IV404 - September 2008

New Debt Crisis in Third World?

31 October 2011, by Éric Toussaint

Eric Toussaint

However, the debt crisis that hit the advanced industrial countries in 2007 could radically change the conditions of indebtedness in developing countries in the near future. Are we approaching the onset of another debt crisis in developing countries? The question requires thought, because if such is the case, we need to be prepared and take appropriate measures to limit the damage.

The Historical Facts

The last two centuries in the history of capitalism saw several international crises (three in the 19th century and two in the 20th) [1], which directly affected the fate of emerging countries. The origin of these crises and the moment at which they peaked are closely related to the pace of the world economy and to that of the advanced industrial countries in particular. Each debt crisis was preceded by an abnormal boom in the countries of the center, with an excess of capital being partly recycled into the economies of the periphery. The crisis was generally triggered by a recession or crash affecting some of the main industrialized economies.

Easy Money

In the past few years, many developing countries have seen their export revenues soar thanks to the rising prices of goods they sell on the world market: hydrocarbons (oil and gas), minerals, and agricultural products. This allows them to draw on these foreign exchange revenues to repay the debt and be credible candidates for new loans.

In addition, the commercial banks of the North, who had pulled back on loans at the end of the 1990s after the financial crises in developing countries, gradually re-opened the credit lines starting in 2004-2005. [15]

Also according to the BIS Annual Report, the countries most at risk are South Africa, Turkey, the Baltic states, and those of Central and Eastern Europe, like Hungary and Romania (in the last two the real estate bubble is about to burst, while to make things worse loans have been indexed to strong currencies, the Swiss franc in particular).

"In view of the turmoil engulfing banks in advanced industrial economies, the second major vulnerability in some EMEs concerns the sustainability of bank-intermediated capital flows. Historically, bank flows have periodically been subject to sharp reversals, such as during the early 1980s in Latin America and during 1997-1998 in emerging Asia." [16]

Conclusions

As a result of the crisis affecting advanced industrial countries, loan conditions will certainly tighten for developing countries. The large currency reserves that they have been able to build up over recent years will serve as a buffer against the consequences of tighter conditions, but will not be sufficient to protect them entirely. Certain weak links in the South's indebtedness chain are in danger of being directly affected in the near future, all the more so since some of them have already been severely affected by the world food crisis of 2008. It is vital therefore to closely follow a situation that is presently uncontrolled, and prepare to find solutions. Otherwise the people will once again have to pay the highest price. [17]

Footnotes

[1] See Eric Toussaint, Your Money or Your Life, Chicago: Haymarket books, 2005, chapter 7. See also Eric Toussaint, The World Bank: A Critical Primer, London: Pluto, 2008, chapter 4.

[2] "Cross-border claims of BIS reporting banks on EMEs (emerging economies) were estimated at $2.6 trillion in 2007, an increase of $1.6 trillion over the past five years" (BIS, 78th Annual Report, Basel, June 2008, p. 41).

[3] For a detailed analysis of the cause of the crisis and the international context, see Eric Toussaint, Banque du Sud et nouvelle crise internationale, Liège-Paris: CADTM-Syllepse, 2008, chapters 9 and 10.

[4] North-American ABCPs (asset backed commercial papers) are negotiable certificates issued by banks or other companies on the financial market for a short period (2 to 270 days). These certificates are not collateral-backed (for example by a real estate property). They depend on the confidence of the ABCP buyer in the bank or company that sells it.

[5] Collateralized Debt Obligations

[6] Leveraged Debt Buy-Out. The acquisition of companies financed by debts.

[7] Credit Default Swaps. The purchaser of a CDS wishes, in purchasing it, to protect himself against the risk of non-payment of a debt. The CDS market has developed significantly since 2002. The volume of CDS-related sums increased eleven-fold between 2002 and 2006. The problem is that these insurance policies are sold without regulatory control. The existence of these CDS has encouraged companies to take more and more risks. Believing themselves protected from defaults on payment, lenders grant loans without verifying the borrower's ability to repay.

[8] Auction Rate Securities. These securities sold in the US represent credits to city councils, universities (for student grants), hospitals, etc. Each week, clients can buy or sell them via an auction system. In June-July 2008, the market collapsed and the banks that had sold these debts had to buy them back from their clients and pay state-imposed fines. The sums involved are estimated at $330 billion and the fines paid by UBS ($150 million), Citigroup ($100 million), JP Morgan, Morgan Stanley, etc. add up to hundreds of millions of dollars.

[9] Bear Stearns, the 5th largest investment bank in the US, was heavily involved in the CDS market.

[10] This is a prime example of privatized profit in times of economic prosperity and public-borne losses in times of depression. These two institutions were privatized at a time when they were making huge profits. Now that they have recently paid out dividends to their private shareholders, they have been nationalized so that the state can take over their losses. As the editorial of the very neo-liberal magazine The Economist itself declared in its 30 August 2008 issue: "That is capitalism at its worst: it means shareholders and executives reap the profits, but the taxpayer bears the losses."

[11] But for the latter this was short-lived: some of them are experiencing a sharp downturn (Shanghai, Hong-Kong, Bombay-Mumbai, Sao Paulo, etc).

[12] BIS, 78th Annual Report, Basel, June 2008, p.55.

[13] BIS, op. cit.

[14] BIS, p. 51.

[15] The BIS also writes: "Bank credit to the private sector has expanded tremendously over the past five years — in Latin America by a cumulative 7 percentage points of GDP and in CEE by 30 percentage points. Such rapid credit growth could have overstretched the capacity of institutions to assess and monitor credit effectively, p. 54.

[16] BIS, p. 53.

[17] As regards alternative proposals, see: Eric Toussaint, Banque du Sud et nouvelle crise internationale, op cit., chapters 1 to 4. See also: Eric Toussaint, "Quelles alternatives pour le développement humain?" 22 August 2008; and Damien Millet and Eric Toussaint, 60 questions/60 réponses sur la dette, le FMI et la Banque mondiale, CADTM-Syllepse, 2008, chapters 10 to 12

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12 December 2008

IV404

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The process is locked in its contradictions

29 September 2008, by Fernando Esteban

Brazilian President Lula and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez

But the laboratory of ideas that is Venezuela today gives rise not only to the most insane hopes but also to a considerable degree of exasperation, without either of these two feelings being able to make us say definitively that the Bolivarian process is one more abortive revolution, or the framework of the future socialist society to which we aspire.

We will not go over again the advances of the process. They are known and recognized, and have been the subject of many articles. It is rather to the figure of Hugo Chavez that it is necessary to pay attention, because it has to be recognised that he is the essential keystone for an understanding of what has been going on in this country for ten years now. The contradictions of Chavez's personality have a profound impact on a process which, in reality, can only be chaotic. By turns spellbinding by the force of his discourse and the smoothness of his analyses and disconcerting by his alliances against nature with Russia or his volte-faces with Alvaro Uribe, the Colombian president, Chavez troubles, provokes, questions us and in fact, makes it difficult to develop a pertinent analysis of a process that is ceaselessly in movement, and which can from one day to the next render invalidate our view of what is happening with the Bolivarian revolution. And over the last few months, the actions and speeches of the Venezuelan president have been more than a little destabilising.

Liberal economic measures or a Bolivarian NEP?

The economic situation of the country is alarming. So we can understand the attempt of Chavez to re-launch the Venezuelan economy faced with the structural difficulties which confront the country, difficulties often inherited from the previous regime of Punto fijo [1] [1]

For many years, inflation has ranged between 25 and 30 per cent per annum, and the decision in May by president Chavez to increase the wages of civil servants by 30% does not in any way solve the fundamental problem, because the capitalist bourgeoisie regularly increases the price of basic foods by 30 per cent or organizes a lockout so as to worsen shortages - one of the opposition's favourite tools of destabilization.

Agriculture (sugar cane, corn, bananas, rice and stock raising in particular), neglected during the oil adventure, no longer represents any more than 5 per cent of GDP and employs scarcely 10 per cent of the active population. Admittedly the system of communal banks, established four years ago, has made it possible to finance many agricultural cooperatives. Thus in 2007-2008 the surface of cultivated land increased by 20 per cent, and production varies, depending on the crops, between +10 and +25 per cent. But in Venezuela the problem is not to find land to cultivate, but people who are ready to cultivate it. There is indeed more land that has been recovered than peasants to work it.

Imports of food can reach up to 80 per cent of domestic consumption (Venezuelan domestic production is for example unable to satisfy the national consumption of eggs!). The country imports almost all its goods of production, whereas, in addition to oil, Venezuela exports iron (12th world producer), steel, aluminium, bauxite and gold.

The problems eating away at the economy are real, in spite of sustained economic growth of almost 10 per cent per annum and a GDP of around 180 billion dollars, which makes Venezuela the fourth economic power of Latin America [2] [2] So last a June series of measure was announced which were supposed to re-launch the country's economy, but the least that can be said is that they are at best inspired by Keynesianism, and in the worst cases are frankly liberal [3] [3] Among other things, the creation of a fund for strategic productive sectors was announced, financed to the tune of a billion dollars. Half of this was to be provided by Venezuela, while the other 500 million would come from Chinese investment. These billion dollars are destined for both public and private projects, as well as joint public-private enterprises. They will have to be invested in strategic sectors like food production, agro-industry, manufacturing and the production of goods based on Venezuela's own raw materials and basic resources.

Chavez also announced also the re-launching of the "Fabrica Adentro" programme and the creation of more than a thousand Venezuelan enterprises "shared with the workers since shares will be sold to them" (sic). These mixed companies are intended "to develop and raise productivity".

During this announcement, an easing of exchange controls was also proposed for small and medium-sized companies for imports of goods of production, machinery and spare parts for goods of production, in order to speed up necessary imports of goods of production or of raw materials necessary for production.

Finally and especially, as regards taxation, president Chávez announced the elimination of the tax on financial transactions, "a tax which slows down the productive process".

These were so many measures that were taken in order to reassure the middle-classes in view of the forthcoming electoral deadlines in November (municipal and federal

elections), but which risk reinforcing the rate of abstention among popular layers.

But beyond even the measures themselves, it was the choice of the form of the announcement which was the most disturbing. In fact, it was done with great pomp, in the company of approximately 500 entrepreneurs from different sectors of the Venezuelan economy, among whom were Lorenzo Mendoza of the Polar companies (beer), Oswaldo Cisneros of Digitel (telephones), Juan Carlos Escotet of Banesco (banks) and Omar Camero of Televen (television). Chávez reminded us on this occasion that it is the private sector that has the greatest weight in the running of the country's economy.

A whole official current of the government defended these measures and the alliance with the bourgeoisie as a transitional stage, aimed at strengthening Venezuelan industry, employing the term of NEP [4] [4], deforming the meaning of the name of the policy that Lenin and his comrades found themselves obliged to implement, by allowing capitalist investment, in particular in agriculture.
It would quite clearly be an error to analyze the Bolivarian process from a classical point of view, where the definition of the moment when the stage of transition starts refers to the moment when the pillars of the old bourgeois State are destroyed. Admittedly, to try to understand and analyze the characteristics and particularities of this revolution supposes being able to discuss everything, including what might be taboo between us. However it seems difficult to understand in what way these measures, defended by Chavez, permit a strengthening of the process, in the framework of a future stage of transition.

Going back to the nationalisations

Twelve days later, when the most radical wing was wondering about the logic of such economic reforms, Chavez caught everyone on the back foot by announcing the nationalization of the sugar factory of Cumanacoa in the state of Sucre, in the framework of a plan for the development of endogenous production of sugar cane.

This nationalization followed those of Cantv (telephony) and Corpoelec (electricity) which took place in July 2007, of Sidor, the country's principal steel-works in April 2008, of the cement industry, including the French company Lafarge and the Mexican Cemex, in May 2008. Lastly, this nationalization preceded the announcement of the nationalization, in July 2008, of Banco de Venezuela, a subsidiary of the Santander group, which was the second-biggest private bank in the country, with funds of more than 500 million euros. This last nationalization is extremely important, because it should make it possible to fight against the over-indebtedness of the poorest families, engaged in an American model of consumption and thus requiring credit to pay for credit [5] [5].

Admittedly, one can always find something to criticise on the form of these nationalizations, because on each occasion, they have in fact been bought - often at a very high price. Nevertheless they contribute to giving weight to the state productive and financial apparatus, to the detriment of the private sector. In fact, the Venezuelan state is a bourgeois state, with many elements of state capitalism. But the nationalizations undertaken, even if they did not take place within the framework of expropriation, form part of the debate on what the socialism of the 21st century can be, in the framework of a democratic and anti-imperialist revolution.
The elections in the PSUV and the congress of the JPSUV

A few weeks before the nationalization of the sugar factory of Cumanacoa, there had taken place the elections to the leadership of the PSUV [6] [6] Since July 21, 2007, the official date of the creation of the PSUV, more than 4 million Venezuelans have joined it. In all, more than 14,000 battalions (the basic structure) of 300 militants each have been formed. The figures are eloquent and demonstrate the breadth of the movement. The PSUV is becoming an essential tool in the organization of the Venezuelan social movement, even though only 15 per cent of the members take part in a regular way in its activities and only 40 per cent voted during the various internal elections. During the elections to the leadership, only 80,000 members could vote, without anyone knowing on what criteria this choice was established. Chavez dictated on live television a list of 70 names from which it was necessary to choose the 35 people who would comprise the future national leadership. Finally, the 35 members of the national leadership having been elected, Chavez designated, again on live television, the members of the political bureau. Among them there were only members of the government, and no representative of the social or trade-union movement. The vote of the delegates in each battalion took place without there being any control over or verification of the results.

People thought that the PSUV had been completely stitched up, when once again Chavez surprised everyone by announcing that the candidates for the regional governments (federal elections) and the local elections would be designated by the rank and file of the party [7] [7]. More than 2 million members took part in internal elections to choose the candidates, without any hitches. Of course, there are many criticisms that could be made of the way the internal campaign was organised. For example, the fact that all the candidates were forbidden to campaign within the PSUV (in the name of democratic equity) in the last resort served the interests of the best known candidates, members of the government or those standing for re-election. Nevertheless, this internal election is to date one of the most important democratic processes, within a party, in all political history.

Also, the constitution of the Youth of the PSUV (JPSUV) could not pass unnoticed. The founding congress took place from 11-13 September, 2008. It brought together in Puerto Ordaz (in the state of Bolivar), more than 1600 delegates. Over three days, they discussed the future statutes and the general political line of the new organization. As part of this, working

papers were distributed which were supposed to be approved by the congress. Concerning the statutes of the JPSUV, the articles defining the organization did not mention, for example, the terms anti-capitalism or internationalism. Nor did the articles on internal functioning mention currents of opinion, not to mention tendency rights. However, the quality of the debates and the force of youth quickly made it possible to overcome some bureaucratic attempts to leave the statutory proposals unchanged, backed by arguments that the congress should be satisfied with making some "observations". At the end of the day the statutes adopted were more appropriate for an organization which defines itself as revolutionary. Thus article 2 mentions that: "The Youth of the PSUV has as its objective to organize, educate and bring Venezuelan youth into revolutionary political activity aimed at radically transforming society and overcoming all the forms of exploitation, exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination which affect young people, by dynamising and democratizing the day-to-day spaces of young people; to gain equality, freedom and the combative and pro-active participation of all young people. The JPSUV will take up anti-imperialism, the fight against poverty and hunger, direct, combative and pro-active participation, the fight against corruption and bureaucracy, the principle of responsibility and of co-responsibility, the building of socialism as the only possible solution, inventiveness, criticism and self-criticism, co-responsibility with the environment and nature, pluri-culturalism and multi-ethnicity, social justice, the building and strengthening of people's power, solidarity as the central axis of human relations, humanism, respect for the historical memory and the identity of the peoples of our America, internationalism, the Bolivarian ideal, the fight against capitalism and consumption, and ultimately the construction of a truly egalitarian society".

Certainly in the preamble to these same statutes, there is no mention of the relations which link the PSUV and the JPSUV, other than to indicate that "one of the fundamental tasks of the militants of the JPSUV will be the diffusion of the principles of the PSUV, its programme, and the documents concerning its structure." The question of the autonomy of the youth organization is clearly denied. However another battle is shaping up to be crucial within the JPSUV: the election of a democratic leadership, respectful of the various sensibilities which compose the organization. This election was not on the agenda of the founding congress and is being carefully sidelined by a part of the PSUV which would be very happy to get its hands on the youth of the organization. It will be the responsibility of the militants to succeed in imposing this debate, unless Chavez sets the tone first...

The enabling law

A month and half previously, on July 31, 2008, Chavez had once again caught everyone off balance by having 26 decrees published within the framework of the enabling law. To have these decrees adopted, Chavez took advantage the full powers which the constitution gives him. This does in fact enable him to legislate for a definite period (18 months), to emit decrees having the force of law in different important sectors of national life, such as popular participation, the exercise of public office, economic and social questions, science and technology, town and country planning, energy, the transformation of the institutions of state, public finances, security and defence, infrastructures, transport and services.

Thanks to the enabling law, Chavez decided to get adopted the majority of the proposals made at the time of the constitutional reform (except the controversial question of the renewal of the presidential mandate) and which are real social advances. So a law was adopted defending the right of people to have access to goods and services, ensuring the distribution of goods of primary necessity, preventing unreasonable price increases, and protecting people against subliminal advertising. Another concerned housing and the habitat, giving a legal guarantee that disaster victims will receive attention at the time of natural catastrophes, and similar guarantees to those over 60, to the disabled and to people exerting family responsibilities alone. It also makes it possible to receive mortgages of up to 100 per cent of the value of the house. There was a partial reform of the social security law, helping workers who give home care, domestic employees, casual workers and members of co-operatives of production. There was an organic law on food safety and sovereignty which aims to maintain satisfactory levels of self-sufficiency, protects the communities of self-employed fishermen, stimulates national production, restricts the proliferation of monopolies and which finally which allows the state to set the prices of products of primary necessity.

Without even knowing the contents of these laws, the opposition immediately began a campaign to discredit them, treating the presidential decrees as an act of legislative contraband and a coup d'état against the National Constitution. The opposition, by calling for a mobilization to reject the 26 decrees, tried to create a climate of instability and mistrust in an already disturbed population.

Victory of the moderate wing at Sidor.

In fact, confusion is also present in the Sidor factory, and this had unexpected consequences at the time of the recent September trade-union elections. The biggest steelworks in the country, Sidor was nationalized in April. In the factory, which covers nearly 900 hectares, there are almost 20,000 workers employed. Every two years, elections take place between the various trade-union tendencies for the leadership of SUTISS [8] [8], the local trade union. Because of the size of Sidor, the weight of SUTISS is extremely important, since with nationalization it has found itself co-managing the factory. With 20,000 workers, by adding on their families and their close relations, it is nearly 150,000 people whose lives are involved with Sidor. To them, we

would have to add all the subcontractors and the shopkeepers who live thanks to Sidor. In a city of 950,000 inhabitants, you can easily imagine the impact of such a steelworks.

The struggle of the workers of Sidor and the conquest of nationalization showed that a working class is capable of uniting and being strong, in spite of internal divisions. This nationalization had repercussions right up to the top of the state, since the Minister of Labour, Jose Ramon Rivero, was replaced by Roberto Hernández, an old militant of the PCV (Venezuelan Communist Party). All of which means that the trade-union elections were this year of exceptional importance. There were seven lists in competition. Among them was Alianza sindical, headed by Jose Mélendez, a comrade of Marea Socialista. In spite of a high-quality campaign and a permanent presence on the terrain, Alianza sindical did not succeed in winning the elections, finishing in second position with 697 votes, while the list Movimiento Revolucionario Orinoco obtained 1,393 votes. The other lists finished far behind, with less than 400 votes. It should be noted that the outgoing trade-union leadership obtained only 152 votes. So, the engagement of Jose Mélendez in favour of nationalization during the three months of intense struggle that Sidor experienced, as well as a clear position on the question of workers' control, was not enough.

While adopting a much more equivocal attitude on the question of workers' control, the Movimiento Revolucionario Orinoco list strongly positioned itself as representing change. Not having had any representative in the outgoing trade-union leadership, contrary to Alianza sindical, MRO surfed on the effect of the nationalization to claim the leadership of the trade union, in the name of a new start. Whereas the supporters of the list had not been very involved in the struggle over the previous months, they were able to bring towards them a number of workers who were attracted by the idea of a change in the trade union at the point where a new era was opening up because of nationalization. In this sense, the results of the elections in SUTISS are quite symbolic of the questionings which traverse the population.

The "pitiyankees" and the American danger

But in spite of its hesitations, the process continues to advance, and continues to frighten its detractors. So the most recent actions of the opposition are not to be taken lightly.

For the first time, various officers of the Venezuelan army were arrested for conspiracy on September 17, 2008. According to Jose Vicente Rangel, ex-Vice-president of the Republic, they planned to attack the presidential plane in the air, during one of its many flights. Several phone conversations discussing this and leaving no doubt about the intentions of the officers were recorded and immediately broadcast on the "La Hojilla" programme on Venezolana de Television. Furthermore, during their first interrogations, the prisoners admitted their participation in this new plan of destabilization. Vice-admiral Millán Millán, who acted as coordinator of the conspiracy, and General Báez Torrealbaint also acknowledged having had contacts abroad.

Still according to Rangel, civilian contacts have also been discovered, responsible in particular for collecting money for the conspirators, and linked to the Mexican far Right. Rangel also accused Juan Manuel Santos, Minister of Defence of Colombia, of leading the conspiracy from Colombia, denouncing his permanent contacts with the Venezuelan opposition and with retired Venezuelan officers.

Lastly, strong suspicions weigh on the United States for possible logistical support. In fact, there is not much chance of anyone believing that it was by accident that the US Fourth Fleet [9] [9], with 24 warships of various kinds, was in Venezuelan waters. In the same way, the CIA is said to have been very active in this affair, through various advisers of the American State Department, such as Roger Noriega [10] [10], Otto Reich [11] [11] and John Walters.

These last events demonstrate the still unceasing activity of the Venezuelan opposition, the "pitiyankees" [12] [12] who have not given up the idea of overthrowing Chavez, since the democratic road clearly seems to prevent them getting rid of him. They echo the sad events in Bolivia where America uses the same methods, namely financial and logistical support to the local opposition in order to try and overthrow the elected government. In such a context, it is not surprising to see that at only a few hours' interval, Morales and Chavez expelled their respective American ambassadors.

Chavez annoys them, the constant American pressure shows it once again. His ceaseless verbal attacks against US imperialism, his rapprochements with Iran and Russia are so many blows against American hegemony. But beyond that, it is really the model of society that is being built in Venezuela which annoys the Americans. Admittedly, the process is chaotic, is still too subject to the decisions of Chavez and sometimes too timid in its progress. But all the measures taken must be accompanied by a struggle, so that, for example, the nationalized companies are managed democratically by the workers. There is no possible transition if there is not a deepening of the measures taken in favour of the workers. But that is not only the responsibility of the state and of Chavez. The Venezuelan president will not reduce his influence himself. That will only happen if the workers are able to unite, to unite the working class in order to be an independent force. Thus, the future of the Bolivarian Revolution is not only the responsibility of Hugo Chavez, but will depend more on the ability of the workers themselves to be the main actor, impossible to circumvent, of the process.

Footnotes

[1] In 1958, the dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez was overthrown. The Fourth Republic was founded. This was the

beginning of the system of Punto Fijo, where the two principal parties, the COPEI (Social Christian) and Accion Democratica (a member of the Socialist International) shared power alternately. The policies followed were clearly of a liberal type. Punto Fijo ended in 1998 with the arrival of Chavez in power and the adoption of a new constitution.

[2] All these figures come from the annual economic reports of the IMF and the World Bank.

[3] Speech by Hugo Chavez in the Hotel ALBA on June 11, 2008.

[4] New Economic policy.

[5] In 2007, 75 per cent of Venezuelan bank credits were consumer loans. The remaining 25 per cent were credits for investment.

[6] United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

[7] Speech by Hugo Chavez in the Teresa Careno Theatre on May 10, 2008

[8] United Union of the Workers of the Steel Industry

[9] Based at Mayport in Florida, the Fourth Fleet is made up of ships, planes and submarines of the US Navy. Created in 1943 during the Second World War, the Fourth Fleet had the role of making the South Atlantic safe against the incursions of German submarines. Officially, its re-establishment aims to demonstrate the will of Washington to increase security in the Southern hemisphere. In fact it is a response to decisions taken by certain Latin-American nations to reinforce their defence system, in particular around their sites of production of hydrocarbons, as with like Brazil and Venezuela.

[10] Roger Noriega is the US ambassador to the Organization of the American States. It was necessary to find a reliable man to deal with the OAS. And for that the choice of Bush fell on the principal Latin-American collaborator of the quasi-pensioner Jesse Helms, champion of the blockade against Cuba. Roger Noriega is a mediocre functionary who has had, for a long time, a disastrous reputation in diplomatic circles... but he has, apart from that, well verified far-right convictions when it comes to Cuba or Haiti.

[11] George W. Bush called on Otto Reich to impose his order in Latin America. In spite of the protests of all the Latin-American states and of the US Senate, he made him his special emissary on the continent. This man has a heavy past: planner of destabilization, conceiver of propaganda, protector of terrorists and organizer of coups d'état. Moreover, combining business with pleasure, he promotes the interests of his personal clients, like Bacardi and Lockheed.

[12] A contraction of the French adjective "small" and the term "Yankee", designating Venezuelans who are in the pay of the Americans.

To the end, he was still working to do the right thing

29 September 2008, by Bill Onasch

Camejo was born in to a wealthy Venezuelan family. His mother, Elvia, who had family and friend ties in the USA, and was concerned about health care in Venezuela at the time, chose to have Peter in a hospital in the Bronx. As a result Camejo began life as a dual citizen of the USA and Venezuela. Peter spent his earliest days in Venezuela. When Elvia divorced his father, Daniel, when Peter was seven, he relocated with his mother to the U.S. where he resided the rest of his life.

Peter was an exceptional student in high school and achieved a perfect SAT score in math. He went on to attend the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology for three years. But soon interest in the civil rights movement, and later radical politics, began to distract him from academic pursuits.

He became involved in the newly formed Young Socialist Alliance, an independent formation that evolved in to the youth group of the Socialist Workers Party. I first met Peter in 1963, when he came to Chicago to speak for the YSA. He was already well on his way to becoming, in my opinion, the best agitational speaker our generation produced.

He put these speaking skills at work in many venues. He became a well-known student leader at UC Berkeley–where he was enrolled from 1965 to his expulsion, ordered by Governor Ronald Reagan, in 1967 for "unauthorized use of a microphone." Reagan listed him as one of the "ten most dangerous Californians." The only evidence cited for this remarkable assertion was that he was "present at all antiwar demonstrations."

The height of Camejo's speaking abilities was reached during his 1976 campaign as the SWP's presidential candidate. He traveled 150,000 miles, speaking at dozens of campaign events. He even managed to get the last word in on William F Buckley's television talk show. With no funds

available for television or direct mail advertising, and only able to get on the ballot in eighteen states, Camejo racked up an impressive vote total of over 90,000.

Camejo also produced some serious writing, such as Racism, Revolution, Reaction, 1861-1877: The Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction; Liberalism, Ultraleftism or Mass Action; Who Killed Jim Crow: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement and It's Lessons for Today; and How to Make a Revolution in the United States.

Years later, after Peter applied his mathematical prowess as a stock broker, first with traditional Wall Street firms, later with his own enterprise, he wrote, The SRI Advantage: Why Socially Responsible Investing Has Outperformed Financially.

For reasons not clear to party members at the time, Camejo parted company from the central leadership of the SWP in 1980. He eventually became a leader in California's Green Party, describing himself as a watermelon–green on the outside, red on the inside. He made three campaigns for Governor as a Green and in 2004 was Ralph Nader's vice-presidential pick.

I certainly had my differences with parts of Peter's evolution from socialist agitator to watermelon. But the contributions he made to building social movements and the socialist movement for decades are enduring and, to the end, he was still working to do the right thing. He will be missed. Our sympathy goes out to his family, friends, and comrades.

European social movement faces challenges

26 September 2008, by Esther Vivas, Josep María Antentas

Handing out the ESF issue of Internationalen with its beautiful cover.

From its first meeting in November 2002 in Florence to today, the ESF has simultaneously achieved a lot and very little. The social forums are not an aim in themselves, but an instrument to serve discussion and joint campaigns and mobilizations. They only have meaning if they help us to advance in this direction. The forums have not themselves created lasting convergences or the development of concrete struggles, but they have had a general positive influence in this direction. The great merit of the ESF process has been to affirm a space of convergence in the struggles against neoliberal policies on a European scale. Although weak and without firm roots, they have been a reference point for most of the social forces opposed to these policies. Something that has not been the case, for example, with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), caught up in its policy of "critical support" to the neoliberal logic of the European Union (EU).

The international context in which the ESF has been developed has changed from its beginnings, during the growth of the global justice movement. The latter grew rapidly until the mobilizations against the G8 in Genoa in July 2001 and the attacks of September 11 in New York. After some initial hesitations, in which the movement seemed to lose ground, the new stage was characterized by the centrality acquired by the fight against "permanent global war", whose zenith was the protests of 2003 against the invasion of Iraq. This was the scene in which the first ESF in November 2002 in Florence took place.

Starting from its second meeting in Paris in November 2003, the ESF developed in a phase characterized by the loss of centrality of the international mobilizations for global justice and of its unifying capacity, in a context of sharpening and multiplication of concrete struggles against neoliberalism and of greater sectional dispersion and "nationalization" of these struggles. A scene, really, marked by a crisis of perspective on the part of the global justice movement and the World Social Forum in which the ESF is framed. Later meetings in London in 2004 and Athens in 2006 showed the continuity of the process and its rooting in new countries, but also its difficulties in continuing to develop and move forward. After the novelty effect and the initial impulse, in recent years the dynamic of the ESF shows symptoms of decline, routinism and loss of concrete usefulness.

Today, the great challenge of the European social movements is to be able to articulate an answer on a continental scale to the neoliberal logic of European integration and to measures like the "Returns Directive" [harmonizing EU procedures for the expulsion of "illegally staying" immigrants] or the as yet unapproved Working Time Directive raising the limit of the working week to 65 hours. The success of the first ESF generated enormous expectations on its potential on this terrain. In fact too many. After the international day against the war in Iraq, February 15. 2003, called by this first meeting of the forum, which brought millions of people on the streets, the great challenge was to take a real step forward in the continental articulation of the struggles. The propagandistic formula used at the time was "to make February 15 social". But the subsequent advances in this area have been limited, generating a certain sensation of frustration and stagnation. The Iraq war had a centralizing effect that does not exist in other areas.

The logic of governmental policies is the same across the EU and obeys the agreements taken in this framework. But the rate and dynamics of application of the reforms are different in each country. In recent

years, the social resistance to neoliberalism has been considerable. It is nevertheless still very defensive (with some precise exceptions), and often ends in defeats or precarious victories and are developed in an unfavourable context. All this makes the initiation of coordinated initiatives on European scale difficult. Nevertheless, there has been important progress in some areas, some linked to the dynamic of the ESF and others not, like the harmonization of European networks and campaigns on specific subjects like days (many still symbolic and limited) of simultaneous mobilization in several countries, for example that impelled by the student movement against the European Higher Education Area or determined "Euro strikes" in some companies.

We need to advance then in this "Europeanization" of the resistance. In fact, the European social movements have the double challenge of deepening their local roots and fortifying themselves "from below" and, in parallel, creating forms of national and international articulation, that avoid the isolation of social resistance through spaces like forums, concrete campaigns and networks. Florence was a spectacular and promising start on a road that has been difficult and complex, with advances and backward movements, winding and not very linear: the road to the construction of a Europe of the peoples opposed to the logic of the capital.

**This article first appeared in the newspaper "Público", on 21/09/2008.*

Facing the food crisis: what alternatives?

25 September 2008, by Esther Vivas

Coconut palm used to convert it into bio-diesel

As we face this situation, what alternatives are being proposed? Is it possible to adopt different models of food production, distribution and consumption? Before covering these questions, let's address some of the principal structural problems which have generated the situation.

In the first place, hunger can be traced to the pillage of community's natural resources. Earth, water, seeds – all have been privatized, no longer public goods. Food production has been displaced from family farming to agricultural industry, and has been transformed into a means of capital enrichment. The fundamental value of food, to nourish us, has been diminished to its market value. For this reason, although there is presently more food than ever before, people are denied access to the abundance, unable to pay ever-increasing prices.

If farmers have no lands with which to feed themselves, nor excess crops to sell, then in whose hands is the world's food? It lies in the power of agricultural multinationals, who control all the links of the commercialized chain. Of course, this is not simply a problem of natural resources, but of production models. At present, agriculture can be described as intensive, as 'drug' or 'oil' -dependent, kilometric, de-localized, industrial – in short, the antithesis of an agriculture that respects environment and people.

Secondly, in addition to usurped resources, we face neoliberal policies, applied over decades to favor greater commercial liberalization, the privatization of public services, monetary transfer from South to North (with external debts incurred), etc. The World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank (WB), International Monetary Found (IMF), among others, have been some of the principal architects of the policies.

These policies have allowed Southern markets to open up by favoring subsidized products, which are sold at prices lower than their costs, and further, by permitting prices even lower than those of the autoctonous products, local farming has been effectively finished off. These policies have reduced diversified growing to a small-scale industry beside that of mono-cultivation aimed at exportation.

In third place, we should note the monopoly of food distribution chains. Megasupermarkets like Wal-Mart, Tesco or Carrefour dictate the prices of food products, both what is paid to the farmers, and what is paid by the consumers. In Spain, for example, the average disparity between original and purchase price is 400%, with distributors reaping the greatest benefit. On the other hand, the farmer is receiving less and less pay for his goods, and the consumer is paying more and more for his purchases.

Proposals

However, there are alternatives. As natural resources are reappropriated, agricultural sovereignty must be reclaimed – farming communities must regain control of their agricultural policies. Earth, seeds, water – all must be returned to the hands of the farmers, that they might feed themselves and sell their products to their local communities. This requires an integral agrarian reform of both property and production, and the nationalization of natural resources.

Governments must support small-scale production, thereby allowing soils to naturally enrich and renew; saving non-renewable resources; reducing global warming; and allowing independence with respect to human nourishment. At present, we all remain dependent on an international market and on the interests of the agricultural industry.

Returning agriculture into the hands of the family farm is the only route to guaranteeing universal access to foodstuffs. Public policies must

promote agriculture that is autoctonous, sustainable, organic, and free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). For products which are not cultivated locally, the instruments of fair trade must be implemented at an international level. We must protect agro-ecosystems and biodiversity, seriously threatened by the present agricultural model.

In response to neo-liberal policies, we must generate mechanisms and regulations of intervention, which stabilize market prices, control imports, stabilize quotas, prohibit dumping, and in moments of over-production, create specialized reserves for food shortages. At the national level, countries must be independent in deciding how self-sufficient their production will be, and must prioritize the food production for domestic use.

Along the same lines, we must reject those policies imposed by WB, IMF and WTO, the treaties of free bilateral and regional trade, as well as prohibiting financial speculation, the trading of food futures, and the large-scale production of agrofuels. It's necessary to end with the North-South domination mechanisms such as the external debt and to fight agro-corporate power.

In front of large-scale distribution monopolies, we must demand regulation and transparency throughout the chain of production and commercialization. Large-scale distribution has highly negative effects on farmers, suppliers, and workers, on environment, and on consumption. For this reason, we must seek alternatives at the stage of purchase: going to local markets, forming part of organic agricultural cooperatives, supporting short-circuit commercialization – with a positive effect on the land and a direct relationship with those who work it.

We are obliged to make advances, too, toward responsible consumption. For example, were the whole world to consume as does a United States citizen, we would require five land-locked planets just to satisfy the needs of our world population. And yet, personal change is not sufficient if it goes unaccompanied by collective political action grounded in a solidarity between country and city. If lands are left without resources or populations, eventually there will be no one remaining to work them, and no one to feed us all. The building of a flourishing rural world directly concerns the city-dweller.

And finally, we must establish alliances between the various sectors affected by capitalist globalization, and we must take action politically. Healthy food will not be possible without legislation to prohibit transgenics, or indiscriminate logging practices. Neither will stop if those multinationals who exploit the environment are not stopped – and for all of this to happen, we need legislation which addresses and prioritizes the needs of people and of ecosystems, instead of economic incentive.

A paradigm shift in food production, distribution and consumption will only be possible with broader political, economic and social transformation. We must create alliances among the world's oppressed: farmers, workers, women, immigrants, and youths – if we are to achieve the "other possible world" to which all social movements aspire.

**Article published at América Latina en Movimiento (ALAI), nº433. Translated into English by Danielle Hill.*

From the Caucasus to the Balkans - an unstable world order

24 September 2008, by Catherine Samary

n U.S. President George W. Bush and President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia

The offensive launched against South Ossetia on August 7 by Georgian president Mikhail Saakachchvili is generally described, at the very least, as a blunder – because of the crushing Russian military victory. However, according to the Canadian researcher Michel Chossudovsky, "it is obvious that the Georgian attack of last August 7 in South Ossetia had been carefully planned". He reminds us, indeed, that "the attacks against South Ossetia occurred one week after the United States and Georgia finished their imposing military exercises (held from 15 to 31 July, 2008). The attacks were also preceded by important summit meetings organized under the aegis of the GUAM [Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldavia], a regional military alliance sponsored by the United States and NATO", which met at the beginning of July. Its strategic objective is the "protection" of the energy routes that circumvent Russia in order to weaken it.

The links established between the Georgian leader and the United States, in particular since the "Rose Revolution" of 2003 which brought him to power, and the proven presence of United States (and Israeli) military forces in Georgia do indeed rule out the idea that the offensive of Tbilisi was not known about in Washington... The prospect of Georgia and the Ukraine joining NATO, although the question was postponed at the recent summit meeting of the Alliance in April, and is due to be discussed again in December, would further accentuate the loss of power of Russia in a moribund Community of

Independent States (CIS) where the United States no longer hesitates to intervene directly. Except that, in this instance, Washington obviously did not choose to become involved on the terrain of military confrontation. The defeat inflicted on the Georgian Army obviously damages the credibility of its military-political support to it. The only immediate military effect of the Russian offensive was the recall of Georgian troops mobilized in Iraq so that they could defend their country (with 2000 soldiers, Georgia is the third military occupying force in Iraq, after the United States and the Britain)... The Georgian attempt to retake control of South Ossetia by force on August 7, 2008, upset an unstable equilibrium. The riposte by Moscow, whose troops have been present, in particular within the "forces of interposition", recognized by the United Nations, since the conflicts of the 1990s, went well beyond the control of these areas. It marks a turning-point in its ability to defend its great power ambitions vis-à -vis its "near neighbours", concerning in particular the control of the energy routes.

Kosovo is not Ossetia, they repeat interminably, in a logic of double standards

The contortions that are made in order to say that the bombardments by Moscow and the recognition of the independence of Ossetia and Abkhazia don't have anything in common with the (humanitarian?) "strikes" by NATO and the recognition of the independence of Kosovo are painful to behold, whatever the obvious differences, generally exaggerated by what were the dominant media stereotypes. In reality, we should on the contrary take time to reconsider, with a game of mirrors, the comparison between the Balkan and Caucasian conflicts. We would see at work there, essentially, obvious double standards, concerning many common points.

The USSR was not Yugoslavia. But here and there the decomposition of the social system and the federation produced bloody conflicts, in places where minority communities were trapped within new "unitary" nation-states which used the dominant role of the ethnic-national majority to control a territory and its wealth. And in the absence of such a majority, Bosnia-Herzegovina was subjected to a terrifying dismemberment by its neighbours...

In the recent conflict, Moscow has "borrowed" from Washington its discourse and its methods - without having, obviously, the strength of a world imperialism -, with similarities that go further than many people would care to admit or remember... One and the other power claimed to protect (and in fact manipulated for their own ends) the peoples who were threatened by the emergence of new independent states, making short shrift of "international law". But it is as false for the one as for the other to affirm that the independence of their respective "protégés", was the basic, obvious and initial choice. This choice - no matter what one thinks of the methods used - comes from the populations concerned, in Kosovo as in Ossetia or Abkhazia. It was not inevitable, but due to the policies of domination inflicted on the peoples concerned. But the proclamation and then the recognition of independence, for the Albanians of Kosovo as for the South Ossetians, is not yet sovereignty and even less wellbeing. In both cases, they will be confronted with their powerful protectors...

The scenarios were not the same, but the substance is close. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, autonomous regions of Georgia, saw their statute called into question by Tbilisi at the time of the independence of Georgia at the beginning of the 1990s - as Kosovo saw its status called into question by Belgrade (as also did the Serbs in Croatia by their regression to the status of a threatened minority). But the West backed the "democrat" Yeltsin, keeping silent about his dirty war in Chechnya. (The Chechens and Kosovo only benefited from a statute of autonomy, and did not belong to the cases where the right of self-determination was recognized. But Belgrade never conducted in Kosovo the kind of dirty war that there was in Chechnya...) Boris Yeltsin did not recognize the independence proclaimed by Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the abolition of their statutes by the Georgian government in 1992. But in the framework of the freezing of the conflict, the UN and the OSCE gave him full powers to include his armed forces within the "forces of interposition" in these secessionist regions, after extremely violent confrontations in1991-1993 left several thousand dead and hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Moscow exploited these conflicts in order to establish its own bases, at the demand of the Abkhazians (Muslims representing less than 20% of the population the territory of their self-proclaimed republic, which experienced a vast ethnic cleansing of non-Abkhazians) and of the Ossetians (Orthodox Christians speaking a language close to Persian). But although it made the choice of legitimising and giving practical support to the separatist forces, it never supported the project of unification of the (North and South) Ossetians. And like Washington in Kosovo until recently, Moscow was quite satisfied with the freezing of the conflict, without recognizing the independence of the secessionist republics, but with its troops present on the ground with the approval of the UN: such a posture enabled it to present itself as a defender of frontiers and of international law alongside Belgrade, against the independence of Kosovo in February 2008...

Did Moscow set a trap Tbilisi by "letting it believe" that it was choosing the cause of Belgrade against that of Ossetia? This is at least a zone of uncertainty concerning Russia's choice. In the same way, the US military staffs were far from being unanimous on the appropriateness of the Georgian offensive, which they were not ready to support militarily. That leaves a possible ambiguity in the "signals" received in Tbilisi, leaving a quite considerable degree of autonomous decision to the Georgian leader: it is because he himself was

confronted with an increasing contestation of his regime, and was undoubtedly convinced of Western and in particular US support (after the military exercises in July) faced with a fait accompli, that Mikhail Saakachvili sought by this crusade against the secessionist regions, to regain a little popularity.

The societies behind the geo-strategy

We have to go back to what is generally passed over in silence in the commentaries centred on the geo-strategic stakes: what is happening on the social and societal level… It was already the combination of a "unitary" and racist policy against the autonomous regions with the galloping corruption of the regime of Shevarnadze (an ex-Communist who was in power in the newly independent state) which was the internal background to the "Rose Revolution" of 2003. That the opposition (as in the other "coloured revolutions" - and the one, without colour, in Belgrade in 2000) was massively financed by the CIA with the help of a pro-Western discourse, does not at all detract from the role played by real popular mobilizations in these pseudo-revolutions. However the aspect they had of being superficial and manipulated from outside, explains the fact that the corruption of the new "parvenus" was in every case on a massive scale, reinforced by the clientelist policies of privatization. So the "democrats", a term used to designate those whom the western powers support, were nowhere really solidly established…

Eduard Shevarnadze had been obliged to accept the Russian presence in the separatist regions – because, it was said, it had been legitimated by the UN and the OSCE… But the rise of a strong regime in Moscow with Putin in the new millennium and Russia's re-found economic growth since 1998 inflected the choices of Washington: the separatist regions were the Trojan horse of Moscow in this strategic zone where the oil and gas pipelines circumventing Russia were to pass… Mikhail Saakachvili obtained openings in exchange for sending Georgian troops to Iraq. But that did not give him internal legitimacy. The elections of November 2007, where probable fraud was backed up by repression, remain disputed by the opposition.

The complications of the tensions with the secessionist regions and Moscow were accompanied by the reinforcement of the links with the United States in the context of recurring politico-financial scandals and - since 2004 – an accentuation of the neo-liberal course: privatization of more than 1800 enterprises between 2004 and 2008, with projects of extending this logic towards the universities and the health sector… As everywhere (and as in Russia, in particular where the same type of social policies are being implemented) the great mass of the population finds itself losing out. To attenuate dissatisfaction, the Georgian regime (there again, as in Moscow, with other means…) sought to regain popularity by rushing into a warmongering and nationalist course … A careful examination of the Georgian political scene after this fiasco will undoubtedly be the source of a reversal of alliances - as after the coloured revolutions of Ukraine and elsewhere…

The uncertainties of a warlike and socially regressive world order

Moscow declares its indifference to the retaliatory measures that are being threatened - the current crisis of the WTO and the IMF, the United States bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, visible divisions among the member states of the EU over the independence of Kosovo and the integration of the Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, give it room for manoeuvre to push forward its strategic aims: to neutralize Georgia, to block the projects of oil and gas routes circumventing Russia, to advance the pawns of the Russian multinationals in the Caucasus (as is being done in the Balkans), to use the energy weapon to influence the policy options of the countries that are dependent on Russian resources and supply routes.

But the offensive of Moscow can also stiffen against it a certain number of governments (concerning among other things the enlargement of NATO or the recognition of Kosovo).

And Russia has also lost out where Washington has been able to make progress on the points blocking its strategy of "security": the United States did in fact exploit the Russian offensive to exert pressure on the Polish government which – like that of the Czech Republic -, was confronted with strong popular opposition to the presence of US anti-missile shields directed clearly against Russia. The pact which has just been signed in Warsaw (often compared to the episode of the Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962…) could have disastrous consequences "for Europe and for the entire planet", says William Engdahl.

At the same time, the attempt by Washington to counterpose to the Russia-Armenia-Iran axis a Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkey axis is far from being consolidated: Azerbaijan, in particular, seeking to placate Moscow (and to keep, after the bloody conflict of 1988-1994, High-Karabagh with its Armenian majority) is not a candidate for NATO membership. It is the only country able to transport its oil to European markets by circumventing Russia via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyan pipeline - BTC- which crosses Georgia and Turkey. The BTC was not affected by the Russian bombardments, but a railway bridge was destroyed in Georgia, forcing British Petroleum (BP), the main operator of the oilfields of Azerbaijan, to stop transporting oil by rail tanker wagons towards the Black Sea. As a result there has been an increase in the use of the busy Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline which passes through Russia…

The Nabucco project (also supposed to transport Caspian gas towards Europe by avoiding Russia) is at a standstill in Baku. while Moscow is building a competitor pipeline…

Many alliances are as uncertain as the result of the elections in the United

States...

A new multipolar order is emerging. But it continues to propagate war and social regression, as well as national oppression; and the Putin regime (like China) does not represent any kind of progressive alternative, neither on the social level nor from the point of view of democracy.

Small states and great powers in evolving relations of property...

The search for cultural and political recognition in the face of the conflicting dominations by the great empires (Persia, Byzantium, then the Ottoman Empire - against Russia) was expressed for the Orthodox Christians of Georgia by a "voluntary union" with Russia at the beginning of the 19th century; then it turned against the Russification imposed by Moscow and against a certain Great-Russian racism ...

But when it sought in its turn to affirm its sovereignty over a territory where other communities lived, Georgian nationalism itself became "unitary" and dominating. And this is why, in conflict with the Georgians, the Ossetians (who are also Orthodox Christians, but speak a form of Persian) were the first historical points of support for Moscow in its conquest of the Caucasus in the 18th century, with the foundation on their territory of the imperial city of Vladikavkaz ("gateway to the Caucasus") - a conquest which was completed a century later by the submission of the neighbouring Chechen people.

But marriages between Ossetians and Georgians were possible, even frequent – a certain Stalin was the son of such a mixed couple...It is the dictatorial political choices involved in building national states on the backs of other peoples, it is the inequalities and injustices that are the cause of the conflicts... When he exercised power in the Kremlin, Stalin manipulated the national questions for which he had responsibility in the USSR, with the aim both of establishing Great-Russian domination (denounced by Lenin shortly before his death) and of selecting peoples reputed to be "loyal", or on the contrary suspected of contesting or subverting the regime in power. The distribution of territories and the deportation of entire peoples (like the Crimean Tatars), the organisation of the autonomous republics and of national rights made it possible to divide, granting some subordinates rights while governing in a dictatorial way. The Ossetians were all the more favourable to Moscow in that they had been mainly Bolsheviks, faced with a Georgia that was at the same time Menshevik and unitary. Nevertheless, while granting a statute of autonomy to the Ossetians, the Kremlin also exploited the mountainous barrier of the Caucasus in order to integrate North Ossetia into the Russian federation, and South Ossetia into Georgia.

But the internal borders within the USSR (sometimes having a certain basis in history, or aiming at weakening such or such a suspect nationality) would be transformed into real state frontiers after the break-up of the USSR, proclaimed by Boris Yeltsin. Minorities would be trapped within states which all the more denied their rights in that they appeared to be Trojan horses of Moscow. The dissolution of the USSR was in actual fact the affirmation of the Federation of Russia by Yeltsin at the time when he launched the liberal shock therapy, in 1991... The control of the new states implied also the control of a territory, of its wealth, and of currency reserves resulting from foreign trade - when there were resources, in particular energy, to export. The Russian Federation held the bulk of the energy resources, which it would be able to "cash in on" at a high price to its former partners...

In what architecture of relations of property and international relations would the new oligarchs who profited from the opaque financial operations of capitalist restoration situate themselves? The new "elected leaders" would manipulate nationalism both against Moscow and as a substitute for a protective social programme - while adopting a threatening attitude against all the minorities which might look towards Moscow for protection... Clientelism and corruption became general, not in fact excepting any of the new regimes. But under the Yeltsin era, the oligarchs tended to set up strongholds against the central government – which even lost its power to make them pay taxes... The reign of Putin meant the re-establishment of a hierarchy and of a strong central power (demonstrated both by the pulling into line of the oligarchs and by the second dirty war of Chechnya), which were sources of a certain popularity. But at the same time that enables him to impose internal market relations, i.e. a new labour code and prices of basic goods that the Medef (the French employers' organisation) would applaud with both hands...

"Resistance is the only way"

22 September 2008, by Foad Rad, Michael Löwy

Foad Rad had a chat with Michael Löwy, veteran of the Fourth International, the socialist world movement, and a well known sociologist about climate change and the need for a new world system.

You mention that global warming is accelerating at a much faster pace than earlier climate models have indicated. How much faster?

* It is difficult to estimate exactly, what we do know is that global warming is a fact and that it is accelerating ever faster. Today we also know that many of the scenarios presented in IPCC's reports will take place, not in the year 2100 or even 2050. No: these scenarios will take place much sooner than that.

* We can already see several obvious examples of ecosystems collapsing. Global warming is passing several critical points which heighten the risk of it moving into an uncontrolled, self-reproducing mode; Runaway climate change.

What stance should the left movement take, considering this situation?

* The first thing we must do is reach out to the public with the message that global warming is a fact that it will manifest itself during the coming decades and, therefore, we cannot wait any longer and must act now.

* The second thing we have to do is take a stance on how the climate is developing. Since there already is a risk that things can derail, we will have to put our demands much higher than the goals set by EU, the Stern Report, the Kyoto treaty and other goals set by bourgeois governments. It is very important to tell people this so that they realise that the climate goals of the ruling class are not enough to prevent a human and, primary, planetary disaster.

Should we not support the climate policies of current governments?

* Today's governments are simply incapable of preventing the suicide which capitalism is paving the way for. However, this is not due to lack of collective will on behalf of the ruling class or lack of understanding. Rather it is because the capitalist system does not allow limitations. That makes ecological and social adaptation impossible.

* Profit is the main driving force behind capitalism and this requires unlimited expansion, unlimited accumulation and commodification. Those a few, but essential parts of the continuous reproduction of the system. Aside from all other technicalities, this is the ideological aspect of the climate issue. Hence, we should therefore draw the ideological conclusion that the bourgeoisie cannot handle the seriousness and the responsibility which the climate issue contains.

* The cause of the problem is not perverted aspects of bourgeoisie governments, but rather the capitalist system itself. That is something the public must become aware of. What they must also become aware of is that there is an alternative, not an abstract one, but something very concrete and conceivable, ecosocialism, which is the common and democratic control of production for social needs and within ecological boundaries. This is nothing mystical or Utopian, in the negative sense of that word, but a necessity.

How should the left establish ecosocialism as an alternative to today's system?

* Even if the goal is an ecosocialist society, we must remember that this is not relevant during the initial stage, because people do not usually lend their support to what they construe as abstractions, but rather mobilise behind real changes in their everyday life. Therefore it is important to support concrete demands from the public which go against the capitalist logic. Political parties do not necessarily have to be the driving force, but people who put forth concrete demands from their own experience.

* We cannot mobilise people for an ecosocialist revolution now, but instead we begin with making concrete and direct demands to those in charge in order to decrease global warming. For instance, if a government does not support international climate treaties, the first priority is to remove the government since it ignores climate science, and replace it with one that does not, even if it is a bourgeois one.

* In Australia, mobilisation from the people achieved exactly that. Through demonstrations, gathering upwards of 150 000 people, the Liberal government, who had not signed the Kyoto treaty, was replaced. This represented progress even though the replacement was a right-wing Labor government.

* We must hence fight for concrete local demands, as in Ecuador where the indigenous people stopped oil companies pumping up the oil, or like the Parisians demanding free public transportation, or peasants in Brazil fighting deforestation of the rain forest. All such demands are important and must be supported. With every victory we have to put forth new demands in a dynamic process, which increasingly challenges the capitalist logic.

How should a globally weak left go about accomplishing this?

* The climate struggle will not primarily be an ideological struggle between capitalism and socialism, rather popular concrete demands in opposition to powerful economic interests.

* For example, in Brazil the different rural constellations (such as family agriculture and smaller peasant corporations) stand against the multinationals and the commercialisation of agriculture, something which has strengthened the antagonism and actually led to the killing of several peasants. This is a struggle we must support in order to prevent further deforestation and money being ploughed into the ethanol industry, when farmers can and want to produce ecologically. Even if the opposition is not socialist, it is a struggle containing several clearly anti-capitalist aspects.

* The struggle must therefore be fought from already-existing antagonism and conflict between local people and globalised capital. In all these spontaneous struggles, where people challenge powerful interests, there is a tendency towards collective organising. This experience of the struggle is the only hope we have today.

Today we see all governments in advanced capitalist states talk about the climate and their desire to solve the climate issue, and at the same time making huge investments which

strengthens fossil-fuel society's grip on us. How can we unravel the climate policy of the ruling class?

* Bourgeois governments deal with this crisis in a systematically erroneous way and this is something inevitable. Also, it is not possible to place hope in the hands of the green parties because they do not perceive the fundamental contradiction between capitalism's insatiable thirst for fossil fuel and ecological crisis. That is something which manifests itself in their policies, which do not reach further than eco-reformist proposals. Aside from this, the green parties are often used as an alibi by bourgeoisie governments.

* The only way is to visualise the already-existing contradictions, but I do not think there is a universal way of approaching this. Every country and each situation has its specific prerequisites, different needs and demands that must be satisfied. In Brazil we have deforestation, and burning of the Amazon rain forest, which contributes to enormous greenhouse gas emissions and the decimation of one of Earth's greatest carbon dioxide sinks. Which ever way one looks at it, the situation in the Amazon forest is acute and may inevitably lead to human disaster.

* But at the same time awareness increases among people who put ever harder pressure on passive governments who talk beautifully about preservation of the rain forest but, by agreeing contracts with commercial companies, in reality are part of deforestation.

* Today this issue unites the peasant movement, Christian churches, the local population, different left and environmental organisations and even international organisations that worry about this catastrophic development. All these have joined forces to coordinate the struggle against the agrobusiness, and here we have a struggle where concrete political demands are being made.

* The attempts to save the Amazon forest could fail since there are powerful parties such as cattle raisers, commercial soy bean growers, and ethanol producers. They are being challenged. However, the peasants have no alternative to challenging these powerful interests.

* With enough support they can turn the policy in a different direction. This is just an example of how we can create strong enough bonds between different forces so as to the people organize to change the conditions for the struggle.

How do you view the future?

* The scientific reports do not give much hope, but a good sign today is that the Ecosocialist International Network is growing and next year the second international conference in the Amazon will be held to mobilise the fight against deforestation. That brings hope.

* Bertolt Brecht once said: "If you fight you might lose, if you don't you have already lost". Resistance is the only way.

The article was previously printed in Internationalen no 19 2008.

Collective agreements under threat!

22 September 2008, by Tomas Johansson

Polish trade unionists at the ESF.

Let's stop here for a while to explain the relationship between a trade union and a collective agreement in simple terms. In a simplified manner we could say that a trade union is nothing but an organisation fighting for the conclusion of collective agreements for its members, in order to end the devastating competition that previously existed between workers, before the advent of trade unions. An agreement covering all union members makes it infinitely harder for employers to lower salaries and worsen working conditions.

Salaries and working conditions in the Nordic countries are, in general, regulated by central collective agreements covering whole trades, while laws upholding a minimum standard regulate labour market policies in central and southern Europe. These minimum laws are often the result of weak local collective agreements which have been transformed into law. If we look at the minimum wage determined through law in several European countries, we notice they are often very low and far from the wage levels the Nordic collective agreements uphold.

This reflects the fact that trade unions, both for blue and white collar workers, inhabit more central positions in the societies up North. The strength of our unions is a cause for extensive discussions, as is the unions' decline over the last decades, but it is a fact that, for example, the share of employees organised in trade unions is considerably larger up here. That is also a reason why the so-called Nordic model is more sensitive to the jurisprudence and legislation of the EU than the rest of Europe.

There is also a political basis behind the Nordic model, which is the close cooperation between large parts of the trade union movement and the, often in-government, social democratic parties of the Nordic countries. There has therefore not existed a great need to, for instance, protect the employees with minimum wage legislation. In a sense the possibility of getting support from the 'comrades' in the government, if the union road is closed, has almost been taken for granted.

When the EU intervenes, weakens and threatens collective agreements it

creates a very sensitive and embarrassing situation for the Swedish trade union federation LO, led by the social democrats. Ever since the referendum on the membership of the European Union we have been told by the pro-European Union social democratic trade unions that the EU provides a protection of the interests of the employees. However alongside the various rulings of the EU's various institutions, which clearly show that the free capitalist market takes precedence over collective agreements and workers' interests, the leaders of these unions have been "forced" to tell lies in order to hide reality.

Four different judicial decisions from the Court of Justice of the European Communities from 2007 and 2008 should be highlighted in order to draw attention to where the EU is taking collective bargaining agreements:

- In the case which attracted most attention, the so-called Vaxholm case or Laval case, a Latvian construction company refused to sign a collective agreement with the Swedish construction workers' union (Svenska Byggnadsarbetareförbundet, Byggnads). The company was blockaded and thus brought suit to the Labour Court in order to have the blockade invalidated. The Labour Court then handed the matter over to the EU court to decide whether or not the union's blockade to fight wage competition was in agreement with EU legislation. The decision of the EU court disallowed the union's blockade. The court also declared that the host country, Sweden, is only allowed to demand the minimum level regarding salaries and employment conditions from foreign companies. Important is that the Swedish trade unions have (or have had) a strong law in support, called Lex Britannia, which lays down the right to use legal union mechanisms to force foreign companies to sign Swedish collective agreements. This law will probably become a distant memory with this ruling, or at least it will be severely weakened.

- In the Viking case, a Finnish shipping company wanted to register one of its ships under a flag of convenience in Estonia, in order to cut costs by signing an Estonian collective agreement with considerably inferior salaries and employment conditions. The Finnish seamen's union gave notice of industrial action in order to prevent the registration. After a number of trials in various international legal instances, the EU court delivered its ruling that the Finnish union certainly had the right to resort to industrial action, but that the right of the company to free establishment took precedence over the right to strike. A few days before the case was brought up in yet another international instance, the two parties reached a settlement, but the verdict of the EU court is still standing: The right of establishment has precedence over the right to strike.

- In the so-called Rüffert case, the EU court decided that the German state of Lower Saxony could not demand that a foreign construction company follow the state's local collective agreements. The background was that the German state has a law prohibiting companies to pay workers below the agreed minimum wage of the state, and it demanded that a Polish construction company abide by the state legislation. Lower Saxony demanded that the Polish company pay a fine of 85 000 Euro since it broke the laws of the state, but the ruling of the EU court declared that Lower Saxon legislation is incompatible with the EU legislation; the state is not allowed to force a visiting company from another EU country to accept its wage levels if they are higher than the general collective agreement within the German construction sector.

- In a case concerning its legislation, Luxembourg had to concede its previous national legislation which demanded that visiting companies with their own employees had to pay a salary which would follow the automatic upgrading of living expenses for the employees in Luxembourg. The EU court considers the lowest possible salary in any given country to be applicable for visiting companies. This ruling is very similar to the Vaxholms case in this regard. According to rules in Luxembourg, visiting companies should apply the same legal rules as domestic companies, but even in this issue Luxembourg was defeated as the EU court ruled that this is a stricter demand than what is contained in its own placement directives. What distinguishes this case from the rest is that it is not a company approaching the EU court, it is the EU Commission itself which is trying the case in the court.

All these very important rulings clearly demonstrate that the inner market of the European Union is prioritised over the interests and rights of employees. All the talk about EU as a guarantor of workers and employees interests falls flat. It is not for nothing that the EU supporters in the trade unions lay low at the moment, and they are very quiet.

The leadership of the LO considers the proposal for a new constitution of the EU, the so-called Lisbon Treaty, a "last resort". A few months ago the LO vice president Erland Olausson wrote in the federation's newspaper: "In today's EU treaty there is no protection for the right to strike. In the proposal to a new treaty ... there is such protection. If we had had this treaty in place the outcome of the [Vaxholms] case would have been different. It is important that the Lisbon Treaty is adopted as soon as possible."

In exactly the same way as when the LO leadership blatantly lied to the workers of Sweden before the referendum on the EU membership in 1994, they now apply the same cheap tactics and claim that the Lisbon Treaty would protect the collective agreements and the right to strike. They build their whole case on the charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and claim it would save us. But neither the Lisbon Treaty nor the Charter of Fundamental Rights include any kind of guarantees for the integrity of collective agreements and national legislation, like the Lex Britannia. What is absolutely clear is that it is the ruling of the EU court and the EU legislation that takes precedence over the collective agreements and legislation of the individual member countries. Everything else is nonsense.

The LO leadership knows better but

does not hesitate to tell 'white lies'. Concretely these four cases reflect a large and direct threat to national collective agreements, and imply that salaries can be pressed downwards through the rulings of the EU court stating that the lowest wage levels in the collective agreements must be applied as the norm. For our part, up here in the North, this includes an extra risk as we do not regulate our lowest level wage through law, but through collective agreements. The law makers in Luxembourg and Lower Saxony have been severely reprimanded, and know for future reference that in terms of collective agreements and labour law, the EU court has the last say. In Sweden the parliament will try to modify Lex Britannia in order to save what can be saved.

Considering that the trade union movement, with very few exceptions, around the world is in a defensive position and in many cases has been severely weakened, the rulings of the EU court have further undermined them. Add the continuous and daily rationalisation campaigns at our work places, and the future for employees and trade unions look bleak. As a trade union activist, one always wants to highlight the positive developments which can provide a glimmer of hope, but as long as workers and employees do not rise up and resist on a large scale, the future certainly looks dark.

Translation: Linn Hjort

Needed: A climate revolution

22 September 2008, by Foad Rad

The scientific facts force us to modify the WSF slogan into something more accurate: Another world is not only possible, but necessary. The question is: How?

During the past weeks we have heard about the worst floods in 500 years hitting the northern part of India, which changed the course of the Kosi river, broke the banks of a dam and swamped hundreds of square miles as far as the borders of Nepal, leaving thousands dead along its route. At the same time we see pictures from the Caribbean islands getting hit by a series of forceful storms causing major havoc, flooding agricultural areas and transport networks. This has put the islands in a severe condition. Around 500 people have been killed and the death toll continues to rise as the islands have hit by yet another storm, Ike. And a few latitudes north, we once again witness displaced people in New Orleans, this time over two million fleeing to avoid the storm.

This shows not only that these disasters tend to hit the poorest countries hardest, but also that an increase in climate catastrophes is without doubt the very consequence of climate change. The only logical conclusion is therefore to act to be able to prevent a destabilized climate.

As if this was not enough, we at the same time heard the news about the rapid melting of the Siberian and Greenland ice, releasing methane (a greenhouse gas 22 times stronger than CO2) from the bottom of the Siberian Ocean. This has been by far one of the most alarming scenarios expected in the course of climate change, which is seems to be happening much earlier then the scientists expected.

In other words, we are facing a severe situation and we must act if we want to prevent the most extreme scenarios. We have access to scientific figures and raw data, various analyses of climate models, but above all, it is possible to prevent this development, despite the fact that the governments in power have failed to prevent the ongoing fossil machine from approaching devastation. They are indifferent to this issue, not because it is impossible to put and end to it, but because they are run by other interests. The only efforts made so far have been within the suffocating frames of the global economy. That includes the Kyoto protocol, which has turned out to be just another way for the fossil dependent industries to keep the wheels going by creating new markets by using pollution as a commodity. The economic logic behind it has not offered any real solutions, but has rather been feeding the fossil industries, and it has failed mainly because the Kyoto protocol is a part of the ideological force behind the present global economic policy.

The dominant ideological structure, including academia and established science, responds to this profound challenge with a business-as-usual attitude, and uses various economic instruments to allow capital to accumulate, and hope to fix, the carbon concentration in the atmosphere essentially by means of technological changes. The Kyoto protocol, which regulate planetary regime to limit carbon emissions, is entirely constructed along such lines. They turn over the managing of climate crises to the capitalist class itself, and next generation of protocols will undoubtedly do the same unless mass action from below stops it from doing so.

The main reason our governments only offer us these solutions is that the global economic system cannot adjust itself to ecological limitations and is therefore the very antithesis to sustainable development. Capitalism is not only unsustainable: it promotes a culture of fatality, and is indeed suicidal – and must therefore end before it gets hit by irreversible global structural crises. These contradictions are, in the long run, threats to the very fabric of life on Earth as we know it, and they also make it clear that the process of production is symptomatic of a general tendency in capitalism to neglect the social dimensions of a conflict in general, and ecological limitations in particular.

That is why the market has failed us before and why it has not been able to solve problems of this magnitude. This system is failing us now by putting forward the Kyoto protocol, which represents a concrete example of the reductionist thinking and the arrogant ignorance of the neo-liberal economists concerning the climate issues. And with all certainty it will fail us in the future, since contemporary capitalism is not merely an ideology – it also constitutes the framework for our way of life. And most essentially: It can not be limited. If limited it would most definitely die. Limiting business-as-usual can be compared to limiting the breathing of competing runners: If we do that they will collapse – and probably die. Capitalism works in the same way, primarily because the expansion and commodifying of the world is the life blood of this system.

Ecological conditions are a part of all processes of accumulation, and processes of accumulation in turn tend to transform ecosystems. The current hegemonic system appears to be a severe destructive force and has, by commodifying everything, made us surrender to something that appears greater than us: Capital. From this standpoint, it seems that there are no other options except to engage in massive confrontations with the central institutions and forces that defend the economic world order. It is in and around such processes that a confrontational, yet reasonable, climate movement for the twenty-first century can arise.

When facing runaway climate change and a ruling class that is ignoring the consequences, the only option possible left is to speed up the birth of the antithesis to the current social formation. A new and universalistic approach to the climate issues is therefore as necessary and desirable as essential part of the political struggle. The only force that can break the chains of fossil Capitalism is a broad and radical popular movement that can mobilize all the forces struggling for a socially and ecologically sustainable society. We are right know seeing the signs of this kind of budding movements already, the most successful is the British one, but there are more under way in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Australia, USA and other countries, demanding a political change – a change diametrically opposed to the current hegemonic worldview that declares a limitless burning of fossil fuels and business-as-usual.

Abortion rights: Still a fight in Europe

22 September 2008, by Katarina Wikström

Reproductive rights are the rights relating to reproduction and reproductive health. The World Health Organisation defines these rights as follows:

“Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence.”

It might sound like a basic human right. However, the right to freely choose a partner, the timing of the pregnancy and the number of children is far from certain for women the world over. This uncertainty exists not only among the poorest in the Third World, but also among us in Europe; the right to abortion is limited here as well. The option of abortion on demand gives a woman the important right to decide over her own life and her future. However, a woman’s body – or, rather, her uterus – provokes moral-conservative groups and religious fanatics across nations and religious boundaries and anti-abortion lobbyists within the European Union are well-organised and work hard for their conviction.

Despite this, most countries in Europe provide free abortion, and most until the twelfth week. Sweden’s abortion legislation is among the most liberal, allowing for abortion on demand until week 18 of the pregnancy and up to week 22 in specific cases.

In all countries abortions are performed whether legal or not, but many are illegal and unsafe. Women who have these kinds of operations risk illness, sterility and even death. In Poland alone, about 200 000 illegal abortions are estimated to be performed each year. Every year a number of women die as a result.

Abortion is prohibited in three of the EU’s 27 member countries: Ireland, Malta and Poland. In theory, it is possible to be granted an abortion under specific circumstances, for example, if the pregnancy is likely to cause the woman’s death. But this has proven very difficult in reality.

In a recent and notorious case concerning a fourteen-year-old Polish girl who fell pregnant from rape, it became clear how strong the resistance to abortion rights is. Even according to the strict Polish abortion legislation, rape is considered a legitimate reason for the operation. However, the Catholic Church actively mobilised resistance against the girl’s right to choose and attempted to stop the abortion. In the end, the law prevailed and the girl aborted the foetus.

Women in these countries who need to have an abortion and who have the financial means always have the

option of seeking help abroad. Others are subjected to the illegal alternative. This not only puts their lives and health at risk but can also impose criminal penalties. For example, in Malta a woman risks three years imprisonment after an illegal abortion. Due to the risk of prison sentences or other legal punishments, no one wants to be held responsible if an operation fails.

One of the few bright spots regarding this issue is Portugal. For a long time, abortion was criminalised here, but a positive development has recently taken place. In 2007, a majority, nearly sixty per cent, decided through a referendum to decriminalise abortion – to the great dismay of the Catholic Church.

A country where the development unfortunately goes in the opposite direction is Lithuania. At present, a parliamentarian process is taking place which may lead to the prohibition of the right to abortion. If this proposed law is passed, abortion will only be granted if the woman's life or health is threatened by the pregnancy, or in the case of rape or incest. Currently, no decision has been made.

Even countries where abortion is legal can apply their principles with great rigidity. One case which upset many of the general public concerned an eleven-year-old girl in Romania who was refused an abortion despite having been raped. The reason was that the pregnancy was two weeks over the legal limit. According to a medical-ethic committee there were insufficient reasons for overruling the legal limit – according to the law, all abortions after week twelve of the pregnancy are illegal, unless the foetus is badly deformed or the mother's life is endangered. This, however, was not the case of the eleven-year-old. But thanks to the great international attention that the case attracted, the abortion was finally approved by a government commission.

The groups that are for and against the right to abortion can be classified as two ideologically opposed categories: pro-choice or pro-life. The pro-lifers are thus called as they consider an embryo as a human life proper. Its rights should be the same as those of any other human being, regardless the circumstances. It does not matter if the woman does not want to or cannot give birth. In extreme cases it is even secondary if rape or incest was the reason behind the conception, or if a woman risks her life due to the pregnancy or the birth. The continued life of the foetus is then more important than the woman's.

The pro-choicers, on the other hand, demand the right of the woman to be allowed to make her own decision, based on what is best in her circumstances. They consider the context, such as the woman's specific ability to care for a child.

One of the most well-known pro-choice organisations in the EU is the Dutch Women on Waves. This is a non-profit organisation founded in 1999, concerned with women's human rights. Its mission is to prevent unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortions throughout the world. Women on Waves has developed a mobile clinic that can easily be loaded onto a ship, which enables it to travel to wherever it is needed worldwide. With this ship, Women on Waves can provide safe and legal abortion services outside territorial waters in countries where abortion is illegal. Women on Waves challenges the restrictive abortion policies of some countries within the EU, and has succeeded in creating debates in the European Parliament.

In Ireland, there is Alliance for Choice, a pro-choice organisation working actively to change the abortion laws. Since 1983 over 100 000 Irish women have travelled to England for an abortion. It is estimated that around seventeen women travel from Ireland to England everyday for this purpose. Amongst other things, Alliance for Choice helps to uphold the anonymity of the women who have the possibility to travel, and they provide child care during the trips.

The feminist network European Feminist Initiative, EFI, has member organisations in 35 countries and has as its objective to work for women's rights. In April, EFI started a petition for the right to abortion for all women in the European Union. The aim is to collect one million signatures, which is the necessary amount for the EU Commission to bring up the issue. The signatures shall be submitted during the 2009 EU election in order to pressure the EU-politicians to place the issue of the right to abortion on the agenda.

The EFI was formed during the European Social Forum in Rome 2003 and will be present at the ESF in Malmö.

It may seem that the abortion issue fundamentally is an issue about liberation and that the European Union, which purports to work for human rights, should promote the right to abortion. Moreover, the EU also has the right to make decisions in matters concerning sexual and reproductive rights. However, the EU lacks a common set of rules guiding sexual and reproductive rights.

Officially, the attitude is that abortion rights is an area out of bounds for the EU. Abortion is considered a health issue to be regulated by the individual member countries. Hence, the EU is often silent before the specific regulations of the member countries. No pressure is placed on those countries still upholding a ban on abortion.

But why is the EU reticent in terms of women's reproductive rights? The mood is clearly hostile to women.

The Vatican has opened an office in Brussels and works hard together with other conservative forces for the implementation of more restrictive abortion laws and for the preference of Catholic Law above EU laws.

Even Sweden, with our liberal abortion legislation, seems eager to keep the issue at a national level, perhaps out of fear that a set of common EU legislation might dilute our own legal framework. The downside of this is the risk that the pro-lifers will dominate the debate.

In 2002 the EU Parliament adopted a resolution, the so-called Anne van Lancker-report, which was an attempt to persuade the EU countries to increase access to safe and legal

abortions, and to end penalties for women having had illegal abortions. The Council of Europe has recently declared that abortion should be legal and accessible for all women in Europe. However, with the exception of Portugal, not much progress has been made. This, despite the fact that the EU has a mandate to promote gender equality and health, and to work against discrimination. It still remains to be seen if Sweden will push the issue during its coming chairmanship in the Council of the European Union.

Translation: Linn Hjort

War without limits among the privileged

21 September 2008, by Danielle Sabai and Jean Sanuk

Thaksin Shinawatra (right) meets with Donald Rumsfeld (foreground left) in the Pentagon.

The first phase of the struggle started in September 2005 and culminated in the coup d'etat of September 19, 2006[1].. It was organized and carried out by a heterogeneous alliance: the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). This grouping is composed of businessmen, monarchists, factions of the army and members of the Democratic Party, traditionally allied to the military and the monarchy.

In a country where there is a total confusion between politics and business, this coalition, led by a press baron Sondhi Limtongkul and grouping together the old Establishment, did not like having been evicted from power by Thaksin Shinawatra, who had come to power through democratic elections in 2001 and was triumphantly re-elected in 2005. Under the guidance of Thaksin and his party the Thai Rak Thai, large "friendly" contractors had succeeded in dominating the political and economic life of the country, managing the latter to further their interests[2].

Financial interests and the power of the royal family, but also of the army and certain "great financial families" unrelated to the Thaksin clan were very seriously threatened.

Using nationalist themes and a legitimate frustration with corruption, the PAD had succeeded in broadly mobilizing the middle class of Bangkok against the Thaksin government in 2006. In spite of mass and continuous demonstrations for nearly one year, Thaksin's popularity among the masses remained unshaken and his opponents found an alternative route to power only through the coup d'etat of September 19, 2006.

Business as usual

There followed a 15 month period of an inept government appointed by the military who highlighted the fact that, if there had been a change of scenery and actors, it was business as usual, whereas the situation of the most deprived worsened because of a rapid rise in the cost of living.

The junta made use of these fifteen months to write a new constitution whose objective was to reduce the power of the Prime Minister and the executive, to reinforce the leading role of the army and to limit considerably the power of elected politicians. All this was done to reduce the influence of Thaksin: the dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT), prohibition of political activity of 111 of its top cadres, a ban on campaigning for a "no" vote at the time of the referendum on the approval of the new constitution, obstacles to the candidacy of ex-members of the TRT at the time of the legislative elections of December 23, 2007. Despite all the junta's attempts, the elections returned to power those who had been driven out of it. The People's Power Party (PPP), formed to replace the Thai Rak Thai, was elected with a large majority whereas the Democratic Party, supported by the ruling junta, was far behind. The military, reeling from their defeat initially sought to slacken their relationship to the PPP, which resulted in particular in the return from exile of Pojaman Shinawatra, soon followed by Thaksin, her husband.

The crisis resurfaced when the opponents of Thaksin sought to transform the result of the elections to their advantage by invalidating some of the PPP candidates thanks to the kindness of judges of the constitutional court, all faithful "royalists" and pro-coup. In response, the government of Samak Sundaravej sought to amend the new constitution in order to secure itself against a possible dissolution of the PPP. At the same time, the government resumed the populist policy of its Thaksin predecessor, reinforcing its strength among the rural voters of the North and North East of Thailand. The PAD, reconstituted in May 2008, then decided to launch a crusade against the government, accused of wanting to amend the constitution with the aim of cancelling the corruption charges weighing against Thaksin. Very quickly the watchword of the coalition was the resignation of the Prime Minister, Samak.

PAD and government: two reactionary forces

Beyond the facade of the fight against corruption (of which its members are not free), the principal goal of the PAD is to end the sovereignty of the people and the system of election of Parliament according to the principle "one person, one vote"[3]. According to its leaders, the ignorant rural and working masses sell their votes to local bigwigs at the elections. They

would like the elected deputies to represent no more than one third of the chamber with the remaining deputies being primarily retired officials (in particular from the military) and "important people" as well as carefully selected trade-union and NGO leaders. They also foresee the military playing a permanent political role in the so-called fight against corruption, protecting the monarchy and national sovereignty.

All means are used to create a level of agitation and violence sufficient to justify a new coup d'etat, and to advance these deeply undemocratic ideas. In the demonstrations, the PAD does not hesitate to resort to provocation to create violent incidents, claiming they have been attacked by pro-government supporters while they are themselves at the origin of the tensions. The objective is to create a situation of conflict which would justify recourse to the army to restore order.

Concerning the Khmer temple of Preah Vihear, the PAD did not hesitate to try to destabilize the government, to exacerbate Thai nationalism, by holding up the threat of a loss of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the origin of this nationalist storm is the joint signature by the Thai and Cambodian governments of a UNESCO request to give the site (temple and surrounding area) the status of a "world heritage site". A 1962 decree by the International Court in The Hague allots the temple to Kampuchea. But 4.6 kilometres of territory giving access to it are in Thailand. The PAD, supported by the Democratic Party, started this political crisis against what it considered an abandonment of territorial sovereignty. No less than 300 Thai personalities including actors, senators, and intellectuals signed a letter of protest to UNESCO to denounce this joint request. A war between the two countries is not inconceivable, each government having good reasons of domestic policy to make full use of these nationalist themes[4].

The current government is led by a representative of the far right. Samak was among those responsible for the massacres of 1976 at the university of Thammasat (where 40 died) and of 1992 (demonstrations in Bangkok for the re-establishment of the democracy). He defends the interests of the fraction of the commercial, industrial and financial bourgeoisie related to Thaksin driven out of power by the coup d'etat. Even if he maintains the social measures taken previously by the Thaksin government (free basic health care, debt moratorium for peasants, credits to small producers and villages and so on), he is developing a class politics in the service of the big bourgeoisie.#

A dispute disconnected from social demands

The current conflict does not unfortunately result from the social struggle but from a confrontation for the control of power within the dominant classes. The workers' movement in Thailand is characterized by the weakness of trade unionism and an absence of political parties representing its interests. The independent and combative trade unionism which had been forged during the exceptional struggles of 1973-76 which had built links with the peasant and student movements was strongly repressed by the coup d'etat of 1976, then by the coup d'etat of 1991 to take only the most outstanding events. The prohibition of the right to strike, of association, and meeting in the months which follow each coup d'etat, alternating during the phases known as of "parliamentary democracy" with an industrial legislation which very strictly limits the field of trade-union activity to the level of the company; make the exercise of the right to strike, solidarity action and the expression of a political standpoint very difficult. The various governments, civil or military, have in addition facilitated the creation of trade-union confederations with an aim of dividing trade unionism and of allowing conciliatory bureaucrats, even pure gangsters in the pay of the police force or army, to monopolize the bodies of representation of the workers. These corrupt bureaucrats regard trade unionism as a profitable business allowing access to important and even more lucrative positions in the apparatus of State, with the proviso of making an alliance with the rising factions of soldiers, police officers and businessmen, and of taking actions only when that is wished in high places. This is what explains, for example, the involvement in the PAD of the leadership of the trade-union confederation of the public sector, the State Enterprises Workers' Relations Confederation (comprising forty-three trade unions with two hundred and thousand members).

In spite of these obstacles, independent trade unionists have maintained an activity at enterprise level, sometimes choosing to create NGOs rather than trade unions, in order to circumvent the legal obstacles to trade-union activity, and creating geographical coordinations in the working class concentrations. Very courageous struggles have taken place, in particular in textiles, for wage increases, against excessive working hours, the numerous occupational illnesses and industrial accidents, and for the elementary rights of the workers. But they have remained very few and scattered, not managing to converge in a national movement as in 1973-76. The alliances forged with combative NGOs have been invaluable in increasing the level of consciousness of the workers and building links with peasant or village associations fighting over-indebtedness and the destruction of the environment. In spite of these advances, combative trade unionists and militants in the associations have not managed for now to link themselves to create an independent political party which could represent the workers of all sectors during the episodes of parliamentary democracy, or organize resistance to the coups d'etat. The sad end of the Communist Party of Thailand in the mid-1980s, laying down its arms after twenty years of sterile Maoist guerrilla warfare, which had led it to desert the factories, contributed to confusion and demobilization. As everywhere in the world, a new socialist perspective for the 21 century has to be redefined in order to offer an understanding of the current world and possible alternatives.

The legal obstacles set up by the Thai state are another explanation of the absence of a social democratic or revolutionary party. Workers must vote in the city or the village from which they originate and not in the city where they live and work. As the majority of urban workers are of rural origin, they cannot vote for a candidate originating from their ranks. Obviously, the various governments have always refused to amend this legislation.

Building a progressive alternative

On Tuesday, September 9, the nine judges of the constitutional court dismissed the Prime Minister for having violated the constitution on the grounds that he appears on television cooking programmes for which he is paid. If to be paid by television channels while being in charge of the State obviously poses a problem, it is an obvious pretext: once more the "pro coup d'etat" judges assume the right to settle the political debate. Yet this measure will do nothing to settle the crisis. It seems likely that Samak will again be supported and elected Prime Minister by the coalition of 5 parties which form his parliamentary majority.

Opened de facto by the arrival in power of Thaksin in 2001, this acute political crisis within the dominant classes is far from being settled. In the absence of alternatives, certain progressive elements are tempted to support the government, asserting that it was democratically elected, or the PAD in the fight against the corruption of the government. The workers do not have anything to gain from choosing one camp rather than another. It can only result in a new reduction of democratic political space and a greater difficulty in rebuilding an independent political movement representing the interests of the workers.

Let us hope however that the political debate opened will make it possible for progressive associations to advance their own demands.

[1] See: "Coups d'état en Thaïlande : une spirale sans fin?" Sanuk Jean, Sabai Danielle.

http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3605&var_recherche=tha%EFlande

[2] See: "Thaïlande: le pays du sourire à l'heure d'une nouvelle crise politique". Sanuk Jean, Sabai Danielle.

http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article1799&var_recherche=tha%EFlande

[3] See: "PAD: bulldog on a leash or another nail in democracy's coffin?" Chang Noi, July 21, 2008 http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/padmeaning.htm

[4] The Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has also used this incident when on the election trail.

A revolutionary fight against the demon

15 September 2008, by Celia Hart

Celia Hart Santamaría wrote this article for Kaos en la Red earlier this month, before she and her brother Abel Hart Santamaria were killed in an automobile accident. This CubaNews translation, edited by Walter Lippmann, is the title piece in a collection of her works to be produced next month by Socialist Resistance, who also published her book, It's never too late to love or rebel.

Celia Hart speaking at a Socialist Resistance conference in London
Photo: Liam Macuaid

We should be used by now to seeing our scorching Caribbean summers ended by enemies attacking us by air and sea, as if they were intent on training us for other contingencies. However typical they are of this region, hurricanes are now growing in size and number as a result of human disdain toward nature's balance.

We are condemned by the insatiable greed of the wealthy of the world and their mortal obsession with using their money to pay for what their poor souls just can't perceive to deal with these new enemies who turn up in the summer to threaten –for a change– the fragile Caribbean islands along with all their dispossessed.

That's what happened two days ago with Hurricane Gustav.

In one of his latest reflections, Fidel said: "We are lucky to have a Revolution", and with good reason. Right now I wish that even the New Orleanians would have one, so that they can be spared what they went through three years ago.

Over 70 people were killed by Gustav in Hispaniola and Jamaica alone when it was still a tropical ttorm. Not one dead in Cuba, if only because even storms are fought by a Revolution. And it's precisely with a massive and well-timbered revolution that we'll build the bridges, towers and houses destroyed by the rich people's heartlessness.

Days before arrival

We lead a humble life in Cuba, but our happiness is certainly worth millions. True, we rack our brains and rummage around in our drawers before we dip into our "vacation" money to make sure these little talking monsters we brought to this world "have lunch and dinner at home". Raiding the fridge –and our pockets– to feed them has become quite a feat in today's Cuba. Yet, we always succeed, feeling happy to have

them near us as they fill our homes with that infectious laughter that I seem to recognize only in Cuban children –any chauvinism aside– or playing in the streets with a half-deflated soccer ball, going around in bunches as if they had been glued to each other at birth. Unless the paltry selfishness of some parents gets in the way, our children have no race, age or name. They're organized in a communist guild and manage to have fun from sun-up until after nightfall, like resolved democratic militants of secret organizations.

Elsewhere, the children we see in the streets have no home, or refrigerator, or parents who might take pride in their good grades and suffer when they fail at school… Who cares, they don't have a school anyway! The others, no less unhappy, suffer a similar fate, having to stay shut up inside their house all day to avoid a possible kidnapping or rape or any other evil…

Children in Cuba are not just another statistic. They're millions of owners who have at their service our whole institutional structure and, of course, their slaves, that is, their parents, perhaps because –as José Martí said– "it is they who know how to love" and therefore the most sensible human beings.

Saying that every Cuban summer teems with children is an understatement. They're on TV, in theaters… and around the table! They wolf down in no time everything we go to great lengths to buy, but how comforting it is to see them happy and healthy! If you lived near the sea like me and –fortunately– and many other Cubans given our nation's narrow shape, you would see them having fun in the water and playing on the sand, and you would drown your sorrows in laughter.

This summer we also had the Olympics with their ups and downs… but Fidel already talked about that with words as clear as my coastal waters in summer, and I take the opportunity to send my best wishes to à ngel Valodia Matos, our tae kwon do fighter who so "subtly" made a corrupt referee understand that we may be left with nothing but our dignity, which will never be put at stake. Angel has been banned from international matches, but many of us will remember him better for what he did.

Now the summer season is coming to an end and we're all looking forward to the school year and the "You-can-no-longer-wear-these-shoes-to-play" admonitions, not to mention the task of getting everything ready, from their schoolbags to our alarm clocks and the batteries they need, all the seemingly trivial details that make us wake up to the realization that a new period is beginning in our children's life… as well as in this Revolution.

Gustav is coming

As in previous years when the summer is nearly over, our wicked, insensitive enemy threatens to destroy it all, including our children and their sea waves. It's capitalism at its worst.

So it happened with Hurricane Gustav, which for several days lashed against the southern part of the eastern provinces after laying waste to Hispaniola and Jamaica. By the way, whatever God has in mind for Haiti still eludes me: hunger, intervention even by friendly countries, and storms for good measure. I don't know about God's mood, but we human beings, and especially here in America, should do something about it. Sometimes I'm aghast at the thought that Haiti gave us the first revolution in the continent and now it only gives us its worst set of statistics.

Gustav battered our eastern provinces from the south with growing fury as it went through the tiny island of Jamaica, whose mountains tried unsuccessfully to soothe the event, albeit alone, with no coordinated help from its citizens. In just a few hours, the death toll rose to eleven, like it happened in Haiti. It emerged from Jamaica as a tropical storm –with wind speeds of more than 100 km/h– before it gained strength from the warm Caribbean waters and its eye, better organized, began to look, lascivious, in our direction.

Our beautiful green alligator is much more than just a poor Caribbean island: it's the richest and most committed of America's daughters. Regardless, Gustav dared to damage irreverent Cuba.

People were evacuated from 20 of the 54 eastern municipalities, mainly to protect them from the heavy rains.

Believe it or not, my people are very educated in science. All preventive measures and every plan to avoid economic losses and preserve our dams were set in motion because of this damned summer ghost. And mark my words, as it grew stronger and got ready to travel the length and breadth of the island, it had to confront no-nonsense contenders… among them the Revolution's scientific expertise.

Our committed science and José Rubiera

Fidel said once that socialism should be "of men of science". Yet, I'm afraid that many misunderstood him. Socialism will be a society of men of science, but of a committed, revolutionary science, never the conceited paper-pushing career that science has become in many places. I won't dwell on that fact… for now! However, that's one of science's major aberrations: a merciless fight to find out who's better at publishing more stupid things.

Dr. José Rubiera is to me the best public example of the role a true scientist, and particularly a physicist, can play in society. He performs his functions as a communicator without neglecting research, as one of those who "throw all the meat upon the grill", as they say in Argentina, even at the risk of missing.

When a young person tells me that physics is unintelligible or dense, I only ask them, "Do you dig the weather report? If you do, then you dig physics". And that's simply because these comrades have got our joyful Cuban people used to this discipline.

Hurricane season turns Dr. Rubiera into the Cuban people's Public Friend No. 1. Every time someone points out,

"Rubiera said so", we're all satisfied. Whenever he showed up here, there and everywhere these days while things were getting tough, many of us wondered, "Does he ever sleep?". We would listen to his soothing voice give a master class in physics to forecast the birth and growth of the beast and to explain how cyclones revolve and why they depend on atmospheric pressure, wind speed and water temperature. No one realized we were seeing a lecture on thermodynamics or fluid dynamics in the committed and humble peace of this colleague, or better yet, this comrade.

Another question, now that issues like salary (or non-salary), surplus value, profits, etc., are in fashion: how much does Rubiera earn? What's his social class? OK, he's an intellectual, but where does he stand with respect to the means of production? If we merely go by the old concept of "to each according to their work", how much could we pay the brilliant expert for his services? He would surely be a multimillionaire, since when it comes to the crunch we want to hear nobody but him. That's why he's a communist. What he does is something money can't buy, no matter how much he gets on top of his doubtlessly very modest salary as a reward for his work, and he knows that. Yes, he does: I've seen it in his eyes.

I had the honor of meeting him in a Toronto airport once. No sooner had I seen him than I rushed to greet him as if we were family, as any Cuban would do. Of course, he knew nothing about the person who was stalking him, but I did know him. I was amazed at his great unaffectedness, dressed as he was like the man next door and carrying an oilcloth briefcase. I was this close to start shouting in my bad English, "This is Rubiera, the hurricane guy!".

I was lucky that there's not much you can do in an airport lounge, so I took up all his attention under pretense of our being colleagues –he had studied physics before meteorology. That's when he confessed what he wanted: to put science not only at people's service, but use it to inform people, because a scientist sometimes gets into the bad habit of staying within concentric circles and becoming a super expert well beyond the reach of those unfamiliar with natural sciences, and it's all a big fat lie. Nature is not as complicated as it's cracked up to be. Einstein was one of greatest humanists in the world, and yet he managed to explain his theories in a way that even the children understood. José Martí, in turn, said that it was in the books on science where he found the best poetry. That poetry of science is what José Rubiera dissects for us every single day.

True, August 31, 2008 was rather dramatic poetry, what with our sorrow over the heartbreaking devastation Gustav caused in the Isle of Youth and Pinar del Río province. In face of that terror, Rubiera once again shared with us his scientific knowledge about the event.

And the murderous eye made landfall in Cuba … and stumbled upon a Revolution.

Short pieces of news have already been reported about the disaster in both territories: almost 100,000 homes destroyed, power and telephone lines lying on the ground, solid pylons bent in half like putty, vast crops completely lost… an impressive string of calamities.

There's talk that even a ship was pushed inland and ended up in the center of Nueva Gerona, the municipal capital of the Isle of Youth.

When electric power was restored here in Havana and we could see footage of what those humble people went through, there was no option but put our hands together and sob quietly.

Later that day we heard a live radio transmission about what was going on with our fellow citizens in the western provinces. Curiously enough, it was being broadcast by Radio Rebelde. Its voice kept us posted in the midst of the gusts and the anguish, now and then using the same phrase that made it so typical back when bearded men and underground guerrillas were fighting against human hurricanes who were tearing our homeland to pieces: "This is Radio Rebelde, broadcasting from free Cuban territory". And then would come Che Guevara's voice: "Attention, attention, Column Two, Column Two… Camilo, this is Che". You could hear it very often, but in those days the words "This is Che" would bring great hopes every time. Now Radio Rebelde would get in touch with comrades Olga Lidia Tapia and Ana Isa Delgado, Municipal Defense Council leaders and First Secretaries of the Party in the Isle of Youth and Pinar del Río province respectively. I'll always remember both their names and their courage. They were on a war footing, so where were their children? Probably with their fathers. Things have changed here in that regard: there's growing confidence in women, no doubt a major achievement. We're aware of our Revolution when we're faced with hardship.

José Martí had talked about that: "¡It is true! The sudden blows reveal the core of things". Many things were revealed in Cuba after Gustav's sudden blow.

According to the reports, Gustav has been the worst meteorological phenomenon in half a century, leaving almost 80 people dead in its wake when it passed by nearby islands, even if it was not so strong then. How can you explain Cuba's verve after we were hit by a much stronger storm?

It's precisely because we've had a Revolution for the last 50 years. It's true that we lost many things. My compatriots from Pinar del Río and the Isle of Youth lost everything… except their lives and their confidence that not only the nation's leaders but every one of us will be at their beck and call to help.

Cuba put every effort into the task of keeping all citizens safe and cared for. Only with a Revolution like ours can every available resource be used with a single purpose in mind. Television and radio stations, bakeries, hospitals, schools… all of them devoted to protecting every soul. You should have

heard the Party secretary in the Isle of Youth, hoarse almost to the point of speechlessness, encouraging her fellow islanders not to be fooled out of their homes by the apparent calm conveyed by the lethal eye of the hurricane. Dr. Rubiera had made it clear that the wind speed would be more violent along its rear wall. We were all scared of the winds blowing at 200 km/h with gusts of over 300 km/h, yet the two women in charge seemed oblivious to the danger.

No system can match the impact of a revolutionary process. Therefore, thank heavens for centralization, since it made it possible for linemen from the eastern provinces to go help from day one the areas hit by Gustav.

Almost 450,000 were evacuated in less than one day, and all hospitals were ready. What's more, a comrade gave birth to a child right in the middle of one of the strongest gusts. She named him Gustavo….

In less than two days, by virtue of the Energy Revolution –Fidel's pet project that some criticized so much– electricity was restored in 40% of Pinar del Río province.

On Sunday, as we went out to have a quick look at the city, the unanimous remark was, "Poor souls, they're always hit by hurricanes", with feelings of solidarity only possible in a socialist country…

We'll have great economic loss… there's talk of a billion pesos… but we lost none of our compatriots, In fact, the revolutionary miracle made us grow in number thanks to the woman who brought us little Gustavo! Instead of losing people, we increased their number.

I'll make a comparison just this once… Over a million people left New Orleans, their minds filled with memories of a deadly Katrina three years ago. Many of them were immigrants afraid of being deported instead of evacuated. In the US, for all its wealth, people are left by themselves. Some make it, but many others –as Katrina made so patently obvious– are abandoned to their fate.

All the more reason to appreciate the Revolution at a time like this. There were also certain clowns that not even a hurricane kept away from us who put up a two-bit obscene show around a rock singer that some counterrevolutionaries here tried to turn into a prisoner of conscience. Good God! A musician who heeded no social rule was fined for being vulgar and noisy, while the foreign media strived to make a fatuous trial look outrageous instead of covering the unique natural and human lesson Gustav gave. But that's how they are, and they'll never change. Let them go on spending paper and money in the most incomprehensible and ineffective nonsense they can think of to try and hurt the Revolution, for she can look after herself.

Thoughts by the seashore

Sunday dawned without electricity, so I joined the rest of my neighbors and went down to the seashore. The waves were huge, but not enough to spill over, while the air gave off scents of seaweed and salt water indicative of the lull that comes after a storm. I managed to find an empty place to sit and tried to figure out where my indescribable melancholy came from….

My first thoughts went to the Caribbean islands, somehow doomed to endure the pounding of tropical hurricanes, perhaps the price of living in such a pretty sunlit region of the planet. However, we're not condemned to suffer year after year from the malice of monsters bred by an irrational capitalism. The toxic emissions to the troposphere cause an almost unlimited warming of the ocean and thus these colossal cyclones and the thawing of our beautiful glaciers. Hence the polar bears can't feed their offspring, we get skin disease and our flowers wither… just to produce more shoes, cars and perfumes that only 10% of the human race will ever enjoy. Recently, the World Bank "found out" –as if it had been nothing but a miscalculation until then– that there are 400 million people more than they had thought. We're turning the world into a statistic, and nature will never forgive us.

At least for starters, Cuba and the Caribbean islands should sue the centers of power for millions in compensation for these losses.

Eventually, we'll build the houses, schools, churches and pylons the hurricane victims need, but what about next August? Capitalism kills nature while we're left to breathe worse, starve to death and suffer from the ravages of their squandering.

Something's wrong with the world to which only socialism has alternatives.

After some more thinking I started to feel proud of being part of a Revolution where the ups outnumber the downs and people can organize themselves and synchronize action with love to stand up to these excesses. I felt proud of the certainty that we have both Dr. Rubiera and his remarkable way of going about Physics and comrades Olga Lidia and Ana Isa, the provincial Party leaders who demonstrated their leadership capabilities in such a difficult time. Then I watched my son as he happily ran around the reefs with his friends, making the most of the few days they still had left before a new school year.

My melancholy was still there, though. And then I looked at the green leaves of the coconut trees floating on the water and realized that I missed a voice, a green, cap-wearing, larger-than-life figure with a stealthy but decisive gait. For the first time Fidel is not leading this fight, and no matter how hard I try his absence makes me feel a profound, inexplicable pain, eased only by his own reflections on the hurricane.

Nevertheless, my ease of mind improved much more when it dawned on me, as if I had been struck by lightning, that he was in Rubiera's expertise, the olive green of the fatigues my comrades from Pinar del Río and the Isle of Youth were

wearing, the unfathomable optimism of my compatriots even after losing everything they had to the inclemency of the weather and the greed of the rich and still shouted "Long live Fidel!" as they stood in torn streets and collapsed buildings, aware that our greatest strength is our enjoyment of life and the commitment Fidel helped us develop, which neither arrogance, nor wickedness nor the enemy will ever defeat…

That's what our many enemies, be they a gluttonous hurricane or a nuclear bomb, will have to learn to respect. And for that we have Fidel's green strength.

Revolution or Death

Balance-sheet of U.S. imperialism

14 September 2008, by Gilbert Achcar

Barack Obama and Tom Coburn greet President Bush
Wikimedia

THE DISASTER that marks the end of the Republican administration of George W. Bush reinvigorates the discussion of the status of the United States, whether it is a "hyperpower" or in decline. Can you provide perspective on this debate?

THE CONCEPT of "hyperpower," attributed to Hubert Védrine, former foreign minister of the French government under Lionel Jospin (1997–2002), describes the image of the United States such as it appeared following the first war with Iraq in 1991. This concept looks back to the emergence of a "unipolar world" with the increasing paralysis of the Soviet Union, then its disappearance—or rather of a "unipolar moment" according to the more precise expression of the American neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer.

The year 1991 was a turning point, a year fraught with symbols because there were real changes: not only the collapse of the USSR, but also the first Gulf War, which was a defining moment in the configuration of the post–Cold War period. Indeed, the United States concretely demonstrated the power of the military force that was built up during the Reagan era—from 1981 to 1989, a period during which military expenditure was the highest in the history of the United States, except for years of war.

The 1991 war was also part of demonstrating to U.S. allies that "the obliteration of communism" would not imply that they could do without American military force, and even less so since there were indeed very significant threats of international destabilization. The role of "American gendarme" has not decreased; in a certain sense, it's been reinforced, because full-scale military interventions are presented as a "democratic" requirement for "peace." The same period saw the proliferation of expressions like "global cop"—or "globocop"—alluding to a popular film. This last term was on the cover of one of the major American weekly magazines.

The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq in August 1990 was used by the American administration to return and establish itself militarily in this region of the world, which it had had to leave at the beginning of the 1960s (with the evacuation of the American base of Dhahran in the Saudi kingdom under pressure from Nasser's Egypt). The United States reinstalled itself in force in this zone whose strategic importance, because of oil and geopolitical concerns, does not escape anyone. Control of this space is used as a strategic argument in relations with their partners who depend on Middle Eastern oil, whether it's Western Europe or Japan, as well as with their potential adversary, China, who is no less dependent in this respect.

In such an overall situation, given the intricacies of all these elements, the United States comes forward as a "hyperpower," much stronger than the "superpower" it was in times of bipolarity. Especially since the U.S. had two consecutive record periods of economic expansion, first under Reagan—in terms of duration, again except for war years—and then under Clinton—an absolute record. The economic bet initiated under Reagan was, in a certain sense, won. It was certainly a risky bet, to the extent that some had foreseen the final phase of American decline in this period. It should be remembered that the principal best-seller on the American decline was published in 1987, in the midst of the Reagan period: Paul Kennedy's book The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. That book made a monumental error in judgment on the actual significance of military spending. Its interpretation rested on the following idea: Excessive military spending was, as such, a sign of the decline of the American Empire and it was going to accelerate its collapse by "overstretch," i.e., going beyond the means available. However, the reverse occurred. The Reagan bet consisted of an apparently incoherent combination of neoliberalism, including tax cuts for the wealthiest, and of "military Keynesianism," a (debatable) formula that designates expenditure in the military sector for the purpose of economic stimulus. The combination of a reduction in fiscal revenues and an increase in military spending resulted in an astronomical budget deficit, accompanied by a process of consolidation of the arms industry through transactions on the stock market.

In sight of the end result, the Reagan bet was crowned a success. Another dimension of this bet was to bring the economy and power of the USSR to its knees. Reagan himself, in his autobiography (An American Life), indicates that he "was briefed" by the

CIA, before his inauguration, on how the economy of the USSR was in a state of asphyxiation. He deduced from this that, in this context, the arms race would accentuate their choking. This is certainly not the fundamental cause of the collapse of the Soviet economy, but it is an incontestable fact that to simultaneously wage the war in Afghanistan and compete in a paroxysmal stage of the arms race greatly accelerated the agony of the USSR. Left standing alone in the field, the United States thus emerged as the only power in a unipolar world, as a "hyperpower."

Védrine's term also reflected French bitterness vis-à-vis an American partner who had exclusive decision-making power on all the key questions that emerged during that time. Such was even the case with those questions that most directly affected the European Union, like the maintenance of NATO, its change from a defensive alliance to a "security organization," i.e., a military interventionist one, and on top of it all the expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe, toward the member states of the ex-Warsaw Pact, and even later to include former Soviet republics. The ostracism of the new Russia that resulted from these plans would impact the future of Europe. It was, however, Washington that decided, playing on inter-European divisions when necessary.

Moreover, as I already indicated, America's increased power was propped up by the very long phase of economic expansion under Clinton, and by a revival of productivity, and conquering or reconquering leading-edge positions in the realm of technology—a realm in which military expenditure played a determining role. We saw then the "comeback" of the United States, after the stage of deindustrialization in the 1970s that had given rise to so many declinist forecasts. This whole set of factors consolidated the hyperpower image, which culminated, paradoxically, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, with the "war on terror" launched by George W. Bush's team—the most arrogant administration in U.S. history. Its arrogance expresses the intoxication of this "unipolar moment" at its apogee with the coming to power of the members of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the occupation of the ideological and political scene by the neoconservatives. The Bush administration would convey all this in the way it reacted to September 11, the way it led the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, then of Iraq in 2003.

A POSTERIORI, various European analysts put the question: How is it possible that a power such as the United States allowed an administration such as George W. Bush's to seize control? That deserves an explanation.

IT SEEMS to me that two major dimensions are involved here. One relates to the sociopolitical changes inside the United States. The bourgeoisie as a class never rules directly and collectively, of course, but in a country like the United States, it does not even exclusively choose the political personnel that will form the executive branch. There is an electoral selection process that is not solely determined by big capital.

The sociopolitical changes of the American electorate have been extensively studied. The evolutions of political topography toward the South and the West gave rise to thorough empirical studies. The increase in votes from the South was decisive, among other things, for the election of George W. Bush. A new political personnel imposed itself—tied, for example, to the Texas bourgeoisie—far removed from the Weberian ideal-type of "rational" industrial capitalism. The sectors whose influence is on the rise are related to oil, to speculation, and to real estate or property income. This is reinforced by the conservative counterrevolution that's been on the rise since Reagan: it accentuated the selection of this type of personnel, who rely in turn on organized and business-like religious networks. The rise in power of the latter group expresses the "anomic" [from "anomie": the loss of norms or benchmarks] social impact of neo?liberal counter-reforms that created a wide opening for the Christian Right, for religious retrenchment.

That's what I see as the causes of the shift in political terrain. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 did not yet reflect this shift, at least not exclusively. In reality, Reagan benefited especially from the reaction to what was perceived as the decline of the United States, by running on the theme of a comeback against Jimmy Carter, who became the very incarnation of decline. However, Reagan created conditions that accelerated and amplified the shift in political terrain toward the Right. When Clinton became president in 1993, he had to face the election of an ultra-right Congress the following year, with the Democrats losing the majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, and likewise with the Senate, after six years. The Republican Right went on to preserve the majority in the two houses of Congress until the election of November 2006.

However, at the time when it came to power in 2001, the new Bush administration was not yet perceived for what it will prove to be. The sharp rupture with the political legacy of Bush Senior was not obvious from the start. On foreign policy grounds, Bush 41 fitted the traditional mainstream of the American establishment. However, it would soon become apparent that there were significantly more differences between Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. than between Bush Sr. and Clinton with respect to foreign policy. In other words, the Bush 43 administration broke with a long bipartisan tradition in U.S. foreign policy.

The election of Bush Jr. was not a collective choice of the ruling class. That the installation of such a team was accepted—the decision of the Supreme Court regarding the dispute over electoral results in Florida as well as the non-objection of Al Gore—expresses an important fact: key sectors of the American bourgeoisie were in favor of an offensive in the Gulf region, which people knew was one of the priorities of the new Republican team. They wanted the situation resulting from the first Gulf War to be resolved,

which Clinton had not been able to do. This is the second element that explains the rise to power of the Bush-Cheney team. Indeed, control of this region was certainly a key element in the acceptance of the quasi-usurpation of power by this team.

Moreover, the Bush-Cheney team seemed initially to insure continuity and political balance, with the presence of Colin Powell as secretary of state as a guarantee of a sort of levelheadedness and respect for the bipartisan dimension appropriate to the field of foreign policy. Initially, the Bush administration even acted with moderation, as with the attitude it adopted in 2001 at the time of the crisis created by the landing of an American spy plane on the Chinese island of Hainan, after a collision with a Chinese fighter plane. Beyond statements, the Bush administration did not really flinch when Beijing refused "to restore the plane intact" and returned it in pieces.

It was September 11, 2001, which offered this administration the opportunity to implement its central project. Cheney and Rumsfeld shared a true obsession over the question of Iraq. Their initial reaction to September 11—today this fact is well documented—was: "Let's invade Iraq" although they knew very well that Iraq had nothing to do with the attacks of September 11.

IF SEPTEMBER 11 made it possible to implement the perspective of the new administration, didn't the actual choices they made reveal the intrinsic limits and contradictions that comprise this perspective?

WITH THE administration of George W. Bush, one can say Paul Kennedy's thesis of "imperial overstretch"—altogether banal—is to some extent validated. Indeed, this administration got involved in risky ventures that went well beyond the means of the United States. And they did this on every level. Let us start first of all with the military. One of the consequences of the Vietnam War has been the development of both a new doctrine by the Pentagon and new military programming relying on the progress of military technology and leading to a reduction in troops, combined with the elimination of the draft and the professionalization of the army—all expressing the will to no longer depend on the enlistment of youth that had proven to be the Achilles' heel in Vietnam.

Thus, under Reagan, they developed what was described as a "revolution in military affairs," closely overlapping with the more general technological revolution (telecommunications, the Internet, lasers, new materials, widespread use of computers, etc). With the first Gulf War, these new methods were tested in the real world, on the ground, providing at the same time an impressive spectacle for the rest of the world. In 2001 moreover, on the technological level, the weaponry used ten years earlier against Iraq was largely superseded. All that confirmed the opinion of the civilian core of the Bush administration—certainly more than the military personnel who have the advantage of practical knowledge—that military technology was to some extent all-powerful. Already the former academic Madeleine Albright, when she was Secretary of State during Bill Clinton's second term, had asked the more circumspect military professional Colin Powell: "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" This tendency to believe in the absolute power of military technology was illustrated most clearly during the invasion of Iraq. It was Donald Rumsfeld, a founding member of the PNAC—who settled the debate over the numbers of troops necessary to control Iraq. He made his decision against the wishes of a significant layer in the Pentagon that considered the project of controlling Iraq with a military presence on the ground reduced to only 150,000 soldiers utterly unrealistic. Many in the military maintained that two or three times that number of soldiers were necessary in order to have a chance to "stabilize" Iraq.

The military adventurism of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld team started in Afghanistan in October 2001, and then continued in Iraq. It led to a situation of overstretch of the military means of the United States: not of its technological means, to be sure, but of its "human resources." From any point of view, the capacities of the U.S. armed forces are clearly above the level of the Vietnam War—except on one point that was grossly underestimated: soldiers. The current troop levels of the U.S. armed forces are much reduced compared with the time of the Vietnam War: in 1970, the total personnel of the Department of Defense exceeded 3 million people; in 2005, that figure hardly reaches 1.4 million, which includes all civilian personnel, administrative and otherwise. Since then, the pressures put on the "human resources" of the armed forces have been pushed to the extreme.

On top of that, the Pentagon does not even manage anymore to achieve its moderate recruitment goals—in spite of the increasingly "enticing" conditions it offers in the form of salary and other advantages. This is surely where the Achilles' heel of U.S. military power is located. In a certain sense, this confirms the resilience of the "Vietnam syndrome," which looked as if it had been overcome in 1991. The quagmire in Iraq actually revived the syndrome. Moreover, to the extent that the quantitative recruitment goals are not reached, there is a tendency to lower the threshold of qualitative requirements, which has resulted in, among other things, the increase in the number of "blunders" in Iraq. The situation in Iraq—and the exposure of the massive lies that served to justify the launching of war—have both aggravated these problems, so it is barely conceivable, if not unthinkable, to restore the draft.

Thus, the Bush administration is forced to rediscover a banality: one does not control a population solely with military technology, no matter how cutting-edge it is. Above all, you have to deploy foot soldiers on the ground. In the debate over the invasion of Iraq, the ideological clique of neoconservatives, of whom Paul Wolfowitz was the principal representative in the administration, was used by Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld to make a case that it was not necessary to put more men on the ground in Iraq than the Pentagon already had at its disposal. It was this

clique that propagated the famous illusion that invading American troops would be welcomed in Iraq with flowers. The administration's self-deception in this regard was decisive in its ability to overcome objections on the part of military personnel. The question, of course, was whether the United States could control Iraq in the long term: This is indeed why Saddam Hussein had been kept in power after the 1991 war—for lack of any certainty that the United States would be able to control the country after his fall. The Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld team settled these doubts with a tremendous dose of wishful thinking.

This monumental miscalculation led to quagmire in Iraq. Iraq turned into a "catastrophe," to use Zbigniew Brzezinski's expression. The Bush administration will leave the scene soon with what is, indeed, the most catastrophic result in the history of American administrations. The greatest failure of U.S. foreign policy will figure among its liabilities. Coming to power at a time when the "hyperpower" was at its apogee and had considerable capital, it leaves after having thrown the United States into bankruptcy. And the expression here is not only metaphorical.

READING THE coverage in the American press, from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal, two poles emerge. One, the economic difficulties that American capitalism is experiencing; the other, the sustained effort to permanently expand the arms potential of the United States. How can we understand the conjunction of these two elements?

CERTAINLY THE military expenditures of the U.S. are enormous. In real dollars, they are the highest since the Second World War. They even exceed those from the period of the Korean War (1950–1953). Nonetheless, in relative terms, that is, compared to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the United States still has a considerable margin for maneuver. At approximately 5 percent of GDP, U.S. military expenditure is still far from the peak of nearly 15 percent during the Korean War and 9 percent during the Vietnam War. Military expenditure remains even below the level of 7 percent reached in "peacetime" under Reagan in 1985.

Still, the more alarming question is that of the twin deficits, which rebounded after the balancing of the federal budget achieved under Clinton, an indispensable measure on his agenda following the massive accumulation of debt under Reagan. The United States is again submerged under twin deficits, the most serious of which is not so much the budget deficit—which was worse under Reagan—but the balance of payments/balance of trade deficit that has beat all records.

From this angle, we are facing a configuration that resembles, with necessary adjustments, that of the first serious crisis of American decline at the time of the Vietnam War. Vietnam already revealed a situation of overstretch, in terms of the indicators at that time, the cost of the war contributing to the whole of foreign spending and to a balance of trade moving into the red that would begin to pull the balance of payments toward a deficit. This would result in the end of the international monetary system established at Bretton Woods in 1944 and based on fixed dollar-gold parity and fixed exchange rates.

Today, taking into consideration the convergence of factors that I indicated, I think that we are living through a similar moment of crisis and decline, of which the slipping of the dollar is one indication. The number one priority of the next American administration will be to attempt to remedy this situation. It will have to repair the damage caused, which is not completely impossible. The United States has enormous resources at its disposal and is capable of bouncing back, so much the more since it can inveigle significant outside resources from its position as world overlord, both on the monetary level (seignorage) and on the politico-military level (suzerainty). And it's hard to imagine how the United States could be dislodged from this position.

In U.S. ruling circles, the understanding that their major trump card resides in military supremacy is acute. In contrast with those who never cease ringing the death knell of an endless decline, we must be extremely cautious. In reality, U.S. military supremacy compared to the rest of the world is at a record high and constitutes the key to the vault. In the military realm, the United States overspends all other countries on Earth combined—something unprecedented in world history. Arms expenditures obviously do not translate into immediate military power, because a whole series of other conditions enter into the balance. Nonetheless, while not dismissing the Achilles' heel I mentioned previously, the hyperpower remains a hyperpower as far as the power to strike from a distance is concerned.

And Washington is keen on revalorizing its role as Lord Protector of Europe and Japan. The policies outlined by Brzezinski for the Clinton administration—of which the expansion of NATO was the most pivotal piece—aimed to weaken Russia, confronting it with an imposed choice between submission and abdicating all imperial pretensions, or a return to a posture of opposition to the Western system. By presenting itself as the defender of the countries bordering Russia, Washington revalorizes its role as protector of "democracy" and "freedom," which was its ideological rationale during the Cold War.

Moreover, the United States positions itself as the rampart against the growing power of China, which worries Japan. Thus, from the perspective of the alliances formed during the Cold War and expanded since the end of the Cold War, Washington still affirms itself in a real position of overlord. And that's what future administrations will attempt to exploit anew, by attempting to refurbish the hegemonic "soft power" of the United States that was largely damaged under Bush's presidency.

HOW DO you explain the roots of the alliance between London and Washington?

WHEN BRITISH capitalism saw that it was on the slope of an irreversible imperial decline after the Second World War and especially after the

Suez crisis in 1956, it took the option of wagering on its alliance with the United States. This alliance was facilitated by an obvious cultural affinity between the two countries and was supported by capitalist interpenetration, a liaison between Wall Street and the City of London. The historic economic ties between the two countries were already very strong, of course.

It is also possible to examine the political attitude of European countries toward Washington in relation to the degree of economic interpenetration between their respective capitalism and U.S. capitalism. We can take the example of Holland or, certainly for a long period of time at least, Switzerland.

The economic and political elite of the United Kingdom chose to play with the strongest. This option was, and still is, considered by the elites as the best way to guarantee themselves a slice of the pie that they would not have had the option of retaining if they had followed the French example. That's why de Gaulle was opposed to Great Britain's joining the Common Market: for him, London represented Washington's Trojan horse. On their side, the British ruling circles thought that the Gaullist attitude was reminiscent of Don Quixote. They still think so. They did not believe in the Franco-German alliance that Chirac and Schröder tried to establish in order to salvage a margin of autonomy against Washington. They remained faithful to the Atlanticist commitment, even more so since they appeared to be a counterweight to the Chirac-Schröder policies in Europe, something that increased their value in the eyes of their American ally.

Certainly, Blair has been called a "poodle" and the United Kingdom is often the brunt of contemptuous commentary in the United States—on the part of Brzezinski, for instance. But all that is unimportant compared to the recompense the British ruling circles expect to gain for their loyalty. Their involvement in the Iraq War is an example of this. Blair, with the support of the City, aligned with Washington for a very simple and comprehensible reason. Saddam Hussein thought he could play on what some have termed "inter-imperialist contradictions" by offering juicy oil contracts to the French and the Russians—I say "Russians" and not "Soviets" because this took place in the 1990s. He hoped they would push for the lifting of the embargo imposed on Iraq throughout the entire decade and up to the invasion of the country.

Against this, the English maintained their tight alliance with the United States and considered themselves rewarded when they were chosen to be the Bush administration's Sancho Panza for the invasion of Iraq. Thus they hoped, and still do, to gain a piece of the pie of Iraqi oil, which is enormous. They think their American ally will guarantee them this and that the Russians, as well as the French, will get nothing, or at most a few crumbs. Certainly, Blair ended up paying his part of the price for the monumental error committed by the Bush administration in its conquest of Iraq. But that doesn't change their fundamental choice.

OVER THE past months, there is an impression that French policy toward the United States is shifting. Can you explain this?

SARKOZY'S POLICIES can be read as the result of an acknowledgement of the failure of a timid attempt to repeat de Gaulle's position on the part of the Jacques Chirac–Dominique de Villepin duo. I say timid because a lot of people tend to forget that in 1995, when Chirac took over the presidency, he brought about a partial return of France into NATO's integrated military command, from which de Gaulle had withdrawn in 1966. Therefore, Chirac himself began to offer some tokens of good French behavior to Washington.

However French interests are most systematically in competition with U.S. interests. From Airbus (versus Boeing) to bananas (produced in Martinique or in Guadeloupe versus the control of banana production by American companies in Central America and elsewhere), and passing through the export of arms—as is evident in the efforts to put the Rafale fighter aircraft on the market—or nuclear production. Not to mention oil and gas, which are at the center of more or less open tensions, from Algeria to Chad via Angola or Libya. So the range of conflicts of interest is quite wide.

Charles de Gaulle's policies consisted of benefiting from the situation created by the Cold War by placing himself in the "gray zone" between the two superpowers. De Gaulle and the ruling sectors of French capital thought they could gain more from this autonomous space than by hitching themselves to Washington's wagon. General de Gaulle's policies would translate into an opening toward the Soviet Union—"Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals"—or into a recognition of China. This attitude of "non-alignment"—to use an expression that overstates things somewhat but that was adopted in the Third World—was France's trump card for a long time. French capital built ties with countries that Washington considered pariahs, but that were eager for relations with Western powers. Since then, French capital found itself in a privileged position within these countries. The Arab world is one of the zones where this perspective was most clearly concretized, obtaining results that were not guaranteed in advance as they are in France's colonial dominion in sub-Saharan Africa.

This is how we can understand Charles de Gaulle's position in 1967, at the time of the Arab-Israeli war. It was a complete reversal of the French position from the 1950s and '60s. Previously, France had been the main supporter of Israel: Israeli arms were mostly French; the nuclear reactor at Dimona was of French origin. The American-Israeli military alliance came about in the mid-1960s; it did not exist in the same way previously. But people often make the mistake of projecting present-day tendencies onto the past. Seeing Israel hitch itself to the U.S. machine, de Gaulle chose to radically change direction and to play the Arab card, thus producing "France's Arab policy." But with the end of the Soviet Union, the gray zone from the Cold War days vanished. Certainly, "rogue states" remain, but they are not very consequential. At the time of the Iraq War, Villepin's rhetoric won some applause, but in concrete terms the result was rather

slim for French capital.

The Americans took over Iraq and their hold on the region remains very strong, even though they have to deal with numerous and very serious problems. Therefore, in some way, to get back to Sarkozy, he is the reflection of how the field that French capital can cultivate, by playing the anti-American card, has shrunk. A sizeable fraction of French capital clearly wants to stop playing Don Quixote and wants to see France align itself with the rest of contemporary Europe in joining a calmer partnership with the United States. This Atlanticist option has always existed in France and has come into conflict with the Gaullist option more than once. Certainly, if the United States plunges into decline, there will be a redefinition of strategic choices and the material interests that lie beneath them.

WITHOUT ENTERING into an electoral perspective or falling into Obama-mania, can't Barack Obama's irruption onto the U.S. political scene be situated in relationship to the decline you talked about and the will to thwart it?

THE FACT that a Black American like Obama, who doesn't have the socio-professional pedigree of a Colin Powell, emerges as possible president of the United States cannot be underrated. Of course, some important sectors of capital support him. But his emergence is nonetheless an extraordinary sociopolitical event in a country that, only forty years ago, was dealing with institutionalized racial discrimination. This shows that affirmative action bears real results; the attacks against measures tied to affirmative action within the United States show this clearly.

That said, why does Barack Obama have a serious chance of winning? Here, we get back to the question of the selection of political personnel, as we discussed earlier. It obviously was not a conclave of the capitalist class as such that chose Obama. Still, the dominant economic circles weigh heavily on choices made, not only by way of their financial resources and their networks, but also through their mass media that represent an entirely determining factor in this type of electoral battle. So, why Obama?

In my opinion, repairing the damage caused by the Bush administration could be facilitated by such a profound and radical change of face, change of image for the United States. An "imperialism with a Black and human face" could restore the image of the United States that was so greatly tarnished by the disaster of the Bush administration. In international polls, the image of the United States has never reached such lows, even during the period of Vietnam. The majority sectors of the American dominant class feel the need to reconstruct the image and the reputation of the country. A figure such as Barack Obama could facilitate this makeover and reconfirm key elements in the American ideology: democracy, social mobility, etc. This is very important from the point of view of "soft power." The sole fact that Obama is the candidate of the Democratic Party, regardless of what the final electoral result will be, already impresses the entire world.

Obviously, for Obama to be able to play this role, for him to don the clothes of the official figure he will have to be, he had to offer some tokens showing his good behavior. On this question, the composition of his staff is of utmost significance. As for his domestic policy, several analysts have already pointed out that it is to the right of Hillary Clinton's proposed domestic policy. In the realm of foreign policy, Zbignew Brzezinski is again the guru. There's also Anthony Lake, close to Brzezinski, who was national security adviser during Bill Clinton's first term in office, then Clinton's special envoy.

Obama, then, is surrounded by people who shaped the perspective of the two Clinton administrations regarding imperial policy. These personnel, drawing lessons from the failure of the Bush administration, today have a tendency to "talk left." Reading Brzezinski's latest writings is quite revealing here: it's Saint Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus! The role of someone like Joseph Stiglitz, Obama's economic adviser, is along the same lines. We find here a taking into consideration of the swing of the bourgeois ideological pendulum necessary after Bush.

The interests of American imperialism obviously find their ultimate guarantee in military supremacy, but a politico-ideological facelift is a necessary and useful complement. Under Bush, the arrogance and right-wing shift went so far that it seems imperative for the "enlightened" fraction of the American establishment to steer "to the left," at least in words. This is where someone like Barack Obama can be useful. The ruling class isn't worried by him because he is not carried along by a wave of social radicalization. The question isn't one of individuals per se. Take Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example. He was the most progressive president in modern American history. This was not due to his personality, even if you do need an adequate personality for such a role, but to the profound social radicalization at the time of the Great Depression that he gave voice to while also holding it in check. It's really not individual personalities that make situations, but situations that make individual personalities.

However, there is no possible analogy between the United States of the 1930s—from the point of view of the balance of social forces, the class struggle, the strength of the working class—and the current situation. At the heart of the ruling capitalist fractions, there is no expression of serious concern. Someone like Obama could be advantageous for promoting U.S. interests—unless the ultra-reactionary course of the Bush administration finds itself confirmed in the election of John McCain, with the United States plunging deeper toward a decline that would be symbolized by a gerontocratic figure à la Brezhnev.

This article first appeared in La Brèche, No. 3, Juin-Juillet-Août 2008, and was translated into English by Sophie Hand and Sherry Wolf. It is reprinted here with thanks to Gilbert Achcar. It appeared first in ISR.

The new Chinese Capitalism

14 September 2008, by Esther Vivas, Josep María Antentas

Work in a Shuzhou factory
Wikimedia

In the 1990s an unrestrained process of privatization of state companies and liberalization of public services took place. Nowadays, two thirds of wage-earners work already for private capital. At the beginning of the 21st century, China's entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2001 culminated its process of reintegration into global capitalism.

They are few on the left, luckily, who have illusions in the Chinese model. But it should be clear that agree that thirty years of reform have created a wildcat capitalism without restraint. And this it is the horizon towards which the country is heading, in spite of the rhetoric about a "harmonious society" from President Hu Jintao. The increasing evidence of the social and environmental disasters caused by the present model of accumulation has caused changes in the official rhetoric and adjustments in the policies to contain imbalances, but not a modification of the general course.

The capitalist restoration has been piloted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) whose ideology and nature have been transformed. Nationalism has become the main element of the discourse and identity of the CCP and is used as a cohesive and legitimating factor in its political project. Hence the strategic importance of the Games.

China is traversed by great social and regional imbalances. The reforms have caused concentration of incomes, social polarization and increased inequalities. The Gini coefficient (which measures inequality) went from 0.30 in 1980 to 0.48 now and according to the World Bank there are 300 million poor people in the country. The bulk of economic activity is concentrated in the coastal regions (receiving 85% of foreign investment last year) which contrast with the impoverished regions of the interior. The present model of development also has a high environmental cost, in particular in terms of air pollution in the big cities and water contamination.

The social base of the Chinese regime is the new emergent bourgeoisie, related to the apparatus of the State and the Party, and a significant urban middle-class, which also includes the most qualified sectors of the wage-earners, and many civil servants and members of the state apparatus.

The working-class has experienced deep transformations. And workers in the public sector, 20% of the active population, have been hard hit by the big wave of privatizations, that have eliminated 40% of public sector jobs. This fraction of the working class has seen the social guarantees of the Maoist period eroded. In parallel, a new fraction of the working-class has emerged, formed by rural migrants to the city and concentrated in the export oriented industries of the east coast and the Pearl River delta, and also in poorly paid sectors like construction and services in the big cities. Internal emigration from the country to the city is fed by a crisis in rural resources and the collapse in spending power of the peasants, around a third of that of urban dwellers. Comprised of about 150 million people, this new working-class occupies the lowest rosters of the labour market.

Their living and working conditions form the bitterest face of the new Chinese capitalism. Low wages, interminable working hours, lack of health and safety at work and violation of the labour laws on the part of many companies and their subcontractors comprise their daily reality. The official union federation, the only legal one, lacks autonomy in relation to the state, is subordinate to the enterprise interests and is not a real instrument of defence for workers.
Against this background, it is no wonder that social struggles have increased from the end of the 1990s. Nevertheless, these are still very fragmented and isolated and due to the iron repression they do not leave any organizational consequences behind them. Convergences between the mobilizations of the workers of the state sector with those of the immigrant working class do not exist. The same is true of the numerous protests in the rural world and the urban areas.

To support these emergent struggles in China against the present model of accumulation, given the importance of the country and the position that it occupies in the architecture of global capitalism, is a central strategic task for movements opposed to neoliberal globalization. Without, obviously, playing the game of the Western governments when they hypocritically denounce abuses of human rights in China or the repression of the Tibetan people. The form the world will take in the future will depend to a good extent on present and future popular struggles in China.

This article first appeared in the newspaper "Publico" on September 7. 2008.

Mindanao on the brink

14 September 2008, by Alex de Jong

Mindanao: Eighth most populous island in the world
Wikimedia

They have been there before; in the seventies when the island saw heavy fighting between Islamic independence fighters and Marcos' troops and in 2000 when then president Joseph Estrada declared 'total war' against the Muslim separatists. In a cruel twist of irony, the spark that ignited the newest round of fighting were the contents of a treaty that some hoped would bring peace to the island once and for all.

On the surface, the developments of the last few weeks are easy to follow. After years of negotiating, the government of current president Arroyo seemed to agree with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front – the main Muslim group still at war with the Filipino government – about the establishment of a highly autonomous homeland for the Muslim minority, or Moros as they're called in the Philippines. The agreement was supposed to end more than twenty years of fighting between the MILF and the government in Manila – fighting that started after the MILF broke away from the other major Muslim nationalist movement, the Moro National Liberation Front, in the late seventies, disagreeing with its handling of negotiations with the central government. The already existing Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao – the ARMM , formed as a result of the agreements between the MNLF and the government - would be extended and granted additional rights to form the Bangsamoro Juridicial Entity (BJE) – Bangsamoro being the name used for the nation of Philippine Muslims.

Things went awry when shortly before the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain which would set the borders of the BJE, the contents of the treaty became public. Not only would the BJE be endowed with extensive privileges, causing the anger of Filipino chauvinists who saw this as splitting of the Republic of the Philippines; large proportions of land would be included in the BJE even though its inhabitants had not been consulted about this. Some regions that would be included in the BJE are predominantly inhabited by Christians or non-Muslim indigenous groups with their own distinct cultures and religions.

Opponents of the treaty urged the constitutional court to declare the agreement unconstitutional, saying no government has the right to divide the national territory of the Republic. The court issued a temporary restraining order, ordering the government to post-pone signing the agreement until it could make a definitive decision about its constitutionality. This order came on august 4, just before the official signing in Kuala Lumpur. All the participants of both panels were already in Malaysia to attend the signing ceremony.

The MILF, obviously angered by this turn of events, declared that the ruling of the court was an internal matter for the Filipino government and that it considered the agreement a done deal. Two military commanders of the MILF decided however that the time for talking was over. Commanders Kato and Bravo attacked a number of Christian communities that had protested against the establishment of the BJE. Dozens of civilians were killed, houses looted and burnt. To cover their retreat from the army, the MILF fighters took civilians hostage in a number of cases, using them as human shields.

These attacks were not authorized by the central leadership of the MILF. But so far the MILF has refused to place the commanders under arrest or expel them. The government demands that the commanders will be handed over and placed large prizes on their heads – further antagonizing the MILF. The chief negotiator for the MILF, Mohager Iqbal, declared they would never hand the commanders over and that if they would stand trial, this would be in a court organized by the MILF. The MILF is a loose organization and many of its members divide their loyalties between the organization as such, local leaders and individual figureheads in the movement and this is not the first time individual commanders acted on their own.

The fighting so far has left hundreds dead – mainly civilians - and forced a large number of people to flee their home. Precise numbers are difficult to establish but the Red Cross houses 70.000 refugees that left their homes and estimates already half a million people on the total island population of 18 million have been affected by the fighting. So far, officially the fighting has been limited between the army and the troops of three MILF field commanders – Kato, Bravo and a third commander, Pangalian, who has been accused of helping the two others. But as the number of casualties mounts and MILF guerrillas split up and retreat to other areas to stay out of the hands of the enemy, the risk of other MILF troops and even the organization as such joining the combat is very real. Already, a majority of the guerrilla camps of the MILF have been attacked.

Not so obvious is what the explanation for the recent events is. The cause the Moro Islamic Liberation Front is fighting for is well-known; an independent Muslim homeland, in some form or another. The organization is highly critical of the level of autonomy of the ARMM but the MILF has seemed willing to settle for an increased level of autonomy. The struggle of the Moros for self-determination goes back a long way, with Moro nationalists placing themselves in what they see as the centuries old tradition of the anti-colonial resistance against successive invaders – the Spanish, Americans, Christian Filipino's – by the Moros. In

its modern form, the fighting broke out when in the early seventies the MNLF decided to take up arms against the Marcos regime in an attempt to end years of discrimination and ill-treatment.

Although a resource-rich and fertile area, Mindanao remains the poorest part of the Philippines, underdeveloped and neglected. Added to this is the specific, racist oppression of the Moros. In the fifties, Manila shipped large numbers of Christian, landless peasants from northern Luzon to Mindanao, displacing large numbers of mostly Muslim farmers there. This was an attempt to defuse a communist-led insurgency in the north that was mainly based on the peasantry. Later, in the seventies not just the MNLF but also the Marcos regime propagandized the war as a religious conflict. Manila funded Christian fundamentalist vigilante groups that committed a large number of cruelties. State sanctioned anti-Muslim racism made the lives for many Moro's, already under-privileged, worse.

Although focusing on democratic, political goals as national self-determination, both the MNLF and the MILF have acquired some understanding that there's an economic side to the plight of the Moros – part of the agreement that led to the establishment of the ARMM was a series of developmental projects by the central government in the Muslim territories. Many of these promises remained unfulfilled.

But why did this old conflict lead to renewed fighting when a solution seemed so close? A possible interpretation of the recent events is that the government never intended the peace treaty to be implemented and that it hoped that protest from communities or the court would block the treaty, giving the government a reason to resume the war and maybe even provoking the MILF to attack first. If this was indeed the plan, it appears to have been successful.

Such a level of cynicism might be difficult to imagine but the Arroyo government and its supporters would be well capable of it. Since Arroyo's coming to power in 2001 hundreds of progressive activists have been murdered by hit-squads or were 'disappeared'. Regarding the other main insurgency in the countries, led by the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, the government has made it clear that its goal is not peace-talks but making 'irrelevant', through military means, the CPP's armed operations before 2010.

Indeed, the first round of fighting seemed to be welcomed by the government. The first attacks happened on the 18th of August; three days later the government declared that in the future its focus in negotiations would not be the rebel groups themselves but the communities in affected areas. That means side-stepping a group like the MILF, which enjoys broad support among the Moro population – according to some estimates it can mobilize over 100.000 armed fighters - and effectively rejecting their claim that they speak for the Moros. Only a few days later, this statement was followed up by a declaration that in any future talks with armed groups, their demobilization, disarmament and the 'rehabilitation' of its former fighters into society would be the first issues on the agenda. In plain English, this means that the government makes surrender a pre-condition for future talks. It seems unlikely that the MILF, aware that it thanks its bargaining position largely to its military power and not from any democratic niceties from Manila, will accept this. The whole agreement was then thrown in the trash by the government – even surprising the judges who had ruled a postponement of the signing.

Long before the fighting broke out the army had been organizing paramilitary groups and distributing large quantities of weapons, only to stand back when the first MILF attacks happened. Soldiers remained in their barracks or arrived hours after the fighting broke out. One reason why so many civilians were killed was that they fought with their own weapons against the MILF. All of this, critics of the government say, can only mean one thing; that Manila sprung a trap on the MILF.

Mindanao has been milked by the Manila government for its resources for decades. Except from agricultural products, various kinds of metals like zinc, copper and gold, are found on the island. And its not only natural resources the Arroyo government has been mining in Mindanao: as Nathan Quimpo points out, it has been massive fraud in the ARMM that has allowed the political machines of Arroyo and her supporters to steal the most recent elections; Mindanao has become 'the national center for committing electoral fraud and stealing elections at the national level'1. Making a deal with a part of the Moro-elite for some kind of political autonomy or granting them a somewhat larger slice of the pie - like the ruling elite did when it established the ARMM – is one thing, giving up control over these resources is another. Some of the most resource-rich parts of the island are under MILF control and the BJE would have been allowed to control a size able part of Mindanao and have its own currency, armed forces and diplomatic ties with the outside world, thus taking its people and resources out of the hands of Manila.

The MILF has lost a considerable amount of support the last few weeks. Part of its appeal was that it considered itself a revolutionary organization at war with the state, not with the Christian community, unlike some of the splinter groups that have been targeting civilians. This attitude not only won it sympathy among Moros but also the respect of Christian Filipino's who support a political settlement. If the current conflict spirals further down the path of a sectarian confrontation, the Filipino elite – Christian and Moro - will be the one benefiting from a weakened, divided opposition while the Moro guerrilla's will be fighting and dying for empty promises. Already, civilians are arming themselves or asking for more arms from the army to fight against the MILF. Socialists in the Philippines, like the section of the Fourth International – the Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao or RWP-M which concentrates its work on Mindanao, face the hard task of confronting state-repression and combining the struggle for democratic rights like self-determination with economic emancipation.

No solidarity with Russian imperialism

3 September 2008, by VPERED

Georgian soldiers in Iraq, May 2006

From the first hours of a confrontation, the Russian and international media was filled with statements and attempts to give an explanation of the current situation. At the same time we are compelled to ascertain that only a very small share of those messages which have filled media space, expresses a position adequate enough at this conjuncture: we have to deal with one-sided patriotic statements (frequently reaching a hysteria) or, on the other side, we face another extreme measure – desire to accuse the people which have been involved in military operations of all mortal sins. Our task as Russian socialists is not just to declare a general position, but also to give the Marxist analysis of the situation, and to be capable of offering an alternative to state propaganda of any kind.

Unlike many, we are not going to choose, from the two sides (Russian and Georgian), who was "right" and which was "guilty". We believe that both sides of the conflict went to it menacingly. There is no requirement for discussion about who has begun the first fire and who whom has provoked. The position of the governments of both countries consists in orientation to the military opposition, and is capable of revealing the real political resource of these countries on the international scene.

Not the first or last time, the hostage of interests of both imperialistic groups, into one of which includes the United States, there were ordinary people. This time – the people of South Ossetia became victims, whose right to self-determination became a subject of trade in this conflict, as did the Georgian population which has already suffered from intrusion of Russian "peacemakers".

It is impossible to deny that the choice of the South Ossetian people is quite clear: Russia is considered by the majority of Ossetians as the defender from ethnic cleansing and violence by the Georgian government.

This position of the peaceful population of South Ossetia, perishing under blows of the Georgian army, is quite natural. The concrete balance of forces on international scene, no less than weakness of the international (and especially Georgian) labor movement, means that at present the Ossetian population does not have any defenders other than armies of imperialistic Russia.

In this situation the demand for withdrawal of Russian troops from a conflict zone, before a ceasefire and at least the most preliminary arrangements for a peaceful settlement are developed, means to give worry to the population of Ossetia; its workers, its old people and children.

From the very beginning of the conflict we clearly demanded the immediate termination of military operations. We demanded that military operations of the Russian armies in South Ossetia were limited to necessary defence, without developing into war with the peaceful Georgian population, which died in Gori and other places under the Russian bombs.

We decisively declared that our position has nothing in common with a position of the right and pseudo-left Russian politicians acting under the flag of struggle for "the state interests of the Russian Federation".

Proclaiming the full and unconditional solidarity with the Ossetian people, expressing the full and unconditional support for the struggle of Ossetians for their national self-determination, we also unconditionally refuse any solidarity with Russian imperialism, or any support for the state of Putin and Medvedev.

"The state interest" of imperialist Russia is an interest of corporations and the top bureaucrats, which is strongly opposed to the interests of the working people. To support "the state interest" today means actually to support that the Russian imperialism could include new regions in its sphere of domination.

We have a moral and political right to support the Ossetians against their oppression by the bourgeois nationalist regime of Saakashvili, only because we are ready to act in support of any people oppressed by the Russian imperialism.

We unconditionally support the right of South Ossetia to self-determination, up to a split from Georgia and creation of an independent state, or reunion with the North Ossetia as a part of the Russian Federation.

But we are convinced that despite all the "humanitarian" and "peace-making" rhetoric of the Russian authorities, the Russian ruling class becomes the main obstacle in a way of the real self-determination of the people of South Ossetia.

In spite of the fact that the Russian government is ready for today to play openly with recognition of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it never approve their joining the Russian Federation. The independent decision of the population of South Ossetia of its own destiny would create a dangerous precedent of infringement of the system of a “vertical of power” and unconditional submission of regions to the centre. The reunion of Ossetia as a part of Russia could seriously call into question those principles and rules on which the Federation is currently based.

Despite the present termination of operations, military-political intensity will not decline for a long time, and open military operations will give way to incidentally repeating acts of sabotage and mutual provocations in a

combination to mutual charges of the infringement of norms of international law and an exchange of diplomatic notes. Russia will continue to conduct its own game in this region: it will keep the armies, most likely, having increased a contingent and definitively having put South Ossetia under a complete control. Georgia, probably, will receive the vote for joining NATO (this point still will be a subject of huge political discussions) and additional support from the USA.

The United States will continue the strengthening in Caucasus. To the accompaniment of threats to the Russian government and conversations about new "cold war», the American and European establishment will not dare at the beginning of the real confrontation with Russia. The defeat of Georgia was a serious blow to the foreign political strategy of the USA in the region, directed on support of satellite states of "New Europe". On the other hand, Sarkozy's peace initiative has shown the desire of the EU to take advantage of this situation for the demonstration of its own position. Energy dependence on Russia, no less than its remaining serious military potential, are able to force the EU and the USA to reconsider the unconditional support of the regimes like Saakashvili's. At the same time, the consent to actual freedom from the hands of the Russian government in South Ossetia and Abkhazia gives the EU and the USA the right to demand from Russia support on such strategic questions, such as pressure on Iran. For its part the Russian capital, which is deeply integrated into the world market, is least interested in political isolation directly beating down its profits. The fall of the rouble exchange rate and the beginning of recession in the market are disturbing symptoms creating a threat to political stability in the country. The original aspiration of the Russian ruling class today is (as fast as possible) to smooth the situation, simultaneously using it for the statement as the full member of world club of imperialistic powers.

Thus, the side which remains lost, as before, is the South Ossetian people. Inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, who got Russian citizenship in theor masses in recent months, remain citizens of the second grade: Refugees from Ossetia, already coming into the southern regions, will drag with them a pityful existence, becoming the object of racism and oppression.

We demand a real right for the Ossetian people to decide their further destiny without external dictatorship from any side. We consider that the decision of the status of South Ossetia, should be considered with the opinion of thousands of Georgians living on its territory and today who have appeared in the position of refugees in territory of Georgia.

We call the peoples of Russia, South Ossetia, Georgia to struggle against a policy of the governments that can lead to new wars. We consider necessary that each of these people has called to account the politicians and business elite of this countries, bearing on them responsibility for bloodshed and troubles of the ordinary people.

***We call for Russia, as a real, equal and democratic federation!**

*Against imposed from above chauvinism and Caucasophobia, for the full personal, political and social rights for all inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia if they want to become citizens of Russia!

*Against secret maneuvers of the governments of the USA, Russia and the European Union! For the full and unconditional right to the self-determination independent of situational interests of the imperialistic centers!

*For the peace and class solidarity of working people!