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Eastern Europe faced with the crises of the system

29 September 2010, by Catherine Samary

The entry of Eastern Europe into the new world order in the 1980s...

The 1970s had been a decade marked by a crisis of profit and of the world order, striking the countries of the capitalist centre. For their part, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe remained, as was exemplified by Czechoslovakia, dependent on the economic “support” of the USSR, backed up by its tanks... Their debt towards Moscow, in non-convertible roubles (in the framework of the barter relations within Comecon - the Community of Mutual Economic Aid, governing the exchanges between countries with planned economies) was from now coupled with a second debt, this one denominated in hard currencies, and it had become heavy. The USSR was not involved in this debt, as it was still subject to a Cold War boycott, both financial and industrial, that had blocked any imports of cutting-edge technology since 1917. The opening up to Western imports, aimed at a certain acquisition of modern technologies, was thus done (with the agreement of

the USSR) by the countries of Eastern Europe which were not subjected to the Western boycott. It also corresponded, for the regimes concerned, to the search for imports of Western consumer goods to attenuate popular discontent after the impasse of the economic reforms of the 1960s. It was also for them a question of obtaining certain Western technologies with the aim of improving the quality and the productivity of their exports: these exports would then make it possible to repay the debts in foreign currencies. But bureaucratic conservatism did very little to make the technological imports effective and the debt steadily increased, accentuated by the rise in interest rates at the beginning of the 1980s.

However, at the same time, the coming to power of Reagan opened up, after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, an ultimate phase of the arms race, which weighed heavily on the USSR in the first half of the 1980s. It made it possible on the contrary for the United States to take the offensive on several terrains concerning their own multidimensional crisis: on the internal level, public spending on armaments strongly supported research and innovation, while re-launching the economy (which was in recession at the beginning of the decade); at the same time, on the

international level, it was the first phase of a re-conquest of politico-military and technological hegemony that the military interventions in the following decade would ensure. The technological revolution that was underway in the United States and in general in the developed capitalist countries, an essential element for the ruling classes to restructure social relations and the world order, was going to widen the differentials with the USSR and Eastern Europe, whereas these differentials had been historically reduced after the Second World War and up until the 1970s.

The decade of the 1980s was thus marked by a debt crisis of several Eastern European countries - Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland and the GDR - which, incapable of profoundly reforming themselves without major anti-bureaucratic social transformations, had launched out in the preceding decade into imports of Western technologies, financed by private credit [1]. This debt crisis opened a new historical phase, making it possible for real external pressures to weigh on the societies of Eastern Europe at the very moment when the USSR of Gorbachev was turning towards an external “disengagement”. This aimed at obtaining Western credits that were necessary for its own modernization. The search for hard

currency to pay for imports thus resulted also in new pressures and tensions within COMECON at the end of the 1980s - the USSR from now demanding repayment of what was due to it, and if possible in hard currencies... and making its priority in foreign policy the search for Western finance and technologies: thus a "withdrawal" from any interventionism, exemplified by the agreement negotiated with Chancellor Kohl on German unification...

Meanwhile, the five indebted countries of Eastern Europe had experienced differentiated politico-economic orientations, which all played a decisive part in the historical turning point of the "transition" towards a change of system at the start of the 1980s:

- The Yugoslav Federation, under pressure from the IMF in the 1980s, was paralysed by the rise of social and national conflicts and by three-figure hyperinflation, reflecting the loss of overall coherence of the system. The wars of ethnic cleaning which accompanied the dismantlement of the Yugoslav federation and system, and the impasses of the European and U.N. peace plans, were instrumentalized by the United States to redeploy NATO after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact: the Yugoslav crisis was a decisive stage towards the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region [2]

- The Hungarian Communist leaders were the only ones to decide to respond to the crisis of the external debt by selling the country's best enterprises to foreign capital - which initially made it possible to attenuate the internal austerity policy, and made Hungary, in the first years of the following decade of "transition", the principal host country for foreign direct investment. Nor did they hesitate, following on the new European relations established by Gorbachev, to help to bring down the Wall, for a price...

- On the other hand, the dictator Ceausescu was aiming at paying back the whole of the Romanian debt on the backs of his people - something which the Romanian nomenklatura finally decided was so explosive for itself that

it fomented a pseudo "revolution" and arranged the death of the dictator at the end of the 1980s.

- At the same time, the absorption of the GDR by the Federal Republic of Germany was decided on - with the agreement of the USSR, which received some financial counterparts from Germany, accompanying the repatriation of its troops.

- Lastly, after the repression of Solidarnosc under the regime of the Polish general Jaruzelski, compromise agreements made possible the introduction of liberal shock therapy in Poland, backed up by the cancellation of the Polish debt decided on by the United States at the beginning of the 1990s: no expense was spared to win over the new "elites" "who were in power to privatizations... and to NATO.

But what kind of "growth" (measured by GDP - Gross Domestic Product) thus emerged from the destruction of the old system under the conditions of a peripherisation (in the sense of subordination to external criteria and financing) which preceded entry into the EU...

It is necessary to distinguish two major phases... and to underline the Slovenian variant, before the reversal of policy in 2008-2009.

From 1989 to the end of the years 1990: a "systemic crisis" and "privatizations without capital"

The 1990s was overall the decade of the destruction of the old system (privatizations, changes of the criteria of management...) in two stages: the first half of the decade was marked by declines in growth of 20-30 per cent in all the branches of the economy. Then recovery took place [3], unequally, but with job losses and widening of income differentials: "inequality increased in all the economies of transition", which "began the

transition with levels of inequality that were among the lowest in the world" [4].

We cannot understand, without these source data, why within the framework of pluralist elections - the main thing that had been won compared to the former regimes - the popular votes went... to the former Communists from the very first years of the 1990s. This was not a question of nostalgia for the one-party state - which was radically rejected - but of the right to employment and to access for all to basic goods and services. Except that the "ex" no longer defended these rights, which were excluded from the kind of growth and "convergence" advocated by the old Europe. From now on, the proclamation of "catching up" was only based on the comparison (East/West) of rates of growth of GDP - which is in no way an indicator of "wellbeing".

The convergence of systems had privatizations as a "marker". But with what money-capital? The old system did not make accumulation possible and those who had formerly run the party-state preferred to be the recipients of privatizations... Thus were invented the "mass privatizations" carried out (in various forms) by the legal transformation of enterprises into private limited companies. Their "social capital" was divided into shares and distributed virtually for nothing, partly to workers and citizens and the remainder to the state. Only Hungary and Estonia chose at the beginning of the "transition" to sell their best enterprises for "real" money-capital" - in other words to sell them to foreign capital [5].

From 1999 to 2008: the "big-bang" of the enlargement of the EU to the East and of profoundly unbalanced growth

The undertaking by the EU to admit ten countries of Eastern and Central

Europe [6], decided in 1999, aimed in fact to contain increasing popular discontent. This has been expressed up to now on the electoral level by the rise of the rate of abstention and by xenophobic votes, as well as by the political difficulty of building governmental majorities. The choice of enlargement was thus geopolitical. But it was not accompanied by the means of establishing socio-economic stability.

The difference in per capita GDP between the poorest and the richest states of the Union was, with the entry of Spain and Portugal in 1986, from 1 to 4.9. With the arrival of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, it increased to 20.1. But whereas enlargement towards the countries of Southern Europe and Ireland was accompanied by an increase in the "structural funds" of the European budget, it was the opposite which was decided in the EU's "Agenda 2000". Germany had only given up the deutschmark by obtaining severe budgetary rules; and it did not want to "pay out" for the integration of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe [7]. However enlargement "paid in" for Germany: it delocalized many workshops there, exerting downward pressure on German wages and basing its (weak) growth during the 2000 decade on export surpluses. But the European budget was fixed at a ceiling of one per cent of European GDP (against some 20 per cent for the US federal budget), whereas the Treaty of Maastricht limited debts and public deficits while furthermore prohibiting (in order to join the euro zone) any financing of states by the central banks at reduced or zero rates.

So on the whole these countries were encouraged to turn to private financing, which was supposedly effective and associated with the freedom of movement of capital.

How to attract foreign direct investment (FDI)? By social (reducing wages and social protection) and fiscal dumping. The rate of company tax fell by 8.4 points between 2000 and 2009, the lowest rates being in the East, in particular 15 per cent in Latvia (compared with an average of 23.5 per cent in the EU 27) [8]. In order to respect the "criteria", the contraction

of revenues from tax was accompanied in general by cutting welfare expenditure. Hungary, which wanted to increase its budget for education and health between 2003 and 2006, had to turn to the financial markets to finance its deficit, which reached 9 per cent.

But freedom of movement of capital opened another source of private funding: banks. After privatizations without capital, the new decade was that of an organic banking dependence that was encouraged by membership of the EU: in 2008 [9], in the 10 new member states except Slovenia, banking debts were mainly held by foreign banks (between 65 and 80 per cent for Latvia and Poland, and for the seven others between 82 and... 100 per cent).

Slovenia obstinately kept some 70 per cent of its banking activities under public control, and also the bulk of its infrastructures (energy, transport...) in spite of the repeated reproaches of the European Commission, the World Bank, the OECD and the EBRD [10]... The important role of the trade unions (specific to Slovenia) which organized several general strikes, limited the cutting of taxes and wages. Slovenia thus has the weakest "comparative advantages" of all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as regards wages... and the lowest level of FDI per capita between 1989 and 2008, (1500 dollars, as against an average of approximately 4500 dollars, and more than 6500 for Hungary and Estonia). However, its level of GDP per capita is the highest of all those countries, close to that of Spain...

Which did not prevent it getting "bad marks" for non-compliance with the "rules" of pure and perfect competition... between unequals.

The new East European periphery faced with the test of the crisis

Almost the whole of the 1700 billion dollars of East European borrowing is

in fact held by West European banks (between them Austria, Italy, France, Belgium, Germany and Sweden alone hold some 84 per cent). However, private banks gave priority to buying public debt and to consumer credit, facilitating the access of the multinationals to the retail sector... and to investments in real estate. The frenzy of debt-fuelled consumption (in a context of impoverishment) thus underlay the recent leap in growth (in particular in the Baltic States) accompanied by profound imbalances in the balance of trade, particularly in those countries where foreign exchange rates "were stabilized" by being rigidly pegged to the euro (the Baltic States in particular).

At the beginning of the 2000 decade, the international lowering of interest rates had encouraged taking on debt in foreign currencies wherever the exchange rates were favourable. Nearly 90 per cent of Hungarian mortgages since 2006 have been denominated in Swiss francs and the total amount of loans in Swiss francs outside of Switzerland has been estimated to be the equivalent of 500 billion euros. Forty-five per cent of the entire Hungarian market in real estate loans and 40 per cent of all consumer loans are denominated in Swiss francs rather than in the national currency, the forint - which became a trap when interest rates on Swiss francs increased and capital flight made the forint drop in value.

The amount of the loans granted (in particular by Austrian and Swedish institutions) is the equivalent of 20 per cent of GDP in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia and 90 per cent in the Baltic States. These countries had to refund or refinance the equivalent of 400 billion dollars in 2009 - the equivalent of one third of the region's GDP.

From September 2008 outflows of capital and the contraction of exports started to affect several countries, which called on the IMF, first of all those whose growth had been most dependent on external loans and financing (Hungary, Ukraine, and the Baltic States). But in 2009 only Poland [11] had a slightly positive growth rate; in the other countries the drop ranged from around 3 per cent to

more than 10 per cent and was sharpest in the three Baltic States, accompanied by political and social crises.

Questions began to be raised [12]: "the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were (...), even before the crisis affected them, weakened by the imbalances inherent in their model of growth. So the convergence outlined (...) was probably not an intrinsically sustainable process (...). But it needed what the crisis revealed for that to appear clearly" [13].

However, the concern expressed by the 2009 report of the EBRD is entirely devoted to the safeguarding... of the privatizations and market financing which incarnate "the transition". It is delighted (and rightly so) that the Western banks which are organically implicated in those countries did not behave like simple speculative funds and withdraw from the region. But there is a contraction of financing in the face of the risks involved.

A look back at the "generous" choices of the "historical" unification of the continent...

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 opened a new historical phase for Eastern Europe. But it also marked a turning point at the heart of neo-liberal globalisation and European construction.

The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 tried to contain the socio-economic and political heterogeneity of the member states by narrowly monetarist criteria which are applied in none the richest countries of the planet (Japan, the United States...): limitation of public deficits and debt associated with the ban imposed on the central banks of the eurozone financing member states. Behind largely arbitrary criteria, what was being negotiated was Germany's abandonment of the deutschmark and its distrust of the "laxness" of the peripheral countries -

in fact, since the countries of Central and eastern Europe were still far from even being part of the EU, it was the southern periphery of the Union that Germany distrusted as regards the creation of the euro and the future status of the European Central Bank: it was out of the question (and Germany inscribed it in its constitution) that the ECB should assist a member state in difficulty. But while each national budget had to tend towards being balanced, there was no any question of an increased European budget to compensate for this constraint.

Whereas preceding enlargements towards the countries of the South were accompanied by an increase in the European budget (in particular with what were called the funds of "cohesion") to help those countries whose GDP was lower than the Community average, the new enlargement was going to be done on a minimum European budget. The Franco-German axis imposed in the 2000 decade of the "historical" enlargement towards the East a levelling off of this budget at one per cent of European GDP (whereas the United States has a federal budget of some 20 per cent of GDP): the EU thus has a single monetary policy which has different effects on a heterogeneous whole, without a budget that can compensate for these asymmetries by redistributive measure, and imposing as a common "value", a right of competition that takes precedence over the principles of solidarity and social protection.

But behind these criteria, there were great asymmetries in the powers that states had, and in particular a "German exception", codified as such in the draft European Constitutional Treaty: over more than ten years, the budgetary transfers of the Federal Republic of Germany towards the new Länder came to more than 100 billion DM per annum (more, each year, that the entire total of private capital investing in Central and Eastern Europe during this whole period). In the course of the decade, these colossal resources were not used to improve the wellbeing of the East Germans (as was demonstrated by their political discontent and the way they voted) but to dismantle the social

state, to encourage privatizations and to keep wages under the pressure of competition with the wage levels in neighbouring Eastern Europe...

Relocations were encouraged by the enlargement of the Union. And Germany took advantage of its proximity to the new member states of the East to impose drastic wage austerity: between 2000 and 2007, nominal unit labour costs of fell by 0.2 per cent per annum in Germany, whereas they increased by 2 per cent in France, 2.3 per cent in Britain, between 3.2 and 3.7 per cent in Italy, Spain, Ireland and Greece - with, in the peripheral countries, a nominal increase that was all the greater because inflation was higher there...

And there we had another major destabilizing element of this construction: (weak) German growth was based on export surpluses, with low inflation and weak domestic demand and a sharp drop in wages helped by the relocation of German workshops to Eastern Europe. But to the German surpluses there corresponded growing deficits in the periphery of Southern and Eastern Europe, without however these representing homogeneous entities [14].

Overall, alongside "new Europe" whose subordinate situation marked the long phase of adhesion, the periphery of the South of the eurozone is a "weak link" of "old asymmetrical Europe": Germany determined, along with France, the Maastricht criteria of but was one of the first not to respect them; Germany holds the purse-strings of the budget, emphasising how much it contributes... without saying what it earns via its exports... It exploits the present crisis by speculating on the euro and on the public debt of Greece, Spain and the most fragile states, in order to consolidate its own options of wage and social austerity.

The instrumentalizacao

n of public debt and the recourse to the IMF to impose new austerity plans: from the peripheries to the centre?

It is the power struggles between states, the power of each one of them, and domestic social resistances which determine in fact the criteria of the management of public debt. And the principal countries which have on the level of their discourse preached a “withdrawal by the state” in favour of markets and private savings have experienced for thirty years an increase in their public deficits. These were, in the United States as well as in old Europe and Japan, much higher than during the post-war boom, which was marked by the social intervention of states [15]: as far as incoming revenue was concerned, there was lower tax revenue both because of the slowing down of growth and as a result of the neo-liberal choices of tax exemptions for capital. Welfare spending fell but could not disappear with the rise of unemployment and of social resistance; in the United States, in the 1980s, the last decade of the Cold War, and in the 2000 decade, the rise in arms spending led to a colossal increase in deficits, supporting growth... And in a general way, the recourse to the emission of bonds for public debt (rather than financing of the deficit by the central bank) has been accompanied by an increase in interest rates (and thus of “debt servicing”) in order to attract speculative capital...

In other words the new phase of crisis of public debt fits into a long-term framework that is profoundly marked by the failures of liberalism. But it also represents a new phase of the banking crisis of 2007-2009, whose epicentre is located at the United States and which is becoming a worldwide crisis. It is the massive bail-outs of private banks, victims of their own appetites

and financial instruments, and the economic stimulus programmes initiated in the face of with the world recession, which have nourished the new crisis that is affecting Europe in particular. The bail-outs of private banks by the central banks and the economic stimulus programmes initiated by states have stopped the drop in growth, but not the lay-offs or the speculative logics, which are still functioning. And today the banks are using the sums they receive at derisory interest rates against the states which bailed them out...

The ideological discourse on public debt seeks on the one hand to camouflage, behind the urgency and “the obviousness” of the necessity of austerity, to what extent this “necessity” is of variable geometry; and on the other, to obscure what are the real causes of debt, associated with the transformations that have been carried out since the beginning of the 1980s. The change in the share of added value to the detriment of wages, considered as costs to be compressed, has been accompanied by a rise in household debt to sustain consumption... In particular as regards real estate... The increasing share of profits that are not reinvested is directed towards speculative investment associated with various financial operations and with freedom of movement of capital. Liberal promises to bring efficiency and freedom mean today the lengthening of working time, the destruction of social protection and of the environment, and the reign of all-powerful money in access to education, housing and health (and for millions of peasants, to land and water).

Going to the root of the crises...

The three crises whose effects are combining (the crisis of 2007-2009, coming from the US heart of the globalized system; the one that threatens the euro from its weak links; and the one that started to affect Eastern Europe in 2009) have a major common point: whether we are talking about the United States, Greece or the Baltic States, they are the repercussions of a profoundly

unbalanced growth, where the weakness of earned income and tax was compensated for by large-scale indebtedness, the source of financial profits; the delirious increase in this debt was facilitated, as in every capitalist crisis since the 19th century, by financial and stock-exchange operations that were taken advantage of by free capital.

The recourse to the IMF in the two “peripheries” of the European Union (the South and the East) is aimed at saving this architecture. Applied in the middle of European construction, it both reveals the fragile features of the Union and accentuates them: what it is about is putting back in place the monetarist straitjackets of the Treaties by protecting private finance, which is however both directly guilty of the crisis and benefits from it. The aim is to impose, thanks to the crisis, a new radicalisation of the policies that have been followed up to now: it is welfare expenditure, pensions based on solidarity between generations, public sector wages, the last forms of social protection which must be ground down. The extreme flexibility of work against any logic of collective rights, incomes and decent status, aims both at generating additional profits and making the unemployed, low-paid workers and those in precarious employment “guilty” of “too many” demands, and to divide them, crush them, atomize them in order to make them unable to resist.

In the absence of progressive alternatives, the votes for the far Right, from Hungary to the Netherlands, point to a sad future...

Alternatives

European construction is “going forward”, as in each former phase of its installation, because the decision makers (but also the populations, in the absence of credible alternatives) fear that it is worse to stop than to continue. Nationalist and xenophobic reactions are among the worst possible alternatives. But the acceptance of the austerity plans, which are profoundly socially unjust, imposed today by the combined action of the IMF and the European institutions, will actually prepare the

way for all the anti-European xenophobes ...

Because it is a particular European construction which is in crisis, in the framework of globalized capitalism. The governments that are in power serve the markets (all the European treaties have gone in this direction since the Single Act of 1986) - and the markets serve the dominant states: these states take refuge behind the anonymous "judgements" of the markets and behind the Treaties (which they signed) in order to "note" with fatalism which are the right policies to be followed, always the same ones: to reduce welfare spending, to dismantle public services in order to open up new fields of privatization and financial speculation. The European Treaties and the economic policies which determined them are bankrupt, and they were established, with variable geometry, on the backs of the people and of any democracy worthy of the name. It is freedom of movement and the free choice of human beings that it is necessary to protect, not those of capital. And it is at the level where the decisions are made - in particular at the European level - that it is necessary to build, from below, solidarity-based resistance that contests the Treaties, the financing, the finalities in the satisfaction of needs and basic rights... against the logic of scapegoats ("foreigners") and of the law-and-order policies which accompany the destruction of social

gains. The criminalisation of poverty and the ethnicisation of social questions are aimed at facilitating the repression of resistance, to stop people from seeing what are the real causes of the crises and identifying those who are responsible for them.

The unbalanced growth of the Baltic States before the crisis in 2006

	LITHUANIA	ESTONIA	LATVIA
Growth of GDP	7.8%	10.4%	12.1%
Growth of Cr�dit	35%	53%	52%
Trade Balance (Settlements) of GDP)	-9.5%	-14.6%	-21.3%

Average rate of growth of GDP and jobs

	1989-1994	1994-2000	2000-2007
	GDP Jobs	GDP Jobs	GDP Jobs
Bulgaria	-5.7 -5.8	-0.2 0.0	5.6 2.0
Estonia	-1.6 -4.3	5.8 -2.7	8.0 1.7
Hungary	-3.2 -4.2	3.6 0.5	3.8 0.3
Latvia	-11.2 -5.1	4.3 -2.3	9.0 2.4
Lithuania	-11.5 -2.0	4.5 -1.2	8.0 1.3
Poland	-1.6 -3.6	5.7 -0.2	4.0 0.6
Czech Rep	-2.3 -2.0	2.2 -0.8	4.5 0.8
Romania	-4.6 -1.8	0.1 -2.4	6.1 -0.8
Slovakia	-2.4 na*	3.8 -0.6	6.2 1.0
Slovenia	-2.3 -4.6	4.3 -0.3	4.4 0.9

Rate of growth of GDP and jobs (and rate of unemployment) in 2008 and 2009

		2008			2009		
	GDP	Jobs (rate of unemployment)	Real wages	GDP	Jobs (rate of unemployment)	Real wages	
Bulgaria	6.0	3.3 (5.6)	7.4	-1.6	-2.2 (7.9)	3.4	
Estonia	-3.6	0.2 (5.5)	4.1	-10.3	-7.0 (15.2)	-3.6	
Hungary	0.5	-1.2 (7.8)	1.5	-6.3	-3.0 (9.9)	-3.2	
Latvia	-4.6	0.7 (7.5)	0.9	-13.1	-8.9 (20.9)	-10.8	
Lithuania	3.0	-0.5 (5.8)	4.3	-11.0	-7.7 (13.8)	-12.9	
Poland	4.8	4.0 (7.1)	3.7	-1.4	-2.3 (8.4)	0.8	
Czech Rep.	3.2	1.2 (4.4)	0.8	-2.7	-1.7 (7.1)	2.1	
Romania	7.1	0.3 (5.8)	12.0	-4.0	-2.2 (6.4)	2.2	
Slovenia	3.5	2.9 (4.4)	2.0	-3.4	-4.7 (6.2)	1.6	
Slovakia	6.4	2.9 (9.5)	4.2	-2.6	-1.7 (12.2)	2.5	

*na = Information not available

Source : Eurostats and the online database de WIIW (Viennese Institute of International Economic Studies)

Life expectancy at birth in the countries of Eastern Europe in 1970 and 2002, compared to the figures for France in the same years

	Average 1970-1975	Average 2000-2005
Bulgaria	98.1%	89.7%
Hungary	95.7%	91.0%
Poland	97.4%	93.5%
Czech Rep.	96.8%	95.4%
Romania	95.6%	89.2%
Slovakia	96.7%	93.3%

Source : United Nations (UNDP), Human Development Report, 2004, New York 2004 - quoted by Jacques Sapir, *La fin de l'euro-lib ralisme*, Seuil, Paris 2006, p.95.

"Somehow, we filled a space that did not exist, a political space that had not yet been recognized"

24 September 2010, by Francisco Lou  , Miguel Romero

Viento Sur [16] plans to give an account of these experiences

through conversations with political leaders who are open to

reflection on the practice of their organizations. We are not

interested in ideological issues; we want to know the ways these organizations practice politics, their problems and their results.

What most attracts us about these experiences is their diversity, the different or even contradictory options that arise. We believe that every reader will find in them aspects that match and aspects that diverge. This is a good vaccine against "models". There are no infallible guide-parties. We need instead a practical internationalism that seeks to know about other experiences of anti-capitalist politics and understand them so as to learn from them.

We do not have a timetable for the publication of interviews. We will try to not delay too much. We began the series talking with Francisco Louçã [17] about the Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal, the least known organization of the new anti-capitalist left in Europe, perhaps because it is the most "unorthodox". Which is in itself a good reason to take an interest in it.

Miguel Romero, editor of *Viento Sur*.

Miguel Romero: Let's start with the origins of the Bloco.

Francisco Louçã : There was a social process of defeat of the left in the referendum on abortion in 1998. It was a situation in which the whole left was present with an expectation of winning which ended in a defeat, a tangential defeat, but an unexpected defeat with a great moral impact. It is true that this led the leadership of the UDP [Unión Democrática Popular, a group of Maoist origin] - who at that time already had less electoral presence though more of a militant base than the PSR [the Fourth international organisation] - to think about making a proposal to the PSR to create a new political force that completely reconfigured the field of the socialist left. And it presented this proposal. When it did so, there was not a tradition of strong unitary relationship of militant perspective; there had been an electoral convergence in 1983, six years before, which had failed, and the results were not significant.

M.R.: Was there a unitary campaign for the right to abortion?

F.L.: Not only between the UDP and the PSR. Within the framework of the campaign all currents were involved, people from the Communist or Socialist Parties or Catholics or even right wing people who did not accept that women were criminally punished for having an abortion. In the tactical options of the campaign there was some relationship between the PSR and UDP, but also with many others. There was a relationship of social movements with political parties, the expression of a movement in a unitary framework, but finally, nothing that created a political culture of relationship to a new party. You are right: the proposed establishment of the Bloco was the decision of a political leadership. When I met Luis Fazenda [leader of the UDP], after a few early meetings between representatives of both parties, we knew very little. We knew each other from afar, we had met once or twice at some meeting, but we had never had a conversation in depth. In this approach an important role of linking up was played by some people: for example, Fernando Rosas, a well-known political figure of the Portuguese left intelligentsia from the generation prior to ours, who came from the Communist Party and afterwards the extreme Marxist-Leninist left, and had already for many years worked with the PSR.

There was a general perception that an era was over. The moral effect of defeat in the abortion campaign was a sense of failure and the end of the period of April 25. The traditions of each party were such that most of the activists admitted that they needed something new; it was accepted, in the PSR, the UDP and PXXI [Política XXI, an organisation originating from a split in the PCP] which was another current associated with the process, but in principle it was thought that a coalition would suffice. Then came a precise proposal, a daring proposal: not a coalition, but a new political movement. There were no conditions for a unification of the parties which would require a convergence at the ideological level; this road lacked interest but what was possible, and

much more important, was to create a political organization, whose strength and whose unity was established beyond ideology. To have a solid and stable political agreement we do not need to agree on the interpretation of the 1917 Revolution or the Chinese revolution in 1949. We had to concentrate on the definition of the political tasks and the formation of the political culture of the new movement, from the base. This proposal initially encountered difficulties within the UDP and inside of the PSR. But after initial resistance it was affirmed. I think that it was crucial to raise that option, although it was the most difficult.

M.R.: All this reminds me the situation here after the defeat in the NATO referendum. You were more intelligent than us, more "political" in the best sense of the word. You understood you had an opportunity to convert a defeat into a step forward for the anti-capitalist left and not to let it escape. Here in 1996 we didn't see that, and when we believed we saw it a few years later it was an illusion.

F.L.: The risk is that when in a phase of retreat, building a new organization is something dangerous. We had a political proposal which attracted many people who were not from the PSR, the UDP or of PXXI. Attracting many independent leftists was a very important aspect. In a few months the Bloco became an organization of 1,200 or 1,300 members, most of whom were not members of the founding organizations. But above all, the Bloco was a political force with a capacity to act. In politics opportunities arise that are taken or not taken; these opportunities are built or they disappear. We faced significant challenges quickly: e.g. the movement for independence in Timor in 1999 after the foundering of the occupation by Indonesia, which had great force in Portugal. Also the mobilizations in response to the wars in the Balkans. That same year there were European parliamentary elections. The Bloco was present for the first time; we didn't get anybody elected.

M.R.: But the results were better than those previously obtained by

the PSR and the UDP?

F.L.: We got more votes than the sum of those obtained previously by the organizations. Enough to understand that this vote in Lisbon would elect a deputy in national parliamentary elections. As it was shortly before the parliamentary elections, that created a capital of positive hope and expectation which was what upset the electoral balance. So we got two members in Lisbon which in successive elections became 3, 8 and 16. These successive electoral victories had an immediate impact on public and social intervention and all this in a very short time. It was possible to quickly see that the project to create a political force had strong ideas: the fight against globalisation - then was the period of the great rise of this movement - against war, against capitalism.

We provided immediate answers and that allowed us to do something that had never happened in Portuguese politics. Portuguese institutional politics consisted of two left wing parties and two right wing parties with few oscillations; there were internal changes but without structural changes in these parties. The UDP had a single deputy in 1976. There were splits in the Socialist Party re-absorbed later; the Communist Party had as many as 45 deputies at one stage (now 13). Nobody had outstripped the Communist Party in electoral terms. The emergence of a fifth national party is a unique case in a very stable structure. And we are talking about 25 years after April 25.

M.R.: I understand that you had sidelined ideological issues, but how were the political bases for agreement formalized? I imagine that there would be a common reference document.

F.L.: The Bloco began with a political text entitled *Começar de novo* (Starting Anew), a brief reference text that we later transformed into another more programmatic document, once we had verified the strength of political agreement on the attitude to society. The text was a natural result of the evolution of organizations, currents and independent persons, who had an important role in our

leadership. It included our responses to actually existing capitalism, financialization, globalization, unequal exchange, mechanisms of exploitation and their social extension, the institutional question of the European Union... and other issues that had to be dealt with: social delinquency as exploitation, the vision of war... Political development was very much consolidated around these questions.

Somehow, we filled a space that did not exist, a political space that had not yet been recognized. This was possible thanks to the decisive role of the leadership, because any organization with institutional influence is under great pressure, any political organization that starts from a small group of hundreds of people is subject to enormous tensions of differentiation. Either a leadership is capable of managing this process, absorbing, creating public authority... or the process fails. Authority is very important, mass political authority, let's call it. The consolidated organization should see that its leadership represents an alternative to the existing parties and is working to create such an alternative in the social struggle of the masses.

For many years comrades had known that a party only has political influence when it is a compulsory reference point in all national debates; in any important matter that is being discussed, it must be a compulsory reference. I firmly believe in this. On issues such as the Treaty of Lisbon, the stability programmes, the fundamental choices of economic policy... debate is intensive and this is where the ability to influence, create polarization comes into play.

M.R.: There is one aspect of your experience that I find particularly interesting. I assume that prior to the creation of the Bloco, there was a basically stable political map in Portugal as in most European countries. The appearance of the Bloco unbalanced, destabilized the map, because a political force appeared that was present in the institutions, but was not subject to the rules of "governability".

F.L.: Yes, certainly. When we elected two deputies, it appeared as an

electoral surprise. It was clearly a strong electoral base which reflected, to some extent, "abrilismo" ["Aprilism"], the political resistance of April 25. But it later responded to a left, socialist, radical, culture which struck a chord with militants of other parties.

The basic idea was to reject the idea that the Bloco was a mere "updating" of the far left and, on the contrary, place it as a force that competed for the leadership of the left. This was the case from the beginning, but it was gaining strength, because objectives must be based on what you can do. We knew that the key to our intervention was not to dispute a similar ground to that of the Communist Party. We could only gain strength in comparison to the Communist Party if our goal was far beyond that, pursuing a comprehensive recomposition of the left. This led us from the beginning to have a very unitary position towards the CP, which initially attempted, as you would expect, to belittle and ignore the existence of the Bloco, to then have a relationship with two aspects: a parliamentary relationship which was very unitary, negotiated, and intense, and at the same time, much dispute in terms of social viewpoint and political reference. The more aggressive the CP was from the political point of view, the more it lost. This allowed us to attract sectors coming from the history of the CP and win a huge confidence from the popular base which identified with the CP, in the fight against the austerity or for a combative trades unionism.

However, the key was the way in which we could respond to the challenge posed by the Socialist Party, as the ruling party and the regime of "alternation". We were able to have a very strong political momentum when the Socialist Party lost the elections to the right in 2002; then the Bloco could have a very active policy in the alternative and in confrontation with the government and have a very unitary policy with the CP and the Socialists, something that the CP did not do. It always argued that there was a symmetry between the Socialists and the right. One government is the same as another. It is true that the policies that are applied may be even worse under a

Socialist government as we see today, with the labour legislation of the Socrates government, but from the social point of view there are different bases. Therefore we developed a very active role in dialogue with the Socialist social base, which is an important part of the population, while presenting our criticisms and alternatives: this was our true dispute for hegemony and that is what we did. At that time there was in the leadership of the Socialist Party Ferro Rodrigues who was a leader of the Movement of the Socialist left (MES) at the time of the April 25; I have known him since I was 14 years old. We could do many things with them, in spite of major differences in economic policies, but in the fight against poverty and for social security we took valuable initiatives. This leadership was decapitated by a judicial proceeding, a legal frame-up. Afterwards came José Socrates, who is a liberal technocrat.

What became clear at the time was that the Bloco de Esquerda should have two concerns: one, to build a movement with mass influence to represent an important social force with an anti-capitalist consciousness, a socialist politics, there can be no doubt about that. But at the same time, we had to develop a centre of tactical intervention, a capacity for tactical relations that could be very effective in confrontation with neoliberal policies. I think that this is the main difference between the Bloco de Esquerda and many other European revolutionary organizations that we know of. Tactical intervention is very important to us. There is an "identity-based" space of affirmation of a political culture, an ideology, but the political action of the organization is not the affirmation of identity, but the relationship with other sectors to create convergence, because if there is an attack on social security, or concerning the retirement age, an attack on wages, that requires a left organization with mass influence, which is important in the fight to stop this attack. This is a way of practicing politics to win: we must be strong where Governments are weak; we need to create convergence where there is more support for socialist policies.

M.R.: is this a criterion of the leadership or a party culture among the activists? Some time you hear it said in educational sessions that a revolutionary policy "being correct" does not have much value: what matters is to intervene to change reality. But to change reality it seems the initiative of the party is not enough; there is a need for a close relationship with the social movements and that may give rise to conflicts between the "political" and the "social".

F.L.: These conflicts exist. In general, social movements in Portugal are very little organized. The strongest and more structured is the trade union movement which has a rate of unionization of only 15 or 18%, and is very limited in its capacity of organization, of social intervention, although capable of promoting some big political actions with a strong impact, demonstrations of 100,000 or 200,000 people on issues like education, health, unemployment, or "austerity".

But there is no structured feminist movement, the environmental or counter-cultural movements are weak, although there is a significant internationalist movement. We are developing pioneering work with our members, and this sometimes influences our relations with civil society. Already some years ago, about four years ago, we decided to involve ourselves in the work of the social organisation of young people in precarious work, collaborating with some trade union organisations, but also meeting some hostility from other unions, and with non trade union organisations. We developed our own policy initiatives: mobilizations, legislative initiatives, create associative networks and so on. But it is political initiative which creates these movements and our activists try to occupy the greatest possible political space.

M.R.: I understand, but I think that this situation must create tension, or at least risks of tensions between the "political" militants of the Bloco and the "social" activists of the movement...

F.L.: But this is something inevitable, natural in a mass movement. And on the other hand, it must be considered that the Bloco has the characteristics of a "political movement"; we have some 8,000 adherents with very uneven levels of militancy. What fundamentally defines our political identity is public dispute, a very strong confrontation with the government in Parliament, which is the centre of political debate in Portugal. There are very tough debates with the Prime Minister every fortnight, in which we present alternatives, with important consequences including for the governing party, every fifteen days. In the previous parliament, in which the Socialist Party had an absolute majority, our policy of alliances with critical Socialist sectors led several times to the government's parliamentary defeat: in two cases, the government won by two votes, because several members of the Socialist Party voted against their government on important topics: privatisation, health education, and above all labour legislation. This represents a serious break from the political viewpoint in Portugal; hence came our relations with Manuel Alegre, who led this process of political and parliamentary insubordination and who will be a major left candidate in the upcoming presidential elections. We have a very broad convergence with many sectors that can defend the public sector against privatisation or against greater flexibility and new labour legislation. This improves our ability for expression in the mass movement, hinders the government offensive and could politically unbalance this conflict.

We create social space for political struggle, thus increasing the chances of convergences. Our line is this: the centre of activity for the Bloco de Esquerda is the defence of public services, our main battle is fighting liberalization and privatization, the defence of public services of education and health, the protection of economic democracy against inequality. We want people to understand that we are useful, that we can decide and from that point of view serve to change their lives. And we want this impact in the dispute with the government and

the Socialist Party

M.R.: It seems that this policy depends a lot on immediate results, let us say obtaining "successes", not simply electoral, but at least partially attaining the objectives proposed. But in the situation in which we live is very difficult to obtain those "successes". Sustaining the long-term construction of an anti-capitalist organization on tactics and their short-term results seem very problematic.

F.L.: A pressure for "results" exists, but I think that it is not the decisive aspect. Faced with social despair what we have is a reform without reforms, a social democracy without compensation. This leads to a social tensions with consequent fear of unemployment, insecurity, isolation of wage-earners and so on. The perception of injustice is accentuated by our ability to act. This is in itself a result: people know that there is someone who fights for them, who is prepared to expose this insane, economic system, to explain, to show what injustice is in itself something mobilizing and organizing.

For example, something we often do is have a very direct response to the financial scandals, the functioning of the banking system. This is something which has also led to many judicial processes on the part of managers, entrepreneurs, many attacks from them. The best-known employer in the country Belmiro de Azevedo, recently made a violent attack against me. This strengthens us much... And these employers know why we threaten their power: there was a case of collapse of a bank in a crisis of 2008, several banks had problems, but one of them went under; a parliamentary committee of inquiry on this bank was created, where we were present and we denounced all the details of offshore trading, commissions... We held public meetings explaining how these processes worked; this created an anti-capitalist education, a concrete perception of what the economy is, a very strong perception from the point of view of the indignation, the politicization, the mobilization of people and their response.

M.R.: How do these public meetings work?

F.L.: We hold them regularly all around the country to give an account of our parliamentary work and discuss with people. In addition, two years ago, we started to organize in August a series of street meetings, in public squares in the open air, for people passing by, which year attracted more than 20,000 people. Always on these specific issues, where there is a great social concern. The audience is very interesting: pensioners, Socialist Party voters, teachers, some young voters. We have a reverse of the Communist Party age pyramid: the CP has few young voters and many elderly, while in our case it is the other way round. Now we start to recompose that relationship. It's about having a strong political impact while simultaneously perceiving the need for specific, practical changes and also their difficulty. Not to create illusions about what can happen, not promise people a pay rise, but show how wages could rise if there were measures of economic justice. This gives anti-capitalism a much greater force than any anti-capitalist, propaganda proposal because it allows a specific expression of what injustice is, why some companies do not pay taxes, why in one hour commissions of 30 million Euros are paid to a banker, why a manager can earn seven times the salary paid to an employee, and so on.

M.R.: The Bloco has been a highly pluralistic organisation since its foundation. How do you work in such conditions? A system of seeking consensus? How do you manage disagreements?

F.L.: At the last Congress, last year, there were three lists: the majority which won 81% more or less, a minority motion with 11% and the other which was 8%. So on a directly proportional basis we elected 80 members to the National Committee which is the governing body: therefore, there are 16 or 17 members of minorities, who present their viewpoints. There is a minority that is part of the Trotskyist current known as "Morenistas" and maintains a systematic opposition, do a kind of "entry" work, which is not very relevant; they have some people, some

young people, but are not important in promoting the political thinking of the Bloco. There are other currents in the second minority who collaborate and have partial agreements with the majority. The majority itself is very diversified, also because we have regional organizations that are already strong enough in themselves. The differentiation of the country is extensive, so that in each region different perceptions are posed, a different work from the point of view of political synthesis. This is expressed in congresses, meetings, regional and sectoral conferences (trade union, ecology, youth, mayors and councillors, who are about 350, most participating in municipalities without direct responsibilities; only in rare cases we are part of a governing majority). We have little implantation in local institutions; in proportion, far less than at the national level.

M.R.: Sorry to insist on this, but democratic management of differences arising out of its own practice in a large party seems very complex. There is a culture that comes from the social forums, and that has permeated many organizations, establishing consensus as the sole criterion. But it tends to convert disagreement into a disease, rather than something normal in a free and healthy collective.

F.L.: In a structure such as the social forums consensus is possible because it works with common minimum denominators and freedom of action: outside of the consensus everyone does what they want. In a party that cannot be true: a party has to work with the maximum possible agreement and not the minimum possible agreement. What is decisive in politics in the long term is the strategic coherence of a leadership, which knows where to go how to act.

M.R.: Yes sure, but these are objectives that are extremely difficult to achieve and they cannot be achieved without debate.

F.L.: All the elements are important: but having a leadership with a very clear consciousness and rejecting leadership methods which create

division is key. A party like the Bloco simultaneously has a strong public presence, an important institutional presence and a great social diversity. The leadership must be very capable of interpreting all the signals and making decisions that strengthen the Bloco. The level at which decisions are taken in a leadership of this type is an everyday, permanent level. But they are important decisions. We now have, for example, a confrontation with the government on a regional finance law, a confrontation, very sharp moreover, with public implications, threats of resignation from the government, and so on. We have a conflict on labour legislation, a major problem concerning a large multinational factory which is going to close, lay off workers... The ability to act is highly dependent on very precise, very tactical decisions.

As we live in a universe where politics is communication, "tactical and precise" also refers to the choice of words: the form of conducting politics is largely around image, through the proposal made, the conflict of ideas, the presentation of alternatives, the social organization that is recognized and creates impact. This involves choosing very precisely: a leadership does not speak with many voices, speaks in highly concentrated terms, which involves having a very high level of confidence and a high degree of consultation. When I need to make immediate decisions, I consult the key persons on the subject concerned, the other parliamentarians, people with more experience and knowledge in this field; and at the same time if I know that someone is to make a speech that can politically affect the image of the Bloco, we jointly discuss the exact manner in which that should be done. It is not just about politics in general, but matters of detail, knowing exactly how each view is expressed. For example: the Prime Minister gives an interview on the political situation on Monday. All broadcasters transmit the live response of the various parties. Therefore it is very important that our response is extremely accurate, not what a leader thinks at that time. Before responding, we take a few minutes to consult. Because the political conception of an organization relies heavily on communication.

M.R.: Let's see, develop this a little more.

F.L.: This is one of the major changes made by the Bloco, and not only derives from this institutional presence that we won, but cannot lose. This is a strategic choice that we have made in the past five years: transforming our model of communication regarding left traditions left as we know them.

M.R.: This is an important issue. Can you explain what your system of press is? In particular, to consider one of the oldest traditions of left communication: what role does the newspaper of the organization play?

F.L.: Ever smaller. We have a monthly newspaper that is sent to the members of the Bloco and distributed on newsstands. But perhaps in the future it will no longer exist, because the centre of our communication is the internet. We have a web portal where a professional team works that is already very large, about ten people, working in radio, television, and media consulting. We also intervene in social networks. It is a highly developed information system with an ambitious goal. We would be happy if we had about 100,000 people, 1% of the population following the information we produce daily.

M.R.: You are very far from that?

F.L.: We are already close to 40 or 50,000 people counting all forms of communication we use: social networks, internet access, broadcasting on Youtube and similar things. We also have several people working as press consultants with the leadership with the Bloco. The relationship with the press is a difficult one.

M.R.: It sounds weird that you have "media advisors" in a militant organization...

F.L.: These people are great professionals in communication, and are also among the best political cadres that we have. We need skilled people, with a capacity of communication with the directors of newspapers, the television editors,

with those responsible for news, to respond appropriately.

We are in a world in which we focus on communication. The dominant communication is a world of manufacture of rumours as a political weapon, of communication agencies formed by "spin doctors". We have to overcome them. There is an intensive debate about that, and we have to be the most capable in this debate, creating ideas that mobilize and inform social mobilization. So we had to decide on a major change in our system of communication, which will be increasingly important in our policy.

M.R.: OK, let's move on to another topic. Suppose that you consider that an objective is correct but have no capacity for mobilization in the short term, because it is too radical: for example, the prohibition of layoffs. If so, do you discard it?

F.L.: We are introducing a programme that is consistent from the point of view of a socialist idea. We are not interested in the paralysing distinction between maximum and minimum programme. When we introduce a proposal for action, of response, immediate intervention on the situation, we try to be understood by people, and we can therefore expand our ability to influence in this area, starting from this response.

For example, turning to your question on the prohibition of layoffs, which as you know, is a subject of discussion with comrades from other European countries. We advocate an idea that seems to me just, difficult and provocative: prohibition of layoffs in companies that make or have made profits. If you have made a profit in past years, the idea is that it is returned to society, maintaining employment. People understand that it is a strong position but not part of the tradition of the labour movement on this issue. I think it is an understandable and correct position. On the other hand, the general idea of banning layoff, outside of this context, would I think be empty. It would mean automatic nationalization of all companies in bankruptcy by a neoliberal government, which has no

sense or credibility. It does not correspond to the level of overall perception of the working population or the capacity to implement a socialist model. A left government with a socialist culture cannot emerge immediately and therefore this cannot be regarded by the generality of workers as a concrete answer to unemployment. It is mere political poetry: it doesn't help, or mobilize, or give rise to an important battle for the consciousness of people. I understand that it is among alternatives arising in the political and social struggle. But we cannot choose the proposals that are the most radical, but those that respond best to the question that arises and, therefore, achieve a greater impact.

M.R.: I have the perhaps mistaken notion that the more success a party obtains the more it is "nationalized". On the other hand it seems clear that the conditions to take forward anti-capitalist politics are increasingly international. To go to specific issues: frankly, I do not see in the Bloco much interest in issues outside of Portugal.

F.L.: No comment [in English in the original].

M.R.: I was afraid of that...

F.L.: Now to be serious. Today a socialist programme would undoubtedly be strangled by the European Union. Any active socialist policy has to deal with the EU institutions to transform the conditions of European politics. It is obvious. We, however, still have no chance of victory in this area. We are still in a context of initial political construction of a European intervention. On the other hand, the stronger a party or movement is in a country, the more it depends on national politics, the more absorbed it is in national politics. Even a global or European coordination of the left must be based on strong national parties rather than minority organizations which are coordinated for ideological reasons. We need to attempt a relationship of very diverse currents, a little as Trotsky did in the 1930s with the British ILP, Dutch SAP, the POUM,... a relationship of different

currents with much more variety than what we can imagine today.

We must do this with great naturalness. There is a certain nationalization of politics when this is decisive, that is true. A political organization with mass influence is the subject of claims which do not arise in other circumstances and this is why it has these priorities. It is also true that a form of international coordination is lacking, we are in a phase of reconstruction of the left and there will be here and there successes and failures. It is also true that Portugal is not, for example, France: France is the most politicized country in Europe and is a central European country. Perception of political relations is very different in France than it is in Portugal. It is perfectly understandable that is so, because France has another place in European construction, as do Germany and Italy, even Spain. Portugal is a country which is very peripheral from this point of view.

M.R.: Let me ask you a question on a topic which will probably be controversial on the European left. At the presidential elections to be held in January the Bloco will support the candidacy of Manuel Alegre, a prominent member of the Socialist Party left. Can you explain the reasons for this decision?

F.L.: Manuel Alegre was a presidential candidate five years ago. The PS ran Mario Soares and he was presented as an alternative candidate. He launched a movement which surprised us, because he had many more votes than Soares. He swept the Socialist electorate and added many independent leftists who were critical of the then Socialist Government: it was the first indication we had that it was possible to have a dialogue with a distinct sector of the Socialist electorate. From there our tactical vision became more precise and we had a direct goal, namely to establish a permanent dialogue with this sector.

Dialogue was launched, particularly with Alegre, who moreover radicalized his differentiation from the Socialist Party, for which he was a deputy as well as being Vice-President of the

Assembly of the Republic. Alegre voted against the government on important economic issues, often agreeing with us; this led to a major crisis in the PS.

Dialogue and convergence established this political base allowing the holding of two major forums, one on democracy and left politics and one on public services. Actions were carried out in Lisbon and had a strong political impact because never had a leader of the Socialist Party supported a meeting convened by very different forces, involving also trade unionists, leaders of the CGTP and others from the social left. This was seen as an act of transformation of Portuguese left politics.

Alegre then decided not to be a candidate for Parliament for the PS because of disagreement with the reform of the labour code, but he remains a member and has participated in initiatives of his party. Now he has decided to be a candidate for the Presidency.

This candidacy has created a huge division in the Socialist Party. So far the government has said nothing. The problem currently is that no Socialist leader wants to put themselves forward because they would get fewer votes than Manuel Alegre. A significant part of the centre and right Socialist sectors have spoken out against Alegre, accusing him of being a person very close to the Bloco. The CP has already announced it will present a candidate and has also criticized Manuel Alegre for his relationship with us, but announcing that their votes would go towards the election of a candidate from the left.

M.R.: Have you have considered the possibility of taking a similar position: your own candidate with the destination of their vote announced from the beginning?

F.L.: In these elections a candidate of the Bloco would have no meaning; they are elections that will be decided in the first round. The right is unified around President Cavaco Silva, so either he wins in the first round or a left candidate does. No President has ever lost in a bid for re-election, but a President running for their last term

of office has never had a strong challenge. This means that the electoral polarization will be total.

If we had a candidate, it would be insignificant from the electoral viewpoint and sectarian from a political viewpoint. But that is not the reason why we will not be present. Our choice is part of the policy we want: i.e. to develop to the maximum a current that can raise inside the broad electoral space of the Socialist Party the contradiction of a strategic discussion on neoliberalism or public politics, neoliberalism or socialism. And this is what Alegre represents. His discourse has been very strong on insecurity, unemployment, the labour code and he clearly belongs to a sector to the left of the Socialist Party. Recently, his speech against the stability and growth programme presented by the Socrates government and condemning privatization, wage policy and the degradation of the public services, was one of the positions with major impact on society and the political debate, and led to responses from the Government. Incidentally, the Bloco was the only party that presented an alternate text to the programme, which was voted on in Parliament, with alternatives to the wage freeze, privatization, tax policy, showing how public services and social security should be funded.

Creating a majority party requires the development of these differentiations over time and the political change that they represent. On the other hand, we have a government with a relative majority; the government wants to bring the elections forward. It has constitutional difficulties around this, but wants to overcome them as soon as possible to try to regain an absolute majority, taking advantage of the fact that the drama of the budgetary adjustment has not yet taken place in 2010; they know the social problems which will accompany such a reduction of public spending and wages and pensions.

The Socialist Party lost the absolute majority because of the increase in the vote for the Bloco de Esquerda. And this rise in the vote of the Bloco is explained, largely, because of our relationship with critical Socialist Party voters. Disgruntled Socialist

voters felt that there could be an alternative and that bridges of dialogue on the left existed. That changed the perception of hundreds of thousands of people. And the government knows. If it calls early elections, it will seek to fight the Bloco in order to regain the absolute majority.

The only left party that is in dispute with the Socialists is the Bloco, because what is decided here is whether there is an absolute majority. A policy of isolation in the presidential election was the worst mistake that we could commit. What interests us specifically is situating the contradiction and the difficulties on the side of the Socialist Party and we have the strength of a policy of convergence. Therefore for the decisive dispute which is that of the government, the more able we are to have convergence, dialogue and broadening, the stronger we and we will deprive the Socialists of an instrument of isolation us that it could benefit from in that context.

M.R.: Well, we are already finished. In his last article, Daniel [Bensaid] proposed recuperating the "Communist" idea as that which best corresponds with what we want to do, even recognizing that it is contaminated by Stalinism. We should not lose sleep over names, but I think it is true that we have no words to satisfactorily explain who we are and the society that we are fighting for. What do you think about this topic?

F.L.: It is true that more and more activists are recuperating the word communism – since the tragedy of the Soviet Union or China- in the sense of common property, a society transformed radically, but this process unfolds strictly in terms of ideas: it is a militant reference point for some very politicized layers. As a form of social identification that produces sympathy for our project, I do not think that we succeed in overcoming in the short term the brand that marked the Soviet tragedy. It is true that the Soviet century ended with the fall of the wall and that ended the centrality of the history of the Soviet Union for all formations on the left.

We have to face this history in the 21st century, as also in China which will be still more important for the future, very differently to how we did in the 20th century, in that there are now other emancipatory movements which can make important contributions. I think we need to have a very open mind on this question.

However, in social intervention, defining ourselves as "socialist left" feels better and more straightforward in the struggle for hegemony with people who call themselves socialist and whose policies are often the most aggressive against the working population.

M.R.: Finally, I think that the greatest achievement of the Bloco in recent years is its reliability, the political-moral link it has established a significant part of the "people of the left", beyond even of their own constituents. Have you sought specifically to strengthen this relationship or is it a consequence derived from political intervention?

F.L.: What we want is to be as independent as possible to have direct relations with a portion of the population, but it is clear that the decisive aspect of communication is the way in which we construct a discourse with impact on millions of people and that is part of the creation of a social movement of struggle. The kernel of this is being highly politicized, very prepared and attentive to detail. The detail must always be rigorous. It must always be to the millimetre in terms of what is being done and what is said. Modern communication is a regime of clips: political discourse is 25 seconds. It therefore has to be very direct and mobilizing against the "pacifying" and alienating discourses.

How to construct credibility in the context of this relationship? Especially with policy coherence. For example on fiscal matters, a matter on which we have worked for ten years, we work on tax inequality, combating evasion, the protection of the financial system... we are trying to build a public perception about this. In a situation of injustice, it is important that people know how injustice works, how they are robbed.

On the other hand, is the ability to accumulate trust. People follow our interventions in discussions with the Government. The Prime Minister is a very aggressive man, particularly with the Bloco because he feels that our policy is inconsistent with his. This is a huge advantage for us. Firstly because the media focus on conflict and not consensus. The first news is that of confrontation between the Government and us. This builds over the years the idea of a left that disputes, which is not afraid, that teaches things as they are. We have already brought about the fall of a member of the Council of State, a banker who was a trusted aid of Cavaco Silva. We showed his responsibility in the failure of a bank. We managed to force the resignation of a director of the main Portuguese private bank for fraudulent handling of offshore accounts. We managed to defeat them.

There is a strong class hatred transmitted also on the other side: action creates reaction and there is class hatred from our social adversaries and the government class also, who are aware that we are at a turning point for the country's political future. This creates credibility, creates strength. It largely explains why we have more votes than the CP, despite the fact that this party has an intense history in the anti-fascist struggle, a continuity of activists over several generations and still has a social base, strong, organized, still with more social intervention than us. We have a lot to do, but this is what explains this difference.

M.R.: One more. A few months ago, in a statement to the newspaper "Diagonal", Jorge Costa, a leader of the Bloco with whom I have the impression that you get on quite

well, said: "the struggle of the Bloco is for the destruction of the traditional political map of the country ". It is a strong formula which leads directly to the question of government. But what can it mean to govern from the left in the world we inhabit in Western Europe?

F.L.: We used the expression "destruction of the traditional political map" in the most precise meaning of the terms, namely that the existence of the Bloco de Esquerda will transform Portuguese politics and, in particular initiate a battle for hegemony so there is a dominant force in the Portuguese left able to opt for socialism. This is exactly our challenge to the Socialist Party. The Socialists have 40%, the CP 10%. Our problem is the 40% of the Socialist Party. While alternation is situated between the Socialist and the right with essentially continuous politics, the social organization of the workers is overdue. The Bloco is not intended to be a marginal party for government alliances, coalitions or support as others might think, but a party whose objective is to fight for hegemony, to be dominant, because it is a dominant force. This means also raising the question of government.

This party wants to govern and that is what people understand. People are not currently waiting for an organization that raises the strategic conditions of socialism as an immediate solution, but a government that can immediately respond to economic disaster. That is why the question of neoliberalism is so important from a tactical point of view. We have to hegemonize the fight against neoliberalism. If confused Keynesians and similar people have intellectual hegemony among politically active people conscious of what neoliberalism means, we are

lost. The same is true with human rights: if the left is not able to raise the banner of human rights, it is not a political reference point.

To win, the left must be capable of hegemonizing and leading the fight against neoliberalism, because that is the actually existing capitalism. We do not accept a distinction between capitalism and neoliberalism: neoliberalism is the form of capitalism, the effective form of its updating and the transfer of income inside modern societies. It is here where the relations with other sectors arise, so as to hegemonize a governmental alternative regarding this policy. Our goal is not resistance; our goal is to win, to be a strong majority, to have the majority, to determine policy. The process of political recomposition of reconstitution of class representation is a condition to make this possible. This will not happen without having achieved hegemony, without have attracted a large part of the national intelligencia. We must be able to manage national projects, direct the financial system, to carry out a decisive project of a decisive socialist rupture. It will take a long time yet to get there; time for implantation and class organization, the structuring of a popular and workers' movement, which is the only possible axis for a combat for socialism.

The enunciation of this policy objective must be our starting point. At each decision which is practical, immediate, for us to show what a socialist government would do as opposed to a neoliberal government. We must ensure that people feel that difference. Today it is only a minority: it is necessary to broaden the number of people with this perception.

Vientpo Sur April 2010

Mexican women - then and now

22 September 2010, by **Heather Dashner Monk**

This is the 21st century: 100 years after the Mexican Revolution. So many things have changed, yet so much looks so similar. Araceli may well develop a serious lung condition from working over a wood fire in an enclosed space, as thousands of other women have for centuries in Mexico. But her daughter has a high-school education and a job in a library, definitely a step up after working as a cashier in a huge outlet clothing store along the Mexico City-Toluca highway. Araceli herself took up tortilla-making to earn her living after trying other ways: the last was renting videos and DVDs out of her front room.

Women's lives — their work, their family life, their educational opportunities, the health care they can expect, their social standing, and political participation — have changed over these hundred years. The country has gone from being overwhelmingly rural to mainly urban; [18] between 1930 and 2000 average life expectancy rose from 34 to 75 years; the conditions in which women do housework and care for children and the sick — still almost exclusively their responsibility — have changed enormously: the majority have running water, gas for cooking, indoor toilets, and homes with flooring. [19]

In 1910, women made up 14% of the work force, by 2008 they were 38%. Almost half that increase occurred in the last 40 years. Almost four million women 15 years or older (under 4%) are illiterate today; 92% of girls between the ages of 6 and 14 attend school — not the best possible numbers, but still a huge change from a century ago.

And, by the end of the 20th century, 95% of women of reproductive age knew about at least one type of contraceptive and at least 78% could expect to give birth in a hospital or clinic, lowering maternal deaths considerably.

Currently, women's participation in public life is incomparably greater

than it was a century ago: women did not get the vote until 1953, but there are 140 women deputies (28% of the total) in the present legislature. Mexico has had two more women candidates for president since Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, leader of the human rights struggle against repression and for the presentation of the disappeared, became the first woman to run back in 1982.

Election laws stipulate that no more than 70% of a party's candidates must be from a single gender — a round-about way of saying that at least 30% must be women. But the recent case of eight women deputies who, after being sworn in, immediately attempted to resign and turn over their seats to male running mates, reveals that the law is seen as only a formal requirement.

On the other hand, women continue to be almost exclusively responsible for housework, with 18% still cooking on wood fires and 13% trying to keep their children healthy and house clean with dirt floors. They continue to earn 84% of what their male counterparts do and on average work for pay five hours longer each week. To support their families they are swelling the ranks of the burgeoning informal sector.

More importantly Mexico has the unfortunate privilege of having coined the term "femicide," stemming originally from the cases of more than 300 women missing and/or murdered on the U.S. border city of Ciudad Juárez since the 1990s. It is a phenomenon since discovered to be a nationwide — and even international — trend of increasing violence against women just because they are women. The militarization of Mexico has brought with it increased incidence of rape by military and police personnel [20]; the growing influence of organized crime has caused increasing concerns about human trafficking, mainly women and children.

These contradictory changes are the

result of struggles by working people to improve their lives, both during and after the 1910-1917 Revolution, combined with the needs of capital itself to modernize the country and create better conditions to compete in today's world.

What did women actually do during the Revolution?

Did they benefit from it as peasants and workers? As women?

The most significant, life-changing activities women carried out in the Revolution at the outset were related to their families. Hundreds of thousands of women were uprooted from their homes, traveling with the armies of Zapata, Villa, and Carranza — initially people's, not regular, armies. Under these radically different conditions, with the exception of tilling the land, they continued to be responsible for the same kinds of jobs that they had done in the home: making tortillas, cooking whatever was at hand, washing clothes, nursing and caring for injured soldiers.

But these activities were no longer carried out inside four walls, essential as that was for family survival: now they were essential for the survival of the armies. Since water was a major concern for women to be able to do their jobs, they were often the scouts who determined where the armies would camp for the night. All this put women in the middle of public life at its most raw. It was an unparalleled upheaval in the lives of a large part of the female population, changing not only experiences but horizons and expectations.

One of the Revolution's most famous corridos is about these women, called "Adelitas":

Popular among the troop was Adelita

The woman the sergeant idolized,

And besides being brave, she was pretty

So much so that even the Colonel himself respected her.

Some of course, risked their lives as couriers or spies or for printing manifestos, making and distributing guns, or they took up arms themselves. As with any mass movement, a few individual women rose through the ranks to positions of command. Zapatista Colonel Rosa Bobadilla and journalist and activist Juana Gutiérrez de Mendoza, who participated in drafting Zapata's Ayala Plan, are cases in point. In the North, Elena Arizmendi promoted the creation of the Neutral White Cross, organizing nurses and medical students as the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship-linked Red Cross stood on the sidelines.

Before and during the Revolution, women of the middle and upper classes, particularly, but also some working women, set up all-women's organizations to discuss, analyze, publicize, and fight for women's rights. From 1904-07, *The Mexican Woman*, *Monthly Scientific-Literary Magazine to Promote the Evolution and Perfection of Mexican Women* was published, arguing for women's right to access to the professions in order to become better homemakers.

Two textile workers, the sisters María del Carmen and Catalina Frias, set up the 300-strong Daughters of Anahuac on the outskirts of Mexico City in 1907 to defend the rights of women workers who sympathized with the Flores Magón brothers' Mexican Liberal Party.

After Victoriano Huerta's February 1913 coup against the Madero government, María Arias Bernal, Inés Malvaez and Eulalia Guzmán formed the Women's Loyalty Club, to hold weekly vigils at the gravesite of the assassinated president. In time, these gatherings became massive and a symbol of resistance to the usurper's government. From 1914-19, Hermila Galindo and her team published more than 200 issues of a weekly, *The Modern Woman*, demanding women's right to vote and throwing its support to the Carrancistas.

In 1916, over a thousand participants attended two famous Feminist Congresses in Yucatán, promoted and financed by Carrancista General Salvador Alvarado, then governor of the territory, and organized by, among others, Hermila Galindo. Participants, mainly school teachers, focused their discussion on women's education and job training, but also delved into suffrage and sexual hygiene. The government's objective was to modernize and secularize society, though participants expressed many other aims.

What did all these struggles achieve for women as women?

In 1915, Zapatista authorities issued a family law eliminating illegitimacy, recognizing common law marriage and establishing a woman's right to divorce. The Carranza government instituted the right to divorce and remarriage in December 1914. After the victory of Carranza's forces, the 1917 Constitution established the right to work and form unions, the right to the land and the separation of Church and state, all important building blocks for future rights. [21] More specifically, it stipulated equal rights to wages and to work for men and women, plus certain protections for women workers who were pregnant.

The Family Relations Law passed the same year gave married women the right to sign contracts, participate in litigation, and equal rights to custody of their children; however it also stipulated that adultery by the woman was always grounds for divorce, whereas in the case of men, there were a series of caveats. [22] The new law also compelled married women to have their husband's permission to work outside the home – a provision this writer had to adhere to as late as 1975. But neither the Constitution nor later legislation enfranchised women despite the fact that dedicated Carrancista and feminist Hermila Galindo proposed it to the Constituent Assembly. To the contrary, the first

electoral law gave the vote exclusively to men, constituting a major defeat for women's rights. [23]

It was in the years following the Revolution proper that working people's fight for their rights bore other fruit that women shared: greater access – not just the formal right – to education through literacy campaigns, carried out mainly by women teachers in rural areas (1921-22); making contraceptive advice available – Margaret Sanger's famous pamphlet was translated into Spanish – in Yucatán hospital clinics [24]; the right to divorce by mutual consent, and women's right to custody of the children, established in the 1928 Mexico City Civil Code after a prolonged campaign by feminists; the right for single women and widows who were breadwinners to be full members of the collectively farmed ejidos with the same formal right to the land as men (1927); and the right to maternity leave and not have to perform dangerous jobs, established in the 1931 Federal Labor Law. [25]

In the 1930s, with a strong Communist Party presence, both rural and urban unions organized, spearheading the fight for decent working conditions, wages and other rights. In 1935, women peasants and teachers organized massively in the United Front for Women's Rights (FUPDM) to demand their rights, including the vote. Finally, in 1938, Congress passed a law giving women the vote with the public approval of President Lázaro Cárdenas. But the law was never published in the *Official Gazette* so it never went into effect, something Cárdenas obviously controlled. It was not until 1953, with the FUPDM long dissolved into the ruling party, that the PRI finally "gave" women the vote.

So, despite all the sacrifices, despite women's massive and specific participation in the revolutionary process and later struggles, before the state was completely consolidated by incorporating all the mass organizations into its structures, and despite certain measures to "modernize" the country with more or less positive consequences for women, what women gained from the

Revolution was only partial recognition of their rights and demands. It should come as no surprise that women's organizations "along with unions, peasant and urban residents' organizations" were absorbed into the PRI apparatus, completely eliminating their autonomy and political punch.

What about today?

The 21st century opened with the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) ousting the PRI from office after 70 years of what Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa called "the perfect dictatorship." But three years earlier, the center-left Party for the Democratic Revolution (PRD) had won the mayor's seat in Mexico City, where one-fifth of the population lives; and six years earlier the Zapatistas had amazed the world by taking over a small but significant corner of southern Mexico. Against a backdrop of deepening PRI-PAN neoliberal policies "even as they began to be discredited internationally" the scene was ripe for social, economic and political polarization as all forces fought for the upper hand.

Feminist groups "the survivors from Mexico's 1970-90 second wave of feminism" had mostly morphed into NGOs working on specific topics like sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women, and gender education, as gender studies became more widespread in academia after a 1990s downturn in the social movements and women's organization in them. Many women activists became public officials in the new Mexico City center-left PRD government (a positive development in that it gave women more visibility in public posts, but with the down side of taking both women and men out of the social organizations they had helped form). In synch with international trends (Beijing and its aftermath), NGO activities centered mostly on proposing public policy measures, training public officials, and lobbying Congress, targeting dialogue with women PRI and PAN legislators especially through a series of "Women's Parliament" meetings. These activities continued into the 21st century.

But by 2006, soaring unemployment and growth of the informal sector of the economy, cutbacks in public spending, especially education and health care, the implementation of U.S.-backed measures to open a swathe of gigantic public works in a corridor reaching all the way to Panama, growing use of police and the military to quell discontent throughout the country, and the government offensive targeting unions particularly, all contributed to a situation ripe for explosion.

Major social movements emerged involving women. The Zapatistas continued to develop their self-organizing "Caracol" movement in Chiapas; 50,000 peasants opposed the building of the huge La Perota dam in the state of Guerrero [26]; Mazahua indigenous women organized to defend their water supply from being channeled into Mexico City, totally destroying their way of life [27]; collective ejido farmers opposed president Fox's attempt to expropriate their land to expand the Mexico City airport in San Salvador Atenco and won, only to be arrested en masse with their leaders and sentenced between 31-112 years in prison [28]; a 2006 cave-in at the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila state sparked the mobilization of miners' survivors (mostly women), which eventually led to the persecution and international defense of miner-union General Secretary Napoleon Gomez Urrutia and a three-year-long miners' strike in Cananea. [Striking Cananea miners and Pasta de Conchos family members were recently forcibly removed from the facilities they had occupied for three years; the strike was declared "non-existent," that is, without legal basis, and the family members demands that their loved ones' bodies be recovered from the pit denied.]]

The dynamics of women's struggles today

To look at women's dynamics in all these struggles is beyond the scope of this article but I have chosen a couple of examples to examine in slightly more detail.

The first was sparked in May 2006 when primary and middle-school teachers in southern Oaxaca staged a sit-in/vigil in the state capital for higher wages and more funding for schools in the state's extremely depressed areas. [29] When PRI strongman Governor Ulises Ruiz ordered the teachers repressed a month later, more than 350 local indigenous, community, and union organizations joined together from all over the state to form the Popular Assembly of the Towns/Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) to demand his ouster.

Given a local media blackout, in August 2006, a march of women to the state-owned TV station turned into a 21-day occupation, with the women broadcasting full-time. When the transmitters were destroyed by paramilitary gunfire on the 22nd, Oaxaca City residents came down from the hills to occupy four local commercial radio stations and then set up barricades throughout the city center.

Soon thereafter, the women created their own Coordinating Committee of Oaxacan Women (COMO), whose demands echoed the general APPO demands. Participants included women from different left currents, some familiar with feminist struggles, but were mainly women from community and union organizations. Their high public profile gave them even more weight in the movement than their numbers and heroism already would have. The self-organizing process they went through, organized initially as women but around general demands, allowed them to exchange experiences and to try to collectively understand the difficulties they faced as women participants in the movement. This prompted them to put forward specific women's demands, including the fight against discrimination and violence against women.

Only days after the radio takeovers, amidst constant clashes with police that cost several lives, including that of U.S. journalist Brad Will, the PAN federal government sent in Federal Police, followed by troops. The movement was so large and entrenched in the communities, however, that it was not possible to

completely repress it and the sit-in/vigil moved to a near-downtown plaza. The November 2006 APPO congress emitted the Declaration of Oaxaca, demanding a government truly representative of the diversity of popular organizations, including indigenous peoples, city and country dwellers, peasants, workers, business people, women, men, children and the lesbian-gay community. The general APPO movement and COMO as part of that continued to struggle, but, given the onslaught of government repression and just plain exhaustion, finally retreated around 2008.

Second, as the social movements defended themselves, the PRD ran former Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) for president. After the July 2006 election, both sides claimed victory and a year-long battle ensued as AMLO, backed by a mass movement, demanded a vote-by-vote recount and set up what the movement called the "legitimate government," complete with cabinet members, which repeatedly brought millions of demonstrators out into the streets. This became without a doubt the largest civic movement in the country, putting forward an alternative government program.[The Zapatista movement created an alternative "Other Campaign" to counter AMLO's candidacy, which it denounced as a ploy to hoodwink the population. But after the elections, it also took an increasingly separatist position vis-à-vis not only this political movement, but most of the major social movements, posing itself as a contradictory alternative to them, including the electrical workers' union led fight to create an alternative program for the social left, the miners' union defense of their working conditions and right to conduct union activities without government interference, and even the fight for the freedom of the Atenco prisoners. Unfortunately, this has isolated them considerably from the other movements, which is of no help in defending their very real gains.]]

In 2008, when President Calderón put a bill before the Senate that would have allowed the construction of oil pipelines and refineries, plus the operation of the latter, to be sub-contracted out to foreign private

corporations — functions reserved constitutionally to the state-owned oil giant Pemex — AMLO convened a Movement to Defend Our Oil, bringing together unions and urban community and peasant organizations nationwide to oppose it.

He called for the creation of 20 brigades of 500 women each in the Valley of Mexico to distribute the movement newspaper and go door-to-door to explain why Pemex should not be further privatized. The men emulated them and formed their own brigades, and eventually, together, they numbered 47 or 48 with up to 1,500 members each. About 100,000 women participated as brigade members. The press dubbed the women the "Adelitas," alluding to the Mexican Revolution, a soubriquet the women took up proudly. It was the women who took over the Senate when the bill came up for discussion, demanding that there be a nationwide public debate before the legislature passed anything. These debates were eventually held and a relatively toothless version of the original bill passed, signaling a temporary victory, and the movement subsided.

According to brigade leader Patricia Ruíz Anchondo, former Mexico City community leader and government official, López Obrador still occasionally convenes meetings of the heads of brigades. Today, however, he has concentrated his efforts on building a national network of community centers dubbed "The Houses of the Movement to Defend the Popular Economy, Oil and National Sovereignty," which is where many veterans of these brigades have centered their efforts, but no longer in women-only organizations.

These are prime examples of the dynamics in Mexico's popular movements with women's participation: repeatedly women organize around general demands, but very often as women in specific groups, sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes at the initiative of the male-led organizations. Inevitably, women come to the fore as natural leaders: in the case of Oaxaca, former COMO member and primary school teacher Aurora Ruiz now represents her local

before the union's Executive Committee; housewife Flor Hernández Quero was elected this July as a city councilwoman in Oaxaca. In the case of the Adelitas, former community activist Karen Quiroga is currently a member of the Mexico City Legislative Assembly.

But the main dynamic is that the contradiction both in their homes and in the struggle itself, as their activity creates friction with their traditional roles, can lead them to put forward some form of specific demands addressing their oppression. The central political problem posed is whether this will flourish and blossom into a full-fledged movement, uniting with other groupings, for women's rights. This depends on the internal development of the overall movement, including how long it lasts, the degree to which the women's organizations are under the tutelage of male leadership, the ways women's demands are posed within the general movement, and the kind of support and link-ups that can be made with other women's organizations regionally or nationally.

The PAN/PRI attack on women's bodies

The proof that mass women's participation and even self-organization in political or sectoral movements is not enough to achieve an end to discrimination and inequality can be seen in the fact that no one was equipped politically to respond to the PAN/PRI joint offensive against the right to choose launched in October 2008.

The bi-partisan offensive began after the Mexico City PRD-controlled Representative Assembly voted in April 2007 to decriminalize abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy and provide the service in public hospitals for free. A month later, the PAN-appointed head of the National Human Rights Commission filed an appeal questioning the law's constitutionality, but in August, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the legislature. Undaunted, in October, the ruling

PAN and the opposition PRI began a joint onslaught in state legislatures to establish the fetus's "right to life" in state Constitutions. By May 2010, they had managed to pass this in 18 out of 31 states. In addition, in some states they changed penal and health codes, with assenting votes by individual legislators from every single congressional party thrown in for good measure.

Feminist groups immediately responded locally, denouncing the measures and defending women jailed for having had an abortion, but only three states coordinated with each other. A few federal PRD congresswomen went to a Santo Domingo meeting of the Socialist International leadership to denounce the PRI, a member organization and very jealous of its prestige abroad.

Six Mexico City-based NGOs that had long been lobbying for the right to choose found themselves facing a brick wall of PAN-PRI unity on the issue: lobbying had reached its limit. They eventually launched a public campaign to oppose the offensive in September 2009. But old capital city-versus-state power rivalries kept the two flanks from uniting until a national forum was convened by a Mexico City socialist feminist group in December 2009.

Thirty-nine organizations present from 19 states launched a National Pact for Women's Life, Liberty and Rights to demand freedom for women prosecuted for having an abortion, the safeguarding of the secular nature of the state, the decriminalization of abortion nationwide and the right to

health, plus denouncing all legislators who had voted for these measures. Inspired by Argentina's Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, participants voted to hold coordinated vigils nationwide on the first Thursday of every month.

Despite the feminist movement's relatively small size, local efforts combined with national pressure have had a positive effect. PRI President Beatriz Paredes had to publically retreat from her party's position; in Veracruz, in a second round of voting in the legislature, the PRI voted against its own constitutional reform; in a related matter, the Supreme Court ruled the use of the day-after pill constitutional in May 2010; and in April, PRD legislators formed their own network (including a few PRI adherents) to counter the measures and rein in some of their own party members who had voted for the state constitutional "reforms." This particular war is far from won, but at least a few skirmishes have been favorably resolved.

So, what does this have to do with the Mexican Revolution?

My initial reflection would be that there seem to be parallels between what happened then and what's happening now. Politically and socially, the kind of dynamics women experience in mass movements and in

the way that women respond to the contradictions that sharpen in their lives seem to lead to initial awareness about the social, not merely individual, nature of their oppression. This empowers them as a group and as individuals. But the far-reaching nature of women's oppression, and the key role it plays in maintaining the status quo (something the PAN understands perfectly), is such that more is needed.

It is not enough for women to participate in social movements and political activities; it is not enough for them to participate and organize as women in these activities; it is not even enough for women to put forward their specific demands in these movements. All of this is positive and necessary, but what is also needed is for women to have their own autonomous, cross-sectoral movement.

Easier said than done. Today, the difficulties this poses can be exemplified by a perfectly valid observation by Patricia Jiménez of Oaxaca's COMO: "The PRI and PRD women made a big fuss about abortion in the state legislature last September. Where were they when the [Ulises Ruiz] government was carting women off to jail?" And now that the PAN and the PRD made an electoral pact that successfully ousted the PRI from the governor's seat, what kind of measures will the new hybrid government take on women, and what kind of allies are community and union women going to be able to count on to further their own demands? [30]

Against the Current 148, September-October 2010

Youth camp: La rivoluzione sarà mondiale !

22 September 2010, by Åge Skovrind

Participants came from many countries, from Greece to Portugal, over France, Germany, Belgium or Poland, but also from outside Europe: Mexico, Philippines and South Korea.

Something remarkable about the camp is its self-organisation. Participants are responsible for the functioning of the camp, on the practical level (bar, cleaning etc.) and politically (workshops and plenaries).

It demands a good daily coordination which is guaranteed by representatives from each national delegation.

Do you want a glass of beer? Then

you'll have to pay with your "che-money"! Because the camp has its own currency. The exchange rate is fixed according to the buying power of different countries. An excellent example of solidarity in practice.

From Denmark 28 youth participated, a majority whom of are not members of the SAP, the Danish section of the FI.

Annika is one of them. She's an active member of SUF (Socialist Youth Front) and came to the camp for the first time. Socialistisk Information asked her to tell about her experiences.

- My boyfriend is a SAP-member and I'm pretty sure that I'm not going to join SAP. But I've worked with SAP-members in SUF and we tend to agree so I thought it would be a good way to understand their political background and get some education in international conditions.

And you achieved this?

- Yes, and in general it was positive. It was really interesting to go into depth with subjects you don't work with normally. During the week there was an extensive programme with many offers where everybody could find something according to interest.

Was there anything that was different from your expectations?

- Not really, because we were well prepared and had met to talk about what to expect.

The camp is organised by the Fourth International and many participants are members of organisations linked to the FI. How is it to participate as someone who is not?

- I didn't experience it as a problem. Of course there was some contributions to the programme prepared by SAP but the Danish delegation worked very democratic where everybody could take part in organising our participation. If there was any dividing lines it was more between those with a lot of political experience and those comrades with less.

Really, one of the most interesting aspects of the camp, was the organisation of direct democracy. At least once every day we had a meeting in the Danish delegation where we discussed who would participate in what activities and who would be our representatives in the camp coordination etc.

The Danish delegation was super cool. Everybody was very active.

Were there any of the meetings that you found of special interest?

- I achieved a lot from the LGBT space. I'm normally not so involved in

this area so it was cool to get a deeper understanding politically and also on the LGBT struggle is organised in different countries.

Was there anything that could have been better?

- The educationals consisted of very long speeches with one-way communication and the translation wasn't so good. So I didn't achieve so much from that. In fact I only went to one of the educationals. We were warned in advance that it was likely to be that way. Maybe it reflects a different culture for meetings in other countries but it doesn't seem very pedagogic.

Did you get to speak with someone from other countries and did you learn something new?

- Certainly. When our delegation from Denmark had meetings with other delegations. I learned a lot from the meetings with Poland and Philippines and then the debates at the LGBT space was very interesting.

Do you want to go again?

- Definitely. Next year it'll be in France and that seems attractive. I like French food! There is room for improvement. We had enough pasta with tomato sauce this year!

Translated from Danish by Thomas Eisler for International Viewpoint.

The green banner of Mohamed and the expansion of world trade

15 September 2010, by Jean Batou

Mohamed was born in Mecca, around 570 A.D. Central Arabia was at that time experiencing rapid development, stimulated by the flow of caravans which conveyed goods and information on the North-South axis, from Palestine to Yemen, and the East-West axis, from Ethiopia to the Persian Gulf. The birth of Islam cannot

be understood outside of this context. At the four cardinal points of this universe, the two great empires, Byzantine Roman - which still controlled most of the lands around the Mediterranean - and Sassanid Persian, and the two civilisations of Ethiopia (the kingdom of Aksum) and of "Arabia Felix" (Himyar or Yemen),

constituted powerful centres of attraction. Byzantium was at that time the ally of Christian Ethiopia, while Sassanid Persia had succeeded in subjecting South Arabia, which thus lost part of its dominance over the rest of the peninsula. From 540 to 629 however, the incessant wars between Byzantines and Persians weakened

their influence over the disputed zones of the Fertile Crescent, increasingly populated by migrants of Arab origin.

Playing to the full their role of intermediaries, the Bedouin tribes of Central Arabia, partly sedentarized, developed a network of markets and fairs, with Mecca at the centre. They were in contact with many Christian dissidents (monophysites, Nestorians, etc.) of the Fertile Crescent, but also of Ethiopia and Yemen, who were arguing about the double nature, divine and human, of Christ, and also with the Zoroastrians and the Jews of Persia. [Patricia Crone has claimed that Islam must have originated in Northern Arabia, rather than in Central Arabia, where the development of trade, but also the diffusion of Judaism and Christianity, was still very limited in the first third of the 7th century (*Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton U.P., 1987). The bases of this startling hypothesis have however been weakened by recent archaeological digs.]

The Arabia of Mohamed

"The Fertile Crescent and its surrounding areas offer points of contact with more distant trade routes than any other comparable region" of Eurasia. [The quotations from M. S. Hodgson are taken from *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1: *The Classical Age of Islam*, Chicago, 1977.] In addition, its relative aridity - apart from its large alluvial plains -, was favourable to semi-nomadic stockbreeders and merchants, who were able together to counterbalance the influence of the landed aristocracy. This social alchemy encouraged the blossoming of monotheist religions - Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity -, which better corresponded to the needs of the commercial classes, who were above all preoccupied by the regulation of interpersonal relations. The individual was from now on presented as a person in charge of a single life (not of multiple reincarnations), before only one God

and only one community, incarnating the same justice, with egalitarian aspirations.

On the borders of the great agricultural states, the societies of stockbreeders and merchants, who also often engaged in plunder, controlled the exchanges between the Mediterranean and the southern seas. To be sure, they were dwarves compared to the great agricultural civilizations, but they sat on the shoulders of giants and sometimes saw further than them. The domestication of the camel guaranteed them milk, the caravan (from the Sanskrit *karhaba* meaning camel) and provided a decisive military asset, in addition to the horse. These tribes, like their cousins, established in the oases, were the most prestigious: they called themselves the Arabs. They enjoyed a social order that was not very hierarchical, not very polarized, and thus characterised by solidarity: the individual was regarded there as a person responsible for his choices, so much so that violence between groups was limited by the reprisals which it provoked.

"During the childhood of Mohamed , notes Hodgson, " the major part of trade between the Mediterranean basin and the Indian Ocean passed through the land routes controlled by the Arabs". On the spiritual level, while the Persians, guardians of the Jews, were winning victory after victory against Byzantium, biblical ideas of all shades were spreading in Central Arabia along the caravan routes. "People were then turning to the universalist religions, the religions of the individual, those which, instead of relating to ethnicity, aimed at ensuring the salvation of each human being in his or her incomparable singleness". [Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, London, Penguin Books, 1996. The other quotations from Rodinson are drawn from the revised and corrected version of his brilliant synthesis, published for the first time in 1961. By the same author: *Islam and capitalism*, New York, Pantheon 1973; *Marxism and the Muslim World*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1981; *The Arabs*, London, Croom Helm, 1981; *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, Seattle, distributed by

University of Washington Press, c1987; *Islam: politique et croyances*, Paris, Fayard, 1993.] Judaism, already established in some oases, but also Christianity, whose pious hermits struck the imagination of their contemporaries, lacked however local roots.

Was old Allah, the unifying divinity of the Bedouins, who up to now had had no specific cult, going to be able to push aside the innumerable tribal idols and "be reborn" as the authentic God of the Book? Rodinson considers that it was in resonance with the time: "An Arab state, guided by an Arab ideology, adapted to the new conditions and however still close to the Bedouin milieu that it was to structure, constituting a power that was respected on equal terms with the great empires, that was the great need of the time. The road was open to the man of genius who would know better than others how to respond to it". This mission would fall to Mecca, which controlled the North-South axis of the Hejaz - the main trading junction of Western and Central Arabia, at equal distance from Syria, Persia and Yemen. It should be said that its place of worship, the Ka' Ba, already under the supervision of Allah, offered a sanctuary to the many pagan divinities of the whole region and even attracted Christians on pilgrimage.

The first steps of a prophet

At the beginning of the 7th century, Arabia benefited from the political weakening of its neighbours, in a context of dynamization of the commercial exchanges on its territory. On the cultural level, this vitality resulted in the flowering of the pre-Islamic poetry which contributed to the development of a common language, starting from various dialects. These odes were recited, they were rhythmic, with a codified metre. They vividly depicted the life, the ideals and the feelings of the Arabs of this time. [Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard U.P., 1991, pp. 12-14.] *The Madman and Laylâ* [Andre Miquel & Ghani Alani, *Le Fou de Laylâ*, Paris, Sindbad-Actes Sud, 2003.] dates from

the second half of the 7th century: it evokes the impossible love which can lead to social transgression, to madness, but also to spirituality:

"In the evening her face lit up the darkness like the lamp of a monk withdrawn from the world. "

These inspired poets, just like the Christian hermits, were not unconnected, as we shall see, with the destiny of Mohamed (we should rather call him Muhammad - Mehmet for the Turks, Mamadou for the Africans). He was born in an ordinary clan of the powerful Quraysh tribe, which controlled the temple of Mecca, and which according to legend dominated the main trade routes of the Hejaz. Having lost his father and mother at a young age, he was taken in by his grandfather, then by his uncle, Abu Tāḥlib, a well-off merchant, before marrying at the age of twenty-five a rich widow fifteen years older than him, Khadīja, with whom he had four daughters.

The historian knows more about Mohamed than about Jesus [The life of Mohamed is known to us by accounts (hadīth), of which the oldest probably go back to at least 120 years after the facts. They were validated by great Muslim jurists who attested to their credibility by analyzing the chain of testimonies on which they depend, not always avoiding contradictions, with the result that they often added: "And God is the most erudite". For further information: Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, New York, Amherst, 2000.]. He is apparently described as someone of average height, with broad shoulders and a strong bone structure, solidly built. With a large head, a long thin face, enlivened by dark eyes, he was thoughtful and well-balanced, able to negotiate at length as well as to move quickly into action. He quickly became a prosperous merchant, to such an extent that his language remained impregnated by it: thus the Koran evokes the last judgement as "the settling of accounts" (21, 1). This material success however did not appear to bring him sufficient satisfaction: his incapacity to give his wife a male heir troubled him; his voluntary renunciation of any extra-marital

relation no doubt frustrated him, in a world where young men led very free sexual lives; and especially, he suffered from not being able to utilise his exceptional spiritual and political qualities.

In the tracks of his Arab predecessors of monotheism (*hanif*), but also of Jewish and Christian mystics, Mohamed spent long hours meditating in a cave on the hill of Hira, near Mecca. It was there that one night he received "the True Vision, like dawn breaking", as he later confided to his future wife Aisha. It was first of all a voice which said to him: "You are the Messenger of God! (...) After the sensations of a supernatural presence, the vague visions, the hearing of simple phrases, came the long sequences of well organised words, presenting a clear meaning, a message". Finally, the powerful Being ordered him to recite: "In the name of God..." He had just pronounced the first words of what would become the Koran. "All that happened in the brain of a single man", comments Rodinson, "but it reflected there, it stirred there, the problems of a whole world and the historic circumstances were such that the product of this mental agitation was such as to shake Arabia, and beyond that, the universe".

The social discourse of incipient Islam

Any monotheist faith tends to pose the principle of the equality of each individual and their submission to the will of God, but also their salvation or their judgment at the end of time, without regard to their fortune. This is all the more true for Islam, which rejects even the Christian dogma of the Trinity in the name of the absolute singleness of Allah. Thus the Koran presents to the faithful, in a very colourful way, the torments of Hell and the delights of Paradise. "The individual (...), underlines Rodinson, "took on a particular and eminent value. It was with him that the Supreme Being was concerned, who had created him and who would judge him without taking into consideration relationship, family or tribe".

As of the closing decades of the 6th century, notes Hodgson, the enrichment of the merchants of Mecca "threatened tribal solidarity and, in any case, undermined the Bedouin ideal of a generous man for whom wealth was a welcome but relatively ephemeral distinction". So it was the freest spirits, rejecting the domination of the leading layers of Meccan society, who first turned towards Mohamed: among them, there were young people from good families who were in revolt against their elders, but also members of less influential clans, non Meccan, individuals who were outside clans, even freedmen or slaves. Moreover, the prophet took the side of the poor and the orphans, admonishing the rich Qurayshis, for whose arrogance he had contempt:

"Watch out! You do not honour the orphan!

You do not encourage people to feed the poor!

You greedily devour your inheritance!

You love wealth with a limitless passion! "

(Koran, 89,17-20)

In the principle of the revealed religions, the injunctions of the Very High are communicated to men through a prophet, whose position makes him legitimately have the ambition of being the supreme spiritual power: "How could a man with whom God spoke directly", remarks Rodinson, "be subject to the decisions of any senate. How could the directives of the Supreme Being be discussed by the Meccan aristocracy?" Besides, does not Mohamed develop "a critical attitude [Rodinson even says: "implicitly revolutionary"] - towards those who are rich and powerful, therefore conformists?".

So measures of repression struck the roughly forty partisans of Mohamed, in particular the most vulnerable of them: thus, the black slave Bilāl was exposed to the sun by his masters, at the hottest hours of the day, with a rock on his chest. In this heavy atmosphere, the prophet still however won some disciples, like **Omar ibn Al-Khattāb**, who would later succeed him as the second

caliph. Some emigrated to Abyssinia, although the majority still enjoyed the support of their clan: Mohamed was protected by the Banou Hāshim, in particular by his uncle, the very influential Abu Tālib. It was the death of the latter, in 619, and that of his first wife, Khadīja, which broke this precarious equilibrium. In 622, while a starving Byzantium was besieged by the Persians and the Avars in an atmosphere of apocalypse, the small group of believers took the road to Medina, 350 kilometres to the north-west: it was the Hegira, that is to say the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Here, the new social organization over which Mohamed presided, encouraged by the voice of Allah, continued to defend the interests of the orphans, the beggars and the travellers. It recommended treating slaves well and if possible freeing them; slavery was even proscribed among the faithful. In 632, when the prophet in person, a few months before his death, led the first pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), he insisted on the equality of all men before Allah, whether they were rich or poor, Arab or not, thus inspiring the fairly general rejection of racism by Islam. Under the green banner of trade Hodgson insists on the fact that the community of the faithful - those who accepted the revelation - were from now on joined together within the umma (from umm, mother) by bonds that went beyond tribal barriers. In Medina, Mohamed endeavoured to equip this community with clear rules, but also with financial means, in particular by means of taxes, thus providing the foundations of a new social order. He arbitrated the conflicts between pagan clans and benefited at the

beginning from a certain benevolent attitude of the powerful Jewish tribes, from whom he borrowed certain rituals: the midday prayer turned towards Jerusalem and the fast of Kippur; Allah also allowed eating the food of the people of the Book and marrying their women. During this time, he extended his political influence by ensuring the independence of his supporters by means of a series of "raids" against the caravans from Mecca (private war was at that time a perfectly acceptable practice). The adversaries within the Bedouin tribes seem to have been few: over time, they came round or were eliminated. That was the case with the poetess Aḥqā', assassinated in her sleep. Had she not declared: "Arseholes of Mālik and Nabāt (...) [clans and tribes of Medina]. You obey a foreigner (...) Is there not a man of honour (...) who will cut short the hopes of these fools?" (quoted by Rodinson).

On the other hand, the Jews had more threatening political ambitions and greater ideological cohesion. They treated the religious ideas of Mohamed with contempt, and he challenged them by asserting the ancestral origins of Islam: did not the Arabs descend from Ismā'il, son of Abraham (Ibrāhīm), himself original founder of the religions of the Book? He also broke with them by instituting the fast of Ramadan, by rejecting some of their food prohibitions (however he banned wine, which was associated with pagan religions), then by requiring believers to pray towards Mecca. He got the better of them by a series of expulsions, expropriations and massacres, among which the massacre of Banou Qorayza, in 627, left several hundred dead. He also took his distance from the Christians by recognizing Jesus as a prophet, admittedly capable of miracles, but nevertheless a man like other men.

Master of Medina and of the very busy trade route of the North of the Hejaz, from which it drew more and more resources, the party of Mohamed

posed an insoluble problem to the rich merchants of Mecca, who did not succeed in defeating it by armed force. This was because the emerging young state, which owed its strong cohesion to the Muslim ideology, was led by an exceptional man who could reconcile long term vision and a sense of opportunity. He was also surrounded by wise advice, in particular from his two fathers-in-law and successors, Abu Bekr and Omar, who were sometimes opposed by his cousin Ali, husband of his daughter Fātima.

In 628, Mohamed announced that he intended to begin the spiritual conquest of Mecca by leading a peaceful march. The enterprise was crowned with success, in spite of the humiliating concessions that he had to accept: as of 629, Muslims were allowed into the city for the pilgrimage. In 630, however, he prepared a great military expedition to intimidate his last adversaries: the Meccan aristocracy, divided, avoided a showdown by submitting and then converting. Medina thus became the capital of Arabia, unified around its prophet, around whom the great Qurayshi families now crowded. At the height of his power, the Messenger of Allah died on June 6, 632.

At the same time, an exhausted Byzantium once again gained the advantage over Persia, which was finally defeated. The armies of the first caliphs (heirs of the prophet), which could no longer hold to ransom the Islamized Arabs, seized this opportunity to launch out on the conquest of the known world. As Rodinson recounts, they advanced at lightning speed: "A century after the date when Muhammad, an obscure camel driver, had begun to gather around him in his house a few poor Meccans, his successors dominated the approaches of the Loire and the lands beyond the Indus, from Poitiers to Samarkand". For the philosopher Ernst Bloch: "The green flag soon floated over a movement that was homogeneous, above the commercial, warlike and religious storm" which was turning the Middle East and the Mediterranean world upside down: from now on, Islam - which was then the ideology of modernity - would govern the expansion of markets, and

do so "from the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire until the rise of Venice, and even of England". [Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1986.]

The Koran and women

"Men have authority over women"; they are entitled to admonish them and even to strike them (Koran, 4, 34). Polygamy is limited to four women (except for the prophet), provided that the husband feels capable of treating them on an equal footing. This of course only concerned a minority of sufficiently well-off believers.

Women were active within early Islam. They questioned, advised and fought. Thus A'isha, one of the wives of Mohamed, was astonished that Allah only spoke to men, provoking a modification of the revelation, which was now addressed to both sexes. As a general rule, however, they received a half-share of inheritance, because they did not have a material responsibility with regard to their family (Koran, 4, 11).

The sexual desire of women is reputed to be ten times superior to that of men. This is not a cause for blame - in heaven, each orgasm should last at least twenty-four years - but must be strictly contained within patriarchal marriage. The Koran does not evoke excision.

Concerning the wearing of the veil, a Koranic verse recommends women to hide their breasts with their shawl (24, 31); another enjoins them to tighten their dress (33, 59). It was also prescribed to address the wives of the prophet behind a curtain (33, 53). Tradition argues that the body of women must be hidden, except for their face and their hands (this is, however, a hadith whose chain of transmission is not well established).

Adultery must be proven by four concurring testimonies in order to be punished (4, 15). Stoning is not

mentioned in the Koran, but in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy, 22, 23-24). Some hadith refer to it, but their credibility is doubtful.

An Islam of the poor?

"The Koran (...) transmitted to the future generations the message of an oppressed man, who had at a certain moment been made indignant by injustice and oppression. It contained in its chaotic text invectives and challenges to the powerful, calls for the equity and the equality of men. One day, men were found who would seize hold of these words and make weapons of them.

"The original Arabs of (...) had had to accept equality with those whom they had conquered and among whom many now identified completely with them. The revolutionary movement which imposed this equality triumphed in the name of its own values, the values which had brought them victory. (...) Throughout the centuries, many other movements (...) would do the same. (...) Somewhere, at the source of these agitations, successful or not, of these more or less justified, more or less inadequate conceptions, there was the man who had been an obscure camel-driver of a humble family of the Quraysh tribe. (...)

"Ideas have their own life and this life was revolutionary. Once anchored in the memory of men, written down on papyrus, on parchment or even, for the Koran, on flat camel bones, they continue their action, to the consternation of the statesmen and churchmen who have used them, channelled them, worked out a casuistry in order to eliminate from them the dangerous repercussions for the good order of a well regulated society."

(Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 1994)

When and how was the Koran written?

There are considerable disagreements among scientists today over the concrete modalities and the probable time of the final drafting of the Koran. Was it essentially completed while Mohamed was alive or just after his death, or some 200 years later, well after the Arab conquest? For Maxime Rodinson: "The groups of words that Muhammad recited as having been inspired to him by Allah, the revelations, formed what was called a 'recital', in Arabic *qor' Ān*. They were written down during his lifetime on scattered documents, pieces of leather, flat camel bones, shards of pottery, palm stems, etc. During his life also, these fragments began to be gathered together, they made suras or chapters from them. (...) A book (*kitāb*) like those of the Jews and the Christians was constituted. (...) Thus the whole of the revelations was set in the mould of units in which a certain order, a certain plan could be distinguished. (...) This work was certainly done at least under the supervision of Muhammad, if did not work on it himself. (...) " (*Muhammad*, 1996).

For John Wansbrough: the rewriting of the Koran was a long process, marked by many confrontations with Judaism and Christianity, and its final version is posterior to the year 800 A.D. (*Quranic Studies*, Oxford, 1977; *The Sectarian Medium: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford, 1978.). Furthermore, Patricia Crone (1987) has gone so far as to question that Mohamed and Islam originated in Mecca (cf. note 1). To learn more, consult the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, 12 vol., Leiden, Brill, 1960-2005.

Trade and religions of individual salvation

"As long as he was bound, so to speak, organically to his clan, his tribe, his village, his city, he was nothing more, in a rigorously hierarchical society, than an interchangeable element, riveted to the place which destiny had assigned to him for a function that was always the same; man was subject to the idea of a life beyond the grave similar or parallel to this one. Over

there too, the social unities of this world would continue to regiment the pale phantoms which would lead a diminished existence. In these lands beyond death, the shades of servants would serve the ghosts of the masters, the phantoms of peasants would cultivate the land for them and the artisans beyond the grave would provide them with all that they needed. Merit and demerit on this earth did not make much of a difference. (...)

"But when there came the time of large-scale international trade which mixed peoples, men and ideas, when societies were established where money became the measure of all

things, where the money economy broke down the borders between different ethnic groups, where everyone could make his personal fortune, where the value of the individual in this world depended on the place that he made for himself by his own efforts, people started to hope that everyone would have a destiny at his own measure. Consequently, prophets arose who (...) promised individually [to the rich] a punishment first of all in this world, then in the other. From then on societies and communities were constituted, which taught their members how to attain a happy condition in the other world, how to save themselves individually. " (Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 1996)

Conclat, a setback that cannot be hidden

15 September 2010, by **Ernesto Herrera**

The Conclat was held on June 5-6, 2010 in the town of Santos, approximately 200 km from São Paulo. The massive participation reflected the expectations created by the process: 4,000 participants and 3,200 delegates; approximately 350 trade unions, federations, movements and associations representing, according to the organizers, more than 3 million workers. In previous months, 926 meetings of rank and file activists were organized, bringing together approximately 20,000 workers, to discuss different theses, make proposals and elect delegates.

The presence of numerous foreign delegations - from 26 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, Europe and Japan - gave the Conclat a clearly internationalist dimension. The presence of Sotiris Martalis, a Greek trade unionist and a member of the Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions (ADEDY), was particularly significant. He reported on the struggles of workers in Greece who face a brutal capitalist offensive against wages, employment and pensions.

Relationship of forces

For the thousands of participants engaged in the process of unification, the Conclat represented a kind of synthesis of various experiences. More exactly, it reflected at an organizational and programmatic level the start of a trade union and popular reorganization which, while being in a defensive context, is constructed in opposition to the neoliberal pro-employer programme of Lula's government. The Conclat expressed, moreover, efforts to unify the struggles, to give a perspective to claims, to seek agreement on questions which until yesterday divided the class-conscious and anti-capitalist camp.

Although this remains a vanguard phenomenon, in the minority from the viewpoint of the working class as a whole, and although not present in a decisive sector among the exploited, that of the landless (organized very largely in the MST, the landless rural workers' movement), this unification process reflected the social energy

accumulated in meaningful layers of the popular movement.

Indeed, the Conclat reflected to some degree the emergence of a new trade unionism. A trade unionism that takes up the more concrete demands of the labouring masses and jointly articulates them with the mobilizations of the exploited and oppressed, placing them in an anti-capitalist perspective. It is from this basis that the Conclat indicated the possibility (if only that) of an alternative on the battlefield for a change in the overall relationship of forces.

Because it is this question that the Conclat must face. That is to build an instrument to change (or try to change) the relation of forces between the class-conscious union camp and the union apparatuses which are subordinated, politically and physically, to the capitalist state apparatus. On Thursday, June 3, a note in the newspaper "Folha de São Paulo" showed the outrageous price of this subordination. The trade union federations allied to the government have received from that government

since 2008 the sum of 228 million reais (\$126.3 million) in the form of a "refund" of "trade union tax".

The Conclat was faced with a challenge that had to be overcome: "the failure of the combative and independent left trade union project", which had begun with the big strikes of 1978-1980 leading to the creation of the CUT. Therefore, the challenge required a step in the construction of a class conscious alternative having an effective impact in key sectors of the working class. A delegate from Santa Catarina (a southern state whose capital is Florianopolis) summarized thus the feelings of the activist rank and file: "We want to create a class trades unionism."

Yet this horizon was effaced even during the Congress. For the union apparatuses of Conlutas and the Intersindical the validity of their own arguments and "the victory of each of their proposals" was more important. Each apparatus harangued its troops. They listened to nothing. They imposed - from the platform and in the discussion groups - a logic of competition. They wanted to prevail in the battle over the relationship of forces... in the Conclat!

Unfortunately, the Conclat failed to consolidate the path to unity. Instead, it ended with a serious split. This "interruption in the the process of unification" - a process in place since the social forum in Belem (January 2009) - represents, from all points of view, a strong regression. It is impossible to hide or disguise. It was enough to see the bitter, regretful, indignant gestures of the workers and social activist who had made so many sacrifices to come from around the country to perceive the consequences of failure. The contagious hopes of the previous days were quickly extinguished.

A majority without direction

The call of the Conclat was shown on the banners and t-shirts: 'we will unite to strengthen the struggle'. This simple slogan summed up the task of the Congress: to overcome the

fragmentation of the trade union left; to create a new federation as an instrument for organising the struggle against capital. In the various theses presented, one could identify convergences and significant differences.

These concerned the functioning of the future trade union federation, the rules of proportional representation of currents, the integration of currents within the leadership and the powers given to this leadership. The same can be said with respect to the analysis of the national conjuncture: there was a "background tension" related to the election campaign for the presidency in October. During the Congress, the polarization was obvious between those who choose to support Ze Maria (Unified Socialist Workers' Party, PSTU) and those who supported the candidacy of Plinio de Arruda Sampaio (Party of Socialism and Freedom, PSOL), seen as two different paths to reflect the struggle and the interests of workers against the two parties of the bourgeois order (PSDB and PT). The mutual rejection of "responsibility" concerning the non-concretisation of the Left Front was a constant during the Conference; a Left Front candidacy would have allowed some modification of the centre left/centre right system which Ricardo Antunes presents in "Correio da Cidadania" as the danger of "Americanization" of the current Brazilian political system.

Nevertheless there was substantial agreement on the situation of trade union and popular struggles and, above all, programme, which created a greater opportunity for unification. There was disagreement on two key issues: 1. The nature of the trade union federation; 2. The name of the new federation. In 11 meetings of the Commission for the reorganization coordination in favour of a new federation, these differences could not be resolved. It was agreed to do so by using the criterion of "workers' democracy", i.e. with a vote of the congress. Now we know the result of this decision, in appearance very democratic.

A clear majority of the delegates spoke in favour of the proposal from Conlutas: a trade union, people's and

student federation. Without doubt, a relevant formula, in synch with the plurality of social sectors engaged in trade union and popular reorganization. The Intersindical proposed a trade union federation that would coordinate in the framework of a national forum with the student movement. In accordance with the Conlutas proposal, the same majority of delegates [originating from Conlutas] spoke in favour of the integration of students in the leadership of the new federation.

As regards the name, a majority (impossible to quantify to the extent that the votes were not counted) imposed the name "Conlutas Intersindica". The delegates from Intersindical (who had prevented the use of the name Intersindical for the new federation), the MAS and others rebelled against this sudden decision and left the Congress. The unification process was "interrupted".

The "recommencement" of the congress - after the withdrawal of the delegates who had left - deepened the split. The majority eventually forming the "new trade union federation" is essentially derived from Conlutas. From the formal point of view, we can say that Congress took decisions; that there was a majority and a minority; that there existed a "democratic legitimacy". But this was without the climate of enthusiasm and with a little less than half of the delegates in the room. It is within this context that the formation of the new federation and the establishment of an "Provisional National Executive Secretariat" composed of 21 members was announced, on the basis of consensus, but with a broad priority given to Conlutas. This Secretariat is responsible for "concretising resolutions" and re-establishing relations with sectors who withdrew from the congress.

The main forces have spoken on the outcome of the Conclat. As regards Conlutas, its judgment is reflected in this formula: "what was going to be a great victory of the process of reorganization, unfortunately, became a defeat following the decision of the Intersindical-United for Struggle-MAS bloc to withdraw from the Conference after losing the vote on the name of

the new structure." For Intersindical, the wording is as follows: "Unfortunately, what we did not want happened. We had to interrupt the process of foundation of the federation. The debate on the construction of the federation (political nature and name) revealed the absolute lack of willingness on the part of the majority of Conlutas to construct a synthesis of differing opinions, choosing as a method, on the basis of an arithmetical majority (small and changing) of congress delegates, to seek to impose a single orientation".

Almost all currents are agreed on continuing to explore the possibilities of unity. However the idea currently predominates that the rupture is "irreversible" if the majority maintains its position and the methods that led to the final failure. Obviously, the "responsibility" of Conlutas and the political form which hegemonies it, the PSTU, is stressed. There is nothing new in stating that the PSTU has a decisive weight in Conlutas and also in many social struggles. It is impossible to understand the emergence and development of Conlutas without regard to the initiative and the active engagement of activists and trade unionists of the PSTU in such a process. Therefore, the majority built by the PSTU in Conlutas has an undeniable political legitimacy.

Admittedly, there is Conlutas-PSTU responsibility in the Conclat failure.

By "abuse" of its controlling majority? The fact of "rushing" the minority? This would be a unilateral and sectarian explanation. The drama resides in the inability to exercise a leading role in this majority obtained in the Conclat; a leadership going beyond the ranks of Conlutas-PSTU, i.e. which would go beyond the membership and influence already acquired; to valorise and ensure agreement and consensus. This is necessary in any process of unification that integrates very different forces, traditions and practices; a process in which the maturity and the credibility of a broad leadership should assert itself, whose capacity is examined and looked to by broader layers than those who had come together in Conclat.

This was a serious error. Since the beginning of the congress, one sensed a climate of rupture in the various trends in the Intersindical (which are almost completely political factions inside the PSOL) fearing being annexed by Conlutas and falling into the orbit of influence of the PSTU (indeed, when voting on the nature and the name of the new federation, there occurred a withdrawal of the Intersindical delegates obliging its leadership to withdraw). Also, because it was known that significant sectors of the Intersindical - who would not attend the Conclat - held a negative position on unification with Conlutas because this unification would close doors to left CUT currents who criticize the subordination of the CUT

to the government.

"Political autism", as one rank and file delegate said? It is difficult to say for a "foreign observer". Nonetheless, the perception remains that the Conlutas-PSTU leadership should not have forced a vote on the name of the new federation. This not only because it did not reflect the process of trade union and popular reorganization, but because it did not respect the sensitivities and pluralism represented in the Conclat.

Before the Conclat the Conlutas congress took place. It was the congress of its "dissolution". But it was not in reality. The 1,800 delegates participated enthusiastically in the debates and votes, eventually affirming a sort of continuity of Conlutas. The result was an undisputed mandate in defence of this "identity". Two days later Conclat was driven into the impasse, there was no consensus and no "concessions" were made. The Conlutas -PSTU leadership took refuge in a hermetic centralism faced with a process of reorganisation which went well beyond its activist forces and its field of influence.

Last minute efforts and negotiations were fruitless. At the time of voting, hundreds of delegates would abandon the congress: the majority from Intersindical, but many members of Conlutas also. This with the feeling that it an enormous opportunity had been lost.

Cars: a time of transformations

8 September 2010, by **Jean-Claude Vessillier**

The crisis of the sector has provided the opportunity for a profound restructuring among capitalist groups, continents and geographical areas, constructors, spare parts suppliers, subcontractors and energy producers. Structural changes combined with sharp conjunctural variations are having a direct effect on jobs and working conditions where flexibility is

on the agenda everywhere.

Profits restored on the pretext of crisis

Crisis, what crisis? This question is posed when we observe the recovery

of production and profit registered by the main world manufacturers during the first quarter of 2010. They have all announced increases in production and turnover. World production of cars increased by 57% in the first quarter of 2010 in relation to the first quarter of 2009 [31]. The two US companies, Chrysler and General Motors, placed under the protection of

the law on bankruptcy in 2009 are back in profit. GM, which had accumulated 80 billion in losses in three years, has suddenly stabilised through the transfer of activities, debt restructuring and public funds.

Decidedly, the response has only gone in one direction: lower sales and production immediately led to anti worker measures, but on the other hand, any increase in production has first been allocated to the restoration of profits. Even if these figures, however, do not indicate a durable and flourishing recovery whether in the USA, Japan or Europe. The levels of production reached in early 2010 are still broadly below those of the period before the recession of summer 2008. And in most developed capitalist countries, scrappage allowances, that is public subsidies to buy new cars, were still being paid at the beginning of the year. It was not envisaged that they would be extended in most countries and the cuts in public expenditure across Europe will accelerate their disappearance.

Structural problems which, combined with the credit crisis, had caused the recession of the sector in the developed countries, are in no way resolved. Overcapacities of production caused by the inability to sell at a price guaranteeing the profit expected are still there. The increase in oil prices and the end of this form of energy as an abundant resource already dictate behaviour and investment in the sector: the individual petrol fuelled car is past its golden age in the developed countries.

In this context the car in Europe has become a consumer good which is increasingly sensitive to economic conjunctures, following in this respect the sharp changes at the level of sales traditionally observed in the USA.

That is why the austerity unfolding in Europe will have very significant consequences for the level of activity of the car industry. Even the improvement in profits observed in early 2010 will not resist this. The main factor in this new crisis is primarily to be found in the very functioning of the capitalist economy and the policies implemented by the European bourgeoisies.

A new distribution of zones of production and sale

The eruption of the crisis in 2008 opened a new phase of restructuring and recomposition of the globalised car industry which has not ended. The fall in world car production is combined with a shift in the world geography of countries of production and sale of cars [32].

The maximum number of cars ever produced in the world was in 2007, at more than 73 million. The total estimate for 2009 is 61 million, or a reduction of 12 million vehicles (-17 %). It is a considerable fall whose breadth has not been witnessed since the Second World War. The two preceding oil crises had more limited consequences - 5 million in 1975 in relation to 1973, - 6 million in 1982 in relation to 1979.

The fall observed does not prefigure in itself a new trend. The most recent data concerning late 2009 and early 2010 witness to a new increase in production, even if the pre-crisis levels have not yet been regained. Having learnt nothing from the recent past, the European Commission has just predicted a doubling of world use of the car over the next 20 years.

The singularity of the situation stems from the fact that the geographical equilibria have durably changed, both in terms of production and sales: the situation prepared by the developments of the last decade has been precipitated by the eruption of this crisis.

Location	Sales 2009	Variation 2009/2007	Production 2009	Variation 2009/2007
European Union	14,500,000	-10 %	13,944,000	-18 %
USA	10,402,000	-35 %	5,711,000	-53 %
Japan	04,559,000	-15 %	7,935,000	-32 %
China	11,756,000	+28 %	13,791,000	+55 %
India	1,988,000	+1 %	2,633,000	+17 %

We could genuinely speak of a collapse of production in the USA, the key country in terms of cars since the 1930s, and it amounts to the most significant fall observed since the end of the Second World War. The level of

production of cars in the USA was equivalent in 2009 to that of the period before 1950. In Europe, the breadth of the crisis differs among countries:

Location	Sales 2009	Variation 2009/2007	Production 2009	Variation 2009/2007
European Union	14,500,000	-10 %	13,944,000	-18 %
Germany	3,977,000	+15 %	5,210,000	-19 %
France	2,438,000	-4 %	2,050,000	-47 %
Spain	980,000	-93 %	2,170,000	-33 %
United Kingdom	2,180,000	-26 %	1,090,000	-60 %
Italy	2,335,000	-17 %	843,000	-52 %
Poland	360,000	+ 4 %	879,000	+10 %

In all European countries the falls in production have been higher than those of sales. This is the consequence of massive destocking undertaken by all firms â€” evaluated at a million vehicles (all European countries and manufacturers lumped together). It is also obvious that the general context of crisis has served as a pretext and opportunity for the manufacturers to decrease their production in the European Union in a much higher proportion than that which would have been required by a simple adjustment to lower sales.

The violence of the crisis varies according to the different European countries. In the United Kingdom and Italy, the falls in production have been of a breadth equal to the collapse observed in the USA. In Germany and France “scrappage allowances”, public subsidies for the purchase of new vehicles, have largely allowed the level of sales to be maintained. If this has been preserved, the same is not true of levels of production. France has experienced the biggest fall in production over the last two years, compared to the evolution of the level of sales. That means that, among European car manufacturers, the French have been the most active in using the crisis to internationalise their production.

More globally, Europe, North America and Japan have been the most affected by this crisis which is all the sharper in that it takes place in a context of recession. In permanent search of branches which guarantee capital the best rate of profit, the capital present today in the cars sector only remains there on condition of finding new sources of profit. Because today there are no better means of doing so than

on the basis of human labour, the end of the car is not on the agenda for them. What they are preparing are new ways of selling and producing for new markets. That is why the car industry is today experiencing a time of transformation where rhythm and content are dictated by the imperatives of capital and the social relations of force.

Finding new markets to meet a crisis of over-production

There will be no second chance for the car in the old developed capitalist countries: Western Europe, North America and Japan. The car there has reached a maximum level of equipment with a car density stabilised since 2005 at around 600 cars per thousand inhabitants, whereas in the USA it has for several years been around 800. The gap is considerable in relation to the ratios in China and India (respectively 34 and 14 cars per 1,000 inhabitants). In China, the car is reserved for the richest fractions and its use is still very restricted on the scale of the country as a whole. That does not prevent urban damage and pollution engendered by car traffic being suffered by the whole population whereas less than 5% benefit from access to individual motoring.

But for this globalised industry, the new market of China is a very significant opening, exceeding the number of cars sold in the USA, with 12 million cars sold in China in 2009. The development of the use of the car in China is more rapid than that observed in the US in the 1950s and Europe in the 1960s. Understandably, this is a market fought over by all the world car companies. Whereas the Chinese productive apparatus as a whole is increasingly export-oriented, the car industry is evolving differently. Car production is primarily focused on the country's internal market. In 2009, less than 10% of cars produced were exported. China is not today the workshop of the world in terms of car production.

Investment in China, programmed by US and European firms, is primarily aimed at finding openings in China and South Asia and of course to make profits there which can be repatriated to the head offices of the parent companies. The alliances created between national and foreign firms in China indicate an industrial organisation which has not yet stabilised. Numerous provincial and municipal authorities have supported the growth of local manufacturers and parts suppliers, leading to the appearance of more than 80 manufacturers and more than 7,000 suppliers. Competition is organised among all of them with the aim of weighing on working conditions and wages and moving towards a reorganisation whereby only a limited number of enterprises is maintained.

Today, through joint ventures, the Volkswagen, General Motors and Toyota groups are the most present in China, but all the other firms seek opportunities and authorisation to enter the country (governmental and regional authorisations are necessary before any investment takes place). Thus in 2009 Volkswagen sold 1.40 million vehicles in China, which became its biggest market ahead of Germany, out of a total of 6.29 million sales worldwide. It has been present in China for 25 years with seven production sites. In three years, between now and 2012, Volkswagen will invest 8 billion euros to open two new production sites. It says it will finance them through liquidity created by the two Chinese joint ventures it has created with the Chinese firms SAIC and FAW [33].

The mobilisation of millions of workers which would be demanded by the pursuit of car production on such a grand scale would raise the level of demands in terms of wages and working conditions. The placing in competition of employees across China, the massive recourse to workers from the countryside rejected and thrown out of the factories because of the slightest conjunctural variation will meet the limits of the finished character of the territories in competition, the necessity of a qualified workforce and a stabilisation of the labour force, as well as the resistance to this exploitation which is

beginning to emerge in the country.

The strike by workers at the Honda factory in Foshan which began on May 17, 2010, witnesses to the current situation in China. Among the many strikes by Chinese workers in recent years, this is one of the longest and it should serve as an example [34]. Around 1,900 trainee workers and employees under contract stopped production of spare parts and brought about the halting of all Honda assembly factories in China. Their demands centred on a wage increase, the rejection of wage differentials both inside the enterprise and in relation to other Honda factories, an end to employer repression, and the reorganisation of the enterprise trade union. This strike can serve as an example in a context where the foreign companies established in the factory face a rise in demands from employees and more particularly migrant workers, who demand wage increases and better working conditions.

The damage caused by car pollution to health, the environment, the climate and the organisation of urban space are just as perceptible in Beijing as in Europe or the USA. Certainly the Chinese car industry will be able to place itself as among the most advanced in the areas of emission standards, because it has the advantage of being a more recent industry than its competitors. But it is part of a globalised industry which does not know how to respond to the challenges of the climate emergency.

Finally, it is most improbable that Chinese capitalists and the Chinese state will in the medium term accept the maintenance of the domination of the Western partner firms of the "joint ventures". Thus the SAIC, property of Shanghai city, which is involved in co-enterprises with Volkswagen and General Motors, will probably spread autonomously in China and in other countries. It is necessary to have the arrogance of a Detroit or Wolfsburg boss to believe that they are going to be able to continue to govern the capitalist world of cars.

From low cost to ultra low cost

Since the generalised measures of pay restraint of the 1980s, the car industry has found it increasingly difficult to find buyers for its new vehicles. To sell dearer cars to a smaller number of buyers had been the recipe found to maintain the profit levels expected by shareholders. This policy was at its most exacerbated in the USA with the 4X4 gas guzzlers which have inundated the country. But this tendency was general in all the developed countries. This collided with the crisis of 2008: financial crisis and increased oil prices condemned this headlong rush to bigger and more expensive cars.

A reverse tendency has emerged: finding buyers through cheaper cars. In all European countries, smaller cars are selling more than others, though this amounts to a simple slippage to models designed before 2008. The new element is the introduction in Western European countries of "low cost" models whose design has been guided by this search for "low cost".

In the late 1990s, Fiat had followed this policy with the Palio, first produced in Brazil and sold in dozens of emergent countries. But this model had been little sold in Western Europe. Renault took the same path with the Logan, built by its Romanian subsidiary Dacia. The main reason for the "low cost" of manufacture of this type of vehicle rests primarily on its design and manufacture, using more classical techniques than the majority of new European products. The wages of Romanian workers do not explain the price of this model because if that was the case, cars manufactured in Slovenia, Slovakia or Turkey should be sold with the same advantage.

Know-how in the area of small and cheaper cars is today very much sought in the world of car competition. The capitalist rapprochement between Renault and Mercedes Daimler is explained largely by the desire of the German group to produce and sell something other than big heavyweight saloon cars. Mercedes wishes in this area to produce models with a greater

distribution than the Smart. The taking of a holding by Fiat in Chrysler's capital was motivated by the same reasons: to go from 4x4s, which had become unsellable, to the production of smaller cars, Fiat's know-how in this area appearing useful to the third of the giants of Detroit. The Chevrolet brand, a dependant of GM, had in 2005 bought out the Korean firm Daewoo to launch itself in the area of low cost. And it is probable that General Motors, soon back in profit thanks to US federal subsidies, will try new alliances in this sector. In this race for small car know-how, the European leader Volkswagen has not stayed still: it has taken a holding in the capital of Suzuki. This Japanese firm holds under the Maruti brand half the market for car sales in India, the leading country for the distribution of "small cars, and is the world specialist in this area.

If you liked "low cost", you will love "ultra low cost". After the Logan at 5,000 dollars, a car at 2,500 dollars is planned for launch in 2012 with a Renault-Bajaj partnership. This product seeks to compete with the Nano model launched by the Indian firm Tata. Naturally, Renault explains that this product will not be intended for Europe. This same approach was taken during the beginning of the industrialisation of the Logan to be disproved subsequently by the facts. India is in this respect a sub continent where the traditional car, in the format and engine assembly stabilised since the Detroit of the 1930s, appears in new variants, from two wheels to public and semi-public transport. But they remain dependent on oil, even if a lightweight semi-public transport vehicle consumes less fuel per passenger transported than a one ton saloon car.

If the extension of this type of solution was technically possible, this would be something too serious for its generalisation to be left in the hands of capitalists guided by the return on their shares. It is clear that the car companies cannot pass from a world where the average price of a new car sold is higher than 20,000 euros [35] to a situation where it would be five times lower. It would be necessary for them to submerge the planet with their commodities to hope to

reconstitute equivalent profit margins.

The illusion of technical recipes and the electricity fairy

It is very much financial interest which guides the behaviour of the car industry. Environmental and climate concerns are suffered as constraints or quite simply denied. It matters little to them that road transport "car and heavyweight" is the sector which has increased its carbon emissions the most over the past ten years. On the other hand, the irreversible increase in oil prices and its end as an abundant energy source forces the car industry to implement other solutions. It does not about the wellbeing of humanity but a strictly financial viewpoint.

The manufacturers, after decades without serious investment in these areas, are beginning to prepare vehicles with hybrid engines and electric vehicles. What they did not do during the years of growth, out of a concern first to pay dividends to the shareholders, they claim to be doing now. For the main car manufacturers, the electric vehicle is today only a small sector of potential activity, and this relates to the size of this industry on the world level. Renault states publicly that sales of electric cars on a 10-15 year horizon would represent 10% of its total sales of new cars in Europe, while PSA predicts 5%, and the German manufacturers 2.5%. With the recent more optimistic predictions, 98% of cars circulating in Europe will in fifteen years still have petrol or diesel engines.

Whatever the "good intentions", today an electric vehicle continues to be dearer to produce than an oil vehicle and this for less possibilities of use, taking account of the capacities, weight and cost of the batteries used as substitutes for the petrol engine. The batteries will be largely constituted of lithium, a non renewable resource present in only a few countries: Chile, the salt lakes of Bolivia (a third of currently proven

world reserves) and Tibet.

Electricity does not flow “from source” and must, of course, be produced. The main source of the production of electricity is today constituted by power stations fuelled by coal or oil. The use of electric vehicles will then not lead to any decrease in the consumption of polluting and non-renewable energy, and will change only the geographical places of emission. In France, a country where most electricity produced is of nuclear origin, a development of the use of electric vehicles would demand an increased number of nuclear power stations.

The car manufacturers, great defenders of the market economy and of competitiveness, do not envisage an initial development of electric vehicles without public subsidies. Electric cars and vehicles with hybrid engines are dearer than the cars of today and the manufacturers are turning to the state to request subsidies. Renault CEO Carlos Ghosn was very clear in September 2009: “It is simple, we will not go to countries where there is no interest in electric energy and which are not ready to implement the necessary incentives. We select countries according to the interest that we observe” [36], citing Israel, Denmark, Portugal, the USA and Japan. “The electric car is not only an approach to car manufacture, it is necessary to have the combination of a manufacturer and a municipality or a government”. This is an extension of the policies followed for some decades, with cars circulating on urban roads financed by public bodies. The capitalist firms reap the profits, the state provides the finance. The individual car, as today produced and sold, guarantees profits only on this condition.

Concentration of capital, physical dispersion of production

Faced with this situation, the car industry is constituting an oligopoly around a few groups who organise

themselves to ensure survival and profits. “Thanks to the agreement with Daimler, the Renault-Nissan alliance is situated, with Volkswagen and Toyota, in the closed club of manufacturers who produce more than 7 million cars” [37]. With this comment, Renault fixed the level of the entry ticket to gain access to this “closed club”. This acceleration of concentration inside the car industry is global: the activity of mergers and acquisitions in the car area at the world level tripled in 2009 to reach 122 billion dollars. This concentration of capital combines with an increase in the dispersion of the physical production of cars.

The time of big workers’ citadels of several thousand workers has passed in Europe. Only the Volkswagen site at Wolfsburg has more than 50,000 employees. The average size of the other most significant European car factories is around 10,000. The production of cars breaks down increasingly between assembly factories, some mechanical engine factories, spare parts providers and subcontractors of various ranks. Whereas the proportion was half in 1990, less than a quarter of the value of a car is today directly produced by the manufacturer who places their label on the finished product. During the crisis which broke out in 2008, workers in the subcontracting enterprises were the first to be affected because it was there that it was “easier” to close a factory [38].

In France, the social reality of summer 2009 was punctuated by struggles breaking out at small and medium enterprises under the blow of closures decreed by very distant headquarters. All the factories thus attacked were far from the finished car product. The coordination of workers across the whole branch was advocated by the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), while the trade union movement refused to envisage any test of strength. The centralised demonstrations which took place at the initiative of workers in struggle have not led to any coordinated overall struggles.

Faced with the internationalisation of production, a nationalist poison can spread. In France, moving production

out of the country has become a significant theme of public debate. However, unlike other goods, cars cannot be transported all around the world to be sold. That is why there is not been in Europe in recent decades a surge of cars manufactured in Japan or South Korea. On the contrary, Japanese companies have set up factories in France, Britain and Spain. And cars made in China are not ready to be sold by the million in Europe.

On the other hand, for French manufacturers in particular, there has been the establishment of an area of European dimensions (enlarged to Turkey) inside of which production is restructured according to a deliberate desire to disperse production as an insurance against social risks and cost imperatives. A race downwards is organised, factories and machines being exchangeable. What is practiced at the level of assembly is again to the advantage of suppliers and subcontractors. The placing in competition by the givers of orders, constituted in only a few big firms, is systematic. The world of this “reverse auction” guided from the computer screens of the purchases department becomes the norm in this enlarged Europe and the whole world. For Renault, this is simply blackmail: it is among European manufacturers the champion in terms of sales, on its historic territory, of cars produced elsewhere. This can only be fought by a battle of the workers’ movement to be built beyond the borders of each state.

Climate emergency and the workers’ movement

There is not in Europe a massive synchronisation between the social movement which has begun to emerge around the climate emergency, which challenges the current use of the car, and the workers’ movement in the car sector, facing the attacks we have just described. Actions and reflections on the subject are almost entirely systematically unbalanced. Either the car industry is seen as one of the places where a collective ability for workers’ resistance is forged and of

polarisation of social relations between classes. Or the use of the individual car is legitimately criticised as responsible for carbon emissions, a factor of segregation of humanly inhabited areas, and the bearer of a destructive individualism.

The criticism of the current use of the car is urgent and necessary. Again it is necessary to be in a position to translate it into appropriate demands and slogans by a social movement. Today in Europe the use of the car has become a constraint imposed by the organisation of the urban area and the shortcomings of public transport. There is no longer any correlation between high income and possession of cars. It is the more well off city centres with the densest public transport networks, like Paris and Tokyo, which constitute in the developed countries the areas where there are fewer cars per inhabitant. That is why the concrete translation of a radical criticism of car use is the systematic prioritising of free public and semi-public transport.

It would be utopian to believe that developments of the existing system would render decreased use of cars possible. When green liberals demand a carbon tax to help the capitalist reconversion of the car industry, they accept the laws of the market which will choose its solutions according to its own imperatives of profitability. The answer can only involve a political

solution, from the viewpoint of the interests of workers, favouring the satisfaction of social needs for the travel of all, and posed as a consequence of a central confrontation with those who decide in this society in their own interests.

Whereas public transport is privatised and gets worse, the fight for the maintenance of a service accessible to all is an area of social urgency. Of course, the new resources of public and semi-public transport remain to be invented because the choice could only be between the car and the new super systems of transport exclusively designed to get employees to their workplaces. The resources of this social inventiveness exist first and foremost among the workers in the sector. But this creativity cannot be deployed without workers' control over production and confrontation with employers who are not concerned by the social use of the commodities that they sell on the market.

As noted by Lars Henriksson, a Swedish worker at the Volvo factory, says, "If we do nothing faced with this and we hope simply that others take responsibility for it, there are many chances that we will soon find ourselves unemployed. To transform car production can appear an impossible task for we who work at the lowest level of the enterprise. But the truth is rather that we are the only ones who can do it! No help or

solution can be expected from the bosses" [39].

Jobs vs. companies

And those who defend jobs are surely not to be found among the leaders of the capitalist car industry. After restructuring and increased productivity, they have for thirty years organised the cutting of employment in cars in Europe and North America. They are the gravediggers of jobs in the name of profits and the survival of their companies. All the solutions they try to apply in the midst of the crisis take this form. The more the car face difficulties, the greater the obstinacy of the bosses in maintaining their profits.

The opposite path is to defend jobs and not companies. Jobs mean the workers, the solidarity of work and struggle, a knowhow and experience, a life in short and that is what we need to preserve. That will not be done by reconversions or industrial solutions seeking only to patch up this industry in crisis. Yes, there is an urgent need to impose other solutions. The car is the industrial sector which employs the most people in Europe and it is here that the sharpest class confrontations are established. The continuation of the history of the car industry will not be decided by the secret strategies of the employers but by social and political confrontations.

Voices from Venezuela

6 September 2010, by Jeffery R Webber, Susan Spronk

ATC: Can you tell us a little bit about your political lives?

GG: I am a co-founder of the radical web-zine *aporrea.org* and a militant in the radical left Marea Socialista (Socialist Tide) tendency within the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, formed on the initiative of president Hugo Chávez "ed."). Marea Socialista is the furthest left current within the party.

SPB: I am also a militant in Marea Socialista as well as a national coordinator of the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (National Union of Workers, UNT).

LP: I am a member of the leadership of the Unión Regional de Trabajadores (Regional Union of Workers, URT) Caracas-Miranda (the regional organization of the UNT). I am currently based in the state of Bolívar

working on the Guayana Socialist Plan and re-constituting the UNT, which has fractured in recent years.

ATC: What are the principal social forces driving the Bolivarian process and what are the major contradictions in the current period?

GG: We are continuing to push forward in the revolutionary process, a

process whose momentum is determined by the class struggle. Given the fact that we still live in a capitalist society, we confront many contradictions in the process. The bureaucratic, bourgeois state gives rise to many of these contradictions. Indeed, one of the largest threats to the revolution is the conservatism of the thick bureaucratic layer of civil servants, who have centralized political power and material benefits and act as a break on the process.

We still do not have control over the economy, which rests in the hands of private capital. Only by consolidating worker and peoples' power can we destroy the bourgeois state and break definitively with the capitalist system. To do this, we need to build alliances that include activist members of the National Assembly, the working class, peasants fighting for agrarian reform, community and popular movements.

We also have to fight the bureaucratization of the labor movement itself and build popular power within the workers' movements. There have been many positive examples of workers organizing "from below," such as in Guayana [a region in Venezuela south of the Orinoco River] and in the electrical sector, where the rank-and-file have fought for workers' control, forming their own councils under the rubric of "co-responsibility" with the State, where the state owns the means of production but decisions are made by the workers. In many cases, however, one of the foremost challenges that these workers face is the civil servants, who do not want to surrender control and who try to sabotage the process.

SPB: Class struggle in Venezuela has intensified over the past two decades, indicated by the Caracazo rebellions in 1989, and then another spike in 1998 with the electoral triumph of Chávez. More recently, the intensification of the class struggle has been expressed in the movement for workers' control and the nationalization of various enterprises, such as companies that make coffee and food, and also the earlier experiment in Inveval [a valve manufacturer taken under workers' control in 2005]. These examples point

to a new situation. The state, which is still a capitalist state, is being challenged.

Right now we are living in a kind of "state capitalism," but this situation can be overcome by deepening the experiences of workers' control, as long as the party or the government do not interfere. Eventually, companies such as PDVSA, the petroleum company, and other companies which remain in private hands, should also be put under workers' control.

The past few years have been characterized by the counter-offensive of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, who use their control of the press to spread their propaganda and to defend their class interests.

LP: We have found ourselves in a labyrinth. In 11 years of the revolution we have not been able to control the economy. The economy is still controlled by the national bourgeoisie, which is tightly linked with the transnational capitalist class. Evidently, more than 50% of production, distribution and commercialization processes remain in private hands, in the hands of the bourgeoisie. We are waging an economic war with the food producers, for example.

From my perspective, we are not really in a transition to socialism. Rather, we have a progressive government that has been promoting important reforms, especially through the social missions, such as in health, education and the provision of subsidized food. These reforms are fundamental "they are needed to resolve the material conditions of the population. But this is not enough. These missions tend to lose their momentum after a number of years.

There is a problem with continuity and permanence. And while the progressive government confronts the bourgeoisie on some issues, the state remains totally capitalist because the social relations of production remain capitalist.

GG: There are two more contradictions that are important to mention. First, Venezuela is inserted

in a global capitalism which is in crisis, which has given rise to expressions of sharp class conflict in many of the advanced capitalist countries, as we see in Europe. It is difficult to develop a revolution in isolation, as we are trying to do in Venezuela.

Second, we confront contradictions of a cultural character. Although some of the cultural and material aspects have changed and there have been advances in the level of consciousness [since the onset of the Bolivarian process], capitalist hegemony is still pervasive; the political and cultural characteristics of capitalism continue to dominate people's consciousness.

There are many spaces where people can now exercise popular power, but they fail to use them. Instead, many people rely on the old way of doing things. For example, in the area of communication: There are many tools, such as the Aporrea website, which could be used more effectively by the popular movements. But people are used to being informed instead of learning to inform themselves.

For example in Guayana, workers are elaborating a rich experience of workers' control in the heavy industries, such as aluminum, metal working, and steel. We need information about this experience that is produced by the communities and the workers themselves in order to be able to challenge the information that is being produced by the bourgeoisie and the state bureaucracy (which usually does not acknowledge the true advances in the process). The television stations are owned by capitalists; the workers do not have control over the press in that state.

I do not think that you can simply "inform" people and they will change. We must continue mobilizing, encouraging popular participation and organization and also political formation. But we confront serious roadblocks in this process given the continuing control of the capitalist class over the media.

ATC: What are the tensions and synergies that emerge in articulating the forces "from above" and "from below"? For

example, what has been the role of the state in creating or closing the space(s) for the exercise of “popular power” in the community and in the workplace?

SPB: The principal forces behind the process that have supported President Chávez are the popular sectors: the unemployed, workers, people who live in the barrios, the poor population. But today we also see the increasing importance of the organized working class. Workers have always participated in the process because they live in the barrios, but as a class with their own expressions and forms of organization, they are participating more and more.

Speaking of the class struggle that I mentioned earlier, the right wing has launched a campaign regarding the largest corporation in cereals and foodstuffs, the Polar Group. [The organized workers] threw out bureaucratic leaders and others who were supposedly going to help the company to avoid nationalization. I think that this struggle will intensify.

Also, recently in Caracas there was a mobilization against FEDECAMERAS, the top business federation in Venezuela, which supported the coup against Chavez in 2002, and afterwards workers demonstrated their support for the process in Maracaibo, Valencia, Puerto Cabello, Puerto La Cruz, Cumaná and Barquisimeto, protesting against FEDECAMERAS.

This is related to the problem we talked about in the first question, that the bureaucracy has too much power and sometimes they make mistakes. One example is when the president threatened to nationalize the Polar Group in Barquisimeto, which is an industrial zone located in state of Lara, and the government initially made the mistake of not talking to the workers and showing their commitment to support them in their struggle against the food giant. The bosses took advantage of this situation, and the Mendoza family, which controls Polar, bought off a section of workers.

Right now this situation is being corrected and the recent mobilizations

are proof of this. The demonstrations against FEDECAMERAS were an important demonstration that today there is a higher level of participation of workers.

As a result of the bosses' strike in 2003 [the lockout in the oil sector], workers have started to form independent unions, replacing the undemocratic unions that never held elections and had the same leaders for 40 years. In this sense, there has been a “revolution” within the unions in terms of worker participation. The peasants are also part of this confrontation with the Polar Group, which owns large tracts of land where they grow corn, cotton and other basic agricultural products.

GG: Revolutionary processes cannot simply be implanted from above; they must come from below. It is all very well and good to have a state that supports the struggle, which backs up the workers against their employer, for example. But the state shouldn't pretend that it is guiding the revolutionary process. Rather, the state should let the revolutionary processes unfold from its own roots.

There are real processes that are occurring from below, such as the conflict in La Gaviota [a canned food company that was recently nationalized]. In this case, the workers confronted their bosses and took over the factory. From the beginning they were running the factory under their own control. But often nationalization has been a government-led process. In the best case scenario they name some responsible leaders from a Ministry. But in most cases, they appoint the workers who have not been real protagonists in the process.

The [revolutionary] process cannot be imposed by bureaucrats: at the best, they can be facilitators or catalysts, but in the worst case they impede the process. For this reason, it is necessary to let the processes develop and unfold themselves, while stimulating them, feeding them, and facilitating them.

I say this because yesterday in the news it was reported that the Communist Party of Venezuela has proposed a law to form a Workers'

Council and to mandate Workers' Control. The proposal for a Workers' Council has been around for a while, and there are already several workers' councils established in the country. There are also several situations where there is real workers' control. But do we really need a law approved by the deputies of the National Assembly, or would it be better to let the process unfold and create a law based upon this experience?

If the law is born before the experience, we will find ourselves at a dead-end. It is impossible to try to mandate an organic process that is by its nature very open-ended, particularly to create a law that pushes forward the revolution rather than reproducing old patterns.

SPB: What is going on is that the revolutionary process in Venezuela is distinct from other revolutionary processes: this is a revolution that is trying to unfold in the middle of a bourgeois state. The revolutionary elements of this process have always emerged from the base, from the workers, not from legislatures and bureaucrats. But here we face many contradictions as we try to transform the system from within.

Laws can be important. For example, in a given private company there might be a bureaucratic union, which is controlled by the bosses, but there is also another group of workers who want to confront this situation. How are these revolutionary workers going to obligate their boss to establish a workers' council that decides what to sell, what basic materials to use, how to produce? In this case, a law that obligates the employer will help these revolutionary workers. But we can't forget that the only thing that can change the situation is pressure from below. History suggests that we need a combination of these two things. In this sense we face a dilemma: the problem of dual power.

LP: Fundamentally, it is the class struggle that pushes the process forward, as well as the conflict between the state and the popular movements. Chávez is in the middle of this conflict, as a guide in the process, pushing for its radicalization. Currently, the forces that have been

pushing forward this process are the popular forces, the people, not the labor movement in itself.

This also creates a certain weakness in the process. As Marxists, we consider that these unorganized classes are not sufficiently prepared to intervene in the transformation of the capitalist relations of production, because only the working class can intervene at the point of production. In spite of the important role that communities and the "pueblo" play in the struggle, they are easily demoralized. They get tired of waiting and find it difficult to sustain the initiative.

ATC: Luis and Stalin, could you elaborate further on the role of the UNT in trying to join together the forces "from below" and "from above"?

LP: The first element that needs to be considered is that the working class is highly segmented; workers are divided into different companies and there are divisions of labor. These divisions are a product of the capitalist system. Such divisions disorganize the struggle of the working class. At the moment, each struggle is isolated, in the workplace, or in the barrio. In other words, the working class is a class in itself but not a class for itself.

It is the role of the party to articulate these struggles, such as the PSUV. But before building this party, how do we achieve the unity of the workers? There are many different ideological and political tendencies within the labor movement today, Trotskyists, communists, etc. These different tendencies need some kind of articulating mechanism to build unity in the struggle at the base.

The UNT has attempted to bring this kind of unity to working-class movements, but it ended up bureaucratizing the movement because it was imposed from above. Of course, we must consider that bureaucratization can give the working class a certain advantage, such as in Spain or Germany, where the workers have a lot of power vis-à-vis the employers and the state.

When Chávez dissolved the

[reactionary Central de Trabajadores Venezolanos, Central of Venezuelan Workers] CTV, we founded an alternative, the Frente Bolivariano de Trabajadores [Bolivarian Workers' Front], which aimed to intervene in the struggle by bringing together the revolutionary elements that were formerly within the CTV. Currently the UNT is not effective at the national level, but there are elements where it is still strong, such as in Mitsubishi [MMC Mitsubishi plant in Anzoátegui state].

You never know how the struggle will unfold, however, or where it will emerge next. While the process of trying to bring together the labor movement [through the UNT] has failed because it was imposed from above, we have to find the "spark" that will build an autonomous process from below. The Socialist Plan of Guayana is an example of a process that has come "from above" but only as a response to demands "from below."

SPB: The UNT was born in the heat of the class struggle of 2003 with the bosses' strike. It continues to be the largest workers' central in the country. Recently, however, a group of dissident workers separated from the UNT to try to form their own central. In the past three years they have not been able to consolidate this organization. We think that the correct path is not to construct a new organization but to rebuild the UNT.

Either this year or next, 150 comrades from all sectors will be holding a congress. We have a lot of work ahead of us, including the writing of an internal statute that will mandate regular elections. Certainly there are a lot of different political currents in the workers' movements, such as Marea Socialista among others, but we need to unify these different currents within one central, the UNT. Workers are still a fundamental social subject to bring about social change.

ATC: What is the importance of workers' control in advancing the Bolivarian project?

GG: Workers' control is important from the perspective of democracy. It helps workers overcome their sense of

alienation, to be considered a creative person whose opinion matters. Dignity is related to so much more than one's salary; it touches on fundamental aspects of our humanity. Workers' control is about having influence, feeling like one is more than a machine that simply follows orders. It is about being a member of a collective.

But workers' control is also fundamental in the redistribution of social wealth. Workers need to decide how, what and when to produce and what, how and when to sell. Workers' control permits the optimal use of resources in the society at large in order to respond to the needs of the communities.

It is also fundamental in defence of sovereignty. You cannot have an anti-imperialist practice without workers' control. The tendency of those who monopolize the decision-making is to concentrate power so that they can guard secrecy over economic decisions and receive personal benefits. For example, many bosses receive commissions from transnational companies when they negotiate contracts. In this sense, workers' control reduces waste and corruption.

To name one example, in Alcasa [an aluminum plant in Guayana], the bosses of transnational companies had established certain standards in the use of certain materials in the processing of aluminum. It was said that this material would last less than 1,500 days and would have to be replaced regularly. The workers discovered that this was untrue, however, that the material could in fact last twice as long, which reduced the costs of production significantly.

The bosses were replacing these parts because they received benefits for these contracts, which put the entire industry at the service of foreign interests. If the workers do not participate directly in the decision-making processes, there is no way to discover bosses' looting mechanisms, such as this one.

In socialism, enterprises function based upon the needs of the society rather than profit. The state is

supposed to be a transitory mechanism that allows for the development of the organizations at the base, the promotion of workers' participation, to guarantee that community organizations move beyond their local concerns.

Currently in Venezuela, these experiences of popular power are circumscribed. *Comunas* are restricted to intervening in their small, defined localities. To move forward, we also have to intervene at the national level. It is certain that there is a learning process. But there are social movements and organizations with a national reach, which could be intervening.

SPB: When workers have control over the workplace, it is not just an opportunity for the individual workers to learn, but for raising class consciousness. Workers learn that they do not need bosses, whether the company is owned by a private enterprise or by the state.

It also creates the possibility that Venezuela may convert itself from a country that only produces primary materials to a country that produces manufactured goods, such as in the case of aluminum. The workers start to ask themselves, what else can we do with aluminum besides exporting it? We have to review the possibilities within every enterprise that is owned by the state. In this sense, participation of the communities is doubly important because they also play a crucial role in mitigating the damage to the environment that the industrialization process implies.

The process of worker control is therefore opening the possibility of a new kind of socialism that has not been seen before, different from that of the Soviet Union or Cuba, for example. In the Soviet Union, everything was controlled by the state, by the party. There was no real workers' control. This has also been the case in Cuba. In Venezuela, on the other hand, it is primarily workers who are participating in the workers' councils and the communal councils.

LP: First and foremost, we must remember that workers' control is a socio-historical demand. It is worth

repeating: We are not inventing anything! Worker management is a product of the struggles and traditions of the working class. The demand for a type of management which emancipates the working class is one of the fundamental products of the development of capitalism.

Under capitalist forms of work processes, the capitalists appropriate the products of workers' knowledge. Worker management entails an end of the division of labor, such that there is no division between intellectual and manual labor and an end to the ideology that legitimates domination. It is an historical demand, the same that was expressed in the 1871 Paris Commune, 1917 in Soviet Russia, 1919 in Germany and Italy, in the Spanish revolution, forms of worker management in Yugoslavia, and in 1956 with the workers' councils in Hungary. There is continuity with these struggles in Venezuela as the working class struggles to emancipate itself and create a new society.

More concretely, demands for worker control started with the petroleum strike in 2003 when workers named their own managers in assemblies since the bosses were on strike. This process has taken off since then, such as in 2005 with the appropriation of Invepal [a paper factory] and Inveval, Alcasa [aluminum enterprise] in 2005, CADAPE [electrical plant] in 2004, and other factories.

The experience of Sanitarios Maracay was particularly important because this was where the first factory council was established and elected by the workers, even before Inveval. Currently we are working on the Socialist Plan in Guayana in Bolívar, which is based upon workers' control.

Everybody is talking about "workers' control." We do confront problems, however, most of all when the petty bourgeoisie and state bureaucrats try to co-opt the notion. For example, in SIDOR, in one sector the workers wanted to implement a workers' council. Four unelected people wanted to join the workers' council: the chief of the section, the coordinator of the section, a delegate from the health and safety committee, and a delegate from the union. But the workers said,

"This is not workers' control. All delegates must be elected by the workers, for each shift." There are many other examples of these kinds of shenanigans.

ATC: What is the role of the local *comunas* in the process?

GG: About 50% of the workers in Venezuela are employed in the informal economy. Many of these people were driven into the informal economy during the neoliberal period with the economic crash, when the options for working in the formal economy and the rural areas were incredibly limited. We also must consider, however, that there is a petty bourgeoisie within the informal economy of people who own their own small businesses.

The importance of the *comuna* is that people are starting to think about ways to transform society by producing in new ways, under a new logic. For example, in Catia [a poor barrio in Caracas] there is a longstanding tradition of shoe-making, which was organized by small- and medium-sized businesses. Production is currently being re-started under the logic of social production, controlled by the community.

This process of "co-management" is still in its early stages, but it may represent a route to overcome the problems of the informal economy, including instability, poor working conditions and the lack of social benefits, as well as problems related to the darker side of the informal economy, such as child labor, illegal trade, drug-trafficking and paramilitarism, in which unimaginable activities occur.

LP: The fundamental role of the *comuna* is to bring together the organized working class with the other popular classes in order to be able to deepen the process. We have to build alliances with the organizations of the barrios and the peasant sectors, such as the Frente Campesino Ezequiel Zamora (Ezequiel Zamora Peasant Front).

In socialism, there are two central elements: the economic and the political. Socialism is democracy.

Socialism does not exist without participation. For us, the National Assembly is a bourgeois assembly. The constitution has bourgeois elements still, such as the division of power between executive and legislative. This is why we are talking about a state made of councils — workers' councils, communal councils, students' councils — which would take on all of these functions. It is a transitional state that we are working on. We know that it is difficult because we are not talking about a comuna the size of a city, like the Paris Comune.

We also need to socialize the means of production. When the workers control the means of production, the society will control the means of power, meaning the judicial power, and the National Assembly. Right now a judge earns 40,000 Bolivares Fuertes, while a worker earns 2000 or 3000 Bolivares Fuertes. This creates an unequal power structure controlled by capitalists. We need to create a new economy and society from the ground up.

ATC: What has been the role of the PSUV in articulating or disarticulating the most radical sectors of the process? How cohesive is the party? How democratic are its internal structures? Should we think of the PSUV as a revolutionary party?

GG: It is an important accomplishment to have one party. We understand the importance of unity. The problem is that this type of organization is constituted as a kind of machine which is controlled by the public servants, mayors and governors, who are dependent on the state for their employment. The revolutionary subjects, such as the popular sectors and the peasants, have very little weight in the party.

We call this situation "administered militancy." What we really need, however, is a party that is directed by the working class, which will reduce the weight of the public servants. Of course, things do not change overnight; this is a struggle. We have to fight for a party that has internal democracy and guarantees the participation of the militant sectors in its programs and its statutes.

At the same time, we have to defend the independence of the popular sectors from the party; the party can facilitate, help to orientate the popular sectors, but should not impose its vision to prevent the total bureaucratization of the process. The popular movement has much to offer in the construction of the party. People in the party think that their primary role is to orient the popular sectors, but in fact the social movements are the forces that should build the party.

SPB: The party still bears many of the characteristics of the Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR), which was primarily an apparatus for winning elections. There is little self-criticism. The workers and the communal councils should not be controlled by the party. In the recent congress, workers' patrols [workplace PSUV branches] were constituted to help select delegates, but their participation was merely symbolic.

There are elections this September. It is a shame that this party, which is supposed to be the hegemonic force, is not really based upon the participation of the workers. A few workers' representatives act as candidates or deputies, but party militants need to work closer with workers' movements. We need a revolution within the party to get rid of the old structure and organization of the MVR and the old parties.

LP: This is a party that has been built from above. I think that praxis is fundamental. Similar to the UNT, the party is bureaucratic. Such a process practically kills any movement at the base. We have to start with the masses. In the assemblies the masses rebel, but right now the student movement, the labor movement and the community movements are divided. So that the PSUV has a reason to be, to commit to the praxis of revolution, we are building workers' patrols, but these are still very small. I am involved in building these patrols.

The problems are structural. It is not productive to say, "This person is corrupt" or "this person is a disguised Chavista." We have to create a program. This is what is going to attract people to the party, when we

show them that there is a plan, an alternative that represents them. In the last elections, we tried to identify people to be deputies. We achieved a few things, but each person was working by themselves and the bureaucratic apparatus won. This was not a surprise. We have to organize ourselves and overcome our individualism.

ATC: What are the transitional moves necessary to dislodge the economic power of the bourgeoisie and to upset more fundamentally capitalist social, property and class relations?

SPB: According to a recent study by Victor Á lvarez, published by the Centro Internacional Miranda, the majority of the economy remains in private hands. The banks, for example, have been profiting handsomely. Unfortunately these are official statistics. This situation is very troubling.

We have to continue to deepen workers' control and to control the amount of profit that the private companies are making. The workers' councils are important for this reason, to prevent scandalous profit rates. It is also necessary to exert more state control over the parallel dollarized economy, in which the rate of profit is about 60-70%. If there is no control over this situation, the private companies will continue to profit at the expense of the rest of the economy.

The UNT is heading up this fight to make sure that the collective interests dominate over individual interests. The government needs to play a role here.

GG: There is a fierce debate within the PSUV, about the rhythm by which and the methods used to arrive at the transition to socialism. Sometimes we are taking steps backwards instead of forwards. We have to push forward to break the monopolistic control of the food companies.

We have made some advance by nationalizing and implementing workers' control in some companies, but the food sector continues to be dominated by the private sector, by

companies such as the Polar Group, an enterprise which controls the production of cooking oil, grains, cereal and alcohol. This company needs to be socialized and placed under workers' control.

Right now, there is also a debate about nationalizing the banking sector. Some banks have been nationalized, such as the Federal Bank and the Bank of Venezuela, but these banks have been nationalized in order to overcome crisis. The government still does not control the financial sector. There is a lot of corruption and bad management in this sector. Some people have been put into prison. We have to put more thought into the role of social movements and workers in this sector.

Another problem is that popular power is fragmented; we do not have popular power at the national level. We must start to build this process with the existing social forces. The peasants, indigenous communities, and communal councils need to create a national council to discuss the state's policies, so that they participate in decision-making at the national level. We need to continue to organize to stem the demobilization that happens when people get discouraged.

We have taken many knocks, especially from the bureaucracy, but there are still reasons to remain optimistic. We have to combine social forces to take power away from capital, and not transfer this power to a bureaucracy which is converting itself into new capitalists in a hidden form.

LP: We need to nationalize the banks and break the monopoly over the food system. As it stands, there are private monopolies that own the banks and the systems of food production, distribution, and commercialization. 72.5% of finance is still owned by national and international bourgeoisie. It is impossible to develop industry owned by the state if you do not control the banking system. Who else is going to provide credit for all of the projects?

We are not talking about nationalizing all of the companies, only the

fundamental ones that have monopolies. This will help us build a national economy and also move from being an economy that exports primary materials towards a productive economy. The other aspect is to create a new idea of democracy. The workers' councils, the communal councils, and the *comunas* are the tools with which we will build the new society. Right now the bourgeoisie is controlling the state.

ATC: An imperial and right-wing counter-offensive against the left throughout Latin America seems to be intensifying. We see, for example, the new U.S. bases in Colombia, the Honduran coup, attempted destabilization in Bolivia and Ecuador, and the consolidation of right-wing electoral regimes in Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Chile. How would you characterize the imperialist threat to Venezuela under Obama, and in what ways is it similar and different from the threat under Bush?

SPB: Breaking the Bolivarian Revolution remains an obsession of the imperialist powers. They are doing everything they can to break the process politically. They support electoral forces like (outgoing Colombian president) Uribe and the right-wing forces in Mexico and Peru. They also apply pressure in other cases so that governments will follow moderate reforms like Lula in Brazil.

GG: Direct military threats are possible, but they have been concentrating their efforts on a media war. In Spain, for example, the media conglomerate Grupo Prisa presented Venezuela as a dangerous country where people die every day due to violence. This problem of crime and violence is not a new one, however; it has existed for decades and is a product of the inequalities of capitalism.

For the first time, the government is trying to confront the problem using a social approach rather than through repression, which is not acknowledged by the media who prefer to depict Venezuela as a "lawless" society. They never mention, however, the brutally violent situation in Colombia, which is

a narco-state where social leaders and civilians are constantly being assassinated.

They are building bases on the border of Colombia in order to be able to launch a military offensive against Venezuela.

Right now they have the opposition, but they also have influence over the bureaucratic sectors that constitute another great threat to the [revolutionary] process. Imperialism has launched aggressive campaigns to destabilize the government. They have not yet opted to invade us, but if they decide that they have to do it, they will. So far they have focused on destabilization from within.

SPB: The right has a lot of faith in their expectation of victory in the September elections. The opposition will try to profit from whatever campaign to attack the Federal Bank, the PDVAL, the government's threats against the Polar Group and Globovisión to try to maintain their bases in the country and sustain their worldwide campaign.

We have to deepen the revolution, take over the strategic industries, and destroy the monopolies. This is the only way that the government can guarantee the provision of food, clothing and medicine, at fair prices. Currently we depend on private, transnational corporations and importers to provide these goods.

We are in a crucial moment where the revolution can advance or take steps backwards. The government has taken a positive step in signalling its support for workers' control, but this is not enough. There is a lot left to be done. The stranglehold that the private sector continues to have over the economy, as Victor Alvarez demonstrates, is very troubling.

LP: We will always be attacked. Imperialism does not sleep. Right now they are playing a waiting game, waiting for people to give up. The imperial power is in a delicate situation, tied up with two wars. This does not mean, of course, that direct military invasion is not possible, but it is less likely. Also, the correlation of forces in Latin America has changed.

There is an interesting correlation of forces in Europe due to the crisis, as well.

Clearly, we do not think that socialism is possible in one country. We need socialism in Bolivia and Ecuador. As Trotsky says, uneven and combined development of the economic forces mean that some countries are more economically developed than others, but there can be revolutionary processes in some of these "backward" places. We have to build solidarity, solidarity that is also material to defend the revolutionary processes.

GG: The imperialist powers are also trying to divide the South American nations that are currently working together, to separate Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, and also Argentina, for example. Argentina is a case where a government of the bourgeoisie has established alliances with the government of Venezuela.

Certain sectors have proposed the creation of the Fifth International as a counter-weight to the imperial offensive. This proposal risks creating

an overly bureaucratic organization; we cannot construct a revolutionary government on this basis. The best defense is to develop the revolution in other countries, and then we would be able to launch an international campaign against the monstrosity of Colombia, for example.

There are four million Colombians in Venezuela. While some of them are with the process because they receive social benefits that they have never had before, many of them remain under the influence of Uribeismo. Political transformation is a long process, and it takes time for people to leave behind what they have always known.

The last thing that I would like to say "unless there are other questions" is about the press. Right now Globovisión, which is linked with the Federal Bank, has a campaign to show the world that the government is trying to destroy them and that they are defending freedom of speech.

I participated in the Front of Bolivarian Lawyers against Globovisión on behalf of Aporeia,

which is petitioning the Supreme Justice Tribunal to open legal proceedings against Globovisión for violating no fewer than 25 articles of the Constitution that protect human rights. The Tribunal recognized the petition in 2004 but has not yet held a hearing because the government is being blackmailed by Globovisión.

Globovisión was at the front of the coup d'état in 2002. It is more than simply a television channel that promotes the cultural and ideological hegemony of capitalism; it is a conduit for the interests of imperialism, with close links to media outlets like CNN, etc. But the Venezuelan government has been very soft with Globovisión, even offering amnesty.

In whatever other country, these people would be in jail or would have been killed. If this were the United States, these people would not have been forgiven since they knew full well what they were doing; their actions were premeditated.

This interview was published in *Against the Current* [ATC 148](#), September-October 2010.

Thousands of Cancuns for climate justice!

6 September 2010, by **Via Campesina**

Social movements from around the world are mobilizing for the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that will take place in Cancun, Mexico from 29 November to 10 December 2010.

The COP 15 in Copenhagen demonstrated governments' incapacity to tackle the root causes of the current climate chaos. At the very last moment, the US undemocratically pushed through the so called "Copenhagen accord", in an attempt to move the debate out of the UN and the Kyoto promises and to favor even more voluntarily free market solutions.

Climate negotiations have turned into a huge market place. Developed countries, historically responsible for most of the greenhouse gas emissions are inventing all possible tricks to avoid reducing their own emissions. For example, the "Clean Development Mechanism" (CDM) under the Kyoto protocol allows countries to continue polluting and consuming as usual, while paying low prices supposedly so that developing countries reduce their emissions. What actually occurs is that companies profit doubly: to contaminate and to sell false solutions.

Monsanto tries to convince us that monoculture plantations of its GMO Roundup Ready soybeans qualify for carbon credits because they

contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases that heat the planet by accumulating organic matter in the soil. Communities living nearby soy monoculture plantations are a living example of the mortal and destructive effects of these monocultures. Similar false arguments are used to sell carbon credits based on forest monocultures, agrofuel crops, or industrial animal production.

Many governments of developing countries, attracted by the potential profits, are betting on these false solutions and refusing to implement measures that effectively confront climate change, such as supporting sustainable peasant agriculture, orienting production towards internal

markets, establishing effective energy saving policies for industry, etc.

We demand the application of thousands of people's solutions to climate change

It is now time for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to embark on resolute policies to contribute to solve the climate chaos. Countries need to take strong and binding commitments to radically cut gas emissions and radically change their mode of production and consumption.

Climate change also is worsening the migration crisis. The droughts, the terrible floods caused by severe storms, water contamination, soil erosion and degradation, as well as other destructive impacts of the neoliberal environmental disaster, are bringing about the displacement of thousands of people, mainly women and ruined farmers, from their rural communities and forcing them towards the cities and the North in a desperate search for the means of survival for them and their families.

It is estimated that 50 million people have been forced to migrate due to the effects of climate change. These "climate displaced people" have come to swell the ranks of the more than 200 million human beings, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), that today represent the worse crisis of migration that humanity has faced. Solutions do exist.

More than 35,000 people gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia at the People Conference on Climate Change and for the Rights of Mother Earth broadening new visions and proposals to save the planet. These thousands of solutions coming from the people effectively confront the climate crisis.

We demand that the UNFCCC endorse the Cochabamba People's Agreement proposals and to reject all false solutions being cooked up for the

moment.

Among them:

Defend land and forest rights: The REDD + initiative (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) should be rejected. Protecting forests and reforesting degraded forests is an obligation of all governments that should be implemented without limiting the autonomy, the rights or the control of indigenous and peasant peoples over the land and their territories, and without serving as an excuse so that other countries and corporations continue contaminating and planting tree monocultures. Territorial and cultural rights of indigenous and peasant peoples should be explicitly recognized in any climate accord.

Reject geoengineering: Large-scale proposals to deliberately alter the climate, such as biochar and genetically modified plants to supposedly increase reflectivity and resistance to drought, heat and salt, the fertilization of the ocean or the massive creation of clouds only create new, unmanageable problems, they are not solutions. Geoengineering is only one example of out transnational companies are willing to play with the future of the planet and humanity in order to create new sources profit.

Reject all carbon trading schemes and Clean Development Mechanisms (CDM): Carbon trading has proven extremely lucrative in terms of generating investor dividends, but has completely failed in reducing greenhouse gas. In the new invented "carbon market" the price of carbon keeps dropping to rock bottom, which encourages further pollution. All carbon emissions should be reduced from the source, rather than allowing payment for the right to pollute.

Reject any participation of the World Bank in the management of funds and policies related to climate change.

We need millions and millions of peasant communities and indigenous territories to feed humanity and cool the planet.

Scientific research shows that peasant and indigenous peoples could reduce current global emissions to 75% by increasing biodiversity, recuperating soil organic matter, replacing industrial meat production with small-scale diversified food production, expanding local markets, halting deforestation and practicing integrated forest management.

Peasant agriculture not only contribute positively to the carbon balance of the planet, it also gives employment to 2.8 billion people, women and men around the world, and it remains the best way to combat hunger, malnutrition and the current food crisis.

The right to land and the reclaiming for territories, food sovereignty, access to water as a common good and a human right, the right to use, conserve and exchange seeds, the de-concentration and promotion of local markets, are the indispensable conditions so that peasant and indigenous peoples continue feeding the world and cooling the planet.

Join us for thousands of Cancuns!

Together with diverse organizations we will set up an encampment in Cancun, which will unite the force and resistance of peasant peoples of the world, who are already cooling the planet.

We call on social movements, popular organizations and all people of the world to organize thousands of protests and actions to reject the false and market solutions. We declare ourselves in permanent mobilization until we defeat the big market negotiations in Cancun in December.

September 1, 2010

[Via campesina](#)

The first month of Labour Relief Campaign Pakistan

3 September 2010, by **Farooq Tariq**

The Labour Relief Camp first camp was organized in Lahore on 1st August 2010 at Regal Chouck Lahore. Earlier on 25th July 2010, we decided to launch a Baluchistan appeal.

It stated, "Torrential rains have unleashed flash floods in different parts of Baluchistan over the few days. Water levies broke leaving the people exposed to flood water. At least three villages in district Sibi have been destroyed. Houses, live-stock such as cattle's and goats, household goods, clothes, shoes and other items have been destroyed. Residents of villages are currently without drinkable water, food, shelter and in need of clothes. In particular, the situation is dire for children and women and they are in desperate need of food and clothing. Disease is spreading fast in the areas affected due to lack of drinkable water. In particular, flu, fever, diarrhea, cholera have been noted and are spreading. The government's response has made matters worse. They failed to act immediately, leaving tens of thousands of people unaided. They came after twenty four hours to the make-shift camps with paltry amount of food bags to distribute. The gap between the food being distributed and the large number of people desperate to eat led to fighting breaking out making matters even worse for these desperate people. Rubina Baluch, Women Secretary LPP Baluchistan, who is a resident of one of the affected villages said, "there is absolutely nothing left here - food, water, and clothing - and we are in desperate need of these'. At least, 10, 000 people are said to be in suffering in these grave conditions".

Perhaps this was the first appeal by any political group in Pakistan to ask people to help the victims of torrential

rains in Baluchistan.

After an informal consultation with several social and political groups in Lahore, we decided to set up the first camp. Already a group of 42 activists including 35 women belonging to Labour Education Foundation were trapped in Kalam, Swat valley. The flood in river Swat had flooded away all the bridges and the road links were delinked from the rest of the country. They were eventually evacuated by a military helicopter after 8 days of ordeal.

The camp in Lahore was supported by many activists and on the first day, we collected nearly 18,000 Rupees within two hours. Next day, it went up to nearly 50,000.

Formation of the LRC

An LRC committee was established with 8 members from eight different organizations. They included, Cindy Kariaper, Pakistan For Palestine, Farooq Tariq Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, Qalandar Memon Labour Party Pakistan, Bushra Khaliq Women Workers Help Line, Khalid Malik Labour Education Foundation, Ammar Jan Progressive Youth Front, Khaliq Shah CADTM Pakistan and Niaz Khan National Trade Union Federation. The committee decided to meet at least twice in a week to discuss all aspects of the campaign.

The LRC committee agreed to campaign on two fronts, collecting funds for the immediate relief and to change the priorities of the national budget demanding a total no to repayment of foreign debts and reduce the military budget, no cuts in development budget and no new taxes, no new loan, but grants and aid.

On 7th August, we issued a new appeal and here is a part that we wrote,

"Please donate to Labour Relief Campaign to help people of Pakistan is facing worst ever floods of its history. Torrential rains have unleashed flash floods in different parts of the country since last three weeks. Water levies broke leaving the people exposed to flood water. More than 12 million people have suffered due to these floods. More than 650,000 houses have collapsed, mainly in villages. Thousands of acres of crops have been destroyed due to flood water. Houses, live-stock such as cattle's and goats, household goods, clothes, shoes and other items have been destroyed. Residents of villages are currently without drinkable water, food, shelter and in need of clothes".

Five days later, the situation had worsened even more and it was estimated that over 20 million people are affected by the flood by then.

We wrote on 12 August:

"The flood is still on dangerous levels in several parts of Pakistan. The numbers of people affected by the flood have crossed 20 million. More torrential rains are forecast by the weather department. This is been considered one of the most devastating flood in world history. The UN has once again appealed for donations for Pakistan. But there has been a very slow response internationally to help Pakistan in this period of great devastation. After destroying most of Khaiber Pukhtoonkhawa and Southern Punjab, the water has now washed down the Indus River Valley, causing a deluge in Sindh. The water has been powered by unusually fierce monsoon rains that began in country's northern areas some three weeks ago. Roads, bridges

and other infrastructure have given way, overwhelming the government's ability to cope. At this point an estimated 1,600 have been killed with another 5 million left homeless".

Camps were set up in different parts of Pakistan including Rawalpindi, Mardan, Hyderabad, Moro, Karachi, Sanghar, Layya and Sibbi.

We sent the appeal to all our international friends and by then, the world was awakening to the most catastrophic incident of Pakistan history.

The results of our efforts so far

In one month, we have raised the following:

Lahore Rs. 654587 (cash)

Lahore Rs. 45000 (goods)

Rawalpindi Rs. 5000 (cash)

Hyderabad Rs. 184100 (cash)

Hyderabad Rs. 299550 Goods and medicine

Moro Rs. 766,190 (cash)

Karachi Rs. 450,000 (cash)

Karachi Rs. 250,000 (goods)

Mardan Rs. 70,000 (cash)

Sibbi did not have information

Sanghar no information yet

Layya no information yet

International appeal Rs. 371784

Confirmed commitments and information received

SAP Netherlands Euro 5000 (Rs. 550,000)

Olof Palme International Center Sweden SEK 50,000 (Rs. 589,500)

Cultural Life Buoy campaign NOK 10,000 (Rs. 138,000)

Yasmeen USA US\$ 2000 (Rs.172,000)

Pakistanis in Denmark US \$ 1000 (Rs.

85000)

A total in cash raised from Pakistan: Rs. 2,129,877

International Rs. 371,784

Commitments Rs. 1,534,500

Goods: Rs. 594,550

Total cash, goods and commitments on 3 September 2010:
RS 4,630,711 (US\$ 54 478)

Apart from the relief campaign, we have also launched a political campaign for non payment of foreign debts of Pakistan. We held our first press conference in first week of August in Lahore and we said, "Pakistan must refuse to pay the foreign debts and divert the amount into the relief and rehabilitation of the flood affectees. It is high time to change the priorities of the national budget and all those suggestions to cut the development budget and spend on flood affectees be stopped. There is an easy way out. Stop paying the debts owed to International Finance Institutions. donor countries and clubs.

The press conference was the first voice in Pakistan on the issue. we contacted like minded groups and parties to raise the issue and the idea was well received. Social and political groups in Islamabad met and decided to take on the issue. In Lahore, on 29th August, LRC organized a multi party conference to oppose the debt retirement and 28 political parties, trade unions and social movements agreed to participate in this campaign. on second September several hundreds marched to Islamabad to demand non payment of foreign debts. One of the largest private television channel Dunia took up the issue on a prime time talk show, "Dunia Mery Aaghey" and invited one of the organizer of the demonstration to put up the case. There is now a beginning of the awakening of some main stream political parties to take up the issue.

Three more rallies will be organized to press for this demand. One such rally will be held in Lahore on 19th September from GPO Chouck to Punjab Assembly demanding an end of

payments of debts while people are in danger of dying in the aftermath of the flood. In this campaign, we have got the material support of OXFAM.

Where is the money spent?

We had decided to spend the amount on flood victims on selected areas where we have local teams to deal the question of distribution in more organsied manner and also to the most needy ones. The initial three areas selected were Union Council Tully in Sibbi district of Baluchistan, Pir Sabaq union council of district Noshehra of Khaber Pukhtoonkhawa and Southern part of Punjab. We held in food items, kitchen items and construction material in two areas, while we were unable to do anything in Saraiki area. Lately, LRC has send amount to Hyderabad jamshoro, Moro and Thatha area of Sindh through Sindh Labour Relief Committee. The local teams in Baluchistan reported wide spread disruption in food item distribution and they had to take special measures to avoid that. they issue tokens of particular food basket after conducting surveys of three villages and then asked them to collect food from a special place designated for collection the food items. Same process was carried out in Pir Sabaq area where distribution of food items and construction material was done with a very disciplined manner. The main reason of smooth distribution was our local committees which included political and trade unions activists.

In Hyderabad jamshoro, we set up medical camps and distributed medicines through our doctors association. Here in Hyderabad, we were jointly working with Communist Party Pakistan, Aadersh, A Sindhi literary magazine. In Moro, our local relief committee was formed in association with local traders and trade unions. There were the most successful in collecting amount and good from an area which was itself effected. Through joint effort, they have won the sympathies of many in the city and are the main distribution group of the area. Several other organizations have contacted and

asked help in distribution to the flood affectees of Moro and Dadu district. In Karachi, SRLC set up four camps and sent four trucks of good to Moro and at present busy in Thatha district to help the flood victims who are sleeping on roads and schools.

The International Response to LRC appeal

This was to give you some idea of our activity during the first month of our relief work. Most of the amount collected in Pakistan are from ordinary people. They have donated us generously. BY setting up camps and distributing aid to flood victims in some selected areas, we have tried to counter the influence of the right wing forces particularly the religious fundamentalists groups. Several hundreds activists of LRC are busy in collecting funds locally and we are also encouraged by different responses from abroad. Political groups associated with Fourth International in several countries particularly in Netherlands and England have send us amount already, while several individual and Left groups efforts in US have brought some cash to the relief. From Sweden, we have already received information of 50,000 Swedish SKR and in Norway, an initiative by actor Toni

Usman for a theater show on 19 September has already won support of Norway artist association with leading actors of Norway taking part voluntarily to help the campaign. In Australia, Socialist Alliance is helping to collect funds and APHEDA, the official Australian trade unions international assistance is collecting funds for LRC.

We had the great arrival of South Asians at Lahore relief camp to collect funds from Pakistanis. Social and peace activists from India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka came to Lahore and brought some amount from their own countries and contributed to LRC funds. They have brought with this a consciousness of South Asian solidarity in real terms.

We appeal to all our international friends to continue collecting funds for our future planned aid and political activities. Apart from the campaign on debts, we have decided to organize peasant rallies in Sindh and Punjab to demand land rights and an end of feudalism.

How to contribute

Contributions in Euros can be channelled via the ESSF based in France:

Cheques to ESSF in euros only to be sent to: ESSF 2, rue Richard-Lenoir

93100 Montreuil France

Bank Account: Crédit lyonnais Agence de la Croix-de-Chavaux (00525) 10 boulevard Chanzy 93100 Montreuil France ESSF, account number 445757C

International bank account details :
IBAN : FR85 3000 2005 2500 0044 5757 C12 BIC / SWIFT : CRLYFRPP
_Account holder : ESSF

The following two websites will direct money given via their donate buttons to this fund if you include the word Pakistan on the donation message.

<http://worldwidesocialist.net/blog/>
<http://www.scottishsocialistparty.org/>

By donating through these accounts the cost of the transfer of money to Pakistan is reduced.

If you wish to transfer funds directly, below are details of the account for sending money to the LRC.

A/C Title: Labour Education Foundation

A/C Number: 01801876

Route:

Please advise and pay to Citi Bank, New York, USA Swift CITI US 33 for onward transfer to BANK ALFALAH LTD., KARACHI, PAKISTAN A/C No. 36087144 and for final transfer to BANK ALFALAH LTD., LDA PLAZA, KASHMIR ROAD, LAHORE, PAKISTAN Swift: ALFHPKKALDA for A/C No. 01801876 OF LABOUR EDUCATION FOUNDATION.

Pakistan flood relief work

2 September 2010

Sindh Labour Relief committee - which consists of Labour Education Foundation, Home-Based Women Workers Federation, Home-Based Women Bangle Workers Union Hyderabad, National Trade Union Federation and Labour Party Pakistan - conducted its four camps in Karachi and supported three camps in Moro District, one in Hub and Thatta each where people coming from suburb of Moro, Jaffarabad, Jaccobabad and get

shelter in different places.

There are a total of 40 camps in Moro and most of the flood victims get shelter in government schools and living in very bad conditions. Three to families live in one room and total 80 to 200 people living in one school. They were not getting proper food for their family. They have no clean drinking water and latrine conditions are very bad and unhygienic. Majority

of the people suffer from gastro, diarrhea, eye allergy and skin diseases. Most affectees from flood are women and children. Women are still confined in their camps just like their homes! And busy in their house hold activities and looking after their whole family.

Majority of them are agriculture workers who pluck the cotton from field and get less then men. Women

told us in three camps that for plucking the cotton women get 70 to 80 rupees on 40 kilo grams while men gets 200 rupees on that. Majority of them also engaged in stitching cloths (60 to 80 rupees for adult suits and 35 rupees on children cloths) , embroidery (150 to 200) and making rilly (100 to 300) work but now they all are jobless! They said that they had no single thing left behind them they have to build all things from start.

Majority of complaints were same in each camp such as:

- Their children were suffer from gastro, diarrhea, vomiting, skin allergy
- They have no access to health facilities like majority of them said that government hospital had no medicines they give slip of medicine from market and they have no money to buy it.
- No clean water
- No proper latrine facilities
- Less utensils and having problem in preparing food

- No gas facilities: in some camps people contributed and get gas from their neighbors and majority of the people said that for cooking they have to buy the wood which was 150 to 250 rupees on per 40 kg.

- No jobs or work

- Pregnant women facing problems like no woman doctor visited them. In one camp we met with one lady whose pregnancy was exceed from 9th month but due to no proper health faculty she is not getting treatment.

- Clothes

- Load shedding and

- Proper cleanness in the area

- No proper place to live: in some camps people said that the school management told them to vacate the place for starting the session. They need place and tent to leave the school place. (majority of the victims were settled in schools)

People in the camp also complained that the government officer is from

Kohrai tribe (mentioned by majority of people in different camps) so he provided all things, UN distributed on 28th August 2010, to his tribe. Majority of permanent people getting all aid but people from suburb were not facilitating properly. They also said that aid provided to family but not according to the size of the family which not fulfill their needs. Government giving them 20000 thousand rupees but it is not enough for them they lost all the things like their home, cattle's and crops. They need place to live, tent and work to survive them selves. Three people (1 men and two women) said that they have hand to work they will stand on their foot in few months.

Moro Labour Relief Committee is also the part of Sindh Labour Relief committee (SLRC). It has collected Rs. 900000 in kind and cash till date and SLRC collected 650000 (cash, medicine, food, water and clothes). In Hyderabad LPP, Adresh Sath with CPP collected nearly 5 hundred thousand in kind and cash. At the movement we have been doing our relief work in Karachi, Hyderabad, Thatta, Moro and Hub Balochistan.

No to the coup

As women organized in the Popular and Diverse Assembly of Women of Ecuador, we reject any coup attempt wherever it comes from. In Latin America we went through decades of cruel dictatorship which resulted in the disappearance, torture and murder of entire generations, which left people without rights, silenced and which opened the way to the advance of neoliberalism across the continent. So we cannot allow the return of coups and dictatorships:

Never again a Honduras in Latin America!

No to the coup attempts in Ecuador!

No to the CIA's interference in our countries!

We will not allow coups that go against the popular mandate and establish regimes of terror, persecution and intimidation. The Constitution of Montecristi, adopted in 2008, is the product of many of our struggles, it expresses our hopes and our dreams and we demand that the president's constitutional mandate is completed, that democracy is respected and that our rights are guaranteed.

We demand that the government promotes and guarantees spaces for citizen participation, dialogue and monitoring, and for social control in all areas; above all we urge the present government to strengthen the building of citizen power, which is the basis and lifeblood of democracy in

any country, while respecting its independence and autonomy.

We urge the police and military forces not to use the instruments of national and public security or, even worse, use them against the sovereign power which is the people of Ecuador, to whom they should be accountable in carrying out their role and duties.

The working conditions of all the Ecuadorian people, including the police and army, cannot be based on conditions that are unfair or discriminatory; the Ecuadorean state budget should aim to eliminate the disparities that create first and second category workers, that do not ensure full employment or proper social security for both women and men.

Special privileges should be eliminated in a country where the poverty of the majority has not yet been eliminated.

We demand that the National Assembly act promptly and with independence in their legislative and supervisory role and open the channels of effective participation in order to reach agreement on all the laws needed to put into effect the new Constitution and ensure a state of law in all of the country.

We demand policies that are coherent with the interests of the people in all walks of life, in all movements and organizations.

Popular and Diverse Assembly of Women of Ecuador

Casa Feminista de Rosa

El Oro Women's Movement

Feminist Collective

Network of Savings and Credit Funds

and Community Banks

The Churo

Wambras Collective

Zurda House

LMGYAI Users Committees - El Oro

Colibri Youth Movement

The Taleguita Solidarity Programme

Flor de Azalea Collective