only with centre-left governments and the previous Berlusconi government had been confronted with big workers' struggles.

However the most significant sector of the workforce, that of the metalworkers, continues to oppose this schema. The FIOM-CGIL could thus go into opposition, which for the first time in the history of rank and file trades unionism has put a unitary platform and a common plan of action on the agenda.

Alternative lefts

So there are signals of a counter tendency which constitutes a point of support for a genuinely class based left proposing a clearly anti-capitalist strategy.

Although it has only existed for three months autonomously, Sinistra critica contested these elections. The exit from the PRC had concentrated its energy for nearly a year, which was necessary to allow everyone to take part in a deep and rich discussion. The decision to contest the elections was only taken on February 17, 50 days before the vote. The symbol of the campaign was presented on February 19: so it was a very rapid operation which only the great unity of the leading group and the determination of all the activists of this new organisation rendered possible. The declared and explicit objective was not to immediately represent an alternative to the crisis of Rifondazione — which for us was already apparent before the elections — nor to the Left "rainbow" but only to affirm the existence and vitality of an alternative project, of a basic pole of ideas, of a broad leading group and an activist collective present in different towns and in the main areas of conflict. To generate awareness, in other words, of the youngest of the Italian far left organisations. This objective was attained. It is for this reason that we can declare ourselves satisfied with having obtained 0.5%, or around 170,000 votes, which is obviously not enough to represent an alternative to the crisis of the PRC, but which allows Sinistra critica to exist, strengthen and contribute to the construction of a new class based and anti-capitalist left. During the electoral campaign Sinistra critica practically doubled the number of towns where it has a presence. Analyses of the electoral results indicate that everywhere Sinistra critica had a presence and an

organised activity our results exceeded 1%, with sometimes 2 and even 3% of the vote.

The overall result of the class based and anti-capitalist left is strengthened by that obtained by the Communist Workers' Party (PCL), led by Marco Ferrando. This party, also emerging from the internal opposition in the PRC, was set up a year before Sinistra critica and his since then tried to fine tune its political propaganda, above all televised, which has had an impact on its electoral result (0.6%, or around 200,000 votes). The PCL had stressed a political language and attitude very marked by the "Communist" tradition. That represented both its strength and its limits, given its very "closed", self-proclamatory, position, de facto separated from the sites of social conflict. It is not by chance that the PCL rejected the offer of an electoral agreement with Sinistra critica, because it preferred to use these elections for its own independent construction in seeking an electorate "similar, working class and adult", disappointed by the historic parties of the left and desiring to demonstrate, even if only through a symbolic gesture, a form of protest. The type of vote that the PCL received in the former working class bastions of the PCI, where the PRC and PdCI obtained good results in the past, witness to the success of this attempt.

An analysis published by the daily newspaper "Repubblica" illustrates the "qualitative" differences in the votes received by Sinistra critica and the PCL. The votes for the latter came to a great degree from the PdCI and only a smaller percentage from the PRC or the Verdi (Greens). The votes for Sinistra critica however came above all from the PRC, but also significantly from the PdCI and Verdi, and these are above all female and young voters. They are also to a great extent "activist" votes, coming from a part of the vanguard involved in the unions and social movements, the votes of those who wished to signal a left commitment, a will to protest against the course of the two Communist parties in the Prodi government.

The forum of the social opposition

How can we relaunch a class based left? Immediately there are no organisational formulae or regroupments which allow us to metabolise the defeat. A new class left cannot be built from above, simply by throwing off the old ruling groups who failed, although that is necessary. What is necessary is above all a collective practice and a real social opposition, which cannot be only a front or solely propagandist, but which should have the capacity to work in depth. The protest demonstrations in response to the obscurantist and xenophobic tide spreading in Italy are certainly an element of that. But we have above all need of a project of building a social base and a political programme which can meet the challenge of the global crisis of western capitalist society.

That cannot be resolved by a formula or political schema, or by improvised alliances. As Sinistra critica we intend to work around two axes, on two coordinates.

First, we will continue the construction of our political project and thus of our organisation, without however self-proclaiming ourselves as a party. We wish then to build a national headquarters, set up a central office made up of staff who are not full timers but will work on the principle of rotation and on a part time basis, and begin to organise in early July our first national event in Rome. At the same time we want to organise for our first real national congress in early 2009, which will also serve for the formal launch of the European election campaign. In this sense the commitment of Sinistra critica inside the European anti-capitalist left project is decisive and we seek its organisational strengthening.

But the second coordinate is as important as the first, if not more important. This involves building a "unitary front" capable of resisting the multitude of attacks from the right, around a programme of social opposition and a project of building a social base, above all in the workplaces, to rebuild the "bastions" of social résistance. For that the importance of a new class conscious trade union will be determinant.

We think that this necessitates a resumption of cooperation between the forces which have not abandoned opposition even when the government was centre left — the alliance of June 9, 2007 which allowed the big mobilisation against Bush's visit — and which has kept a rigorous anchoring in the aspirations of the modern proletariat. The themes are those imposed by the capitalist offensive in Europe: workers' resistance, the defence of public services, the struggle against xenophobia, and the defence of the environment. On all these terrains a European dimension would be needed and while the Italian situation seems so obscure and dangerous it is to be hoped that many Eurosceptics will understand how much a workers' movement capable of transcending national frontiers is vital.

In this goal we propose the constitution of a Forum of Social Opposition inside of which we can rebuild a strategic debate on the identity of an anti-capitalist left starting from its main characteristic: unwillingness to govern capitalism and willingness to overthrow it.

In sum we face a long task, which should be constant and determined. Sinistra critica was born out of a historic defeat and it should be capable of preserving the energies of some thousands of activists. These energies will be precious in the new phase. We did not expect to find ourselves in such a context. We are however there and we will play with conviction the role that has just fallen upon us.

Footnotes

[1] 1. 3. PRC Senator and Fourth International supporter Franco Turigliatto was expelled from the party for not voting for the financing of the Italian army of occupation in Afghanistan

[2] 2. 5. A current which traces its roots to a far left grouping of the 1970s

[3] 3. Armando Cossutta, a historic

leader of the PCI who left the PRC to form the Party of Italian Communists (PdCI), before resigning from the latter in 2007

Mexico 1968: society erupts onto the political stage

4 July 2008, by Arturo Anguiano

Helicopters, officers of the Olimpia battalion, policemen, soldiers and tanks opened fire with powerful weapons against a defenceless crowd in the course of an operation that they claimed was justified by an unexpected confrontation. But it was a state crime, [1] premeditated, organized down to the last details, with the objective of imposing a crushing final solution to a conflict which had mobilised hundreds of thousands of people, which had won over public opinion and gained the sympathy of broad social sectors throughout the country.

The repression caused innumerable dead and wounded, young people, women, children, old men, not only riddled with bullets, but also stabbed by the bayonets of the soldiers. More than 2,000 people were arrested this October 2, including activists and members of the Consejo Nacional de Huelga (CNH) - National Strike Council - who underwent in particular a long night of torture: simulations of executions and castrations, intimidation, kidnapping and violence towards family members and friends, the invention of the most improbable charges which later led to court cases based on entirely fabricated evidence.

There was generalized persecution, an undeclared state of siege, control of the means of communication, de facto suspension of constitutional guarantees, against an imagined subversion . [2] As always in Mexico, the state had acted with all its disproportionate force to liquidate and thus definitively finish off the arrogant student movement.

1. Provocation and violence

On October 2, 1968 they wanted to finish by violence with a history which had begun as a response to the violence of the police on July 23 and 26. On July 23, following a dispute between students from two schools, the forces of repression invaded one of them (it was part of the National Polytechnic Institute, IPN), clubbing in a disproportionate, undifferentiated and senseless way students, professors and school personnel. On July 26, which was to become the real beginning of the student movement, the demonstration that the Polytechnic students had called in protest at this act of repression converged with the traditional demonstration of support for the Cuban Revolution, organized especially by the students of the Autonomous National University of Mexico City (UNAM) and the various left groups.

At the request of the Polytechnic students, groups of students tried to reach the Zócalo in solidarity with the students who were again being clubbed by the police. But they were pushed back violently and from then on there were many confrontations, which were prolonged and widened when the police attacked students of the preparatory classes of the UNAM as they were coming out of their classes. The police completely encircled the old university quarter in the historic centre of the city; the students who were surrounded immediately built barricades. The memory of the Parisian barricades in May was still fresh; the press had given it a lot of publicity . [3]

The first reactions of the students, completely spontaneous, were met with an escalation of repression and generalized confrontations which culminated with the intervention of the army in the night of July 29 and the violent assault and occupation of several schools of the University and the Polytechnic. This included firing bazookas, as in the well-known case of the historic building which housed the preparatory classes of the UNAM. Various establishments were trashed and occupied, places were besieged by the police, burnt-out buses were transformed into barricades, there were casualties, arrests, disappearances, it was even being said that some people had been killed, at the end of these four days during which the students had ceased to be intimidated . [4]

So it was the disproportionate violence of the state that was at the origin of the Mexican student movement of 1968 and that same violence was also the conclusion of it. We were able from the beginning to see the clearly provocative actions and behaviour on behalf of the government, which was looking for confrontation. This was shown by the acts of repression and the invasion of teaching premises by police and soldiers, butt also of the confused actions of leaders of the FNET, [5] by the presence on the barricades of known members of the “porras” (bludgeons) - anti-riot groups - and especially the surprising appearance of stones in the dustbins of the city centre on July 26.

Violence was actually a constant of the so-called Regime of the Revolution in Mexico, which had been built through the obligatory incorporation of social forces in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and through an all-powerful presidency supposedly incarnating the state and the nation. The centralized regime and the imposed hierarchical order did not tolerate any dissidence, nor did it

allow the development of democratic forms of participation and legitimation (elections were ritual affairs with no practical effect other than the legitimation of candidates who had been designated in advance).

Violence in all its forms, legal and non-legal, formed the essence of a closed order, reactionary and clientelist. Blinded by the economic upswing and the consolidation of the state which had followed the defeat of the workers' struggles of 1958-1959 [6], the government of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz – an extreme traditionalist draped in a pathological anticommunism that the regime had entirely invented in the name of the Cold War - did not notice the economic and social transformations that the "economic miracle" itself had brought: urbanization, new sections of the working class based on large-scale industrialization, growth of the tertiary sector, inequalities, agrarian crisis, rural migration and destitution, cultural processes that were new and more open to the outside world, etc. All these elements were pushing forward the maturation of society and at the same time widening the gap between this society on the one hand and on the other an intolerant state and political regime which were built on subjugation and exclusion.

In 1968 there appeared the paradox of a regime hat was absolute, incontestable, sumptuary, but which contained forces and contradictions which were preparing its implosion. It was a regime that was closed with a double lock, without the slightest opening, safety valve or loophole. It was the apogee, the zenith of the so-called Regime of the Revolution of 1910 based on the miracle of stabilizing economic development, which was organising the first Olympic Games to be held in Latin America: a symbol of international recognition. Soon would come the hour of its decline. The student movement of 1968 would be the herald of the decadence of the political regime and the advent of a society that was rapidly and profoundly changing. Its demands for the respect of law, for justice and freedom, its democratic practices, the deployment of its creativity and its capacity for communication, its autonomy, its intrepidity, its rapid politicisation, were going to attack, like a corrosive acid, the despotic logic of the presidential regime.

2. Unexpected responses

The regime had not foreseen the unexpected response of the students, of the professors, of the vice-chancellor of the UNAM, in other words, of society. In a milieu dominated by clientelism and impunity, the arbitrary character of the government and the institutions was tolerated through fear and resignation. Those who were dissatisfied were bought off or eliminated. Individual or collective protests and complaints were discouraged by the level of repression, by the inevitable administrative complications and by a judicial system that was corrupt and completely subjected to the government. So when we, students, started to defend ourselves from the blows of the police by violent and uncontrolled confrontations, when the student assemblies voted to strike against the abuses of power and for the release of our comrades who had been attacked, when on July 30, the vice-chancellor of the UNAM, Javier Barros Sierra, flew the national flag at half-mast in front of his offices because of the military occupation of the school buildings, thus convoking a demonstration in defence of university autonomy, nobody in the higher spheres of the regime understood what was happening.

In Mexico City occupied by the army, the demonstration on August 1, led by Vice-chancellor Barrios Sierra, academics and professors, mobilised more than 80,000 participants, from the UNAM and the IPN. We had reacted overnight, thus starting an avalanche of mobilizations which grew constantly, in spite of the recurrent interventions of the police and the army, the kidnappings, the persecutions, the attacks and the paramilitary (terrorist) outrages, which were organised in the highest spheres, and not just by the lower orders of the regime. The capital of the country was full of life, transformed by the action of the masses of students and teachers. Over several weeks, we gradually took over the city as a forum for discussion, protest, free and fearless expression, taking back public spaces like the Zócalo - normally reserved for the supporters of the regime - but also schools, markets, public places, the streets, the neighbourhoods, transport, offices, companies – they all become forums for dialogue. The big demonstrations which were organized with practically no material resources and with quite a lot of improvisation, were only the indicators of a diffuse activity - which became frantic – of thousands and even tens of thousands of students, who penetrated the last recesses of the city of Valle de Mexico: on August 5, a demonstration from Zacatenco to Casco de Santo Tomás (100,000 participants); on August 13, from Casco de Santo Tomás to Zócalo (150,000); on August 27, from the Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec to the Zócalo (more than 250,000 participants); on September 13, a silent demonstration (200,000 people).

Several central meetings organized by the CNH had prepared these triumphal demonstrations, in a town of 6 million inhabitants accustomed to official parades and spectacles organised by the corporatist "acarreo" . [7]

The expression of student discontent and revolt was incomprehensible for the government; unimaginable, impossible, and obviously, in the mind of the head of state, it could only be the product of foreign forces, subversive, of a communist type, aiming to use the students to destabilize the country and sabotage the holding of the Olympic Games that were so dear to the government. When the Mexican Revolution was institutionalized, in the midst of great popular mobilizations, at the time of Lázaro Cárdenas, society was subjugated through what was going to become the PRI [8]. Combativeness, autonomy, the capacity for organization and expression of the workers and peasants were confiscated by the state. The collective forces of society were confiscated by an extremely hierarchical political regime which divided the population into different sectors (workers, peasants, popular sectors), into corporations (trade unions, trade-

union confederations, different regroupments, perverted by the intervention of the state), where the subjugated collective never allowed the individuality of citizens to be expressed. Disciplined, subject to the imposed divisions and hierarchies which broke its bonds of solidarity, society was going to suffer the tearing apart and the distortion of its communitarian and associative traditions, characteristic of the ancestral peoples and of broad social groups.

Politics in Mexico was thus limited to what took place in the ranks of the PRI, which was a kind of political machine - under the aegis of the President of the Republic - charged with guaranteeing the maintenance of its rule, but also the institutional space for debates, the distribution of power between political actors belonging to what was called "the revolutionary family". New dissidences and new political actors could emerge, but they were immediately co-opted or put out of action in one way or another. This machine was part of the mesh of the state apparatus and its policies, public or not, were dedicated to guaranteeing the existing order, the stability and even the legitimacy which was still rooted in the Mexican Revolution.

So, when the students and the professors started to rebel against the arbitrary repression, the lies and the impunity of the state, they were breaking into the space that was reserved for politics, disturbing, invading, breaking the rules which made possible the full perpetuation of the regime and guaranteed the continuation of the prevailing economic and social order. That is why the Mexican student movement appeared from the beginning as a deliberately political movement; its demands went against authoritarianism: the release of political prisoners, the fight against the impunity of the forces of repression and for their dissolution, the refusal of abuses of power, the demand for justice and for the respect of democratic freedoms [9]. All this without forgetting that in Mexico all social movements, as soon as they appear, are invariably politicized because of the intervention of the state itself, against which they inevitably run up. It is the very nature of the political regime which dilutes the traditional differentiation between social and political and imposes the paradox of the politicisation of all social conflicts by a regime which rests on depoliticisation.

1968 veterans march with striking UNAM students, 1999

By erupting onto the national stage, the student movement won back public space, concretely transforming the entire city into a terrain of political action and communication. The places where people worked, taught and were taught, lived, had occasional encounters (like public transport), were transformed then into as many places of conviviality and dialogue, in other words into political spaces. It was surprising to see the way in which the most varied people and the most different social groups involved themselves in the movement in a thousand different ways. This movement, which had been able to win their understanding, their solidarity, their complicity, in an atmosphere where the media (at that time especially the radio, the press and very little television) had always presented totalitarian characteristics, subject to state censorship and to daily self-censorship, opportunist, at the service of the Cold War, the Catholic church and the political regime.

Without any doubt the imagination of the students, their sensitivity, their creativity and their capacity to invent modes of organization and mobilization filled with enthusiasm a society which had always been subjected to abuses of power, arbitrary judgements, corruption and the inevitable relations of clientelism. Police officers, judges, civil servants, employers, corporatist leaders, party bosses, employees: at every level and in all milieux, ordinary people suffered arbitrary power, authoritarianism, the absence of justice and democracy, and even insults or repression. That was why more and more people from different sectors and various levels of society finally listened to the demands of us students. Many parents identified with the challenge that was being made by their children, their close relations, their friends and neighbours: we who, students or professors, were opposing the paralysis that came from fear and who persisted in the struggle in spite of the blows and persecutions. The indignation of some stirred up accumulated anger, brought to the surface the rage that had been contained, encouraged at least the latent revolt of others, and led to a loss of confidence in the government and the desacralization of the president. The beginnings of a politicisation of the masses started to find its way, thanks to the action of the student movement which disconcerted society by its autonomy, its audacity and its determination.

3. The organization of the movement

As soon as the events of the night of Friday July 26 became known, we started to mobilize and to look for ways to coordinate. On Saturday 27 the strike started to be voted at the Polytechnic, with the creation of a coordinating committee of the IPN and a call for a general strike. At the same time, in the University halls of residence there was established a coordinating committee of the representatives of the institutes which had a tradition of organization, primarily in social sciences and human sciences. Within a few days the strike had drawn in all the institutes of the IPN, the UNAM, the National Institute of Agriculture at Chapingo, the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the Teacher Training School and the National University. Many schools and universities across the country soon joined the strike, as well as private institutions like the Anahuac Ibero-American University. Although the student strike was general only in Mexico City, it was really a nation-wide strike [10]
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The spontaneous organization of the students in general assemblies, brigades and action committees in each establishment went hand in hand with efforts of coordination and centralization that led to a first unitary

manifesto which carried a 6-point platform, demanding an answer from the government within 72 hours and threatening to generalize the strike if they did not receive it, and the first demonstration of the movement was called on Monday August 5. On August 8, which marked the end of the 72 hours, the creation of the National Strike Council was formalized, with the participation in the beginning of representatives of 59 assemblies or action committees. Almost at the same time the Coalition of Professors of Higher Education for Democratic Freedoms appeared, coming from 50 schools which supported the movement, and even sent representatives (with the right to speak but not to vote) to the CNH. Shortly afterwards the Parliament of Writers and Artists was created, which by multiple activities would give the movement its cultural and festive stamp.

The CNH took responsibility for the general coordination and leadership of the movement, by proposing various actions which would keep it on the offensive. This involved various unitary demonstrations, but also meetings, manifestos and initiatives such as the demand for a public dialogue with the government as the way of resolving conflicts. It established itself and was legitimised with the growth of the movement, which reached its apogee between the demonstration of August 5 and the silent demonstration of Friday September 13. During these six weeks the CNH consolidated its relations with the student assemblies and contributed to the reinforcement of the work of the brigades which, during this period, completely invaded the city and developed an anti-authoritarian and democratic discourse which was to be the identity of the movement. It maintained its challenge to the government, facing up to its stratagems, its threats and its acts of repression. Its defence of a public dialogue [11] established as an absolute principle, made it possible to maintain the cohesion and the coherence of the movement by preserving it from the traditional governmental mechanisms of co-optation, and thus reassuring the principal representatives and spokespersons. Without any doubt the objective of obtaining "the greatest popular support" and causing "the greatest isolation of the political regime" [12] which motivated the CNH, was to a large extent achieved, at least for a time and especially in the long run thanks to the conjunction of the forces mobilized throughout the movement.

The assemblies brought together a large number of students who discussed and took collective decisions. It was a real school of politicisation, collective thinking and socialization that certain intellectuals wore themselves out vilifying [13]. But the role of these assemblies was essential, even if they often became interminable and tedious, because they made it possible to maintain on a day-to-day basis the relation between the rank-and-file students and the action committees and the CNH. Information and proposals circulated between the different bodies, which favoured intense discussions and collective decisions, and led to activities that were increasingly well coordinated and centralized. By electing the action committees, the assemblies prevented them from being transformed into bodies monopolized by activists or left-wing militants who were unrepresentative. This way of functioning gave the movement its democratic character and gave it an undeniable cohesion.

The student brigades were the broadest and most effective mechanism of diffusion, mobilization and politico-social organization. Formed in general by three, five or ten students, they moved around easily to paint slogans on the walls, to distribute leaflets, to explain the reasons for the movement in impromptu meetings and discussions with people, to promote solidarity, to collect funds or goods in kind (food in the markets, paper in the offices, paint in the shops, etc). There were also more massive brigades inaugurated by the Faculty of Science of the UNAM, made up of tens and even hundreds of students who organized blockades of traffic on important avenues with the aim of holding impromptu meetings. The brigades also went round factories, industrial estates, offices, markets and building sites; they also went into neighbourhoods that were known to be rough and seemed impenetrable, and the students were always met there with interest and solidarity. The gangs, the groups of youth - feared by everyone, especially by the police – welcomed us and even joined our struggle, as was the case in certain districts close to the schools where these gangs played a fundamental role in defence against the attacks of the police, in particular in Casco de Santo Tomas and Tlatelolco. Many brigades even arrived in an organized way at the big demonstrations, bringing organization and security to them, then they set out again to continue their work during the long night of the city.

The emergence and the extensive work of hundreds of brigades, the demonstrations and the meetings as well as the presence of the CNH, provided the form and the meaning of the discourse of the movement of 1968. The challenge was above all to confront the manipulative disinformation of the press and television, to contradict the calumnies of the government and its spokespersons, something which was gradually achieved, as was seen from the demonstrations which were increasingly followed from the windows of apartments and from the pavements by hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands of spectators who became participants.

Much propaganda was improvised by the brigades themselves, although its production was centralized initially by the action committees of each school and then by the CNH, which increased its capacity to print massive quantities of leaflets. Our comrade artists of the San Carlos School frantically produced the posters and the stickers which could be seen all over the city. At the School of Political Science there was produced very imaginative and original propaganda, with the innumerable posters drawn in ink by Jaime Goded, which nobody apparently took the trouble to photograph or film.

The role of the brigades was decisive for the conquest of public opinion, in informing and arousing the sympathy and even the solidarity of very diverse social groups. The extension of the movement throughout the country was

to a large extent the work of the brigades and their members. Even the media, in particular the press and the radio, from time to time showed signs of opening up, pressured by the journalists themselves who were following the efforts we were making, we students, to make ourselves understood and to achieve our goals, but also because of the obvious impact of a movement which unceasingly put forward its demands.

However, by the very nature and the dispersion of the brigades, by their autonomy and their authentic self-organization, a centralized organization was not possible, although it was tried through a kind of General Coordination of the Brigades (CCGB), which was created on the initiative of the School of Political Science and which in spite of the approval of the CNH was considered by some people as an ultra-left attempt to contest the leadership role of the CNH [14]. In reality this coordination was used to plan and rationalize the activity of these rank-and-file structures, preventing them from going to the same places as each other and expending too much energy. On Sunday September 1 - at the time of the fourth report by the President - we made, without much success, an attempt at a clandestine operation [15]. The military occupation of the UNAM on September 18 did not make it possible for the project to mature, even though many autonomous brigades had continued to function.

All this organisational and participative frenzy did not come from nowhere, and was not completely new. It was in fact the expression of a long process of social and political recomposition of student organizations like the Federation of Peasant Socialist Students, or failed attempts like the National Confederation of Democratic Students (CNED), of struggles for material or clearly political demands, on the regional or even wider level, of which students were the centre or one of the participants, in states like Chihuahua, Michoacán, Guerrero, Puebla, Sinaloa, Sonora, Nuevo León and Tabasco, as well as in the capital itself, at the UNAM, the IPN, and in the Teacher Training Schools [16].

In many of these experiences there were precedents not only of repression and military intervention, of the stubbornness and intransigence of the state, but also of resistance and forms of organization like assemblies, brigades and various coordinating committees. In particular in the UNAM of the 1960s, the activism of the most radicalized students - of which we formed part – finally defeated and dismantled, before the explosion of the year of the Olympics, the kind of integrated student unionism (the University Federation of Student Societies, FUSA, with its student societies, its executive committees and its action groups which were known as "porras"), subject to the PRI, which dominated the campuses; at the IPN in 1968 we saw the death-knell of the powerful FNET. The student movement of 1968 concentrated this complex process, enriched it and reinforced its best experiences.

4. Apprenticeship in legality

What characterized the student movement of 1968 in Mexico was above all its peaceful character, its demand for legality, justice and democracy. It was above all a struggle against impunity, lies, the pigheadedness not only of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, but also of official institutions which were unrepresentative and especially lacked legality, which were subject to corruption and arbitrary power. The six points of the platform had something to do with the violation of rights, with a punitive legality which was superimposed on freedoms, on the guarantees contained in the Constitution, with the demand and the desire for the restoration of the legality that was being violated by those who were responsible for guaranteeing it, by those which had created it and who used it according to their whims.

For the students, especially for the most politicized ones, the apprenticeship in legality was something difficult; it went against the stream in a country that was extremely legalist, but without being attached to laws, subject to arbitrary government and the inexistence of the rule of law. The constitutional order was itself contradictory, the product of situations of compromise of a revolution which had triumphed by crushing its main driving forces, the popular sector of its participants. Presidential absolutism, consecrated, had become a political regime without checks, balances or controls, where simulation was a dominant feature. The three arms (executive, legislative, judicial) were absorbed by a single all-powerful presidential authority. Government and judges lacked authority, were accustomed to arbitrary rule, to put forward ridiculous accusations and to conduct trials based on lies and murky underhand manoeuvres, especially where politics was involved. In fact, one of the demands of 1968 included the release of trade union leaders kept in prison without a real legal trial, such as Demetrio Vallejo, Valentín Campa, Víctor Rico Galán and others.

The everyday nature of governmental violations of the law was astounding. The effective absence of rights contained in a Constitution that resembled just a sheet of paper without any consequence, led to the very real existence of a despotic, omnipotent and intolerant regime, without any kind of democratic mediations. Students, like all those who engaged in political activity, had to operate in a kind of semi-clandestinity and any activity outside the campus was an adventure heavy with threats. Only some ritual demonstrations were tolerated. "Institutional violence" was supplemented by paramilitary violence. During the movement, the government from time to time called up frightening actions like the machine-gunning of schools, beatings-up, kidnappings, bombings, a dirty war which preceded October 2 and which would become uncontrollable in the 1970s.

Consequently, the apprenticeship in legality came to us gradually and not without reservations. Not because of what certain leaders of the CNH regarded as the refusal of democracy or the "extremist and doctrinaire leftism" of the radical wings of the students [17], but because it was a situation difficult to come to terms with. Faced with abusive repression,

with the illegal intervention of the army, the violation of university autonomy, the executions and endless persecutions, the students nevertheless began to speak and understand the language of legality which, to a certain extent, protected us, which legitimised us, which highlighted the cynicism and the incongruity of the regime. The attitude of the vice-chancellor Javier Barros Sierra and the demonstration on August 1 which took his name were positive steps.

The fact of demonstrating without submitting to the regulation which imposed a request for authorization from the police gave us confidence. The brigades, the daily meetings, with or without police attacks, finally led us to hold up rights that were legally established, which had always been made conditional and cancelled by the government. Little by little it was understood and accepted that legality, that the Constitution, could also be the refuge for rights, for freedoms that had been undermined, for a protest against the impunity and the illegality of the regime. The movement thus acquired a legalist aspect, of a demand for the respect of the Constitution and of the law that had been trampled underfoot by the regime which had instituted them. Thus, the student movement was also the precursor of the fight for human rights in Mexico and of the battle for democracy.

5. Massive politicisation

Until the Night of Tlatelolco, where the entire nation felt covered in shame - as Octavio Paz remarked - because of the governmental massacre, the almost ten weeks during which the student movement developed were intense and long days of mass politicisation. This was above all the politicisation of students and professors who had escaped from inertia and from the shackles which subjected them to apathy, conformism, the reproduction of hierarchical relations, to lack of communication and isolation.

The movement was a breath of egalitarianism which created relations of solidarity, co-operation and conviviality. It swept away not only the residues of the official student and professional groupings, but also the old rancours and rivalries fostered by the functionaries of the education system, such as those which persisted between the National University and the Polytechnic and whose origin lay in sporting competitions. The debates in the assemblies, the conquest of the streets, the apprenticeship in freedoms, the vital encounters with people of all social and cultural environments, the recognition of the city in all its diversity, the deployment of unsuspected capacities of communication and especially the collective deciphering of daily events which confronted us with the government, its apparatuses, its handling of the media, the capacity to respond that the movement built, all that signified a process of politicisation, of developing an awareness, of an irreversible cultural change for a whole generation.

But the people (as we said in those days), in other words society with its differentiations and its inequalities, became aware, discovered the demonstrations and the political practices, the opinions and criticisms of the regime which brought countless social groups closer not only to the students but also to politics. That is also why the movement appeared as a possibility of giving politics back its dignity [18] , the politics that had been degraded and confiscated by what still called itself the regime of the Mexican revolution. If the movement succeeded in being regarded as a student and popular movement, it was because the inhabitants of Mexico City - particularly, but not only – in their turn, surged onto the political stage. Professors, artists, small shopkeepers, mothers, whole families of the middle-classes and of even better-off sectors, employees, workers, etc., demonstrated - sometimes in a diffuse way and at other times in an open way - in favour of the movement, during the demonstrations and the meetings, but especially at the time of the daily encounters with the students. In the assemblies of the CNH, more and more groups of all sorts came to express their solidarity or to call on others to do so.

This process caused a change in the frame of mind of the population, of which the most significant moment, the one that revealed the change in public opinion in favour of the students, was not, as many think, on August 27, the day of the demonstration which took the movement to its highest point with, according to some estimates, 400,000 people taking part. It was on the following day, Wednesday 28, with the failure of the so-called homage to the national flag, when civil servants, obliged to take part in an official meeting, rebelled and the government had to resort to the tanks of the army to disperse the meeting. The battle of public opinion had been won; the cracks in institutional control symbolized a decisive change which certainly influenced the government's decision to resort to military force to bring the conflict to an end.

6. The student leadership

Naturally, many students became politicized in the various bodies of the movement, they cut their teeth there and then entered the world of politics. But many participants in the movement were coming from other struggles, from experiences which had trained us in debate and in political practices that were more or less social and open, more or less clandestine or semi-clandestine. The majority of the most prominent leaders of the CNH were or had been in the recent past militants of left organizations, just like many members of the action committees and the organizers of the assemblies and brigades, especially at the UNAM, but also in other schools both in Mexico City and in the rest of the country. In a certain sense, we represented the memory, the continuity of a theoretical and political heritage which had managed to survive and had modelled itself against the stream of the crushing regime which resulted from the first revolution of the 20th century, based on popular and nationalist myths.

The years which had preceded the movement of 1968 were years of recomposition, of reorganization and to a certain extent of reinforcement of the Mexican Left. This process of crisis, ruptures and the emergence of innovative groups and currents of the Left, was in fact the contradictory

outcome of the great independent trade-union struggles which were brought to an end in 1959 with a military defeat [19]. The crisis of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), in the context of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the Sino-Soviet conflict, led to the emergence of critical currents of a Marxist type (defining themselves as revolutionaries or radicals) which opened the range of options on the left, hitherto limited primarily to pro-Soviet Communism and to Lombardism, which was a kind of nationalism, populist in a Stalinist style [20]. Spartakism, created by the writer Jose Revueltas, was the most diversified and extensive current, but there was also the growth of Trotskyism, Maoism and Guevarism. The subsequent social and generational change on the left, with the involvement of many more young people - primarily students and intellectuals who were escaping from the institutionalized networks -, would mature under the influence of the tumultuous winds which made up the international atmosphere [21]. All these left currents led to the National Strike Council (CNH), even though the movement drew them in, disorganized them, and the transformations and the outcome of the movement ended up by flattening them. After 1968, the collapse was followed at different rhythms and levels by a new configuration of the left. But during the movement the CNH had been enriched by debates and contributions, often polarized, which did not please everyone, but which collectively favoured the construction in the heat of the events of a strategy which in the initial period organized the movement, projected it into society and succeeded in isolating the PRI government and showing it in its true colours.

Decisive questions like the public dialogue and the silent demonstration; the construction of the identity of the movement through its own distinctive discourse; the response of the movement at critical moments, as with the calumnies and the threats of the fourth presidential report; the military occupation of the UNAM on September 18 and the tension at the time of the student battles in response to the takeover of the buildings of the IPN, with more than 1,500 arrests; the offensive of the regime against vice-chancellor Barros Sierra - all that involved big debates and decisions which revealed the cohesion and the collective capacity of the CNH. There were debates on whether it was better to organize united demonstrations in the centre of the city area or a lot of decentralized demonstrations in the industrial zones, which were obviously concluded by taking the most effective decision. The relations with the government that the question of the public dialogue implied was however a question which the CNH was not able not solve in time to impose a negotiated way out.

In spite of the diversity of its composition, or perhaps because of it, the CNH had established itself as the incontestable leadership of the movement, fully legitimised as a collective body, independently of the real weight of certain comrades like Raúl Alvarez Garín or Gilberto Guevara Niebla [22] . There were errors due to indulgence with respect to some who played an opaque role, like Socrates Campos Lemus, whose proposal to wait at the Zocalo for the moment of the public dialogue facilitated the return of repression after the crushing triumph of August 27, and who after October 2 was the voice of the government in the movement.

Most important was the inability of the CNH to perceive the change in the political situation after September 13, with the military redeployment and the dirty war. The possibility of a tactical retreat was not even taken into a consideration, although all the signs pointed to the coming disastrous outcome. At the Institute of Political Science, one of the schools considered as the most radical and even extremist, we had discussed it and we had even written a document of analysis in which we formulated the thesis of a victorious movement. Trapped by inertia, like the metaphor of the train which is racing at full speed towards the precipice and in which nobody is able to pull the communication cord, the assembly of the CNH account did not take of this document. In other schools, they made the same proposal and Pablo Gonzalez Casanova also published his reflexions on this subject [23]. Obviously, nobody wanted to take the risk of proposing to the rank and file of the movement the need to stop a movement which had achieved great and irreversible political and cultural gains. It was the final test for the CNH to be considered as the accomplished leadership of the most important politico-social movement in Mexico of the second half of the 20th century [24]. The massacre of October 2, with the arrest of the principal leaders of the CNH and the persecution which did not cease even during the Olympic Games, made the leadership of the movement disappear, with the result that the movement lost its capacity for initiative and its lucidity.

The PCM, which had rather been the scapegoat of the government, without obtaining an important presence in the movement, suddenly found itself hegemonic in the CNH. With the assistance of some students who had come onto to the CNH without any responsibilities, Marcelino Perelló set himself up as the principal leader, with the approval of the press, catapulted thanks to his unofficial relations with personalities in the government, which he maintained without informing the CNH (with the agreement of the leadership of his party). Without taking account of events or seeking alternatives which would make possible a way out for the movement in these new circumstances, the new CNH hurriedly tried to end the strike. Later, when the students decided to put an end to the strike on December 4, the CNH presented a “Manifesto to the Nation, dated October 2”, where in an ignominious way it referred only to the massacre of the Night of Tlatelolco, presented as a question of the “intransigence” and “intolerance” of the government, without taking up the defence of our imprisoned comrades, tortured and subjected to the most absurd accusations, forgetting even that the persecutions were continuing. On December 6, 1968, when the CNH decided its own dissolution, it already no longer existed.

7. The breath of the Cold War

The student movement started with a provocation of the government which

initially seemed a kind of preventive repression – a common thing during the Cold War - to get some awkward characters (communists, critics, dissidents) out of the way in order to guarantee peace during the 19th Olympic Games. That is what the clampdown on July 26 against members of the Mexican Communist Party and its youth organization, the JCM, highlighted, by occupying their offices and those of their newspaper La Voz de Mexico, while the first confrontations between the students and the police in the centre of the city were not even finished. The press campaign which was immediately unleashed was part of the offensive. And after the intervention of the army at dawn on Tuesday July 30 the functionaries of the government (the regent Alfonso Corona del Rosal, the procurator-general of the Republic Julio Sanchez Vargas and Luis Echeverria) denounced a "perfectly organised plan of agitation and subversion". In any event what was clear was that the government of Díaz Ordaz had made a serious error; the conflict got out of his control and in spite of the signs of political crisis and the evolution of events, nobody at the top of the regime understood what was happening.

The student movement revealed the weaknesses of the corporatist presidential regime when it was at its apogee, and at the same time it discovered freedoms; it showed the possibility of experiencing politics in a different way, in a democratic, egalitarian way, without forcing people to play a subordinate role. The student movement was crushed militarily, in a brutal, disproportionate, unjustifiable way. It was a crime of state which must still be judged now that those responsible have been identified. It was not crushed politically. The entire nation was covered with shame by the contemptible nature of the genocide of the Night of Tlatelolco. Crouching like a lion, it leapt, rebelled, humiliated those responsible, and it released forces which have not ceased to produce changes and generate alternatives. In the long run, from a historical point of view, the popular student movement of 1968 has triumphed in a striking way.

Forty years later, the legacy of 1968 is still there, and proud.

Footnotes

[1] Julio Scherer García, Carlos Monsiváis, Parte de guerra. Tlatelolco 1968. documentos of General Marcelino García Barragán. Los hechos y la historia, Mexico City, Nuevo Siglo Aguilar, 1999 and the enlarged edition: Parte de guerra II. Los rostros del 68, UNAM/Nuevo Siglo Aguilar, Mexico City 2002.

[2] Raúl à lvarez Garín, La estela de Tlatelolco. Una reconstrucción histórica del Movimiento estudiantil del 68, Grijalbo, Mexico City 1998. This is the best book on1968 in Mexico, written by its principal leader. In addition to presenting a chronicle and reflexions on the movement, it develops a meticulous analysis of the military intervention in 1968.

[3] Curiously, it was the tabloid evening press that provided the widest and most impressive reporting of the May events.

[4] According to the Secretary of National Defence, "Three battalions of an infantry brigade infantry, in addition to a battalion of paratroopers", that is, about 2,500 soldiers, were dispatched as reinforcements to the 10,000 police who had not succeeded in controlling the students (quoted by Raúl Jardón, 1968. El fuego de la esperanza, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico City 1968, p. 34).

[5] The National Federation of Technical Students (FNET) was a corporatist organism of students of the IPN and other technological schools, dependent on the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which held power.

[6] A number of trade-union struggles of metalworkers, oil workers and other sectors, which took place then, had been stimulated and articulated by the big strikes of the freight transport union, directed by members of left parties (the Mexican Communist Party, PCM, and the Workers' and Peasants' Party of Mexico, POCM). These struggles finally challenged the corporatist regime and demanded the independence of the trade unions.

On March 28, 1959 military repression led to the arrest of approximately 10,000 workers, who were put on government blacklists and so could not obtain any work contract. Finally , the principal leaders, Demetrio Vallejo and Valentine Campa, were condemned for the offence of social dissolution, an offence invented in the 1940s, during the world war.

[7] "Acarreo" is the name given to the forced mobilization of people in support of the actions of the government, taken charge of by the corporatist organizations of the PRI.

[8] I developed this subject in my book El Estado y la política obrera del cardenismo (Era, Mexico City, 1975). The employers and the big agricultural landowners were also obviously organized in corporatist associations, but these were not subordinated to the PRI and benefited from a special status in their relations with the state.

[9] The six points of the petition were: 1. Freedom for political prisoners; 2. Dismissal of the generals who acted like police chiefs; 3. Dissolution of the corps of grenadiers, a direct instrument in repression, without it being replaced by a similar body; 4. Suppression of the offence of social dissolution, a legal instrument of repression; 5. Compensation for the families of the victims of the aggressions of police officers and soldiers; 6. Judgement of the functionaries responsible for acts of vandalism and repression.

[10] . In mid-August many demonstrations had taken place in various cities and 70

establishments were on strike in the states of Vera Cruz, Guanajuato, Michoacan, Queretaro, Hidalgo, Chiapas, Durango, Tamaulipas, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Aguascalientes, Sonora, Baja California, Nayarit, Morelos, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Sinaloa and Puebla (Raúl Jardón, op cit. p. 42).

[11] . "The public dialogue was a real challenge to the regime of corporatist control; for the government, to accept such a dialogue amounted to recognizing the existence of another power, of an independent social actor not subject to control, which demanded radical changes, and this possibility was denied" (à lvarez Garín, op cit., p. 183). The possibility of public dialogue undermined the logic of the closed and antidemocratic government system. It was this demand which was most strongly rejected by the government.

[12] à lvarez Garín, La estela…, op cit., p. 77.

[13] See for example the essay by Monsiváis in the work mentioned above, Parte de guerra…

[14] For example, the fury of Gilberto Guevara Niebla (see, for example, note 17) and the more serene vision of Raúl Alvarez Garín have become part of history.

[15] This question is very little dealt with in the bibliography dealing with 1968 in Mexico. We can find some elements in Jose Rene Rivas Ontiveros, La izquierda estudiantil en la UNAM. Organizaciones, movilizaciones y liderazgos (1958-1972), UNAM/Porrúa, Mexico City 2007, pp. 624-625.

[16] Enrique de la Garza, León Tomás Ejea, Luis Fernando Macías, El otro movimiento estudiantil, Extemporáneos, Mexico City 1986, chap. I.

[17] It is surprising to see how Gilberto Guevara Niebla ridicules and angrily condemns those whom he calls "the radical students of the Humanities sector of the UNAM", to whom he does not recognise the slightest contribution and whom he accuses of having been an obstacle for the movement and of having "sown hatred and adversity among the delegations of the CNH". He also exaggerates the impact of the organizations of the "extremist left", such as the Espartaco Communist League, which hardly survived the events. His entire book exudes scorn and hatred against those who, naturally, put forward on various occasions opinions and proposals different from his. He even reproduces many of the terms used by the press and the government in connection with divisions within the CNH and among the students, the very ones who contributed to forging the movement (La libertad nunca se olvida. Memoria del 68, Ediciones Cal y Arena, Mexico City 2004).

[18] "One of the great virtues of 1968 was the assertion that politics was something necessary and respectable", which could be "conducted with procedures different from those of the PRI", and "as politics of confrontation with the regime". (à lvarez, La estela…, op. cit., p. 147.)

[19] The POCM disappeared after this movement, whereas the PCM, in spite of its recurrent crises, had existed since 1919 and was still the strongest left organization.

[20] The Socialist People's Party represented a well-entrenched current incarnated by Vicente Lombardo Toledano, self-proclaimed Marxist intellectual, who played a fundamental role in the formation of the corporatist regime in the 1930s, becoming practically indispensable to Lázaro Cárdenas. Promoter of class collaboration, of a subordinate "alliance" with the regime of the Mexican revolution, he inaugurated what was known in Mexico as "the parties of muddle heads", the institutionalized false opposition. Until his death, after the movement of 1968, to which he was opposed, he was a key political figure in Mexico. The revolutionary nationalist current, incarnated by the former president Lázaro Cárdenas, although it flirted with the left, was in reality invariably subjected to the regime which it helped to build. In the face of the imperialist threats against the Cuban Revolution, Cárdenas promoted mobilizations which led to the Movement of National Liberation, a kind of broad front, which gave rise to many hopes, but which was de facto dissolved when Cárdenas gave his support to the presidential candidacy of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who took over the government in 1964.

[21] . The Cuban Revolution and the American aggressions against it, the Vietnam War, the American invasion of the Dominican Republic, the Black rebellion and the Black Panthers, the revolt of the Third World against colonialism, the bloodbath in Indonesia, the Six Day War and the Palestinian Revolution, the symbol of Che Guevara, etc.

[22] In fact, the alliance of these comrades, who had been militants of the youth organization of the PCM while maintaining a critical attitude towards its direction, structured a very wide bloc of representatives of schools which regrouped particularly, in a unitary way, the Polytechnic and the technical sectors of the UNAM.

[23] . "Decisiones y riesgo" published in La Gaceta. Boletín informativo del Consejo nacional of Huelga n° 7 of September 13, 1968, reproduced by Gilberto Guevara Niebla, La libertad…, op. cit., pp. 261-268. The document mentioned, which I wrote a little before September 18, was distributed under the signature of the Karl Marx Brigade of the Action Committee of Political Science.

[24] See the opinions of Raúl à

lvarez (op cit., pp 179-180) and Gilberto Guevara (op. cit., p. 267), who after having spoken in praise of the reflexions of González Casanova, ask themselves, with regard to the idea of going back to classes: "How was it possible to deal with a response of this type in an assembly as turbulent as that of the Council and in front of all the student media?"

An invitation to participate in the creation of a new Revolutionary Socialist Organisation

2 July 2008, by Revolutionary Regroupment

This text was voted on and passed at a meeting in London on Sunday 29th June. A Steering Committee was also elected.

1. This is a proposal made by members of the International Socialist Group (ISG), Socialist Resistance (SR), a group of former members of the SWP and some independent Marxists not presently in any organisation. It is an invitation to everyone who would be interested in establishing a new revolutionary organisation based on an understanding of the need for Marxists to build a revolutionary organisation and to work for the widest unity of the working class on economic, social and political issues.

2. We propose a regroupment, based on our common traditions as active revolutionary socialists. This proposal emerges from practical collaboration over the recent period in building Respect. We also appeal to independent revolutionaries and new militants to join us.

3. We hope that a process of discussion throughout this year will culminate in a founding conference to be held towards the end of this year.

4. We have a shared analysis of the nature of class society and how it can be changed. Capitalism is an outmoded system which cannot satisfy even the most basic needs of billions of the world's population. The further advance of humanity and the protection of the environment from catastrophe can only be achieved by the creation of a socialist society.

5. The capitalist state cannot be reformed but has to be overthrown and replaced by a workers' state. This revolutionary act can only be carried out by the working class, the only agency that can transform society.

6. The emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself, acting as a class in its own interests. Socialism cannot be achieved from above by reformist politicians or trade union leaders. The struggle for socialism is international; the struggle of workers and the oppressed everywhere is one struggle.

7. We recognize that capitalism uses the oppression of certain social groups to divide the working class. The organisations of the working class must constantly strive to overcome any divisions by advancing the causes of these oppressed groups. We oppose all forms of oppression and defend the right of the oppressed to self-organization. We support, and will participate in, the struggles against national oppression, women's oppression, racism and Islamophobia and against homophobia.

8. What existed in the "communist bloc" was not socialism. It was a Stalinist perversion of socialism; a dictatorship that brutally oppressed all political opposition, suppressed workers' rights and trampled on workers' democracy. Socialism cannot exist except with the extension of democracy so that the working class collectively takes the decisions about the future of its new society.

9. The dominant ideas of the present society are those of the capitalist class. For the revolution to succeed the most militant workers and their allies have to be organised into a revolutionary organisation which challenges and confronts that ideology with one in the interests of the new socialist society.

10. The revolutionary organisation must be part of the working class and take part in the life and struggles of the working class and the oppressed. It seeks to absorb the lessons of working-class struggles from the past and from today. It must give guidance and perspective to its members in their activity in the workplace, communities and campaigns. Theoretical study and discussion serve as a guide to the practical work of the organisation. In this way we can test our ideas in practice and learn from our experience.

11. Any revolutionary organization must be democratic, including the right to organize around minority viewpoints, but must aim to act in a unified manner. Socialist democracy is the only way to develop a genuine political leadership of the working class and its allies.

12. We believe that the decline of the Labour Party and the disintegration of its mass base present the best opportunity for many decades to build a viable alternative to the left of Labour. The signatories of this appeal have been working together as revolutionaries and with others to build such a party. We believe that the building of a united party of the working class is one of the overarching strategic tasks for revolutionary socialists in this period. The role of revolutionary Marxists in helping to build Respect over the next period will be an important one.

13. We state clearly our commitment to building a revolutionary socialist organisation, which will locate itself in working-class struggle – in the workplace, in the community, amongst the oppressed and in the broad party.

14. We are internationalists, against imperialism and war; we stand for mass action from below in the interests of the working class; we do not set ourselves apart from the working class and its organisations but seek the broadest agreement with others, using the methods of the united-front. Our aim is both to advance the interests of the class and the ideas of revolutionary socialism. To these ends we will explore the possibility of links with other revolutionaries internationally.

15. This document is intended only as a preliminary text. We invite all those who are interested in the ideas outlined above to join us in a process of discussion.

For more information or to become involved visit the Revolutionary Regroupment website or e-mail revolutionaryregroupment@googlemail.com

Marxists in Respect discuss unification

2 July 2008, by Alan Thornett, Duncan Chapel

The regroupment process is the result of a year-long realignment inside Respect, which resulted from the decision by the leadership of the Socialist Workers' Party to split the electoral coalition. Dozens of SWP members who dissented from the split were either expelled or left the SWP as a result.

Since then, closer working relationships between Marxists in Respect led a more organised discussion both on the politics of building Respect and the wider political issues. These discussions showed that the common working perspectives established inside Respect reflected a wider politcal agreement, allowing a discussion to develop about revolutionary regroupment. At the heart of this will be how to help to build Respect into the most effective left alternative to the betrayals of new Labour.

A meeting on June 29th of supporters of this regroupment process agreed to publish an appeal to others who share this perspective to join them in it and help shape the way it develops. The meeting elected a steering committee to plan this process including the many discussions which will be necessary in order to move towards the founding of a new revolutionary organisation possibly by the end of this year.