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A vibrant internationalist, feminist and revolutionary voice has fallen silent: Denise Comanne (1949-2010)

1 June 2010, by CADTM, Éric Toussaint

A feminist actively involved in the local and international struggles against capitalism, racism and the patriarchal system, Denise Comanne created CADTM together with Eric Toussaint and other activists almost exactly 20 years ago. Denise's premature death leaves a huge void, but also leaves many who, having met and known her, have joined her battle against Third World Debt and all other forms of injustice and oppression.

A tireless revolutionary, political leader of the LCR (Revolutionary Communist League, the Belgian section of the Fourth International) for many years, and former trade union delegate of the FGTB (General Workers Federation of Belgium) in the city of Liège, Denise militated to her very last breath in the cause of social movements. During the 1980s she stood firm against police and legal repression in the combat of City of Liège workers against a series of structural adjustment plans designed to repay the public debt. She was held in police custody, her telephone was bugged and she was convicted of participating in strike action and street protest. This only strengthened her determination to fight for social justice and revolutionary change. For her, the combat of people in both

North and South against the tyranny of creditors and the debt was one and the same.

Five days before she died, she had actively participated in the writing and adoption of an appeal entitled "Femmes d'Europe, soulevez-vous !" (Women of Europe, rise up) which declared, among other things: "We, the women of CADTM, demand the immediate suspension of payment of the Greek public debt! We demand that an audit of that debt be made now to determine the portion of illegitimate debts that must be purely and simply abolished! We demand a stop to arms expenditure and the investment of the amounts thus saved in socially useful expenses: social needs and the fight against discrimination and violence towards women. We call for a rebellion against the austerity imposed by the capitalists." Denise had enthusiastically accepted to stand as a candidate in the Belgian legislative elections of 13 June 2010 on the Front des Gauches list. Her public explanation for standing aptly illustrates her determination: "The injustice of the capitalist system is a source of constant indignation and revolt: indeed I have experienced its impact on my own life as a woman and

as a worker. This is why I am an activist. I agreed to be a candidate on the "Front des Gauches" list because at last after ever so many years of failed attempts we are moving towards a true unity of the radical Left." [Front des Gauches](#)

Denise was an internationalist in thought and in action: solidarity with the Polish workers in 1983, with the British miners during their long strike of 1984-1985, organisation and coordination of the voluntary work brigades in Nicaragua to support the Sandinista revolution between 1985 and 1989, solidarity activities with the Palestinian people, several missions in Africa (Benin, Togo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Tunisia, etc.), in South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal) and in Latin America (Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, etc.) to consolidate the CADTM network and participate in the reinforcement of the World Social Forum, solidarity in Belgium with the "sans papiers" (illegal migrants; Denise was also a member of the CRACPE which opposes the detention centres), not forgetting her role in the CADTM magazine "Les Autres Voix de la Planète" of which she was editor from 2007 to 2009, and for which she wrote many vibrant editorials and articles.

Denise also knew how vital it is to fight the battle of ideas and made a point of honour of manning the stands selling CADTM publications. When she was struck down on the afternoon of Friday 28 May, she was toting the suitcase on wheels in which she always carried CADTM books and magazines!

Denise was a very active feminist and a member of the international network of the World March of Women. The day before she died, she finished an important contribution: "Pourquoi le CADTM est-il féministe ?" in which she developed an acute capacity for criticism and self-criticism of her own organisation. This document makes a significant contribution to the entire CADTM network which is active in 29 countries. Finally, as an activist in the global justice movement, Denise had participated in its creation and closely followed the activities of ATTAC in Belgium.

Since the announcement of her death, hundreds of people have sent messages of solidarity and sympathy from every corner of the earth. You can continue to send your messages to the following address: international@cadtm.org

For those of you who can be in Liège, Eric Toussaint, her companion, her family and those close to Denise will receive visits on Tuesday 1 and Wednesday 2 June, from 17h to 19h at the Centre Funéraire de Robermont, 1 rue des Coquelicots, 4040 Bressoux (Liège).

The funeral ceremony followed by the scattering of the ashes will be held at the same address on Thursday 3 June 2010 at 10 o'clock in the morning.

Those who wish to express their sympathy can also make a gift to the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM) on CADTM account no. 001-2318343-22, with the mention "In memory of Denise". For bank transfers from abroad: IBAN: BE06 0012 3183 4322 - SWIFT BIC : GEBA BE BB).

Why I am Standing for the Front des Gauches (Front of the Lefts) in the Belgian General Election on 13th June 2010

Denise Comanne

I was born in 1949, never married, never had children but I am very happy in love.

I studied Archaeology and Art History, and during those university years (1967-1972) I was involved in all the student protests of the time (May 69, "new learning" structures ["enseignement rénové"], foreign students' registration fees, etc.). I became aware of the issue of legalizing abortion and more generally of Women's Liberation.

As employee of the City of Liège, I took an active part in the major strike movements that developed in the city in 1982-1983, 1985, 1987, and 1989. In this context I became Union delegate for the administration sector FG TB - CGSP - ALR) and a political activist in what was then called the Workers' Revolutionary League (Ligue Révolutionnaire des Travailleurs, LRT - former name of the LCR, Communist Revolutionary League, Belgian section of the Fourth International). I have thus been a member of this party since 1984.

In the 1990s I had the opportunity to work for the CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt www.cadtm.org) while still being an employee at the City of Liege, an arrangement that lasted until my retirement in 2009. The CADTM is an NGO that aims at educating for development and whose earnest conviction led to the creation of an international network. In this context I have travelled to Latin America (a continent I had discovered with my trade union's work brigade in Nicaragua), to Africa and to Asia. I am currently refreshing my knowledge of feminist issues considering that the

financial, economic, social, and environmental crisis will have specific consequences on women's everyday lives.

The injustice of the capitalist system is a source of constant indignation and revolt: indeed I have experienced its impact on my own life as a woman and as a worker. This is why I am an activist. I agreed to be a candidate on the **Front des Gauches** list because at last after ever so many years of failed attempts we are moving towards a true unity of the radical Left.

This unity will have to materialize thanks to common work on common objectives in the long term (well-known tune: "ce n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat"...). Among the claims we put forward I particularly appreciate the "Revocability of elected representatives" if they do not do their "duty" and the limitation of their wages to those of a skilled worker. Countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia recently demonstrated that such a claim can be part of a Constitution. They showed us that genuine constituent processes relying on wide democratic participation make it possible to achieve essential social and political breakthroughs. In Belgium politicians give us daily evidence of their unfathomable ability to betray the people and offer them as a sacrifice on the altar of profitability. "Que se vayan todos" as they say in Latin America... Mandates must be revocable!

Translated by Christine Pagnouille

Denise : a vibrant voice among the other voices of the planet

This text was written by Eric Toussaint, her companion, on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday in 2009.

I met Denise in April - May 1983 at the beginning of a trade-union battle which, on that occasion, was to last about twelve weeks. For thousands of us, working men and women from the City of Liège, it was the start of a

legendary struggle 17,500 municipal employees rebelled against the structural adjustment plan that the municipal Â« government Â» (composed of the Deputy Burgmaster's Council backed by the Town Council) had decided to impose on the local staff and population. The political alliance was of the Â« olive branch Â» type: Socialists (PS) + Ecologists (Ecolo) and Â« Social Christians Â» (or Â« PSC Â», now calling itself the Â« Centre Démocrate Humaniste Â»). According to their logic, the best way to repay Liège's billion-euro debt (44 billion Belgian francs in those days), was to privatise several locally-based public services, reduce the number of employees and impose salary-cuts on the remainder. Denise was then employed by the Town-Planning department and I was a teacher at the technical and professional school nicknamed Â« la Grosse Mécanique Â». We met in a whirlpool of struggles and consciousness-raising : a long-haul strike, strike pickets, street demonstrations, strike committee meetings of about twenty people (including Denise), regular trade union meetings with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people present, strong-arm protest actions during the meetings of the Town Council that were voting in the anti-social measures, seeking common ground for public service workers and industrial workers, discussions to take stock and consider perspectives several times a week at the Le Bosphore restaurant, the café known as A l'ombre de la Cathédrale or elsewhere. Did I say a whirlpool? No, rather a social and political tornado! It was a very intense period of our lives, because of the speed at which events were happening.

I had noticed and greatly appreciated (as I still do today) Denise for her tenacity, her combativeness, her eagerness to speak up in meetings (which is not easy and it was the first time for her), her rejection of injustice and refusal to give in to arbitrary commands, no matter from whom. As

for her, she told me later that it was when I spoke at a meeting in the Steel Factory (Jemeppe Kessales' workshop) that she decided to try and take our burgeoning friendship further. I had spoken before a meeting of workers and a delegation of Liège municipal employees to explain the connections between their different struggles and place them in their political context. Before the end of the strike we had begun our love affair - it must have been in June 1983. Twenty-six years already!

I'll spare you the details. Our relationship has always had a political and social dimension, and internationalism has played a great part. In 1983-1984, Denise joined me in my nth journey to Poland to bring aid to radical trade unionists; but more importantly we launched, together with other comrades, volunteer work brigades in revolutionary Nicaragua. The revolution had triumphed in that country in July 1979 and we took part in a vast movement of solidarity, playing a very active role. From 1984 till 1989, almost every year we collaborated in organising the brigades which went off to work alongside Nicaraguan peasants. We all chipped in and organised fund-raisers in Belgium to send material aid to the revolution, and every brigade-member spent their holidays doing three weeks of voluntary work with the peasants, being sure to pay their own fare. In the brigades that we helped organise, almost half were steel-workers, especially from Caterpillar and Cockerill (now Arcelor-Mittal). It was a wonderful experience that Denise and I are far from regretting. We took the opportunity to stay a few extra days in Central America and Cuba in support of other revolutionary processes. On one occasion, things nearly turned nasty for her and me, when we were arrested by Honduran soldiers on the border with Salvador. We were carrying documents for the Salvadorian guerrilla movement that a nun had given us the night before in

the Salvadorian capital. In difficult moments, faced with danger, we stood firm. Denise has always been strong in such tense situations with the forces of repression.

During these journeys, Denise was never concerned about her comfort. We often made do with a bedstead with or without a mattress, a mat on the floor or just a few planks of wood. And if Denise tries to tell you that she doesn't speak Spanish, don't believe it! All the members of the brigades who were with her in the Â« 5ta Region Â» of Nicaragua in 1989 will tell you that she was in charge, and she had talks with the Nicaraguans daily. But she prefers to say that she doesn't speak Spanish. Only someone who lives with her on a daily basis would know the efforts she has to make to understand what people say. To her, because of her hearing problem, picking up and understanding everything that is said is a lifelong combat.

It would take too long to tell you more about these 26 years of action and struggle. But I can tell you that Denise has already had several lives. She was almost stopped in her tracks just after 11th November 2005, but finally she came out of that ordeal strong and raring to go. Her brush with mortality left her more convinced than ever that life should be lived to the full. And she is right. Life should be lived intensely.

Now, with retirement, she is starting a new life. And like many retirees, she will not be leaving the struggle. She will remain very active and still has an enormous contribution to make in the fields of both thought and action. Denise still has a lot to receive and a lot to give.

She is an active and creative force on our magazine *Les Autres Voix de la Planète*, for which she has successfully assumed complete responsibility for the last two years.

June 2009

Translated by Vicki Briault.

Islamophobia sets the terms

31 May 2010, by **Alex de Jong**

Until the 20th of February the Netherlands were ruled by a coalition of the Labor party (PvdA), the Christian-democratic CDA and a smaller Christian party. The Dutch system of proportional parliamentary representation means that the largest party in parliament has to enter into coalition with other parties to form a government.

The relationship between the PvdA and the CDA has been an especially difficult one. What caused the eventual rupture was the PvdA's determination to pull Dutch troops out of Afghanistan after the end of the current mission. The CDA wanted to keep open the possibility of Dutch military involvement, perhaps in the form of instructors for the new Afghan army.

Ironically, one of the reasons why the PvdA refused to make a new compromise with the CDA "after making compromises over an investigation into Dutch support for the war in Iraq and cuts to social spending" was that during the previous election campaign the Christian Democrats had painted them as unreliable. With municipal elections only a few days away, this seemed like a good opportunity to show some backbone.

Ending Dutch military involvement in Afghanistan was one of the promises the PvdA made during its election campaign. A majority of the population supports withdrawal, and the party had seen its support continuously decline while taking part in an increasingly unpopular coalition government. Political calculations like this were what determined the PvdA's approach; there's no anti-war movement in the Netherlands to influence the debate.

The break between the Labor Party and the Christian Democrats means that there will be new national

elections for parliament in June. All parties of the previous governing coalition appear likely to lose seats.

Voters' discontent with the previous right-wing government coalition largely benefited the left social-democratic Socialist Party. In 2006 the SP increased its parliamentary seats from 9 to 25 (out of a total 150). This time around it looks as if the big winner will be Geert Wilders' Party of Freedom (PVV).

Over the last few years, Geert Wilders has had a major impact on Dutch politics. He's a career politician who started out with the right-wing, secular and pro-business VVD party but in 2004 left the party to form his own. In the 4th of March municipal elections the PVV, which concentrated its resources on campaigning in only two cities, won in Almere and came in second in The Hague, the seat of government.

According to polls the PVV could win as many as 25-26 seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections, maybe even becoming the country's largest party. Only the VVD and the CDA "traditionally one of the large ruling parties in the country" leave open the option of forming a coalition with Wilders.

Racist Populism Rising

The PVV's main position is easy to summarize: Islamophobia, an anti-Islamic racism that conflates religious, cultural and ethnic identities. Especially since forming his party, Geert Wilders has been making more and more extreme statements about Dutch Muslims and people with a background in the "Muslim countries." He targets a group that forms about one million out of the country's population of 16 million.

Some of Wilders' proposals include scrapping the first article in the Dutch constitution, which forbids discrimination on basis of race or religion. He is for closing the borders to Muslims, banning the Koran (just as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is already banned in the Netherlands), imposing a special tax on anyone who wears an Islamic head covering and banning Islamic-identified clothing from public buildings.

True to his background in the VVD, Wilders and the other eight PVV parliamentarians have supported the neoliberal economic policies of this and the previous government. But while at first the PVV was vocal in support of plans like abolishing the legal minimum wage and weakening the rights of workers, in the last period the party has cultivated an increasingly populist image, especially since the outbreak of the economic crisis. The PVV objected to the government's crisis measures and, when the ruling coalition proposed to raise the pension age from 65 to 67, threatened to organize street protests.

The PVV's opposition to involvement in Afghanistan "skillfully exploiting the sentiments in the country about an unpopular war" is also contradictory. Geert Wilders is not so much against war and occupation "he is in favor of attacking Iran and is a supporter of the Israeli government" but he opposes the kind of mission the Dutch army was involved in; too much re-building, not enough fighting the "Islamic fascists" who are out to "colonize Europe."

A Larger Trend

With his mixture of anti-Muslim racism and populist appeals against "traditional politics," Wilders is part of a West-European trend that includes the British National Party, the Danish People's Party and the Belgian Vlaams Belang. Since the meteoric rise of Dutch right-wing populist politician

Pim Fortuyn "murdered in May 2002 by Volkert van der Graaf in order to stop him from gaining power through scapegoating Muslims" Muslims in the Netherlands have been continuously targeted.

The tradition that Dutch society should have space for several different cultures is under heavy attack. As in other European countries, the scapegoating has become more intense, giving birth to a new kind of Dutch (and "European") nationalism based on a mythical, "superior Judeo-Christian civilization."

A large part of the Wilders' appeal is his clear presentation of friends ("the common man in the street") and enemies ("Muslims and the left-wing elite that support them"). Wilders is one of the few Dutch politicians who is committed to politics, to changing society, not just to managing the current state of affairs. This has allowed him to dominate the public debate "other politicians shape their positions in reaction to Wilders' statements.

Even when news about the financial meltdown was on the front page, a large part of the public debate revolved around what is euphemistically called "the integration question." Wilders has built on

feelings of resentment and xenophobia that have been developing for years in Dutch society.

Silence of the Left

The Dutch left has been largely unable to respond to Wilders. By far the largest left force is the SP, but this party has done very little to resist the rise of anti-Muslim racism. Traditionally, it neglected anti-racism in favor of more direct economic policies, arguing that racism will mostly disappear by itself when the discontent that is assumed to generate it disappears.

The party lost heavily in the municipal elections and it looks like it might lose more than half of its seats in national elections. But so far it seems unlikely that it will change its course. Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, the SP has refrained from organizing protests or taking a radical stance against neoliberalism.

After years of the SP's continuous growth, there was an assumption that further growth was inevitable and that the party had to present itself first of all as a "responsible candidate for government." The crisis, the SP leadership thought, would force the

other parties to renounce neoliberalism and move closer to its positions.

What is happening instead is that working people are made to pay for anti-crisis measures, and the SP lost its profile as the opposition party. A left-wing perspective in the debate about the causes and solutions for the crisis was barely heard.

An anti-racist movement hardly exists. Whereas in some other west-European countries mobilizations against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan formed a counterweight against rising Islamophobia, the Dutch anti-war movement has been moribund for years.

Traditionally, anti-racism in the Netherlands has been based not so much on demands for equal social and economic rights but on appeals to "decency" and an ideology of a "tolerant, multicultural Netherlands." But since the rise of Fortuyn, the idea of what it means to be Dutch has changed, taking shape more and more in opposition to the Muslim "Other." The tasks of Dutch anti-racists and leftist activists are many, compared to their small number.

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Race & Class: Obama & the Politics of Protest

31 May 2010, by **Malik Miah**

By all statistical data unemployment (particularly longterm unemployed), education and housing discrimination with the resulting lack of opportunities for African Americans is steadily rising. What's worse, protests in the streets are being occupied by the far right, including its most extreme militia and racist elements. The official Republican Party elites are now the dog being wagged by its bigoted white supremacist tail.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate

groups has doubled since Obama was elected. In its spring 2010 report it summarized:

"The SPLC documented an astonishing 244 percent increase in the number of antigovernment Patriotic groups in 2009. Their numbers grew from 149 groups in 2008 to 512 groups in 2009. Militias "the paramilitary arm of the Patriot movement" were a major part of this increase, tripling in number from 42 militias in 2008 to 127 in 2009."

Yet the Michigan white "Hutaree" militia were indicted only because they allegedly planned to kill cops. But threats against Black Americans are seen as protected by the First Amendment. Many of these armed groups openly declare on their web sites hatred for Obama and Black people as a whole.

Yet the Obama administration's response is to shift to the center-right, telling Black leaders to wait and see how his approach of not doing anything special for African Americans

will pay off in the long run.
Obama's New Ally: Al Sharpton

Obama knows full well that the politics of fear and race-baiting is a big reason why most Black leaders are cautious in their criticism of him. He's knows his most loyal base remains the African-American population. But the criticisms are increasing, which is why the Obama team is reaching out to civil right activists with credentials of militancy.

A case in point is Reverend Al Sharpton.

In a front page article in the conservative Wall Street Journal (March 17, 2010), headlined "Obama's New Partner: Al Sharpton," Sharpton is presented as Obama's new partner to push back critical voices in the Black community.

"With his wavy bouffant and medallion necklaces," writes reporter Peter Wallsten, "the Rev Al Sharpton famously confronted government officials on behalf of Black Americans. Now he has found a new role: telling Black leaders to quiet their criticisms and give the government a chance."

The article notes that the Obama administration has called upon Sharpton to respond to criticism that Obama is not doing enough for African Americans, especially in time of high unemployment and new signs of racist bigotry. Sharpton, it must be recalled, was told by Obama's campaign not to come to Iowa during the primary because of his militant past.

Sharpton would seem an unlikely defender of the do-nothing-special for the Black community approach of the White House. But there he is visiting the White House regularly (five times to date) and taking on other Black leaders who are not so patient. In fact Sharpton uses his syndicated radio show to showcase top Obama administration officials who promote the administration's goals to a Black community that not surprisingly overwhelmingly backs the president. (A Wall Street Journal/NBC poll has Obama's approval rating among African Americans at 86%.)

Sharpton, of course, denies he's doing

anything different than in his more militant past. His pragmatism, wearing suits and ties, he says, throws off his foes that tend to "underestimate me as I organize." But Sharpton's shift in approach does reflect a deeper philosophical division among the traditional liberal leaders of the community.

Those Black elected officials who depend on more than the Black community to be elected, such as Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick and many new statewide Black elected officials "in other words, who need "the crossover votes" "see the end of "protest politics" as a positive step forward. Black leaders, in this view, are (a small) part of the Washington insiders and players. "Let's leverage our new political power," is the implication.

The facts of poverty, discrimination and inequality are seen less as being caused by pure racism than economic disadvantage. This new pragmatism, ironically, puts the Black liberals in unlikely convergence with the outlook of many conservative figures who oppose direct actions by the Black community and reject a positive role for government. The liberals still support a big government role, as seen in the health insurance debate, but want to primarily play by the inside-the-Beltway rules.

Even the Congressional Black Caucus is divided on the issue of the role of protest politics and how it levels criticism of Obama. Most elected officials believe their "leadership" is key to protecting the interests of the Black community. Yet many have supported protests in the past to push the White House into action. Today they are more cautious.

So while many of these officials are upset that Obama has not done more for their mainly Black constituents, and the pressure is on to do what even previous Democratic presidents have done for the African-American population, none are actively pushing for the kind of protests we see from the far right.

The theory that "the rising tide lifts everyone's boat" has been proven wrong for the simple reason that

institutional racism makes the lifting uneven for the poorest and most discriminated sections of society. Everyone knows this, but can't seem to figure out how to move forward with what in the past was considered legitimate "going to the streets to demand justice. The first Black president makes it a hard choice.

The community, unfortunately, is left on its own as a result of the "wait for Obama" strategy. In this context of paralysis of the traditional civil rights groups and Congressional Black Caucus, an unlikely radio and television host is stepping up to the plate to pose challenging questions to Obama's team.

Reviving King's Call

Rejecting the theory that "protest politics" is dead or a diversion in the "post racial" era of Obama, Tavis Smiley, a prominent radio and PBS television show host, is using his medium to do so. Smiley refers to those former militants like Sharpton who have adopted "more pragmatic" tactics as mistaken. For Sharpton "to speak truth to power about the suffering of Black people on the one hand," Smiley told the WSJ, "and then to be running in and out of the Oval Office and trying to run the president's agenda or express White House talking points" is not possible.

Smiley is an advocate of placing more pressure on president Obama to advance the interests and the rights of the most oppressed. He joins Bob Herbert, an African-American columnist for the New York Times, in pushing for more action by the Obama White House even as he defends Obama from the virulent attacks and "nonstop ugliness of the GOP and its minions."

Smiley recently produced and narrated one of the best documentaries I've seen on the lessons from Martin Luther King, Jr. "MLK: A Call to Conscience" (<http://video.pbs.org/video>) is a PBS program about King's decision to oppose the U.S. war on Vietnam before this became majority sentiment, even though more work was needed to achieve full equality for African Americans. King gave his now famous speech, "Beyond Vietnam" on

April 4, 1967 – one year to the day before he was assassinated in Memphis where he went to support striking sanitation workers.

Smiley's presentation is powerful because he shows through his interviews and King's remarks how King first came out against the war, even when the entire civil rights establishment opposed his stance as not helping to advance the civil rights agenda. In fact, King said that the war was an issue of morality and on that basis alone no American could support it.

King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in 1965 had pushed back when he first indicated his opposition to the war. The Board's reasoning: How could King turn against president Lyndon Johnson, who had signed the landmark Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts?

King responded that the war must be opposed. He also raised issue with the for profit system we live under, and spoke out against "racism, extreme materialism and militarism." In his 1967 speech at Riverside Church, King described his inner struggle:

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns, this query has often loomed large and loud: "Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix," they say. "Aren't you hurting the cause of your people?" they ask.

And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment, or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live. In the light of such tragic misunderstanding, I deem it of signal importance to try to state clearly, and I trust concisely, why I believe that the path from Dexter

Avenue Baptist Church – the church in Montgomery, Alabama, where I began my pastorate – leads clearly to this sanctuary tonight.

The Necessity of Protest

Tavis Smiley notes that King understood and advocated ongoing protests even after the adoption of the new laws that ended Jim Crow segregation. King firmly believed that public protests against poverty and the war were necessary. His aides didn't want him to go to Memphis either.

As the most prominent African-American civil rights leader and with his large personal capital at stake, for King to push more protests and to oppose Johnson's war showed what type of leader he was.

Many on the left saw King at the time as a moderate, because of his nonviolent tactics in contrast to the more militant nationalist and Black Power currents that were challenging the two-party and the "free market" system. But what pushed him to a more radical position wasn't the more militant younger generation (such as the leaders of SNCC, Stokely Carmichael in particular) or the views of the revolutionary visionary Malcolm X.

King genuinely believed that to eradicate racism and inequality required more than legislative action. He also didn't believe he "owed" president Johnson because of the civil rights legislation. The popular movement won that legislation.

King could have changed course and backed the war – as some civil rights figures, like Bayard Rustin, did. He would have been toasted by the ruling establishment as a "great patriotic American." As Harry Belafonte explains on the PBS program, if King had come out for the war he would've been seen as a genuine American hero and "statesman."

King's decision to stand up to the White House and other civil rights

leaders is remarkable considering the lack of backbone we see today. (It is noteworthy that some 75% of Americans opposed his stance on Vietnam at the time of his death. The rising antiwar movement would change that sentiment in a short time.)

The arguments that Obama's war in Afghanistan is a "just war" and "necessary to fight terrorists" fly in the face of the lessons King taught through his more radical approach toward war and politics. The politics of protest – not depending on elected officials or Congress – is what's missing today in civil rights and labor politics.

The default in leadership has left the "politics of protest" to the organized far right. It is not surprising that white working people in particular, and seniors living under a government-run Medicare program, are misguided and fooled by race-baiting and end up supporting the positions of big business and big insurance cartels against their own interests.

The Tea Party, Republican elites and others openly reject supporting issues of concern to the poor, minorities and the working class. The most powerful response by progressives to those being misled is to tell them the truth and firmly reject any racist, sexist and antigay rhetoric.

Nothing is gained by saying, "These white misguided working people have a point because they are mad at government and Wall Street." Far-right movements historically always tap that type of genuine anger to serve their reactionary goals.

The politics of (progressive) protests is the greatest example of Martin Luther King's leadership. It is what the more militant layer of the Black communities took up, but went further by advocating more militant tactics than the pure nonviolence that was appropriate for the most part in the police-state reality that Blacks lived under in the Deep South.

King set the table by stating that leaders must do what's right, not what's popular. Equality is only possible by keeping pressure on the

powers that be, even “friends.” It is a lesson that the current generation of civil rights and labor leaders have forgotten (or didn’t learn). It is one that must be followed to take back the streets from the right wing, or the steady shift to the far right will not be stopped.

In truth, Obama’s White House is to the right of Bill Clinton and Jimmy

Carter on all issues — even health care, offshore oil drilling and nuclear power. The “Black” Obama is what the right wingers oppose — not his substantive center-right politics. His only “victory” was to establish the concept that health care should be a right and not a privilege, even though his new health bill does not accomplish it.

The politics of protests — as a

strategy — is what the Black community and the working class need. We must press and challenge Obama to do more now (as King did after the historic civil rights legislation was adopted) to advance the interests of the Black community and society as a whole.

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Who decides what we eat?

31 May 2010, by Esther Vivas

In this context, who is deciding what we eat? The answer is clear: a handful of multinationals of the agro-food industry, with the blessing of governments and international institutions, end up imposing its private interest above the collective needs. Due to this situation, our food security is seriously threatened.

The supposed worry of governments and institutions as the G8, the G20, the World Trade Organization, etc., regarding the rise of the basic food’s price and its impact in the more disadvantaged peoples, as they showed in the course of 2008 in international summits, has only shown its deep hypocrisy. They take significant economic profits of the current food and agricultural model, using it as an imperialist instrument for political, economic and social control, towards the countries of the global South.

As pointed out by the international movement of La Vía Campesina, at the end of the FAO meeting in Rome in November 2009: “The absence of the heads of state of the G8 countries has been one of the key causes of the dismal failure of this summit. Concrete measures were not taken to eradicate hunger, to stop the speculation on food or to hold back the expansion of agrofuels”. Likewise, commitments as those of the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security and the Food Security Trust Fund of the World

Bank, which have the explicit support of the G8 and the G20, also point this out, leaving our food supply, once again, at the hands of the market.

Yet, the reform of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) of the FAO is, according to La Vía Campesina, a step forward to democratize the decision-making processes over agriculture and environment: “At least this workspace respects the basic rule of the democracy, which is the principle of “one country, one vote”, and it gives a new opportunity to the civil society”. However, we will still have to check the real impact of the CFS.

Monopolies

The agro-food chain is subjected, in its whole route, to a high business concentration. Starting with the first stretch, the seeds, we can observe that ten of biggest companies (as Monsanto, Dupont, Syngenta, Bayer...), according to data from the Group ETC, control one half of its sales. Copyright laws, which give exclusive rights on seeds to these companies, have stimulated even more the business concentration of the sector and have eroded the peasant right to the maintenance of the indigenous seeds and the biodiversity.

The industry of seeds is intimately linked to that of pesticides. The

biggest seed companies dominate also this other sector and very frequently the development and marketing of both products are made together. Besides, in the industry of pesticides the monopoly is still superior and the ten biggest multinationals control 84% of the global market. This same dynamic is observed in the sector of the distribution of food and in that of the processing of drinks and foods. It is all about strategy, and it is bound to increase.

Big-scale retailing, just as other sectors, registers a great business concentration. In Europe, between 1987 and 2005, the market share of the ten biggest multinationals of big-scale retailing was 45% of the total and the chances are that they reach 75% in the next 10-15 years. In countries such as Sweden, three supermarket chains control around 95.1% of the market share; and in countries such as Denmark, Belgium, Spanish State, France, Netherlands, Great Britain and Argentina, a handful of companies control between 60% and 45% of the market. Mega fusions are the usual dynamic. This monopoly and concentration enables a strong power to determine what we buy, the price of products, its origin, and how they have been elaborated.

Making a profit from hunger

In the middle of the food crisis, the main multinational companies of the agro-food industry announced record figures of profit. Monsanto and

Dupont, the main seed companies, declared a rise of its profits up to 44% and to 19% respectively in 2007 regarding the previous year. The data of fertilizers companies pointed out the same: Potash Corp, Yara and Sinochem, saw their profits rise up to 72%, 44% and 95% respectively between 2007 and 2006. Food processors as Nestlé also experienced

a rise of its economic gains, as well as supermarkets such as Tesco, Carrefour and Wal-Mart, while millions of people in the world did not have access to food.

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[+ info Esther Vivas](#)

Thailand: a bloodbath and afterwards?

24 May 2010, by Danielle Sabai

The media have had much to say about the violent elements among the Red Shirts, which is profoundly abject when one sees the resources employed by the military to "cleanse" the neighbourhood. Since the beginning of the demonstrations, the government has used all kinds of violence against the demonstrators, including the use of snipers, and during the "final assault", the soldiers were authorised to kill. It is not surprising in this context that the demonstrators expressed their hatred and rage by violence against the military and the symbols of wealth.

As in 1973, 1976 and 1992, the ruling élites have responded to Thai aspirations to democracy and social justice with a bloodbath. The balance sheet is the heaviest since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The authorities acknowledge 80 deaths and nearly 2000 wounded since the beginning of the demonstrations in the capital on March 12th.

Around mid-April, the government proposed a five point roadmap to resolve the crisis. It included the perspective of elections on November 14th. The Red Shirts, while accepting the plan, requested guarantees and that the Vice Prime Minister, Suthep Thaugsuban, be charged for the civilian deaths which occurred during the repression of April 10th. But for the government, the roadmap was offered on a take it or leave it basis. A strange way to seek to resolve such a

sharp political crisis. The date of the proposed elections, November 14th, would allow Abhisit to be in power at the strategic moment of the restructuring of the top command of the army. Also, charges of terrorism and conspiracy against the monarchy were maintained against leaders of the Red Shirts.

This tactic proved successful for Abhisit. He profited from the divisions inside the UDD on the approach to follow and appeared as a democrat who had extended a hand to the demonstrators which had been rejected. Thus after being assured of the support of the coalition partners, he could employ strong arm methods to send back to the countryside the "rural hordes" who had invaded the capital.

However, it was still possible on the eve of May 19th, to avoid the military repression and the deaths which followed it. Around fifty senators were in discussion with the leaders of the UDD to organise a truce. But this attempt was rebuffed by Abhisit. From the beginning, he was among the members of the government who advocated repression rather than openness to negotiations. Remember that Abhisit and the Democrat Party had refused to participate in the snap elections organised in April 2006, when Thaksin had sought a new mandate after several months of opposition demonstrations calling for his resignation!

The government was strengthened in its determination by the position taken by the United Nations. After several days of confrontation from May 13th to 16th, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, stated in a press release: "to prevent further loss of life, I appeal to the protestors to step back from the brink, and the security forces to exercise maximum restraint in line with the instructions given by the Government". It could not be clearer that he was giving the government the green light to use force. A far cry from Pillay's statements claiming that the High Commissioner is the spokesperson for victims everywhere.

At the international level, silence has dominated. Thailand is not China, Iran or Venezuela. Massacring peasants and workers in the streets of Bangkok does not arouse as much indignation as killing demonstrators on Tiananmen Square. Obama has not said a word on the political crisis or the civilians killed but the US government has condemned the Red Shirts for "damaging private property". It is true that the Thai élites can count on the support of the US governments whatever happens. After the end of the Second World War, the US made Thailand their main base to contain the development of Communism in Asia. That involved the setting up and financing of authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships. The withdrawal from the military bases in the 1970s did not

mean the end of this cooperation. Military agreements continue, as shown by the annual joint military operations and the fact that the military base at Udon Thani was used by the US in 2003 to illegally interrogate (and torture) detainees in the context of the "war against terrorism". Thailand remains a strategic country for the US which is seeing its power in the region threatened by that of China.

With the crushing of the camp at Rachaprasong, the traditional elites may have obtained a respite but the struggle is far from over. The roots of the Thai crisis are deep: growing social inequality which is among the highest in Asia, a two speed justice system, an increasingly authoritarian regime. The rage and hatred filling the hearts of the Red Shirts and their sympathisers is more fundamentally that of all those, and they are in the majority in the country, who aspire to democracy. Thailand is undoubtedly a not a dictatorship but democracy "Thai style" is an authoritarian democracy. Democratic liberties are conditional on submission to the established order and this rests on censorship, emergency laws and judicial or military coups against governments which do not please the élites. The violence of the repression and the disproportionate means employed show, if there was any need, to what extent the establishment has been shaken by this movement which has liberated political discourse in a country where to declare oneself a republican or a Communist is forbidden by law. The bloody repression of May 19th is a sign of the weakness of the government.

Thai society is for now in an impasse.

Authoritarian democracy Thai style is stricken. Thais no longer believe that genuinely democratic elections can be organised to contribute to a resolution of the crisis. On the one hand the "enlightened elites" think that only they know what is good and necessary for society and its uneducated and uncivilised citizens. They are sure of losing the next elections. Hence the choice made by some of them to repress in order to stay in power. On the other side, the majority of society, which aspires to a genuine democracy and respect for the ballot box. Their struggle is handicapped by the fact that there are no real parties representing their interests. Their votes have been used by Thaksin to provide a basis for his power and to advance his own interests, at the price of numerous abuses.

Finally, the old Thai political order resting on the symbolic function of the king, guarantor of unity and holder of power of last resort is threatened. The events of recent weeks could well have very seriously shaken the almost godlike image of the old monarch. In a country where portraits of the king in public spaces are omnipresent, their absence in the Red Shirt camp in Rachaprasong is revealing of the breadth of their disillusionment with the monarchy. Their repeated appeals to arbitration from king Bhumibol remained without response and the idea that he supports the existing regime is increasingly widespread even if it cannot be debated openly. One of the obstacles to a real democratisation of the country resides precisely in the role attributed to the constitutional monarchy. To counter the idea which appeared in the late 1990 that "sovereignty emanates from the people", the royalists put forward

the idea that "sovereignty belongs to the people"... although in the final instance it resides in the monarchy. The succession of Bhumibol by his son Vajiralongkorn, detested by the people, could lead to a new period of conflicts and the challenging of the established order if mobilisations do not come before.

The élites have won a battle but not the war and history is not on their side. Or as the Thai proverb says, "who escapes the tiger meets the crocodile"...

End to prosecutions!

Most Red Shirt leaders surrendered during the assault to avoid further bloodshed. They risk the death penalty if found guilty for terrorism or at least a sentence of 3 to 15 years in prison for the crime of lèse-majesté. Hundreds of demonstrators have been arrested and are held by the army. Their fate is uncertain to say the least. Their only crime is to have opposed the established order. We should bring our support to all the demonstrators and leaders detained and to urgently organise a solidarity campaign to obtain their immediate liberation and the end of the prosecutions.

Sunday 23rd May

A look at the experience of the LPP and the Pakistani Left

21 May 2010, by **Pierre Rousset**

The dynamism of the LPP contrasts with the inertia of the traditional Left in a country which has experienced a succession of military regimes, which is torn apart by the confrontation of Sunni and Shiite religious fundamentalisms, and which has been destabilized by the war conducted by NATO in Afghanistan and by the murderous actions of the Talibans. The experience of the LPP is particularly interesting.

A historically weak Pakistani Left

Two partitions In 1947, the workers' movement was weak in the provinces of the British Indian Empire which make up present-day Pakistan. The partition of the country and the gigantic migrations which accompanied it (12 million displaced persons, under terrible conditions) cut the Left off from its bastions in the sub-continent (such as Bengal). Two decades later, the war of 1971 led to the rupture between West Pakistan and East Pakistan. This second partition also weakened Pakistani Communism. In fact, the Left then was at that point better established in what became Bangladesh, in particular because large Hindu populations had remained there instead of migrating to the Indian side of the border. In a more general way the traumatic partitions of 1947 and 1971 led to successive waves of intercommunal xenophobia and racism (including anti-Bengali racism in Punjab) which were very unfavourable to progressive movements.

In 1947, the Indian Communist Party accepted the principle of partition. Consequently, its members in the Muslim communities went to Pakistan, and vice versa, giving rise to two Communist parties: Indian (CPI) and Pakistani (PCP). They hoped then that the Muslim references of the new state would remain more cultural than religious. This hope was initially encouraged by the secular conceptions advocated by the "founding father" of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah; but it could not resist the progressive Islamization of the country.

Repression The Communist Party quickly became the object of repression. It was banned for the first time in 1951 and again in 1955. However, in 1951, it probably only had (in West Pakistan) some 200 members. To reconstitute itself, it merged into various regroupments and took part in the creation in 1957 of the National Awami Party (NAP, National People's Party). The PCP had neither the solid programmatic framework nor the organisational coherence to survive such "entryist" experiences unscathed. The Communist activists found themselves in a subordinate position in relation to leaderships that were nationalist, reformist and often bourgeois.

The Sino-Soviet Conflict The Pakistani communist movement had to face further problems. The Sino-Soviet conflict caused deep splits in its ranks, as it did in many other places. But the political crisis of the Left in Pakistan led to a particularly serious situation of paralysis. In India, a first split in the (pro-Soviet) CPI gave rise to a party which wanted to be independent of both Moscow and Beijing - the CPI-Marxist (CPI-M). Then a second wave of splits saw the emergence of a Maoist far-Left, known as "Naxalites" (from the location of a peasant insurrection in 1967) and engaged in armed struggle. Although deeply divided, the Indian Left kept significant forces.

Things turned out very differently in Pakistan. Considering the prestige of the Chinese Revolution, the influence of Maoism became important. However, as from 1965, Beijing gave the military regime its support against India, itself allied with the USSR. Under these conditions, not only did Pakistani Maoism not have the radical character of its Indian counterpart, but it even supported for a time the dictatorship of General Ayub Khan, in the name of the "progressive" character of its foreign policy.

The Soviet bureaucracy was allied with the Indian state and the Chinese bureaucracy with the Pakistani state - that is, with two states which were at war with each other. The Pakistani Communists paid a very high price for this deadly game.

The missed occasion of 1968-1969

The Pakistani communist movement had also inherited the strategic vision of the CPI, of Stalinist origin, "stageist": waiting for a bourgeois-democratic revolution before which it would be vain to propose a socialist perspective to popular struggles. Very weak on the organisational level, it was also politically and ideologically powerless when an immense wave of workers', peasant and student struggles erupted in the country in 1968-1969, creating for several months a kind of situation of social dual power. The Pakistani Communists neither wanted to nor knew how to seize the occasion.

The occasion was, however, all the more important as 1968 was the year of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, of the student barricades and the general strike in May in France, of the Prague Spring and of many other struggles in the world. American imperialism would not have found it easy to intervene militarily in Pakistan if that had been necessary.

The PPP Under these conditions, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), formed in 1967, was able to capitalize on the wave of social radicalisation, winning the 1970 elections. It received the support and the adhesion of many progressive milieux and many trade union cadres, encouraged by the socialist rhetoric and the economic measures advocated by its leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Thus, when the PPP came to power in 1972, Communists were included in the government. Reforms, sometimes radical, were indeed implemented (nationalizations of key sectors), but that was nothing exceptional at the time. Since the Bhuttos themselves were representatives of a big feudal-capitalist family in Sind, it was vain to hope that they would attack the established order, and the left wing of the party proved incapable of breaking the control that this clan exercised over the PPP.

When workers took to the streets in May-September 1972, the government decided to drown this popular movement in blood: the resulting repression left dozens dead in the port and industrial metropolis of Karachi. Bhutto had already supported the war

against the Bengalis in 1971, as well as repressing the Baluchi people. In 1973, he introduced into the Constitution, for the first time, an Islamist definition of the Pakistani state, a decision that was fraught with consequences. Although disillusioned, the Pakistani Left proved unable to present an alternative to the PPP.

The road was open for the growth of radical religious currents of the far-Right. In 1977, the coup d'état of General Zia Ul Haq installed a new military dictatorship and initiated the process of systematic Islamization of the country. After Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged in 1979, the PPP once again took on a progressive coloration in the eyes of the trade-union and progressive activists who were resisting the dictatorship. The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was born in 1981 with the participation of all the wings of the PPP, right, left and centre.

The 1980s: from the “Struggle” group to the LPP

“Struggle” was born in 1980; at that time its founding nucleus was living in exile in the Netherlands. It belonged to the Trotskyist current organised around the British “Militant”, whose principal leader was Ted Grant (Isaac Blank): the Committee for a Workers’ International (CWI). In every country its sections employed entryist tactics, for example in the Labour Party in Britain. In Pakistan it was in the PPP, given the hopes that the working class placed in this party and taking into account that, faced with the military dictatorship, the fight for democracy was the most urgent task of the moment.

In 1986, after eight years of exile, the leading nucleus of “Struggle” returned to live in Pakistan, publishing the monthly magazine *Mazdoor Jeddojuhd* (“Workers’ Struggle”). It was very quickly confronted with a situation of generalized crisis of the traditional Pakistani Left. The illusions in the PPP were again dissipated after the coming to power of Benazir Bhutto in 1988. The implosion of the USSR

created a deep feeling of despair, of absence of perspectives, in quite broad layers. Twice orphaned (from the PPP and from the “socialist camp”), the parties of Stalinist origin lost most of their militant forces. The beginning of the 1990s was a period of ideological reaction, encouraging the development of fundamentalist movements.

Class independence In this context of generalized political and ideological confusion, the group which would found the LPP maintained its socialist programmatic course. In 1991 it ended its entryist policy, judging rightly that the working class was going to take its distance from the PPP. In order to build an alternative, the perspective of the creation of a workers’ party by the trade unions was launched in 1993. For this purpose, *Jeddojud Inlabi Tehrik* (JIT, Struggle Revolutionary Movement) was set up the following year. It addressed a fundamental question: the political independence of the working class. As we have already noted, through alliances with various bourgeois forces, the traditional communist organizations had abandoned this terrain, eroding their identity and finding themselves systematically in a subordinate position within the nationalist fronts, blocs and parties.

The project which gave birth in 1997 to the LPP can be firstly defined in this way: to take up again the fight for class independence, in its social, political and programmatic dimensions. By doing this, the militants who came from the “Struggle” group were able to win to this project trade-union cadres and members of the PCP who did not accept that their party no longer talked about socialism.

The break with the CWI The break between what became the LPP and its origins came in two stages. The CWI split in 1991, one of the key issues being whether or not to end entryism. Ted Grant and his supporters were in a minority, but had the support of the majority of “Struggle”. The minority in Pakistan founded Young Fighters in 1992 to lay the basis for an independent organization, and JIT the following year, whose success paved

the way for the launching of the LPP.

The final break with the CWI came in 1997-98 because of the opposition of the international leadership to the launching of the LPP, and more broadly to the idea that national sections could determine their own tactics.

The influence of the “Militant” current seems to have been for a period very real in Pakistan, Ted Grant being a reference for intellectuals and journalists. One of the members of parliament of the PPP belonged to their organization. But it is quite difficult to measure the cohesion and the implantation of an entryist current: if it does not conquer the leadership of the party in which it operates (which happens only in exceptional cases), the moment of truth comes when it engages in building an independent organisation. Through putting off this moment and because of divisions (this international current experienced several successive splits), it seems that with the exception of the LPP, the groups coming from the “Militant” in Pakistan have lost their substance and the hey days for them seems to be over.

A precarious situation At the end of the 1990s, the LPP was still in a very precarious situation. Ideological confusion on the left was then at its peak. No longer being able to turn to Moscow or Beijing, forced to recognize that there is not, within the Pakistani ruling classes, a “national bourgeois” dynamic, progressive intellectuals came to hope that the “modernization” of the country would come thanks to capitalist globalization, under the direction of the World Trade Organization (WTO). While systematically seeking to encourage alliances around concrete political issues and terrains of struggle, the LPP thus had to undertake a rather solitary political combat.

Constancy in the struggle

If the LPP has been able to develop as it has in recent years, it is obviously because there existed a space for

democratic and social resistance. By its success in 2006, the World Social Forum in Karachi, in which I was able to take part, was a concrete incarnation of this space, in which there were to be found democratic, social and political movements - a space of liberty in a country living under a military regime, feeling the pressure of religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, it was not easy to seize the occasion to bounce back politically. How did the LPP do it?

Defending its right to exist First of all, the LPP refused to let itself be paralysed by repression. The majority of its leaders (including its women leaders) were arrested at one time or another under the Musharraf dictatorship. Its trade union and peasant cadres can be threatened with death by the henchmen of the landowners and capitalists - and some have been killed, or imprisoned by a police force under orders. In the North-West, they can be the target of the Talibans (three militants have already been assassinated). Up until now, the LPP has nevertheless succeeded in preserving its political space, its right to exist, answering repression by democratic mobilization and refusing to be driven into clandestinity. In the same way, its women militants have not given in to the rising pressure of fundamentalism.

Sense of initiative The LPP has also demonstrated very great capacity for initiative. It has helped in the work of unionising particularly oppressed sectors of the working class, such as the workers in the brick-kilns, which are often installed in a rural environment. It has given unconditional support to peasant struggles, in spite of certain "workerist" reservations. It has initiated or taken part in many feminist struggles, with the aim of really meeting the needs of the popular sectors. It organised an intense solidarity campaign after the earthquake which devastated Kashmir in 2005. It has been fully involved in the process of the social forums, both in Pakistan and on the international level. It plays an active role in the antiwar networks on both sides of the Indo-Pakistani border and against the war in Afghanistan. It mobilized all its forces when the Lawyers' Movement

initiated the showdown with General Musharraf in 2007. It extended its intervention as far as the Swat valley, in the middle of the conflict between the army and the Talibans, and mobilized in favour of the populations of "internal refugees", displaced by the war.

A small anecdote will serve to illustrate this sense of initiative. A delegation of the LPP took part in the World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya in 2007. Seeing that the organization of the forum was largely in the hands of big corporations (!) and that the restaurant prices were unaffordable for most of the participants, the LPP members bought supplies in the local markets, set up a makeshift stall and sold every afternoon an "anti-capitalist curry" which was a big success. So with a membership which remains extremely limited, the LPP covers a broad range of activities and responds quickly to political events.

Political constancy The LPP has also shown great constancy in its political orientation. Looking for the "lesser evil", progressive Pakistani circles have very often tended to swing from one position to another depending on the circumstances. Faced with the ineffectiveness and corruption of the parliamentary regime, many of them gave more or less open support to the army, as in 1999 at the time of Musharraf's coup d'état - only to later place their faith in clientelist civilian parties to replace the dictatorship of the army. In the same way, they can support the military offensive against the Talibans after having shown a great deal of tolerance towards the fundamentalist movements in the name of anti-imperialism.

The LPP has always refused to choose between two evils: between the corruption of the clientelist parties and the military regimes, between the army and the religious fundamentalists, between NATO and the Talibans... There is, moreover, much complicity which link these formally opposite poles.

By maintaining against wind and weather its line of "neither the army nor the fundamentalists", "neither NATO nor the Talibans", the LPP has more than once found itself relatively

isolated among left organizations (it currently encounters much criticism because it continues to denounce the exactions of the army instead of keeping silent in the name of the Taliban danger). But by doing this, it traced in the long term an indispensable line of class independence without which there can be no possible rebuilding on the left. That is what is most important.

Courage Let us put it simply. You need courage to multiply political initiatives in a country like Pakistan. Not the courage of underground work or the armed struggle, but the courage of working openly on the hottest political and social "frontlines". Such as going to demonstrate their solidarity with Christian villages attacked by the Islamists. Such as taking sides with the peasants of an army farm, subjected for three months to a total blockade by the army (the AMP had eleven members killed between 2002 and 2009). Such as the women activists who defy the fundamentalists and their moral order. Such as deciding to organize in the frontier conflict zones.

A new stage

In the last few years, the LPP has experienced an important regional extension and reinforced its social implantation. In so doing it is transforming itself, and that is what makes this experience particularly interesting. "Struggle" was at the outset an ideologically compact nucleus of activists. Although still small, the LPP presents today certain features of a mass party. Similarly, the original forces of the party were mainly based in Punjab. Although unequally, it is now present in the whole country. As a consequence, the diversity of Pakistan is reflected in the party.

Party and movements The LPP is attempting an original experiment with regard to the relationship between parties and social movements. It joins with peasant associations and with trade unions in initiatives which combine social demands and a political message in a way that is not very common in

France. This was for example the case with the great popular meeting in Faisalabad which was held just after the congress of the LPP (see the insert below).

However, the LPP refuses to reproduce the “organic” relations that are so common in South Asia between parties and “their” mass organizations. It does not “possess” a trade-union or peasant “wing”. If, in its eyes, only a common front between left parties and social movements can ensure the strengthening of struggles, this alliance must take place in a transparent fashion, respecting the independence of the social movement. Already in 1994, JIT supported the formation of the Pakistan Workers Confederation (PWC), just as the LPP supported the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), founded in 1998. More recently, it helped with the establishment of Anjuman Mozareen Punjab (AMP, Punjab Peasants’ Association), in particular in farms owned by military institutions. Then, in 2003, it facilitated the links that were established between the 22 rural organizations which formed the Pakistan Peasant Coordinating Committee (PPCC). In the same way it supports in Faisalabad the Labour Quami Movement (LQM, National Workers’ Movement).

From 1993, JIT had decided to aid, with the support of institutions, trade unions and social-democratic organizations in Sweden, the development of popular social organizations: schools intended for working children, centres of support to the trade union movement, campaigns for peace... In Pakistan, the Labour Education Foundation (LEF) played a driving role in these initiatives, in particular from the year 2000. That same year, the LPP supported the formation of Women Workers Help Line (WWHL) and of the National Student Federation (NSF) then, in 2003, of the Progressive Youth Front (PYF). The LPP and its predecessors have taken part in many unitary coalitions: from 1991, the Pakistan Anti-War Committee and, in 1992, the Joint Action Committee for People’s Rights (JAC), Lahore), and also, in 2005, the Anti-Privatization Alliance... They also took part in various experiences of left political

coalitions in 1997, 2006, and still do so today.

This short summing-up of their history shows an unquestionable political continuity between the period of “Struggle” and that of the LPP: commitment to the strengthening of social movements, on all terrains. It also shows what is new: the growing weight of trade unions and peasant associations compared to the associative structures and NGOs of the early period, with a qualitative leap at the beginning of the 2000 decade. This process is still underway. A new women’s association is due to be launched in the near future at a federal level (whereas the WWHL was formed in Punjab). The rebirth of a radical student movement is still in the early stages. As for the trade union and peasant movement, it remains divided and very unevenly implanted depending on the sectors and regions...

New members Today, recruitment to the LPP is much less “ideological” than in the past: it depends above all on the activities of the party, both political (various campaigns, the fight against the Musharraf dictatorship) and social (support to struggles). Thus not only the cadres, but also the members of the trade unions and peasant associations join it, giving it its popular base. The presence of trade union, peasant and women leaders was very noticeable during the congress of the LPP.

This popular recruitment to the LPP (still uneven depending on the region: in some places, there is still only a handful of members) is a source of strength. But recruitment to the party often remains fluid. The number of cadres who are educated on the theoretical level is limited. The LPP does not want to slow down its expansion: you have to strike the iron when it is hot. But it will be necessary for it to be able to combine expansion and consolidation, which is easier said than done.

Federalism In another significant innovation, at its last congress the LPP no longer elected a national committee, but a federal committee. Pakistan is a puzzle of provinces and as it develops the party must take

more account of this. For the first time, the 140 delegates came from all the provinces: Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan, Gilgit Baltistan, Sareiki Waseeb, Pukhtoonkhawa (North-western) and Kashmir. The intention is to establish an independent party in Pakistani-occupied Kashmir - the Labour Party Kashmir - the Kashmiris in the meanwhile remaining members of the LPP. In an indication of this situation, the discussions during the LPP congress sometimes took place between provincial delegations.

Punjab remains the strongest base, with 3,500 members. But the Pashtun North-West is the region where the LPP has recently grown most quickly (2,000 members) with the help of a small Afghan organization. Sind, where there are a good many cadres who come from the PCP, is the third-largest province by the number of members. The federal committee has 31 members, including 9 women.

It is all the more important to take account of the national realities and sensitivities of Pakistan in that the Punjabi elite to a large extent dominates (along with the Pashtuns) the army and the administration, which feeds the resentment of the other provinces. Historically, however, the basic structures of the LPP and its partner associations are also located in Punjab. The present geographical expansion of the party is contributing to better balancing its implantation, but this process is still far from being completed.

From one stage to another A first stage has been at least partially completed over the last ten years. The LPP is not a bigger version of “Struggle”. It is a party qualitatively broader both in its composition and in its political profile: moreover it defines itself as “Marxist” and not specifically “Trotskyist” (even though the programmatic heritage of an anti-Stalinist Marxism remains obvious). Especially, its relationship with society has started to change.

Of course, a new stage of construction is beginning while at the same time the preceding one is not yet fully completed. The LPP will face new problems and will have to solve new difficulties. Nothing is definitively

won, but the road that has been travelled is already full of lessons. We must take this experience into account in order to understand them.

On the left...

During my first stay in Pakistan, participating in the Karachi Social Forum of Karachi gave me a glimpse of Pakistani progressive forces and various social movements, such as the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF). However, during my subsequent visits, in 2006 (to Lahore, Rawalpindi, Murdan and Kashmir), and this time on the occasion of my second visit (to Lahore, Faisalabad, Kasur, Okara and Gujranwala), it was by the LPP - my "sister organization" - that I was (very warmly) welcomed. Even though I had the occasion to meet representatives of other currents, I did not really have time to give a proper description of the state of the Pakistani Left - nor even to visit the LPP in all the provinces. So I do not claim to present an exhaustive tableau of the situation and I will avoid drawing peremptory "conclusions"...

It seems however that the turn in the situation which the recent development of the LPP expresses is starting to be felt more widely. The illusions in the "modernising" role of globalization and the WTO are being dissipated by the capitalist crisis. Marx and Marxists are attracting a new readership. The old strategic differences that separated Stalinist, Maoists and Trotskyists are in the process of being overcome. Several groups coming from the traditional Left have just formed together the Workers Party of Pakistan (WPP) - hoping that this regrouping will last longer than some of its predecessors.

The breadth of the Lawyers' Movement and the mass mobilizations which accompanied it, before and after the fall of Musharraf, were really exceptional. Social struggles like those of the textile workers in June 2008 in Faisalabad and the peasants of the military dairy farm in Okara are also remarkable both by their duration and by their ability to face up to repression. The convergences which are taking shape between peasant associations and trade unions - a

convergence which ensured the success of the meeting in Faisalabad, shortly after the LPP congress - have very great potential. The long march of the Awami Tehreek (People's Movement) in Sind expresses the dynamism of regional movements. The rejection of both the Talibans and the army which is becoming stronger in the North-West shows that there too, a space exists for an independent left policy, while NATO's intervention in Afghanistan is becoming bogged down. A new wave of radicalisation seems to be taking shape in the student milieu. In this country, subjected to very strong Islamist pressures, the range of women's resistances to "normalization" and the role that women play in many social struggles (from fishermen to peasants) are impressive. I would certainly not like to claim that the situation in Pakistan is good! But a breach has opened which can enable a radical Left, consistent in its engagements, to reconstitute itself on a scale without precedent in this country.

Internationalists!

The LPP makes very great efforts to concretize its commitment to internationalism. Over and above the activist networks and campaigns (social forums, antiwar movement...), it has forged important links in Sweden, maintains multiple political relations and takes part as a permanent observer in the life of the Fourth International. It wanted there to be as big a foreign presence as possible at its congress and at the mass meeting which followed it. Only six activists answered its call - and three of them had to abandon the voyage, since they did not obtain visas: a North-American and two Indians. So there were three of us present - an Afghan, an Australian and myself - which was too few. In 2006 already, international participation in the Karachi WSF was well below the level that would have corresponded to what is at stake in Pakistan and this part of the world. At a time when US imperialism conceives "Afpak" as a single theatre of war, it is time for us to become aware of the importance of the combat that is being undertaken by our comrades of the LPP and the

Pakistani Left. And of the threats which hang over them. We have already had to conduct campaigns of solidarity to protect them from repression, and we will have to do so again in the future, and to help them to build their party in a country where there reigns such great poverty.

It is increasingly difficult for Pakistanis to obtain visas to go to Europe. It is easier for Europeans to go to Pakistan. The stay there is enthralling, because Pakistan, theatre of war, is also Pakistan, theatre of struggles. This is an invitation to make the trip.

Pakistan

Pakistan was founded in 1947 with the bloody partition of the British Indian Empire. In the beginning it comprised West Pakistan (the present Pakistan) and East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh). The split between these two countries, separated by the breadth of India, occurred after the war of 1971.

With 180 million inhabitants (in 2009), Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world and the second biggest Muslim country, after Indonesia. The population is estimated to be more than 70 per cent Sunni and 20 per cent Shiite, with small minorities: Muslim (Sufism, Ahmadiis...), Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsees (Zoroastrians)... In this federal state situated at the crossroads of many cultural influences, the weight of the provinces, regions and nationalities is very great, with in particular Punjab and Sind on the Indian border; Kashmir under Pakistani administration and Gilgit (in the Himalaya range) on the border between India and China; the Pashtun North-West, the tribal zones, on the Afghan border; Baluchistan on the Iran-Afghanistan border.

Allied with the United States and China, Pakistan occupies a key geopolitical place at the point where the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia meet. It is very directly implied, at its Western border, in the war in Afghanistan. On its Eastern border, the question of Kashmir

maintains a situation of latent war with India. Like the latter, it is equipped with nuclear weapons.

Largely agricultural (cotton, rice, sugar cane), the country exports especially textiles and food products. In addition to textiles, industry covers the sectors of manufactured goods, chemicals, mines and the iron and steel industry, the building industry... The weight of the service sector is important. In the countryside social relations often still have particularly brutal and unegalitarian "feudal" features.

Pakistan has experienced a process of Islamization - which began especially at the end of the 1970s - and a succession of clientelist parliamentary regimes and military regimes. Islamabad is the capital, Lahore the best known historical centre and Karachi its port and industrial metropolis.

A big worker and peasant meeting

The congress of the LPP was followed on January 29, 2010 by a big popular meeting in Faisalabad (the biggest centre of textile production in Pakistan) with nearly ten thousand participants, the big majority of whom were workers and peasants, with a significant number of women present. It was jointly called by the LPP, the National Workers' Movement (FQM) and the Peasant Association of Punjab (AMP) around two central demands: the right to social security for all the workers of the industry; the right to land of those who cultivate it, particularly in the "military farms" which are owned by military institutions. Most of the participants arrived in their contingents, marching in with many red flags; those who came individually were rare: the LPP has only recently established its presence in this city and, especially,

people hesitate to go to such political meetings for fear of bomb attacks.

The contingents came from Faisalabad and its suburbs (the trade-union contingent, including textile workers) and from rural districts around Lahore, Okara, Delapur, Renala Khurd and Kulyana. It was very important that workers and peasants were together in this way, in a common initiative. The presence of Afghan, Australian and French speakers gave it an internationalist dimension, under the historical slogan: "Workers of all lands, unite!" The meeting affirmed its solidarity with the Pashtun populations who are victims of the confrontations between the Talibans and the army, and also with the Baluchis, who have suffered atrocities at the hands of the army. This feeling of solidarity was expressed in many of the slogans: "The sufferings of each are the sufferings of all", "Equal rights for women", "No to discriminatory laws". The slogans were also markedly radical: "No to the IMF and the World Bank", "Down with American imperialism", "Down with capitalism and feudalism", "Asia is red", "Our strategy is the struggle", "Revolution is our road". Chants stressed the fight against war and for social demands: "Give peace a chance", "No to the drone attacks and to religious fundamentalism", "Stop violence". "Land or death", "Trade union rights, our human rights".

Many representatives of associations, movements and unions were on the platform, as well as various left currents. The meeting really made an impact. It re-occupied the Dhobi Ghat esplanade, the traditional political meeting place which had been abandoned for several years out of fear, in particular of suicide bombers. A whole range of detailed resolutions were adopted on this occasion, in defence of the rights of peasants, workers and women - so many concrete commitments made for the coming struggles.

Poetry

Poetry plays a very important part in popular culture in Pakistan. Thus, meetings are introduced and rhythmized by poems sung or recited, which are very much appreciated. This happened at the mass meeting in Faisalabad, but also at the LPP congress.

The poets are fully-fledged speakers. Thus, during the LPP congress, a poetess sang about the oppression of women: "We who give life to every value/We are ourselves without value/We who are called paradise/We live in hell". In the same way the women delegates gave voice during the congress to many feminist slogans.

The mass meeting was called jointly by trade unions and peasant movements and by the LPP. As is the custom in Pakistan, the opening speech by the LQM included the reading of a verse from the Koran; not so the opening speech of the LPP: the political Left refuses to do that. The woman vice-president of the LQM, Sumina Sarwer, intervened wearing a light shawl. Bushra Khaliq, a woman leader of the LPP, spoke bareheaded - and received an ovation from the popular assembly (she is an excellent speaker).

To be the guest of the LPP is not a restful experience. You have to give greetings to a congress, to intervene in a mass meeting, to address a meeting of lawyers, to meet NGOs, to affirm your solidarity with peasants engaged in a struggle against the army, to attend a meeting on the role of trade unions with weaving loom workers, to discuss the world situation with left intellectuals, to tell students about 1968, to be interviewed by journalists, to talk about feminism in a town meeting... and to refuse, regretfully but for lack of time, invitations to go to Murdan, Islamabad, Multan, Karachi...

Bye-election returns Pan-Democrat Council Members.

19 May 2010, by Bai Ruixue

The bye-election, which saw a very low turn out of only 17.1%, was triggered after the resignation of five pan-democrat Legislative Council (LegCo) members in January. The councillors resigned as part of a plan to call a de-facto referendum on the question of universal suffrage. One council member resigned from each of Hong Kong's five constituencies meaning that an election was triggered in which it was hoped that all of Hong Kong's citizens could participate and vote. This was supposed to resemble the effect of a referendum. The idea was that if these council members were then re-elected, it would reflect the fact that the people of Hong Kong are not content with the current undemocratic electoral system and want to see the implementation of full universal suffrage by 2012.

Under the current electoral system, of the 60 LegCo seats, 30 are directly elected seats while the other 30 are elected by functional constituencies made up of a much smaller pool of voters including a number corporate bodies and group tickets. Hong Kong's Chief Executive is elected by a committee made up of only 800 people who are all appointees. Overall this means that some (generally businesses) have control of more than one vote, while ordinary people are only entitled to vote for 30 of the council members. The councillors who resigned from the LegCo did so in an attempt to challenge this inequality. They have rejected the reform package the government proposed last month, which would see the number on the election committee for the Chief Executive expanded to 1,200 and add a further ten members to the legislature, only five of whom would be elected by universal suffrage, as insulting. They also reject the position of the moderate pan-democrats Alliance for Universal Suffrage who

are prepared to compromise and accept direct elections of the Chief Executive by 2017 and full universal suffrage in LegCo elections by 2020.

The question of political reform has seen numerous protests by Hong Kong residents as China's central government has continued to oppose universal suffrage in LegCo elections before 2020. Earlier this month more than 3,000 people marched from Victoria Park to the government headquarters to call for universal suffrage and the abolition of functional constituencies.

The plan for LegCo members to resign was first proposed by the League of Social Democrats (LSD) in July 2009. Initially the Democratic Party had also expressed support but they later retreated and withdrew from the plan. In the end it was two councillors from the Civic Party, Alan Leong and Tanya Chan, and three from the LSD, Albert Chan, Leung Kwok-hung (Long Hair) and Raymond Wong who went ahead and submitted their resignations, putting the plan into action.

Despite a boycott by pro-Beijing parties due to heavy condemnation of the election by Beijing, twenty-four candidates contested the five seats. The most heavily contested was in Kowloon West where Raymond Wong was standing for re-election. In this seat conservative candidate Pamela Pak posed a serious threat to Wong. Pro-Beijing candidate Wilson Shea also stood, despite a boycott by pro-Beijing parties, although he has insisted that he was standing to represent the voice of Small and Medium Enterprises.

Students have also helped to support the referendum plan. In order to ensure the start of the referendum after the announcement of the boycott by pro-Beijing parties, students from

Hong Kong universities formed the group Tertiary 2012 to stand one candidate for each vacant seat thereby ensuring a contested election. They managed to raise the money for their deposits through online donations.

The LSD, who initiated the referendum plan, is seen in Hong Kong as something of a controversial organisation. Founded in 2006, and relying heavily on the image of its leading figures, most notably Long Hair, who is reported to have a Trotskyist background, and Raymond Wong, a former member of the KMT, it has gained popularity, particularly among young people for its radical language and appearance. It was first successful in winning three seats in the September 2008 Legislative Council elections. While criticizing Beijing for its refusal to implement universal suffrage before 2020, the LSD supports China's development and opening to the world. The LSD's programme stresses the importance of social policy. They advocate social welfare, progressive taxation, a minimum wage, collective bargaining and opposition to full scale privatisation. They also call for more attention to be paid to primary and manufacturing industries, while at the same time recommend the promotion of accounting, insurance, finance and legal advice industries as they "in turn will enhance China's development, so as to make Hong Kong a hub for China's advance to the world. [1]

The LSD's Raymond Wong, said in an interview with Mingpao on September 26th 2006, shortly after the LSD's founding, that they wanted to pursue a peaceful coexistence with the bourgeoisie. "Kennedy once said that if we save a minority who are rich, it is to save the majority poor. Let's be clear, we would not annihilate the bourgeoisie through revolution.....We

pursue a kind of welfare state like Sweden.”

Critics have expressed their concerns over the contradictory nature of the alliance of forces involved in the LSD. The Civic Party’s Fernando Chueng, for instance, in 2008 raised the question concerning the LSD, “which claims to be on the left, or even Trotskyist if we are talking about Long Hair, how is it possible for them to raise the banner of the blue which represents the KMT and appeal to their followers to vote for them?”

The Civic Party a liberal democratic party, which joined the LSD in the resignation plan, was also founded in 2006 by pro-democracy advocates who mostly come from a legal background. They advocate a society based on rule of law, protection of individual rights, the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, as well as universal suffrage.

In an article published in December 2009 the LSD’s Raymond Wong explained why he thought fighting for universal suffrage is not something which people should be afraid of:

“some charged that fighting for universal suffrage is too radical, and disrupting HK... (We argue that) HK today is different from the past when the CP seized power from the KMT. HK is a society of pluralism, of openness and prosperity, a society

constituted by the middle class. To allow universal suffrage will not end up in mob politics, and will not bring substantial changes to the social structure.” [2]

While using radical language to demand universal suffrage, along with their calls for a welfare state, the LSD does not identify the capitalist system as the cause of poverty and unemployment. Rather its programme suggests that it sees the origins of social inequality lying in the lack of democracy and the occasional failure of the market, and that universal suffrage and occasional government intervention will be enough to check the unequal distribution of wealth and balance off market failures.

In contrast to this, Left21, a left organization which was recently formed by young people in Hong Kong, argues in its position paper on political reform that the roots of social inequality have a much deeper cause and that “bourgeois representative democracy alone is unable to deal with the curses of capitalist market economy”. [3] It has therefore called for moving beyond capitalism and formal democracy, and for a kind of democracy which simultaneously incorporates political and economic democracy so as to enable working people to have control over their lives. Left21, nevertheless, called for support of the LSD and Civic Party’s

initiative in creating a de-facto referendum, to defy Beijing’s continuing denial of universal suffrage to the people of Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong media has made much of the disappointingly low turn out. In parts of the New Territories, the boycott by pro-Beijing parties meant that many schools and rural assemblies, which are often used as polling stations, were not allowed to open. Some voters had to travel for as much as 30 minutes in order to vote. It is thought that this may have put some voters off. Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen and his ministers had also previously declared that they would not vote. Speaking to the South China Morning Post, however, Civic Party leader Audrey Eu Tuet-mee has said she is satisfied with the turnout declaring it “the biggest mobilization since the July 1 demonstration in 2003, when 500,000 took to the streets.” [4] Nevertheless such a comparison between an active mass movement on the streets is somewhat misleading in terms of the practical message it displays. A low turn out at a ballot tends to be seen as reflecting apathy and the lack of belief that the ballot itself will lead to anything which makes a difference to the lives of the people involved.

17th May 2010

From [China Labor Net](#)

A point of no return

19 May 2010, by **Danielle Sabai**

The political crisis engulfing Thailand is not a clap of thunder in an otherwise calm sky. The discourse about a country where “everyone lives in harmony and where there is no class struggle but a people united behind its adored sovereign” has nothing to do with reality. For several decades, the Thai people have been subjected to authoritarian regimes or dictatorships and a king in their service. The Thai élites have however

not succeeded in preventing regular uprisings against the established order, including those in 1973, 1976 and 1992, all repressed by bloodbaths. Since 2005, Thailand has faced a new and deep political crisis, longer than the previous ones, and whose outcome cannot be, as in the past, the stifling of the aspirations of the Thai people. The economic boom of the period from 1986-1996 has brought about irreversible changes in society,

notably the formation of a working class of around 7 million and structural political reforms. Unlike in previous crises, ordinary Thais – peasants, urban workers and the middle classes of Bangkok, the less well-off – have become conscious of their political weight and begun to make demands.

The 1990s: Eruption of civil society

The roots of the current conflict are anchored in the depths of Thai society. The economic and political upheavals of the 1990s upset a balance which dated from the 1930s and had been established with the end of the absolute monarchy. After the military coup of 1991 and the repression of 1992, civil society entered what had previously been a very restricted political field.

Following a process lasting several years and a public consultation, a 16th constitution, called the "constitution of the people", was adopted in 1997. For the first time in the history of Thailand, the two chambers were elected by universal suffrage. The executive and legislature were separated. The constitution contained safeguards to combat corruption and defend human rights. If it allowed real democratic advances, it nonetheless had numerous limitations. It was necessary to hold a university degree to be a member of parliament. A sign of the contempt the élites have towards the people and a good way of maintaining privileges. The party list system was criticised by the smaller political formations which found it difficult to elect MPs. The electoral procedures set up tended to strengthen the two party system so as to ensure political stability: between 1995 and 1997, Thailand had 4 governments! For the same reasons, the role of the prime minister was strengthened. This was used by Thaksin to strengthen his own power when he was prime minister.

The repression of 1992 led to a reflection on the need for transparency in politics and on the role and place of the military inside society. For many years, the army would be confined to barracks. But in reality it never renounced the exercise of power and the civilian governments never challenged its privileges. The army remained a powerful financial and political institution which exercised its power behind the scenes.

The first half of the 1990s also saw strong economic growth and an acceleration of industrialisation. Hundreds of thousands of rural youth, in particular women, left to work in manufacturing and services in and around Bangkok. Wages were low and living conditions difficult but it was still preferable to working the land, which was not very fertile in the case of Isaan. Work in Bangkok did not simply offer a possibility of earning money and helping parents and children left behind in the village. This migration of young people to the capital is indicative of the transformations underway in Thai society: it offered them the possibility of being "Thansamai", access to a different, "modern", lifestyle, of freeing themselves from "traditions" which were seen as backward and onerous [5]. As is the case everywhere else, Thais aspire to the same standard of living that they see on television and they would like to enjoy the fruits of growth.

The economic boom ended suddenly with the outbreak of the great financial crisis of 1997 which hit Thailand first before spreading to a series of Asian countries. Many companies went bankrupt. Those linked to services protected by the state came out best. This was true of the enterprises owned by Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire who had made his fortune in telecommunications through licences and concessions which he had obtained from different governments and the military in the 1990s. The political and economic stability caused by the crisis strengthened him in the idea of launching a political career. The political withdrawal of the army had opened up a political space. In the business milieu, the idea spread that the army was no longer able to manage public affairs in an increasingly complex and globalised world. In 1998, Thaksin founded his own party, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT-Thais love Thais) with some of the vast wealth that he had emerged from the crisis with. In 2001, he was elected on the basis of a political programme which attempted to respond to a variety of sometimes contradictory social demands. Once elected, he implemented a "pro-poor" policy which considerably improved

the lives of millions of ordinary people. Thaksin created a health system which was virtually free of charge (less than a euro for a medical consultation), helped indebted peasants through a debt moratorium of several years' length, and set up a micro credit system to favour development projects in the villages. It should not however be forgotten that he is a millionaire businessman whose policies serve his own interests first. Corruption, authoritarianism and nepotism prospered while he was prime minister.

Nonetheless, for the first time a Thai politician had taken an interest in the fate of millions of his citizens. His policies clearly followed a classic populist tradition: satisfying the demands of the peasants and workers in order to provide himself with an electoral base and the stability necessary for business to prosper. Meanwhile, muzzling the workers' movement by maintaining laws restraining trade union activity and an electoral system which, by obliging urban workers to vote in their rural region of origin, blocked the emergence of left wing parties. The war on drugs, waged early in his first term, led to thousands of deaths and arbitrary arrests. Thaksin also resumed the war against the Malay minority in the deep south of Thailand. Despite this state violence, which Thaksin had demagogically used to strengthen his legitimacy, the social aspects of his policies made him immensely popular. This made him the sole Thai politician to win a consecutive second term. He was triumphantly re-elected in 2005.

The germs of a new political crisis

The bases of a new political crisis were now in place. When Thaksin came to power, Thailand had been led for nearly 70 years by an élite which held money and power: the army, the higher bureaucracy, the monarchy and some big industrial families. They shared a deep contempt for the people who they saw as uncultured and not suited for democracy. More than twenty coups since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 attest to it.

They are all in favour of democracy, but a “Thai version” of democracy that would allegedly be “better adapted” to Thai history, values and culture [6]. In opposition to Western values, “Asian values” were supposed to stress the primacy of the group over the individual, respect for others, a sense of community, frugality, education, acceptance of hierarchy. In fact, all this served as ideological justification for a very inegalitarian system and deeply anti-democratic laws allowing a few among the privileged to enrich themselves and remain in power. The citizens took no part in the decisions of those who governed while the latter were not motivated to account for their actions. The feeling of belonging to the nation was inculcated in people asked to subordinate their own interests to those of the county. At the heart of this ideological construction, the king played a central place. As “father” of the nation that he incarnates, he regularly visits his “children” to listen to their problems, which he reinterprets “properly”. The monarchy is at the centre of (very) many charitable works and development projects in the countryside. The “self sufficiency economy”, the economic “theory” elaborated recently by the king illustrates the paternalist mechanisms and maintenance of social hierarchies very well. . “Sufficiency has three key principles: moderation; wisdom or insight; and the need for built-in resilience against the risks which arise from internal or external change” [7]. The message is clear: the peasants and the poor are asked to make do with what they have. If the poor are poor, it is because they have not implemented solutions adapted to the resources at their disposal. Emergency laws like the ISA (Internal Security Act) and the crime of lèse-majesté help smother any opposition.

The political game is completely emptied of content. Political links are above all business and clientelist relations: large scale vote buying and collusion between business and politics. In the 1990s, more than half of MPs originated from the world of business. The different political parties do not represent any alternative but are set up to participate in government coalitions where they hope to benefit from

opportunities to do business. A sort of return on investment – establishing an electoral base costs a lot of money.

On the other hand, the improvement in living conditions brought about by the economic boom of the 1986-96 period decreased social tensions and demands. With the crisis of 1997, things changed. Hundreds of thousands of factory workers in the Bangkok area were dismissed and many returned to the countryside without payment. The idea developed by Asia’s ruling élites (in particular Mahathir in Malaysia and Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore) that economic growth should come before democracy was seriously shaken. The Thaksin years made people conscious that the electoral game could also benefit the less well off. It was possible to implement redistributive and more egalitarian economic policies.

Thaksin benefited fully from the system. During his first term, he favoured “friendly” companies and placed “loyalists” at the head of the army. The traditional establishment felt threatened: the financial opportunities, the juiciest contracts were escaping them. The king’s privy council lost control over army promotions, the main lever of maintenance of the order. The Democrat Party, the main opposition party allied to the establishment, was not in a position to compete with the TRT at the electoral level. It had not won an election for nearly 10 years. The king himself felt threatened. Thaksin’s popularity competed directly with his own. The traditional order was challenged.

The countryside elects governments, Bangkok overthrows them

The establishment sought by every means to free itself of Thaksin. An opportunity came in January 2006, when he decided to sell his company Shin Corp to Temasek, a company owned by the state of Singapore.

Royalist forces organised around Sondhi Limthongkul launched a nationalist campaign for the resignation of the prime minister and succeeded in linking together the numerous struggles of the time against the privatisation of the public electricity company EGAT, against the free trade agreements with the USA, against decentralisation in education and so on. However, despite numerous demonstrations against him and a public intervention by the king, Thaksin triumphed again in the elections of April 2006.

It was too much. The army took the military option, undoubtedly with the approval of the “palace”. [8] On September 19, 2006, while Thaksin was abroad at the UN, a new military coup was organised, this time without any bloodshed. The objectives advanced were the fight against corruption and the necessity of restoring the “unity of the country” which had been disrupted by several months of uninterrupted demonstrations. The establishment, the royalist forces but also a great part of the intelligentsia and middle classes celebrated the overthrow of the “corrupt” Thaksin.

In the year following the coup, everything was done to destroy Thaksin’s instruments of power: the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) was dissolved, 111 MPs from the party were deemed ineligible for the five years to come. Part of Thaksin’s assets were frozen (nearly 2 billion dollars). A new constitution was written under military diktat. However, despite the maintenance of martial law in Thaksin’s bastions in the north and north-east, the military could not prevent a victory for the People’s Power Party (PPP), heirs of the TRT, at the election of December 23, 2007. The victory of the forces allied to Thaksin revived the crisis. Very quickly the new government of Samak Sundaravej envisaged amending the new constitution to forestall a new dissolution by the judiciary which had been considerably strengthened by the new constitution, with the power notably to dissolve a party if one of its members was found guilty of a crime.

From May 2008 to December of the same year, the People’s Alliance for

Democracy (PAD) waged an unrelenting struggle to force Prime Minister Samak to resign. The Yellow Shirts [9] are in no way the progressive force their name would imply. The movement is led by Sonthi Limtongkul, a press magnate and former business partner of Thaksin, ruined by the 1997 crisis. He linked up with a whole range of disaffected elements: royalists who felt threatened politically and economically by Thaksin's business clique; military men who did not accept seeing their grip on society reduced since 1992; members of the Democrat Party, the traditional ally of the royalty and army and rejected by the business periphery; judges from the various high courts; intellectuals and members of the middle class tired of corruption and scandals; monks belonging to reactionary Buddhist sects. All supported the military coup. Among the main leaders were Chamlong Srimuang, Phanlop Phinmanee and Prasong Soonsiri, three of the main veterans of the war against the Communist insurrection of the 1970s and 1980s. All were horrified by the people who they deemed to ignorant to be able to vote and participate in political affairs. They are opposed to democracy and mobilised so that the new constitution would put in place an elitist system under which only 30% of the seats in parliament would be directly elected by a popular vote. They consider Samak's government, elected democratically by the majority, as illegitimate. On several occasions, the Yellow Shirts received the explicit support of the very reactionary queen Sirikit.

From May 2008, supported by the Democrat Party and Abhisit, the Yellow Shirts remobilised. For several weeks they occupied the office of the prime minister. In September, Samak's government was dissolved by a judicial decree. Samak, something of a gourmet, was sentenced for having received payment for his participation in televised cookery shows! In response, a new government was formed around Somchai Wongsawat, brother in law of Thaksin. The struggle culminated with the siege of Bangkok's two airports in late November 2008 [10], stranding thousands of passengers for a week

and undermining a Thai economy already disturbed by the world economic crisis. On December 2, 2008, the PPP was dissolved by the constitutional court for electoral fraud. On December 15, following a reversal of alliance organised by the army inside parliament, Abhisit Vejjajiva was elected 27th prime minister by the deputies.

A military coup and two judicial decrees have overthrown three governments whose democratic legitimacy was not in doubt. For most Thais, it appeared increasingly clear that the democratic game was rigged and that the judges were in the service of the rich. To this day, the leaders of the PAD who blockaded the two Bangkok airports have never been brought to court. The countryside elects governments and the élites of Bangkok overthrow them if they do not like them! This reality shows also how spatial and class differentiations pan out in Thailand. The élites and the rich live in Bangkok, the poor originate from the provinces. In Bangkok, peasants are referred to using the very contemptuous term "baan nok" ("outside house"). To live in the countryside is to be backward, uneducated, uncivilised and naïve.

Who are the Red Shirts?

Faced with the situation opened by the putting in place of the Abhisit government, in early 2009 the "United Front for Democracy and against Dictatorship" (UDD), the Red Shirt movement, was set up. This political and social movement was set up originally by the unification of Thaksin's defenders and the pro-democracy forces that had emerged after the coup. The alliance mobilised a popular base mainly made up of peasants, villagers and urban workers, in particular in the north and north-east of the country, fed up with the double language of the judiciary, the absence of democracy and the maintenance of deep inequalities despite a real modernisation of the country. Although he has partly adopted on his own behalf the political reforms of Thaksin, Abhisit appears as what he is, the representative of the

traditional elites. The unity of the movement was achieved around the slogan of resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit and new democratic parliamentary elections.

Thaksin's wealth has largely contributed to developing the struggle, at least initially. Nonetheless, the Red Shirts movement has changed a lot since its emergence. If Thaksin remains a "hero" for many Red Shirts who feel he has contributed to an improvement in their living conditions, the demands are now on another level. The objectives of Thaksin and the leaders of the UDD are to say the least divergent. The leaders of the Red Shirts claim to be the champions of social justice and democracy. Themes which do not suit Thaksin perfectly. In addition, his chances of returning to power are thin and his main objective could well be to recover the 1.4 billion dollars seized by the judiciary in March. In fact, Thaksin has withdrawn from the movement and as Chang Noi, a well known Thai journalist, says, "Thaksin could well not wish to ride this tiger now he knows how big and ferocious it is".

As to its composition, the UDD has from the beginning been a broad and diverse movement. Unity around the slogan of Abhisit's resignation and for immediate elections does little to conceal the very different political views and objectives among the leaders. According to Tumberblog [11] a certain number of leaders like Surachai Danwattananusorn "Sae-Dan", Jaran Dithapichai, Weng Tojirakarn or Vipoothalaeng Pattanaphumthai are former Communists. Others like Jatuporn Promphan are MPs from the Puea Thai party, an heir of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) and of the People's Power Party (PPP). Most are royalists or in any case do not publicly challenge the constitutional monarchy. The law forbidding lèse majesté bans any debate on the monarchy. The "crime" can be punished by 3 to 15 years imprisonment. That does not favour freedom of expression and several Red Shirt personalities, like Giles Ji Ungpakorn and Jakaprob Penkair have had to go into exile to avoid prison.

At last, in August 2009, after several

months of after discussions, divergences appeared publicly among the leaders of the movement. Jakaprob Penkair and “Sae-Dan” left it to form their own group, “Red Siam”. The split took place around the tactic advocated by the main leaders of organising a petition to request the royal pardon for Thaksin. A key question: the appeal to the king poses the question of the place of the monarchy and its desirable and possible evolution. The detractors have argued that this petition accords to the king the power to interfere in an undemocratic manner in the struggle of the Red Shirts and would perpetuate illusions about the intentions of the monarchy. For their part, the three leaders of the group “Kwam Jing Wannee” (The Truth Today), Jatuporn Promphan, Weera Musikapong and Nattawut Saikua, fight for minor reforms in the context of the current monarchy. Jatuporn explained very clearly to the newspaper “The Nation” : “We want democracy under the King as head of state, therefore our activities are limited to attacking Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda or lower figures to prevent an escalating fight transgressing the constitutional monarchy” [12] The leaders of Red Siam, who are more radical, believe that the monarchy should be reformed. Nonetheless they do not challenge the current framework of the constitutional monarchy.

In terms of the rank and file, the Red Shirts are not the dangerous “terrorists” and conspirators against the monarchy portrayed by the government. They are ordinary people. The product of systematic brainwashing from the cradle, they are mainly of religious, nationalist and royalist sympathies. That is what makes this political movement different from the previous revolts in 1973, 1976 and 1992. For the first time, it is ordinary people from the provinces, the peasants, workers, the poor and also the less well off middle classes of Bangkok who are mobilising. The basis of the movement extends to a part of the middle classes who have become aware of the high cost that the coup has represented, whether in political or economic terms and now support a movement which seeks to re-establish democracy. Many inhabitants of Bangkok have come to

show their support for the Red Shirts or to join them.

The UDD has highlighted the specificity of this revolt in updating obsolete terms in the Thai language like “phrai” (serf) and “amart” (nobles). These terms illustrate the oppression and the injustices visited on those who “have nothing” in opposition to the privileged. It certainly amounts to a class struggle, a revolt of the wretched against the established order. The movement has stripped bare the machinery of this profoundly inegalitarian system, at the centre of which lies the monarchy.

End of reign

Is the monarchy still at the centre of the system? The question is legitimate. The political crisis has seriously destabilised the institution. The systematic references to the monarchy by the royalists themselves, first by the army to legitimate the coup then by the Yellow Shirts to legitimate their mobilisations against the “pro Thaksin” governments have helped deconstruct the image of the “palace”, guarantor of national unity and arbiter of partisan conflicts, elaborated over several decades. The doubts have been sown by the Red Shirts and it will henceforth be hard for the establishment to maintain its grip over society by invoking the protection of the monarchy.

The crisis has also revealed that the monarchy is no longer in a position as in the past to weigh on events or smother the protests. The king is dying, and has been in hospital since September 2009. The question of the succession is posed and has opened another political crisis inside the élites. The legitimacy of the monarchy rests to a great extent on the almost God-like image of the current king. Indeed, the designated heir to the throne, prince Vajiralongkorn, is utterly without the “qualities” of his father Bhumibol (“the blessed man”). He is weak politically, known for his decadent morals and detested by the majority of Thais. Salacious stories about his private life circulate on websites before being censored. He is moreover linked to Thaksin who has in the past partly subsidised his lifestyle.

The financial stakes are huge. “Forbes” magazine estimated in 2009 that the Thai monarchy was the richest in the world with 30 billion dollars of net assets. Its financial and industrial investments in all sectors of the Thai economy are colossal. The smooth running of business depends, as all understand, on the maintenance of the established order. Given the lack of charisma and legitimacy of Vajiralongkorn, he will not be in a position to have any political authority. Princess Sirindhorn could play such a role as she is much appreciated but the law would only allow it if the heir died. Internal struggles for the succession are intense. Each of the claimants has built alliances with factions of the army and police, which partly explains the indecisions of the government until recent days.

At the other end of the social scale, we are very far from the high life. A recent report from the UNDP [13] on Thailand tells us that inequality has not ceased to grow in recent years. The UNDP compares the share of income of the richest 5% to that of the poorest 5%. The results are revealing: In relatively egalitarian societies like Japan or Scandinavia, the ratio is around 3 to 4, i.e. the richest 5% are between three and four times richer than the poorest 5%. In the rest of Europe and in North America it is from 5 to 8. Among Thailand’s neighbours, the ratio is around 9 to 11. In Thailand it is in the region of 13 to 15. These inequalities are increasingly rejected by the population.

What outcome to the crisis?

As these lines are written, the military forces have for three days been organising a violent repression of the Red Shirts. According to numerous testimonies from foreign journalists and inhabitants of the capital, the military are firing on the demonstrators with live ammunition. Several civilians have been killed in ambushes by snipers. The confrontations began on May 13 after the head of security at the Rachaprasong camp, Sae Deng, was

seriously wounded in the head by a bullet fired by a sniper. The government denies responsibility for this assassination attempt but it seems obvious that only a crack sharpshooter could have such precision and not wound the International Herald Tribune journalist with whom Sae Deng was speaking when he was shot. Already there have been around fifty deaths and it is probable that the real number will never be known because according to the Asian Human Right Commission the army has removed numerous bodies.

The Abhisit government had made an offer to the Red Shirts last week. The national and international press speculated on a possible agreement which would satisfy the two parties. Abhisit proposed a five point "roadmap" centred around elections on November 14. It was hard for the Red Shirt leaders to reject the plan outright. But Abhisit offered no guarantee. He refused to set a date for the dissolution of parliament and to withdraw the accusations of terrorism and conspiracy against the monarchy. In these conditions, while stating that they accepted the plan and wished to negotiate its implementation, the Red Shirts refused to leave the neighbourhood they had occupied for 6 weeks. Even if it is very difficult to obtain information on the subject, it also seems that the UDD had serious internal differences on the position to be adopted towards Abhisit's proposals. At the beginning of the week, the Red Shirt leaders demanded that the deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban was charged in relation to the confrontations of April 10 which led to around 20 deaths. A request that the government used to justify backtracking on its election proposal and the repression which began on Thursday.

The situation is very complex and changeable and it is difficult to know how it will develop in the coming days and weeks. In the immediate, all scenarios can be envisaged. The repression could temporarily bring a halt to the Red Shirt demonstrations. The army could also meet significant resistance, indeed a development of the provincial mobilisations. In this case, a resignation of the government is probable with elections. But it is also possible that a section of the army could take the situation as the pretext for a new coup. An open struggle between different factions of the army should not be ruled out in that case.

The current impasse in the conflict is sadly not surprising: was Abhisit's plan to end the crisis sincere? The proposal raises numerous doubts. When Thaksin attempted to renew his electoral mandate in April 2006, after powerful mobilisations against him, Abhisit and the Democrat Party boycotted the elections. Did Abhisit really want elections on November 14? Information disclosed by the press reveals him as among the hardliners in the government who wanted repression rather than negotiations. Inside the government, other ministers also did not want elections they were virtually certain to lose.

The date of the elections, November 14, also posed a problem. The value of an immediate dissolution of parliament, beyond its symbolic value, is that it allows the winning side to be in power on October 1 at the time of the annual reorganisation of the army command. Abhisit's proposal would allow him to play for time and be in position at this strategic moment.

More fundamentally, in order for the elections to be organised, guarantees are needed so that they should be just

and democratic and so that their outcome is respected by all. Indeed, the Yellow Shirts did not conceal the fact that they rejected the proposed elections. The élites are not ready to make concessions. In addition, no democratic development is likely while the monarchy and the army, hand in hand, will accept no opposition to their omnipotence. Thus one can imagine that a new electoral victory for the Red Shirt would have led to Yellow Shirt demonstrations to overthrow the new elected government. For now, the democratic game seems completely blocked

Finally and undoubtedly most significantly: the failure of this attempt to exit the crisis is surely revealing of the fact that the majority of Thais no longer believe that elections alone can put an end to the crisis. A deeper political change is needed. The problem is that decades of repression mean that today there are no political parties based in the workers' movement capable of being candidates to power and to offer a progressive political solution to the crisis. A number of leaders of the old workers' parties, whether social democratic or Maoist-inclined Communist, trade unions or peasant associations have been assassinated by the different dictatorial regimes. The workers' movement has still not recovered. That is why political opposition takes the unexpected form of the Red Shirts: a political movement which is neither a party nor an association, heterogeneous and marked by contradictions but whose essence is its organic link with the people. We should hail the courage of these tens of thousands of workers and peasants who have occupied the commercial and business centres of Bangkok for many weeks and who are now experiencing the assaults of the army. They deserve our support.

Repression against the Redshirts must cease immediately

17 May 2010, by **Fourth International**

In order to justify what is unjustifiable, the government has accused some of the demonstrators of "terrorism" and organized a disgraceful blockade of the Rachaprasong district; water and electricity have been cut. Supplies cannot get through to the demonstrators. Radio and TV transmissions in the district have been stopped. These "terrorists" are thousands of men, women and children, ordinary people who are fighting against ruling class justice in Thailand and for the re-establishment of democracy. Their watchword: resignation of Abhisit who has no legitimacy because his government

was put in place by the army when parliamentary alliances changed in December 2008.

If Abhisit were legitimate, he would have agreed to the request of the Redshirts to respect the verdict of the ballot boxes. Instead of that he is showing his political weakness. He is trying to silence dissident voices by censorship and repression. His only chance of staying in power lies in the ability of the army to break the Redshirts movement by violence and repression. More than 65 people have been killed since the beginning of April and the violence continues.

Abhisit must resign immediately and account to the courts for the deaths for which he is the primary person responsible. Negotiations must open with the Redshirts representatives to organize the dissolution of the Parliament and hold elections as soon as possible.

The Fourth International salutes the courage of the Redshirts who have been waging an exemplary fight for several weeks and are now suffering the attacks of the army. It stands resolutely at their side.

*Bureau of the Fourth International
17th May 2010*

Resist government by the rich, for the rich

17 May 2010, by **Socialist Resistance**

The façade of equality within the coalition projected by making Clegg Deputy Prime Minister is a deception perpetrated by a Tory leadership which was determined to get their hands on the reins of power by any means necessary. It is an embrace of death which is already tearing the Lib Dems apart.

In return for the trappings of office the Lib Dems have decided to underpin a reactionary coalition and sign up to the onslaught on jobs, pensions and services which the Tories have been preparing.

The cuts agenda and deficit reduction are the cornerstones of this anti-working class coalition. Yet in the election campaign the Lib Dems supported Brown's approach to the crisis, which was for a limited level of government stimulus (and quantitative easing) in order to maintain demand in the economy for another year. This was inadequate, and did not avoid cuts, but it had temporally cushioned

the crisis "though it was based in the illusion that the economy would recover next year and that the working class could then be made to pay the bill.

However this was an important difference which would have kept more people in work and created better conditions for a fight back. It has now been junked in favour of Tory proposals for an immediate £6 billion slashing of public expenditure with much more to come. This can only make the economic situation worse and a full-scale double-dip recession more likely.

The backdrop of crisis across Europe throughout the election period should have served as warning on this. There was rioting in Athens and so-called "contagion" was threatening Spain, Portugal, and Italy. To this mix was added fresh instability in the banking system and the markets and the threat by Sarkozy to pull France out of the Eurozone unless Merkel accepted the

EU's €750bn bailout fund for the single currency.

The Lib Dems capitulated to the Tories knowing that there was alternative deal with Labour and the nationalist parties on offer "the so-called progressive alliance.

Unprincipled Liberals

This was not a project that we would have called for or supported but we are not neutral on whether the Lib Dems line up with the Tories or against them even though neither of these parties represents the interests of the working class. Caroline Lucas [14] put it well, saying that neither side was progressive and that she would have supported any measures put forward on a case by case basis.

For the Lib Dems this represented a spectacular betrayal of their own

principles. The Labour offer held out a real possibility of replacing Britain's bizarre and corrupt electoral system, which has under-represented them for so long, with some form of Proportional Representation (PR). This is something which the Lib Dems have correctly called for over many years. It would completely change the scandalously anti-democratic "first past the post" system which deprives millions of voters of representation in parliamentary elections. It does not represent workers' democracy, of course, but it is an extremely important working class democratic demand.

A Labour-Liberal coalition would have been a less effective platform for cuts which is one of the reasons the Lib Dems gave for rejecting it. Such a government would have come under massive pressure from the media to implement a cuts agenda. It is true that the arithmetic was tight with the Labour option and that it would probably not have lasted 5 years. But it could have lasted long enough to ensure that the next election would not be under the "first past the post" system.

What the Lib Dems have ended up with is a coalition in which all the cards and the key ministries are in the Tories' hands. The Tories have offered them a referendum on the Alternative Vote system. It is not PR since it is not proportional and is arguably no better than first past the post since it would have no effect on the constituencies dominated by Tory or Labour inbuilt majorities which are the distorting factor in the first past the post system.

One thing the Lib Dems extracted from the Tories was early legislation on fixed term Parliaments. This would mean that the next general election is scheduled to be on Thursday May 7th 2015.

This is a very important electoral reform measure in itself, although five years is too long for a government to hold office. Its purpose in these circumstances is a good illustration of the Lib Dems' cynicism. They wanted to make sure that the Tories did not use them to get into power only to spit them out again when they thought they could win a full majority. The

outrageous proposed change of parliamentary procedure to require 55% of the vote to pass a motion of no confidence in a government is another example of the Lib Dems' desperation to be in office. Whether these safeguards can guarantee a stable government for five years of economic distress and attacks on the working class is another matter.

There are some limited progressive measures in the deal between the parties: the abolition of identity cards; the postponement of the inheritance tax relief and a rise in capital gains tax. Most of the rest of the coalition agreement is Tory policy. Trident, the one issue on which the Lib Dems were out of step with establishment politics, is to stay. There is an unspecified commitment to raising the tax threshold, which is sure to be kicked into the long grass. It is also clear that a substantial rise in the regressive VAT is in the offing.

Aiding the racists

On immigration the Lib Dem proposal for an amnesty after 10 years has been junked in favour of the reactionary Tory proposal for a cap on non-EU immigration. One of the vile features of the election campaign was the repeated racist attacks by both the Tories and Labour equally over their amnesty proposal. Behind these attacks was the bankrupt attitude which rendered all three main parties unable to tackle the far right during the election campaign other than to compete with them on how many migrants they could stop coming in and how many they could throw out.

This makes them directly responsible for the advances made by the BNP and UKIP in the campaign. The reason why both the BNP and UKIP won worrying scores at the national level was because the main parties insist on competing with them rather than opposing them.

The war and the environment were marginal issues in the election campaign and nothing has changed with the coalition agreement. The Lib Dems have also collapsed on nuclear power. The Tory policy of a new generation of nuclear power stations

is coalition policy with the Lib Dems having the right to abstain when it comes to a vote. The agreement is against a third runway at Heathrow and other London airports "but there is nothing about Boris Johnson's proposal for a new airport in the Thames estuary.

The most divisive issue facing this coalition government is that of the European Union (EU). It means the Euro-sceptic Foreign Secretary William Hague sitting in Cabinet alongside life-long EU enthusiast Lib Dem ministers. The agreement not to go into the Euro zone in the current Parliament and a referendum on any transfer of powers to the EU is unlikely to contain this issue even inside the Tory Party.

The coalition is hugely controversial in both of the parties involved. The right-wing of the Tory party regards it as a sell-out as do most of the rank and file of the Lib Dems. This means that the coalition will come under massive pressure once the decisions on cuts start to be taken particularly since neither party has a mandate from the electorate for the cuts they are intending to make.

Labour is already indicating that it is unlikely to oppose the cuts in general but may object to some of the details. They say they want to be a "responsible opposition". This would be a scandalous capitulation to the concept of "national interest" peddled by the Con/Lib Dem coalition and the media but it is in line with the way they have governed and fought the election in the interests of business.

The performance of the left in the election was a disaster. It is true that the two great positive outcomes of the election were the defeat of Nick Griffin in Barking and the election of Caroline Lucas in Brighton. We congratulate those involved in both campaigns. The Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) result was weak. It made no impact on the election at national level and is unlikely to be the basis for anything after the election.

Respect polled far better than any other part of the left but lost its MP and most of councillors. It will need to

regroup and revisit its strategic approach.

The need for an effective party to the left of Labour remains a crucial element of the fight back. One lesson this the 2010 election is that the left should redouble its effort to create a united and pluralist party of the left.

This makes the response of the trade unions to the situation of first class importance. Most unions have so far remained largely passive in the face of cutbacks. This has to change as a matter of urgency. The unions must demand that gaps in the budget created by the banking crisis are tackled through the cancellation of Trident; ending the war in

Afghanistan; withdrawal from Iraq and energetic collection of taxes from big business, the banks and the rich. As a minimum corporation tax should be raised back to at least the levels levied under Thatcher and the key demand for a million green jobs supported.

We must seek to build a mass campaign in the trade unions and Labour Movement to press for the rapid implementation of progressive electoral reform based on PR. The Labour movement must also rally against the dangerous slide towards racist, anti-immigrant policies. Years of the unions trailing meekly behind Blair and Brown have brought us to the very brink of a Tory government. Only the movement of the working

class and the creation of an effective coalition against the cuts can save the working class from fresh, massive and damaging attacks.

We call for:

• Local anti-cuts campaigns to defend public services.?

• Local and national protests on the day of the emergency budget.?

• National unions and the TUC to call national demonstrations to defend public services.

*This is the editorial in **Socialist Resistance** issue 60. It was adopted by the SR national committee on May 16, 2010.*

The workers' and trade-union movement in 2009: consolidation and dispersion

15 May 2010, by **Karine Clément**

According to the sources of the Institute of Collective Action (IKD), there were 183 industrial disputes over the whole year (probably an underestimated figure), with a tendency to increase. In the first half of 2009, there were 62 industrial disputes - half of them in May-June. In the second half of the year, there were 116 disputes (half of which took the form of protest meetings).

In comparison with 2007, the forms of protest changed: in place of strikes we saw street actions. This was a consequence of the crisis (which makes work stoppages a high-risk form of action), but also of labour laws which now make it almost impossible to have a strike within the framework of the law. Because of the absence of effective mechanisms for settling disputes, workers are forced to resort to forms of mobilization not covered by the labour laws, like street actions.

The geographical spread of the disputes was very broad - practically all regions were affected to a greater

or lesser degree. The most tense situation was in the mono-industrial cities [15] where the inhabitants of the city took the side of the workers. As for the most affected sectors, they were the car industry, arms factories, agriculture, and metallurgy. But in fact the increase in the number of disputes affected almost all sectors.

The principal demands of the workers concerned payment of wages and saving the company from closing. In other words, defensive actions predominated, which is not at all surprising in a period of crisis. But faced with extremely strong pressure by the employers and an increase in the rate of exploitation, even defensive actions give a foretaste of a counter-offensive.

In fact the problem does not reside only in the crisis and the so-called objective economic difficulties. Often workers and trade unionists can't believe their eyes: the company is viable and even makes profits, sales are going well, but that does not

prevent management from using the crisis to make savings at the expense of the workers: wages, working conditions, safety norms, etc. And everything is done to dissimulate the real financial position, both from the public and from workers and trade unionists (at least, from genuine trade unionists).

The fact is that because of the crisis or by making use of it, the employers have launched a full-scale offensive against workers who are starting to organize themselves. Since 2007 we have seen a rise in workers' consciousness, with greater autonomy as well as a real ability to organize themselves. Obviously, during the past year this tendency became obvious to the employers, who are doing everything to crush centres of resistance and examples of self-organization.

Their primary targets are the really independent trade unions. These aggressive actions on the part of the employers have been further

reinforced with the crisis which accentuates competition, but also because of the policy of the government which, itself dependent on oligarchic capital, is giving generous help to the oligarchs so that they can get through the crisis without important losses, and doing so at the expense of taxpayers and workers.

A full-scale offensive against the workers

Managers of enterprises, both private and state-owned, engage in systematic violations of the labour laws.

In the first place that takes the form of non-payment of wages. As already happened in the 1990s, workers are transformed into slaves forced to work for nothing. Furthermore, whereas the labour laws require an agreement by the two parties, the employers reduce wages unilaterally, stop paying bonuses, and reduce working hours with a big cut in wages.

Even more serious, large-scale dismissals have begun, generally in violation of the law, accompanied by threats against the workers, who are forced to “resign” from their jobs. Sometimes the sackings are dissimulated through workers being transferred to a company created for one day (this is apparently what happened in the Avtovaz car factory in Togliatti).

We are seeing a multiplication of forms of non-standard employment, without any guarantee of job security. Often cuts in wages are not justified by real financial problems (the situations are difficult to verify because of the systematic dissimulation of the accounts).

It is useless to talk about the official unemployment figures (the authorities consider as unemployed someone who has signed on at the labour exchange): in reality, very few people are ready to wait for hours in a queue for a miserable allowance, between 890 and 4900 roubles (between 25 and 120 euros). According to figures established in accordance with the

methods of the ILO (a declaration by the person concerned that he or she is available for work and is looking for employment), at the end of November 2009 the number of unemployed was 6.3 million people, 8.1 per cent of the active population. As for the “hidden” unemployed, who are still considered as working, but who do not receive wages or who because of a lockout receive only two-thirds of their salary, there are very many of them. Many have loans to pay back, not to mention their current expenditure for essential products and services whose prices, unlike wages, increase.

Frequently, sackings mean a worsening of the workloads of the remaining workers, who, moreover, see their wages reduced. The factory inspectors have noted an increase in stress and in over-long working hours, resulting in a big increase in industrial accidents, sometimes fatal, a situation made worse by the fact that the employers do not hesitate to economise on safety, by threatening with unemployment those who protest.

In short, the workers either are thrown onto the street, almost without means of subsistence, or are squeezed like lemons, forced to work more to earn less.

In such a situation, the majority of them limit themselves to passive demonstrations of protest. Many prefer to knuckle under and put up with the situation, putting all their hopes on the kindness of the employer and on keeping their jobs. Many have recourse to individual forms of adaptation, seeking to make an agreement with management and to negotiate some advantages for themselves. Some nevertheless manage to find a second job or tighten their belts while waiting for better times. With the crisis, these possibilities have been considerably reduced and we have seen a growing number of desperate people launching into spontaneous mass initiatives, which no one controls.

The most important thing is the increase in the number of new trade unions. More and more workers are trying to resist the offensive against their rights, collectively and in an organized way. Moreover, these new

trade unions are developing in sectors where up to now they were absent: the media, the food sector, commerce, etc. And under the pressure of the dissatisfaction of the rank and file, many traditional trade unions are being forced to adopt more combative positions.

It is precisely the most combative trade unions which are the target of the sharpest attacks, not only by the employers but also by certain functionaries and representatives of the government.

The employers and the government: crush and divide the trade unions

The Russian capitalists have never considered the trade unions as a normal phenomenon and have always done their utmost either to eliminate them or to neutralize them, by resorting to corruption or by incorporating them into the administrative machinery of the company. Today, seized by panic in the face of the crisis and confronted with the formation of new combative trade unions, but also with a reactivation of some trade unions which had up to now been passive and loyal to them, the employers and their managers have launched a redoubled offensive. With, overall, the active support of the government and of the local authorities at various levels.

It should be noted that persecutions, repressive and discriminatory measures, far from being limited to only the independent trade unions, are also being used against trade unions affiliated to the FNPR [16] if they take any steps to mobilise their members.

It was the managing director of the OAO Kontsern Kalin trust (in the Sverdlovsk region) who raised the standard of this anti-union campaign. On October 5, 2009, in an interview with an online newspaper, he declared: “For several years, the trade unions, like cockroaches and bedbugs, have endeavoured to infiltrate companies by all kinds of means, and

that puts my back up. For me the trade unions are like sects. If in a company there appeared paedophiles, drinkers of blood, followers of Satan, if they became stronger and started to attract the members of the collective into their sticky webs, people would understand better why I attacked them. For me, trade union militants are just the same: manipulators who pursue their material and political goals to the detriment of the company..."

The forms of repression against the trade unions are very varied. Trade union leaders are summoned by various police authorities for "interviews"; they try to charge them with having organized a protest action on the basis that it was not authorized or on the pretext of having committed an offence invented for the purpose. That is the case with Piotr Zolotarev, a leader of the Yedinstvo (Unity) trade union in the Avtovaz factory, who is regularly summoned by various bodies. Or the tragic case represented by the illegal arrest of Velentin Ouroussov, a leader of the Profsvoboda trade union, sentenced to 6 years in prison on the pretext of possession of drugs. Or the more sophisticated approach of CentreE, which seeks to prove that calling for the setting up of trade unions - as in the leaflets distributed by the MPRA [17] union in the Tsentrosvarmach company in Tver - comes under the terms of the law against "extremism".

There is another means which is now largely available for all employers who go to war against the trade unions: on November 3, 2009, the Constitutional Court declared anti-constitutional article 374 of the Labour Code which prohibited the sacking of non- fulltime union representatives without the agreement of the leading bodies of the union, thus removing the only legal protection from trade-union activists in their struggle against the arbitrary decisions of employers. This article was used especially by militants of the independent trade unions, who have few full-timers and whose activities greatly displeased the employers. They were the ones who were particularly targeted, more especially as it is not complicated to cobble together a so-called offence.

Some recent examples including the dismissal of E. Ivanov, president of the MPRA union in the GMAuto company (in Saint Petersburg) and of a woman militant, O. Chafikova, following a "work to rule" on October 21 and again from 11-20 November. The demands included the following points: incorporation of bonuses into guaranteed wages, the right of employees to have their holidays, the abolition of the annual calculation of working time and the introduction of the 40-hour week.

But the imagination of the employers does not stop there. Sometimes the trade union has its office taken away without the slightest reason being given (as was the case on October 26 where, on the orders of the Civil Aviation authorities, the trade union of air-traffic controllers saw itself deprived overnight of its office in Moscow). Or else trade-union activists are deprived of the pass which allows them to circulate freely in the workshops.

In some companies, leaflets are distributed aimed at discrediting trade-union activists. Sometimes, management calls in the militia or the special forces (OMON) to stop a protest action, an information drive or quite simply a trade-union assembly, as was the case on October 20 in the KarelskiOkatych company when there was an assembly of the Sotsprof trade union.

Another invention in the anti-union arsenal is the seizure of personal goods following a strike, as happened to A. Shkhakharov, president of the trade union of the maritime commercial port of Tuaspinski, hauled before a court by the management of the harbour company TMTP, which asked for him to be condemned to refund the losses caused by a strike.

The attacks against trade union leaders, in the first place leaders of the alternative trade unions, and more particularly those which belong to the MPRA, have increased in number. However, in comparison with the massive wave of attacks at the end of 2008, we have witnessed a certain lull, probably a result of the massive protest campaign (including from abroad) but also due to a change of

tactics on the part of the employers and the presidential administration. Certain media and some experts have linked these recent ups and downs to bureaucratic operations at the top and to attempts at neutralising the combative trade unions and getting them under control. They point out that between September and the end of December 2009, there have been three changes in the personnel responsible for following the trade unions within the presidential administration. Obviously, the trade-union field is regarded as a sensitive question, requiring the utmost vigilance.

The government is playing a cynical game: on the one hand it tacitly encourages the employers to launch prosecutions and other discriminatory measures, on the other it signs agreements, pretty empty of content, with the trade unions that are traditionally loyal to the government. So it is a question of developing pseudo trade unions and at the same time combating the "extremist" unions.

The best known example concerning the creation of phantom unions is the new Sotsprof union, led since the beginning 2008 by SergeĀ Vostretsov, a character who has absolutely no connection with the trade union movement but who, in all probability, has very solid relationships at the top of the government. The government is endeavouring to transform the first alternative trade union federation created in post-Soviet Russia into a union that is under control and pro-governmental, while giving it the appearance of an independent and combative organization. This is by definition an impossible task and the only result of these manoeuvres has been the de facto breaking up of Sotsprof.

However, it seems that on the whole, the preferred tactic is "divide and rule": create a yellow trade union (under orders) in order to oppose it to a too awkward alternative trade union, but also buy off certain leaders by promising them that they will have the ear of the government; or provoke a split, setting unions against each other or sowing discord between consumers

and the trade unions. Thus, last winter the so-called subversive activity of motorists in Vladivostok was presented as being directed against the workers of the Russian car factories.

Faced with all sorts of manoeuvres of this sort the reaction of the trade unions is above all to defend their independence and their cohesion. Admittedly, certain leaders have let themselves be corrupted, others (very few) have taken fright, but the majority have chosen to unite their efforts and to develop solidarity.

Thus, the trade union of the Ford factory (Saint Petersburg region) launched a solidarity campaign with the slogan: "the workers of Saint Petersburg are not the enemies of the workers of the Far East", to which the Society of Active Citizens of Russia (a network-type movement formed at the end of 2008 to protest against the increase in customs duties on imported cars) replied: "the workers of the Far East are not the enemies of the workers of Petersburg". As for the independent trade unions, they have launched a unitary process, with the preparation of a process of fusion between the All-Russian Confederation of Labour (VKT) and the Confederation of Labour of Russia (KTR).

Recently, trade unions of various sectors, regions or federations have signed mutual assistance agreements. This was the case with the agreement between the APK union (which belongs to the FNPR), of the Yaroslav subsidiary of the Baltika firm and the MPRA (which is part of the VKT) of the Ford Motor Company. Another example was the agreement between the union of the Packaging firm and the union of Leroy Merlin ("commerce" sector of the FNPR).

As can be seen, we are witnessing contradictory dynamics within the trade union movement: on the one hand we see dispersion, on the other consolidation.

As for the government, on the one hand it helps the employers to neutralize the unions, on the other it favours reducing the labour force, but is careful not touch the bonuses,

profits and other dividends of the shareholders and directors. So money from the federal budget is made available to support the big companies. On the other hand, it makes big cuts in welfare spending and on the indexation of wages to the cost of living. In 2010, neither the salaries of civil servants, nor soldiers' pay, nor the minimum wage, nor even unemployment benefit will be indexed to the rise in prices.

By this policy the government is sending a clear message to the employers: make savings at the expense of the workers. And to help them to do that they plan not to respect the labour laws: last April, a document was signed by the government, the employers and the FNPR, affirming the possibility "of a temporary suspension of certain articles of collective bargaining agreements".

It seems likely that if the government continues to make the workers bear the full weight of the crisis, for the sole benefit of big business, it will end up sooner or later by encountering a strong reaction.

Spontaneous resistance

During the year 2009, the blocking of roads and assemblies held outside of the workplaces were the principal forms of resistance.

In the beginning, the workers, faced with the deterioration of their situation, began by addressing themselves to the management of their company, by engaging in negotiations via the trade unions and by resorting to the other forms of action envisaged by the labour laws. But since these methods had no effect, they went beyond the limits of the company to address themselves to public opinion and the authorities. By doing that, they were no longer acting within the framework of the labour laws, which, moreover, clearly reveals the limits of these laws. And the actions which were carried out were those of people who despaired of being to obtain payment of their wages in any other way and who were

very worried by the prospects for their company.

For the past year, we can count no less than 88 street actions by workers, primarily mass meetings, often in front of the offices of public authorities. In May-June we witnessed an explosion of blocking of roads (18 cases) following the events in Pikaliovo [18].

In general, at least whenever the union takes part in them, street actions are used as an additional means of pressure and are associated with other initiatives. Their objective is to address public opinion and government authorities, in order to break out of the head-to-head discussion with the employer. The majority have taken place in mono-industrial towns and other working-class areas. Very often they have involved a large number of people, because the destiny of the whole town or neighbourhood depends on the rescue of the only factory which is established there.

In general, local authorities make at least a pretence of taking measures. But experience shows that it needs the intervention of the federal government for the the employers and the local authorities to really move. That is why the blocking of major roads (or the threat of such blockades), accompanied by other actions, has become the most effective instrument. It was the government itself which said after Pikaliovo: "If you want to have your wages paid, then block the roads, otherwise the government will pay no attention to you! ". The dressing-down that President Dimitri Medvedev gave his representatives and the governors, threatening to relieve them of their posts if events comparable to those of Pikaliovo happened on their territory, took effect: sometimes the mere threat of blocking a road was enough to make the local authorities agree to take responsibility for the debts of private employers.

Does the state have sufficient means to extinguish these fires and compensate for the actions of thieving and irresponsible employers? Obviously not. The government sounded the alarm at the end of the

year, by putting before the Duma a bill envisaging very severe sanctions against those who were guilty of "illegal interference in the operation of transport" (including blocking major roads). The message was clear: no, there is no money, no, there is no possibility of obtaining justice within the limits of the workplace, but don't risk taking to the streets!

Here are some significant cases of street actions:

* The town of Pikaliovo (in the Saint Petersburg region) has been the symbol of this new wave of protests. On June 2, 2009, the inhabitants of the city blocked traffic on the trunk road from Saint Petersburg to Vologda. Approximately 300 people, workers from the factories in the city and members of their families, took part in this spontaneous action. They demanded in a very determined way the payment of the wages that were due to them and the restarting of production. As is known, Putin reacted at once and in a decisive fashion: in front of the cameras he forced Deripaska, the owner of Baseltsement-Pikaliovo, to sign a document on restarting production in his factory, which had shut down. In a certain fashion, the problem was settled. Let us remember that on May 20, 2009, the inhabitants, plunged in despair, had tried to "take by storm" the town hall where a meeting devoted to the problems of the city was taking place. Taking part in this meeting were local civil servants, representatives of the procurator's office, the supplier of gas to the city and the owners of local companies.

* The Altaï region: the workers of the ATE-Spare Parts company (and of other firms resulting from the break-up of the former tractor factory, a giant of the Soviet period) started to brandish the threat of a new Pikaliovo. In open letters they announced their intention of organizing blockades of the main road and the railway. From June 18 they organized an unauthorized picket opposite the offices of the administration of the Altaï region. This action had been triggered by the announcement of the arrival in Barnaul of Vladimir Putin. Following the intervention of the police the action was stopped, but the

authorities did not dare to repress the participants: not only did they take responsibility for part of the wages that were owed, they also tried to fill for a time the company's order book. In July, the workers of the Altrak factory, the members of their families and the inhabitants of the town of Roubtsov, in solidarity with them, carried out a series of street actions, including a fresh attempt to block the main road, but they were driven back by the special forces (OMON). From September, the local branch of the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia mobilized and brought logistical support for the organization of expeditions and protest actions. However, some observers consider that this support was especially aimed at preventing a social explosion and new road blockades. The last action by the workers of Altrak took place on December 1, 2009 in Novosibirsk, in the offices of RATM which owns the factory (more than 1100 workers took part in this gathering). As the town of Roubtsov (150,000 inhabitants) is entirely dependent on Altrak and its subcontractors, the two principal demands of the workers were the restarting of production and the payment of arrears of wages.

* Kirov region: the mono-industrial cities of the Kirov region also witnessed mobilizations of workers to save their factory and their city. They were supported by the local section of the RKR [19] in the person of assembly member V. Touroulo.

- The workers of the Molot armaments factory in the town of Vjatskie Poljany took to the streets on several occasions. On June 26, 2009 a meeting took place in front of the offices of the management of the factory where the shareholders were meeting. This was not the first mobilization of the workers, who had not received their wages for several months. The same day the factory received a state grant and the workers got three months of arrears of wages. On October 14, 2009 there took place a new action, with a warning strike which was transformed into a spontaneous meeting to demand full payment of wage arrears.

- The inhabitants of Kirovo Tshchepetsk mobilized to save their town from an ecological catastrophe. The meeting

which took place on September 8 in front of the Velkont factory led to the establishment of a Committee for the Safeguarding of the Town, with the task of controlling companies and the local government on the ecological level.

- At Strijki the workmen fought to keep the Silikat factory, including by transforming it into a factory under workers' control (which from the juridical point of view is very complicated). During the summer there took place a series of actions demanding payment of wages, which had not been paid since the end of 2008, but also guarantees for their jobs and the saving of the factory from bankruptcy. In July a committee for the safeguarding of the town was set up, as well as a Zashchita trade union. On December 14, the workers went to Kirov where they held a meeting in front of the offices of the regional administration, demanding that factory be kept open and asserting the right of the workers' collective to buy the factory with state aid in order to transform it into a self-managed factory.

* Ivanovo region: The workers of several factories were mobilised, again because of non-payment of wages.

- On March 5 the inhabitants of the estate where the workers of the Petrovski factory live organized a meeting in front of the management building to demand payment of wages and to ask for the projected liquidation of the company to be stopped. On June 30 the workers planned a "workers' march on Moscow", but finally decided to defer this action, taking into account some progress concerning the payment of wages and the rescue of the factory, following pressure on the management by the local authorities. At the announcement of the march, the governor of the region of Ivanovo invited the leader of the committee of initiative for negotiations, promising the resumption of production and the full payment of the arrears of wages owed, in exchange for the cancellation of the march.

- On June 27 the workmen of the Menanzhevo combine organized a

march (unauthorized) in front of the headquarters of the local government.

* The Urals: The situation in the Urals is very tense.

- On June 23 the workers of the porcelain factory of Bogdanovchisk (Sverdlovsk region) tried to block the main road to save their company. 150 people took part in this spontaneous action to demand the re-establishment of gas deliveries, which had been suspended that very morning because of the company's debts. The regional authorities reacted at once and following their intervention gas deliveries were restored a few hours before the stopping of the furnaces would have caused irreparable damage.

- On July 22, the workers of the Kuzbasselement company in the town of Leninsk Kuznetsk organized a picket for four hours and blocked Lenin Avenue in the downtown area. Approximately 300 workers (some with their children), driven to despair, demanded payment of their wages, which they had not received for 10 months. Traffic was practically paralysed, which forced the city administration to react. The vice-governor came to meet the demonstrators with promises. But the participants in the meeting refused to move as long as they did not receive their money. And things only calmed down when money for the wages (30 million roubles taken from the regional budget) was paid into the workers' accounts.

- In the bauxite mines of the oligarch Deripaska, a fresh dispute was brewing [20]. The members of the Institute of Collective Action (IKD) became convinced of that after visiting Severuralsk in September. From June 5, 100 miners from the Severuralsk mine (which belongs to the RusAl holding) organized a picket in front of the offices of the management, banging their helmets on the ground for an hour: they were protesting against the removal of food rations, and over wages and the insecurity in the mine which had already caused several accidents.

In September, in various mines, on the initiative of the NPG union [21], a

meeting had been planned to discuss demands and define a plan of action. But the guards and agents of the management blocked the meeting, threatening with redundancy all those who took part in it. As Valeri Zolotarev, president of the NPG in the Severuralsk mine, pointed out, "today, looking back at everything that happened on the eve of the strike in March 2008, you have to say that they have understood nothing". Let us remember that at that time 123 miners of the KrasnaĀ'a Chapochka mine belonging to the n° 3 team had spontaneously decided to stay underground at the end of their shift.

* In Kaliningrad, it was the workers of KDAvia who mobilized in the most determined way for the payment of pay arrears. In July, various categories of personnel launched strikes of short duration, after which the procurer's office opened several inquiries. Then there were meetings. With the support of the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia and other social and political organizations, a meeting took place in the downtown area attended by 500 of the 2000 workers of the company. In November, after several months of mobilization, the workers obtained partial compensation for unpaid wages and material help from the budget of the region.

* Yaroslav region: from January to April there took place a series of meeting of the workers of the motor factory and the inhabitants of Tutaev. Following that, the mayor of Tutaev resigned. In Kurgan, on the initiative of the Zashchita trade union, the workers of several companies, first of all from Area Avtotrans Kourgan and from PromstroĀ-, carried out during the summer and autumn a whole series of actions in connection with wages that were owed: pickets, hunger strikes, demonstrations in the offices of the administration.

* Vladivostok region: the Far East was not immune from disputes, they took place in all sectors.

- On May 13 in Vladivostok, a meeting of the workers of the naval ship repair yards was held, on the initiative of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Vladivostok region. 400 people took

part in it: the speakers denounced the generalized non-observance of the labour laws, the non-payment of wages, and the unjustified increase in administrative staff.

- The inhabitants of Svetlogorie continued the struggle. On April 4 the majority of them (approximately 1000 people) took part in a meeting to demand the payment of back wages (not paid for several months) at the Russki Volfram combine, and to organize free meals for the children. At the time the whole neighbourhood was starving. From August the company started production again and at the end of the year, Svetlogorie was incorporated into the government's programme for the development of mono-industrial towns.

- The workers of the mining and ore reprocessing companies of the Vladivostok region also mobilized. On March 11 more than a thousand of them demonstrated in the streets of Dalnegorsk to demand a reduction of the charges for communal services and to ask that wages be regularly paid. It was the trade union of the Bor combine which took the initiative, supported by the unions of the metal and chemical industries of the region. Representatives of the unions of the health, education and culture sectors and of the wood industry were present to express their solidarity.

* The Far North (beyond the polar circle) was also the scene of mobilizations.

- On May 24 more than a thousand people took part in a meeting in Vorkuta, on the main square of the city. The miners and the inhabitants of the city demanded that the management of Vorkutaugol give up the planned reduction in the workforce, and that the city authorities block the increase in the charges for communal services. The demonstrators also demanded that the widows of miners who had died in the mines should be relocated to another region (a hundred families put in requests).

- On April 10 in Murmansk, on the initiative of the regional section of the Trade Union of the Fleet of the North, a meeting was held in which several

hundred workers, coming from eight companies working for the army, took part. The participants demanded that the Ministry of Defence pay them the arrears of wages that were due. This action paid off and part of the money was paid.

- Another action had an impact comparable to the events in Pikaliovo, by its size and owing to the fact that it took place on the initiative of people who are generally passive: doctors and hospital staff demonstrated in defence of the health system. On May 19 in Arkhangelsk 450 people took part in a meeting: doctors from Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk, Novodvinsk, as well as specialists from the region. They demanded that hospitals be equipped with the kind of high-quality equipment that is essential to ensure quality care, demanded better working conditions and a wage increase, and also that measures be taken to deal with the shortage of staff in the private clinics of the region. On June 29 a picket was organized in the hospital grounds to support the doctors who were being threatened with disciplinary measures. It got to the point where the doctors threatened to go on strike!

* Togliatti: we cannot fail to mention the mass meetings at the Avtovaz factory in Togliatti. The actions undertaken to save this giant of the car industry and in defence of jobs did not go unnoticed by the authorities at both regional and federal level: the result was a flood of (often empty) promises, threats, "soft" restructuring plans and all sorts of other manoeuvres. In spite of strong pressure and thanks to the tenacity of the independent trade union Yedinstvo, two relatively big meetings (more than 2,000 people) took place on August 6 and October 17 in the Square of the Palace of Culture and the engineering section of the factory. What is at stake in Togliatti now is the ability of the trade union movement and, more broadly, of the social movement, to build a broad front capable of influencing government policies towards the factory-based cities. Piotr Zolotarev, president of Yedinstvo, formulated it clearly: "We will not remain passive in the face of the intention to try out in Togliatti a new plan for the factory-based cities.

We want to save our city, our industry. We are looking for the means that will enable us to influence our future, so that the interests of the workers and the inhabitants are taken into account".

To sum up, we can say that where collective actions were carried out in a determined fashion and were accompanied by threats of blocking roads, as in the case of the cities built around one only factory, the public authorities at regional and federal level had to intervene and take responsibility, at least partly, for the debts of the owners who had made their companies bankrupt.

The maintenance of the potential for strike action

As in 2008, what predominates are "crisis strikes" where work stoppages are provoked by the non-payment of wages (one of the rare forms of strike that is envisaged by the Labour Code). But there were also offensive strikes, in the real sense of the term: a collective stoppage of work to defend a series of demands, faced with an employer who doesn't want to listen. During the year 2009, there were seventy strikes, two thirds of them falling under the category of "crisis strikes".

1. Crisis strikes. Up until May 2009, the workers, on the initiative of their trade union, used their individual right to refuse to work, a legal form of strike. Actions then take the form of a sum of individual refusals, organized collectively, faced with the non-payment of wages (article 142 of the Labour Code). But this form of action loses its effectiveness in periods when workers fear above all the stopping of production and the loss of their employment. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases, this form of strike produced results, with payment of wages, at least in part. Some examples:

- In September the workers of the eleventh sector of local government services of the town of Orel went on strike. The sit-down strikes of janitors,

technicians of the sanitation department and the water department lasted a week. The reason was the non-payment of wages since July.

- At the Chikh mine in the Rostov region, the miners went on strike several times, including staying down the mine. At the beginning of October, several of them went on strike in this way to demand the payment of arrears of wages. More than a hundred colleagues supported them on the surface. As a result the manager was sacked and the owner of the mine promised to pay the wages that were due for August. Previously, on June 24, 34 miners had gone on strike and had refused to come up from the mine. And this episode had already been preceded by other strikes "at the bottom", each time with some results, even though the delays in paying wages always started again very quickly.

- On September 14 in the "Third International" shipyard in Astrakhan, the workers stopped work to demand payment of wages. Fifty people took part in the action. After negotiations in the presence of Oleg Shein, member of the Duma, management promised the very same day to pay part of the arrears of wages due.

- Kalibrov Factory in Moscow. One day of strike action (June 22) was enough to make the management give in on wage arrears. There was another strike on August 3, non-payment of wages having started again.

- Naval repair factory of Chajminsk (Vladivostok region): more than 50 workers stopped work from July 20 to August 3 because of five months' arrears of wages. As of July 24 part of the arrears was paid, and on August 3 the workers resumed work, the wages for June having been paid. Only five workers decided to continue the strike until the arrears had been paid in full.

- Yenisseï Mine: after a 24-hour strike underground (27-28 May) the miners obtained satisfaction.

- The welders of workshop 45 of TagAz stopped work on May 23, but in the face of threats from the management, they stopped their movement.

Similar strikes also took place in the Krasnodar building combine (three months' unpaid wages), in the Linetsk building combine (Novosibirsk region, four months' unpaid wages), in the mine of the Abakan mining company (republic of Khakassia, three months' unpaid wages), in the engineering factory of Katav Ivanovo (Chelyabinsk region, five months' delay in paying wages), in car repair factory n° 96 of the Fleet of the North in Murmachi (Murmansk region, five months delay), in workshop 26 of the Taganrog car factory (4 months' unpaid wages), in Uralsprom (Sverdlovsk region, 3 months' wages unpaid). These strikes often took place with the assistance of the trade unions; some were organized by a specific committee of initiative.

Offensive

In spite of the crisis and a certain overall retreat by the trade unions, we have witnessed over the past year offensive strikes, where workers not only mobilized against a deterioration of their situation, but also to demand an improvement in it. These actions can be spontaneous or take the form of a collective stoppage of work organized by the trade union in the framework of a work-related dispute or concerning working conditions. There have also been cases where, with the support of the union, the method of struggle chosen was a slowing of the rhythm of work and strict respect of the regulations ("work to rule"). The most frequent tactic is the threat to go on strike, when the degree of mobilization makes it credible.

Some examples of spontaneous strikes:

- On May 15 in the Lipetsk-kompleks company, the workers of the sausage workshop stopped work because of bad working conditions, low wages and the police system of control. The management having threatened to take the strikers to court, they went back to work.

- In the Korkin mine (Chelyabinsk region) on July 21, the miners, dissatisfied with starvation wages, began a strike. The three shifts

refused to work and sought a meeting with the management to demand a pay rise (of approximately 6,000 roubles - 167 euros).

In general, spontaneous strikes end quickly, because it is easy for the management to intimidate the workers by threatening them with court action for an illegal strike.

With the help of their union and basing themselves on the law, the workers have found other legal forms of struggle. For example, in the Volkswagen factory in Kaluga the workers of the assembly line, referring to article 379 of the Labour Code, refused to work for several days (starting on June 15), because the unbearable heat in the workshop constituted "a threat to life and health".

On September 7 at the GMAuto factory in Saint Petersburg, the assembly line stopped work in the welding shop because of non-observance of occupational safety after a cooling conduit broke down three times, in close proximity to a group of workers.

The "work to rule" which had the biggest repercussion took place precisely in this GMAuto factory from November 11-20. On November 11, on the initiative of the MPRA union, a group of workers from the assembly workshop slowed down to the maximum the speed of work, giving the starting signal for this "work to rule". The union's demands were for the immediate convocation of a conference of the factory collective, the abolition of annual bonuses and a guaranteed 8 per cent wage increase, not counting any further adjustment because of inflation, strict rules concerning holidays and, especially, the abandonment of the annual calculation of working hours and the return to the 40-hour week. It should be stressed that not only union members, but also rank-and-file workers took part in the movement. For a few hours the paint shop stopped the assembly line, but following "convincing explanations" by the management, it started working normally again. However, the planned level of car production was not reached. Officially the management

did not recognize that there had been a strike, but on November 20 E. Ivanov, president of the MPRA union, was sacked on the pretext of "unjustified absence".

The actions organized by the unions are more effective when they consist of brandishing the threat of a strike when there is an industrial dispute. That is what occurred successfully on May 19 when, following a threat of strike action, air-traffic controllers obtained from the federal air transport authority the prolongation of the existing collective agreement. It is true that the union paid dearly for this success, its office being taken away from it.

Although it is true that last year there were no offensive strikes in the real sense of the term, the threat of strike action, made credible by the level of mobilization, was used successfully by some active unions during industrial disputes:

- At the Danone Industry factory (Moscow region), on the initiative of the Trade Union Committee (which belongs to Sotsprof), on December 2 an industrial dispute broke out. The management of the factory received notice that there would be a strike from December 15 if a commission of conciliation was not formed by then and if the demands put forward by the union were not satisfied. As of December 11 the management agreed to negotiate. The demands put forward by the union were formulated with precision and solidly defended on the legal level. They related to the regulation of working hours, the definition of work stations, work norms and instructions, temporary work and discriminatory measures against union activists.

- The same approach was used by the Sotsprof engineering union in the Karelski-Okatych factory, but in this company the union activists encountered fierce resistance from the management, which did not hesitate to use the security forces to prevent a union meeting on October 20. However, the activity and the determination that the union demonstrated won many workers to the union.

- A final example: the launching of the campaign against temporary work (recruitment by agencies specialised in outsourcing). Following actions carried out by workers at the Babayevski confectionery factory (Moscow), recruited by the Petrolina agency and not paid, several unions, including the International Union of Food Workers (IUF) organized in November and December pickets in various cities in the country with the same demands: stop the recourse to outsourcing and other forms of nonstandard employment. In this case the trade unions acted in a preventive way to oppose the legalization of forms of employment which deprive workers of the guarantees that still exist.

Hunger strikes

Unfortunately, since spring 2009, there has been an increase in the number of cases of hunger strikes (at least twenty cases have been listed), although this method is not very effective in putting pressure on the employer and is especially harmful and dangerous for the health of those involved. In general, workers have recourse to hunger strikes when only a small part of the collective is ready to mobilize in an active way (i.e. they are confronted with an absence of solidarity) or when the company goes bankrupt. Generally, after a certain time, the hunger strikers stop their action following promises to pay wage arrears, but these promises remain a dead letter if the hunger strike is not followed by more active mass actions.

We can cite many examples of hunger strikes which failed and which contributed to demoralizing the workers:

- On June 1, the flight personnel of the KraAir aviation company, which demanded the total payment of wage arrears (several months of unpaid wages) ended a 19-day hunger strike. Although they did not obtain satisfaction they stopped their movement because of an abrupt worsening of their health.

- On June 29, the railway workers of Severomuĭsk stopped their hunger strike after seven days, because there

had been progress concerning the question of the reduction of the workforce and cuts in pay;

- In Akhtubinsk, the municipal employees of the CentrJilKomKhoz enterprise undertook a hunger strike "in shifts", the second since the beginning of the year. By taking this action, the workers, on the initiative of their Zashchita trade union, sought to oppose the "organized" bankruptcy of the only service enterprise in the city. But this action did not lead to any reaction on behalf of the local authorities;

- In January 2009, because of non-payment of wages, the workers of the n° 111 military factory in Bryansk conducted a hunger strike. Those who took part in this action had to be hospitalized after ten days. The hunger strike was stopped, although the wages were not paid. The 421 workers of the factory had not received their wages for seven months.

- In February and again in March of the workers of the Zlatustovo iron-foundry (Chelyabinsk region) organized an action to protest against cuts in wages. The first hunger strike (on February 16) had forced the management of the firm to react and retreat, at least verbally. Since the problem remained, the action was started again on March 10. This time, the management of the firm accused the hunger strikers of "political extremism".

On some rare occasions, this form of action has made it possible to obtain payment of wages. Especially when the workers combined the hunger strike with other forms of action, or when the hunger strike had an important echo in public opinion and in the media. That was the case with the Chikh mine (Rostov region) where on June 23 thirty miners undertook a hunger strike down the mine: on June 25 the strikers came back to the surface, because their action had caused real panic among the bureaucrats of the region. The vice-governor and the Minister of Energy came in person to the mine. It will be recalled that previously, in March, the miners had gone on strike, remaining underground in the mine.

At the Baĭkal cellulose factory, following a massive hunger strike (in which sixty people took part, installed in a tent village set up in front of the offices of the administration of Baĭkalsk) combined with repeated pickets and meetings, payment of wages began on June 8.

In Yamala, on August 10, after two weeks of hunger strike, the workers of the geological exploration firm Severnaĭa Ekspedicija obtained payment of wage arrears. Previously, from June 25 to July 3, a first hunger strike had taken place and had stopped following promises by management.

A few remarks to draw the lessons

The dynamic that the workers and the trade union movement had experienced has slowed down. The facts mentioned above reveal a rash of spontaneous actions at the local level, such as street actions with the threat of blocking roads, first of all in the mono-industrial cities. Thanks to the "Pikaliovo" effect, these actions have become the most effective means to involve the authorities in the search for a solution. When these actions take place, questions are raised which are not limited to arrears of wages: in practically all cases, what is involved is saving the enterprise. For this reason, workers more and more often address themselves to the state to demand the nationalization of the company, or in any case to ask it to "put some order" in the situation and to prosecute the "deficient" employer. From this point of view, we can speak of a certain politicization of social conflicts, but with limits: the term "nationalization" generally indicates state aid of one form or another, and not a real change in economic policy.

Overall, the disputes for the year 2009 were defensive, and offensive actions by workers, which we saw in 2007-2008, are rare, although this potential always exists with collective disputes started on the initiative of the trade union and with threats of strike action.

In the conditions of the present crisis,

disputes do not remain confined within the limits of the workplace. The number of spontaneous actions carried out in the street has seen a big increase, indicating that the disputes cannot find a solution within the workplace, especially taking into account the present labour laws. Moreover, the workers have broadened the arsenal of forms of action, trying out any form that is likely to have a certain effectiveness. The majority of these actions take forms not envisaged by the legislation on industrial disputes. And that is not because people have tried not to respect the law - quite the contrary, the legal skills of workers and of the unions are constantly increasing, as is their ability to use the law to their advantage - but because the existing legislation does not make possible an effective solution to industrial disputes.

Lastly, we should stress another important characteristic of the current wave of protests: the disputes break out in a spontaneous and disordered fashion and are not part of an ongoing mass movement, which alone would be capable of influencing the way out of the crisis: at the expense of the workers or of the employers? For the moment, the initiatives of the government and the big capitalists go in the direction of finding a way out of the crisis at the expense of the workers (lowering of wages, reduction of the workforce, non-payment of wages) and by no means in the direction of a reduction of the profits, dividends and bonuses accumulated during the previous period. Worse still: the state takes responsibility for the debts of the employers, who refuse to take responsibility for them before the workers: it is the taxpayers, and therefore once again the workers, who pay for the debts of Deripaska and other oligarchs.

The absence of a general movement is due to the fact that disputes are very limited in space, with the absence of a structure capable of coordinating them and of horizontal links between the collectives involved in struggles. The only thing which exists is a common media space, with "Two, three, many Pikaliovos".

For a substantial mass movement to

develop what is required is an organisational structure, bodies that organize coordination and solidarity between the trade unions, elements that endeavour to counter the government and the employers, with their policy of repression and division of the trade union movement.

Lastly, the scattered nature of disputes is also explained by the fact that the sharpest disputes take place away from the alternative trade unions and their networks. These unions have serious problems in the workplaces: they suffer the consequences of the crisis (in particular in the car industry) and are subject to very strong pressure by the authorities and the employers. That leads them to concentrate on the organization of struggles where they are really implanted and to reinforce their organisational structures. As for the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), its leadership is not in the least interested in taking part in a coordinating body and in the consolidation of a general movement for the defence of workers' rights.

All that explains why because of the crisis and the reactions of the various actors in the face of this crisis, the process of consolidation of the trade union and workers' movement has undergone a definite slowing down.

Nevertheless, the emergence of new leaders in the wave of spontaneous actions and the activation of certain local organizations of the FNPR constitute a positive tendency. Even though, in the majority of cases, the leaders of the movements complain about the very weak support from the leadership of the FNPR, at federal level but also in the various industrial sectors. The positive counterpart to this is that certain trade unions affiliated to the FNPR are starting to conduct battles within their industrial federations and to assert their independence.

Once again, we have to stress the contradictory character of current dynamics: on one side the scattered nature of disputes, on the other, consolidation.

Perspectives for going beyond scattered local actions

In spite of all the difficulties, due to the crisis but also to the pressures exerted on the organized wing of the workers' movement, the tendency towards consolidation continues, in spite of a certain slowing down. The combative trade unions are increasingly cooperating with each other, but also with other social movements and with political militants.

It is clear that to get an improvement of the situation concerning the rights of workers during this crisis period, it is essential to develop a mass campaign with the participation of all the components of the social movement: only such a campaign can force the government to abandon its current policy of seeking a way out of crisis that is synonymous with the deterioration of the situation of workers and violations of their rights.

We have witnessed some steps, still isolated, in this direction. The interregional Car Workers' Union (MPRA) took the initiative of a mass campaign around the slogan "The workers should not pay for the crisis". And on February 14, 2009 a first interregional action was conducted on this theme.

On April 19, during the Social Forum of the Urals, militants - mostly belonging to the Union of Coordinating Committees, SKS [22] and to certain alternative trade unions - agreed to conduct together a campaign for the defence of workers' rights and defined together a list of proposals so for a way out of crisis that is not "on the backs of the people". Among the priority demands are: to provide the trade unions with information on the real economic and financial situation of companies and to guarantee them the right of control over the measures adopted to get out of the crisis. But the campaign did not develop very effectively, at least during the unitary days (10-17

October): not all regions were mobilized, and nowhere did the trade unions participate.

The activists of the social movement are willing to take action along with the trade unions, above all within the SKS: in many cities, they are already conducting work within the workers' collectives, in particular through workers who live in hostels. That is the conclusion reached by the participants in a seminar organized on 18-19 November 19 in Togliatti by the Yedinstvo union of Avtovaz, with the support of the All-Russian Confederation of Labour (VKT) and the Institute of Globalisation and Social Movements (IGSO). The topic of the seminar was: "What trade-union strategy in the conditions of the crisis?".

Obviously, such co-operation will be effective and advantageous for all the participants if it is established on a city level around the questions considered by all to be socially most acute and important. If the first experience is a success, then it is perfectly possible that a form of coordination will be set up, something which is so cruelly lacking in the country, whereas it is crucial in order

to overcome both the scattered nature and the localism of the movement for the defence of workers' rights. At the present time these structures of coordination are at best in an embryonic state.

The trade unions and the social movements have a decisive role to play to bring a positive response to the question of whether the spontaneous movement of protest can be incorporated into an organized movement able to obtain from the government concrete measures for the defence of the rights of the workers.

The government itself should be interested in a strengthening of the trade union movement, because otherwise it will remain alone in the face of an uncontrolled upsurge which could have regrettable consequences for the entire country. But what we are seeing is quite the opposite, with the reinforcement of pressure on the trade unions. The employers get rid of the most active militants by sacking them, by physical assaults or by imprisonment for all sorts of fabricated offences. And we cannot but note that at every level the "masters of the country" help them: whether it is the United Russia party (with its refusal to amend the labour

laws in a sense that would make life less hard for the alternative trade unions) or a part of the presidential and governmental apparatus which by its provocations and its repressive measures does nothing but reinforce the tension in the country.

The workers of today are different from those of the 1990s. They will not accept indefinitely being made fools of. They are demonstrating increasing capacities for self-organization and self-defence. In Russia there exists a new generation of workers who are very conscious of their dignity and who have different demands. They are no longer ready to tighten their belts for nothing, and their ideal is not to join the ranks of those who swear only by their car or their house.

Once again, the choice is simple: either the development of an organized workers' movement, or "the bottomless misery of despair".

Moscow, December 30, 2009. This article was initially published in French by the virtual political review A l'encontre: <http://www.alencontre.org>. The original article was published in Russian on the site of the IKD:

Cochabamba points the way

12 May 2010, by **Iain Bruce**

He told the opening ceremony that the world faced a stark choice, between capitalism and survival. Another participant, a leader of Enlace, the Fourth Internationalist current inside the Brazilian PSOL (Party of Socialism and Freedom), described the event as by far the most developed expression in the world today of that badly-needed meeting "between ecological questions and socialist imagination".

There were obvious threads connecting this gathering with the post-Seattle global justice movement and especially the World Social Forums in which figures like Klein

played a prominent part. The format was similar. More than 35,000 people from 142 countries, representing dozens of social movements, took part in 17 main panels and 18 working groups on themes from the structural causes of climate change and climate debt to agriculture and food security or the dangers of the carbon markets, as well as many more self-organised seminars and other activities.

The core content, too, that radical combination of demands for environmental and social justice, with an explicit rejection of the capitalist economy that denies both, was

anticipated by the Belem Declaration, drawn up by the Assembly of Social Movements alongside the last World Social Forum in the north of Brazil early in 2009.

There were also differences. This summit was strongly marked by the presence, and ideology, of indigenous movements, especially from the central Andean countries of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Yet there were also official delegations from more than 40 governments. President Morales as host, plus his Venezuelan counterpart and main guest, Hugo Chavez, played key roles, as they both had in the

different circumstances of Copenhagen. But the biggest difference with earlier World Social Forums was that this people's summit set out very deliberately to take decisions and plan actions.

The two most important of these were the proposal to hold a worldwide referendum on climate change - this would ask people to decide on the levels of emission reductions required of the developed countries and of finance they should offer to developing countries, as well as on the need to change the capitalist system; and secondly the plan to set up an International Climate and Environmental Justice Tribunal with the legal capacity to try those states, industries and people "that by commission or omission contaminate and provoke climate change".

Both of these initiatives were underpinned by the adoption of a position of principle, in favour of a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, and the proposal to set up a new world movement, "a Global People's Movement for Mother Earth...", constituting a broad and democratic space for coordination and joint worldwide actions".

Some important and complex debates are to be had here, debates that go to the heart of what an ecosocialism appropriate to the 21st century would be like. As a first stab, we would suggest there are two pitfalls to avoid. One is an uncritical and potentially paternalistic endorsement of anything that passes for indigenous or "ancestral" knowledge. To take one example, there is often a patriarchal (not to mention homophobic) bias built

into the "indigenous" concept of a natural "balance" between men and women. The other, probably greater danger, is to reject, in the name of a supposed "marxist rationality" or even universal culture, the real lessons and inspiration that this new movement can draw - is already drawing - from the experiences, demands and proposals of Latin America's indigenous movements.

The people's summit also drew up specific demands to be taken to the next governmental summit, the COP16, in Mexico in December. These include "an amendment to the Kyoto Protocol" which would not only require legally-binding commitments from developed countries to "emissions reductions of at least 50% based on 1990 levels", but would exclude "carbon markets or other offset mechanisms that mask the failure of actual reductions in greenhouse gas emissions". Evo Morales delivered these conclusions and demands to Ban Ki-Moon at the UN in the first week of May and was due to take them to Spain, which holds the presidency of the EU, later. They are demands that take into the heart of the international climate negotiations an explicit rejection of the market-based "solutions" peddled by all northern governments.

These are important advances for the international movement against climate change. But they are advances that raise delicate tactical and strategic questions, in particular over the relation between social movements and governments in this new climate campaign. On the one hand, just as Chavez and Morales

were able to take the voice of the street protests into the COP15 plenary sessions in Copenhagen, it is now clear that the demands and alternatives raised in Cochabamba would never have the same international impact without the backing of these governments. On the other hand, it is also clear that these governments in Bolivia and Venezuela, not to mention other supposedly progressive Latin American administrations, are themselves caught in a sharp contradiction. Whatever their expressions of anti-capitalist intent, in different ways and degrees, all of them remain tied to "extractivist" forms of capitalist development. That is why the Bolivian government refused to recognise the deliberations of Working Group 18 in Cochabamba, set up by one of the Bolivian indigenous movements that provides key support for the government, to examine the role of big mining and infrastructure projects in Bolivia and elsewhere. In a more acute form, this is also the contradiction that has pitted all of Ecuador's indigenous movements, including those previously closest to the government of Rafael Correa, against riot police in Quito and across the country in early May, protesting against the governments' failure to take account of indigenous concerns in its bill on water rights.

Mother Earth, in the form of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, ensured that few European, African or Asian campaigners reached Cochabamba. But these are challenges for the whole international movement, challenges that show just how broad and potent the campaign against climate change has already become.

No to cuts, yes to proportional representation

10 May 2010, by **Socialist Resistance**

The outcome of the general election was the one long predicted, with no party winning a majority. Labour lost and the Tories failed to win. The Lib

Dems lost the surge they had expected and the result was the first hung Parliament for over 30 years. The Lib Dems got 25% of the votes and under

10% of the seats.

None of them received the mandate they had wanted in order to

implement their cuts agendas in the face of an escalating economic crisis. Whatever government emerges, therefore, the workers movement has to gear itself up for a fight on cuts.

The election arithmetic has made the Lib Dems the power broker in any post-election coalition arrangements; however, giving them the best opportunity for several generations to change the scandalous voting system with which Britain is saddled. If they blow this opportunity they will face another very long period of time rendered irrelevant by a corrupt and bizarre electoral system which awards power to political parties with scant regard to the votes they receive.

Clegg has gone to the Tories first, presumably on the basis of comments extracted from him during the campaign, to discuss a possible Tory/Lib Dem coalition on the basis of electoral reform. It is a dangerous game. Cameron responded with a typically disingenuous offer and will follow it up with cabinet positions and a taste of power for the Lib Dems to help make his offer more palatable.

Moreover, these negotiations are taking place during a crisis of the EU and growing financial instability which were sparked by the crisis and conflict taking place in Greece and which threatens to spread across southern Europe and beyond. There is a real danger that this will be used to bounce the Lib Dems into supporting the Tory cuts agenda.

This is an extremely dangerous game that the Lib Dems are playing. The Tories will stop at nothing to get their hands on the levers of power and then cling onto it. They will hope for a honeymoon period on the basis of the disingenuous manipulation of policy whilst looking for a chance for an early general election.

There is now a huge campaign by the Tory media to push the Lib Dems into the clutches of the Tories. The chance of the Tories making a genuine offer on electoral reform, however, is remote, and if they do they will ensure that it is deal they can break. The Tories will stop at nothing to preserve the status quo. They occupied government throughout more of the

20th century than any other party on the basis of first-passed-the-post, and their aim is to repeat the performance in the 21st century.

Meanwhile the priority of the Tories is to get their cuts budget through in the fastest possible time and are no doubt putting heavy pressure on the Lib Dems over this. But any deal the Lib Dems might make in order to allow them to get this through either as part of a coalition arrangement or as a deal to keep a minority Tory administration in office would not only be disastrous for the working class but ultimately disastrous for the Liberal Dems themselves – given their stance in the election campaign.

The alternative for the Lib Dems is to seek a deal with New Labour and the nationalist parties, a combination of which could also command a Commons majority. This would be no less democratic than a Tory/Lib Dem arrangement since between them Labour and the Lib Dems won 14 million votes against the Tories 10 million.

True, Tony Blair stitched the Lib Dems up of course, over PR after 1997. He made an agreement with them and then kicked it into the long grass when he didn't need them any more. Brown, however, is in a very different position. A deal with the Lib Dems is the best option open for new Labour for the foreseeable future and it would be worth a genuine offer of proportional representation, which appears to be what he has offered. It would also make a future majority Tory government very unlikely since they would have to win more than 50% of the vote.

Brown has already made the offer of early legislation and an early referendum on electoral reform, though there may well be a demand for him to resign and open the door to a new Labour leader before a deal can be struck

This makes more political sense from a Lib Dem point of view than deal with the Tories – which would be bitterly controversial within their own party. They are closer to new Labour than they are to the Tories and if they go in with the Tories they would soon be faced with supporting a George

Osborne emergency budget costing millions of jobs.

We do not call for a Lib-Lab-led coalition: but we are not neutral on whether the Lib Dems line up with the Tories or against them. It is clear that a Lib-Lab coalition may be less of an immediate and long-term threat than allowing the Tories to get their hands on power – through a coalition or as a minority government.

But we know that neither of these leading parties represents the interests of the working class. This would not in any way be “our” government, but a second choice option for a ruling class that could not overcome suspicion of Cameron to deliver a majority for the Tories. It is clear that even if a Lib-Lab coalition is lashed together, it will still come under massive pressure from the international markets and the Tory media to implement the Tory cuts agenda.

This makes it even more important to campaign for the trade unions, most of which have so far remained largely passive in the face of cutbacks, to link up and mobilise alongside pensioners and the public to fight any cuts or privatisation in welfare or public services. The unions and labour movement must demand that gaps in the budget created by the banking crisis are tackled through the cancellation of wasteful spending such as Trident, the Afghanistan and other wars, ID cards, etc, along with energetic collection of taxes from big business, the banks and the rich: corporation tax should be raised back to at least the levels levied under Thatcher.

We must not leave the issue of PR to the Lib Dems or Labour, but seek to build a mass campaign in the trade unions and labour movement to press for the rapid implementation of progressive electoral reform based on PR. And the labour movement must also rally against the dangerous slide towards racist, anti-immigrant policies. A Lib-Lab coalition would not in itself be a progressive option: but the fight to keep it from implementing reactionary policies could be a focus for a progressive radicalisation of the trade union movement.

Years of trailing meekly behind Blair and Brown have brought us to the

very brink of a Tory government: only the movement of the working class

can save the unions from fresh, massive and damaging attacks.

A workers' election campaign against feudalism and capitalists

10 May 2010, by **Farooq Tariq**

Since 2007 the Labour Qaumi Movement, chaired by Mian Qayum, has led many successful struggles for decent wages, conditions, social security cards and an end to bonded labor in this area. A member of Federal Committee of the Labour Party Pakistan (LLP), Mian Abdul Qayum spoke of himself at the May Day rally as a worker who is poor but not weak. He remarked "We know how to deal with the gangsters. Workers are with us and our seven-year struggle, which has brought positive results. We have formed unions and will do so in the future as well." He said he is contesting election with an aim of demanding the implementation of a minimum wage law for workers. He stands for labor rights, for reversing price hikes and against load shedding of electricity and gas.

He pointed out that the parties of the rich are wondering about how a worker can raise the money for an election and mentioned some even allege intelligence agencies are funding the campaign. "I want to tell them that here are my agencies, sitting in front of me in thousands who are behind my campaign." At that point I got up and gave Rupees 500 and appealed to everyone to donate, using the slogan that "we will give note (Rupees notes) and vote"! We received a spontaneous response not witnessed for many years as workers came up with five, ten and fifty Rupee notes. We raised 13000 Rupees (US\$ 160).

Later, a worker commented to me that LPP is reviving the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) revolutionary traditions from the 1970s.

Earlier on the program I spoke about how the PPP candidate appeals to voters on the basis that if he is elected, he will definitely be a provincial minister and thus situated to solve constituents' problems. I remarked that we know from experience just how much misery these ministers have brought. We know for sure that another minister means more problems for the workers.

I also took up the case of collaboration between the PPP and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) and said that in this constituency the ruling class fights each other to win this seat but at national level they are united on a neoliberal agenda of privatization and imperialist attacks within the tribal areas. Fortunately, there is a candidate from working class, so vote for him.

I also spoke about the rising unemployment and price hikes with no wage increases. There was a very energetic response from the crowd as they chanted militant slogans again and again. I spoke of the challenges to the working class and how there is an opportunity to make a difference through voting for a worker in this election.

At the rally there was a message of support from Abid Hassan Minto, president of the Workers Party Pakistan. Comrade Arif from the WPP brought their message that at an earlier May Day rally in Faisalabad, their president announced the party's full support for Mian Qayum's campaign.

This memorable meeting was the largest election rally held to date in Faisalabad. But the question remains:

Can the LPP win the seat? Despite the massive May Day rally it is very difficult to say. The parties of the rich will use all the state and private power to win the seat. It is also a matter of prestige for both the PPP and PMLN. But the rally revealed that there is a worker's candidate in the race and he has a militant and numerous following. Industrial workers are campaigning for Mian Qayum with one car, over a dozen motorcycles, and many more are on cycles and on foot. It is clear that the LPP has developed a base. With few resources we find that after working 12 hours a day in the factories, workers nonetheless come to campaign for Mian Abdul Qayum until midnight. Workers are sacrificing because they believe they can make a difference and elect a worker's leader to the Assembly.

Mian Qayum is contesting the Punjab Assembly seat vacated by Mohammed Asif Ajmal, a member of the PMLN. With graduation [from high school or college] a condition imposed on candidates, Ajmal provided a fake degree for his candidacy in the 2008 general elections. In a tight race he managed to pull ahead of the PPP's candidate, Rana Aftab, by just 400 votes. Before losing in 2008, Aftab had been elected to the Punjab Assembly two times.

But when challenged about his degree last month in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Ajmal opted to resign. Yet once again this fraudulent person has been nominated by the PMLN, a party claiming to champion an independent judiciary and willing to launch Jihad against corruption.

Overall, there are 17 candidates in

the contest, including Rana Aftab, currently president of the PPP in Punjab. There are a total of 119,439 registered voters in the constituency. During the 2008 general election, 61 percent went to the polls to cast their votes. The winning candidate, supported at the time by General Musharraf, was Mohammed Asif Ajmal of the Pakistan Muslim League Q. He received 29413 votes. Later he shifted his affiliation to the PMLN.

There are 42 villages and 10 union councils in this PP 63 constituency of the Punjab Assembly. Around 14000 industrial workers are believed to be working in different textile and power looms factories there.

There is long history of enmity between two different tribes in this constituency, resulting in dozens of deaths. The PMLN candidate represents one tribe and the candidate of National Muslim League and former Member of Parliament represents the other. The LPP candidate, in contrast, appeals on a class basis against the feudal lords, gangsters and capitalists.

The LPP Campaign

Women workers are in the lead of this campaign to get one worker elected to a parliament dominated by feudal lords, capitalists and their representatives. A group of 10 are working round the clock to knock every door to give out a leaflet and a poster of Mian Abdul Qayum. The leaflet outlines demands for a minimum wage of 15000 Rupees, a minimum 8000 Rupees unemployment benefit for all adult unemployed, no to imperialist aggression and bombing in tribal areas of Pakistan, social security cards for every industrial worker, an end to discrimination against women workers and for a united fight of workers and peasants against the PMLN and PPP leaders.

During the first 10 days of the campaign, the LPP held 10 public meetings, 35 street corner meetings and mapped out a door-to-door campaign in all 42 villages. In contrast to the rich parties' leaders, the LPP candidate is moving around in the company of one car and scores of motorbikes and cycles. Traditionally the PPP and PMLN candidates travel

with over 70 big cars and vans. They are protected by both a large number of policemen and their own armed security guards.

Despite all this, two public meetings on 25th April in the village Daroran showed the contrast. One was organized by PMLN and the other by LPP. At the LLP meeting there were more villagers, and most were the poor of the village. In a second LLP meeting at Chaenchal Singh Wale village later that night, several hundred villagers showed up to hear Mian Abdul Qayum despite the rain.

The PPP candidate says if he loses, it will be because of LPP campaign, the PMLN candidate says the same. We are clear if either gets elected, workers will lose. We are contacting Left-wing parties, social organizations and radical individuals and youth to support us.

Some say that we are in the third position after the PMLN and PPP candidates. But we have urged workers not to spoil their votes by voting for an enemy class. It does not matter how many votes we get, it does matter that we are standing and hopefully, we will have reasonable votes for the first time in LPP history. Over 10,000 workers in the last 10 days have attended our public and corner meetings.

Our initial finance appeal brought some results. But we need much more. We need to build a Socialist alternative, free of the influence of the capitalist class.

We need your support. Please come forward in whatever way you can. Above all, we need your money for a cause that unites us nationally and internationally. It is workers fight in Pakistan to unite the workers internationally.

Please find below an appeal we sent you on 10 April 2010 for more information.

Help us to put forward a credible

alternative to the politics of the rich

An appeal to all friends in social and political circles

On 10 April 2010, Mian Abdul Qayum, a labour leader in Faisalabad, submitted his nomination papers as candidate for the Punjab Assembly constituency 63 Faisalabad. The other candidates will be from the Pakistan People's Party, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and National Muslim League. We need your support to contest this by election.

Who are our opponents?

The seat was declared vacant when Mian Asif Ajmal resigned after it was clear during a Supreme Court hearing that he had submitted bogus degrees to the election commission in 2008 to prove that he is a graduate. Asif Ajmal is an industrialist and owner of a textile factory. He was arrested by police in 2008 after he and his goons fired on his textile factory workers when they demanded an increase in wages and union rights. One worker was killed and over a dozen seriously injured. He spent nearly one and half month in jail but used his political influence among police and courts to secure his release.

He was elected in February 2008 election on a nomination of Pakistan Muslim league Q, but later joined PMLN. Mian Nawaz Sharif has nominated Asif Ajmal to contest this seat once again. Thus the person who used bogus degrees and deceived his constituency and the election commission is awarded candidacy by the PMLN, a party that claims to defend democratic traditions and to struggle for an independent judiciary.

The Pakistan People's Party Punjab president Rana Aftab is once again in the field to contest the election. He was defeated by Ajmal in 2008 after

having been a member of the Punjab Assembly for two [earlier wrote three!] terms. He is rich farmer and an advocate by profession; he is a diehard PPP activist.

Amjad Warraich, a former Member of Parliament and leader of the National Muslim League, the new Muslim League under his leadership, has also announced his candidacy. His wife is member of the National Assembly and his brother is in the Punjab Assembly.

The Labour Party Pakistan has decided to put forward the candidacy of Mian Abdul Qayum. He is chairman of Labour Qaumi Movement and a member of LPP Federal Committee. We have decided to contest this election in order to challenge the hegemony of the big capitalist and feudal parties. We have little experience of parliamentary politics and know they favour those with a lot of money. Rich politician spend millions in violation of the Election Commission laws and no one take notice. Despite this, we have decided to fight back through entering the race.

Our candidate: Mian Abdul Qayum

Mian Abdul Qayum is a labour leader of textile and power loom workers. He is the founding member of Labour Qaumi Movement, a labor organization that has led many struggles of textile workers in Faisalabad and the surrounding area. Over 10,000 joined when the LQM organized a mass workers rally on the eve of the Labour Party Pakistan's Fifth Congress on 29 January 2010 at the famous Dhobi Ghat ground in Faisalabad.

Mian Abdul Qayum, himself a textile worker, has been able to organize LQM in every area of Faisalabad. The union has accomplished much through of its militant actions and its expressions of solidarity with other movements. At present, he works full time for LQM and the workers of the Faisalabad textile sector pay his expenditures. His partner, Shamim Qayum, is also a LQM activist and organizes women workers.

Mian Abdul Qayum has been arrested several times during the last few years during the struggle of the textile workers. He led a strike that lasted 20 days and resulted in a complete victory of power loom workers but spent 28 days along 24 other power loom workers in Jhang jail. Since the LQM was established over 10,000 power loom workers have received their social security cards. There was none when the LQM was formed in 2003. The LQM has been able to help workers in winning wage increases, releasing blocked payments, and forming new trade unions in several factories. In general labor dignity is being restored.

The LQM is an independent labour organization supported by several left political currents and social organization and movements. The Labour Education Foundation, a radical social organization, has helped the LQM in trainings, workshops and organizing workers. Most of its leaders are formally members of Labour Party Pakistan. The LQM formation is a departure from the traditional trade unions that have been unable to grow during the last decade because it is a community-based labor organization and not just at the work-place. The LQM combines activism at both the work place and within the community. It has formalized many informal sector workers and revived the workers' tradition of picket lines at the work place and at the homes of the bosses.

The LQM strategy to press the demands of the workers varies from case to case. It has held hunger strike camps, public rallies, seminars, workshops, Gherao (pickets) of factories, bosses' homes, police stations and at the labor department, as well as demonstrations and other forms of protests. It has held very militant but peaceful struggles.

Mian Abdul Qayum's decision to contest election against the parties of the rich is an important step in promotion of working-class politics. It will pave the way for more independent actions of the working class not only in the parliamentary field but also outside. After the election of Mai Jhoori in Baluchistan by election last month, the contest of

Mian Abdul Qayum will also be closely watched by many in Pakistan and internationally.

Our election program

Although this is a Punjab Assembly by election, the LPP is contesting the election on a revolutionary program with transitional demands. In a meeting on 9th April 2010 at Labour Qaumi Movement in Faisalabad where the party discussed the campaign's priorities, it was decided to take up three issues forcefully: opposing the price hikes, supporting labor rights and opposing the load shedding of electricity and gas. The first two are directly linked with the lives of workers and the other is linked with the survival of local power looms industry and infrastructure. There has been a massive price hike because of the conditionality's of the IMF and World Bank loans. We will also take up oppose the neoliberal agenda and as well as the role imperialism and the multi-national companies play. We will raise the issue of labor's right to form unions and fight for workers' rights to a decent life.

Importance of this election

This election has been announced at a time when the PPP government is making important decisions to implement the neoliberal agenda. Price hikes are out of control. Important public sector institutions are for sale. The infrastructure is collapsing. The load shedding of electricity is over 12 hours. Most of the power looms are closed because of shortage of electricity and thousands of workers have been laid off temporarily. Workers are very angry and there is a possibility of a grand backlash against the PPP government through this election.

The area where the election is taking place is the same area where thousands of workers have gathered on the call of Labour Qaumi Movement for defense of worker rights and better job conditions. The

PPP Punjab president is also running in the election so workers have the opportunity to punish the PPP for their policies. This is also an election where both the PPP and PMLN have put up candidates against each other, unlike the previous by elections. The PMLN nominated a person who has been involved in firing workers, forging educational certificates and other criminal activities. We call on workers to reject the candidates of both parties and vote for a worker.

A strong vote or particularly the victory of a textile worker in a by election would generate enthusiasm among the working class in Pakistan. It would open up an alternative path to those parties of the capitalists and feudal forces.

This is the first parliamentary election that LPP is contesting since the 2002 general elections. The LPP has carried out good street work against military dictatorship, and has fought for workers rights and the right of

peasants to own land. The LPP can make a difference in this election if it gets the right support from its friends.

What you can do

We need your support in different fields but have little time left. The election is on 15 May 2010.

1- Please help us financially,

2- Please take off time to go to the constituency. It is called PP 63 and it covers the areas next to Faisalabad airport, Sadhar, Thekiwala, Pansera on Jhang Road. Please come and help in the election campaign to go door to door.

3- Please help us in transport. If you have a car, small van or jeep, please lend it to us with a driver for at least a week before the election campaign. We have to cover a long distance and we need a lot of transportation.

4- Please help in printing of literature, posters and leaflets. If you can get it printed, we can provide you the text and designs.

5- Please help us in designing banners and help in printing on cloth.

6- Please give suggestion in promotion of the LPP election symbol, APPLE. Unlike the PPP and PMLN, who have very violent election symbols, we have a peaceful symbol.

7- Please take a day off 15 May to help on the Election Day.

8- Please suggest any other way to help us.

Please contact me for any help and I will put you in contact with the people involved in that area.

Labour Party Pakistan appeals to all its supporters, friends, comrades and members to come forward to help in the campaign of Mian Abdul Qayum.

The situation in France after the regional elections of March 2010

8 May 2010, by **Sandra Demarcq**

A result that leaves no room for doubt

The principal aspect of these elections is the extent of the rejection of Sarkozy and his policies, a rejection expressed in various ways. It was a major defeat for the party in power, the UMP. The Right received around 26 per cent of the votes cast in the first round and 35.5 per cent (which represents only 15 per cent of registered voters) in the second round. It came behind the Socialist Party (PS) in almost all the regions. The eight ministers who stood were defeated just as much, if not more, than the other UMP candidates. It was

clearly the government's policies as a whole which were being repudiated, policies which serve the interests of the big shareholders and the richest classes, policies which make the majority of the population pay for the crisis, policies which destroy public services and social gains. So in terms of electoral punishment for sitting governments, these elections are up there with the best of them. There is nothing new about local elections expressing a corrective compared to the preceding results. That happened, for example, against the Left in 1983. But, generally, it was a corrective and rarely a phenomenon on such a scale.

The massive level of abstention constitutes the other major aspect of this election. It was 53 per cent in the

first round and 49 per cent in the second for the electorate as a whole, but it was nearly 70 per cent among young people, two-thirds in the popular classes and the turn-out was only 30 per cent in many popular neighbourhoods. Abstention on this scale indicates a disavowal of the institutional parties but also an alienation of part of the population from electoral politics. Social exclusion produces political exclusion.

The National Front (FN) has taken on a new lease of life. Although its score and its ability to stand in the second round (which is only possible for lists receiving at least 10 per cent in the first round) are down compared to 2004, the FN is surmounting its crisis. It is taking full advantage of the crisis

of Sarkozyism and the nauseating debate launched in the middle of the campaign by Sarkozy on national identity, which set up a competition as to which candidates could make more racist speeches than their opponents. But the FN also attracts a protest vote, including among popular layers. It was the scale of the rejection of the Right which made possible the clear victory of the PS and its allies and allowed them not to be penalised for their record of applying neo-liberal policies in the regions that they have governed since 2004. In the second round, all the lists of the Left improved on their score in the first round. That kind of results had not been seen since the beginning of the 1980s. The lists of Union of the Left, and the PS in particular, certainly cashed in on the mood of "anything but Sarkozy", but it seems that these lists did appear, for part of the electorate, as credible and capable of opposing the Right. Nevertheless, we cannot say that this electoral success represents approval of the policies followed by the PS and its allies. Indeed, the results of the PS, when it found itself faced with a triangular contest in the second round, were less good. In the Limousin region, for example (where the NPA obtained two regional councillors on an NPA-Left Front list), the results that this list obtained show that when there is a third choice available, on the left, independent of the Socialists, alongside the traditional head-to-head between the PS and the UMP, there is an improvement compared to the first round. On March 14, the list got 13.13 per cent and won 19.1 per cent a week later (a gain of 20,000 votes). We saw the same situation in Brittany, where the Europe-Ecology list stood against the PS in the second round.

The PS is in the strongest position because it alone appears capable of replacing the Right as the centre of gravity of the government. Europe Ecology, which was less successful than in the June 2009 European elections, but won around 12 per cent of the vote, is establishing itself as the second force on the left in electoral terms. The reasons for this success are multiple. The strong ecological aspirations among the population explain this result, even though the programme of the Greens and their

allies is in no way the expression an "anti-system" party. At the same time, the vote for Europe Ecology is a way of expressing distrust in the PS, even though the main leaders of this political current have largely taken part in government at different levels, in alliance with the PS.

The results of the Left Front appear rather good in the context. The Left Front won an average of 6.95 per cent, compared to 6.45 per cent in the European elections, but with very uneven results and with peaks in the traditional bastions of the Communist Party (PCF). The continuation of the Left Front and the maintenance of its scores mark the establishment on the political scene of anti-liberal reformist Left, different from social-liberalism even though it remains dependent on it, which will continue to contest with us the radical space in French politics. The fact is that by choosing the alliance with the Left Party, the PCF, in these two elections, has stemmed its continuous electoral decline, which began in the 1980s, without however being able to reverse the curve and find a clear dynamic. The number of PCF elected representatives has been cut by half compared to 2004. We were able to verify in the interval between the two rounds the fundamental disagreements that we have with the leaderships of the parties which make up the Left Front. Programmatic fusions with the PS took place in almost all regions. The PCF decided to take part in executives dominated by the PS. The leadership of the Left Front, with contradictions, is thus demonstrating its readiness to take part in a new version of the Union of the Left with the 2012 elections in view.

Disappointing results for the NPA

Let us put it clearly, the results obtained by the NPA in these regional elections were not good. The average over the 21 regions where we were present was 3.4 per cent. So that represents a clear weakening. In none of 18 regions (apart from the three where we stood in alliance with the Left Front), did we cross the 5 per cent threshold, although with 4.99 per

cent we only missed out by a few dozen votes in Basse-Normandie. In the three regions where we had joint lists with the Left Front, the results were a little better. This was especially true in Limousin. On the other hand, in the Pays de la Loire region, again by a few dozen votes, the list did not reach the 5 per cent threshold, obtaining far less than the combined scores in the European elections.

The level of abstention, which reached 53.6 per cent, once again particularly affected the popular neighbourhoods, with the turn-out not exceeding 30 per cent in many towns, sometimes less.

More fundamentally, we suffered, in a sharper way than in the European elections, the disaffection with the electoral process of most of the voters closest to our ideas, a phenomenon which we suffer from much more than the other parties. That necessarily comes from being at an intermediate threshold, where unlike the PS, Europe Ecology or even the Left Front at the regional level, voting for us does not appear as a credible way to punish the Right, independently of the sympathy that people have for our ideas. That poses a difficult problem: how to build a political party which does not want to take as its basis working within elected bodies and being organized around its elected representatives, but rather direct political action based on social mobilizations, on organizing young people, workers and popular layers in workplaces and neighbourhoods. On that basis the utility of our presence in elected bodies can only become credible as the prolongation of this action, which requires us to be implanted and to have support on a large scale, which the NPA has in certain places, but not on a national scale. That also requires us to be more able to give the coherence of a political alternative to the social demands that we put forward: it means in particular going beyond demands on jobs, wages and social protection, being able to appear as representing an alternative for the organization of society in favour of workers. So we can attract an electorate at certain elections, in particular around the figure of Olivier or when our vote appears as a credible

way of sending a political message, but we do not yet have a sufficient solid implantation to enable us to have broad and consistent electoral support.

But overall all of the scores to the left of the PS were disappointing, the far Left in general being particularly affected. The weakness of the social mobilizations last autumn of course weighed heavily in the balance. Basically, faced with the brutality of the crisis, faced with the violence of the policies of the Sarkozy government, we did not demonstrate that it was useful to vote for us.

The crisis is ahead of us

These regional elections open up a political crisis where the government, with Sarkozy at its head, has lost any legitimacy that it had. Hardly had the results been announced before splits began to appear in the Right, now realising that the re-election of Sarkozy was no longer sure. Sarkozy has no alternative but to unify his own camp by making a turn even further to the right, with pension reform as its central axis for the coming months. For Sarkozy, the success of this reform, which apparently mainly consists of extending the retirement age to 62 or 63, will prove to his own camp that he alone is able to

“modernize” the country. Facing him, we can now see again the project of an alternative government of the Left, under the leadership of the PS. Each of the three forces concerned by this project has to some extent overcome the crisis which they had experienced since 2007. The PS is temporarily reunified around Martine Aubry. The Greens produced, with Europe Ecology, a solution to the dead end their movement was in. And Jean-Luc Mélenchon enabled the PCF to halt its decline, by giving it a new shot of vitality. Although a new version of the Union of the Left is already being prepared, the contradictions are still strong within each of the three poles, with different projects and important internal rivalries.

The current turn in the crisis is incarnated by the situation in Greece, in a scenario which is being repeated in Spain and in Portugal and will not spare, to differing degrees, any country of Europe. The public debt contracted by bailing out the banks and the financiers is the object of fresh speculation, and governments are presenting the bill to the majority of the population (freezing of wages, reduction of pensions and social protection, job losses in the public sector). The economic and ecological crisis which is accelerating is provoking resistance which, though strong, is at this stage insufficient to stop the capitalist offensive in the countries where the attacks have been

raised to a new level.

Profound discontent is being expressed throughout society and was expressed in the last weeks of the election campaign, even though the struggles were not able to upset the electoral game or overcome the blockage organized by the government and the leaderships of the big trade-union confederations. It is impossible to predict how these contradictions will work themselves out. The combination of a very much worse economic situation and elements of political crises puts the government in a difficult situation. But this particular economic situation can be exploited only if a fighting Left, as strong and united as possible, is able both to take up the challenge of the social resistance, the united mobilizations that have to be built, and to put forward an anti-capitalist alternative.

So even though the NPA has suffered, after one year of existence, an electoral failure which creates a situation of some difficulty, these last few weeks do not invalidate our original project. More than ever, to build and develop a mass anti-capitalist party, a party which can amplify mobilizations, a party for “the revolutionary transformation of society” remains, in a period of total crisis of the system - economic, social, ecological -, not only a necessity but a real, immediate, possibility.

The current state of the trade union movement in Kazakhstan

5 May 2010, by Ainur Kurmanov

The old Soviet-era trade unions have collapsed, turning into an aging, parasitic bureaucratic caste. Likewise, the free trade unions that emerged in the early 1990s have seriously deteriorated and thus do not offer a real alternative for union activists who want to engage in genuine struggle. At the same time, the economic crisis,

which has staggered many sectors of the economy, has stimulated the growth of a new trade union movement. The signs of this new movement have begun to emerge everywhere and are a cause for optimism.

The History of the Labor Movement in Kazakhstan

As in many other Soviet republics, the massive miners strikes of the late

1980s gave rise to the first free associations of workers - the locals of the Independent Miners Unions (NPG), which were mostly concentrated in the country's central regions, in particular in Karagandy Province. They formed the basis for Birlesu ("Unity"), an association that was transformed into the Kazakhstan Free Trade Unions Confederation (KSPK) when the country gained its independence in 1991. KSPK locals were formed in five provinces, and four industrial associations were created as well: an airline crews association; a trade union of the republic's miners; a trade union of healthcare workers; and an education workers union. In addition, eighty-six trade unions were formed in various other sectors. In the early 1990s, the KSPK was a genuinely alternative organization that also exercised an invigorating influence on certain industrial unions within the Trade Unions Federation of the Republic of Kazakhstan (FPRK, the successor to the republic's branch of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, or VTsSPS). The activists in these unions began vigorously defending the interests of their workforces.

Around the same time, in 1992, the Solidarity Workers Movement of Kazakhstan (RDKS) emerged. Fairly politicized in its outlook, this movement was at first influenced by anarcho-syndicalists until left-wing communists and socialists took control of it in 1994. The movement was behind a series of massive radical strikes and actions by workers from various sectors in Almaty, Uralsk, Karaganda, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and South Kazakhstan throughout the 1990s. The RDKS collaborated with rank-and-file activists from both the KSPK and the industrial unions of the FPRK. One serious success that came out of this collaboration was the creation, in 1995, of a republic-wide strike committee, which was organized by the leading industrial unions of the FPRK and the provincial branches of the RDKS.

The collapse of the former state sector and the massive privatizations of 1995-1997 led to the destruction of heavy industry. This in turn sparked socially catastrophic processes that followed upon the disappearance of

whole sectors and the closing of several thousand enterprises. Entire regions of the country were devastated. Sixty "ghost towns" appeared, and unemployment afflicted thirty percent of the working population (four million people were listed as "self-employed" in 1998). Approximately three million people left the country, including huge numbers of skilled workers and specialists of various ethnicities. These processes were accompanied by the liquidation of the entire social welfare system and Soviet-era labor laws.

All the progressive trade unions and labor organizations in the country were delivered a heavy blow by this collapse, on the one hand, and by state persecution, on the other, and many of them ceased to exist. This process was aided and abetted by the errors and anti-labor actions committed by trade union leaders themselves. This discredited the idea of an organized labor movement and led to the total degeneration of the leadership in these unions. Thus, for example, responding to the anti-communist and neoliberal moods among some miners, in 1992 the leadership of the KSPK entered into close cooperation with the old leadership of the AFL-CIO. It began promoting the idea of depoliticizing labor organizations and supporting the government's experiments with the market economy. This stance was reflected in KSPK leader Vitaly Solomin's open support for the government's passage of new pensions legislation, which copied the Chilean model of pensions provision.

The KSPK leadership's inconsistency and rejection of pro-active measures led to the closure of many regional unions, as well as to the persecution of the leaders of the miners union in the city of Kentau. By the late 1990s nearly all the locals within the KSPK had turned into tiny groups, and today the KSPK has only several thousand members. In 1997, the chairmanship of the FPRK was taken over by Siyazbek Mukashev, a personal friend of President Nazarbayev, who wanted to gain control of his country's trade unions and prevent actions and protests by workers. This altered the balance of forces within the former

Soviet trade unions as well: the elements that were most conservative and amenable to cooperation with transnational corporations and the authorities finally gained the upper hand.

All these developments caused splits and the expulsions of the most energetic and radical activists in the union locals. Thus in 2002 the union of machine construction workers, part of the FPRK, initiated the liquidation of the progressive trade union at Metallist, a major defense factory in Uralsk, because it had begun a relentless campaign against the government's privatization and destruction of the enterprise. In 2001, nine industrial trade unions announced they were quitting the FPRK because of the complete decay of the federation's leadership, its usurpation of power, and its tendency only to engage in commercial activities involving union property. The coal miners union suffered a split even earlier, in the late 1990s. In 1996, when the Karaganda open-pit mine and metallurgical complex fell into the hands of ArcelorMittal after it was privatized, the trade union committees at eight mines formed their own corporate-level coal miners union, Korgau ("Defense").

In 2003, the union of transportation and civil aviation workers, which had left the FPRK and was headed by Murat Mashkenov, joined parliament deputy Serik Abdrakhmanov and former KSPK leader Vitaly Solomin in creating the Kazakhstan Labor Confederation (KTK), which allegedly had an initial membership of forty thousand. But to this day the KTK has shown no signs of activism and militancy. The leaders of a political movement of workers that formed out of the RDKS were imprisoned in the late 1990s after campaigning for the creation of their own labor party, while the movement's rank-and-file activists were persecuted and subjected to mass dismissals. By 2007, this movement had practically ceased to exist. At present, there is no unified trade union sector in Kazakhstan, and the existing unions have no influence on economic life and the activities of the companies at which their members are employed.

The Current Role of the FPRK

On paper, the FPRK is still the largest officially recognized trade union organization in the country. You would be hard pressed, however, to learn its actual membership figures, although its reports claim it represents approximately one million workers (out of a working population of four million). This year around 100,000 people have lost their jobs as a result of the economic crisis, and so the authorities have turned the official trade unions into yet another pillow for suffocating the rage of workers. Alongside the social conflict resolution “councils” controlled by the ruling party, Nur Otan (an analogue of the CPSU, except with a market economy ideology), the provincial branches and industrial unions of the FPRK have long followed a policy of cooperation and “social partnership” with the authorities and employers. One striking example of this policy are the memoranda on the preservation of “social stability” – that is, a public disavowal of demonstrations, pickets, and strikes – signed by a number of labor leaders at the beginning of this year.

And yet such important criteria as a minimum wage, a minimum basic pension, and a minimum subsistence level are neglected by the official policy of the FPRK. It is worth noting that at present the minimum wage and minimum subsistence level are the same, amounting to 13,740 tenge (approximately 80 USD) per month. According to the country’s labor laws, these levels should be set in consultation with the trade unions. Ideally, trilateral commissions, roundtables, and other meetings should take place in order to determine the minimum wage before this figure is introduced into the republic’s proposed budget.

However, it all happens the other way round. The FPRK’s leadership does not insist too strongly on participating in the discussion of the national budget, and as a result practically no one takes its opinion into consideration. Moreover, aside from flimsy memoranda and other such

declarations, the FPRK is totally ignored by the government and management. And even these “general agreements” are signed only after the country’s budget has been passed.

Another important basis of the current “social partnership” is the collective bargaining agreement, but its function in workplaces is more declarative than real. In the state sector, it has more to do with work conditions than with wage levels. Most important of all is the fact that collective bargaining agreements do not in any way reflect inflation and the devaluation of the tenge, and thus owners can confidently refer to old documents and base wage rates if pressed. The regional agreements signed by employers, the unions, and the authorities also contain no mechanisms for indexing wages. So it turns out that the work of the current union bosses is just a giant soap bubble that in no way defends millions of laborers.

This year, meetings and elections are scheduled to take place throughout the FPRK, and the status of many union bosses is thus genuinely threatened. But as likely as not many of them will survive this tense moment and keep their jobs insofar as the old mechanisms of “democratic centralism” still operate. Here, apparently, is where the trustworthy chairs of the FPRK’s regional unions will step into the fray. Strange as it may seem, these regional chairs automatically become directors of the limited liability companies that oversee the use of trade union property and report to the FPRK’s economic servicing directorate. Public and economic functions are thus fused in the same people, and this suggests a possible dependence on the “general line” of the federation’s leadership, which in turn might influence the election of delegates who are precisely loyal. In Kazakhstan, this is how the conferences of trade unions and the one true party are conducted: naturally, the unions and the party are united in their desire to ensure true “stability.”

The last straw was the expulsion of the only remaining progressive trade unions from the FPRK – the association of scientific workers,

which has come out against the privatization of scientific research institutes; and the interindustrial regional union ODAK, which has been advocating radical methods of struggle and had supported the call for nationalization of production made by several enterprises that went on strike.

Trade Unions in the Metals and Mining Industries

There is no amalgamated union of metal workers in Kazakhstan. The Soviet system of industrial unions still exists. Thus, for example, there is the ore mining industry union, which although it has not actively opposed militant workforces, has also not engaged in any other kind of activity or activism. Its organizations exist only formally at many enterprises.

Workers at a number of maintenance facilities and plants for the manufacture of rolling stock are members of the railroad transport workers union, which is a corporate union within the parastate company Kazakhstan Railways. It gets its funds and office space directly from management, as well as the bonuses and salaries for its permanent staff, and representatives of management are also part of the union’s leadership board. Therefore, over the past several years this “trade union” has not supported a single lawsuit filed by laid-off workers. It also backed the management of the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant against the plant’s workforce, which went on strike on June 22, demanding that the plant be nationalized.

This is a common disease amongst such so-called trade unions. Thus the corporate trade union at Kazakhmys, a major copper producer allied with Samsung, came out against a sit-down strike by copper miners in January 2008. The union’s chair joined leaders of the Jezkazgan district union in threatening members of the strike committee with dismissal and violence. Deputies of the company’s president also control this corporate union. Union leaders receive their

salaries and other resources from the Kazakhmys company budget, which should indicate that they are totally independent of union membership dues and the interests of the workforce. A similar situation also exists at the Kaztsink Company, in East Kazakhstan.

Korgau, the coal miners union that brought together miners from eight mines in the coal production unit at ArcelorMittal along with workers at adjoining facilities (around 25,000 workers in all), pursues a similar policy, although it is not part of the FPRK. In the person of its then-chair Vyacheslav Sidorov, Korgau opposed a strike at all eight mines in 2006 and demanded that the workers return to the pit faces. This led to Sidorov's being hissed and nearly beaten by shaft men at a demonstration outside the mayor's office in the town of Shakhtinsk. The union's current chair, Daniyar Mirgayazov, does not even bother to hide from journalists the fact that he receives monthly bonuses from company management for maintaining "social stability" and that in June of this year he approved a 14% pay cut for workers. In recent months, whole crews of miners have begun leaving the union, and so Korgau has asked ArcelorMittal to strip them of all the benefits and guarantees stipulated under the collective bargaining agreement. A court in Shakhtinsk is now adjudicating this very issue between workers and the union. In addition, the process of forming an alternative union for coal miners has been launched.

An analogous situation has developed within the trade union committee at the Karaganda Metal Works (22,000 workers), which is owned by Mittal Steel Temirtau, a subsidiary of ArcelorMittal. Wages there were likewise slashed by 14%, and workers in various shops began forming initiative groups to study labor laws and the collective bargaining agreement. Vladimir Dubinin, chair of the official trade union, attempted to repudiate the dissatisfaction of metal workers to the press and conceal the fact that they were quitting his union. Company management and the official trade union are now attempting to stop this movement with threats and other forms of persecution.

The trade union of machine manufacturing workers, which is still listed as part of the FPRK and allegedly has 20,000 members, has practically ceased to function. The union at the Almaty Heavy Engineering Plant (AZTM) has now independently organized workers in the struggle to save the plant and nationalize it. The leadership of the industrial union, however, has also been noted for its anti-labor actions, in particular at the Metallist plant in Uralsk.

Like their colleagues in other unions, the trade union of petroleum industry workers and the trade union council of Mangystau Province (on the Caspian shore in West Kazakhstan), attempted to stop actions by drillers at Burgylau, Ltd. (in Kazakh, burgylau means "drilling"), in April of this year. The workers immediately formed their own independent trade union (with two thousand members) and organized a sit-down strike and a hunger strike, demanding that the enterprise be nationalized. At present, this new union's struggle is supported by oil workers at ten other facilities (over 100,000 workers), and we are in the process of forming an integrated trade union association. This is an encouraging situation insofar as independent trade unions have also begun to form at sites owned by various foreign petroleum-extraction companies - for example, the union of oil workers at the Zhanazhol field (2,000 workers) in Aktope Province (Western Kazakhstan). A fairly independent stance has also been taken by activists with the trade union of gas workers (around 8,000 members) at the Karachaganak field near Uralsk, one of the largest deposits in Europe.

Strange as it may seem, the corporate trade union at the uranium company Kazatomprom (around 40,000 workers) has actually come to the defense of its workforce, opposing planned massive layoffs that were spurred by reorganization of the industry and the government's refusal to develop high technology and new production facilities. As a result of these actions by the government, six thousand workers at the Ulbinsk Metallurgical Plant might find themselves without jobs next year,

while another thousand might be laid off before the end of this year. Despite coercion by the security forces, the union has no intention of surrendering, and it has shown interest in joining us to creating a common organizational structure. The only problem is that it has not managed to enlist all workers to its cause: only twenty percent of them are members of the union.

New Trade Union Opportunities and the Latest Strikes

The authorities have done everything they can to halt and, where possible, ban the process of self-organization on the part of workers. Now it is already impossible to control the process of layoffs, while the law "On Strikes" and the Labor Code make it as difficult as possible for workforces to use strikes and industrial actions to combat the abuses of management. True, the government has created a "working commission" to prevent layoffs that includes representatives of the FPRK, but it would appear that the bigwigs of the extraction industries could care less about this commission. Who concretely has this "commission" saved in Kazakhstan? Meanwhile, the union bosses continue to spout trite phrases about "social partnership" and "stability" even as they allow people to be torn to shreds by the predators of the modern business world.

Late 2008 and early 2009 were marked by new strikes and actions by workers in various sectors of the Kazakh economy. As a rule, these were actions sparked by nonpayment of wages or significant wage cuts. In December 2008, strikes were carried out by construction workers at major development companies in Almaty and Astana, by workers at the car maintenance units of Kazakhstan Railways, and by minibus drivers in the southern capital. Municipal workers in Taraz and metal workers at the Irtys Chemical Metallurgical Plant organized mass hunger strikes. The most impressive action and a kind of wake-up call was the strike by construction workers at Agip KCO

(Atyrau Province, Western Kazakhstan), which erupted into a demonstration that ended in mass clashes with the police. Several thousand people took part in this action, and workers from two other companies supported them.

In our opinion, this past spring marked a new chapter in the history of the contemporary labor movement and a new starting point: the strike by oil workers at Burgylau, Ltd., in Zhanaozen (West Kazakhstan). Two thousand workers there demanded new management, reinstatement of their comrades who had been fired, and nationalization of the enterprise. The workers occupied their own plant, fearing that equipment there would be hauled away, while approximately forty workers staged a twenty-day hunger strike. Two workers were seized by officers of the KNB (the former KGB) and beaten up, and to top it all off smoke grenades were thrown into their jail cell. Daniyar Besbayev, the chair of the trade union committee, was subjected to multiple attempts to have him brought up on criminal charges and threatened with physical violence. However, the twenty-day strike led to a partial victory for the workers: all employees who had been laid off were reinstated and new management was installed at the facility.

Workers at the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant carried out another powerful strike action. The two-thousand-strong workforce there demanded that the government reexamine the outcome of the plant's privatization, which led to this strategic enterprise falling into the hands of unknown owners who filed for bankruptcy and began making massive layoffs and shutting down production. A similar situation developed at the Almaty Heavy Engineering Plant, where the trade union committee organized actions against the closing of shops by new owners. Now Esenbek Ukteshbayev, leader of the strike committee at the car maintenance plant, is the subject of a prolonged court case: plant management and the authorities are trying to accuse him of having organized an "illegal strike."

Analysts are predicting a rise in the

willingness of workers to protest, and this will lead to new, more massive local actions in the various provinces of Kazakhstan. One feature of the labor disputes that have happened this year is the fact that, as a rule, they have taken place without the support of the official trade unions. Sometimes, as was the case at the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant, trade union committees have openly sided with management and acted as instruments of their policies. According to the strike committee, even the industrial union of railroad workers, instead of supporting the workforce's demands, adopted a wait-and-see attitude, which the activists themselves regarded as a show of support for the plant's owners.

In response to such attitudes, workers have begun to develop initiative groups (or strike committees, when strikes are under way), as well as participating in public associations. Thus, for example, the public association Miner's Family, in Shakhtinsk, took on the functions of a trade union organization. In Karabatan, Zhanaozen, Karabulak (home of the Almaty Sugar factory in Almaty Province), and the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant, labor actions were carried out by independent trade unions or trade union committees that were formed and elected by the rank-and-file. Another frequent way that workers show their lack of trust in the utterly rotten "Soviet" trade unions that officially represent them is to consciously quit these organizations.

In May of this year, the first coordinating session of various grassroots initiative groups, strike committees, and independent trade unions took place in Almaty. The event was to a large extent organized by the ODAK trade union association, headed by Marat Moldabekov, leader of the militant union of scientific workers. The rank-and-file and independent trade union activists who gathered for this roundtable discussed what further steps could be taken to consolidate their efforts and organize solidarity campaigns. Trade union associations and labor groups from Zhanaozen, Aktobe, Kostanay, Kokshetau, Jezkazgan, Karaganda, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Semipalatinsk, Taldykorgan, Shymkent, and Almaty

responded to this call to consolidate and form a united policy front.

The session was attended by the most well-known activists of the Kazakh labor movement, including the mine workers leader and NPG organizer for Kazakhstan, Pavel Shumkin (KCPK); Ivan Bulgakov, chair of the Defense of Labor trade union association and leader of a strike by copper smelters in East Kazakhstan; Daniyar Besbayev, leader of the union of oil workers and the striking drillers at Burgylau, Ltd.; and Kanatbek Murzatov, an activist with the Jezkazgan miners. The important thing was that the first forum for discussions and dialogue amongst activists was held. True, there were also some rough patches insofar as there were two types of activists present at the roundtable. A minority of attendees, made up of functionaries, and the majority, comprised of grassroots activists, did not always understand each other correctly, and this is an objective indicator. The militant attitude of the new labor leaders, who came to the conference from the drilling sites, mines, and factory floors (unlike some of the old leaders of the independent unions that emerged in the early nineties) was a fresh breeze, a testimony to a new generation of cadres who have risen with the current wave of the struggle. Many speakers underscored the paradoxical fact that the current crisis is creating new, favorable conditions for the rebirth of the organized labor movement, and that mass actions are just around the corner.

The conference adopted a proposal by the socialists to create a permanent informational and coordinating center to assist the independent trade union movement, which would be operated under the auspices of the ODAK trade union association. The website of the new center - socdeistvie.info - has been launched. In addition, the conference adopted a communiqué, proposed by Pavel Shumkin, whose centerpiece was the thesis that the unified struggle of workers is a struggle for both economic and political rights - that is, freedom of assembly, freedom to organize, freedom of speech, and freedom to affect legislation that harms the interests of workers. At present, we

have filed documents to register a regional association of trade unions and an all-republic interindustrial union, whose purpose we have already established. In January, a new conference is planned that will feature both current and new participants in the project of creating unified organizational structures for the labor movement.

The Activities of Transnational Corporations

A large number of transnational corporations are active in Kazakhstan, and they control nearly all the country's extractive industries. The plight of workers in the plants and mines of copper producer Kazakhmys and ArcelorMittal is particularly unenviable. It is in these places that we encounter the highest percentage of work-related injuries and on-the-job deaths. The reason for this is that the owners have no desire to spend money on new equipment and to degas the mineshafts. At a number of worksites, although plant and equipment depreciation has reached 100%, management continues to exploit these facilities. Everywhere, accident crews and rescue teams, electrical maintenance and repair crews have been laid off.

Management sometimes uses the excuse of economic difficulties to introduce "structural changes" that in fact heighten their exploitation of local workforces. Kazakh workers are treated with particular disdain at enterprises in which foreign capital has a stake. A telling example in this respect is the policy of the management of Shymkentsement towards its employees.

With the silent consent of the authorities, these "anti-crisis" measures on the part of employers lead to a deterioration of the condition of wage laborers and to a total violation of their labor rights. The notorious "intensification of labor" means in practice that workers are subjected to genuine, incredibly cruel exploitation while receiving the same poverty-level wages. Output norms are

increased, and workers are made to take on additional responsibilities and combine different skills and professions – all of which, as a rule, earns them no extra pay. Layoffs and firings have now become a real billy club in the hands of bosses who force their rightless workers to double their profits.

The actions of transnational oil and gas companies have also provoked the outrage of environmentalists. Chevron is a member of the international consortium Karachaganak Petroleum Operating B.V., which is developing the Karachaganak oil and gas condensate fields in West Kazakhstan Province. At present, the courts are examining a lawsuit filed by the Green Salvation Ecological Society, the Kazakhstan Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law, and the Shanyrak Public Association against the Government of Kazakhstan for its failure to protect the rights of the inhabitants of the village of Berezovka.

Deindustrialization and the Slogan of Nationalization

The economic crisis and the property redistribution brought on by the flaring up of the political situation in the country have incited new processes of deindustrialization, which will set off new waves of layoffs and firings. The Samruk-Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund, a monster that embodies state monopoly capitalism in Kazakhstan (it has even swallowed up the ministry of industry), is becoming an instrument for destroying the country's major industries. Aided by the state administration, the oligarchic group of Nazarbayev's middle son-in-law Timur Kulibayev is systematically purging competitors from the market and carrying out a redistribution of property that concentrates hydrocarbon deposits and profitable enterprises and factories in its hands.

This same group is also carrying out the systematic liquidation of individual factories and issuing orders for the layoffs of workforces. After the administration at the uranium

producer Kazatomprom was purged, the former minister of industry and commerce, presidential representative Vladimir Shkolnik, literally told a meeting of its directors, "We don't need to adopt new technology and improve production." This policy is now reflected in the deliberate liquidation of the manufacture of uranium tablets and other important nuclear energy products that had been sold for export.

In practice, this signifies a return to the ordinary extraction of raw uranium minus value-adding processing, which signals the collapse of the country's nuclear industry. The Ulbinsk Metallurgical Plant is already shifting to a two-day workweek, and in the future the facility might be mothballed altogether. Where its six thousand highly skilled workers will go is anybody's guess. Naturally, after the top managers at this profitable state company were arrested, projects to build nuclear energy facilities in China were halted, and contracts with Japanese and European companies were torn up.

The lobbying of Russian producers is evident in this story: it was they who got their hands on all the profitable pieces of this nuclear pie. This, however, is not the main point. The ruling classes also hope to smash the country's large workforces in order to prevent the radicalization of the labor movement and the emergence of new trade unions. The destruction of the social base for future mass actions is in fact the goal of the actions taken by these classes. The Samruk-Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund has already circulated a directive to lay off thirty percent of the workforce at many enterprises, including the Almaty Car Maintenance Plant, where strikers demanded the nationalization of their facility.

The shutting down of production and the liquidation of the country's productive forces are enabled not only by the top-down directives of the haute bourgeoisie and the banks, but also by the efforts of mid-level entrepreneurs and con men who seek as quickly as possible to strip factories and plants of assets, equipment, and scrap metals, while mortgaging off their buildings and land plots to obtain

loans. During periods of crisis and massive property redistribution, the bourgeoisie always tries to extract the last drop from the factories and workers it owns, only to leave a wasteland in their wake.

The events in Zhanaozen and at the car maintenance plant in Almaty have shown that the labor movement is in the process of becoming politicized. This is a reaction to massive layoffs, wage cuts, increased exploitation, and the destruction of production facilities. Workers now understand the slogan of nationalization in a way that is completely different from how it is understood by Kazakhstan's opposition liberals or government bureaucrats. For workers, this slogan symbolizes the need to save jobs and production itself. This has also invigorated the re-elections of trade union committees, where radical activists have offered themselves as candidates. All this is an important indicator of the moods that now prevail among the working masses.

The Need for Cooperation and Solidarity

We are happy to see that the trade union movement is being reborn and renewed at the grassroots. More and more new activists and groups are emerging. Working sometimes in clandestine, under the threat of dismissal, political repression, and even physical violence, they are ready to form new workers organizations and are already forming them. These are sincere people willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause of workers; they are free of the burdens of the past and the extraneous features of contemporary NGOs. We are trying to structure this process, to direct it towards the adoption of a unified program of demands and the formation in the near future of a republic-wide association of trade unions.

In the conditions of police persecution that we face, it is thus all the more important to maintain constant contact with leading international trade unions: when our activists encounter repression, they can organize protest campaigns; when our workers take action, they can organize solidarity campaigns. The enormous practical experience in social struggle accumulated by the different national branches of the international working class is extremely important for us, and so it is vital that we facilitate this exchange of ideas and recommendations.

Ainur Kurmanov was arrested on April 27, following a picket. He was taken to court and charged with "organising a picket" in front of a bank, Temir Bank, and given a maximum sentence of a fortnight's imprisonment on 27th April 2010. He will appear in court this Thursday (6th May) to appeal against his sentence. The picket was organized by the opposition social movement, 'Kazakhstan 2012', to protest over home reposessions.

Popular insurrection opens new page of history

5 May 2010, by Jan Malewski

The demonstrators, first gathering to protest against the arrest of oppositionists, were attacked by the forces of repression and replied immediately with stones, charging the police squads who had fired on them, disarming them and overcoming the trucks and armoured vehicles of the police, taking over the television, freeing political prisoners, seizing several administrative buildings and finally the seat of the presidency and the villa of president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, forcing the latter to flee. The popular insurrection overthrew the regime, at the price of at least 83 dead and more than 1,500 wounded in the capital alone.

An unstable regime

Contrary to the neighbouring post-Soviet republics, where the Kremlin had set up a renovated central bureaucratic apparatus, strengthened and prepared for capitalist restoration during the 1980s, the bureaucracy of Kyrgyzstan made the leap into the capitalist system on the basis of division. The real privileges of the bureaucrats did not allow them to constitute a private capital. It was thus state functions, ensuring the control of the mechanisms of privatisation and state finances, which constituted the privileged path to a

rapid primitive accumulation of capital, in particular in a country at a low level of industrialisation and without a great number of enterprise directors, the first candidates to their private appropriation. The history of independent Kyrgyzstan (since August 31, 1991) is that of struggles inside the new bureaucratic elite, largely originating from the layers who headed the state in 1990. Struggles by wage earners, the big losers in the private appropriation of public goods, broke out on a cyclical basis to disturb the game.

From June to August 1990 popular confrontations in Och and Uzgen, provoked by increased unemployment (22.8% of the local population) and a

housing shortage, transformed into an ethnic conflict between Kazakhs and Uzbeks, repressed by an intervention by the Soviet army, opened the road to a Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, formed by intellectuals and intermediary bureaucrats. This opposition demanded the overthrow of Absamet Masaliyev, an old member of the Political Bureau of the CPSU, president of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic. In October 1990 the Supreme Soviet proved incapable of choosing the president of the Republic – a new post created in the context of the reforms of the regime – between the candidates originating from the traditional nomenklatura, Masaliev and the first Kyrgyz minister, Apas Jumagulov.

It was an “outside” candidate, Askar Akayev, a member of the party but not the highest nomenklatura, president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, considered initially as a liberal, who was chosen. Elected president of the independent Kyrgyzstan during an uncontested election in December 1991, he set up his administration by drawing on his intellectual friends, thus destabilising the traditional bureaucratic elites.

Rapidly a part of the liberal intellectuals became disenchanted while Akayev oriented the regime towards an authoritarian presidentialism. Favourable to privatisation, he granted to himself and his cronies special privileges through Parliament, of which he had ensured himself the control. Ideologically disoriented and divided, the “democratic” opposition was not capable of affirming itself. In 1992 the biggest opposition party, Erk (Liberty), split into two, Erkin (conservative) and Ata-Meken (Homeland, which joined the Socialist International), while the old bureaucratic elite reconstituted the Communist Party. The budget resources fell following privatisations, the possibilities of private accumulation for the members of the elite were reduced and political tensions sharpened. In the middle of the 1990s social discontent began to grow, as the pauperisation of the population increased [23].

Akayev did however succeed in

getting re-elected in 2000 although the elections were rigged. In March 2002 he ordered firing on demonstrators who protested at Jalal-Abad against the arrest of a parliamentarian, while in May the police brutally dispersed a similar demonstration in Bichkek. A popular movement demanding his resignation, broader than the traditional political opposition, began to develop. His term expiring in 2005, Akayev began to prepare a dynastic succession, ensuring the election to Parliament of his son Aidar and daughter Bermet. But he had overestimated his strength. One week after the parliamentary elections, on March 18, 2005, massive demonstrations broke out in Jalal-Abad, Och, Toktogul, Pulgon and finally Bichkek, the capital. The people occupied administrative premises and arrested regional leaders. The opposition unified around Rosa Otounbayeva, a former minister, and Karmanbek Bakiyev, former Prime Minister. On March 24 the oppositionists took control of the seat of government and the television, and president Akayev fled. The police force dispersed or went over to the opposition. The prime minister resigned and the March elections were annulled, while Kurmanbek Bakiyev was named Prime Minister and interim president, then elected president in July 2005. The “revolution of the tulips” during which the opposition benefited from Western material aid, had won the day.

Bakiyev rapidly followed the road of his predecessor, discarding those who had brought him to power, tightening his regime around a clientelist base in the south of the country (the region of Jalal-Abad and Och), practicing nepotism and corruption. He took control of the media and began to intimidate opponents: after 2007, a number of them were attacked by persons unknown while others were found dead in mysterious circumstances. In July 2009, Bakiyev rigged the presidential election, declaring himself winner with 78% of the vote, whereas the true result, discovered after his downfall in the office of his brother, head of national security, placed him in third position and gave 52% of the vote to the social democrat Almazbek Atambaev. After this election he tightened the regime

still more around his cronies, naming his son, Maksim, as head of the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovation, which controlled the finances of the country. His brother, Zhanybek, already directed the Security Services. The regime privatised all the sectors of the economy. The years of drought, added to the pillage by the presidential team of the resources of this poor country [24] and harshly hit by the rise in price of raw materials, rendered living conditions unacceptable: daily electricity cuts, lack of running water, increase in food prices. In January the regime imposed a big increase in the price of services and announced a second wave of increased for July. Bakiyev had previously sold the energy companies at a very low price to companies controlled by his friends.

Path to insurrection

The rise in social tension was perceptible from the arrival of the bills in January: “Whereas they spent 20-30% of their wages to pay them, now they would spend around 80 % to pay for services” said a Bichkek analyst in early February [25]. On February 24 several hundred people demonstrated against the energy price rises in Naryn, at the centre of the country. The regional authorities promised to allow them to submit their demands. On March 10 several thousand again demonstrated in Naryn, now demanding the dismissal of the president’s son. On March 17 the oppositionists protested massively in Bichkek. On March 31 the regime had the court in Bichkek ban an over-independent newspaper, Forum, following the publication of the verses of a Kyrgyz poet: the terms “In a period of crisis each son of the homeland should turn into lightning” were considered as an “incitation to the organisation of a coup d’État”.

In March, in an attempt to mobilise his troops, Bakiyev began to set up “kurultai”, meetings of notables inspired by Kyrgyz tradition. But the idea was taken up by the opposition parties and the social movements, who also organised “kurultai”, much bigger

and which became embryos of civic self-organisation. The reaction of the regime was to forbid these “illegal assemblies” and multiply arrests, but the effect was to boost the popular mobilisations.

On April 6 in the city of Talas, following the arrest of Bolotbek Scherniyazov, director of the party Ata-Meken (Homeland), who had prepared a national meeting of self-organised “kurultai”, planned for April 7, several thousand demonstrators confronted the police, seized the building of the regional administration, constructed barricades defended with Molotov cocktails, occupied the airport and blocked the runways. The insurgents in Talas also installed a “governor of the people”.

Leaflets were addressed to the forces of repression: “Today the government uses you for its own goals. It imposes on you actions contrary to the law, it makes you attack opposition activists and the people who protest. Decide yourselves. We have confidence in your intelligence and your dignity. Think of your parents, brothers and sisters, your neighbours and friends, who must bear humiliation to live. Don’t forget that your children and your grandchildren grow up and want to be proud of their parents. The authorities remind you of your oath and your obligations to preserve the order. But the holy oath is a symbol of loyalty towards the homeland and not towards the Bakiyev family. You have taken the oath to preserve law and order, to be in the service of the people! We hope that you will respect this oath. A day will come when the reigning family will disappear and the time will come when everyone has to take responsibility. Down with Bakiyev! Enough of his familial law! Power should belong to the people!”

On April 7 the demonstrations spread in the capital, Bichkek, and overthrew the regime of Bakiyev. The forces of repression opened fire but were overcome by the people. The parties of the opposition set up a Central Executive Committee of the “Popular Kurultai of Kyrgyzstan” which in its first resolution announced : “So as to guarantee public safety and respect for the law, to prevent pillage and ensure the return to public life, the

Central Executive Committee of the Popular Kurultai has decided to form a popular militia, to appoint Madylbekov Turat commander of the city of Bichkek, to submit all the bodies of protection of order and all military personnel to the commander of Bichkek, to transfer all the resources of Internal Affairs to the commander of the city of Bichkek” Detachments of 40-50 popular militia members, originating from groups of insurgent youth, patrolled the city.

The appeals addressed the police and soldiers had an effect when it appeared that the latter could choose between two powers, that of Bakiyev, which was collapsing, and that of the insurgents which began to build itself. Little by little the majority of state employees chose the popular camp.

The Bakiyev regime fell. Bakiyev himself fled to the south of the country, where he organised meetings in his support in his home village and in Jalal-Abad, but with little success “” journalists who were there say that only a third of the people gathered (between several hundred and several thousand) applauded him, the others preferring to hedge their bets. In Jalal-Abad most people deserted the streets when he arrived, for fear of confrontation or out of hostility. In Och, shots disturbed a meeting of several thousand people organised by Bakiyev, forcing him to flee. Some members of parliament for his party, Ak-Zhol, who held 75 out of 90 seats in Parliament, demanded his resignation. The president also tried to obtain a military intervention by UN troops or the Kazakh or Uzbek armies, without success. He tried to negotiate the conditions of his resignation and finally, on April 16, he left the country with the help of the authorities in Kazakhstan.

Provisional government

In the name of the “Popular Kurtulai”, Rosa Otounbayeva took the head of a provisional government, announcing a new Constitution, the return to parliamentarianism, a new electoral code and elections within six months. Noting that Bakiyev had emptied the

state coffers by transferring the funds to private banks, the provisional government took control of the six private banks and closed the bureaux de change to try to prevent capital flight. There is also talk of renationalising the assets privatised by Bakiyev and the enterprises in strategic branches. Rosa Otounbayeva has admitted that the new regime has only found 22 million dollars in the state coffers, but has promised to lower rates for communal services.

The provisional government was set up by three political parties “” the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, the Socialist Party Ata-Meken, the Ak-Choumkar Party “” grouped inside the United Popular Movement, as well as by several non-governmental, trade union and independent associative organisations. However from its constitution those who had taken the “White House” have made known their discontent, demanding a third of governmental seats, which they have not obtained.

The main ministers in the provisional government are not unknown. All have already occupied ministerial or parliamentary posts or have been top civil servants. Rosa Otounbayeva had been a Soviet diplomat, then Prime Minister and Foreign Minister under Akayev and Bakiyev and ambassador of these two presidents. Currently leader of the SDPK, she has a reputation as incorruptible and does not seem to be involved in the factional struggles of the opposition, which was enough to place her at the head of the provisional government. Her first deputy, in charge of the economy, Almazbek Atambayev, director of the SDPK, was a minister under Bakiyev in 2005-2006, then oppositionist, then prime minister in 2007, then his adversary at the presidential election of 2009. General Ismail Isakov, the new head of the army and police, was minister of Defence and head of the Security Council under Bakiyev, who had him sentenced to eight years in prison in January 2010 after he had joined the opposition in October 2009. Temir Sariev, in charge of finances, was the presidential candidate of the Ak-Choumkar Party in 2009. Justice minister Azimbek Beknazarov has been prosecutor general. The

charismatic leader of the Socialist Party Ata Meken, responsible for constitutional reform, Omurbek Tekebaev, led the opposition to the Akayev regime, was candidate for president in 1995 and 2000, then president of the Parliament in 2005, then supported Bakiyev then broke with him in 2006. Finally Abdygany Erkebaev, founder and first president of the SDPK, was president of the Parliament, then leader of the opposition shadow cabinet formed in 2008.

As in any popular insurrection, when the workers do not have their own representation and political project it is the groups constituted "in Kyrgyzstan today the political parties formed by the elites previously carved out of power" who take the initiative. In the north of the country at least they now enjoy popular support, but not a blank cheque. Thus a report from Al Jazeera recently showed the homeless of Bichkek dividing up land in order to build houses. "The land doesn't belong to them, this has no validity" said a member of the militias of the provisional government who arrived at the scene. But he did nothing to remove the stones which had been put in place to mark out the land. Conflicts also broke out when Otounbayeva let it be understood that she was ready to let Bakiyev leave if he formally resigned the presidency. Demands to judge him for his crimes immediately appeared and finally the provisional government announced that it would

not negotiate with the criminal and the latter would be arrested and judged as soon as possible.

The vice-president of the Ata-Meken party, Rayshan Jeenbekov, has said: "If we resolve the socio-economic problems in one or two months, then this government will stabilise and can last perhaps longer. But if we do not resolve these problems, if we are not capable of punishing all the guilty of the authoritarian regime of Bakiyev, then we will face a big question." [26]

The parties who took the head of the insurrection and formed the provisional government had a democratic project "parliamentarianism, the reject of autocracy and so on" but no programme of social transformation which would improve the lives of the great majority of the population, nor even an imagination allowing an orientation in this direction. The balance of failure of the USSR renders this imagination difficult. The forms of self-organisation which began to emerge in March "the popular kurtulai" rapidly turned towards insurrectional combat, their most active members took up arms, but discussions on a social project did not develop. To feed, clothe and house themselves, people were left to their own devices, forms of collective action in this area were slow to appear. The low level of industrialisation of the country does not lead naturally to self-organisation in the workplaces.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan represents a

strategic base in central Asia. The existence on its territory of Russian and US military bases witnesses to the fact, as does the latent conflict between the two powers. These bases were not at the centre of the preoccupations of the insurgents. The Russian and US governments, surprised by the popular explosion, aspire above all to re-establish social peace in Kyrgyzstan. To do this they are ready to provide financial aid to the provisional government. But this aid is not given solely to secure their bases, it will be conditional on the ability of the new regime to control the population and preserve the social model whose bankruptcy since 1991 needs no further demonstration.

The Kyrgyz popular insurrection is a magnificent example of what the oppressed are capable of in overthrowing an autocracy. It has broken down one of the doors blocking social transformation. It has rendered more fragile private ownership of the means of production by putting pressure on the most significant swindlers at the moment "the Bakiyev family. It is both enormous and insufficient. In order for the revolution to grow into a social transformation, an emancipatory popular revolution, the people must construct their own forms of self-organisation, find a programme and equip themselves with a strategy.

A new page of history has opened in Kyrgyzstan. The rest remains to be written!

Statement on the European crisis

3 May 2010

1. The global economic crisis continues. Massive amounts of money have been injected into the financial system - \$14 trillion in bailouts in the United States, Britain, and the eurozone, \$1.4 trillion new bank loans in China last year - in an effort to restabilize the world economy. But it remains an open question whether or

not these efforts will be enough to produce a sustainable recovery. Growth remains very sluggish in the advanced economies, while unemployment continues to rise. There are fears that a new financial bubble centred this time on China is developing. The protracted character of the crisis - which is the most severe

since the Great Depression - reflects its roots in the very nature of capitalism as a system.

2. After a harsh wave of job cuts, in Europe the focus on the crisis is now on the public sector and social welfare system. The very financial markets that have been rescued thanks to the

bailouts are now up in arms about the increase in government borrowing this has involved. They are demanding massive cuts in public expenditure. This amounts to a class attempt to shift the costs of the crisis from those who precipitated it – above all, the banks – to working people – not just those employed in the public sector but also all those who consume public services. The demands for austerity and public sector ‘reform’ are the clearest sign that neoliberalism, intellectually discredited by the crisis, nevertheless continues to dominate policy-making.

3. Greece is currently in the eye of the storm. It is one of several European economies that are particularly vulnerable, partly because of a buildup of debt during the boom, partly because they find it hard to compete with Germany, the giant of the eurozone. Under pressure from the financial markets, the European Commission, and the German government, the government of George Papandreou has torn up its election promises and announced cuts amounting to four per cent of national income.

4. Fortunately Greece has a magnificent history of social resistance running back to the 1970s. Following on from the youth revolt of December 2008, the Greek workers’ movement has responded to the government’s cuts packages with a wave of strikes and demonstrations. We also welcome the example of the Iceland referendum in which people rejected debt refunding imposed by the banks.

5. Greek workers need the solidarity of socialists, trade unionists, and anti-capitalists everywhere. Greece is simply the first European country to have been targeted by the financial markets, but they have plenty of others in their sights, first of all, Spain

and Portugal.

6. We need a programme of measures that can lift the economy out of crisis on the basis of giving priority to people’s needs rather than profits and imposing democratic control over the market. We need to stand for an anti capitalist answer: our life, our health, our jobs before profits.

- All cuts in domestic public expenditure to be halted or reversed: stop pensions ‘reform’; health and education are not for sale;

- A guaranteed right to work and a programme of public investment in green jobs – public transport, renewable energy industries, and adapting private and public buildings to reduce carbon dioxide emissions;

- For a public banking service and financial system under public control!

- No scapegoating of immigrants and refugees: legalize them!

- No to military expenditure: Withdrawal of Western troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, drastic cuts in military spending, and the dissolution of NATO

7. We resolve to organize European solidarity activities against cuts and capitalist attacks. A victory for Greek workers will strengthen resistance to the cuts elsewhere.

Greece : Aristeri Anasynthesi, Aristeri Antikapitalistiki Syspirosi, Organosi Kommuniston Diethniston Elladas-Spartakos, Sosialistiko Ergatiko Komma, Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras (Syriza) ;

Portugal : Bloco de Esquerda ;

Austria : Linkswende ;

Belgium : Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire - Sozialistische arbeiterspartij ;

Britain : Socialist Resistance, Socialist Workers Party ;

Croatia : Radnička borba ;

Czech Republic : Socialistická Solidarita ;

Cyprus : Ergatiki Dimokratia, Yeni Kibris Partisi ;

Denmark : Socialistisk Arbejderparti ;

Euskadi : Gogoa ;

France : Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste ;

Germany : Internationale Sozialistische Linke, Marx21, Revolutionärer Sozialistischer Bund ;

Italy : Sinistra Critica ;

Ireland : People Before Profit Alliance, Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Democracy ;

Netherlands : Internationale Socialisten, Grenzeloos ;

Poland : Polska Partia Pracy, Pracownicza Demokracja ;

Russia : Vpered ;

Scotland : Scottish Socialist Party ;

Serbia : marks21 ;

Spanish State : En lucha/En lluita, Izquierda Anticapitalista, Partido Obrero Revolucionario ;

Sweden : Socialistiska Partiet, Internationella Socialister ;

Switzerland : Gauche anticapitaliste, Mouvement pour le socialisme /Bewegung für Sozialismus, solidarités ;

Turkey : Devrimci Sosyalist ??çi Partisi, Â-zgürlük ve Dayan??ma Partisi.

Fiscal crisis or a crisis of distribution?

30 April 2010, by Özlem Onaran

However, the decline in the labor share has been the source of a potential realization crisis for the system. The decline in the purchasing power of workers limited their potential to consume. Demand deficiency and financial deregulation reduced investments despite increasing profitability. Thus neoliberalism only replaced the profit squeeze and over-accumulation problems of the 1970s with the realization problem. Financial innovations and debt-led consumption seemed to offer a short-term solution to this potential realization crisis. Since summer 2007 this solution has also collapsed. The crisis was tamed via major banking rescue packages and fiscal stimuli. Now the financial speculators and corporations are relabeling the crisis as a “fiscal” or “sovereign debt crisis” and pressurizing the governments in diverse countries ranging from Greece to Britain to cut spending to avoid taxes on their profits and wealth. The governments agreeing to the cuts are acting as if these same speculators were not the beneficiaries of decades long neoliberal policies and the main creators of the crisis. The public spending cuts are being formulated as “cutting the waste” and are obscuring the fact that public debt would not be there, if it were not for the bank rescue packages, counter-cyclical fiscal stimuli, and the loss of tax revenues due to the crisis. The pressure on wages associated with budget cuts is great news for the corporations! However the push for public debt reduction is the biggest threat to recovery. It is debatable where the recovery will come from, even if the bottom of the recession were reached, once the fiscal stimuli are withdrawn.

Wage suppression, global imbalances and Europe

The realization crisis at the origin of

the crisis based on wage suppression was deeply connected to global imbalances. The debt-led consumption model generated a current account deficit in countries like US and Britain. This deficit was financed by the surpluses of developed countries such as Germany and Japan, developing countries like China and South Korea, or the oil rich Middle Eastern nations. In most cases current account surpluses were made possible by wage suppression.

In the European context, the wage suppression strategy and current account surpluses of countries like Germany were matched with current account deficits, public or private debt in the periphery of the Euro Zone, in particular in Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland or in Eastern Europe, in particular in Hungary, Baltic States, Romania, and Bulgaria, and also in some core countries like Britain and Italy. The crisis laid bare the historical divergences within Europe, and now transformed the global crisis into a European crisis.

The crisis once again showed that the EU with its current institutions is a union of banks and corporations. The European Central Bank (ECB), who acted as a lender of last resort to the private European banks, did not fulfill the same function in the case of the Euro zone governments due to its legal statute. ECB is forbidden to buy government bonds of the member states directly. The banks were not only bailed out by the ECB, but also the macroeconomic environment in which they are operating was supported by counter-cyclical expansionary fiscal policy to prevent the recession turning into a great depression. Now it is again the same banks who are asking for high interest rates against the default risk of the governments with high budget deficits and public debt and threatening to stop lending to the governments who fail to reduce the risk of default.

In countries like Greece where both public debt and budget deficit are high and coupled with a high current

account deficit, the attack of the speculators has brought the country to the edge of a sovereign debt crisis. Indeed before Greece, in 2009 Eastern European countries were under attack. After Greece, attention soon turned to Portugal and Spain.

At the root of the problem is the neoliberal model that turned the periphery of Europe to markets for the core countries without any prospect of catching up. The lack of a sufficiently large European budget and significant fiscal transfers targeting productive investments in the periphery prevented convergence in productivity with respect to the core. Stability and Growth Pact as well as EU competition regulations limited the implementation of national industrial policy. In the absence of industrial policy and productive investments to boost productivity and unable to increase their relative competitiveness by devaluing their currency after the adoption of Euro, the strategy of competitiveness was based mainly on wage moderation, and increased deregulation and precarization in the labor markets. However, wage moderation also did not save countries like Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, since Germany was engaged in a much more aggressive wage and labor market policy. Overall, labor's share in income declined sharply in Europe.

Between 2000-2007 nominal unit labor costs declined by 0.2% a year in Germany while raising by 2% in France, 2.3% in Britain, between 3.2% and 3.7% in Italy, Spain, Ireland, and Greece. In particular in the periphery nominal labor costs have increased faster than in Germany due to a higher rate of inflation. This however does not mean that there was no wage moderation in these countries: in the 1990s and 2000s productivity increases exceeded changes in real wages in all Western EU countries. In Germany as well as in Italy, Spain, and Portugal real wages even declined in the 2000s, with the gap being largest in Germany. The phenomenal competitive advantage of Germany

was simply due to wage suppression rather than increasing productivity. Indeed the productivity increase in Germany has been quite modest; e.g. lower than in Britain, Ireland, Greece, and Portugal in the period of 1991-2007.

With weak domestic demand due to low wages, exports were the main source of growth in Germany, but this has led to the current account surpluses at the expense of the current account deficits in the periphery of the EU. Indeed Germany is like the China of Europe with large current account surplus, high savings and low domestic demand. In the countries of the periphery consumption led by private debt has filled in the gap that low exports and high imports have created. In Greece and to a lesser extent Portugal fiscal deficits also increased along with the debt of the households and corporations.

This is the background of the sovereign debt crisis in the periphery, as it was unleashed in Greece in December 2009. Following speculations about Greece's default and exit from the Euro zone, the Euro zone governments' decision to deal with the crisis in Greece came at the end of March 2010 after months of hesitation and worries about Germany's constitution court, who could rule out any bailout as being against the treaties. As part of a package involving substantial IMF financing and a majority of European financing via coordinated bi-lateral loans, Euro area member states declared their readiness to support Greece. Any disbursement is subject to severe cuts based on an assessment by the European Commission and the ECB. The loan will only be made available, if Greece cannot borrow in the financial markets, and interest rate will be at a penalty rate. However the speculators are aware that this is not a solution to Greece's insolvency problem and find the amount insufficient to avoid a default. In April 2010, as the IMF and the Eurozone technocrats were bargaining the conditions of the credit, the interest rate of the two-year government bonds increased to almost 15% and Greek bonds were downgraded to junk status. The contagion started to

threaten Spain and Portugal, whose bonds were also downgraded slightly; in Ireland the interest rates on bonds increased and eyes turned to the sovereign debt problem in the core countries like Italy, Belgium, Britain, and even the US. The later increase in the amount of the package will only postpone the problem. EU does not question the reasons behind the deficits; it ignores all the structural problems regarding divergence in productivity, imbalances in current accounts due to the "beggar my neighbor" policies of Germany. Unexpectedly, the original €30 billion bailout package planned by the Eurozone governments is estimated to be roughly the amount the European Banks, most of which are based in Germany and France, would be losing on their holdings of the Greek government bonds, if Greece had to restructure its debt (The Economist, 2010a); thus the Eurozone governments are indeed bailing out their own banks. Under the pressure of the banks' speculation the initially spelt amount turned out to be the first part of a larger 3-year package.

The role model pointed out by the EU politicians for Greece was Ireland: Ireland has already smashed public sector wages between 5-15%, cut social welfare and other spending in order to decrease its budget deficit from 12.5% in 2009 to 2.9% in 2014. These brutal spending cuts in Ireland have been praised since they have restored market confidence without aid from the EU. However this did not prevent the speculators from asking higher interest rates on Irish bonds after the contagion effects of the crisis in Greece. The other role model celebrated for its self-discipline has been Latvia, who has managed a real devaluation not by abandoning its pegged exchange rate, but by deep cuts in wages and public spending, at the cost of 25.0% loss of GDP in two years and 22.9% unemployment in 2009.

Greece is now pushed to cut its budget deficit from 13.6% of GDP in 2009 to 3% in 2013 via dramatic cuts in spending, public sector wages, increase in retirement age, tax hikes, sale of public land, and a fight against tax evasion -the only correct thing in the package. The bulk of the austerity

measures will hurt the working people. However it is unclear how the austerity plan will rescue Greece from insolvency: as the recession becomes deeper, tax revenues will become lower and despite severe cuts, budget deficit might not improve. The high interest rates are also increasing the problem of insolvency further. The Economist (2010b) estimates that nominal GDP of Greece will be 5% lower by 2014, if it is to reduce its budget deficit to 2.6% of GDP by 2014, which would however still mean a debt to GDP ratio of 153%.

Outside the Euro zone, Britain is another major plot of race between the mainstream parties on how and when to reduce the budget deficit. Although the deficit is one of the highest in the EU with a ratio of 11.7% to GDP in 2009, the whole buzz about Britain's public debt is surprising when one considers that average maturity of the debt is 13.7 years, the interest rate is at historical lows, and the ratio of debt to GDP is 68.6%. Moreover part of the increase in the public debt to GDP ratio is because of a lower GDP. Since the end of 2009 the recession has turned into stagnation; public sector cuts at this stage would turn stagnation into a double dip recession. The presumed positive effect of reduced budget deficit on private investments is based on the argument that lower government borrowing leads to lower interest rates and a higher private investment and consumption. Under the current conditions where consumers are trying to reduce their debt, investments are postponed due to uncertainty about the recovery and interest rates are already low, this channel has no relevance. Decline in income and confidence, job losses, the pressure to pay back debt is restraining household consumption. Both investments and consumption will not return back to normal even when the banks relax credit. Under these circumstances the talk about a fiscal crisis looks more like an excuse of the business lobbies to avoid tax increases to finance the budget deficit, and make the wage earners pay the costs of the crisis through cuts in income, jobs, and social services, and to create a situation of "national emergency" to smash the remaining power of the trade unions in the public

sector.

The austerity packages throughout the EU are pushing the countries into a model of chronically low internal demand. The deflationary consequences of wage cuts may turn the problem of debt to insolvency for private as well as the public sector. In the past in Germany low domestic demand was substituted by high demand for exports. But it is not possible to turn the whole Europe into a German model based on wage suppression and austerity, since without the deficits of the others German export market will also stagnate. As the world's periphery comes out of the recession, this demand can help the exporters of Germany for some time, but not every country can be the winner in this game. Particularly for the periphery of Europe contracting domestic demand means prolonged stagnation or even recession, which is neither economically nor politically stable.

Real wages have already declined in 2008-09 compared to 2007 in Britain, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Hungary, the Baltic Countries, and Romania. Ireland, Greece, Portugal, and Spain are preparing for severe real wage cuts in 2010. Sharp and long-lasting increases in unemployment are likely to make the wage losses much stronger. Unemployment has increased in 2009 by 1.9%-points in the Euro area, 2.3%-points in Britain. Particularly high increases took place in Ireland and Spain (6.0 and 6.7%-points respectively) due to the collapse of the construction sector and loss of temporary jobs. Unemployment is expected to increase further and display a significant persistence. Firms might want to make use of the recession to rationalize a strategy of increasing productivity and start a new wave of firing or engage in hiring freezes long after the recovery. If firms increase the working hours and delay hiring, this would worsen the job chances of the unemployed and the young first time job seekers. The crisis then will lead to an increase in long term unemployment as well as discouraged workers who drop out of the labor market. There are also structural problems of unemployment in sectors like automotive industry and construction, where the crisis only

uncovered the already existing bottlenecks. Recovery of the aggregate economy will not necessarily create jobs in these sectors.

For an internationalist Europe!

Although the costs of the rescue packages are clear, no effort is being made to make the responsible and the wealthy pay the costs. The tax on bank bonuses in Britain only targets a small dimension of the problem. The economic crisis is intermingled with the ecological crisis, and showing that capitalism is economically, ecologically, and politically unstable and unsustainable. The struggles emerging all over Europe can be turned into a leverage for developing an internationalist alternative to the crisis in Europe. The existing wage suppression policies of the different EU countries have hurt the working people of these countries alike. The popular argument in Germany that Greece has a public spending crisis is hiding the point that it is the German workers' loss of wages, unemployment benefits, and pension rights in the last decade, which has created an important part of the imbalances in Europe.

Uncovering this truth is an important step towards building a working peoples' alliance for an alternative Europe. An internationalist solution might generate a more powerful front in the core and the periphery compared to national alternatives, e.g. as suggested by Lapavistas and colleagues (2010) for Greece based on exit from the Euro and an anti-capitalist agenda. A national solution in a small country is destined for isolation and a long term persistence of the problems of underdevelopment. Moreover, tactically speaking, in the current situation in Europe, anti-European and anti-Euro policies are more likely to mobilize nationalist, right-wing mobilization than a pro-labor anti-capitalist strategy.

The left strategy has more to gain from an internationalist alternative.

The major crisis calls for a major policy restructuring in the direction of a democratically planned, participatory socialist economic model and the starting point is the urgent problems of employment, distribution, and ecological sustainability:

- public employment in public transport, insulation of the existing housing stock, building zero energy houses, renewable energy, education, child care, nursing homes, health, community and social services
- a substantial shortening of working time (in parallel with the historical rate of growth of labor productivity) without income losses for the workers to achieve full employment at a low growth rate consistent with the carbon emission targets
- firing freeze and wage floors in the private firms, re-appropriation of the bankrupt firms under workers' control supported by public credits.
- a minimum wage coordinated at the EU level
- a European unemployment benefit system to redistribute from low to high unemployment regions
- an EU budget at the level of 5% of EU GDP financed by EU level progressive taxes.
- tax coordination for higher and progressive corporate tax rates, inheritance tax, wealth and income taxes with the highest marginal tax rate increasing to 90% above an income threshold, which corresponds to the income of the richest 1% of the population
- a progressive wealth tax on the stocks of government bonds with the highest marginal tax rate reaching to 100% above a certain threshold to restructure the public debt
- abolish the Stability and Growth Pact;
- turn the ECB into a real central bank with the ability to lend to member states as well as European Bank for Reconstruction and Development;
- nationalize the banking sector and other key sectors such as energy,

transport, housing, education, health, social security under democratic participation and control of the workers and the stakeholders (consumers, regional representatives etc.);

- capital controls within and across the borders of Europe.

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