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Creating cross-border links between militants

29 September 2011, by **Robert Pelletier**

The participants represented their trade-union organizations (“August 80” in Poland, the CGT and STM-Intersindical Valenciana in the Spanish State, the Inter-regional Trade Union of Car Workers of Russia, IF Metall from Volvo-Truck in Umea (Sweden), their associations (Autoworkers’ Caravan from the United States) or their political parties (the Polish Party of Labour, the New Anticapitalist Party from France, Sinistra Critica from Italy). A delegation of the French trade union federation Solidaires-Industry took part as observers. The discussions took place in five languages (English, Spanish, French, Italian and Polish) thanks to the voluntary help of interpreters who were themselves activists. A declaration was adopted at the conclusion of the discussions.

The meeting took place against the background of major reorganizations

in the industry, with lay-offs and the closure of sites and at the moment when the mobilization of the “indignant ones” was developing in Spain.

We present below a summary of the exchanges between militants of the various enterprises present at the Amsterdam meeting, following on the introductory report.

Renault Cléon, France (NPA): In our factory there are 4500 workers who manufacture transmission belts and engines. At Renault, working conditions are getting worse and the pressure on workers is increasing, with more and more harassment, and there have been some suicides. Renault is trying to get out of the “crisis” by making workers accept worse conditions, by “breaking” workers’ combativeness. Renault is increasing relocations, investments in

countries known as “low cost” and increasing the pressure on workers with the argument: “We are too expensive”. They mean to make workers accept the loss of certain gains with the least possible resistance. For the first time, today, Renault is manufacturing more cars abroad than it does in France. As a result, there is a rise in protectionist reflexes. In the trade unions there are two kinds of ideas, those which tend towards protectionism and those which are opposed to it.

Where things are worst is in the companies which supply parts. We have to create links between the factories ordering these parts and those which supply them, basing ourselves on the example of the strike at Sealinx which succeeded in blocking a Peugeot factory.

Ford Valencia, Spain (STM-

Intersindical Valenciana trade union): As is the case all over Europe, Toyotism is dividing the working class. Ten years ago, attacks were directed against all the personnel and there were overall responses. Today, the employers do not attack everyone at the same time. That makes it much more difficult to carry out common battles. People are afraid, with very high unemployment (23 per cent, almost 50 per cent among those under 30). Social protection is being seriously undermined. Unemployment benefits are much lower than wages. To be unemployed makes it impossible to pay your rent or get credit. The banks then take back your house, sell it at a price much lower than the purchase price and thus consider that the credit has not been refunded! Workers find themselves homeless and are still in debt... In that situation it is enormously difficult to mobilize workers who are afraid of finding themselves unemployed.

At Ford, there is a big "treacherous" trade union, the UGT, with 75 per cent of the workforce! To be in this trade union gives you advantages: promotion, getting a better work post for health reasons. After workers have taken early retirement, there is hiring, but in fact the UGT controls it. If a worker wants to get someone in their family taken on, they have to join the UGT. The bosses are trying to have the canteen closed at night. Workloads have increased, and with the worsening of working conditions, there is an increase in musculoskeletal disorders. The new recruits do not have the same conditions as the old ones. Despite all these attacks, at the last elections of union delegates in February, the UGT maintained its position.

FESIM-CGT, Trade Union, Spain: The crisis in Spain has not been only a crisis of overproduction but also a crisis of speculation with attacks against workers' rights over 25 years. Legislation has been constantly modified, in particular to make it easier to sack workers. At Nissan, there have been three agreements in three successive years to freeze wages while increasing productivity. By referendum, supported by the UGT (the CGT and CCOO unions were opposed), the workers accepted a

worsening of working conditions and a cut in wages for two years in exchange for production of a new model. There are also attacks against pensions (the retirement age has been raised to 67), against health (loss of treatment), education (development of the private sector and parents paying more and more). So wages are attacked directly, but also indirectly through driving down social services.

There are nevertheless attempts to resist. At present there are big demonstrations. In the factories workers are in retreat but in the street, young people and workers are coming out to demonstrate. It is perhaps the beginning of resistance on a wider scale.

LEAR Corporation, Italy (Sinistra Critica), (supplier for FIAT in Turin): In the 1990s there was a relocation of most of the suppliers, used by FIAT to reorganize outsourcing and thus to impose a reduction of costs. The suppliers compensated by cutting wages and subcontracting out to even smaller companies. The manufacture of car seats was thus transferred from Turin to Portugal then to Poland, where social conditions are worse. The methods of blackmail imposed in FIAT were also utilised by suppliers. Working conditions have got worse. The three big trade-union confederations have made agreements with the employers and the government in order to lower wages and worsen working conditions, for greater productivity. We are going towards the elimination of national collective bargaining agreements, which are being replaced by negotiations at company level. In exchange for these "accepted" retreats, the employers promise recognition of the unions, which would deal with education and training, social security, hiring. We are going towards trade unions which are tools at the service of the employers. As a result, the CGIL, the largest trade union, is racked by internal conflicts while the government continues to dismantle working-class gains.

Volvo-Truck, Umea, Sweden (IF Metall trade union): There is a similar situation in the Swedish trade unions. A right-wing government for

six years has changed the situation: modification of the law on work contracts, short-term contracts, sickness leave. The government is hand in hand with the employers. For industrial workers, there exists only one trade union, led by the social democrats. It is very difficult to create an opposition in the union, whose leaders want to accompany the employers in the framework of the crisis. Many people are leaving the union. Before, 75 per cent of the workers were in the union, now the percentage is considerably reduced.

In Volvo, working conditions have changed, and so have collective agreements. There are short-term contracts, and there is a lot of subcontracting with fewer rights. The employers organize production with a great deal of flexibility, thus being able to move production from one factory to another in the event of a strike. There are laws which facilitate sackings; there are fewer and fewer permanent contracts. Working conditions are not too bad in general, even though what is happening here resembles what is happening elsewhere. There has not yet been a frontal attack against collective bargaining agreements.

Ford Bordeaux, France (NPA): The Ford factory in Blanquefort near Bordeaux has been manufacturing gear boxes since 1973. It employed up to 2500 workers. In the course of its European reorganizations, Ford decided to sell this factory to a German group, HZ Holding. The factory was to continue to produce for Ford, who would become a customer of the new owners. In fact, no industrial project was developed and this takeover was limited to a simple financial transaction, collecting along the way subsidies from the public authorities. In Blanquefort, under the leadership of the CGT union in the factory, we fought to maintain our jobs in the factory rather than for redundancy payments.

A long battle began, with unequal support from the other trade unions. This fight was also a demonstration of the transparency of all discussions. Thus, negotiations were always conducted with the workers kept informed, and with their support. The

disappearance of the factory would have had negative effects extending well beyond just the workers of the factory and the fight was not confined within its limits. A local support collective was set up as a way of mobilizing, involving workers, their families and all the organizations of the Left. The government was also challenged. At the time of two "World Motor Shows" in 2008 and 2010, several hundred workers and their families "went up" to Paris to make their demands heard.

This mobilization led to a first result, on January 1, 2011, when Ford Europe bought the factory back. But we haven't won yet, because no serious commitment to an activity that would ensure continued employment was made. Without transforming themselves into economic or industrial experts, the members of the union are demanding the implementation of a "structuring" industrial project. On May 6, 2011, Ford Europe announced investments that would make it possible to maintain nearly a thousand jobs on the site. Nothing has been definitively won and these employers' promises will become reality only at the price of continuing our mobilization.

PSA Madrid, Spain (CGT trade union): It was an old Simca factory, at the time of Chrysler (lorries, tractors...), bought by PSA involving a deterioration of activity. There were production losses, the number of workers employed fell from 16,000 to 2,825 and so it was more difficult to fight, in spite of big mobilizations at the time of the fall of the dictatorship. In the 1980s, when working conditions were worsening, the trade unions took part in these retreats and changed nature. Mobilizations have become more difficult. There have been many cases of stress, anguish and psychosocial problems as a result of a reorganization of work which has resulted in additional pressures, an increasing workload and a reduction of the workforce.

FIAT Tychy Poland, ("August 80" Free Trade Union): The employers proposed an agreement on flexibilisation of working time with an organization of work they called flexible and our union refused to sign.

This led to attacks against us: pressures, convocations, blackmail regarding jobs, blackmail of militants... Some workers left the union following these pressures. The employers then took the union to court. The factory inspectorate noted violations of the law, but that did not have any consequences. The "August 80" Free Trade Union is the most combative; the other two unions "are more or less bought". The number of trade union members is falling and financially it is becoming difficult. The owner hires "false" workers to spy on the militants and take notes. There are spontaneous reactions of workers who can no longer put up with the conditions: the office of a union that is the most submissive to the employers was ransacked by workers, several hundred cars were sabotaged... Many workers were laid off to create a climate of terror, to prevent resistance. It is a real policy aimed at reducing the audience of the combative trade unions. During the two last years, the factory beat all the records of production and profitability. But wages do not increase. Individual contracts are increasing, which goes in the direction of the destruction of collective links, collective agreements and at the end of the day collective consciousness. But we stay confident even though today we must face blackmail: "If you behave yourselves, perhaps you will have more work, if not it is the end of the factory". The room for manoeuvre for the unions who are accomplices of management has been reduced enormously. Their policy also plays against them; they will end up by becoming useless to the employers, who want to liquidate trade unionism in a brutal fashion.

GM Opel Gliwice, Poland, ("August 80" Free Trade Union): We have also had to face attempts to destroy the trade unions with a policy of terror towards workers and threats of dismissals. Everything is done to prevent workers from taking part in union meetings (breakdowns of the entry gate, etc) and fewer people come to the meetings. The employers impose wage moderation, make savings on the health of the workers and increase the use of short-term contracts and subcontracting. If the worker protests, his contract is not renewed. The "Solidarnosc" union at

Opel Gliwice "has sold itself", has become an accomplice of management. It criticizes the initiatives of the "August 80" union and says that disputes weaken the company.

Renault Rueil, France (NPA) (Engineering Centre, 3 to 4,000 engineers and executives): A worsening of working conditions (Individualization, breaking down of work collectives) which has resulted in six suicides in recent years in the biggest engineering centre, in Guyancourt (10,000 workers). In the small factories of the industry, the employers' offensive results in lay-offs. In the big ones, it results in attacks on social gains. Hard struggles such as that at Continental do not prevent closures, but make it possible to obtain conditions of redundancy that are less bad than elsewhere. The problem is the absence of coordination of struggles. The employers have an advantage by having only to isolate the combative trade unions, while drawing trade unionists into a multiplicity of meetings so as to divert them from fighting back.

Renault Valladolid, Spain (CGT trade union): The current situation dates from 2009, after the fight against the possible closure of the site. The company promised work until 2013, with an agreement for a new vehicle, signed by the unions without a struggle. The electric vehicle is a hope for the workers because there would be big sales. But with no guarantee concerning jobs. Management relies on certain trade unions to develop productivity: modification of working conditions without negotiation. Lay-offs and disciplinary measures are increasing as the company replaces workers on permanent contracts by hiring precarious workers, freezes wages and develops flexibility, increased overtime and weekend work. This policy tends to discredit the trade unions. The majority unions do not say anything even if they are attacked and the workers no longer believe in the unions. There is no more social collective and we are seeing a rise of individualism.

Solidaires-Industry, France (observers): The attacks over

working time are increasing, but because of the weight of unemployment, resistance is difficult. Individual resistance exists, but isolation sometimes leads to suicide, as at the Technocentre in Guyancourt (Parisian region).

Volkswagen, Russia (Interregional Trade union of Carworkers): Development of precarious work and wage cuts. Two types of factory in Russia: those which come from the USSR and those built by multinationals (Ford, GM...). In the old factories, there are the old trade unions which have kept their structures and are very close to management. It is practically impossible there to build independent trade unions and we failed in this task. The independent trade unionists who tried often ended up by selling out. In the new factories, the multinational owners make enormous profits. There is also persecution of independent trade unions. Every time an independent trade union is established, a yellow trade union is also established. This makes it possible to create a facade. Many leaflets are declared illegal and are prohibited, and sometimes we are taken to court. Any independent organization is declared to be extremist.

Autoworkers' Caravan, United States: In 1999, there were 379,000 workers in GM, as against 19,000 today. The reorganization of work involves cutting the workforce, the development of precarious contracts, subcontracting. Workers suffer a lot from stress because of the increased workload. The UAW (Union of Auto Workers) is undemocratic. In the 1980s, many companies such as Toyota and Mercedes came and established themselves in the country, without trade unions. The big enterprises in Detroit (Chrysler, Ford, GM) sold subcontracting activities to suppliers who had to deal with the payment of pensions. It is a place for experimentation in changes of working conditions. There are two levels of wages, the old ones and the new ones, and the reimbursement of health costs is much less. According to the law, only 20 per cent of workers must be in the new system, but the employers always push to go further.

This creates divisions, tensions and reproaches between old and new workers. Labour costs in the transplanted companies are much lower than with the big three. The unions have played a big role in the creation of this division and in the retreats imposed. They have undertaken not to strike between now and 2015 and have accepted wage cuts. The unions at Ford are the only ones not to have accepted this agreement. There is a group of trade unionists who organize the "carworkers' caravan" and who refuse to follow the way the unions are evolving.

FIAT-Mirafiori, Turin, Italy (Sinistra Critica): With the referendum, a very dangerous employers' policy of blackmail is developing. The referendum means that we do not need the trade unions, that things can be decided directly with the workers. In the same vein, there is the spread of negotiations with individuals before hiring. That tends to eliminate, little by little, the role of the unions, the role of the collective and to isolate workers. If we do not manage to create bridges, collaboration, we will inevitably lose out against the multinationals. A defeat costs us a lot because the employers will be able to make defeats known but not working-class victories like that at Ford in France. In all these attacks, the "yellow" trade unions are accomplices, but they too will lose their positions and that could open up perspectives. Faced with these new forms of attacks by the employers, we have no other way than that which consists of establishing cross-border links and collaboration between militants. That is what we try to do at FIAT, between the Italian and Polish factories. We have to build ways of cooperating, to popularize these ideas, to establish a common platform of demands.

Seat Barcelona, Spain (CGT): Today, to get hired and to become a trade unionist is almost impossible. The trade unions are discredited... and the discredit of the unions that submit to the employers affects even those which are combative. Young people no longer see the union as necessary, and think that you can more easily fight in the street. But in the street, you do

not attack the wealth of the companies. We have to fight against the employers, every day, on the job. Resistance exists every day, in one form or another. Combative trade unionists need to meet, to set up a network which makes it possible to act as soon as the workers of a factory are in difficulty, to develop solidarity.

FIAT-Mirafiori, Turin, Italy (Sinistra Critica): FIAT proposes an investment plan for 10,000 workers in Mirafiori, plus 30,000 in subcontracting. This is not an industrial plan, but an attack on working conditions: very heavy physical loads, suppression of the ten-minute pause. Out of 5,500 workers in the body shop, 1,500 are sick (musculoskeletal disorders of the hand in particular). The new work methods will cause an increase in occupational diseases while in parallel there are attacks against sick-leave. Management demands that the trade unions sign this agreement, which provides that neither the unions nor the workers will strike. There will be individual contracts to sign for new employees, but also for the old ones. This plan was refused by the workers and the referendum was won only thanks to executives and to white-collar workers who do not experience working conditions on the conveyor belt. There was resistance to this blackmail, workers wanted to say no to it. It was almost a success and we challenged the agreement in the courts. Now other companies want to impose agreements like the one at FIAT. We have to continue to fight so that workers do not sign.

Ford Valencia, Spain (STM Intersindical Valenciana trade union): The attacks by the government are increasing: a cut in pensions of 20 per cent, easier sackings, wage cuts for civil servants and deterioration of public services. Through giving "presents" to the wealthiest, the state has less income. There are many industrial accidents which are hidden. Concerning early retirements in the factory, the employer attacked once, failed, then started again and made a success of it this time, but with an agreement which was a little less bad: 1,000 young people could be taken on with permanent and not precarious

contracts. We have to establish a network that is not only useful for sending messages. When we went to Ford Bordeaux, we returned home full of enthusiasm and that gave us strength to carry on.

Solidaires-Industry, France (observers): In defending jobs, we have to refuse demands with nationalist connotations. Relocations are not the fundamental reason for redundancies and closures of sites. Reorganization-dismantling of big industrial structures through the development of subcontracting is just as responsible for the destruction of jobs. So it is all the more criticisable to fight against relocations. Ecological arguments cannot constitute a precondition for saving jobs.

Renault Cléon, France (NPA): The employers need a trade unionism of accompaniment to get their cutting of labour costs accepted. Threats of relocation and blackmail referendums are increasing. We have to develop links between militants outside our own workplaces.

NPA, France: Trade unions like the CGIL in Italy or the CGT in France no longer have any space to negotiate compromises by basing themselves on struggles. The role of governments is being reduced, while remaining politically important, whether at Renault-Nissan or FIAT-Chrysler. PSA and Volkswagen remain mainly anchored in their country of origin, even though they have international strategies. Relocation is in the first place relocation elsewhere. Resistance should be organized, i.e. defence of jobs, but without choosing what should be produced and by raising the question of another kind of activity.

Sinistra Critica, Italy: The trade unions, including the combative unions, are not reacting quickly enough on the level of international responses. We are acting in a situation of urgency. It was when there was the blackmail at Mirafiori that we contacted the comrades of FIAT Poland, but we are late. Previously there was common FIAT/Seat work, but it disappeared. The FIOM is still able to resist. After having accepted class collaboration, the FIOM fought and won battles... but it lost the war,

of which the attack at FIAT is the illustration. The factory in Sicily will close. The factory of Pomigliano and also Mirafiori (14,000 workers, as against 60,000 twenty years ago) should close because, in fact, it is Chrysler that is swallowing FIAT. It was possible to win, to resist, but we lost because of the low number of working days, in particular in the body shop. Within the class, there are trade unions that are allies of the bourgeoisie. They are useful for the employers today, but what about tomorrow? The FIOM does not have an international strategy commensurate with the attacks at FIAT and even more widely, because there is no solution at the national level. We must defend the need for the reduction of working time to confront over-capacity and over-equipment. Today we are beginning to establish links and start resistance. It is not up to us, as trade unionists, as workers, to say what we should produce when the question of reconversion is posed, the question of the role of the state in industrialization.

NPA, France: The idea that there are no more collective agreements is progressing quickly, more or less quickly depending on the countries concerned, which challenges even the "yellow" trade unions. The growing concern is perhaps financialisation: Renault, whose headquarters is in the Netherlands, no longer has anything to do with being the national manufacturer, "the Company". The attacks against workers have a direct effect on the Stock Exchange, which sees them as a sign of good management. We have lost time in common international work in, particular on the question of wages. We have to conduct battles for simple, unifying demands, in order to start to build up a network, even starting from the small reality of today.

Ford Blanquefort, France (NPA): The battle for jobs is difficult because it appears not very credible to save the factory, since it seems impossible to counter the employers' strategies, especially those of the multinationals. There was also sometimes ambiguity on the part of the trade union officials, who explained that we need an industrial project in order to save a factory. Our project consists of saving

all jobs and affirming that is up to Ford to find solutions. The idea of "getting out of the factory" is unavoidable, it is the way to find perspectives, hope of changing the situation. The question of secondary employment (subcontracting, indirect jobs) makes it possible to establish the link with outside, with the population, with local councillors, because our jobs are linked to other people's jobs. From the first demonstration in the town, we were determined to make ourselves understood by the media, the elected representatives and the population. We also established links with trade unionists involved in struggles, initially in Bordeaux, then beyond. Every time it filled us with enthusiasm, as the comrade from Ford, Valencia said. Because if we only fight in the factory, our morale depends only on the atmosphere in the factory and so when times are rough, we are less combative. But by looking to the outside and building links, we were able to stay on course in the fight for everyone's job.

Autoworkers Caravan, United States: I suggest having a document to give an account of the discussions that we have had this weekend. We would need a leaflet on the question of protectionism, and one about the question of subcontracting. Produce a leaflet regularly, every three months, written by comrades who work in various countries. I brought our newspaper "Labor Notes" which speaks about the struggles of workers. This newspaper could perhaps be used as a model, we can exchange information. We are keen to have information on struggles in Europe.

Sinistra Critica, Italy: In Italy, we will try to organize our action on a broader scale. We have up to now been almost exclusively at FIAT Turin. We will try to open a discussion in the FIOM on the need for international links, for an international commitment. We will reinforce our links with our Polish comrades.

Provisional conclusion: All the speakers have insisted on the need for increasing and widening this type of meeting. Other initiatives exist, such as the meeting of the International Council of Car Workers (CITA), which will take place in Munich in May,

2012, with which we should be associated. In the immediate future we must establish regular links between militants and trade-union committees, in order to start to build transnational responses faced with the attacks of the employers of the industry. It is certainly not a question of confining ourselves to our own industry, insofar as the attacks that we are experiencing are part of global

policies of the bourgeoisies on the international level. We will start by installing a computer network that makes it possible to have rapid information on mobilizations, to exchange and compare our analyses, and every time that it is possible to give support, to coordinate struggles. Without underestimating the difficulties that relate on the one hand

to the question of languages but also to the disparities of situation and history, it is essential to get down to this task. National meetings involving more enterprises can be the next stage, with the perspective of participation in the CITA meeting.

Robert Pelletier has summarized here notes taken during the meeting by several participants.

“Our future is not for sale”: The Chilean Student Movement Against Neoliberalism

24 September 2011, by Manuel Larrabure and Carlos Torchia

Against this backdrop, Latin America has arguably been at the forefront of struggles that challenge the neoliberal claim that ‘there is no alternative.’ Indeed, it was in 1989 that poor communities in Venezuela climbed down from the barrios to protest the neoliberal package about to be delivered by the government. This event, known as ‘el caracazo,’ became the first great mass insurgency against neoliberalism in the region. Soon, others would follow: the Zapatistas in Mexico, the water and gas wars in Bolivia, ‘el saqueo’ in Argentina, to name the most memorable examples. In addition to expressing opposition to neoliberalism, these experiences had a common commitment to think and act outside the ‘red square.’

In each case, communities and workers self-organized and fought with their own hands and feet, rejecting vanguardist approaches of the old left, which often turned into an intellectual-political elite supposedly liberating the masses from above. In addition, many of these movements sought to prefigure new social relations while struggling against the present ones, organizing themselves on the principles of participatory democracy, and horizontalism. ‘Strong leaders make a weak

people,’ Emiliano Zapata’s famous principle, popularized by the Zapatistas in the 1990s, perhaps best captured this political moment.

Pink Tide Sweeps Latin America

By the late 1990s, many of these movements had lost steam, and their demands became channeled into the electoral arena, bringing to office several new left and center-left governments. Soon, most of Latin America would be swept by this so-called “pink tide.” This phenomenon sparked a renewed hope within many sectors of the left that insisted capturing state power was central to the process of social transformation. No doubt, some of these new governments made important strides forward. However, over 10 years later, some have begun to question the reform - and in some cases revolutionary - potential of many of these new left governments, including those of Venezuela and Bolivia.

A reinvigorated right wing that has been fiercely fighting back needs to be included in these assessments. In some cases, they have been organizing secessionist movements, and in the

case of Honduras a successful coup was orchestrated with the help of American imperialism. The right has also won elections, most notably in Chile where the government of Sebastián Piñera has become one of the leading neoliberal administrations in the region, at least for now.

After 17 months of relative quiet, the Piñera government now faces its first major challenge and one of the biggest mass movements in recent Latin American history. It is one that has brought both students and workers to the streets - sometimes called the ‘Chilean winter’ - since May. Importantly, this is also a crucial challenge for the new Chilean left that is being created as we write. This consists of an attempt to build a movement from below that is neither co-opted by the bourgeois state, nor simply ignores it. Walking the tightrope between these two avenues is precisely what students and workers in Chile are struggling with as they build for the next set of demonstrations.

The Neoliberal

Education System in Chile

For the last 30 years, the principal function of the Chilean educational system has been to expand the accumulation of capital. This has been done through the deepening of the educational model first developed by the dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinochet, a task the post-Pinochet governments of La Concertación were happy to carry out. Central to this model was the transfer of fiscal responsibility for elementary and secondary education to the municipal level, while providing subsidies to private schools. Recognizing the unpopularity of this model, the current neoliberal right wing government led by the billionaire, Sebastián Piñera, sought to reform the system by increasing the privatization of elementary and secondary education.

At the post-secondary level, the government has allowed a steady increase in tuitions. Currently, students in Chile pay an average tuition of 300,000 pesos (\$630) per month, making this one of the most expensive post-secondary education in the world (particularly relative to income levels). Not surprisingly, privatization has opened the door to transnational capitalists, particularly banks who have been more than happy to provide students with ample debt loads to finance their studies. In addition, the post-secondary system is highly class divided. Working-class students receive a second-rate education at the elementary and secondary level and at underfunded public universities where they are taught to be followers and prepared for a routine life of unskilled, low-wage and precarious employment, if not unemployment. In contrast, upper-class students attend private schools and universities where they are socialized to internalize the prevailing values of free markets and individual success with the hope of one day obtaining a management position at a large corporation.

This education system reinforces one of the most unequal Latin American societies. In fact, 10 per cent of Chileans have average income larger

than those of Norway, while the income of the poor 10 per cent is equal to those in Ivory Coast. In addition, between 2006 and 2009, the level of poverty increased from 13.5 to 15 per cent, even as social spending was increased significantly by the social democratic administration of Michelle Bachelet. Importantly, all this is happening despite high levels of annual growth in Chile, indeed the highest in Latin America. Not surprisingly, the education system expresses this broader political and economic reality.

Today, 83 per cent of the students attending the public municipal schools live in a household in which the average monthly income is less than 180,000 pesos (\$330), but two out of three students attending paid school were supported by an average family income of 1,526,000 pesos (\$2,700). In 2004, 64 per cent of the highest scores in the standardized university admissions tests came from students enrolled in the paid secondary schools. However, 93.2 per cent of students attending municipal high schools failed to obtain grades high enough to be accepted to traditional universities. Not surprisingly, only 10-20 per cent of young Chileans belonging to the poorest 40 per cent economic strata are currently enrolled in post-secondary education.

Students Fight Back

Neoliberal education in Chile has led to growing consciousness among secondary and university students that the entire educational system needs to be radically changed in favour of a more inclusive and democratic public one. The first signs of this growing unrest occurred in 2006, during the secondary student rebellions against the neoliberal education law originally dictated by Pinochet, and maintained by the Concertación governments. The students demanded education be considered a right, not a commodity, and an end to the subsidiary role of the state in its provision and delivery. To this end, five hundred thousand students organized a general strike that combined street mobilizations and high school seizures, shaking the

Bachelet government. Eventually the movement faded, as its leadership became trapped in negotiations with the government. Nevertheless, the students forced the Bachelet administration to recognize the crisis in education was real, as well as the deeply authoritarian character of the education laws inherited from the military.

In 2011, the second phase of the movement got underway. This occurred in the context of growing social mobilization by different sectors of the Chilean working-class struggling against low wages, labour flexibilization, the firing of civil servants and mining development. In addition, people angrily voiced their opposition to the construction of coal-fired thermal power plants that threaten their health and the environment. Notably, on January 11th, in the southern province of Magallanes, communities declared a civil strike to protest the abrupt rise of gas prices by 16.7 per cent, as decreed by the Piñera government. On this opportunity, twenty four social organizations created the "Magallanes' Citizens Assembly" which took direct control of the main cities, blocking highways, building urban barricades, even declaring a curfew on vehicles and demanding the government to annul the price increase. For seven days, the Assembly operated independent of political parties, and was able to mobilize 30,000 people on a daily basis, asserting itself as the real government in Magallanes. This forced the Piñera government to reduce the price hike to 3 per cent and increase gas subsidies for poor families.

Adding to the momentum, on May 12th secondary and university students called a national day of protest against the poor quality of the education system. They took the streets on the main Chilean cities from Northern Arica to the Southern Punta Arenas. The mobilization received the support of the Central Union of Workers (CUT), the National Teachers Union, the main university student federations, and the Public Servant National Association. In Santiago alone, 30,000 demonstrators voiced their demands: an end to "market

education,” reductions of student debts, increased funds for public universities, and the democratization of educational institutions. It has been estimated that more than 100,000 students and supporters across the country participated in this day of protest.

Tired of waiting for a meaningful response by the government, the students proceeded to call a national strike for June 30th. The mobilizations on this day showed high levels of militancy, as secondary students in Santiago seized more than 100 high schools. In the capital alone, more than 100,000 people took to the streets while another hundred thousand did the same in the rest of the country. It quickly became clear that the movement’s political consciousness was growing. For example, when government officials asserted that there simply were not enough funds to meet the student’s demands, Camila Vallejo, President of the University of Chile Student Federation and President of the University Students Confederation (and also an activist of the Juventudes Comunistas de Chile), responded by saying that if transnational corporations are stopped from stealing the country’s natural resources, the government would have enough money to finance not only free public education for all, but also free healthcare. “Our future is not for sale,” one of the movement’s key slogans, began to resonate with the protests on the streets.

The student movement reached its first victory when Piñera was forced to change his education minister, Joaquín Lavín, a former junior minister in the governments of Pinochet and member of the Opus Dei, whose personal popularity had declined to just 8 per cent. Lavín was supposed to be the next presidential candidate of the right wing alliance presently in office.

Growing Support for the Movement

Another victory for the student movement was the growing support from broad sectors of the population.

Parents, teachers, and copper miners openly expressed their support, recognizing that all their grievances against the neoliberal regime were being expressed in the student strike. However, the government responded quickly by threatening to declare an early winter break to the school year, and even its possible cancellation. In addition, the corporate media began its demonization campaign against the students, using isolated incidents of violence conducted by *los encapuchados* (the “black block”) to delegitimize the whole movement.

Responding to these attacks, Camila Vallejo asserted that, although these violent provocateurs do not represent the collectively agreed tactics of the student movement, their actions are driven by their marginalization from the system and their rage should be understood as a reaction to their future-less position at the bottom of the neoliberal ladder. At the same time, she added, government infiltration within some of these groups cannot be ruled out. Indeed, adding to the suspicion, about one hundred ‘*encapuchados*’ were found attempting to torch the central offices of the National Teachers Union, a staunch ally of the student movement.

On August 9th and 18th, gigantic demonstrations took place in Santiago and in the main Chilean cities. Between 150,000 and 200,000 marched in the capital to express their support for the student’s decision that dialogue with the government was not possible until it accepted the main elements of their proposal. Families with small children, artists, teachers and workers expressed their commitment to be part of this democratic movement that demands a democratic society and the end of 30 years of neoliberalism in the country. Even elite private secondary high school students joined the movement.

It was estimated that out of the 4 million students in Chile, 500,000 are actively participating in the struggle. However, it is clear that many layers of society are also actively involved. For example, the movement’s call for people to show their solidarity by banging pots at night has been taken up by entire neighborhoods who have

mobilized to public squares, streets and highways, bringing memories of the anti-Pinochet struggle in the 1980s. Further proof of the movement’s wide appeal was evident during a meeting held by “families for education” on August 21st in Santiago’s main central park [1]. The meeting attracted 1 million people in support of the student’s demands.

The latest wave of actions unfolded on August 24 and 25 leading to the movement’s first national strike, called by the Central Union of Workers (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile - CUT). The strike was supported fully by the students [2], as well as teachers, civil servants, human rights organizations, intellectuals, artisans, artists, shantytown dwellers, and physician associations. Demonstrating a high level of intergenerational working-class solidarity, when the media asked the leader of the student movement why they supported the union, she simply replied: “they are our parents.”

The CUT demanded a new labour code, an end to precarious jobs, better salaries, healthcare reform, and a publicly controlled pension system. The demonstrations were the largest yet, bringing together 600,000 people across the country. The strike affected 15 Chilean regions and 90 cities. Despite heavy police repression and mass arrests, the organizers of the demonstrations called the events a great success and promised further actions if their demands were not met. The students have also intensified their demands, and now are openly calling for a constituent assembly to change the constitution.

Tactical Creativity

Reflecting on these events, it is important to highlight the movement’s level of self-organization and dismay for pre-established elite political institutions. Symbolic of this is the student’s re-working of the historic chant, “El pueblo unido jamás sera vencido,” now modified to, “El pueblo unido avanza sin partidos” (“The people united move forward without parties”). In addition, during the mobilizations, students occupied the headquarters of both right wing and

socialist parties. Finally, consistent with the deeply democratic and participatory character of the movement, students debate and discuss through assemblies, and the leadership remains closely aligned with the demands of the base. As one news report on Telesur summed it up: "The youth trust only their own power." The sentiment seems widespread. Reliable surveys now show the popularity of Piñera, his government, and all major parties at an all-time low. Not surprisingly, students have rejected the calls for dialogue made by parliamentarians from La Concertación, as well as the reform proposals presented by the current Minister of Education. On this opportunity, the students reiterated their demand for a radically different educational system that is linked to an alternative development model based on the recuperation of national resources and tax reform.

This story would not be complete without also highlighting the remarkable level of tactical creativity in the student movement. For example, as a response to the government's declaration of early holidays, the students took to the streets in bathing suits and snorkel equipment, that is, in the middle of winter! The student movement turned whole sections of cities into surrealist carnivals that even the mainstream media could not resist. A quick search on YouTube produces fantastic homemade videos documenting some of the students' most memorable performances, including 'el gagazo,' a dance-a-thon to the music of Lady Gaga in the capital's central square, *el besaton*, a mass kissing marathon, and flash mobs of mock suicides.

The sharp political instincts of the student movement was also evident when, in response to the media's

incorrect depiction of the movement as essentially violent, they collected hundreds of teargas canisters and used them to form giant peace signs on the streets. On this occasion, they did not forget to mention that much of the funds needed to meet their demands could be found by simply making cuts to policing budgets around the country. As reported by Telesur, students even took the time to repaint houses damaged during the protests and collect funds to compensate individuals whose cars had been torched by the *encapuchados*.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above that the Chilean student movement has become a major development for the left not only in Chile, but in Latin America as a whole. The students are presenting one of the leading neoliberal administrations in the region with a major political challenge. Crucially, they have managed to do so by building their own power outside of pre-established political institutions. Importantly, the movement has done so without simply avoiding the state, but rather through direct confrontation with it, and with a demand for its transformation and democratization. At a time when the electoral road to social transformation in the region appears blocked, this development holds much potential.

Many dangers remain, however. The students have pressed at full steam for three months, and it is hard to say how much stamina they have left. Certainly the full support of organized and unorganized workers is crucial. However, the union leadership is highly bureaucratic and likely to put the brakes on street militancy. Furthermore, divisions around tactics persist, particularly when it comes to

the *encapuchados*.

Another danger is that even if the movement topples the Piñera administration, it is possible it might get co-opted by the neoliberal Concertación, or the still very much top-down approach of the Chilean Communist Party. Finally, and perhaps most worrisome, are the recent public statements made by government officials alluding that, as in the early 1970s, violent repression may be the only solution to continued mobilizations.

In conclusion, it is worth noting the parallels between the Chilean students and the indignados explosion against poverty and unemployment that has struck the streets and squares of London, Madrid, Belfast, Athens and Barcelona. Like these other insurgencies, the Chilean movement is youth-led. In addition, they all come as a reaction to the dynamics of the greatest global economic crisis since the Great Depression.

It is clear that the movement in Chile "has more legs." Indeed, young activists are now creating new radical organizations. It is therefore crucial that leftists in Canada and around the world engage in active international solidarity by organizing forums, solidarity trips, discussion groups, and so forth. For the historical left in Chile (the Communist Party, Christian Left, Humanist Party, MAS and Allendistas Socialists), and for the new left that is emerging, the task is to support this rebellious movement, connecting present struggles with past ones, and taking the lead from the energy and creativity of all those who fight "from below" for new political means to exit from capitalism. ¶

From The Bullet, Socialist Project ¶ E-Bulletin No. 542, September 6, 2011.

Five questions to Michel Warschawski

21 September 2011, by **Michel Warschawski**

International Viewpoint: For several weeks now a large-scale social movement has been demanding "social justice". Do you think that this movement is changing the political situation in Israel and in the Middle East?

Michel Warschawski: Let us not exaggerate! That the current social mobilization can lead to political change in Israel is one thing, but to affirm that it marks a major turning-point at the regional level is seriously exaggerated. At the regional level, the major event remains the Arab Intifada which will exert much more influence than what is currently happening in the Israeli street.

Having said that, and even if the link is not made openly, the social movement and its demands pose not only relevant questions about the economic and social options of the present government, and in particular the dismantling of public services, but also those of its political options: to finance a new industrial relations policy, it will be necessary to cut military budgets and the financing of colonization. Is it an accident that the only open criticisms of the popular movement come from the leaders of the settlers, who try to describe it as a Woodstock of spoiled children from the trendy neighbourhoods of the north of Tel-Aviv?

International Viewpoint: The breadth of the current social movement and its popularity (the opinion polls indicate that it is supported by more than 80 per cent of the population) reflect a taking of distance from the present regime and from the role played by the State - which is no longer a Welfare State. The former minister and former military leader of the occupied territories, Benjamin Ben Eliezer, recently stated that he feared the worst catastrophe since the creation of the State of Israel, because "the people who are in the streets today are the elite of Israel" and there is

"a link between this public and the power of the nation". Could this be a sign of a beginning of loss of legitimacy of the Zionist project within the Jewish population in Israel?

Michel Warschawski: There too let us not exaggerate: Zionism - as a colonial project and as an ideology - is not being called into question, far from it! On the contrary, the spokespersons of the movement insist strongly on "neither right nor left" and on the non-political character of the movement. During the big rallies in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, the question of the Israeli-Arab conflict was voluntarily avoided... except by some artists who, contrary to the spokespersons, have made the link.

What is being called into question, and this is already very important, is the dismantling of the Welfare State and its disastrous impact on education and health.

What Benjamin Ben Eliezer underlined is the fact that it is not a question of a movement coming from the poorest popular layers, but of the middle classes, of couples who work, have a relatively high level of education, do their annual period as reservists in the army and would like to have their share of the fruits of the current economic growth of Israel, which benefits especially a few thousand families for whom the present government is the source of their power. "Israel is us!" they say they in substance and it is this message which Benjamin Ben Eliezer, but especially those whom we call the oligarchs, would like to make Netanyahu hear, because the gigantic profits raked in by these oligarchs over the last decade are linked to the political and social stability of Israel and that stability is well worth some reforms of unbridled neoliberalism in favour of these middle layers.

International Viewpoint: In the demonstrations we could see placards saying "Tahrir Square is here". On Rothschild Boulevard

there is a "1948" tent in which there are Jews and Palestinians who are favourable to shared sovereignty in a state for all its citizens. It seems that protest camps of Druses and Palestinians have appeared... Do you think that the July 14 movement will contribute to loosening the vice of nationalism in Palestine and in the Middle East?

Michel Warschawski: The Palestinians of Israel have imposed their presence in the movement, including on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel-Aviv, and their demands are both political and social. Having said that, Jewish demonstrators, for example, tore down the Palestinian flag which was on their tent. The present challenge for the anti-colonial Left and for Palestinian militants still remains the same: to make a link between social demands and political demands.

Netanyahu helps us in this, when he calls on young couples in search of housing to go and live... in the settlements, provoking the anger of those who want answers where they live, in Tel-Aviv, Haifa or Beer-Sheba, not in Ariel or Ofra.

International Viewpoint: The demands of more than 80 camps of the movement and of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators aim at changing the political and economic orientation of the country. At the same time the principal spokespersons of the movement insist on its non-political character. How do you explain this contradiction?

Michel Warschawski: In Israeli jargon, when you say "non-political", that means without expressing a position on the Israeli-Arab conflict. In this sense the movement is indeed non-political. It is on the other hand eminently political in its unambiguous rejection of the neoliberal project.

International Viewpoint: Over the last ten years we have seen in Israel attempts to build new trade

unions, combative and democratic, (Koach La-Ovdim, Maan). Do they play a role in the present social movement, and if so what role do they play?

Michel Warschawski: All the actors of the social movement are present in the movement, including Koach La-Ovdim. This current represents the first successful attempt to break the

monopoly of the Histadrut as sole representative of the working class. It is still a modest structure, but it is no longer marginal in certain sectors, and increasingly it will have to be taken into account.

Violent repression in the north of Pakistan

20 September 2011, by Pierre Rousset

For more than a month, progressive activists have suffered violent repression in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Himalayan "Territories of the North". Last August 11, the police fired live bullets against people demanding payment of compensation allowances following a devastating landslide which had happened a year before in the valley of Hunza, on July 4, 2010. This landslide caused very big floods and the formation of a vast lake; this destroyed many dwellings and a transport route that is essential for local trade with China. The villagers accuse the administration of having abandoned them and of having pocketed the allowances due to 25 of the 457 affected families.

The villagers demonstrated on August 11, on the occasion of the arrival of the minister for the province. The police force killed in cold blood Afzal Baig (22 years old), then his father, Sher Ullah Baig (50 years old) who sought to protect him. In reaction, the following day, the population of Aliabad and other localities of Hunza rose up, clashing with the police, setting fire to a police station and the Deputy Commissioner's office. For four days, the population took control of the city.

To calm the population, the authorities wrongfully claimed that prosecutions had begun against the police officers responsible for the killings and granted financial compensation to the grieving families. They took advantage of this to prepare the repression of progressive circles, in order to impose

silence on the events of August 11. Thus, a week later, on August 19, 36 people were picked up (including ten members of the LPP, six of them being maintained in detention). A new wave of arrests began on September 16, with 33 more people picked up.

Six members of the LPP were initially imprisoned. Baba Jan, a member of the federal committee of the LPP [3], a leader of the Progressive Youth Front (PYF), was very involved in the popular mobilizations. Thanks to resistance opposed by the PYF to the police force, he had time to escape arrest on August 19. But he was still wanted and was in danger of being summarily executed ("disappeared") if he was captured, a victim of an "extrajudicial execution". The area of Gilgit-Baltistan is unfortunately well-known for violations of the human rights by the authorities. Baba Jan thus chose give himself up to the authorities, a month after going underground, not before first holding a press conference so that no one could be unaware of what might happen to him.

Nevertheless, according to information obtained by the LPP, Baba Jan was removed from his cell by the Pakistani secret services - the ISI [4] - then tortured for two days: suspended by ropes, severely beaten for having fought in defence of populations that were victims of climate change! The ISI wanted to make him "confess" that he was responsible for setting fire to the Deputy Commissioner's office - to which he replied that he had arrived

on the spot only later.

If Jan Baba is thus targeted by repression, it is because he played a very active part, with the LPP and the PYF, in making known in Pakistan the scandal of July 4, 2010 and its sequels. Thanks in particular to their action, with press conferences held in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, this issue made it to the front pages of the national press.

The LPP is launching a solidarity campaign for the release of Jan Baba and the other prisoners, and in defence of all the victims of repression. It demands the dropping of the false charges against the demonstrators and effective compensation for all the people affected by the landslide of July 4, 2010. This campaign will be conducted in Pakistan and on the international level. We will give regular reports on it.

September 19, 2011

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), based in Hong Kong, launched last July already an [appeal against repression in Gilgit-Baltistan](#).

For the time being, letters of protest can be sent to Pakistani embassies and messages of solidarity can be sent to the LPP (labour_party@yahoo.com).

To find all the information available on ESSF concerning this question, use the key words JAN Baba and Gilgit Baltistan.

Globalised Israel: The Rules Have Changed

20 September 2011, by Assaf Adiv

During the past thirty years, but especially in the last decade, Israel has undergone major economic change. Ownership of the economy has shifted from the State and the Histadrut (the General Federation of Labor) into private hands.

Until the 1980's, the state sector—headed for decades by the Labor Party—controlled every economic nook and cranny. As of 2007 its place has been taken by eighteen families with enormous wealth and influence. This change coincides with a broader process, in which the country has been sucked up into capitalist globalization. Israeli capital has become part of global capital. The national character, once the country's *raison d'Être*, in many respects has vanished.

The economic change has deeply affected the society, its politics and even its armed forces. Huge gaps have opened, undermining Jewish solidarity (a necessary condition of Zionism). Poverty is no longer just a problem of the unemployed. Many who have jobs cannot make ends meet. The Histadrut has been emasculated, organized labor eroded.

Kadima, the ruling party, epitomizes post-Zionist Israel. Its leader, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, is a man without a guiding idea, a manager who adapts his country to the shifting needs of the global market. He must cope, however, with the backward tow of the old guard. While seeking to intermesh with the West, Israel continues its atavistic Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It is torn between a colonialist yesteryear and the drive of capital to maximize growth. It is torn, in other words, between the refugee camps of Nablus and the cafés of Tel Aviv. With no leadership to resolve these oppositions and close social gaps, Israel today is just plain stuck.

The country's Left expects *America* to broker peace, despite its repeated failures to do so in the last quarter century. In contrast Hezbollah and Hamas see Israel's troubles as signs of imminent collapse. Their view is short-sighted. Israel is an integral part of global capitalism, to which it is bound "for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health." The sicknesses are new in kind. Our strategy must be new as well, if we refuse to accept the suffering of the working poor, in Palestine or Israel, as a *fait accompli*.

1. Privatization and reduction of the role of the state

After 1948, when Israel was established on the ruins of the Palestinian homeland, its regime was centralized. The government and Histadrut ruled through the Mapai Party (later called Labor). In their book, *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2002—published gratis on the web in pdf), Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler interpret the centrality of Zionist institutions in the proto-Zionist economy, especially the Jewish Agency and the Histadrut, as compensation for the weakness of capital at that time. This weakness was evident in an underdeveloped market, a lack of credit and a limited private sector.

"The package deal between them was simple," write Nitzan and Bichler. "The Histadrut...gained the exclusive right to import, organise and discipline the labour force, whereas the Jewish Agency...was responsible for raising the foreign capital needed to put it to work.

"Much of Israel's hyped rhetoric of 'statism', 'socialism' and 'nationalism'

originated during those years. Yet behind the ideological commotion, there was another, much more important process: *the formation of an Israeli ruling class*" (p. 18).

Later (p. 96) the authors expand on the last point: "The MAPAI government controlled the process of capital formation, allocated credit, determined prices, set exchange rates, regulated foreign trade and directed industrial development. However, this very process also set in motion its own negation, so to speak, by planting the seeds from which dominant capital was subsequently to emerge. In this sense, the state acted as a cocoon for differential accumulation. The budding corporate conglomerates were initially employed as national 'agents' for various Zionist projects. Eventually, though, their increasing autonomy helped them not only shed off their statist shell, but also change the very nature of the state from which they had evolved."

The Israeli economy's center of gravity shifted from the public to the private sector, in tandem with the international shift to globalization. The power of the country's ruling class depended, historically, on its ability to read the global map, allying with powers that were on the rise. This was one reason why the social order was modeled at first on the welfare state, the dominant mode among western nations after World War II.

In the early 1980's, however, after the postwar boom had run its course in the developed nations and the ills endemic to capitalism had reappeared, US President Ronald Reagan and British PM Margaret Thatcher set about eliminating the welfare state, shifting toward privatization. Israel—where the costs of the Lebanon War and the settlements had sparked triple-digit inflation—was among the first to dance to the new tune. The Stabilization Plan of 1985

did more than just control prices. It cut all restraints on financial trading. It eased conditions for foreign investment and opened the way for Israeli capitalists to invest abroad.

"Protective tariffs were reduced. The first and most important change was the country's increasing exposure to the vagaries of the world economy. Import duties, which averaged 13 per cent in the 1970s, dropped to 1 per cent in the 1990s, while import penetration, expressed as a share of GDP, rose from 37 per cent to more than 50 per cent over the same period. Local producers, faced with these mounting pressures, were forced to shape up or give up" (Bichler and Nitzan, p. 274). Most of Israel's traditional industries suffered major damage. This was especially so for textiles. It is estimated that 25,000 textile workers (half the total) lost their jobs in the early 90's.

The merger with the global market led also to cutbacks in the public sector. Privatization, in the 1990's, became the code word for the future. An outstanding example may be seen in the kibbutzim. These used to be models of solidarity and equality, serving "in Israeli propaganda" as the symbol of a new society, a secular "light to the nations." Many today have been privatized. Others have undergone a process of wage differentiation. The kibbutz idea is history. (See Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem*, Routledge, 2007.)

The Stabilization Plan of 1985 opened the way for the development of Israel's financial market. The Tel Aviv stock exchange expanded. Israeli companies began mobilizing capital on Wall Street, where their value rose by leaps and bounds. In 1992, the value of the 38 Israeli companies on the American exchange amounted to \$6 billion. Within three years their number had increased to 60, valued at \$10-15 billion (Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

The plan also brought a reduction in taxes on companies and employers. Their contribution to the budget fell

drastically. The average corporate tax dropped from 61% in 1986 to 36% in 2000. The participation of employers in the funding of workers' National Insurance went from 15.6% of wages in 1986 to 4.93% in the year 2000. The parallel tax paid by employers to help fund employees' health insurance was totally cancelled in 1997; instead, an extra charge was made for medical visits (Shafir and Peled, pp. 341-56).

Eighteen ruling families

Privatization has been, as said, a major factor in Israel's mesh with the global economy. In the last twenty years, control has been concentrated in a few families. The move was justified as a way of saving the economy from waste and corruption, which would ruin Israel's chances in the global economic arena. Privatization, we were told, would make Israel attractive to foreign investors. This would create jobs, and public services would become more efficient. What happened, in fact, was that capital went from public to private hands, while the little guy remained out.

Business Data Israel (BDI), a data-analysis group, has investigated the phenomenon. It lists the eighteen ruling families, the Ofers, Arisons and so on. Their total incomes came to 77% of the national budget for 2006. BDI estimates that this total is half the national industrial output. At the end of 2005, these eighteen families reaped 32% of the profits made by the country's 500 biggest companies. Their incomes amounted to 198 billion shekels (about \$50 billion). The report concludes: "The processes of privatization in recent years, including privatization of the banks, of Bezek (communications), El Al and Zim (shipping), not only failed to reduce the centralization of the economy, but even increased it" (Ynet, February 13, 2006 *Hebrew*. See also Nitzan and Bichler, p. 87.) The situation is similar for the banks. The three largest "Hapoalim, Leumi and Discount" preside over 80% of the banking market and rake in 70% of its profits. Hapoalim is controlled by the Arisons, Discount by the Bronfmans, and Leumi is a candidate for privatization next year.

Peace as a bridge to the global economy

The Oslo Accords, which Israel signed with Yasser Arafat in 1993, and the Arava Agreement, which it signed with Jordan in 1994, were seen by many as the symptom of a transformation. According to this view, Israel's ruling class had opted to exchange war and occupation for peace and economic cooperation. Where peace is concerned, this prognosis is unfulfilled, but clearly there has been an economic surge.

The Oslo and Arava agreements coincided at first with an enormous Israeli effort to tighten economic ties with the Gulf states and the Maghreb, mainly through economic conferences (1994-1996). The big breakthrough, however, occurred outside the Arab sphere. Nitzan and Bichler (p. 337) describe how the multinationals discovered the Israeli market in the post-Oslo era and began, one by one, to open branches here and create partnerships. Among them were Kimberly Clark, Nestlé, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, McDonald's, Burger King, British Gas, Volkswagen and Generali. World banks also opened branches, including Citigroup, Lehman Brothers, HSBC, Bank of America and Chase Manhattan. The world's communications giants followed suit.

Why did these companies choose to invest in Israel? One reason was that the privatization extravaganza offered them tempting deals at bargain prices. The optimism over the Israeli potential can be compared with the appetite they exhibited toward East European markets after the collapse of the Soviet regime. The Israeli government, seeing itself as too centralized, wanted to shed assets in the hope of gaining a place in the global economy. To foreign investors, here was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to pick up those assets for peanuts. The Israeli companies and their government showed great flexibility, sloughing off the national connection and ignoring the need to create jobs.

Fusion with the global order

Stef Wertheimer and his son Eitan are a parade example. For three decades

Stef was considered a pioneer of Israeli industry: he established the Tefen industrial area in the north of Israel, as part of a plan called "the Judaization of Galilee." In May 2006, however, the Wertheimers sold 80% of their company, ISCAR Metalworking, for \$4 billion to Berkshire Hathaway, a financial concern headed by Warren Buffett. At the signing, Buffett promised not to harm Israeli production. Nevertheless, the sale is a mortal blow to the concept of a *national* economy. The core of control over Israel's leading industrial concern has here passed from owners who once had a strong commitment to the Zionist project to an American businessman who has nothing in common with it, whose financial empire "the second biggest in the world" is run without feelings or ideology. None of this stopped the Wertheimers.



Left to right: Eitan Wertheimer, Warren Buffett, PM Ehud Olmert. Photo by Avi Ohayon, courtesy of Israel Government Press Office.

Another example of the change undergone by Israeli companies is the sale of Tnuva, an agricultural cooperative, to Apax Partners Worldwide LLP, a British buyout firm (*Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 21, 2006). Established in the 1930's, Tnuva was among the most important cooperatives in the proto-Zionist economy. It dominated the milk, egg, chicken and vegetable industries. It was a central factor in breaking Arab agriculture and labor. Recently 51% of Tnuva was sold to Apax for \$1.025 billion. The company then opened a plant for dairy products in Romania, and it now casts longing glances toward Russia.

The cooperation with multinationals is evident, above all, in high tech. During the 1990's many "startup" companies were founded in Israel. These are small clusters of computer engineers and programmers who discover this or that new technique, which they develop in a direction that will attract investors. The idea is to find a big American buyer. In the casino of new technologies for sale, there have been

several dizzying Israeli successes: the acquisition of Nicecom by 3COM for \$53 million, of Scorpio by U.S. Robotics for \$80 million, and of Orbotech by Applied Materials for \$285 million (*Haaretz*, November 28, 1997). AOL bought Mirabilis for \$407 million, Intel bought DSPC for \$1.6 billion, and Lucent bought Chromatis for \$4.5 billion (Nitzan and Bichler, pp. 343-44). In November this year, *Yediot Aharonot* celebrated "10 years of exits," summing up American acquisitions of Israeli companies in the last decade. The amount paid by American companies totaled \$42 billion ("They Made it," *Yediot Aharonot*, November 13, 2007).

These deals filled the pockets of a few young Israelis (graduates of the army's computer department or Soviet immigrants), but they did not pull the rest of the economy along. Comverse, Amdocs and Check Point "Israel's three largest high-tech companies" employed 13,000 at the end of the 90's. Their value on the NASDAQ exchange was \$50 billion (77% of the total value of all companies represented on the Tel Aviv stock exchange). But these three firms are registered and located in New York, and most of their major stockholders are non-Israelis. A big question mark, in short, hangs over the "Israeliness" of these companies (Nitzan and Bichler, pp. 344-45).

Israeli capital goes abroad

While Israel has opened itself to foreign capital, its own has flown to foreign lands. In addition to the high-tech companies mentioned above, billions have been invested elsewhere in real estate, construction, energy, water purification, agricultural technology and more. These investments are concentrated in Turkey, Eastern Europe, the US and the Far East. In many cases, Israeli firms form partnerships with local or multinational companies.

Strauss, an Israeli company, provides an example. It began as a family dairy farm in Galilee back in 1936. By 1995 it was able to buy Achla, which makes salads. Two years later Strauss bought half the stock of Yotvata dairies. In 2004 it merged with Elite, which makes coffee and candy. The

combined company is valued at nearly \$1 billion. According to a survey by Dunn and Bradstreet, Strauss in the last decade has become active in dozens of countries, with production centers in eleven. It has partnerships with food giants such as the French Danone, the Dutch Unilever, and the American Pepsi Cola. Its activities abroad bring in 40% of its income. It is a leading factor in coffee in Central and Eastern Europe. It dominates the second largest coffee firm in Brazil. It has also bought Sabra, which produces salads for the US market. It controls Max Brenner, the chocolate company. Strauss has traveled a long road, becoming a global firm interwoven with multinationals, and as such it serves as a model for other Israeli companies.

2. The crumbling of the old party regime

The salient feature of the new regime in Israel is the weakening of the two traditional parties, Labor and Likud, and the emergence of Kadima. In the 2006 elections, Labor won 19 seats and the Likud only 12 in the 120-seat Knesset. Kadima, on the other hand "sans history, ideology or shape" won 29 and formed the government.

The Labor Party consumed from within

The new Israeli bourgeoisie, having emerged from the state's cocoon, ended the monopoly of Mapai (Labor). In 1977 the representatives of this new class established a party called Dash, whose leaders included Stef Wertheimer and archaeologist Yigal Yadin. Dash got support from the economic elite. On winning 15 seats, it joined the Likud coalition. For the first time in its history, Labor was sent to the opposition.

Some 17 years later, Labor suffered an equally disastrous blow from within. It had always controlled the Histadrut, which in turn controlled Israel's largest and securest health fund. In order to have health insurance, Israelis had to join the

Histadrut and pay dues there. This connection provided Labor with a guaranteed source of electoral strength and income. As of 1994, the union had 1.8 million members. In that year, however, two young Laborites—Haim Ramon and Amir Peretz—broke with their party and formed a new list for the leadership of the Histadrut. Their idea was to cast aside the federation's old-fashioned image. Surprisingly, their venture succeeded. On assuming control, they agreed to separate the health fund from union membership. The latter plummeted to half a million by the year 2000, with a corresponding drop in income.

Why should Labor members undermine their own party? Labor was then divided into two camps, one under PM Yitzhak Rabin and the other under Shimon Peres. The Rabin camp represented the new bourgeoisie, to which the mandatory connection between the union and the health fund seemed antiquated, insular, and undemocratic—in a word, un-western. Moreover, the Histadrut was a power base for the rival Peres. The weakening of the Histadrut may have been intended as a service to Rabin. In any case, the new bourgeoisie got its way. Neither the Histadrut nor the Labor Party has ever recovered.

When Amir Peretz returned to Labor in 2005 and again surprised everyone by winning the leadership, a devastating split occurred: long-time party leader Shimon Peres quit, with his supporters, and joined Kadima.

The split in the Likud and the rise of Kadima

The vision of Greater Israel, the ideological basis of Herut/Likud, dissolved with the election of Binyamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister in 1996. There was already, at that time, a consensus in the Israeli business community concerning the importance of peace as a precondition for economic development. This led the Netanyahu government to continue the Oslo process, thereby tacitly conceding that the Likud's old concepts were obsolete. The party's conflict remained latent for a decade, until Sharon decided to disengage from Gaza.

Regarded as the father of the settlements, Sharon had been the Likud's supreme hawk. Toward the end of the second Intifada, however, he had come around to the conviction, given the lack of a Palestinian peace partner, that Israel would be well advised to withdraw from Gaza and dismantle the settlements there. He signaled to the public his readiness to sacrifice things that were holy to him. He had found something holier—the favor of Israel's business community and its new middle class.

A few months after disengagement, Sharon decided to establish Kadima, bringing with him key figures from Likud and Labor. His new party attracted large numbers from the middle class.

Under Ehud Olmert, who took the reins after Sharon's massive stroke, Kadima is a combination of the pragmatists in both Likud and Labor. Its main concern is to adapt Israel to the new global order. Without Sharon's charisma, however, it cannot fill the gap in leadership. This is no mere fluke. The new party epitomizes post-Zionist Israel: maximum political flexibility and lack of social principle. The sole purpose is to perpetuate the status quo for the good of the middle class, which wants a land—in Olmert's words—"that's fun to live in" (*Haaretz* March 10, 2006).

3. The army adapts to the new rules

The military was and remains a fundamental pillar of Israel. Generals were the society's leaders, soldiers its most respected group. The globalized regime of the last two decades has shaken this institution, affecting its organization, demographic composition and influence.

The "people's army" exists no longer

Many research papers conclude that Israel's army is no longer a people's army, and that the country has thereby lost a core of cohesion and strength. The researchers also agree that the changes are unstoppable. The fact is that many Israeli youth are no

longer ready to devote long years to military service.

In his book, "From People's Army to an Army of the Peripheries" (Carmel Press [Hebrew], 2007), Dr. Yagil Levy defines the main reasons for the change. First and foremost: the army has failed time after time to win a decisive victory on the battlefield—*la* 1967 (this so-called "Six Day War" has become the standard of victory). The second reason has to do with the political and class changes described above, which have replaced Zionist-nationalist values with ambition for personal success, measured in money.

The 1967 war, according to Levy, was a watershed. The subsequent economic boom created for the first time a broad middle class that had no appetite for self-sacrifice. "The new materialism," Levy writes on p. 54, "...undermined several deeply anchored values of the centralized, collective state, in favor of a new hierarchy of values, essentially individualistic. Paradoxically, then, militarism 'inflated' materialism to a record high... Thus the group that reaped the military spoils—the Ashkenazi, secular middle class—showed a diminishing readiness to bear their costs."

Under the rules of the new economic regime, in tune with the demands of global capital, the army has also been forced to examine its expenses using economic criteria. As a result there has been a decline in calls to reserve duty, which is a very expensive item. Till 1985 Israelis put in 10 million days of reserve duty per year. By 2001 the number had diminished to 3.8 million (Levy, p. 69).

The army's new composition

There has also been a change in the composition of the officer staff and the ranks of command. For more than thirty years the Ashkenazi elite, hailing from the coast and the kibbutzim, held a central position. Today, in the elite units, we see more and more people from the periphery, to whom army service offers a degree of social mobility. A look at the class and ethnic affiliations of the officer staff and the elite units in the last two decades shows an increase in the

proportion of Mizrahis (Orientals), settlers, Soviet immigrants and Ethiopians.

Levy compares the casualties from the first Lebanon War (1982) with those from the Intifada of 2000. He finds that the formerly marginal groups today pay the highest price. Of the 120 Israeli soldiers killed in the recent Lebanon conflict, for example, three were from Tel Aviv. GHQ Commander Eleazar Stern criticized the Tel Avivians after the war, accusing them of not bearing their share (Levy, p. 153).

Draft dodging

In 2007, the IDF commanders decided to publish data on mobilization. These showed that a fourth of the youth reaching 18 avoid the army altogether. Half are released on grounds of yeshiva study, a smaller group because of criminal background, and the rest for medical or psychological reasons. In response, Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi announced that Israelis must "return the blush of shame to the cheeks of the draft dodgers."

There is a general feeling, however, that because the army has lost its social standing, this campaign for mobilization is bound to fail. Moreover, the published figures are by no means new. The website of New Profile, which helps conscientious objectors, reported four years ago that in addition to 20% who are never drafted, another 20% do not complete their service ([New Profile](#)).

In sum, war weariness, the desire for normality, and the growth of groups opposing the Occupation "together with the new bourgeoisie's desire to merge with the global economy" have led to a decline of the military's influence in political and social life.

4. The Tel Aviv "bubble" and Zionist dogmas

The image of the new Israel becomes clear when we look at the Tel Aviv skyline, which has filled in the last two

decades with skyscrapers and luxury apartments. The world's leading banks and multinationals have opened offices. Restaurants have sprouted up. Cafés and night clubs are everywhere. The emporium is as western as a city can get. Elsewhere in Israel, however, poverty deepens. The elderly poor, the cripples, the unemployed and the ill are not to be found on the new Israeli agenda. The distance between Tel Aviv and the periphery has never been greater.

The gap between rich and poor is a feature of current reality. From a society once marked by a high degree of equality, Israel is today among the least equal countries in the West. The masses of the poor are to be found, as ever, among the Arabs and the ultra-orthodox, but not only there. Today's poverty afflicts 20% of the population. Among the poor (i.e., people with less than half the median income) are 162,000 families in which at least one member is employed (*Yediot Aharonot* September 4, 2007).

Israel's new period of free-market capitalism has witnessed a turnabout in labor relations. The economy earlier had an extremely high rate of unionization (85%), ensuring employment security, a fair wage, and social benefits including pension plans. Today labor rights are trampled. During the last 15 years, Israel has permitted the importation of more than 300,000 foreign workers under near-slavery conditions. Personnel companies mushroomed. Contractors appeared by the hundreds, exploiting the foreigners with government approval (see "Breaking of Organized Labor in Israel," *Challenge* 98).

The rise in Israeli living standards has been dramatic. The per capita GDP climbed from \$5585 in 1980 to more than \$20,000 today. But the fruits of this growth remain at the top of the tree. The managers of the companies on Israel's stock exchange today earn 21 times the average salary.

Disengagement, McWorld and the Jewish Jihad

In *The Globalization of Israel*, noted above, Uri Ram defines the contrast between Israel's two social poles as

that between the middle class, which seeks to join the West, and the peripheries, which live in a mental world that is nationalistic and messianic. It is the contrast, he writes, between McWorld in Tel Aviv and Jihad in Jerusalem.

The confrontation of these two extremes came out during the disengagement from Gaza. Despite the worry that the operation would lead to civil strife in Israel, the McWorld attitude had the upper hand. The army that evicted settlers preserved, nonetheless, its unity, and except for a few right-wing refusers, soldiers followed orders. Sharon won widespread approval, which he transformed into political capital on establishing Kadima.

A new kind of war in Lebanon

The new Israel, fused with the global economy, made war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The war was conducted in a way that suited its character. The international consensus around Israel's actions becomes understandable when we remember the enormous involvement of Israeli capital with the ruling centers of the global economy. For Israel did not act unilaterally in this war. At every step it took account of its foreign investors.

Despite the conventional wisdom, according to which the Olmert government failed in Lebanon, the fact is that one year later Olmert has managed to create the broadest coalition Israel has seen in seventeen years. Militarily, he considers the war a tactical victory. In recent studies, military analysts confirm the fruits that Israel reaped. First, Hezbollah has been distanced from the border. Second, relations with the Sunni Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan) have improved. Third, the movement to isolate Iran has gained momentum, and Israel's ties with Western Europe have strengthened.

To be sure, many castigated the government for abandoning the poor of Galilee to enemy fire. But the criticism did not translate into a political force that could bring about change. In the eyes of those with political clout, the more important

point was that the economy had continued to function during the war. While the Galileans huddled in shelters if they had them (the Galilee Arabs did not), deals were signed for millions, the stock market rose, and the Tel Avivians sipped café au lait.

The government's conduct after the war, especially its decision *not* to alter the budget for 2007, expressed its resolve to demonstrate business as usual. This meant departing from certain promises—namely, to repair the damage done to the weak by Netanyahu during his stint as Finance Minister. Amir Peretz had led the Labor Party into Olmert's coalition on the strength of these promises. After the war, without a blink, the same government—including Labor—increased the defense budget at the expense of social programs, keeping a tight rein on budgetary discipline. The act showed foreign investors that Israel's government was stable and strong.

5. Conclusion: The need for a realistic strategy of change

Israel's crisis reflects its borderline position between the developed West and the Islamic world. This contrasts with the situation of Europe and the US. Tel Aviv is only 32 miles from Nablus.

Given this proximity, the country suffers from a split personality. It adopts a western life-style while still pouring money and lives into the Zionist project. It seeks to present an enlightened face while shutting Palestinians behind walls and checkpoints.

Those who fail to read the new reality devise programs and slogans that are no longer relevant. This is the case with Hamas, which claimed, at the start of the Intifada in 2000, that suicide bombers would bring the Zionist entity to its knees within five years. Likewise, Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, recently compared Israel's strength to that of a spider web.

The assessments are strategically wrong. True, they identify the cracks that have appeared in Israel's foundations and the loss of faith in its leadership. They correctly read, as well, the general Arab frustration with American imperialism, a frustration that attracts new members to Hamas and Hezbollah.

But the Islamic alternative offers no down-to-earth hope for the poor. Moreover, these parties fail to comprehend that Israel is far from collapsing, for it has accumulated power through its merger with western capitalism. They fail to see that Israel serves as a successful platform for its own broad middle class. The Lebanon War of 2006 reflected a crucial difference between Israel and Hezbollah. It showed that Israel operates according to a strategy; it puts economic stability first; it forges alliances with Arab as well as western states; and it works with both to isolate Hezbollah and Iran. The war showed that Hezbollah, on the contrary, acted without a clear strategy, basing its acts on false assumptions without a political horizon.

Given Israel's integration into the global capitalist system, we may also doubt whether calls for a boycott are realistic. To be effective, a boycott would have to be directed not just against Israel but against the

whole *team* of countries with which it is enmeshed, including the US, Britain, Germany and Japan. Who would remain to do the boycotting?

As for the Israeli Left, it continues—with the Kadima-Labor government—to seek salvation in Washington. This Left has no solution for the poverty afflicting much of its society. It has no political alternative to the one that Olmert is pushing.

If we want to fight effectively, not isolating our struggle from reality, a different approach is needed. We know that certain alternatives to capitalism have proved to be harmful and destructive. The challenge is to put forth a progressive alternative. If we read the new reality correctly, as we have tried to do here, we shall be better prepared for the difficult period that is to come

In view of these developments, our party, the Organization for Democratic Action (ODA-Da'am), has had to adapt its program to the new realities. Israeli society is suffering from the same problems as its western counterparts. To bring change we must organize a new social base, composed of all those Israelis and Arabs who have been marginalized by gloves-off capitalism.

ODA places the interest of the workers before the national interest. It puts forward a program for returning negotiating power to the workers. It builds new bridges between Jewish and Arab activists who share the idea of a socialist egalitarian society. Its internationalist perspective gains relevance at a time when the Israeli bourgeoisie has forfeited patriotism, choosing to exploit labor at the cost of Zionist solidarity.

The original article is [here](#).

“What type of revolution?”

19 September 2011, by **Ahlem Belhadji**

In Tunisia, the Council for the Protection of the Revolution has been replaced by the High Instance for the

Protection of the Revolution and Democratic Transition which has been set up to break the revolutionary dynamic. It replaces not just the Council but also the January 14 Front. The Constituent Assembly elections were scheduled for July 24, but nothing was done so that they would be on time, so they have been put back to October 23.

There are urgent popular and democratic demands, notably at the level of the courts, the economy and the media. The demand for a trial of the old regime is present. For this a profound reform of the judiciary is need. Until now this has been entirely insufficient. During the trials, ministers have been acquitted, Ben Ali has been sentenced for drug trafficking, and general Seriaty for forging passports. That is the reality, there have been no trials worthy of the name. The media remains under the monopoly of dirty money, several television channels are directly linked to the former regime.

The economy is also the right to a job, a dignified life, and there is nothing. The small successes are the movements of employees in some sectors. Success in preventing major exploitation in subcontracting for example, or improvements for civil servants. But at the level of political choices there is nothing. Life is increasingly expensive, the measures for the young unemployed are insufficient. There is above all a strengthening of links with international imperialism. For example, payments on the Tunisian debt have gone straight into the pockets of corruption. And the agreements, in particular with the European Union, are completely unfavourable to Tunisia and do not

challenge the old relations, on the contrary.

Women have participated a great deal in the revolutionary process. There are today two aspects. One is the advancement of their rights. Parity has been imposed in the High Instance. But on specific questions, the situation remains difficult, notably for abolishing discriminatory laws. The question of personal status inherited from 1956 has been posed to the parties. Before pressure from feminists, women and some parties, the government has dealt with the question of elimination of all forms of violence.

What type of revolution is the Tunisian revolution? A democratic revolution? Socialist? It is a classic debate inside the Tunisian left. So far as self-organisation is concerned, the regional and local councils for the protection of the revolution remain, but their coordination does not really emerge and it is not up to the level of the expectations to counteract the march of the counter revolution. There have been very few committees of self-organisation, essentially after the revolution, in certain enterprises which belonged to families who had abandoned them. There have been some initiatives, occupations, above all in the farms, in the context of the agrarian reform.

Since the revolution the UGTT has become very proactive, unlike at the beginning, where it wished to hide and control the social struggles while waiting to ensure the democratic transition through the constituent Assembly.

The January 14 Front brought together the revolutionary and radical forces. But its charter was not very

clear, notably concerning the type of government desired. The revolutionary forces were weak, but they would have been able to ally with social forces to go towards a popular and workers' government. But this has not been a slogan inside the Front because for some it was necessary to realise the democratic stage before the social and revolutionary phase. The Front also included nationalists who had no real place there. It rapidly broke up, first because of the High Instance, but also because of the alliances for the preparation of the Constituent Assembly.

The Essebsi government control everything, despite the independent bodies which organise the future elections. The media, political money, the absence of left unity will essentially favour the Islamists and the liberals. The RCD has been kicked out the door, but it has come back through the window. Despite the High Instance, money is uncontrollable: a party that nobody knows can be present everywhere on the television, in the street, at the airport, because it has money, even if it has no social base or project of society.

The Workers' Left League was present everywhere during the revolutionary process: we were the essential coordinators in the mobilisations in the Casbah, we were very present at the trade union level, and among youth. We have more leaders than base for the moment, because we are in the process of constructing the latter. We have debated participation or not in the Constituent Assembly. We decided to participate while denouncing what is happening and working on the illusions on the Constitution considered as a solution for the oppressed.

Secrets of the Keystone XL pipeline

19 September 2011, by Alexander Cockburn

Even as the protesters savaged the scheme as a fearsome environmental

disaster, the State Department issued its final environmental impact

statement on August 26. Not surprisingly, it was favorable to the

project, furnishing such nuggets of encouragement as “analysis of previous large pipeline oil spills suggests that the depth and distance that the oil would migrate would likely be limited unless it reaches an active river, stream, a steeply sloped area, or another migration pathway such as a drainage ditch.”

There will now be a ninety-day review period. If federal agencies aren't unanimous, then the final say-so is up to Obama. It's a sound bet that Obama will issue approval. Would the ductile president risk a thrashing from Republicans for putting birds ahead of jobs? Right before Labor Day he gave the business lobby what it sought on postponement of new air quality standards.

But undoubtedly the prime rationale put forward by the president will be security of supply and energy “independence,” meaning supply from the fine, upstanding Calgary-based TransCanada Corporation, as opposed to “not secure and reliable sources of crude oil, including the Middle East, Africa, Mexico, and South America.”

We saw this bait-and-switch game a generation ago amid the battles over oil in Alaska, where the North Slope drilling and pipeline were approved by Congress only because the oil was intended to buttress America's energy independence. Congress required the oil companies operating on the North Slope to refine the crude in the United States, with no exports permitted.

In fact, the companies had a long-term strategy to export Alaska's crude to Asia. In 1996 President Bill Clinton, extending Lincoln Bedroom sleeping privileges and a Rose Garden birthday party to Arco's former CEO Lodwick Cook in exchange for campaign cash, signed an executive order OKing foreign sales of Alaskan crude.

This time there will be no twenty-five-year pause. From day one of the

Keystone XL scheme the oil companies' plan has been to take the heavy crude from Alberta, refine it in Texas and then ship it out in the form of middle distillates - diesel, jet fuel, heating oil - primarily to Europe and Latin America.

Contrary to the lurid predictions of declining US oil production, disastrous dependence on foreign oil and the need for new offshore drilling, not to mention the gloom-sodden predictions of the “peak oil” crowd, the big crisis for the US oil companies can be summed up in a single word: glut.

Here let me wheel on a very useful report, “Exporting Energy Security: Keystone XL Exposed,” just issued by Oil Change International (OCI), a “clean energy” advocate. The explosive sentences (buttressed by figures from the government's Energy Information Administration) come on pages 3 and 4: “For the last two years, and for the foreseeable future” demand (for oil in the United States) is in decline, while domestic supply is rising”.

Gasoline demand is declining due to increasing vehicle efficiency and slow economic growth; meanwhile, “as a result of stagnant demand and the rise in both domestic (notably North Dakota) and Canadian oil production, there is a glut of oil in the US market. Refiners have therefore identified the export market as their primary hope for growth and maximum profits.

Enter San Antonio-based Valero Energy, the largest exporter of refined oil products in the United States and a big-time retailer of gasoline in this country through its Valero, Diamond Shamrock and Beacon stations. As OCI's report emphasizes, the Keystone XL pipeline would “probably not have gotten off the drawing board” if it hadn't been for Valero. The company has the biggest commitment to the pipeline, guaranteeing a TransCanada purchase of at least 100,000 barrels a

day, 20 percent of Keystone XL's capacity, until 2030.

Valero's CEO and chairman, Bill Klesse, doesn't keep his firm's business plan a secret. The big overseas market is diesel because Europeans, Latin Americans and others like the more fuel-efficient diesel engine. Valero's Port Arthur refinery can process cheap heavy crude from Canadian tar sands into high-value, ultra-low-sulfur diesel. Better still, since the refinery operates as a “foreign trade zone,” it won't pay tax and custom duties on exports or on any gasoline imports from its Welsh refinery.

There's no national need for the Keystone XL extension. It spares TransCanada the task of trying to send the tar sands oil to Canadian terminals through fractious First Nations north of the border. It feeds Big Oil's bottom line. It's an environmental nightmare - mainly because of the certainty of corporate penny-pinching in maintenance and the equally appalling (and deliberate) lack of government safety enforcement.

Money talks, of course. Obama received \$884,000 from the oil and gas industry during the 2008 campaign, more than any other lawmaker except John McCain. Valero throws the money around. Across 2008, 2010 and thus far in the 2012 campaign, it ranks in the top six contributors from the oil and gas industry - favoring Republicans by 80 percent or more. Between 1998 and 2010 Valero gave \$147,895 to Rick Perry, outstripped only by Exxon. Surely, one way or the other, Bill Klesse can hope for a night in the Lincoln Bedroom.

September 7, 2011

This article appeared in the September 26, 2011 edition of The Nation

<http://www.thenation.com/article/16...>

Pakistan's floods â€” ‘This is not a natural

disaster'

19 September 2011, by Peter Boyle

And this is just the beginning of the monsoon season.

Farooq Tariq will be one of the guest speakers at the Climate Change Social Change activist conference in Melbourne, over September 30 to October 3.

"There have been big debates about the changing global climate and its effects on Pakistan", Tariq said. "This latest rain wave is unprecedented. Looking at the history of our weather, it is reported that once in seven years there has been a bad flood. But this has changed. This is second year in a row that there is a devastating flood."

The 2010 floods inundated a fifth of Pakistan, directly affected about 20 million people "mostly by destruction of property, livelihood and infrastructure" and killed about 2000 people.

After that disaster, aid groups had warned the Pakistan government to invest in prevention measures to mitigate against seasonal rains, avoid

a repeat of last year's experience. But it failed to act.

"The government failed miserably because they never care about people. The warring 'partners' in the Sindh state government were too busy in kill each other in Karachi through out the Ramadan. The Sindh government was busy trying to save it self from collapse because all the four partners of Sindh government were fighting each other. More than 2000 were killed in Karachi during August alone. So despite all the warnings there were no precautionary measures taken.

"Now there are very heavy rains in Sindh, in particular. Hundreds have been killed and 10 millions on the roads again. There is an emergency situation in most of the Sindh districts. There is a total collapse of the civil life. The military has been called in and they are doing some relief work and rescuing people.

"I just saw on television hundreds of starving flood victims attacking a government food store and looting

everything. People are desperate. The Labour Relief Campaign sent 300,000 rupees [more than \$3500] yesterday to our Sindh comrades to buy medicines for the flood victims.

"We have set up camps in Hyderabad to collect funds. The Labour Relief Campaign committee is meeting this evening in Lahore to discuss further relief efforts."

Donations can be sent to:

Account: Labour Education Foundation

Account 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.

From Links:
<http://links.org.au/node/2490>

The revolutionary left in the February 20th Movement

18 September 2011

Certainly, the emergence of the February 20th Movement was principally based on political demands, varying between the reform of the monarchy and its challenging through the demand for a constituent assembly. But a true political dimension of the movement in Morocco has not yet found the social roots which should incarnate a

massive political force conscious and capable of going to the end. That means, in the first place, the eruption of the working class as a conscious and organised social force in itself. If the campaign, led by the February 20th Movement, for the boycott of the constitution should stimulate a general opinion hostile to despotism, that was not enough to force the

regime to abrogate it.

That said, the emergence of the February 20th Movement, its extent and progressive growth - especially in Casablanca and Tangiers - constitute a patent index of a qualitatively new era in the political scene in Morocco, turning the page on a past during which the regime was absolutely

hegemonic, and opens the way to the breakthrough of the potential combative strength of the oppressed.

In this context, the Moroccan revolutionary left is, for the first time in its history, in a real mass movement, albeit alongside other political forces opposed to the regime which do not have any perspective critical of capitalism, namely the Islamists. In the case of Morocco, the latter constitute the most organised force of opposition, having previously profited from the weakness of the left and the rise of movements of the same ideological-political affiliations since the Ayatollahs came to power in Iran. The three decades of effervescence of these forces were precisely the epoch of the crisis of the left and the collapse of its more dominant tendencies in the world (parties and states).

The presence of the Islamists in the current movement in Morocco has led a part of the left - be it reformist or revolutionary - to panic, hoping to obtain political "guarantees" as to

their real objective and programme, while another part has openly refused to involve itself with the movement on the pretext of not mixing with them. For this latter tendency on the left, the evolution of the movement and the growing popular influx in the demonstrations will quickly marginalise it in sectarianism and sterile dogmatism. Whereas the first part runs behind Al-Adl-wa-l-Ihsân without any criticism, ignoring thus the basic conditions for a unitary political action already shown by the experience of the history of the workers' movement as a fundamental tactical conduct for revolutionary socialists.

The distrust towards Al-Adl-wa-l-Ihsân should induce in the left a modality of unitary action which involves placing itself as the main pole of convergence, and not breaking the movement. If the left is found in the same front of opposition with the Islamists, each having their own objectives, that should not be at the

price of advancing its own programme and tactics. To strike together and march separately, to militate obstinately to set down roots among the oppressed people, develop and enlarge the field of militant actions (with a view to turning quantity into quality), remaining attentive to the evolution of the level of the dynamic and consciousness of the masses to advance adequate slogans: such are the methods which would allow the left to meet its historic responsibilities.

The phase of the current struggle is still of a defensive character. It is possible and necessary in the future to pass to a dynamic of revolutionary offensive which would allow broad social layers to assume revolutionary actions of greater breadth. Nonetheless, to reach such a level in the relationship of forces, it is necessary that the revolutionaries ensure that they put in the first ranks the mass struggles while remaining intransigent in their orientations and fundamental political principles.

Regime attacks against the activists of the Movement of February 20

18 September 2011, by Attac-CADTM Morocco

This weekend was also marked by the arrest of our comrade rapper artist of the movement of 20 February in Casablanca Belghouat Moad, Called "Haked" ("i Outraged" in Arabic) was arrested Friday on charges of assault against a pro-regime demonstrator.

The rapper's songs "HAKED" very critical to the regime including the king have become the artistic voice of the movement of 20 February in all the country songs are chanted in the demonstrations including one where:

"If the people want to live, all you have to stand up and defend its

interests

Them, they all won and they left us the crumbs

Many activists have already sacrificed their lives for us! "

Or:

"We want a leader who we call accounts and not a holy man!

«Beware if you speak, they will stop you!

I will talk and you stop me! You shared the cake between you, kiss her hand! Long live my father who raised me, but our brother (the king) cornered the Morocco alone and as I live I will not let him concede it to his

son! "

Moad "Haked" was presented in court last Monday but his Judgment Day is still freezing, sleep method to fatigue activists who do not allow themselves intimidated at the moment after the sit-in that was held outside the police station and the palace of justice since his arrest a march was held yesterday in the neighborhood where he enjoys great popularity.

His arrest also marked the march on Sunday to "Sidi Moumen" (a popular district of Casablanca) to which was attended by thousands of citizen(e)s.

The years of 9/11

17 September 2011, by **Against the Current**

There was the drowning of New Orleans by the sheer racist and cynical neglect of its Black and poor population in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the followup catastrophe of the 2010 BP Gulf blowout, the product of regulatory negligence over the insane search for ever-more-remote sources of non-renewable planet-destroying fossil fuels.

Then came the financial meltdown and housing crash that helped bring on the Great Recession, as the dismantling of banking regulation (another product of the much-praised "bipartisan" spirit) enabled those exotic derivatives, credit-default swaps and other instruments certified by rating agencies like Standard and Poor's as the highest-grade investments which were in fact the quality of used toilet paper. Now, those same rating agencies see fit to "downgrade" the credit status of the United States itself.

For those who choose to look, these years have brought our society face to face with its real condition, and it's not pretty. We try to explore a few pieces of the picture in our tenth anniversary coverage in this issue of *Against the Current* from John O'Connor's overview of imperial strategy and Julie Hurwitz's survey of the assaults on democratic rights, to Richard Lichtman's assessment of the prophetic warnings of Chris Hedges, to the powerful poetry and reflections on language of Martin Espada.

From Blowback to Irrationality

It's tempting to review the long sordid history of the classic blowback that turned our anti-Soviet clients into the 9/11 attackers. OBL's al-Qaeda network was enlisted by the CIA, Saudi Arabia and the intelligence

service of Pakistan to wage jihad against the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

In the glory days of Ronald Reagan, mujahidin was a term of endearment for our proxy warriors in Central Asia, with little thought to the potential that these "anti-Communist freedom fighters" as well as our other loyal friends in Pakistan's military elites and fundamentalist Islamists might have their own agendas. But that's old news.

The Bush-Cheney gang shredded the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution, from extraterritorial prisons at Guantanamo and Bagram to "extraordinary rendition," torture and hundreds of cases of people (U.S. citizens and others) rounded up, tried and imprisoned with virtually no media coverage in most cases. But what's more sinister is that the bulk of these practices even if without the notorious practices of waterboarding and sexual torture that produced the big Bush-era public scandals have been continued, consolidated and routinized under the presidency of Barack Obama.

Secret, undeclared war on presidential orders, along with the destruction of due process, judicial openness and elementary norms of fairness in domestic law, are now all-but-permanent features of a national hyper-security state consumed with terrorist threats whether real or imaginary. After the Iraq debacle, we're probably done for a while with that kind of massive preemptive invasion and that's an excellent thing but we now live in the era of secret war with drones and Special Forces assassination teams that draw no attention except when their helicopters get shot down or large-scale civilian deaths are uncovered.

See <http://www.solidarity-us.org/atc/curre>

nt for this article and the others referred to within it.

There are other casualties. Despite the public's concern over global warming, this has been largely a lost decade at a critical stage of the battle to prevent catastrophic environmental degradation and climate change. The evidence pointing to the dangerous consequences of climate change, up to and including the potential for civilizational collapse, has piled up even while effective action is blocked by diversionary climate-change-denial mythologies claiming it's all a hoax designed to strip away American security and sovereignty. This summer's massive droughts and now horrifying famine in East Africa, to say nothing of weather extremes in the southern and western USA, like last year's peat fires in Russia, look to become regular features of coming years.

During this time the massive inequalities in U.S. society have grown enormously, unions have been almost gutted and industrial wages for new hires reduced by half, prison populations have exploded with convictions for nonviolent drug use, immigrant communities have come under a reign of terror of raids and mass deportation, and state and local budgets have crashed with ruinous effects on basic public services and education.

In short, this first decade of the 21st century has seen the United States enter into sharp social decline and a notable erosion of its seemingly invincible former imperial authority. The issues confronting U.S. capitalism arise from the deeper crisis of global capitalism. Yet some aspects of today's stunning dysfunction of American bourgeois politics reflect aftershocks of September 11, 2001. These include not only the unchecked ascendancy of corporate and banking greed, but also the growth of a weird

pseudo-populism on the right, combining billionaire funding with fanatical anti-tax and anti-regulation elements, which in the recent deficit-ceiling game of chicken seemed to partly escape the normative channels of ruling-class political discipline.

At a certain level of abstraction, the 9/11 attacks assaulted rationality itself — and in the immediate aftermath rationality sure enough lost.

We've mentioned Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld's promise of war without cost. This was most certainly not the first U.S. war launched on lies ("Remember the Maine" in 1898, the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, Saddam Hussein's WMDs and al-Qaeda connections in 2003), but it was the first time the government told the people they could have their flagwaving victory cake and lower taxes too. This myth that defied all reason, and caused more economic damage — to say nothing of lost lives — than the 9/11 attacks themselves, would have been all but impossible before 9/11.

How do we account for the imperial adventure in Iraq, which was not only criminal but also quite stupid, strengthening only the regime in Iran at the expense of Washington's regional clients? Was it an absurd, ideologically-driven neocon pipe dream to "transform the Middle East" with a series of improbable pro-imperialist regime changes — or did it reflect some thought-out strategic notions of how to consolidate U.S. domination of the post-Cold War world as outlined in John O'Connor's article in this issue?

The question has prompted considerable debate because both factors were in play. There was actually considerable resistance to George W. Bush's war drive among traditional pro-imperialist policy elites — but these objections were overridden by promises of a quick victory and the bonanza of conquering Iraq's oil riches, and also by the cultural pathology of post-9/11 America.

"Why do they hate us? Because of our freedoms," was a common mantra. This literally mindless formula wasn't

only a whitewash of the depredations that have made the United States rightfully the target of popular anger in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America — it became the pretext for assaults at home on precisely the democratic freedoms and civil liberties that the war was supposedly defending.

Another disturbing irrationalist sideshow was the mushroom growth of "9/11 truth" conspiracy theories, most of which were absurd on the basis of their mind-numbing complexity alone. The myths of an inside government job, of vanished airliners, of plots by Israeli intelligence and so forth had currency not only within rightwing subcultures but also regrettably in parts of the left. There was, and remains, good reason for skepticism over the received accounts of 9/11 — not about the undoubted fact that the attack was carried out by the religious-totalitarian fanatics of al-Qaeda, but about the full extent of what the Bush administration should have known in advance from its own and other intelligence services. It is unlikely, barring some new whistleblowing heroes, that the full background hidden in closed archives will be known for decades if ever.

Islamophobia and Other Paradoxes

A contradictory feature of the post-9/11 years has been the eruption of anti-Muslim bigotry in U.S. society at both the popular and intellectual (if it deserves such a title) levels. This phenomenon has certainly fuelled the growth of the religious and secular right wing and the wave of anti-immigrant repression, not only against Muslims. Yet the government, even under Bush-Cheney, had to disavow anti-Muslim sentiments given its close alliance with fundamentalist regimes (Saudi Arabia) which the United States deems to be moderate, friendly, etc.

Official Washington doctrine is that Islam is a religion of peace and that Muslim citizens in America are overwhelmingly peaceful, productive and loyal; the state's practice has

been ethnic and religious profiling and surveillance of Muslim mosques, communities and especially charities. Some of these, notably the Holy Land Foundation, have been closed and their officers — Ghassan Elashi, Shukri Abu-Baker, Mufid Abdulqader, Abdulrahman Odeh and Mohammed El-Mezain — given 15-65 year prison sentences on the retroactive and arbitrary application of post-9/11 laws about "material aid to terrorists," meaning hospitals in Gaza.

Vicious tracts, books, DVDs and religious broadcasts on Islam as "the terrorist religion" proliferate. One particularly sick argument that circulates in religious right broadcasts exactly echoes al-Qaeda's ranting: "Yes, most Muslims are peaceful, but truly faithful Muslims who obey the tenets of Islam are required by their religion to be terrorists." Yet the majority of the U.S. electorate voted in 2008 for Barack Hussein Obama, despite all the widely circulated disinformation calling him a secret Muslim, not a U.S.-born citizen, educated in an Indonesian madrassa, etc. — because they preferred his stated policy positions. (What president Obama has done in office is another topic.)

In this limited sense at least, rational thought prevailed when given a democratic chance. The rise and yet the rejection of Islamophobia is one among many paradoxes of post-9/11 America. This is a society in profound crisis and gripped by political reaction, but capable of producing, for example, the 2011 rebellion that shook Wisconsin. Its political elites govern on the basest appeals to fear and paranoia, but popular support for their military adventures is visibly withering. Its ruling class preaches the "necessity" of austerity through every media outlet, but the majority of people do not want to see social security and Medicare or public education gutted.

The working people of the United States, in short, have the normal and predictable concerns that are to be expected in any society. The political system, on the other hand, teeters toward self-destruction as a direct function of the smashing of the unions, the weakness of social movements and

the unchecked influence of corporate cash in elections and the mass media. Karl Marx's observation that the struggle for basic reforms (e.g. the eight-hour work day) is necessary to discipline capital's wildest extremes, and important for the functioning of the system itself, seems strikingly relevant.

As this issue of ATC was in preparation, the self-wounding of U.S. capitalism reached another level with the debt-ceiling "compromise" that slashes the budget at the worst

possible moment "on the eve of a double-dip recession" and promises even more savage cuts to come under the aegis of the "bipartisan Congressional commission."

In the absence of large-scale social resistance, the Obama-Boehner-Reid program "a rightwing Republican initiative in all but name" offers a longterm slide toward deeper U.S. decline, deeper class and racial inequality, and may eventually help produce a severe global depression. Alternatively there's the Tea Party

program, which would bring about these results right away.

Both the immediate and the lasting impacts of the 9/11 events and the imperial response were incisively foretold on that very day by a comrade, working at the time as a flight attendant out of Boston, who remarked when contacted by an alarmed editor of this journal: "We've entered a whole new world of shit." Indeed. That remark if anything may be even more true in September 2011 than it was on September 11, 2001.

LPP leader arrested for assisting climate change victims

17 September 2011, by Farooq Tariq

Baba Jan's "crime" was that he organised rallies and demonstrations against the police killings.

The LPP has issued an urgent appeal for messages to protest against Baba Jan's detention. The judge sent Baba Jan to prison on judicial remand. "He was dragged out of jail by the intelligence agencies", alleges the alert. The Labour Party Pakistan demonstrated today at Islamabad National Press Club and has planned more demonstrations across Pakistan.

Instead of arresting the police officers involved in the deaths of the two activists, police registered 16 charges against Baba Jan and others. They arrested at least 36 activists, among them 10 members of the Labour Party Gilgit Baltistan. Baba Jan escaped arrest and was sheltered by the community; after a month underground, he decided to surrender. Currently, six activists including Baba Jan remain under arrest, facing charges that many know to be fabricated.

Baba Jan joined the Labour Party Pakistan in 2004 and was elected to the LPP federal committee at its congress in Faisalabad in 2010. Previously one of the main leaders of the Peoples Youth, he had left the Pakistan Peoples Party (LPP) youth wing to join the LPP and organised the Progressive Youth Front (PYF) across Gilgit Baltistan, the northernmost province in Pakistan.

Baba Jan was among the first to raise the issue of the Atta Abad Lake and toured Pakistan in 2011 to organise rallies and demonstrations to highlight the plight of villagers who have lost their homes to this newly formed lake caused by deforestation, soil erosion and climate change.

He spoke to the national media in press conferences held in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad.

The corporate media finally took up the issue and some compensation was paid to the victims, however a new movement began to urge

compensation for all affected, as some had not been compensated. When the police opened fire on the July protest, killing two activists, Baba Jan and his comrades took up the case.

The Labour Party Pakistan appeals to all human rights organisations, political parties, trade unions, youth and peasant organisation raise their voices to save the life of Baba Jan.

For more information, please contact Ihsan Ali, president of the Gilgit Baltistan High Court Bar Association and member of LPP federal committee (03462524792), or Nisar Shah, general secretary Labour Party Pakistan (0300 2147960). Please send protest messages to Farooq Tariq at farooqtariq@hotmail.com.

September 15

You can hear the message of Baba Jan before he presented himself to the court at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TM9...>

The Palestinian UN Statehood Initiative: What's At Stake?

16 September 2011

On one level, this may look like a purely symbolic gesture by the feeble PA/PLO leadership of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). No one believes it will change the situation on the ground - the blockade of Gaza, the cancer of Israeli colonial settlements in the West Bank, the apartheid-annexation Wall, the imprisonment of thousands of Palestinian activists and hundreds of children, and for that matter the police-state behavior of the PA's own security forces. It certainly will not bring about the return of Palestinian refugees uprooted from their homes in successive rounds of Israeli ethnic cleansing.

Some Palestinian activists, for these reasons and because of their rightful distrust of the Palestinian Authority for its corruption and endless compromises, believe that taking the Palestinian statehood claim to the UN at this time is useless - or even worse, that the PA might surrender fundamental principles, e.g. giving away the Right of Return or "recognizing Israel as the Jewish State," in exchange for some empty promises that will be worthless in the end anyway. Such fears are not groundless, and the discussion among Palestinians about their road forward is an important one.

For the Palestinians' allies, however, and especially for activists in the United States, we believe the central issue is a different one. For any possible progress to occur toward justice and peace in the Palestine-Israel conflict, it is essential that the governments of Israel and the United States suffer a huge political defeat.

That is why the fight at the UN is important - and not about whether any of us may think that a "one-state" or "two-state solution" or whatever is possible or desirable at the moment.

What's happening is that the grotesque and obscene policies of successive U.S. governments, Republican and Democratic, are coming home to roost - and it's about time, too.

Since 1967, Washington has been on record for UN Resolution 242, calling for Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), and opposed to Israeli settlements which in any case are all illegal under international legal conventions on the obligations of occupying powers. Ever since the 1991-'93 Madrid and Oslo Accords, the United States has been on record for the two-state formula of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. And during this period and especially in recent years, the Palestinian Authority has desperately desired nothing more than to be a loyal U.S. client and has futilely banked on U.S. promises to deliver an independent state through the "peace process."

Instead, the United States has funded the Israeli occupation through its \$3 billion annual military aid package. It has vetoed every attempt at the UN to censure Israeli settlements. It has blocked cease-fire resolutions when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and again in 2006, until Israel signaled it was ready to stop fighting. And it has rigged the "peace process" in order to make sure that "the peace process" lasts forever but never produces peace. Meanwhile Israeli settlements, the expanded "metropolitan Jerusalem," the annexation Wall and apartheid roads have carved up the projected Palestinian state till only fragmented Bantustan-type population enclaves remain. The past twenty years are littered with so many lies and "road maps" to nowhere that even the experts lose count.

When the Palestinians held a democratic election in 2006 and chose a Hamas majority, the United States and Israel attempted a coup that was supposed to restore the "moderate" Abu Mazen to power. Ultimately, however, even the most conservative Palestinian nationalists have had enough American knives stuck in their backs. Disgusted with U.S. deceit, under pressure from their own population and pushed along by the power of the Arab Spring, this Palestinian leadership - far from a militant or revolutionary one - is disobeying the Obama administration's orders.

The pressure is intense. "The road to Palestinian statehood does not go through New York [the United Nations]," declares Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, who has done everything in her power to make sure the road goes nowhere at all. Instead, statehood can come "only through direct negotiations" under conditions dictated by the U.S. and Israeli masters. And what conditions! The United States Congress, Democrats and Republicans, with the smallest handful of exceptions, jumped up and down like so many trained chimpanzees when the Prime Minister of Israel openly denounced and disrespected president Obama's call for freezing (let alone dismantling) settlements. Now this same Congress threatens to cut off all U.S. aid to the PA for daring to seek UN endorsement of what is, on paper, official United States policy.

In a startling New York Times op-ed (September 12), a prominent former Saudi Arabian government official Turki al-Faisal wrote:

"The United States must support the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations this month or risk

losing the little credibility it has in the Arab world. If it does not, American influence will decline further, Israeli security will be undermined and Iran will be empowered... Moreover, Saudi Arabia would no longer be able to cooperate with America in the same way it historically has. With most of the Arab world in upheaval, the 'special relationship' between Saudi Arabia and the United States would increasingly be seen as toxic by the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims, who demand justice for the Palestinian people.

"Saudi leaders would be forced by domestic and regional pressures to adopt a far more independent and assertive foreign policy. Like our recent military support for Bahrain's monarchy, which America opposed,

Saudi Arabia would pursue other policies at odds with those of the United States, including opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq and refusing to open an embassy there despite American pressure to do so. The Saudi government might part ways with Washington in Afghanistan and Yemen as well."

To be sure, the threat of breaking the Saudi-U.S. alliance is not to be taken seriously. The point, however, is that the most reactionary (and indeed anti-Palestinian) of Arab regimes is fearful of the popular backlash over the United States' Israel-uber-alles policy. And that U.S. policy will only change if it becomes clear that Israel is

becoming an imperialist strategic liability rather than asset.

There's been a lot of talk in recent years about "civil society" bringing about meaningful change. Well, Palestinian civil society has been on record for the past six years calling for international BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) against Israeli apartheid and occupation institutions. It's time for U.S. "civil society" to stand up too. The United States and Israeli governments are afraid of their impending isolation, not because it's a military threat - which they know how to handle - but because it will be a sign of weakening U.S. authority in the Middle East and the world. Yes, it will be a serious defeat, and they have it coming and then some.

"Work, Freedom and Dignity"

16 September 2011

Even if he is very old, I am not sure that he does not understand - I think rather that he doesn't want to understand. This same discourse can also be heard here in Europe in relation to the immigrants at Lampedusa "What do they want here in Italy or in France, they have their freedom now!" Thus the bourgeoisie on both sides of the Mediterranean does not wish to understand that freedom without social justice is not freedom. That their democracy will always be abstract for the great majority of the population as long as social classes exist. Yet, since December 17 of last year, the first day of the demonstrations in Sidi Bouzid and until today, one slogan has always been on the lips of the demonstrators - "Work, Freedom, Dignity".

To understand the revolutionary process in Tunisia, we need to review all the social struggles underway. Every day since January, there are strikes, mobilisations, sit ins, re-appropriations of land. Every day, groups of individuals demonstrate before a ministry, a town hall, an

enterprise, on a village square or in the streets of a city... you could say that the demands and claims are being constructed to the extent that the victories and front lines become clear.

What is revolutionary in Tunisia today is not the fall of Ben Ali or a few individual liberties acquired, but rather the change in the relationship of forces. Today the bourgeoisie in Tunisia is afraid, it makes concessions and the more it does so the more the working class demands them. Categories of the Tunisian population which have never in the past 163 years, since the time of the general revolt against the Beys, questioned their place in the relations of production, have risen up and taken that which they deem just. Small farmers from the most remote steppes of Tunisia, garbage collectors, housewives, building workers, porters at wholesale markets, bank employees and even police officers, all are organising.

In the current context of capitalist crisis, workers in Tunisia have

obtained employment rights, wage increases, an end to the process of privatisation in the post and in water distribution, the re-employment of victimised trades unionists, the creation of collective agreements in the construction sector... the list of victories is long. However the struggles continue to accelerate. What is at stake in this process is not only the fact of having worked a job at no matter what price but having a job and the power to do it in dignified conditions of life. Indignation here is not just an abstract or metaphysical concept but the expression of social and trade union demands for a better distribution of wealth.

Impotent in the face of these demands, the regime and the bourgeoisie that it represents have displaced the debate towards the political-media sphere. Thus the television speaks only of elections, the constituent assembly, the international economic crisis (not even about the Tunisian economy), of alliances and political parties. Meanwhile, this regime accuses both

trades unionists and their UGTT federation, as well as the parties of the far left, of sabotaging the national economy and of irresponsibility. The last rumour launched by the regime through its press organs claimed that all the grocers and small artisans will lose their trades if the leftists take power. At the same time, these same press organs exaggerate the Islamic risk and hold up the threat of a religious fundamentalism which will plunge the country into the Middle Ages.

This Islamist question is very real, it is complex. Today, on the left, it polarises two camps. The first calls itself modernist and constructs its discourse on a struggle against fundamentalism at the expense of a challenge to current economic and social choices and positions itself in a social democratic framework. On the other side, the radical left - which does not deny this threat, but on the contrary fight it in the unions or in the universities - does not consider it as the priority of struggle today. For this left, the religious fact can only be fought by a better distribution of wealth, solid social guarantees and above all the purging of the forces of the old regime, whether in the police, the justice system, the administrations, media or culture. That is why the Ligue de la gauche ouvrière believes firmly in trade union organisation and the multiplication of workers' and precarious employee fronts in the private, public, artistic or economic sectors.

The Tunisian regime today as yesterday cannot exist and repress without the backing and the cooperation of the Western powers. I would like to touch on two essential aspects of north-south relations here.

- First, economic exchanges. Three days after the departure of Ben Ali, Benetton stated that it would close its factories in Tunisia. Other big groups known for their incestuous links with the Trabelsi or Ben Ali clan then followed. It is not the Tunisian bourgeoisie which will miss Benetton but the three thousand people employed in its factories in the Sahel and the other workers who they try to scare so that they will continue to accept the same working conditions as under the dictatorship. For in recent years numerous multinationals have established themselves in Tunisia thanks to the complicity of the regime - complicity in the obtaining of special tax arrangements, privileged terrains, derogation from collective work agreements, and a pliable police force capable of repressing any mobilisation.

That is what is called globalisation! and this globalisation has only been possible with the complicity of international governments, notably the French and Italian ones. Indeed, the statements of French and Italian policies in the last twenty years tell us enough. And even today when the Italian foreign minister for example practices blackmail in blocking the investment projects underway, even projects in the phase of finalisation. It is like punishing a naughty pupil.

- But relations between the two banks of the Mediterranean do not stop with exchanges of goods or economic relations. There is a tool that global capital has always used to enslave, dominate, colonise weaker countries, that of debt. This odious debt that Tunisia has paid from the time of the Beys until today is a useful tool. If France stole a march on Italy in 1881 in occupying Tunisia, it was because the Bey was more indebted to the French banks than the Italian ones. If

France cancelled a part of the Tunisian debt after independence, it is because it had again lent it money so as to allow the young Tunisian republic to buy out the lands that had been occupied and exploited during its protectorate.

This same debt that today the Tunisian government rushes to pay, to the point even of making it a question of national honour, is none other than that of a global capitalism, which the Bretton Woods institutions have erected as a model of globalised capitalist development, even when they precisely know that those with whom they dealt were an anti-democratic and anti-human mafia.

Our young organisation is today at the heart of the campaign against the payment of the debt and if we are here with you ten years after Genoa, it is to confirm the necessity of a common front against this capital and its bourgeois and retrograde governments. The revolutionary processes that we have seen for some months around the Mediterranean can only be finished by an effort of all, whether in the north or the south. It comes down to us today more than ever to say, to shout, to explain that "the revolution is possible". And for those who tell us today that it is finished and that we cannot win, a single response: "out of the way!".

(The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers' Left League) is a Tunisian anti-capitalist organisation formed in the course of the revolution. This is a statement made by a representative of the organisation at a public meeting organised by the Italian anti-capitalist organisation Sinistra critica on July 22, 2011 in Genoa to mark the 10th anniversary of the mobilisation against the G8 summit in that city in 2001).

Mass strikes called in Britain

15 September 2011, by Fred Leplat

November 30 will mark a significant stepping up of the resistance in the war against the Tory attacks on the welfare state and instead to make the rich pay for the crisis - a great step forward when the reaction of the leaders of the larger unions over several decades has normally been to try to do deals rather than organise to resist attacks on jobs and services

The pension reforms proposed by the Tory government will force workers to pay more, work longer and receive a smaller pension. Even though they tell us that "we're all in it together", the Tories have allowed the gap between the pensions of bosses and workers to widen. The pension of Stephen Hester, director of the Royal Bank of Scotland is £420,000 while the average public sector pension is £6,500. RBS was "re-nationalised" three years ago to prevent it from collapsing.

This year Hester received a £7.7million pay package which included £4.5million potential shares windfall on top of his £2million annual bonus and £1.2million salary. With the government's drastic reduction in public spending to pay plug the deficit hole created by the

likes of Hester, figures out show a dramatic rise in unemployment with a total now over 2.5million, or 8%, with those under 25 hardest hit.

These are some of the reasons why there is likely to be overwhelming support amongst trade union members for strike action - and widespread public support as well.

At the same time, the political and social crises roll on with the unending revelations about News International and with the riots in August. The outlook for the ruling class is bleak as they have no solution, and the economies are teetering on the edge of a recession.

We can expect more appeals that "we are all in it together" and that there is no alternative to a radical programme of austerity. But there is an alternative. It is to organise for trade union action and campaigns across society to defend our public services and jobs, and to tax the rich and corporations to pay for the crisis. We are not responsible for the debt and we should not have to pay for it.

The attacks are the same in every country in Europe: pension reforms,

unemployment, cuts and privatisation in public services, slashing living standards by freezing or cutting pay, and removing welfare benefits. As the crisis is international, so must be the response of all those who refuse to make the working class and society pay for this crisis.

That's why the Europe Against Austerity conference in London on 1st October is so important. It will be the first event since the start of the crisis in 2008 where all those who want to oppose the attacks will meet. The conference will not only issue a declaration against the austerity programmes but will discuss how to organise a movement of resistance across Europe.

The Coalition of Resistance is hosting this conference jointly with the other organisations and individuals sponsoring the event. These include the European Left Party, NPA, Attac, CADTM, Union Syndicale Solidaires, Ken Loach, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Len McCluskey Unite, and Bob Crow RMT. For details of the conference and registration, go to <http://www.europeagainstausterity.org/>

Women of Corn

15 September 2011, by Esther Vivas

For centuries, rural women have been responsible for domestic chores, care of people, feeding of families, and cultivation and marketing of surplus from their gardens, and have borne this load of reproductive, productive and community work in a private and invisible domain. In contrast, the principal economic transactions of agriculture, the trading of livestock and bulk buying and selling of cereals in the market, have been carried out by men... occupying the public rural domain.

This division of roles assigns to women the upkeep of home, of health, of education and of families and gives

men the management of land and machinery and most significantly the "know-how", thus perpetuating the roles allotted as masculine and feminine which for centuries and even today persist in our societies.

Nonetheless, in many regions of the Global South, in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia, there exists an evident "feminisation" of paid agricultural work. Between 1994 and 2000, women occupied 83% of new employment created in the sector of non-traditional agricultural export. But this tendency includes a marked division of gender; on the plantations, women perform the

unskilled tasks such as collection and packaging, while men carry out the harvesting and planting.

This incorporation of women into the paid workplace entails a double burden for women, who continue to carry out the care of their families whilst working to obtain an income from an employment which for the most part is precarious. They can expect worse working conditions than their male counterparts and lower pay for the same tasks, therefore having to work longer to earn the same.

Another difficulty is access to land. In several countries of the South, laws

deny women this right, and in those that legally concede tenure, tradition and custom impede disposition to them. However, this problem not only occurs in the Global South. In Europe, many women farmers do not have their entitlements recognised and despite working on the land like their male peers, farm ownership and payment of social security, etc is usually commanded by men. Consequently, women, on retirement, cannot count on any pension, nor have claim to assistance or to payments, etc

The degradation of farmland in these Southern countries and the increase in migration to the cities has provoked a process of agricultural disintegration. Women are an essential component of this national and international migration, engendering a disruption and abandonment of families, land, and processes of production whilst increasing the family and community burden of the women who remain. In Europe, the United States, Canada... migrant women end up taking the jobs

that years back were filled by locals, reproducing a cycle of oppression, burden and "invisibilisation" of care, whilst externalising its social and economic costs to the communities of origin of the migrant women.

The incapacity to resolve the current crisis of caretaking in western countries, the combined result of massive incorporation of women into the labour market, the aging of the population, and the non-existent response from the state to these needs, leads to the massive importation of female labour into domestic work and paid care, from the countries of the Global South.

In opposition to this intensive and unsustainable neoliberal agricultural model which has demonstrated a complete inability to satisfy dietary needs of people and a complete disrespect for Nature, and which is especially adverse to women, arises the alternative paradigm of food

sovereignty. This deals with the recuperation of our right to determine the what, the how and the source of what we eat; that the land, the water and the seeds are in the hands of small farmers (male and female); and the fight against the monopoly of agrifoods.

And it is requisite that this food sovereignty is profoundly feminist and internationalist, and that its accomplishment will only be possible from full equality between men and women and free access to the means of food production, distribution and consumption, along with solidarity among peoples, far from the chauvinistic cries of "ours first."

We must reclaim the role of women farmers in food and agricultural production, and recognise the part played by the "women of corn", those that work the land. To make visible the invisible. And to promote alliances between rural and urban women, from the North and the South. To globalise a resistance... feminine.

"The events are essentially a source of hope"

14 September 2011, by Gilbert Achcar

Gilbert Achcar: For me, the events are essentially a source of hope. I certainly have worries about the evolution and the future of the movement but the fact that such a revolutionary shockwave is sweeping the region is something very positive. Those who express fear of what is going on are implicitly those who believe that the stability offered by the despotic governments could be regarded as the lesser evil compared to potential scenarios they have in mind, like a Islamic takeover. Such views are not only ethnocentric or antidemocratic but also completely wrong in their assessment because the basic reason for the development of Islamic fundamentalist opposition movements is precisely the existence of such despotic regimes. In fact, most of these regimes have been sponsored by Western countries, thus

discrediting the very idea of democracy or secularism as advocated in the West. As long as there are such regimes there will also be those kinds of fundamentalist opposition. One should rather take into consideration the fact that the populations of these countries are fed up with despotism, and that they badly need to get rid of it like every other population in the world. What was deemed good for Eastern Europe, for instance, also applies to Arab countries.

Höller: From a distant or more "outsider" kind of perspective, what has been striking is the vast difference among countries: While some have witnessed on-going, almost "unending" waves of upheaval (like in Egypt) others have stayed comparatively calm. What in your opinion are the main

criteria for this, for countries very prone to potential uprisings, while others are almost immune, or maybe too repressive for such scenarios to develop?

Achcar: There is hardly any country in the region that is immune to such a scenario, from Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and even Oman and Bahrain. Maybe the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are the only countries that have not been affected, but these are extremely artificial states, where the holders of citizenship actually form a small minority"something like fifteen or twenty percent of the population. As for most other countries, the extent and shape of the protest movement depend on the degree of repression, the point to which the government is hated or not,

how despotic it is, if at all. The uprising started in Tunisia where there was quite a despotic government, and spread to countries like Egypt, Libya and Yemen where the regime is abhorred by vast sections of the population. In most other countries in the region, with the major exception of the Saudi kingdom, there is less a problem of harsh despotic regimes but more a demand for political reform, or mainly for social demands as is the case in Iraq. This said, the very uneven development of the movement is a natural result of the unevenness of the region. A lot of countries share a lot of problems and features when it comes to lack of development, social equality, or social justice. But when it comes to patterns of political power there are of course vast differences.

Höller: You recently stated in an article that “first and above all, it’s a democratic uprising.”* From the standpoint of a more fully-fledged radical democracy it would seem that potentially all significant social groups have to join in and find a new alliance, or equilibrium of power in order to effectuate a thorough democratic makeover. Do you see something like this at work for instance in Egypt, as opposed to Libya or Syria, or does this concept not apply at all?

Achcar: Well, we are not yet at a point where we could contemplate radical democracy—depending, of course, on what you put behind this label. When I say that it is a “democratic revolution” I mean that the current movement is much closer to the 19th century “spring of the peoples” (1848), which swept Europe from Paris to Vienna, than to the revolutionary shockwave of 1918, which came in the wake of the Russian revolution and was a class-based revolt led by radical left forces with a perspective of socialist change. That is not what is happening in the Arab world, where the process is more basic than that and involves a very broad coalition—the more despotic the regime, the broader the opposition facing it. Once the first step has been achieved, getting rid of the most prominent representatives of despotism and corruption, the next step is to define in positive terms what

kind of alternative political regime is to follow. That is where splits occur within the broader opposition, quite normally. The vanguard of the movement have been people who are dedicated to getting a modern democratic society and respective institutions—mostly young liberal (in the political, not economic sense) democrats, very much like the youth of 1848. But initially, everywhere where there was a despotic regime you also encounter groups adhering to religious fundamentalist perspectives. Once the dictators are gone, there occurs a divorce between the Islamic movement and the Leftist coalition, a divorce that is already becoming very clear in Egypt and Tunisia.

Höller: Some of the uprisings, at least at the very early stage, seemed to be very much dominated by (as you say) a liberal democratic youth. To what extent has this predominance overshadowed a more class-based, or working-class-related perspective? Or in other words: Do you see a more balanced, or a more unequal relation of forces at work in the current movement?

Achcar: The best way to address this is to look at the facts. The two countries where the uprisings have been most successful so far, viz. Tunisia and Egypt—and we have to keep in mind that it is still very much an ongoing process even there—are actually the countries where the workers’ movement joined the fray. The workers have been very instrumental in toppling the existing rulers in both countries. But such a class-based movement is lacking in countries like Libya, Yemen, or Syria where there has been no workers’ strikes until now, whereas the strikes were a decisive factor in toppling Mubarak for instance. This is not to say that the workers’ movement in Tunisia or Egypt is inspired by a perspective of social change in the sense of superseding capitalism. These are not movements with a radical anti-capitalist character—which is why we are not in a kind of post-World-War-I situation. These are rather workers who are seizing the opportunity of the current upheaval to push forward their own demands for social change and

reform. But this also shows how decisive the worker’s movement can be in the democratic struggle itself. After all, this is a historical pattern if you look for instance at the so-called “cradle of democracy” in Britain where a major role was played by the workers’ Chartist movement in the 19th century in pushing towards universal suffrage (although it was only male actually), against the right to vote based on wealth as it had existed theretofore. This was very instrumental for the overall democratization process.

Höller: The New York Times recently wrote: “In an arc of revolts and revolution, the idea of a broader citizenship is being tested as the enforced silence of repression gives way to the cacophony of diversity.”* Would you agree with that kind of assessment and if yes, what in your mind would be the necessary steps to transform this “cacophony of diversity” into a roughly democratic system?

Achcar: Well, “cacophony of diversity” is just another word for democratic pluralism. When it comes to political regimes, I prefer a cacophony over a symphony with an authoritarian conductor. Some people emphasize the fact that there is no leading force in these movements, which in a sense is more reassuring than having a leading party with an eye to monopolizing power. This said, I do not think that there is a cacophony in the sense of chaos but rather that at each stage of the struggle you have different alliances. You do not have the same bloc of forces from A to Z in such complex processes. When it comes to overthrowing the despot you can have a very broad alliance including religious fundamentalist forces. But when it comes to defining the new institutions that you want to replace him with the alliance naturally gets much narrower. Those fighting for democracy can agree on this goal and act together without getting into ideological debates on issues like socialism. This is actually not what is happening. People are mainly concerned with deepening the democratic change and making sure that what started as a revolutionary

process is not aborted but gets to the end of a democratic transformation.

Höller: A lot of responses from the West seem to be governed either by very romanticized revolutionary projections (like a new Mecca of a coming world-revolution) or, on the other extreme, by very misleading Orientalist or Islamophobic fears. To what extent is it possible to escape such projections, especially from the perspective of an outside observer?

Achcar: Well, the fact is that when it comes to democratic aspirations or political freedom, Arabs or other Muslims are not different from Chinese or Latin American or Eastern European peoples. Orientalism in the pejorative sense belongs to a line of thought that believes that people are fundamentally shaped by different cultures, that there is a different cultural essence to different parts of the world and, therefore, different political needs. I reject such views and strongly believe that democracy and freedom are very much universal ideas, and I do not fear the term universal at all in this context. After all, if one looked at Europe in the 18th century one could have said that the culture there was such that European peoples needed absolutist regimes, which is what they had before the monarchies start crumbling at the end of that century and during the next. Similarly, there have been theories about how Eastern European peoples, from Prussia to Russia, were addicted to totalitarianism, and yet Stalinism after 1989 crumbled in an amazingly rapid way and gave way to more or less democratic regimes. If it is not quite yet the case in a country like Russia, it is not a matter of culture but of social-economic and political conditions including the country's size and uneven development. The relative weakness of civil society there is also related to the fact that this is the country where the experience of totalitarianism has been the longest of all. The other point is that those who say that the uprisings are opening up to Islamic fundamentalism are forgetting the fact that the worst regime (when it comes to fundamentalism as well as political and social despotism) in the whole

region is the Saudi kingdom. But this is the country most courted by all Western states. The Saudi kingdom, a hugely rich state led by the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist institution, which is actually a U.S. protectorate, is the main source of the spread of fundamentalism in the Muslim world. For at least two decades, the United States in alliance with the Saudi kingdom has been using Islamic fundamentalism against the Left—against left-wing nationalism, against communism and so on. Western Islamophobia is primarily a fear of anti-Western Islamic currents. It is a fear for Western interests and not a fear for the people of the region. Anyone caring for the people in the region would first of all be very happy that the dictatorships are finally getting overthrown, that it is possible now to stage demonstrations and so on. And secondly, they would understand that the fact that a government is collaborating with Western states does not mean that it is enlightened. The Saudi kingdom is the best proof of this.

Höller: One particular fear that is repeatedly expressed are the consequences that the upheaval might have for the security of the state of Israel. At the same time, hopes are emerging (e.g. with the recent opening of Egyptian borders to Gaza) that the living conditions of Palestinians might now significantly improve. What, in your opinion, will be the most relevant consequences for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Achcar: Israel is exactly one of those states that reflect those Western attitudes fearing democracy on the Arab side. It has shown many signs of great anxiety at the democratic uprisings in the region. Here you have the spectacle of a state that is accustomed to boasting that it is “the only democracy in the Middle East,” and that is now struck with anxiety because there are democratic upheavals all around it. Israel as well as the United States know perfectly well that they cannot have friends in the region except despots. If a government is in any way to reflect popular aspirations, it will need to be hostile to Israel and the U.S.—not

because the people are fanatics or racists, but because of what they are suffering at the hands of Israel and the U.S. who both occupy Arab territories. The current upheaval raises at least the hope that Israel will finally realize that it cannot continue on the road of arrogance and intransigence, which is very much epitomized by the Netanyahu government. This kind of attitude creates a lot of hatred because it is itself based on deep contempt. Without a change in the Israeli attitude there will never be peace in the region. If you look at the “Palestine Papers,” which were recently published through Al-Jazeera,* you will see that the Palestinian leadership went as far as possible and made every single concession the Israelis wanted it to, but did not get anything in return. Basically, this “Machtpolitik”, which Israel displays and which is purely based on force, can only lead to disaster in the long run, for the population of Israel as well as for its neighbors.

Höller: Do you expect a new boost of anti-Zionism taking hold now?

Achcar: You can hardly imagine a new boost because the hostility to Israeli policies is already very high. It is boosted by Israel's behavior and not by anything else. Now there is a process of reconciliation and unification of the Palestinians, but they are still committed to pursuing a peaceful settlement. The point is that despite all that Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority conceded, it did not get anything in return.

Höller: U.S. foreign policy has shown to be very inconclusive and insecure in dealing with the recent uprisings. Are we maybe entering a historical phase that might point towards the end of a strong U.S. influence in the region? Or do you think that the greater geopolitical map will largely stay the same in the near future?

Achcar: We are definitely witnessing a major upheaval in geopolitical terms. Until now, the U.S. used to exert hegemony over the region through a despotic alliance. What we are seeing now is a surge and

irruption of the people on the political field, and the U.S. is faced with a situation where it has to take this popular factor into consideration. They have now to build alliances with conservative forces enjoying a genuine popular influence, which is why they are now striking a deal with the Muslim Brotherhood whom they consider to be a relatively moderate force among Islamic fundamentalism. This can be seen in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood is collaborating with the military. The U.S. is trying to develop a plan B for the region, with the Muslim Brotherhood as a key player; they also bring in their Turkish allies but the lynchpin of their strategy remains the Gulf monarchies and their Gulf Cooperation Council*. After all, that is where the oil is, which makes this region so important for the U.S. Otherwise they would not give a damn about it.

Höller: To come to a different aspect of the recent upheaval: A lot has been made of the alleged role of new media and especially social media—Facebook, Twitter, and other communication tools—in organizing the uprisings. How relevant or realistic are such claims from a political theorist's point of view? How would you describe the overall status of technological modernization with respect to the more political and social modernization processes that are at stake now?

Achcar: We have to look at such technological means for what they are.

They are means and instruments but they do not create movements. Protest movements have always existed in modern times regardless of whether you only had the very basic printing press in the 18th century, or the Internet like today. People have always used the available technology to organize and move. One important dimension, though, is the network character of organization, which is very much facilitated by the network nature of new media technology. This allows a more horizontal type of organization and therefore, facilitates a movement without recognizable leaders. In most democratic uprisings nowadays, you find this same tendency towards new and more flexible forms of organization to emerge in the struggle. With tools such as Facebook, you can do it straightaway over a whole country if not a whole set of countries whereas in the past, it would start in one city, then every other city would have to follow suit, and so on; or there was one leading party that already had an organization everywhere. So the new technology facilitated a lot this type of horizontal organizing but it did not create the movement. In that sense, there was no "Facebook revolution" indeed.

Höller: Six years ago, in 2005, you wrote about the Arab spring—“late and cold” were the qualifications you used back then.* It has taken quite a while for this metaphorical spring to materialize, or become “warmer.” What, in your opinion, will be the rough timeframe for the current spring to evolve into a more full-

blown summer?

Achcar: When I used the spring metaphor in that article it was ironic. In fact, that was what the media and the Bush administration wanted people to believe to be happening in 2005 as a result of the occupation of Iraq and the pressures they exerted on Egypt and the Saudi kingdom for some cosmetic changes. There were some changes indeed but it certainly was not a “spring of the peoples.” Today, the spring metaphor is much more justified, even though the “spring of the peoples” in the 19th century ended badly. Its impact, however, could not be eradicated. The legacy remained and ultimately, the democratic changes happened. Currently, I think that there is more ground for hope because in the 19th century the dominant condition of the world was much more despotic altogether than it is nowadays. The Arab world is more of an exception in our present world, but the people have started to overcome their fear, which was the best tool of despotism. Whatever happens in the short run and whatever is the outcome of elections in different countries, there is now a real possibility to build a strong democratic movement. Therefore, there are good reasons for hope and measured optimism without falling into the illusion that there will be no major obstacles or difficulties ahead. What has already been achieved is absolutely impressive.

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New party founded

12 September 2011, by Héctor Márquez

This initiative had been announced in October 2010 by Martín Esparza, general secretary of the Mexican Electricians' Trade Union (SME), during a meeting which attracted more than 60,000 people to the Aztec

Stadium in Mexico City.

Behind this initiative lay the growing awareness inside the SME, which faces governmental opposition, and the catastrophic situation of the

country, the struggle at the political level had become more necessary than ever. The Calderón government has done everything to show that it is the sworn enemy of all workers, and in the exclusive service of the oligarchy and

imperialism. In this sense, the OPT clearly refers to the struggle for the conquest of political power and the necessity of overthrowing the political class, representative of the oligarchy, currently at the head of the country. It should be noted that the participation of the OPT in elections did not appear among its priorities, and that it does not intend to be the prisoner of any institutional calendar.

The appeal of the SME has been heard by other worker, peasant, indigenous, popular and political organisations and represents a historic step in the conquest of the political independence of the workers. Organisations identifying with socialism have always existed in Mexico, but no party has ever won to its ranks the bulk of workers while defending a programme of class struggle. For historic reasons, the trade union organisations have always been linked, in a corporatist manner, with the party-state (the Institutional Revolutionary Party) which has governed the country for 70 years. The conquest of the most elementary trade union freedoms is far from being realised, as shown by the governmental hostility to the SME.

National liberation

or Socialism?

In recent months significant debates have taken place and have allowed the sketching of the contours of the new OPT. If the documents adopted explicitly mention the need to struggle for a radical transformation of society, designating the current economic and political model as being responsible for the current catastrophe and adopting an anti-capitalist tone, socialism, although mentioned, appears as a distant horizon to be reached, without a real strategic vision or elements of transition.

The emphasis of the programme seems rather focused on national liberation and the struggle against imperialism, which, in the Mexican tradition, means above all a nationalist and distributive orientation. It should also be noted that internationalism plays a strong role in the documents of the organisation and that the latter explicitly refer to the revolutionary processes underway in the Arab world and the rebellions in Europe. Certain organisational aspects which have given rise to important debates, like the right to organise tendencies inside the organisation, as well as the tactic

to adopt for the electoral process of 2012, will be debated during the next congress of the organisation which will take place in March of next year.

Beyond the congress

Although the congress undeniably represented a significant success in assembling more than a thousand delegates from 22 states, the OPT must face a situation of ever more uncontrollable violence and a still more significant presence of US military personnel. The OPT will launch its first recruitment campaign in a few days, in a context of sharpened political and social crisis and faced with an inept regime, the birth of this new force represents a significant step in the sense of the organisation of the oppressed. Together with the Movement for National Regeneration (MORENA) of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the OPT can contribute to an acceleration of confrontation with the regime, which appears inevitable in the medium term, as is happening at the same time in many places around the globe.

September 19 "Goodbye Nuclear Power Plant" Rally in Tokyo

12 September 2011, by Kenji Kunitomi

People of younger generation, who have not been involved in political or social movements until recently, are participating demonstrations and raising their voices against nuclear power plants. On June 11, three months after the earthquake, roughly 70,000 people participated in the antinuke rallies and street demonstrations in more than 140 places nationwide, including 20,000 people in Tokyo.

From September 11 to September 19,

six months after the earthquake, a series of actions are planned all over the country as "Denuclearization Action Week". The culmination of this campaign is the September-19 50,000-participants rally of "Goodbye Nuclear Power Plant". Kenzaburo Oe, a prominent Nobel-Prize-winner novelist, is one of the promoters of this rally. Zenroren (National Confederation of Trade Unions), which is closely linked with the Communist Party, is to join the rally in line with trade unions under the influence of the Social

Democratic Party as well as Zenrokyo (National Trade Union Council) which includes independent leftist unions. Various civic movements and NGOs as well as many leftist groups will also join the September-19 rally. Recent polls show that more than 70% of the Japanese people are for stopping or reducing nuclear power plants and shifting to renewable energies. The participation of the Communist Party seems to reflect the broader popular pressure. The party recently modified its nuclear policy and began to

demand the immediate withdrawal from nuclear power.

The ruling Democratic Party of Japan has its political credibility severely damaged by betraying its promise to oppose the building of a new U.S. base in Okinawa, failing to effectively respond to the financial crisis, demonstrating its inability to provide effective supports for sufferers of the earthquake/tsunami, which left more than 20,000 people dead or missing, and causing distrust and confusion due its lack of effective responses to the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Thus, its two prime ministers were forced to resign within only two years after coming to power,

Yoshihiko Noda , who was appointed as a new Prime Minister on September 2, insists on early resumption of the operation of the nuclear power plants which are now under periodic inspection and promotion of the export of nuclear power plants, the neo-liberal strategy of substantial tax increase and reduction of social spending on the pretext of "reconstruction" and overcoming of the fiscal crisis, as well as the strengthening of US-Japan "security" alliance to counter "China's military expansion strategy". This set of policies is strongly supported by the Japan Business Federation and big businesses.

The September-19 rally will be focused on forcing the government to abandon the plans for construction of new nuclear powers and renounce the resumption of the operation of the nuclear power plants which are now under periodic inspection, thus making it possible to stop all nuclear power plants promptly. Success of the "Denuclearization Action Week" would have a tremendous implication for the workers' and citizens' movements which are eager to resist the big businesses' policies to cling to the nuclear power generation and prop the nuclear industry as a strategic export sector for a renewed economic growth.

In the depths of a Chilean winter: the promises of a social and political spring

9 September 2011, by Pierre Mouterde

Chile as a country has always been a barometer, a kind of social and political laboratory that enables us to see more clearly what is happening elsewhere, on a world scale. That was the case in the 1960s and 70s, with the Popular Unity of Salvador Allende, an expression of that "hour of the furnaces" which had, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, set the continent ablaze with its aspirations for social change. It was in the 1970s and 80s, with the dictatorship of national security of General Pinochet, a symbol of that ferocious repression and of the imposition by force of a neoliberal economic model which would soon become standard all over the world. It was also an example in the 1990s and the 2000 decade, with the return to democracy, but to a "restricted democracy", with the armed forces continuing to rule behind the throne. And perhaps it is an example today with this strike which has such absolutely unprecedented features?

A strike without precedent

Because it is not only a question of a large-scale student strike, involving secondary school pupils as well as university students. It is a movement which has managed, as the weeks passed, to win the support, not only of teachers' unions and parents' associations, but also of broad sectors of civil society. As if the students had been able to make it understood that their cause was everyone's cause. For this reason the movement snowballed, overcoming all the obstacles that were placed in its way: since April 28, 2011, date of the first important student demonstration (8,000 people) until the general strike of today, via the marches of June 30 (300,000) and August 9 (500,000), there have been a multitude of demonstrations, occupations, hunger strikes, huge rallies. Furthermore, all this led to the revival of a series of other social demands which had remained unanswered: those of the Mapuches in

the south, of the ecologists in connection with the HidroAysen project in Patagonia, and finally those of the trade union movement, in particular the aspirations for a better redistribution of social wealth.

High stakes

It should be said that important issues were at stake: in Chile, under the regime of General Pinochet, education was hit head-on by the steamroller of the logic of neoliberalism, without the various successive democratic governments (including that of Michele Bachelet) changing anything substantial. Education thus became a "commodity", a pure question of money and business, a source of enticing profits for the banks and the profit-hungry contractors. Whereas until 1973, Chilean public education was known for its quality and its free character, the economic principles preached by the Chicago boys and the dictatorship literally, as recalled by Victor de la Fuente of *Le Monde*

Diplomatique, turned things upside down: "Private schools, which were rare in 1973, now cater for 60 per cent of pupils in primary and secondary education. Less than 25 per cent of the education system is financed by the state and school budgets depend, on average, on registration fees for 75 per cent of their income. Moreover, the Chilean state devotes only 4.4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education, much less than the 7 per cent recommended by UNESCO". In addition, the level of student debt has taken on considerable proportions. In a country where, according to the statistics of the Department of Economy of the University of Chile, the minimum wage is the equivalent of less than 340 Canadian dollars [5] and the average wage is the equivalent of approximately 1,000 Canadian dollars, young people spend on average the equivalent of between 300 and 800 Canadian dollars a month to follow a university course. Consequently, "70 per cent of students are in debt, and 65 per cent of the poorest among them stop their studies for financial reasons".

A democratic break

But what is most remarkable goes well beyond all these impressive figures. It is the way in which the students are conducting their struggle against the government of President Piñera. Even though everyone knows that their leaders - including the very charismatic Camilla Vallejos, president of the Confech student union - are members of left-wing parties, they have been able to organize their movement on a broad, democratic and non-partisan basis, and to give it at the same time an absolutely new course, demanding, far from any sectoral concerns, nothing less than "the end of profit in education" and "a free and quality education" conceived of as a genuine "public service", thus pointing the finger not only at the whole of the neoliberal model of which Chile was made the champion, but also at the vast majority of the Chilean political world which has in recent years made itself the more or less acknowledged accomplice of neoliberalism. The result has been that these structural demands have ended up by attracting growing support from public opinion (80 per cent of the population support their demands), and on the other hand putting the government (representing the hard Right of the past) on the defensive, finding itself with less than 20 per cent of support in recent opinion polls. As if galvanised by the

vivifying audacity of the students, the whole of society has started to understand all the perverse and profoundly unequal aspects of this model inherited from the dictatorship, thus liberating democratic aspirations and growing hopes of change. This explains why the threats and repressive acts which President Piñera seems at present to rely on have so little effect. It is also why the ideas of a plebiscitary referendum (on the student proposals) and even of a Constituent Assembly are beginning to circulate more and more widely, like a call for a real "democratic break". And even if it is quite difficult today to make any prediction as to what will happen in the future, what we can say without fear of contradiction is that Chile is discovering in its own way - beyond all the terrors bequeathed by the dictatorship - that for it too "another world is possible". At the moment of the Arab Spring, of the revolt of the European "indignant ones" and of the turbulences that we can, ourselves, experience on the provincial political scene, should that not invite us to think about what, here, a real Québécois autumn might be like?

This article was first published, in French, on the website of Gauche Socialiste, the Quebec section of the Fourth International. [La Gauche](#).

Time for Israeli Social Protest to Make Political Choices, End Illusion of National Unity

8 September 2011, by Michel Warschawski

Israel looked as an island of stability in a sea of unrest and revolutions, and its leaders didn't hesitate for one minute to sell this stability to the Western governments: "To defend your interests in the area, you cannot trust even the toughest dictatorships that you are supporting with money and military equipment; sooner or

later, popular movements might take over and jeopardize everything you have invested in these allies" said in substance the Israeli leaders to their Western counterparts. "The State of Israel is your only stable and trustworthy ally!"

Yet a few months later "Israeli

stability" was overtaken by the biggest popular mobilization the country has ever known. According to the police, 350,000 women and men demonstrated in the main cities of Israel on the night of Saturday August, 6. More than 10% of the entire Israeli adult population! The 6 August demonstration was, until now, the

highlight of a month long mobilization, but definitively not its end.

Housing - a burning issue

The movement started around a single issue: housing. After several decades in which an Israeli couple was able to access decent housing thanks to state-subsidized loans, the new neo-liberal economy makes it almost impossible. A young couple, in which both partners are earning a decent salary, cannot anymore buy an apartment. The cutting of state subsidies and cheap loans, privatization of lands and dismantling of the system of public housing make it almost impossible for a young couple to access a flat. This policy hits not only the poor, but most of the middle class too.

And indeed, the present movement started as a movement of the middle class. Only recently did the most weakened layers of society join the movement, in the main cities as well as in the so-call periphery. Let's remember that according to the Israeli National Insurance, 30% of Israeli children live under the poverty line, i.e. slightly less than one quarter of Israelis are considered to be poor... in a country which is wealthier than the European Union average.

Challenging neo-liberal choice

Very soon, however, the demands around housing developed into an overall challenge of the neo-liberal system as such.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been one of the world's most aggressive leaders in implementing neo-liberal economy; when he served as Finance Minister (1998-1999), market economy was his religion, private enterprise and "free" competition his holy Bible. And indeed, in few countries was the process of privatization and dismantling of public services and properties so brutal and complete. Almost nothing remains from the old welfare (some would say even

socialist) state and even the education system is gradually being privatized.

The return of Netanyahu to the prime minister's office signaled a new offensive but this time, instead of frontally attacking the poor and middle classes, Netanyahu choose another method: To give to the rich, especially by dramatically reducing income taxes for enterprises and high revenues. With Netanyahu the money-power connection went out in the open in a truly provocative way, and the personal friendship between Netanyahu, his ministers and senior officials, on the one hand, and the "tycoons" - local name for the oligarchs - on the other, are almost every day on the front-page of the local media

By shouting "social justice" and "against privatizations - welfare state!" the demonstrators are challenging the very heart of Netanyahu's economic and social philosophy and praxis.

"A government of the tycoons" is how the Israeli middle class perceives Netanyahu's government, and rightly so: all other layers of society are left aside, not only the poor.

New layers are joining - from the center to the periphery

After a couple of weeks of mobilizations, however, new social layers began joining the struggle, the ones called "Israeli periphery". Periphery has a double meaning: geographical periphery, i.e. living outside the three big cities (Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa), as well as social periphery.

During the first weeks, the most weakened classes were not part of the mobilization, and the movement's spokespersons insisted that they belong to the middle class, as if that sociological fact should provide them privileges compared to the poor. Moreover, they also insisted that, unlike the poor, they are "normative Israelis", which means in Israeli

language, paying taxes and serving in the reserve army.

On Saturday night, 13 August, tens of thousands of "peripheral" Israelis took to the streets, in Netanya and Beersheba in particular, and by doing so changed the class nature of the movement. In parallel, two new sectors joined the mobilization: poor women (especially in Haifa) and the Palestinian minority. In both cases, new demands, specific to these sectors have been raised. It is worth noting, for example, that the Arab demonstrators were welcomed by the Jewish ones, some of them explaining that "they have no problem at all with Arabs, but they hate the Palestinians (sic)".

The movement

In its first stage, the protest movement was reminiscent of the World Social Forum initiatives in the first decade of the present century: no program, no leadership, no joint agenda beyond the two overly-used slogans. Everyone was the movement and raised his or her own demands and concerns. Tel Aviv's Rothschild Avenue, where the first tent site was established, quickly became a huge forum of discussions, exchange and dialogue, in addition to cultural activities; well known artists came to express solidarity and contribute to the mobilization.

The demonstrators insisted that they were "neither left, nor right" and indeed many Likud voters are part of the movement. They also insist in making a difference between a "social" movement and a "political movement", strongly denying that they are "political". No one can deny, however, that the movement is openly challenging neo-liberal economics and calling for a return to the welfare state. In that sense it is a break with the consensual policy of all the Israeli major parties - Likud, Kadima and the various splits of the Labor party.

The real nature of the movement and its spokespersons will be revealed when they will have to answer the question that was already raised by Netanyahu and the Finance ministry directors - more money for housing,

health and education, from where to take it? The question is relevant... and the answer obvious: from the huge budgets for settlements, from the defense budget, from the tax exemptions for big enterprises and banks. There is plenty of money, but the decision is political.

Netanyahu's reactions

Benjamin Netanyahu's first reaction to the movement was no surprise: "The movement is politically motivated and manipulated by the left", but soon after, his close advisers made him understand that if the movement is the left in Israel, the left is the great majority of voters. Netanyahu therefore changed his argumentation, and claimed that changing budget's priorities would weaken Israeli security. Ehud Barak, from his penthouse in one of the most expensive buildings in Tel Aviv, was even cruder: "Israel is not Switzerland" said the kibbutznik that became a millionaire.

As usual in Israel, the next answer of the government was to establish a commission. Led by Professor Trachtenberg, the commission's mandate is very limited and its members unable - and unwilling, for most of them - to relate to the main demand of the protest movement: the end of the neo-liberal economics, and a return to some kind of regulated capitalism. In the best case it will focus on a critic of concentration of capital, denounce the "tycoons" and suggest some measures to limit their financial power.

The next step of the present ultra-right wing government may well be inspired by Ehud Barak: Heating the border with one of Israel's neighboring countries or even

provoking a series of terrorist activities in Israel, hoping that "security" will recreate a spirit of national unity against a foreign threat. It will not be the first time that an Israeli government uses this dirty strategy. It seems, however, that Israeli public opinion is smarter than in the past: When government spokespersons recently raised the security issue, the answer of the demonstrators has been: "housing, education and health are our real security"., showing in a way that they are well aware of this old trick. Will it be sufficient to deter the Israeli government from initiating a war? No one can answer that question. The great publicity given by the Israeli right to the visit of the American war-mongering Glenn Beck and his racist statements are definitively not a good sign.

An overall alternative program

The demonstrators reacted to the government's initiative by establishing their own commission, made up of progressive economists, sociologists and social activists. This alternative group has a very heterogeneous composition, including the former deputy governor of the Bank of Israel, and quite many activists have expressed their hostility to the alternative commission.

Every one in the progressive camp would agree that any alternative should include

* a dramatic increase in the budgets for health, education and welfare;

* the implementation of the existing law concerning public housing and the allocation of budgets for the building

of social housing all over the country;

*an emergency plan for development of the "periphery";

*increase of taxation on big companies

*expropriation of empty dwellings all over the country;

*dismantling the Land Authority Administration;

But this is not enough, and additional demands are definitely not included in the consensus of the movement, which tries hard to remain neither left nor right. One should understand, however, that like democracy, social justice cannot be divided. It is a matter of either, or.

Priority should be given to the most deprived communities, in particular the Palestinians and the ultra-orthodox communities; these communities are not the main concern, to say the least, of the middle class spokespersons of the protest movement;

In order to finance the legitimate demands of the protestors, one must demand big cuts in the budgets for settlements and "security";

Sooner than later the movement will have to put an end to its "apolitical" claim. Right and left are opposite directions, one leading to more poverty and social discrimination and the other to a more just distribution of wealth. One of the most popular slogans of the demonstrators, "REVOLUTION", is a very ambitious program. To achieve even a small part of it requires the making of choices and an end to the illusion of national unity.

From the Alternative Information Center, Sunday, 28 August 2011 08:03 :

<http://www.alternativenews.org/engl...>

Historic Declaration by Palestinians, Israelis

in Support of Israeli Social Protest, Anti-Colonial Struggle

7 September 2011

Together for putting an end to occupation and racism, in support of the struggle of the Palestinian people to attain their national rights and against national and social oppression

Even in light of the encouraging developments in the Middle East, the wave of social protests and the awakening of the peoples' struggles for freedoms and the right to live in dignity, the Palestinian people still live under the yoke of the Israeli occupation, despite their persistent and ongoing struggle for freedom. The international community, for its part, demonstrates its helplessness and does not lend a hand to support the Palestinian struggle for liberation and justice.

The protest movements and the winds of change blowing in the Arab world have aroused excitement throughout the world amongst freedom seekers, encouraging many to adopt the model of popular struggle. These protest movements have had a deep impact on various groups in Israel, amongst both Jews and Palestinians, and made an important contribution to the rise of the popular protest movement within Israel for social justice.

Moved by our aspiration to attain a just and fair peace in the region, a peace that is truly essential for the peoples of the region and can assist in promoting the struggle for justice and progress for everyone, **we - Palestinian and Israeli social and political forces, representatives of women's associations and young people from both sides of the Green Line - emphasise the need for a joint struggle**, with the goal of liberating the peoples of the region from colonialism and hegemony,

particularly that of Zionism, halting the occupation and Israeli military aggression and supporting the just struggle of the Palestinian people for fulfillment of its right for self-determination in accordance with the decisions of the international community.

We look forward to the liberation of all the region's peoples from dictatorship, ruling tyranny and from all forms of national, social and economic oppression. Therefore, we the signatories on this document, emphasise:

1. We support the Palestinian September initiative in the United Nations, the body which carries responsibility for laying the foundations of peace internationally, in order to demand full membership for Palestine in the UN and recognition of a Palestinian state in the borders of 4 June 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital, and to strengthen the efforts to end the occupation of the Palestinian people's lands, with preservation of the right of the Palestinian people to oppose the occupation and the right of return of the refugees in accordance with United Nations Resolution 194. In this context, we emphasise that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) is the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, deriving its legitimacy both from the Palestinian people in the homeland and exile and from the recognition it received from the Arab League and the United Nations.

The UN initiative is a legitimate step. The United Nations must fulfill its responsibility to realize its responsibility to establish peace and justice on the international level. This is a step that strengthens the rights of the Palestinian people and in no way

represents a threat to Israel, despite the great efforts of the Israeli government to present this step to the Israeli people as a declaration of war or harming the legitimacy of the existence of Israel.

2. We understand that one of the primary reasons for the social and economic distress of citizens in Israel, in addition to the capitalist economic policies, is the continuation of the occupation and excessive security budgets, which Israel's government seeks to justify as needed for defending the security of the settlements on the one hand and the state borders on the other. We therefore believe that an end to the occupation and establishment of a fair and just peace are essential for a life of peace and welfare.

We welcome the participation and integration of the Palestinian population in Israel in the social protest. This is an important opportunity to present before various groups within Israeli society the distresses of the Palestinians and the injustices caused to them, so that these groups can take responsibility in the struggle against the marginalizing policies and ongoing discrimination against the Palestinians in Israel, for putting an ending to confiscation of lands and full equality, and an end to the occupation of the Palestinian lands that were occupied in 1967.

We warn again the familiar attempts by the occupation government to evade the crises and its internal crises and the pressure of the protest waves through the politics of fear which point to an external threat: Whether by presenting the Palestinian appeal to the UN as a "danger" or by military actions, as we have witnessed in the past few days in light of the harsh escalation in bloodletting of the

Palestinian people in Gaza.	Association of Palestinian Democratic Youth (Palestine)	Government (Palestine)
3. We recognize the right of the Palestinian people, living under occupation, to make use of all the legitimate forms of resistance in accordance with international norms for removing of the occupiers from its land and for self determination. In this context, we emphasise the importance of the joint popular struggle of Palestinians and Israelis. A popular joint struggle is one of the central guiding principles in the struggle against the occupation, the settlements, racism, colonialism, against policies of exclusion, weakening, impoverishment, and racist separation within Israel.	Association of Progressive Students (Palestine)	Palestinian People's Party (Palestine)
	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Palestine)	Popular Campaign for the Boycott of Israeli Products (Palestine)
	Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Israel)	Progressive Workers' Union (Palestine)
	Democratic Teachers' Union (Palestine)	Tarabut-Hithabrut - Arab-Jewish Movement for Social and Political Change (Israel)
	Democratic Union of Professionals in Palestine (Palestine)	The Alternative Information Center (Palestine/Israel)
	Democratic Women's Movement in Israel (Israel)	Union of Palestinian Farmers' Unions (Palestine)
September 2011	Israeli Communist Party (Israel)	Union of One World for Justice (Palestine)
Signed: Political parties, social organizations and young women and men Palestinian and Israeli activists (in alphabetical order)	National Campaign for Return of the Bodies of Arab and Palestinian Martyrs Captured by the Israeli	Union of Palestinian Working Women (Palestine)
		Workers' Unity Bloc (Palestine)

450,000 Israelis take to the streets demanding social justice

7 September 2011, by Marta Fortunanta, Mikaela Levin

Some 60,000 people marched through the streets of Jerusalem on Saturday night, demanding social justice (Photo: Marta Fortunato, AIC)

"The tents are only the wrapping," National Student Union Chairman Itzik Shmuli said to the huge crowd. "The people of Israel are at the heart of this movement. We will not stop this protest until you, Mr. Prime Minister, give us real solutions."

All the speakers, in Tel Aviv and the other cities, agreed that the protest will enter a new phase, with new forms of actions but the same level of mobilization. "It could be that the campsites become more concentrated and consolidated, but they won't be folded up. The protest will keep going

and only get stronger until our demands are met", the spokesman of the leaders of the tent-city in Rothschild Boulevard, Roe Neuman, told the media during the march. In Jerusalem, the decision was different. The chairman of the Hebrew University Student Union, Itai Gotler, told Haaretz that they are closing down the main camp in Jerusalem, but vow to keep the struggle and the protest alive.

The huge crowd that assembled in just a few hours in Tel Aviv's Kikar Hamedina reassured leaders of the movement that they have the necessary strength to confront the government. "My generation always felt as though we were alone in this world, but now we feel the solidarity,"

a very pleased Daphni Leef stated. She was the first one to pitch a tent in Rothschild Boulevard and one of the leaders of the movement who received increasing criticism in the last few days from Israel's conservative media.

"After six weeks of protests, this movement has become mature", Idan, an active organizer of the demonstrations, told the Alternative Information Center (AIC) in Jerusalem. "People have become aware of the situation. For the government stability means ignoring what is happening in the Israeli streets, but now Netanyahu is obliged to listen to our protests and to act. "

Social justice and equality are the slogans of the demonstrations.

Nothing has changed since the end of July, and political consciousness has not grown. The main question is whether this movement might be the beginning of a new political party and of a structural change within the Israeli political scene that is able to challenge the colonial policies of the Israeli governments. What is the future of the movement? What are the plans and the hopes of the Israelis who took part in the protest?

"I don't know what will happen after this protest, I can't predict the future," said Eyal, a young father in Jerusalem. "I don't think this movement could become politicized, as our demands are just economic and social demands". Many other protesters who were demonstrating in Jerusalem yesterday shared this vision. "I have no political vision, what I ask is just social justice," Idan added.

Angela, who is active in the Grassroot Jerusalem movement is very critical. She held a small banner in her hands: "Also the Palestinians demand social justice." "We have to start talking about the Palestinian issue, the military occupation and the colonial policies of Netanyahu", she said to the AIC. "I don't know what will happen in the next few days because even though most of the organizers of the demonstrations are leftists, they have deliberately avoided talking about the Palestinian issue and any other political issue in order not to divide or destroy the movement."

The Palestinians who protested last night in Jerusalem were very few: there were a few Negev Bedouins, far away from the demonstrators, like a separated body. "Israel has stolen the

lands of its Arab Negev citizens" a big banner said.

"Israel wants to shift the focus from internal protests to the issue of security," said Dana, a university student - After the attacks of Eilat some demonstrations were canceled but the fact that today we are back together and we are more numerous means that we want to continue this protest." The future? "Anticipated elections."

However, according to recent polls the Israeli right hasn't lost votes and if anticipated elections were held, religious and nationalist parties would gain more than half of the Knesset seats.

The lack of a common political vision, the tacit consent of the colonialist and militaristic policy of Netanyahu and the fact that in October many students are to start university lessons and that many young people are to serve in the army raise the question of what could be the future of this movement.

The word solidarity was also used several times in Haifa on Saturday night. In that northern city, social justice went hand in hand with social solidarity and union among Jews and Palestinians from the start. At the foot of the Bahai Gardens, the chairman of the University of Haifa's student union, Yossi Shalom, addressed 40,000 people: "There is no more beautiful sight than social solidarity. As a student, this is the most important lesson I have learned in recent months".

One of the founders of the main

Palestinian camp in Haifa, Shanin Nasser, was also very moved by the number of people that showed up. Just a few weeks ago, when 15 people died in Eilat in the triple attacks and then another 15 in the Israeli bombings on Gaza, Nasser and his friends from the neighborhood of Wadi Nisnas were worried about the damage this could do to the new partnership they were trying to build with the Jewish youth in Haifa.

Yesterday their hopes were restored. "Today we are changing the rules of the game. No more coexistence based on hummus and fava beans. What is happening here is true coexistence, when Arabs and Jews march together shoulder to shoulder calling for social justice and peace", the young journalist highlighted.

Government warnings about possible rocket launching from the Gaza Strip left Beer Sheva, Ashdod and Ashkelon without any marches; but protesters from these southern cities moved to the north or the center of the country to join other tent cities.

The long awaited 3 September march was a success by all accounts, but now comes the difficult part. The popular movement has to use these 450,000 voices to sit the government down at the negotiation table and obtain concrete changes; no committees or promises, but solutions. In three weeks the Israeli government, society and probably the whole world will have their eyes peeled to the United Nations building and the Palestinian bid to have their state recognized. After that comes a month of intermittent Jewish holidays starts. The moment is now.

Summer 2011 Social Protest in Israel: Possibilities and Challenges

7 September 2011, by Sergio Yahni



A sign at a protest camp in Israel, saying "the market is free, we are

slaves" (photo: Sergio Yahni, Alternative Information Center)

Stanley Fischer, Governor of the Central Bank, reduces Israel's social problems to four major phenomena: housing, cost of living, taxes and the government's (in)ability to provide services demanded by the public. The Ministry of Finance maintains that the social demands of the protesters would cost some NIS 60 billion. Media analysts and data published by both Israel's Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance indicate that state coffers could positively respond.

But the thousands of people camping out in the country's squares and the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets on Saturday, July 30 are demanding a fundamental change in national priorities, the elimination of Israel's neo-liberal policies and the restoration of the welfare state. Or, as the demonstrators themselves shouted: "revolution."

Israel's government lacks the political will to solve the problems highlighted by these protest, yet attempts to manipulate the protests and use them to deepen its neoliberal project.

In a Jerusalem press conference on 1 August, Stanley Fischer declared that the solution to the housing shortage would include the creation of committees to bypass the existing planning processes, the approval of construction and a reformation of Israel's real estate market. Between the lines: Fischer wants to hold large construction and contracting companies to fewer ecological and social constraints whilst simultaneously accelerating the privatisation of state lands.

Today, 93% of Israel's state lands are lands belonging to Palestinian refugees, and are thus protected by international guarantees issued by the United Nations since 1950.

Similarly, Prime Minister Netanyahu is promoting the opening of the dairy market to imports in response to the high cost of food and the privatisation of public services.

From the ranks of the social protest itself, however, comes a more radical suggestion: reduce the defence budget. On 31 July, during the monthly review with the Knesset's

Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Chief of Staff General Benny Gantz, referred to this proposal. General Gantz said that "we must take into account the period in which we are, in which threats are most significant, and we cannot compromise our ability to act. In this there can be no compromise."

He was referring to the demand of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that the UN recognize an independent Palestinian state. According to Gantz, a Palestinian non-violent protest movement is set to erupt in September "in conflict against the wall or against the settlements." He added that now the army is acquiring weapons to respond to a mass Palestinian mobilisation and developing intelligence networks in order to prevent such a movement.

At a meeting of the Likud faction in the Knesset, which took place on 1 August, Prime Minister calmed the concerns of his Chief of Staff: "Despite the protest, cutting the defence budget. Is not on the government's agenda. "

The thousands of people who have occupied public space in the cities of Israel are not a homogeneous group and have no recognised leadership. They reject Israel's neoliberal regime, the privatisation of public services and the intimate relationship between capital and government. Beyond this, protesters do not agree on anything. The protest has no national leadership. No one protest camp represents another. Within the camps themselves, there exists a consensual address to address problems and concerns. Any group of activists can make decisions like any other group, and the practice of conducting meetings in which decisions are made by consensus has yet to be introduced. However, the protest has established a space that serves as a reference for the local and international press. This space is on the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv.

While media activists are camped out in the Rothschild Boulevard, this does not mean that other protesters are being represented by them. The media focus is here not only because the first group of protesters sent up camp on

Rothschild Boulevard, but also as Israel's mainstream media and politicians prefer to understand the protest movement as that of the middle class, even though most protesters are public housing tenants, single mothers, Jewish immigrants from Asia and Africa and migrant workers.

This middle class biased perspective rendered it easier for the Tel Aviv Municipality to try and forcibly evict the protesters camped out in South Tel Aviv's Lewinsky park. The protesters here are not from Israel's imaginary middle class, but residents of one of the city's poorest neighbourhoods, including numerous migrant labourers. Significantly, the atmosphere prevailing in the social movement camped out in the Rothschild Boulevard and its solidarity marches convinced the municipality to desist from its eviction attempts.

The amorphous nature of this protest movement prevents it from being exploited by groups that have traditionally negotiated social protest in Israel, above all by the General Federation of Workers in Israel (Histadut), which is the majority union and possessor of the sole right to negotiate with the government and employers.

In an interview with Israel Army Radio, Histadut Secretary General Ofer Eini, acknowledged that the union does not lead this social struggle, but stated outright that if the purpose of protesters is to overthrow the Netanyahu government, the Histadut would not participate. "We are a democratic country, we are not Egypt or Syria," said Eini.

Eini was upset primarily by the grassroots demand that any and all meetings with the government be transparent to the public. The National Union of University Students also spoke against this demand. Molly Itzik, President of the National Union of University Students, told the press that they would be "responsible adults at the time of dialogue with the government." Members of the Student Union have said that the Rothschild encampment has been infiltrated by "anarchist elements that impractically raise the demands."

The leaders of the Student Union hope that the new academic year will open with a tangible victory it can present in the student elections. Ofer Eini knows that the public demand for greater transparency in negotiations with employers and the government is a danger. In March this year the Histadrut faced a wave of protests by social workers who were unwilling to accept the agreement negotiated by the organisation of workers in government and business after some three weeks of strike.

The main danger facing the Histadrut is not the Israeli government or employers, but the radical labour organisations Power to the Workers (Koach Laovdim) and Maan. These organisations are relatively new to the field of industrial relations and act to forge trade unions that horizontally represent the interests of workers, whilst the Histadrut are an organization which collaborates with both the government and employers.

Israeli President Shimon Peres intervened in the crisis on 1 August in order to fill gaps in the protest movement and convince the group of Rothschild Boulevard to jettison the

demands for transparency in contacts with the government. The situation is fluid, however, and even if this group would agree to enter into negotiations with the government, an alternative protest movement leadership could decide not to accept the dictates of the union bureaucracy and to reject the interests of the National Union of Students.

The issue that everyone considers and yet nobody discusses relates to the Palestinians. Protest movement activists fear that the Palestinian issue is or will be used by the government as a weapon against them. However, in all public presentations, speakers point out that Jews and Arabs are partners in this struggle fight, although no one is willing to define the immediate, practical meaning of this statement.

Activists are also aware of the possibility that the government could choose a military provocation to deflect pressure and attention. This could be expressed in an assault on Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory. There are numerous protesters who believe that the killing of two Palestinians in Qalandiya on the

night of 31 July 31 was a provocation conducted for this purpose. In response to public pressure, Netanyahu stated that this killing was solely in response to military demands.

Barring exceptional developments, the groups will continue to fight together until late summer. But the division between Rothschild Boulevard and those camps situated on the social periphery, where people have no other options, will be exposed in September, when children return to school and the middle class will end their holiday rebellion. Those who will remain are those lacking all other alternatives. However, the summer of 2011 will be a watershed of 'before' and 'after' for Israel's social movements.

Translated to English by the Alternative Information Center (AIC).

[<http://www.alternativenews.org/english/index.php/topics/israeli-society/3720-summer-2011-social-protest-in-israel-possibilities-and-challenges->]

August 2 2011

9/11, bin Laden, the USA and the Arab uprisings: The perils of people power

7 September 2011, by Gilbert Achcar

Like most terrorist attacks launched by little-known underground groups, al Qaeda's September 11 attacks were an attempt to capitalise on wide-ranging social and political frustrations. Al Qaeda's goal was to paint itself as heroic, thereby attracting a broad following. Such endeavours can only be successful "to various degrees" where deep frustrations already exist. Examples include where there is widespread poverty, a resented, despotic regime, intolerable social inequalities or foreign occupation.

Such conditions are heavily represented in the Arab region. In light of the ongoing upheaval there, there is hardly any need to dwell on the fraught domestic issues which have affected the Arab region for decades. Rather, I want to revisit the question that has obsessed Americans since September 11: "Why do they hate us?"

The fact that 19 young Arab men were prepared to die on the morning of September 11 in order to inflict maximum damage on the United States was a painful wake-up call for

Americans. Most Americans had never heard of al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden before then. Most had hardly any clue about how intensely Arabs hated the US and its government. And this hatred wasn't limited to Arabs. It extended to most of the Global South (Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia).

Not that there were huge numbers of volunteers for suicide attacks in the Arab world or the Global South. Except for a tiny minority, the hatred was rather passive. The fact remains, however, that the September 11

attacks were greeted with *schadenfreude*, not only in the Middle East, North Africa, and other Muslim-majority countries, but around the globe.

My own experience of this remains engraved in my memory. I happened to be visiting East Asia soon after September 11, staying for a short time in Hong Kong. Knowing I was an Arab, the warden of the building where I was staying, an old Chinese man who had been a policeman before retiring to his present job, told me in his limited English: "This man, this man from your country, great man, great man!" Initially, I didn't realise what he meant and asked him which man he was referring to. His reply astounded me: "Bin Laden," he said.

Osama bin Laden had acquired global hero status almost overnight. From that fatal day, his face would even emblazon T-shirts in sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America, though not in Arab countries, where local regimes rightly perceived bin Laden as a major threat. Indeed al Qaeda's leader would not have missed the opportunity to call for their overthrow.

How could such a horrendous crime and causing the death of thousands have projected Osama bin Laden onto the world stage as the champion of the "wretched of the earth"? For his popularity stood upon that: peoples' frustration at their states' inability to counter the US superpower and their subsequent joy at bin Laden's "representing" them in taking revenge on the global bad cop. But why would people want to exact revenge so eagerly, and in such a terrible way? Indeed, "Why do they hate us?"

It is interesting to re-read the answer that George W. Bush gave to this same question when he delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001: "Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble, and disagree with each other."

The futility of this explanation is even more glaring today than it was 10 years ago. Leaving aside the obvious absurdity of asserting that a group of men would commit suicide simply because they did not like freedom in another, faraway country, how could anyone claim that the motivation for the hatred bin Laden personified was the resentment of freedom and democracy? The fact was that those who cheered for bin Laden in the Arab world were subjugated by despotic regimes, which their new hero had pledged to destroy. This was actually acknowledged in the same discourse, when Bush said: "They [al Qaeda] want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan."

The underlying assumption George W. Bush's speech made was that this so-called hatred of freedom and democracy had wide currency among Arabs and Muslims, and that Washington's Arab friends, despite their lack of democratic credentials, were still more "enlightened" than their subjects. The "Orientalist" perception of Arabs or Muslims as people addicted to despotism—which represented their "culture"—lurked rather obviously behind the president's statement. How else could one reconcile Washington's pretension to pursue a "civilising mission" and its reliance on, and support for, despotic regimes in the region?

The great Arab revolt of 2011 undermined to a large extent the very possibility of holding such discourses. They will not vanish, of course, but they have become much less sustainable and believable than they used to be. Indeed, the perception that Arabs are addicted to despotism has never been anything more than an optical illusion, resulting from the fact that they seemed to tolerate despotism rather well. This cultural explanation was often given as a justification for the fact that the Arab region contained an impressive collection of mummified absolutist regimes, as if it were a vast natural reserve of archaic government institutions. The same illusion was reinforced by the impression that whenever the Arab populace resented its government, it did so mostly by

supporting forces advocating an even more despotic, theocratic rule.

The crux of the illusion was to mistake positive mass support for Islamic fundamentalist movements for what was merely no more than borrowing from the only available means for expressing their discontent. Islamic forces were often the only available national opposition with a minimum of credibility. They were tolerated as such in most US-friendly regimes (Tunisia being the exception, but only after 1990) because these regimes—whether in the various Arab monarchies, or in Egypt or Yemen—often resorted to making concessions to the most reactionary religious aspirations in order to cover for their unpopular domestic and foreign policies.

The upheaval of 2011 has seen the irruption of new players on the Arab political scene, who have regrouped along strikingly similar lines in almost all the countries of the region. They form a new generation of liberals in the American sense, that is, social liberals who are very different from the classical liberals prominent in Arab politics before the Second World War, and who vanished almost completely after the first 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the subsequent rise of nationalist forces.

The politics of this new generation are intimately shaped by the new communication technology, both upstream and downstream. Their espousal of liberal values is influenced by access to global culture that has happened since the advent of the "information age". Their ability to connect, interact and organise is intimately dependent on the use of the global communication network. If it is very much reductive to describe the Arab upheaval as a set of "Facebook revolutions", it is justified on the other hand to describe this vast network of mainly young people as being largely a Facebook movement.

This liberal current, along with a variety of leftwing groups, has been and still is instrumental in the impulsion and organisation of the upheaval. Islamic forces joined the movement only after it was initiated in the most prominent cases. Coming on

a back of deep popular discontent due to a broad range of social, economic, and political factors—a discontent that found expression in the rise of various forms of social protest in several Arab countries during the previous decade—the initiatives of the liberal-left alliance unleashed a formidable chain reaction of popular revolts that is probably still only in its infancy. The main common slogan introducing the various demands of this great regional upheaval has been: “The people want ...” This is the Arab equivalent of the “We, the people” that opens the preamble to the United States Constitution of 1787. It is the clearest possible indication that it is the people who are the new hero on the political scene.

And whenever the people become the main actor on the scene—notwithstanding the individual supporting actors, the shuhada, or the martyrs, as they are called by the mass movement—all previous substitutive heroes are superseded. The British journalist Robert Fisk was right when he referred to bin Laden’s killing in *The Independent* (May 3, 2011), writing that “the mass revolutions in the Arab world over the past four months mean that al Qaeda was already politically dead”.

“Bin Laden told the world”indeed, he told me personally—that he wanted to destroy the pro-Western regimes in the Arab world, the dictatorships of the Mubaraks and the Ben Alis,” wrote Fisk. “He wanted to create a new Islamic caliphate. But

these past few months, millions of Arab Muslims rose up and were prepared for their own martyrdom—not for Islam but for freedom and liberty and democracy. Bin Laden didn’t get rid of the tyrants. The people did. And they didn’t want a caliph.”

Is this new collective hero who craves freedom and democracy therefore reconciled with the United States, which sees itself as the foremost upholder of these values? Definitely not, as anyone will agree who has observed what the various popular mobilisations have had to say about US policy in the region. Even in Libya, where one might expect the popular uprising to be grateful to Washington for its military intervention, there is deep frustration at how the revolution has been hijacked by an Atlantic Alliance that refuses to deliver the weapons the insurgents have been requesting since NATO’s intervention started. The West’s distrust of the Libyan insurgents is reciprocal. There is no other explanation why the insurgents have rejected Western intervention on the ground in their country until now.

The root cause of the resentment against the US that prevails among Arabs bears no relation to any hatred of freedom and democracy, or any “cultural” clash. The truth is that what the author of the *Clash of Civilisations*, the late Samuel Huntington, called “the democracy paradox”, which he defined as the fact that “adoption by non-Western

societies of Western democratic institutions encourages and gives access to power to nativist and anti-Western political movements,” has nothing to do with “civilisation”, and everything to do with imperial politics.

The reasons for Arab resentment of Washington’s policies are numerous and well known. They range from US sponsorship of Israel, which hardly wanes however arrogant and brutal the attitude of Israel’s governments can be, to the occupation of Iraq, to Washington’s support of despotic regimes, believed to safeguard US interests—oil being the crucial factor—against the “democracy paradox” enunciated by Huntington. This is why the so-called paradox will keep proving true in the Middle East.

The ongoing democratisation in the Arab world, if it is not interrupted by a counter-revolutionary backlash, will certainly and increasingly bend regional government policies in a direction contrary to US imperial schemes and interests and to a degree that bin Laden could never have achieved. Unless we see a far-reaching change in Washington’s Middle East policy, the shifting of heroes from Osama bin Laden to “the people” will prove severely detrimental to US regional interests. Confronted with “the people” and what they want, Washington may very well come to regret the loss of the convenient foe that bin Laden represented.

From *American Review*:
<http://americanreviewmag.com/storie..>

Subcontinental Strategies: on the evolution of the Indian Left Parties

6 September 2011, by **Achin Vanaik**

Both the Stalinized Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) and the once larger, but now smaller and shrinking, Communist Party of India (CPI) have remained forces of some political

significance. The CPM, unseated in West Bengal after a record 34 continuous years in office, even in defeat obtained around 30 per cent of the vote, at the head of the Left Front

which won 41 per cent. [6]

Formations owing allegiance to the Maoist tradition, meanwhile, have actually increased their membership

and extended their influence in recent years. Why has this been the case?



If only three or four countries have been bucking what is otherwise a global trend, the reasons must lie in the specificities of their respective socio-political formations. In India, the explanation for the persistence of Maoist and Communist forces is best sought in the country's peculiar dualism, in which stable macro-structures of bourgeois liberal democracy co-exist with extremely undemocratic, violent socio-political realities at the meso- and micro-levels, especially, but not only, in the countryside. Secondly, steady capitalist development has brought dramatic polarizations between prosperity and extreme deprivation, overlaid onto the enduring pre-capitalist structure of the caste system, with great social deference at one end of the hierarchy and contemptuous exclusion at the other. In this context, traditional Stalinized and Maoist notions of developmentalism in the name of socialism continue to exert a powerful appeal for large masses of people.

The combination of sustained macro-level democracy and capitalist advance with persistent underdevelopment and socio-economic exploitation has pushed the Indian left in two different directions. The legatees of the Communist tradition have essentially been co-opted into the liberal-democratic system of electoral and parliamentary politics. Even their stalwart defenders recognize that their many years in power in West Bengal as part of the Left Front—dominated by the CPM and its junior partner, the CPI—and their alternating terms of office in Kerala have corrupted them programmatically, bureaucratically, socially and morally. The effects of their long involvement in —managing capitalist development', even as this process has taken an increasingly neoliberal turn, were evident in the West Bengal Left Front's behaviour over land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram, though this did at least cause rumblings internally. However,

political differences between the CPM and the CPI are not of serious consequence. In the wake of the recent state-assembly reverses in West Bengal and Kerala, talk of a possible near-term merger of the two parties has resurfaced. Were it to go ahead, which is by no means certain, it would be of much less moment than if it had taken place 15 to 20 years ago.

Even if the CPM and CPI were willing—which they are not—they are increasingly incapable of carrying out mass mobilizations among the poorest and most deprived, either to defend them or to help fulfil their basic needs and aspirations. Perhaps the most dramatic indication of this came in 1992, when the Hindu right organized the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya—the greatest mass mobilization in India since independence. But at this decisive moment in modern Indian history, the parliamentary left could not even carry out a counter-mobilization against the onslaught of communalism. Bringing out their captive trade-union wings in the standard form of one-day bandhs (strikes) and mass processions with economic demands is no substitute for a sustained practice of extra-parliamentary mass mobilizations that address a whole range of issues. The only relatively bright spot is the growth of the CPM's and CPI's women's wings; but this too is taking place within a broader women's movement in India that, compared to its past, is more sectoral in character, more fragmented, in which socialist- or Marxist-feminists exercise less influence than before.

Red corridor

Indian Maoism, by contrast, has moved in the opposite direction. With the exception of one strand—the CPI-ML (Liberation) group, which is itself stagnating—it has remained essentially immune to the lures of parliamentary and electoral politics, at least concerning its own direct involvement. It has rooted itself among the poorest and most deprived sections of the population: Dalits and especially tribals in Central India. Its base area of Dandakaranya is a hilly,

thickly forested region covering an area of 92,000 square kilometres, over twice the size of Kerala, cutting across the states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra and most of Chhattisgarh. [7]

Naxalites also have a presence in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat and Uttarakhand. In July 2011, the government declared that 103 out of the country's 602 administrative districts were affected by —left-wing extremism'. [8]

Maoism has survived and grown in India for one obvious reason which neither the state nor the mainstream parliamentary left are prepared fully to acknowledge: it has been the principal defender of the poorest and most deprived against their class oppressors and the politicians, bureaucrats, police and paramilitaries backing them at various levels. Like Marxist revolutionaries everywhere, India's Maoists face the persistent riddle of how to bring about enduring radical transformation in a capitalist society with stable and entrenched structures of bourgeois democracy; as well as strong military and police apparatuses as a back-up for sustaining class rule. Yet Indian Maoists have simply failed to register the existence of this strategic dilemma, since their theoretical understanding of the Indian social formation as semi-feudal and semi-colonial effectively denies the existence of the country's complex reality. Their strategy has essentially been one of armed overthrow of the state through a struggle in which the —countryside will surround the city'. They now give greater emphasis to lower- and working-class urban mobilization, and also speak of building —mobile liberated zones'—from which revolutionaries move out when under pressure, to return later. But in the longer term, their strategy is simply a recipe for comprehensive failure, and in the short and medium term paves the way for many damaging and unacceptable practices.

This is so for a number of reasons. Firstly, a military strategy cannot in the long run succeed against the

Indian state. Provincial governments and some opposition parties have sometimes found it useful to harp on the 'Maoist threat' and exaggerate its impact, as a way of obtaining more Central funds, which are then used for various other purposes; at other times, it has suited them to make a rapprochement with the Maoists. But much weaker national governments than that of India have been able to defeat very significant insurgencies which had mass support. The principal lesson the authorities have learned is that the more prolonged the stand-off between themselves and even popularly rooted armed insurgencies, the more wearied becomes the latter's mass base, the more likely internal divisions are to emerge, and therefore the weaker the insurgency will become. The lessons of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) defeat in Sri Lanka are clear. Here was a non-state insurgency with unusually strong military capacities—it had its own air force and navy—confronting a state far weaker than India's, with a mass base that was not just looking for life improvement but was even committed to the strategic goal of Tamil independence. Yet it still lost militarily to its opponent, which was of course helped out by the Indian state. It is not a coincidence that India, precisely after the Rajapaksa government's victory over the LTTE, escalated its coercive actions against 'Naxalites'.

Second, a militarized strategy demands a top-down command structure, which necessarily shapes the organization in an authoritarian manner, minimizing the scope for internal democracy and putting a premium on secrecy and strict obedience. When things go wrong, as they inevitably will in one way or another, suspicions abound, and peremptory, ad hoc punishments tend to be imposed both on activist members and on sections of the wider social base. Fear becomes a means of cementing loyalty inside the organization and among its supporters. Alongside this, a militarized strategy creates a culture of hostility to those who do not share the same perspective; other progressive forces are seen as possible or actual competitors for support from the same social layers that armed Maoism is determined to

monopolize. Such sectarianism tends to take extreme militarist forms. [9]

Thirdly, even though Maoist cadres are drawn from among tribals and Dalits, there remains a crucial disjuncture between the concerns of the leadership and those of the mass base. The former is ideologically committed to the long-term project of overthrowing the state; the villagers are looking for more concrete, near-term improvements in living conditions. To some degree, these immediate needs are held hostage to the more distant strategic aim. For example, the building of roads can lead to some life improvements in rural areas, but it can also facilitate government actions against the 'liberated zones'; Maoist groups thus have an interest in preventing those forms of development they cannot control. Finally, the need for finances, in order to secure weaponry and to carry out positive developmental activities among Dalits and tribals, means that armed Maoists cannot be consistent or wholehearted in their opposition to class enemies, but seek compromises with them that are financially favourable in the areas they control. These 'liberated zones' are therefore not liberated in the classical sense of, for example, China's Yan'an in the late 1930s. There are thus serious limits to the Maoists' ability to carry out socially transformative measures within these zones which could then create deeper and wider loyalties to their more abstract, longer-term goals.

Questions of force

Making these criticisms, of course, in no way implies endorsement of the Indian state's repression and demonization of the 'Naxalites'. One can condemn unwarranted acts of violence by Maoists, but these cannot be equated with the brutalities committed by the Indian state. The government's bid to crush Maoism has involved a frontal assault on sections of the latter's social base, which remains the most oppressed in Indian society; the continuation of this policy will mean further violence of this kind, with profound implications for Indian democracy. The government's stance is all the more dangerous because it

receives legitimation from a whole array of intellectuals, academics and media figures, endorsing the idea that armed Maoism is 'enemy number one'.

This is plainly ludicrous. The principal danger to Indian democracy comes not from Naxalism but from the forces of Hindutva, which have carried out violence and brutality on a scale that dwarfs anything armed Maoism has done. [10] The forces of the Hindu right have succeeded in institutionalizing themselves within Indian civil society in a way unmatched by the whole of the left, mainstream or Maoist; its political and cultural vehicles have been legitimized as an acceptable part of the mainstream. For example, the instigators and apologists for the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat—figures such as Chief Minister Narendra Modi—are not only unpunished, but lauded as statesmen.

The state's efforts to 'eliminate Naxalism' are also a cover for delegitimizing all forms of radical left politics. Thus when the mainstream parliamentary left effectively endorses the Indian state's policies towards the Maoists—or worse still, as in West Bengal, even orders armed actions against them—it is doing serious damage to its own cause. The state's bid to shrink the public space for radical activity of even a non-violent kind is evident in the treatment of Maoist 'sympathizers': for example, the civil rights activists Arundhati Roy and Binayak Sen (also a dedicated medic for the poor) have been accused of sedition. No doubt the very high public, indeed international, profile of the two—Sen's trial aroused protests from a host of Nobel Laureates—has stalled further action. [11]

But the point has been made, and warning served to other civil-rights activists to think twice before attacking government policies vis-à-vis 'Naxals'.

It is important to stress that in India, even struggles for elementary demands are met with violence at a very early stage. Time and again, repression has succeeded in preventing such movements from reaching a critical mass or in finishing

them off altogether. Neither the mainstream left nor many progressive social movements have wanted to come to grips with this question of force, but it cannot be dodged. A posture of Gandhian non-violence at all costs and in all circumstances often fatally disarms such struggles. Indian Maoists have at least addressed this reality, even if inadequately, and their very success in sustaining themselves among the poorest is testimony to the partial efficacy of taking up arms. However, what should be at best a defensive posture, politically subordinated to a more sophisticated strategy for long-term transformation, has unfortunately become the main strategy itself.

Ironically, it is the Indian far right—most notably the Sangh Parivar—that has been most able to control its use of force within an overarching strategic and political framework, to which its violent actions are firmly subordinated.

Parliamentary Stalinism

If Maoism is in a long strategic cul-de-sac, what of the Stalinized mainstream left parties? Over the last three decades, as in many other countries, the centre of gravity of Indian politics has shifted significantly to the right. The mainstream left has not been left untouched by this drift. Its trajectory could be seen as broadly parallel to that of Europe's former mass Communist parties, which went from Stalinism to Euro-communism to ultimate subordination to their Euro-socialist competitors; except that it is the CPM and CPI which have themselves become the main social-democratic force in Indian politics. Indeed, with the rightward drift of Congress, it is ironically the CPM and CPI that are today the principal legatees of the old Nehruvian consensus—the social-democratic vision of a strongly secular, welfarist and non-aligned, yet capitalist India. Formal commitment to a communist future leaves no imprint on these parties' programmes or behaviour.

Yet for all the manifest deficiencies of the CPM's and CPI's brand of

democratic centralism—far removed from best Bolshevik practice—there is still more internal discussion within them, and greater accountability of leaderships to members, than in any other party in India. Unlike most social-democratic parties of the later 20th century, they remain strongly opposed to Western imperialism. However, they have been consistently unprepared to offer a public repudiation of Stalinism, whatever some intellectuals and sympathizers inside or outside the two parties might say privately. There is likewise no public acknowledgement of China's capitalist transformation. The consequence of such silence is that they are incapable of learning the lessons of the past or of strategically orienting their own cadres and activists. Ideological and programmatic mistakes are not directly confronted; errors are sidestepped, not overcome. The parties cannot be genuinely self-critical of their past or present, and honest intellectual, political and moral rectification cannot take place. Most importantly, without an explicit, public and wholesale repudiation of Stalinism and its legacy, there is no way that a new, principled programmatic perspective—a "socialism for the 21st century"—can be built.

What, then, are the prospects for the parliamentary left? Since the CPM is the hub of these forces, some reflections on its possible future trajectory may not be amiss. The party's stunning defeat in the West Bengal state elections of 2011 is widely seen as a historic turning point. Given the scale of the rebuff from voters, this is understandable; but it is also revealing that the CPM's electoral fortunes, its eligibility to govern at provincial level, are considered the prime indicator of its political strength. This in itself illustrates the CPM's degeneration since it first became a serious contender for government office in the late sixties. It has been a degeneration in two intimately related senses—political-organizational and structural. On the first count, the CPM was once a movement-based party, whose cadres were motivated by an ideological programme which, though Stalinized, nonetheless inspired involvement in mass struggles on behalf of various

oppressed sectors—protecting Muslims from communal violence in the mid-sixties, or struggling for justice in rural areas. Four decades on, the transmogrification of the party is complete—though not without lingering tensions between its theoretical commitment to anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist perspectives and its focus in practice on the electoral route to power, above all in West Bengal and Kerala.

Despite the shared "social democratization" of the CPM's wings in these two states, the deformities of the regional party in the richer and more powerful West Bengal have been much greater. Three important differences between the two states have affected the evolution of their respective CPM units. First, land reform in Kerala gave the great majority of the rural population ownership rights, to at least small household plots, thereby ensuring that basic food needs could be met, either directly through crops grown or through sale of agricultural produce. In West Bengal, Operation Barga, which ended by 1981, gave sharecroppers security of tenure and rights to usufruct, but stopped there, never initiating the kind of redistribution of land ownership that would have greatly weakened the rich and middle peasantry, which continues to enjoy significant influence in the panchayat structure that was also set up and regularized by the Left Front in West Bengal.

Here lies the second difference. In Kerala, the panchayat structure saw a genuine devolution of funds and decision-making powers that has enabled a range of local grievances to be addressed and needs fulfilled. Moreover, control of the state government has alternated between the CPM-led Left Democratic Front coalition (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF); the Muslim and Christian communities, 23 and 19 per cent of Kerala's population respectively, have broadly remained loyal to their respective parties, the Indian Union Muslim League and the Kerala Congress. This has meant that neither the CPM nor Congress could ever hope to establish the kind of top-down, centralized control over the Panchayati Raj that the CPM has in

West Bengal. There the party succeeded in making it a mechanism for electoral-political dominance through the systematization of a structure of patronage and coercion, with its associated forms of blandishments and threats, rewards and punishments.

In both West Bengal and Kerala it is proximity to power and its benefits that mainly motivates the CPM's cadres, rather than commitment to a Third International ideological legacy. But in West Bengal the organizational degeneration and lumpenization of its cadre base is much greater, because the continuity of its hold on power helped to create a much stronger meshing of party and administrative (civilian and police) bureaucracy—a 'partocracy' that lends itself to all kinds of abuses.

This has resulted in a very effective form of patronage for those willing to pledge loyalty to the CPM; the party becomes a crucial avenue for resolving many everyday problems—access to health care, distress finances, employment for a family member, help with the bureaucracy, vengeance against an enemy, and so on.

The third key difference lies in the far superior levels of health and education in Kerala, which have enabled the state to compensate for the lack of industrialization, and therefore of adequate labour absorption, through the export of personnel of varying skill levels to other parts of India and abroad, thus creating a remittance economy; to this can be added a growing tourism sector. In West Bengal the Green Revolution, and agricultural growth rates more generally, ran out of steam by the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. Looking to the Chinese policy of inviting FDI to promote industrialization, the CPM's state leadership took advantage of the 1991 reforms giving India's states greater economic autonomy from the centre and pushed the party towards an increasingly neoliberal line. By 2006, confident of its control over the rural hinterland—perhaps thinking to follow Beijing's example in this regard too—the CPM pursued land acquisitions to fuel SEZ-led industrialization, to be realized by outside investors, Indian and foreign.

This was the strategy that led to the Singur and Nandigram episodes of state-sponsored violence, which backfired dramatically in political-moral as well as electoral terms. Alongside this, the 2006 report by the Delhi-appointed Sachar Committee showed how miserable the socio-economic situation was for Muslims in West Bengal—they make up nearly a quarter of the population—compared with most other Indian states with large Muslim communities. This created great disillusionment amongst an otherwise loyal voter base. Protection of their lives from communal assault was no longer enough; they demanded improvement. Both of these conjunctural developments contributed to the shift in public perceptions against the CPM and Left Front in West Bengal.

Where does the CPM go from here? In Kerala, the 2011 state assembly elections actually brought a reversal of the shift against the Left Democratic Front expressed in voting for the national Lok Sabha elections of 2009, and in the 2010 panchayat elections in the state. In the latest elections, the incumbent LDF coalition almost defied the longstanding trend of alternating stints in power, obtaining 68 seats out of the total 140 to the victorious UDF's 72. There is no reason to think the Kerala party unit will alter its programme or strategy: it will continue along the established lines, expecting to return to power the next time around.

What about the West Bengal unit and the central party leadership in Delhi? Until the end of the 1980s, national-level policy in the CPM was little more than the upshot of inner-party efforts at balancing the interests and concerns of the two main state-level units, with West Bengal dominant. The emergence of coalition politics at the Centre from 1989 onwards gave smaller parties such as the CPM unexpected leverage—even parties with 20–30 Lok Sabha seats could be considered useful partners—and opportunities to play a much bigger role at the national and international levels. It was here that a tension then emerged between, on the one hand, sections of the Delhi-based leadership, and on the other, the West Bengal

leadership and its supporters in Delhi. At one level this tension is rooted in a disjuncture between a theory and formal programme that is anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist, and a practice in West Bengal that became increasingly neoliberal in orientation, implemented by a state-level leadership seeking more stable relations with a Congress-led centre.

At another level, the issue of whether the parliamentary left should join a Congress-led central government has frequently divided the party, as more generally it has the non-Maoist left outside the CPM and CPI. The seduction of gaining central power, to strengthen the CPM's hold of its regional bastions as well as perhaps extending its influence elsewhere, has been pitted against the very real fear, if not strong likelihood, that the left would end up sharing responsibility for a neoliberal drift internally and pro-American consolidation externally, without real power to change either course.

For too many on the left, as well as some liberals, the issue of whether the CPM should have joined the 1996 United Front government, when its leader Jyoti Basu was offered the Prime Ministership, or the 2004 Congress-led United Progressive Alliance administration, has been seen as the crucial strategic question—the decisive test that would have determined its future fate—when it has not been anything of the kind. The real tragedy of the CPM is that either way—whether it had joined a Congress-led government at the centre or not, and whether or not it joins one in future—its further de-radicalization is assured. Of course, there is no question of the CPM somehow rejuvenating itself to become a much more radical anti-Stalinist force. The point is that it cannot even hope to again become the kind of movement-based party, with ideologically motivated and dedicated cadres, that it once was.

The party's major internal stocktaking will take place at its next congress, to be held in Kerala and scheduled for April 2012. The CPM will not disappear in the coming period. It will continue on well-worn paths, hoping—indeed expecting—that the

mistakes of the new Trinamool Congress dispensation in Calcutta will once again hand it electoral victory. It has no other vision. If the chance to join a central coalition government again arises, the CPM will this time most likely take it. But for the longer term project of building a more radical and principled Indian left, this will mean little or nothing.

Radical perspectives

One of the key arguments used to justify unwavering loyalty to India's mainstream left parties is that this is a period in which progressive forces are on the defensive. The mainstream parties are held to be the principal mechanisms for preserving the remaining historic gains made by the socialist movement, and for preventing a further rightward drift towards communalist, anti-democratic forces. This reasoning has been deployed to legitimize unprincipled alliances with non-BJP parties and the pursuit of a "Third Front" politics. The very nomenclature "an unspecified entity that is neither BJP nor Congress" is an indication of how far the CPM and CPI have moved from earlier demands for a "left and democratic front". But such compromises are based on a deeply flawed perspective: the idea that the transition to socialism will involve some kind of interregnum of social democracy or its equivalent in developing countries. This notion should be laid to rest. On this count, the right is correct: the present variety of neoliberalism, with a more or less human face, is the only kind of capitalism on offer.

What is required, then, is a much more radical and offensive perspective, guided by an explicitly anti-capitalist politics. While it can share much ground with existing social-democratic demands "for re-establishing the principles of universal and free healthcare, quality public education, guaranteed pensions, affordable public housing and transport" which have become all but impossible to fulfil in contemporary capitalism, this politics must also put forward what used to be

called "anti-capitalist structural reforms". Also required is the reassertion, in more creative contemporary forms, of classical transitional demands: transparency, opening management's books, workers' control, direct democracy and so on. There is much that can be learnt from the rich international history of such efforts "Yugoslavia's self-management workers' councils; Cuba's urban farming experiments; participatory budgeting in Brazil; communities of peace in Colombia; panchayat-based resource planning in Kerala; the tradition of democratic unionism forged in South Africa's struggle against apartheid.

In more abstract terms, what is required is a politics that unites the particular with the universal. Historically, the two have most often been conjoined through the broader political projects of nationalism, socialism and democracy, whether separately or in combination. For the most part, where socialist revolutions have successfully transformed the state they have been connected to progressive nationalist struggles. But that era is over, and it is now the project of a socialism connected to the struggle for deepening existing democracy that must inspire hopes for radical transformation. In the past, the principal organizational embodiment of such a combined politics has invariably been the political party, or the united front of such parties. We can be more flexible "perhaps we can create a new party, a new front, or some combination of radical parties and socialist-oriented movements.

What does this imply for the pursuit of radical politics in India? No existing political force can be the nucleus around which a left alternative will be built. This can only come about through a recomposition and realignment of existing forces, which will inevitably involve splits and fusions as well as accretions from unexpected sources. What this implies is that it is not loyalty to an organization but to a programme embodying principled radical positions that is important: the programme makes the organization, rather than the other way around. Second, there must be a combination of electoral and parliamentary activity with extra-

parliamentary mobilization.

Indeed, for an effective left, it is success at the extra-parliamentary level which essentially determines success in electoral terms. Thus the left must have and constantly seek to expand an ideologically trained and committed cadre base; for this, it must practise a politics of passion, far removed from the mundane compromises of bourgeois forces. The organization that will embody the programme of this new kind of left must itself practise the strongest forms of internal democracy: complete freedom of discussion and debate among members, the right to form tendencies and factions, and proportional representation of these groupings at all levels of leadership.

Within the leadership there should also be representation, proportional to the membership, of women, tribals, Dalits and Most Backward Classes (the lowest non-Dalit castes). This would be a means of attracting such social groups, especially their most active and committed elements, away from existing, sectorally oriented organizations whose politics lack a clear anti-capitalist thrust.

Finally, the left cannot fall into the trap of a narrow bourgeois nationalism. In South Asia, the "socialism in one country" perspective of both Stalinism and Maoism was and is a disaster. The Indian left that still speaks of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism or believes in a stage-ist approach "and hence rationalizes electoral-political alliances with non-Congress and non-BJP parties" is unprepared to recognize that India is a sub-imperialist, regional power. This is a crucial problem. It is not enough to attack American imperialism and oppose India's strategic alliance with the US and Israel, important though these stances are.

It is vital to acknowledge India's own imperial role in South Asia: its oppressions in Kashmir and the Northeast; its overt and covert interventions in support of reaction in Bangladesh, the Maldives, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and Sri Lanka; as well as the mutual hypocrisies of relations between the Pakistani and Indian

ruling classes. Opposition to all this must begin here. Indian Stalinism often tails the Indian state in its nationalist posturing, while the Maoists will only recognize other Maoists as politically serious partners. Indian socialists seeking a wider and deeper radical internationalism must not only solidarize with anti-imperialists elsewhere; they must also prioritize the building of a more unified South Asian struggle.

Edward Thompson once said very beautifully that throughout history, there have been struggles for decency, humanity and justice, and struggles for power. These are not parallel tracks; they meander, and sometimes merge. When they do, power is being harnessed towards the important goals. When the tracks separate, some choose to go towards power while others continue on the path of

principled politics. Our best hope is to continue on this latter path and seek to merge it with the path of power, so that we can then move forward on both fronts.

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The revolution seen from the inside

5 September 2011, by Jamal Jaber

Jamal Jaber: Azeldin, my brother, you have been in opposition to the Gaddafi regime for more than eleven years...

Azeldin El Sharif: Yes, I was a victim of the Gaddafi regime. I was arrested and tortured for having fought against the corruption of the administration, among other things. But the horizon was blocked, since oppositional political activity was not authorized. It was dangerous and the threat was ever-present. I decided to leave for Britain in 2001 to continue from abroad the fight against Gaddafi.

Jamal Jaber: You are at present in Libya, since the revolution of February 17. What changes which do you regard as most important in the new Libya?

Azeldin El Sharif: The first is the outbreak of the revolution in an organized way in the west of Libya, although Gaddafi was counting on an East-West partition of Libya. But Misrata, Jebel Gharbi, Zawiya, Zintan and other cities, and even the capital, Tripoli, rose up. That thwarted the hopes of Gaddafi who tried to crush the uprising, until the beginning of NATO air strikes, which was supported by the Libyan masses. There is something which has to be understood, namely that the Libyan people is not illiterate. People know what happened in Palestine,

Afghanistan and Iraq. The Libyan people knows about all that. That is why Libyans refused military intervention on their territory, the presence of a foreign army in Libya; the only intervention that was requested and that was acceptable was limited to the protection of civilians in Libya.

Jamal Jaber: It was a request for intervention to protect Benghazi, if I am not mistaken?

Azeldin El Sharif: Not only Benghazi... Actually when we were in Britain, the Libyan opposition abroad demanded from the United Nations an intervention as soon as possible. We put pressure on the British government by writing and demonstrating, with few results. That was before Gaddafi used planes and heavy weapons.

Then, the opposition started to demand a no-fly zone, i.e. a ban on Gaddafi using military planes against the Libyan people. Thanks be to God, there was Resolution 1973 of the United Nations for the protection of civilians, following the use of military planes to kill civilians, initially in Tripoli and the neighbouring regions. Then Gaddafi used tanks and rocket launchers. That is why in the first stage the ban on Gaddafi using warplanes was a pressing need to protect civilians, just like the ban that was subsequently imposed on him

using his terrifying military arsenal to destroy cities and kill civilians. Then we moved on to the stage of striking at the depots and bases where Gaddafi's missiles are kept. In this sense Resolution 1973 was in the service of the Libyan people and the protection of civilians. However, it met with opposition from many socialist and left currents abroad, who think that the Libyan people does not know what it needs and who on the other hand do not propose any alternative in terms of protection.

Jamal Jaber: Today, the National Transition Council of Transition does not ask, I believe, for a military presence on Libyan territory, but for the arming of Libyans so that they are capable of completing their uprising against the Gaddafi regime. Did the council manage to obtain this aid from the Western countries?

Azeldin El Sharif: The revolutionaries obtained support because they organized their ranks and their military camps. Their organisational level is better than in the past. We know that young Libyans were not armed. They came out as civilians, demanding a peaceful change of government. Unfortunately, they had to face heavy weapons and found themselves bearing weapons to defend themselves, to defend their revolution and their country. In spite

of their lack of military training, the armed organization of the revolutionaries has been developing.

Jamal Jaber: As regards Western support we are seeing air raids on the strategic points and centres of Gaddafi, aimed at neutralizing his forces. But are the Western countries also providing arms to the revolutionaries? Do you have accurate information on this subject?

Azeldin El Sharif: To date, I cannot say that a Western country has provided arms to the Libyan revolutionaries. I know that they have delivered some equipment, in particular means of communication, protective clothing, uniforms and supplies, but no arms up to now. On the other hand, Arabs have delivered sophisticated arms and France has given some arms. We are waiting for Britain and Italy to give the revolutionaries arms so that we can quickly finish with this situation. Stagnation gives the regime some respite and facilitates the counter-revolution.

Jamal Jaber: Germany has announced that it recognizes the National Transition Council as the representative of the Libyan people. Don't you think that this is actually a position of the European Union?

Azeldin El Sharif: Indeed, we know that the countries of the European Union are moving towards recognition of the National Council as the sole representative of the Libyan people. This is an important step in helping the Libyan revolution. The recognition by Germany of the Transition Council represents an important point of support for the Libyan people, all the more so as we had believed up until now that it had adopted a hostile position, because it was bound by agreements made with Gaddafi. Germany took a long time to establish links with the Transition Council, but we regard this new standpoint as positive.

Jamal Jaber: Do you believe that the position of the United States is aligned on that of the European Union?

Azeldin El Sharif: Indeed, the United States was the second country, after Britain, to demand that Gaddafi goes. However it is well-known that France, China and Russia refused the solutions put forward by Britain and the United States. Subsequently, the French position evolved positively, since it proposed to the European Union - and took the initiative on it - air strikes to prevent Gaddafi from advancing towards Benghazi.

Jamal Jaber: And with regard to Russia and China?

Azeldin El Sharif: They are currently moving towards recognition of the National Council because there is no more hope for Gaddafi and his regime.

Jamal Jaber: In the last few days, Russia has talked about a roadmap aimed at removing Gaddafi and then organizing a kind of national meeting. Do you have information on this subject?

Azeldin El Sharif: In fact, these are Russian scenarios. From the beginning, Russia abstained in the Security Council on Resolution 1973. Russia, like China, was openly opposed openly to this resolution but international pressure and the continuation of the killing of civilians by Gaddafi led the two countries to abstain. Russia and China are now leaning towards support for the Libyan popular revolution, while Libyan society is maintaining relations with these two states.

Jamal Jaber: Up to what point can we hope for effective support by the Arab countries for the pursuit of a real Libyan democratic revolution? Is it not rather a question of a conjunction of conjunctural interests?

Azeldin El Sharif: The part played by the states of the Arab League for the adoption of Resolution 1973 at the Security Council shows a high sense of responsibility towards Libya. It is necessary to emphasize the positive role played by Qatar. The revolutions which took place in Tunisia and Egypt, by bringing down the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak, gave us a strong impulse, but these events contributed to delaying the support and the

assistance which reached us from these countries, a little later. We give thanks to God for the revolutions in Tunisia and in Egypt before the beginning of the Libyan uprising, because they prevented the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak from intervening against the Libyan people. Actually, the Libyan people had risen up before the revolutions but it had been overcome quickly because Gaddafi was supported by Ben Ali and by Mubarak. We are grateful to the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and we hope for a revolution in Algeria, so that the Algerian people can get rid of this repressive military regime.

Jamal Jaber: That means that for you the Libyan revolution is part of the Arab movement for change and that it is the prolongation of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions ...

Azeldin El Sharif: Of course, Bouazizi, may his soul rest in peace, set fire to himself for the revolution, and after him came the revolutionaries in Egypt and Libya. This extension will continue. These are popular revolutions in which Arabs, Africans, Amazighs and Toubous are taking part. They all say no to oppression, no to dictatorship and arbitrary rule and yes to freedom.

Jamal Jaber: Do you mean by that that there is also a social factor in the uprisings that are taking place, over and above the factor of democracy? What is the social reality behind the Libyan uprising?

Azeldin El Sharif: Social reality in Libya is related to the acuity of the mechanisms established by Gaddafi to impose his rule over society. In Libya, the Arabs, Amazighs, Toubous and Africans live together, with Turks and Kurds as well. There is a mixture of nationalities. They live in a beautiful harmony and maintain social and family links. When the revolution broke out, Gaddafi tried to use the tribal factor to create a tribal civil war, but the Libyan people shattered Gaddafi's hopes, demonstrating that it was a united people which aspired to live in a just state, built on the principles of freedom, democracy and participation in governing the country, far from any marginalisation

or relegation.

Jamal Jaber: Did the National Council deny having any relations with Israel yesterday, since accusations on the subject have been relayed by the press?

Azeldin El Sharif: Libya has behind it a history of resistance to Zionism in Palestine... My father was in the Resistance in Palestine in 1948: he took part with other Libyans in the campaign which saw the participation of forces coming from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and Egypt as well as from countries of the Arab Machrek. So it is impossible for anyone to abandon these fundamentals in order to establish links with Israel. I was very happy with the declarations of brother Mustapha Abdeljalil, president of the National Transition Council, when he clearly indicated that there were no relations with the State of Israel, affirmed that Libya does not recognize this State and called for the victory of the rights of the Palestinians, for international justice through support for the rights of the Palestinians and the building of their independent state in complete freedom.

Jamal Jaber: For about four days, Clinton, the American Minister for Foreign Affairs, has declared that Gaddafi had to go, but she said that she had on the other hand addressed a series of requests to the Libyan National Transition Council, without however explaining what they were. Do you have an idea of what she is demanding from the Transition Council?

Azeldin El Sharif: They are questions of law, in particular when it concerns the recognition of the new Libyan state, because many European countries recognize the legitimacy of states - and not that of transitory governments - therefore of states which have institutions and enjoy majority popular support. The Transition Council and the revolution must constitute a government which can be recognized and represent the Libyan state at the United Nations. That will take time. The Transition Council is endeavouring to unify Libya by driving out Gaddafi. However there

are regions which are fighting against the Gaddafi regime and are not yet liberated. The Transition Council does not proclaim the Libyan state so that the Gaddafi regime does not use that as a pretext to say that there is a new state in the east of Libya, which would justify his maintenance in power in the west.

Jamal Jaber: Don't you think that the concerns of the West (the United States and the European Union) are concentrated on Libyan oil and gas much more than on the aspirations of the Libyan people?

Azeldin El Sharif: Let us be frank... presidents express the interests of their states. European governments can close their eyes to morality, practise hypocrisy and put it at the service of their interests, and that was the case before the revolution of Libyan youth. Gaddafi sold oil and gas to the European governments. There were contracts signed and there was investment. We know that the relationship between the European governments and Gaddafi was very close. They are ready to collaborate with any regime in the world, therefore with any dictator, in order to have profits and markets.

But the crimes committed by Gaddafi towards his people rebounded on those states and those governments which covered these actions and did not protect civilians. So I say that the European states found themselves obliged to take a position. They are conducting a policy that is guided by their interests. The war started by the West will have a cost. Who will pay the price? It is the Libyan people that will pay, whether we want it or not, obviously. The countries which have supported the Libyan people during the war will see their future guaranteed by this people, which will not be ungrateful. And the countries which will be able to invest in oil and gas will be those which have helped the Libyan people.

Jamal Jaber: But aren't you afraid that the West will maintain a position aimed at prolonging the crisis locally and militarily, and thus maintain the partition between the east and the west of Libya?

Azeldin El Sharif: No, I do not believe that. Several things should be taken into consideration: the first being the way the conflict ends, the role of the United Nations in the west of the country. Nor can we ignore the need to make sure that the masses in the west do not want partition. All these elements are extremely important.

We know that the majority of the Libyan people in the west want the departure of Gaddafi, and for him to be tried along with his criminal accomplices. The inhabitants of the west were not spared by Gaddafi, who used his war machine against them. Many are them of them are among those who are on the different fronts with the revolutionaries. I met a lot of them here in Benghazi. They came there to organize and fight Gaddafi.

Furthermore, I have heard it said that NATO has fixed a new three-month deadline to finish the war. We hope for the end of the war as quickly as possible. The revolutionaries are today in better position from the point of view of organization, preparation and armament.

Jamal Jaber: And if he stayed in power, on what could Gaddafi base himself? What are the forces in Libya that still support his regime?

Azeldin El Sharif: Gaddafi built up his military arsenal in preparation for this possibility, namely the defence of his regime. We have heard that during the last two years, Gaddafi bought four billion dollars' worth of armaments in Russia, Britain and other countries. And he bought even more when the situation of the neighbouring Arab regimes deteriorated before February 17.

The infrastructure of the Libyan army was destroyed decades ago by Gaddafi. There was not a regular army in the full sense of the term, capable of coming out of its barracks and interposing itself between the people and the regime. On the other hand, Gaddafi established militias and security camps which depend on the enormous funds that he has. So he could follow the policy of the carrot and the stick, and govern Libya by iron and fire.

Jamal Jaber: Do you have an idea of what Gaddafi's forces represent?

Azeldin El Sharif: It is a heteroclitic mixture. I saw young Libyans training in military camps named after his children and his supporters. The sons of Gaddafi command these military camps and these units. All those who are in them are under the command of the sons of Gaddafi, Khamis, Saadi, and the others.

Jamal Jaber: Does Gaddafi enjoy popular support?

Azeldin El Sharif: Gaddafi has lost the confidence of all the large tribes. He used the sons of the tribes against the people. In the same way, he instrumentalised tribalism as a weapon to frighten, marginalize and liquidate all those who refused to carry out his orders. There are many large tribes: Warfalla, Atrak, Fitouri, Zliten, Jebel Gharbi, Abidat, Awakir, but the tribe in Libya is not the base of the political regime. The tribes have gone through a process of integration in the cities and the villages, through intermarriage and living together. But Gaddafi has cunningly put soldiers from the east in his service in the west, so that they are ruthless, and conversely put soldiers from the west in the east. And he has also played on that in the south. He has played on that to stir up resentment between Libyans.

Jamal Jaber: So who still supports him?

Azeldin El Sharif: Various types of individuals. There are people who have been educated in the heart of Gaddafi's regime, who have lived on his hand-outs and absorbed his thoughts. They are indebted to him personally. They come from different regions (including Benghazi and the Jebel). Today, they lie by saying that they represent the Warfalla tribe or other tribes in their support for Gaddafi. Actually the tribe of Warfalla has not intervened in this conflict. It is said that the chiefs of the Bani Walid area - where there are many Warfalla clans - were put in prison, and that the sheikhs would be killed if their clans demonstrated against Gaddafi. And yet the Warfalla tribe which

fraternizes with the Kadhafa tribe and proclaimed its allegiance to Gaddafi in the past, is not taking part today in the war, nor in the internal conflicts. That shows wisdom.

Jamal Jaber: Let us come back to the Libyan uprising. Why do you believe that the uprising and its victory occurred in Benghazi and in the Eastern region in general? What are specificities of this region?

Azeldin El Sharif: The coup d'état and the hegemony of Gaddafi over state power go back to 1969. There have since been many attempts to put an end to his rule, whether in Benghazi, in the east, or Tripoli, in the west and in the region of Warfalla-Bani Walid. However, the city of Benghazi sums up all of Libya. All the Libyan tribes are integrated there, and you can see Arabs, Amazighs, Toubous, Africans and other tribes living in the same city. Benghazi has the reputation of being a city where there are no foreigners, in the sense that the foreigner is treated there like a native of the region. He is warmly welcomed and integrated among the inhabitants.

Jamal Jaber: Is there in Benghazi or in the Eastern region a particular history of political opposition?

Azeldin El Sharif: Yes, various oppositions arose there, but unfortunately Gaddafi crushed them all. That is why the opposition continued abroad from fear of being killed: in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Syria, in Iraq and in Europe. But because of the security agreements concluded between Gaddafi and many of these countries - by the application of the principle of reciprocity - Libyan opponents were handed over. That was the case of Umar Mihayshi, one of the members of the council of the revolution which carried out the coup d'état of 1969, who was handed over by Morocco. The opposition maintained itself abroad, but it suffered from its divisions.

We can distinguish two kinds of opposition: on the one hand, a radical opposition which wanted the fall of Gaddafi by any means, political and

military; on the other, a reformist opposition which worked for change, even if it were to take place under Gaddafi. The Muslim Brothers belong to this second opposition. A National Front of Libyan Salvation was created abroad in the 1980s, while at the end of the same decade there emerged inside the country The Islamist Fighting Movement, which died out in the 1990s. There were also other parties, like the Democratic National Rally, of which one of the representatives is Nuri El-Kikhia, or the National Socialist Party, which is Ba'athist. The most recent gathering of the opposition brought together various tendencies and personalities abroad, and was held in London in June 2005 under the name of the National Congress of the Libyan Opposition.

These oppositionists held a second congress in 2008 and set up organisational structures, including a follow-up committee and an executive committee. But today, after the revolution of February 17, the majority of the oppositionists in exile have returned and are trying to organize in Libya itself. All of them support the National Transition Council as an authority for the transition towards a free and democratic Libya.

Jamal Jaber: Azeldin my brother, you chair today the Network of National Solidarity which carries out a series of social activities and which emerged after the revolution of February 17, especially in Benghazi. What are the reasons that drove armed individuals to destroy one of the buildings of the network?

Azeldin El Sharif: That is what happens when you are successful where others fail. Some people do not want to see you succeeding in your action. We face many tasks. Change is not easy and Libyan society needs a major reorganization, on both the political and administrative levels. It is well-known that many elements which worked in the institutions of the regime have joined the various institutions which currently work in the name of the revolution. We need a reorganization of all that on the basis of the general interest, and not of

A revolution on the march

4 September 2011, by **Ghayath Naisse**

A dictatorial, corrupt, hereditary regime

Bashar al Assad, the current president of the Syrian Arab Republic, is the son of the former dictator Hafez al Assad, who reigned with an iron fist for nearly thirty years. Assad the elder came to power following a coup in November 1970 overthrowing his Baath party comrades, in power since March 8, 1963, thanks to his office as minister of defence. He imprisoned his former comrades (considered as the socialistic wing of the Baath party) for periods of around 25 years. Most of them died in detention or shortly after their release

In 1973, Assad had a constitution drawn up which gave him all power. Article B stipulates that “the Baath party is the leading party of the state and society”. The only concession was made in response to the demonstrations of the Muslim Brotherhood who demanded that a stipulation that Islam should be the religion of the president be incorporated in the constitution.

The former dictator drew on the models of the “eastern Europe socialist” countries in 1972 when he created a “Progressive and Nationalist Front” including the pro-Moscow Communist Party and four other small nationalist parties. This “governmental” front had no real power except that of applauding the decisions of the dictator; moreover all the parties of this front, except the Baath, were banned from any political activity among the army and among students. He also drew on the North Korean model in creating “Baath vanguards”, an organisation

responsible for indoctrinating children from a very young age, to maintain the cult of the personality of the leader and mass parades in his honour.

The regime of the elder Assad invaded Lebanon in 1976 with the blessing of the United States and the Western countries to crush the Lebanese nationalist movement and the Palestinian resistance. The following year an armed insurrection was launched by the Muslim Brotherhood. During the armed conflict, the two parties committed the most abominable crimes, but the response of the dictatorship was the more bloodthirsty; it definitively crushed this insurrection with a bloodbath at the massacre of Hama, in early February 1982. Even today we don't know the exact number of victims (between 15,000 and 30,000 dead). This repression was not limited to the Muslim Brotherhood, it extended to all the political forces of the left, who suffered successive waves of arrest until exhaustion set in. Thousands of activists experienced death, torture and imprisonment without trial thanks to the emergency law in force for very long periods, as well as exile. Society was virtually emptied of its live forces. It seemed that the regime had triumphed over society. In the 1980s and 1990s a bloody repression reigned with a total deprivation of liberties, which we call the black years.

Power and economy

The socio-economic policy of Hafez al Assad was initially marked by the heritage of the left wing of the Baath that he had overthrown, that is to say he inherited the nationalisations associated with the most radical agrarian reform in the region; the old

dictator maintained a massive corruption of the military and the upper civil service in exchange for unfailing loyalty to his person. The form of pre-existing state capitalism was transferred through corruption into a milch cow for this nomenclature and in particular for the circle around the dictator, his family and his most faithful lieutenants.

Syria thus experienced in the 1970s and 80s an operation of illegal enrichment based on a policy of massive corruption led by the leading group itself. The socio-economic composition of the country has radically changed. We find ourselves then before a significant new “class” of wealthy bourgeois who have become rich only thanks to their function in the state apparatus and their pillage of the public sector and the national wealth.

This new “class”, organically linked to the state, needed to invest its wealth in the various sectors of the economy. Decree number 10 of 1991 was the trampoline by which this class was able to “launder” its wealth. It authorises investment in the private sector and opens up import-export, but always under the control of the state, and also perpetuating the system of general corruption. The 1990s decade was that of the emergence of a bourgeois “new class” of new rich, a hybrid class born out of a merger of the bourgeois bureaucracy and the survivors of the old bourgeoisie that we had called the private bourgeoisie.

This was accompanied by a growing impoverishment of the middle and popular layers. From the 1990s onwards, an astronomical cleavage would separate the state elite and this new bourgeoisie from the rest of Syrian society. The police state

repressed any independent activity. In 1990 the first organisation in defence of democratic liberties in Syria, the "Committees for the Defence of Democracy Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria", created in December 1989, estimated the number of political detainees in the gaols of the dictatorship at 18,000 persons.

The king is dead, long live the king!

The old dictator Hafez al Assad died on June 10, 2000 (officially declared on June 11). In a session held the same day which lasted half an hour, article 83 of the Constitution was modified, lowering the age required to become president of the republic from 40 to 34 years to adapt exactly to the age of Bashar al Assad. This same day the vice president Abdel Halim Khadam, one of the pillars of the dictatorship and one of its most corrupt members (who became in an "oppositionist" in 2005) published two decrees, one promoting Bashar al Assad to the rank of marshal (he was colonel) and the other naming him supreme head of the armed forces. The circle was closed, in a few hours the son (a doctor by training) replaced the father in the presidency.

On July 17, the inaugural speech of the new president promised many political, economic and administrative reforms. This climate of possible "change" allowed the emergence of a movement of free political expression among intellectuals in the context of what we call the "Damascus spring". But this climate of relative freedom was of short duration, because repression returned from February 2001, so that a new lead weight crushed all critical or independent political or intellectual activity. The new president pursued the same policy of repression as his father.

However, on the socio economic level the son far exceeded his father, for he encouraged from the beginning the application of all the neoliberal recipes of the World Bank and IMF. To do this Bashar formed a team schooled in neoliberalism, presided over by Abdalla Aldardari, an irresponsible maniac. After a decade long reign, half

the population of 23 million inhabitants live at the poverty threshold and more than a third below. Unemployment is at 20% according to official statistics and at 25% according to independent sources. It affects in particular the young because more than 55% of those under 25 are unemployed, in a young country where those under 30 form 65% of the population. The state has withdrawn from its social role, suppressing the subsidies which supported basic needs - sugar, rice, bread and diesel oil. A new system of private education has been set up at the expense of public instruction which has fallen into ruin; the public health system is impoverished and neglected. The year 2008 was marked by the decision of the government to "free prices and suppress subsidies to the poorest layers". The share of gross domestic product taken by the new bourgeoisie went from 63.4% to 70% between 2005 and 2007. (According to the pro government newspaper "Annour", August 19, 2008).

Rise of opposition

This mixture of degradation of the standard of living of the majority of the people with merciless repression could only lead to opposition. The latter became visible from 2006 onwards. In May of that year in Damascus, two demonstrations of hundreds of workers from the public construction company took place with confrontations with the forces of order. The year 2006 saw a strike of taxi drivers in Aleppo and confrontations between the inhabitants of a neighbourhood in Homs and the police, over the demolition of some houses for the benefit of big property developer.

In 2007 there were several confrontations with the police and demonstrations took place like in the Almosrria neighbourhood in Aleppo, Almazra'a in Damascus, and Dimas near Damascus. In 2008 there were demonstrations of workers in the port of Latakia, as well as in Dhabia and Zabadani near Damascus. In 2009 and 2010 again there was unrest.

Despite these signs of growing popular unrest and the dynamic

revived by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and across the Arab countries. Assad declared in an interview on January 31, 2011 to the "Wall Street Journal" that his regime was spared from this wave of revolution because it "served the interests of the people", while stressing that "Syria is not like Egypt or Tunisia" In this interview he stated contemptuously that the reforms that he had promised ten years ago would require "generations before being realised".

A revolution begins

A fortnight later, on February 17, a "banal" event in a country like Syria took place: a young man was assaulted in the street by police, probably for a simple traffic offence, in Alharika, right in the centre of Damascus. A demonstration of around 3,000 people resulted, the demonstrators shouting for the first time "the Syrian people refuse to be humiliated".

On March 6 the security services arrested around 15 youths in the town of Daraa, near Jordan. These children, influenced by the televised images of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolution, had tagged on the wall of their school the famous slogan "the people want the fall of the regime". They were savagely tortured by the head of security Atef Najib - who is the nephew of the president - their fingernails ripped out; the traces of torture on their bodies were horrible. When their families met this torturer to request the release of their children, this criminal told them, according to their testimony: "forget your children, have other children with your wives, if you are incapable bring your wives to me, I will do the necessary".

On March 15 around thirty courageous youths demonstrated in the mosque of Omayyad in the old city of Damascus, demanding freedom and dignity, with a new slogan "Allah, Syria and freedom only". All were arrested and are still in detention. But it was in the martyr town of Daara that the revolutionary process was unleashed. On March 18, 2011 a

peaceful demonstration invaded the streets demanding the liberation of the children, freedom and the lifting of the state of emergency. The response of the security forces was to use firearms against the peaceful demonstrators, leading to hundreds of dead and wounded as well as any number of arrests.

It was the powder keg of the revolution: on March 20 there were again demonstrations and massacres in Daraa, on March 21 also, still demanding freedom and the lifting of the state of emergency, on March 22 demonstrations in Daraa and Nawa, on March 23 again Daraa and the demonstration-repression cycle set in,

but from March 25 there were also demonstrations in the poor suburbs of Damascus and the coastal town of Latakia. Each demonstration with its batch of dead, wounded and arrested.

From the end of March the movement of opposition became national. Assad made his first speech since the beginning of the unrest on March 15; he neglected the demands for freedom and democracy of the demonstrations, stating that these demonstrations were nothing other than a western conspiracy against his regime, and he presented no apologies or regret to the victims.

This speech was seen by the Syrian masses as an insult and an affront to

their legitimate demands. From this date the revolutionary process spread across the national territory and the number of demonstrators grew visibly. On July 1 the number of demonstrators was estimated at around four million, with around four hundred thousand demonstrating in the town of Hama. The slogan of the demonstrations became that of the other Arab revolutions: "the people want the fall of the regime!"

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Mass murdering the left

2 September 2011

Performed with utmost efficiency, the single worst mass murdering in the history of the labour and left movement in Scandinavia has taken place. Behind the deed stood an ideologically convinced and well planned right wing extremist, whose openly articulated political goal was to destroy socialism, Marxism and the multicultural society. A beast product of decades of massive bombardment of anything that has to do with socialism has shown itself to the world in a bloodbath of young, peaceful and defenceless socialists. But in our Swedish mass media, editors, politicians, TV talk shows and experts, are speaking about the danger coming from "extremists", whether from the right or the left.

"Just as for the extreme left, Islamism and other sects that celebrates violence, we should not be too surprised when the words of hate take the physical form of mass murder and terror", Sweden's biggest daily Dagens Nyheter writes in an editorial (24 July). The next day the editors add that "not all members of Young Left are accomplices when the autonomous left perform their 'actions' where

people are hurt and the police corps is one of the targets". In the radio program Good Morning Sweden, the Department of Democracy minister from the liberal People's Party compares the massacre in Norway with the Gothenburg riots in 2001. The so-called extremist expert Anna-Lena Lodenius wants to "broaden the perspectives" and talk about "lonely men who feel that they are marginalised, not least those who are also unemployed and/or with little education" (DN Debatt, 24 July).

These shameful insinuations serve the purpose of reshuffling the cards and make both right and left equally the culprits. Yes, they aim for a ruthless plundering of the victims, they exploit the grief and the terror for vested interests, by saying that left activists and anti fascists, unemployed and poor, are a part of the same magma out of which the monster Anders Breivik poured out.

But Breivik, the son of a diplomat and a long standing member of the right-wing populist Progressive Party in Norway, a man with Christian and conservative values, he was no lumpen

proletarian who had lost his unemployment benefits. He was no street fighter and certainly not the inverted mirror image of some "left extremist". He was charged with bourgeois Christian and anti-socialist values that had been extended into extreme fantasies about the world and his own calling in it. The ruthlessness of a psychopath was the trigger off the mass murder.

In this way, Breivik comprises the refined fanatisation of thirty years of right wing propaganda, from the anti-communist crusade against socialism and welfare states in the 1980's, via the islamophobic Huntington with his "battle of civilisations" in the 1990's, to the "war against terror" and the massive return of right wing extremism into European politics in the 2000's.

Today's efforts by the whole political spectrum - xenophobic parties like the Sweden Democrats included - to establish a smoke screen of symmetry between extremism to the right and to the left, whilst doing lip service to "the open democratic society", cannot be left unanswered.

The labour movement and the left in Scandinavia have been the target of the worst and most murderous attack ever. Never before - not even in war time - have so many socialist in Scandinavia become victims in one single attack. This blow is directed against us all. The scope of the right wing terror must be made perfectly clear, the responsibility of anti-socialism must be scrutinised into its bone, its fanatics confronted, its

networks torn apart, its violent thugs arrested and its riff-raff culture and mentality eradicated.

The Norwegian socialist youngsters who were butchered must not have sacrificed their young lives in vain. Their martyrdom for the socialist vision of the equal value of all human beings, cherished in a society of social justice and equality where oppression is no more, must lead us to our

promise: that we will never be put down, that we will never give up, that we will never be defeated.

After thirty years of right-wing offensive, and against today's hypocrisy and smoke screens, the whole labour movement and the left must let the storm blow. The mass murder in Norway is the ultimate and most terrifying consequence of this right-wing offensive.

Foundations of an ecosocialist strategy

2 September 2011, by Daniel Tanuro

Contrary to the false but extremely popular Easter Island metaphor advanced by Jared Diamond, [12] the environmental deterioration we are now observing is not at all comparable to the damage that may have occurred in previous historical periods. The differences are not only quantitative (the seriousness and global scale of ecological problems) but also and above all qualitative. While all the environmental crises of the past stemmed from social tendencies to chronic under-production, hence the fear of shortages, the current problems originate in the converse tendency to over-production and over-consumption, which is specific to generalised commodity production.

Consequently, the expression "ecological crisis" is inappropriate. It is not nature that is in crisis, but the historically determined relationship between humanity and its environment. This crisis is not due to the intrinsic characteristics of the human species but to the mode of production that became dominant about two centuries ago - "capitalism" and the modes of consumption and mobility that it entails. The serious damages to ecosystems (climate change, chemical pollution, swift decline in biodiversity, soil degradation, destruction of the tropical forest, etc.) constitute one dimension of the global systemic crisis. Together, they express the

incompatibility between capitalism and respect for natural limits.

Productivism without limits

The fundamental reason for this incompatibility is straightforward. Under the whip of competition, every owner of capital is permanently seeking to replace living labour by dead labour, that is, to replace workers with more productive machines, since the latter procure surplus profit in addition to the average profit. Needless to say, this operation would be meaningless for the capitalist if it were not accompanied by an attempt to eliminate his weaker competitors through the increase in the mass of commodities placed on the market at low prices. The innovation, in this mode of production, lies not in the reduction in the volume of labour but in the never-ending accumulation of capital.

Accordingly, the capitalist's constant search for new fields of added value leads him to produce a never-ending quantity of useless and harmful commodities which, to produce surplus value, must constantly create increasingly artificial outlets and needs. "Productivism" - producing in order to produce - necessarily implies "consuming in order to

consume" and is part of the genetic code of this mode of production, just like commodity fetishism. Capitalism, said Schumpeter, "not only never is but never can be stationary." [13] Indeed, if capitalism were to be stationary, it would be necessary to abolish competition between the numerous capitals that make up Capital, which is obviously absurd.

But, it may be objected, if efficiency in the use of resources were to increase more rapidly than the mass of commodities produced, the expanded reproduction of capital would not be accompanied by an increased depletion of natural resources. Capitalism would then be ecologically sustainable. Indeed. That is the thesis of the decoupling between GDP growth and the ecological footprint. It is illustrated by the so-called Kuznets bell curve, according to which the environmental impact of a given society will increase to a peak, then decline with the increase in its wealth and therefore the development of its productive forces.

True, of all the modes of production that have existed in history, capitalism is the one that has most spectacularly increased the productivity of labour and thus efficiency in the use of resources. That is because the quest for surplus profit that prompts mechanisation simultaneously favours increased savings in the use of natural

resources. However, this observation does not challenge the ecocidal nature of the system, and the Kuznets curve is false. On the one hand, the increase in efficiency is necessarily asymptotic, not a linear function of the increase in fixed capital – otherwise one would have to conclude that perpetual movement is possible since, if carried to an extreme, labour could be performed without loss of energy. (This glaring error was committed by the experts who assessed the share of European electricity consumption that could be covered by the Desertec solar power project in the Sahara. [14]

On the other hand, empirical observation shows that increasing the volume of production does more than offset the increase in efficiency, which is only relative. A striking example is the case of the automobile: the efficiency of the engines increases, but the global needs for hydrocarbon fuels and the greenhouse gas emissions explode as a result of the never-ending increase in the number of vehicles. Growth-obsessed capitalism inevitably implies a growing consumption of resources, which is irreconcilable with their finite nature and their rates of renewal.

The alarming increase in serious ecological problems poses the question of the theoretical limits to capitalist growth and consequently capitalist degradation of the environment. To answer this, we must clearly grasp that capital is not a thing, it is a social relation of exploitation, the development of which was historically made possible by the prior appropriation of natural resources (land, water, forests, etc.) by the ruling classes on behalf of profit. This appropriation then entailed that of the labour force, transformed into a waged commodity. The pillage of resources and exploitation of labor – when it is considered from the social standpoint – are therefore the two sides of the same coin.

However, leaving aside its social component (cooperation and its forms), human labour power can also be considered from the thermodynamic angle, as one among other natural resources (the human body is a converter of energy). In this

case, pillage and exploitation are in fact but one and the same process of destruction, and surplus labour can be described as a quantity of energy monopolised by the employer.

Once this is recognised, it is possible to answer the question about the theoretical limits of capital. On the one hand, the expropriation of the direct producers, their alienation from the nourishing earth, has created a social class whose only means of subsistence is the sale of its labour power in return for a wage.

On the other hand, the worker who is hired as an employee finds ready-made, placed at his or her disposal by the employer, the necessary ingredients for his or her productive activity – tools, buildings and energy – that are directly or indirectly derived from resources taken from nature through labour or transformed by it.

In this context, and taking into account the fact that the increase in efficiency is only relative, it goes without saying that the incessant quest for surplus profits through capitalist productivism weighs on both the variable and constant fractions of capital, so that it must inevitably consume an ever-greater absolute quantity of labour power and natural resources even though it favours their relative economy. Seen in this light, Marx's enigmatic formula that capital has no limit other than capital itself simply means that this mode of production will stop on its own terms only after it has exhausted the only two sources of "all wealth: the land and the labourer." [15]

This conclusion leaves so little room for optimism that some people desperately cling to the idea that some endogenous mechanism not yet identified might block the system before it has reached this theoretical limit. However, we must resign ourselves to noting that there is nothing of the kind, nor can there be. The reason, once again, is straightforward and has to do with the fundamental laws of capitalism: this mode based exclusively on the law of labour value has as its sole purpose the production of exchange values, not use values. Since value is determined

by the labour time socially necessary for production, it is obvious that capital does not have any means that would enable it to account spontaneously for the resources that nature gratuitously puts at the disposal of humanity. The money form – the symbol and essence of value – by its very abstraction and the complete reversal of perspective that it engenders (money seems to give value to commodities, although it is commodities that give money its value) creates the illusion that unlimited material accumulation is possible.

It should be explained that capital, although it counts and measures everything, is incapable of taking natural resources into account both qualitatively and quantitatively, as is shown by the irresponsible insouciance with which it irreversibly destroys the stocks of numerous resources despite warnings of all kinds. This madness has even found its theoreticians in the person of ultraliberals who – in the face of all the evidence – defend the absurd thesis of the complete substitutability of natural resources by products of human activity.

A political answer?

Of course, SOME capital is invested massively in the green sector of the economy, for the profits there are attractive, thanks especially to public subsidies. But "green capitalism" as such is an oxymoron. The only meaningful issue is to what degree the ecological blindness of the commodity mode of production might be offset by policy measures exogenous to the strictly economic sphere. In view of what was said earlier, the answer is obvious: the efficiency of ecological policies depends entirely on the determination with which those who advocate them dare to challenge the freedom of capital, and to construct the necessary relationship of forces to impose them (which in turn involves linking the solution of the ecological question to the struggles of the exploited: the fight against unemployment, poverty, social inequality, discrimination and deterioration of working conditions).

And this is where the shoe pinches. Tim Jackson, for example, is probably one of the non-Marxist authors who best understands the productivist logic of capitalism as the fundamental cause of environmental degradation. In *Prosperity Without Growth*, rejecting superficial explanations, he writes perceptively that “the throw-away society is not so much a consequence of consumer greed as a structural prerequisite for survival,” for the system needs to “sell more goods, to innovate continually.” [16] But Jackson sidesteps the conclusion to be drawn from his own analysis: instead of challenging the mode of production, he veers toward questioning a “desire for novelty and consumption” that in his view is part of human nature. As a result, the mountain gives forth a mouse:

[Translation]

On the ecological side, *Prosperity Without Growth* pleads for government to set harsh limits on the use of resources subject only to environmental constraints. And that is what should be done.... However, one cannot pretend to ignore, as Jackson does, that the business class successfully opposes all drastic environmental regulation, even in those cases where the need for it is questioned the least;

On the social side, Jackson has the merit of arguing for a reduction in labour time, but he subordinates this measure to the maintenance of corporate competitiveness, so no figure is assigned to it. In his view, the reduction in labour time is in fact a form of flexibility, not an immediate collective response to unemployment or a tool for redistributing the wealth produced (without reduction in wages). He envisages it only as a last resort, whenever the conversion of economists to a new “macro-economic model” would not suffice to simply displace the focal point of economic activity from the value producing sector to dematerialised services. [17]

Generally, all of the proposals advanced to politically remedy the ecosuicidal nature of capital trip over the same obstacles: the logic of profit and the class nature of the institutions. [18]

Mirage of internalisation

Einstein is reputed to have said “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” This theorem is perfectly applicable to the idea that capitalism could embark on the path of sustainability if some political authorities assigned a price to natural resources. Since the ecological crisis is a consequence of generalised commodity production, the destruction of the environment cannot be stopped by “commodifying” water, air, carbon, genes or any other natural resource. Not only does this “internalisation of externalities” not bring us any closer to a solution, it takes us in the opposite direction. Needless to say, the transformation of natural resources into commodities implies their appropriation by capital. Accordingly, the matter is settled because capital, by subjecting them to the law of labour-value, thereby tends to remove them from any governing principle other than profit.

In any case, independently of these considerations, and even more fundamentally, attempts to assign a price to natural resources come up against an insurmountable theoretical difficulty: how to evaluate in monetary terms properties whose production is not measurable in hours of labour, and which therefore have no value, and whose destruction is, moreover, deferred in time? Liberal economists attempting to answer this puzzle squabble over the current conversion rate and question to what degree consumers are willing to pay for the environment or to accept its degradation. The price of natural resources varies, then, according to whether the persons who are questioned are wealthy or poverty-stricken. Pushed to the limit, this method clearly reveals its absurdity: what commodity value should be given to sunlight, knowing that life on Earth depends on it?

The impasse of commodity calculation appears clearly in the proposal for a carbon tax to make fossil energies more expensive than renewables and consequently reduce carbon gas

emissions. As we know, to have a reasonable chance of not overly exceeding a 2°C increase in temperature from the pre-industrial era, these emissions must decrease by 80 to 95% by 2050 in the developed capitalist countries, and by 50 to 85% world-wide, with the inflection point being reached by no later than 2015. [19] These ranges “and it would be prudent to aim for the higher figures” mean abandoning fossil fuels within two generations, although these energy sources account for 80% of our present energy needs (and petroleum is the raw material of the petrochemical industry).

In fact, the scope of the reductions to be achieved, given the urgency and the size of the difference in cost between fossils and renewables, is such that even a tax of \$600 a ton would not suffice (it would simply allow a reduction in global emissions by one-half by 2050, according to the International Energy Agency. [20] Then, armed with this ecological concept (before the term existed), he returned to the issue of soils in order to advance a radical programmatic perspective: abolition of the separation between town and country, the indispensable complement in his view to the gradual disappearance of the separation between manual and intellectual labour.

It must be stressed here that the expression “rational” management should not give rise to confusion. Nature, for Marx, is “the inorganic body of man.” The correct metabolism of the whole is not achieved by a bureaucracy of green technocrats but by the suppression of social classes. Indeed, the division of society renders impossible any conscious and organised mastery of exchange of matter with the environment. Not only because the drive for profit impels the bosses to pillage natural resources but also because their capitalist appropriation means that the resources are arrayed against the exploited as hostile forces from which the latter are alienated. Added to that is the competition between workers and the fear of unemployment, which encourages each, individually, to desire the profitable operation of “his” or “her” company, and thus to collaborate involuntarily in

productivism. Finally, based on a certain level of development of capital, commodity consumption gives the workers a certain number of meagre compensations for their alienation from production.

None of these mechanisms can be broken except by the development of class solidarity on an ever-broader scale. That is why, for Marx, the rational regulation of the social metabolism can be realised only by the “associated producers.” And Marx explained that it is this alone that provides “the only possible freedom.”

Although Lenin referred to it in some positions he took on the agrarian question, [21]

and Bukharin made an intelligent presentation of it in his handbook on Historical Materialism, [22] the Marxist concept of rational regulation of material exchanges subsequently sank into oblivion.

No Marxist thinker assigned it the importance it deserves, and in fact none of them saw its relevance when the ecological question became a social issue in the 1960s. This is not the place to inquire into the reasons for this discontinuity in revolutionary Marxism. [23]

Suffice it to warn the reader against simplistic interpretations: Stalinism is not the sole culprit, although in this field as well it did signify a terrible theoretical regression. [24] Rather, we will emphasise the fact that there is an urgent need to assign “Marx’s ecology” a central place in the theoretical thinking and programmatic development of the Marxists. [25]

The problem of global warming illustrates this need. The saturation of the atmosphere in CO₂, mainly due to the combustion of fossil fuels “that is, a short-circuit in the long cycle of carbon” is a flagrant case of irrational management of material exchanges, and this irrationality confronts humanity with a terrible dilemma:

- On the one hand, three billion people live in disgraceful conditions. Their legitimate needs can only be met by increasing material production, and

thus processing resources removed from the environment. This means consuming energy, 80% of which is of fossil origin today, a source of greenhouse gas;

- On the other hand, the climate system is on the verge of a heart attack. If we are to avoid irreversible catastrophes (the major victims of which will be among the three billion people aspiring to a dignified existence), greenhouse gas emissions must be radically reduced. This means reducing the consumption of the fossil energies now needed for the processing of the resources taken from the environment, and reducing material production.

Within the short period of 40 years now left to us, according to the IPCC “and absent an extraordinary scientific revolution in energy” there is simply no acceptable capitalist solution to these simultaneous equations. A system based on competition for profit is quite simply incapable of satisfying non-solvable human needs on a mass scale while sustainably reducing the consumption of energy and material production. Attaining either of these objectives separately is already incompatible with the logic of capital, so how can they be achieved in conjunction? That this is not possible is clear from an examination of the climate scenarios proposed by governments and international institutions.

The Blue Map scenario of the International Energy Agency, for example, aims at a reduction in global emissions of 50% by 2050. [26] It is more than probable that this objective is insufficient; in any case, it could be achieved only by massive recourse to nuclear energy, agrofuels and so-called “clean coal” (not to mention shale gas and oil sands). Blue Map would involve the construction each year, for more than forty years, of 32 nuclear power plants with a 1,000 MW capacity, and 45 new “clean” coal-fueled plants with a 500 MW capacity. There is no point in going further: the terrible catastrophe of Fukushima, Japan, is enough to show the aberration in such projects.

The strategic choice is therefore the

following:

- either we leave capitalism behind by radically restricting the sphere and volume of capitalist production and transportation, and it is possible to limit to the maximum the damages of global warming while guaranteeing a quality human development based exclusively on renewable energies within the perspective of a society based on some other economy of time;

- or we remain within the capitalist accumulation logic, and climate deregulation radically limits the right to existence of hundreds of millions of human beings, while future generations are condemned to cope with the problems originating in the project creep of some dangerous technologies.

Obviously, we will opt for the first solution, but it must be emphasised that strict environmental constraints will subject the transition to socialism to some previously unforeseen conditions. There is no over-estimating the scope of the challenge. In the European Union, for example, reducing emissions by 60% (they should be reduced by 95%!) without resort to nuclear power would necessitate a reduction of about 40% in final energy demand. [27] It is not easy to gauge the cascading implications on material production and transportation, but it seems obvious that the objective will not be achieved simply by eliminating unnecessary and harmful production (weapons, advertising, luxury yachts and private planes, etc.), fighting the planned obsolescence of products, or reducing the ostentatious consumption of the wealthiest layers of the ruling class. More radical measures will be needed, and these will have some effects on the population as a whole, at least in the developed capitalist countries. In other words, the transition to socialism must be made in conditions very different from those of the 20th century.

One indication is provided by the estimate of the share of agribusiness in total greenhouse gas emissions. According to the campaign “Ne mange pas le monde,” from 44 to 57% of greenhouse gas emissions are due to

the present model of production, distribution and consumption of farm and forest products. This figure is obtained by adding together emissions due to strictly agricultural activities (11 to 15%), deforestation (15 to 18%), and the handling, transportation and storing of foods (15 to 20%) and organic residues (3 to 4%). [28]

The fight for the optimum possible climate stabilisation cannot be limited, therefore, to the expropriation of the expropriators-polluters-squanderers. The change in property relations is only the necessary "but not sufficient" condition for an extremely profound social change involving a substantial modification in social modes of consumption and mobility. These modifications "must be placed in perspective now, for they are urgently needed and they have immediate implications. This is possible, for they apply cultural and ideological mechanisms that have a certain autonomy in relation to the productive base of society. Although they themselves do not involve any structural change, they must be considered an integral part of the anticapitalist alternative. To the degree that they lead to collective practices, they can promote increased consciousness and organisation.

A new period

The Transitional Program written by Leon Trotsky in 1938 begins with the statement that "The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism." It concludes that "The objective prerequisites... have not only 'ripened'; they have begun to get somewhat rotten. Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind."

The founder of the Red Army refers firstly, of course, to the historical context: the victory of fascism and Nazism, the crushing of the Spanish revolution, and the imminent world war. His judgment on the putrefaction

of the objective conditions, however, seems to have broader historical implications. This theme reappears, moreover, in Ernest Mandel's writing: "Growing productive forces with growing commodity-money relationships can in fact move a society farther from the socialist goal instead of bringing it closer." [29] A remarkable quotation, the strategic implications of which deserve to be explored.

For this is, in fact, the unprecedented situation with which we are confronted: in the developed countries, capitalism has gone too far in the growth of the material productive forces, such that a worthy socialist alternative implies no longer an advance, but a form of retreat. (We are speaking of the material forces, and not questioning the need for developing knowledge and cooperation among producers, of course.) It is this new historical conjuncture that is expressed in the pressing need to produce and transport less, in order to consume much less energy and totally eliminate fossil CO2 emissions by the end of this century.

The fact that the development of the material productive forces has begun to move us objectively further from a socialist alternative is the major fact on which the new concept of ecosocialism is founded and justified. Far from being only a new label on the bottle, this concept introduces at least five novel aspects, which I have outlined in my book *L'impossible capitalisme vert*, and which I will briefly recall here: [30]

1. The notion of "human mastery of nature" must be abandoned. The complexity, the unknowns and the evolving nature of the biosphere involve an irreducible degree of uncertainty. The systemic social and environmental interrelationship must be conceived as a process in constant movement, as a production of nature.

2. The classic definition of socialism must be completed. The only possible socialism now is one that satisfies actual human needs (freed from commodity alienation), democratically determined by the interested parties themselves within the limits of the

resources and by carefully questioning the environmental impact of these needs and the way in which they are satisfied.

3. It is necessary to go beyond the compartmentalised, utilitarian and linear vision of nature as the physical platform on which humanity operates, as the store from which it draws the necessary resources in the production of its social existence, and as the dump in which it unloads its garbage. Nature is at once the platform, the store, the waste receptacle and the set of living processes which, thanks to the contribution of solar energy, circulate material between these poles while constantly reorganising it. Wastes and their mode of deposit must therefore be compatible in quantity and quality with the capacities and rhythms of recycling by the ecosystems. In other words, the proper functioning of the whole depends on biodiversity, which must be protected.

4. Energy sources and the methods of conversion that are used are not socially neutral. Socialism, consequently, cannot be defined, as Lenin did, as "soviets plus electricity." The capitalist energy system is centralised, anarchic, wasteful, inefficient, dead-labour intensive, based on non-renewable sources and oriented toward accumulation. A socialist transformation worthy of the name necessitates its gradual replacement by a decentralised, planned, thrifty, efficient, living-labour intensive system, based exclusively on renewable sources and oriented toward the production of durable, recyclable and reusable use-values. This concerns not only the production of energy in the narrow sense but the entire industrial apparatus, agriculture, transportation, recreation, and land development and planning. This extremely profound transformation can only be achieved on a world scale.

5. Going beyond the threshold from which the growth in the material forces of production complicates the passage to socialism involves a critical attitude toward increasing the productivity of labour. In a number of fields the implementation of an anticapitalist alternative respectful of

ecological balances necessitates the replacement of dead labour by living labour. This is clearly the case in agriculture, where the ultra-mechanised agribusiness system, a huge consumer of inputs and fossil energy, will have to give way to another mode of operation that is more intensive in human labour. This applies as well to the energy sector, for decentralised production based on renewables will necessitate a lot of work, particularly in maintenance.

Generally speaking, the quantity of living labour must increase radically in all fields directly linked to the environment. A parallel can be drawn with personal care, education and other sectors in which the left considers the development of public employment as a given: human intelligence and emotion, combined in a culture of "care-taking," are in fact necessary in matters directly pertaining to interaction with the biosphere.

Some dogmatic minds will fear that these thoughts open the door to a revision of revolutionary Marxism in the form of concessions to the austerity offensive against the working class in the developed countries. There is no truth to this. It is not a question of yielding the least parcel of terrain to the guilt-tripping

discourses that use the ecological crisis to try to disarm the labour movement and its representatives.

One line of demarcation between ecosocialism, on the one hand, and the political ecology of degrowth, on the other, is the attitude toward the class struggle. We remain firmly convinced that the exploited learn through the experience of collective struggles, which begin with the defense of wages, jobs, and working conditions. Every struggle of the workers, even the most immediate, must be supported and considered as an opportunity to increase consciousness and orient it toward a socialist perspective.

Within this strategic framework, the observation that the socialist transition must now operate under environmental constraint does not weaken anticapitalist convictions; on the contrary, it reinforces them. However, only the truth is revolutionary. We cannot hide the fact that the socialist transformation will very probably involve renouncing certain goods, services and habits that profoundly influence the daily life of broad layers of the population, at least in the developed capitalist countries.

The task, then, is to advocate objectives capable of compensating this loss by a substantial advance in

the quality of life. In our view, the priority should be given to the pursuit of two such objectives: (1) gratuity of basic goods (water, energy, mobility) up to an average social volume (which implies the extension of the public sector); (2) a radical reduction (50%) in working time, without loss of salary, with proportional hiring and a decrease in the pace of work.

In the last instance, said Marx, all economics comes down to economy of time. To affirm the necessity of producing and consuming less is to demand the time to live, and to live better. It is to open a fundamental debate on the mastery of social time, on what is necessary and to whom, why, and in what quantities. It is to awaken the collective desire for a world without wars, in which we work less and otherwise, in which we pollute less, in which we develop social relations, in which we substantially improve welfare, public health, education and democratic participation. A world in which the associated producers re-learn how to "dialogue" collectively with nature. That world will not be less rich than the present world (as the Right says), nor "as rich for the great majority of the population" (as a certain Left says). It will be infinitely less futile, less stressed, less hurried "in a word, richer.

The Left Bloc and Resistance across Europe

1 September 2011, by **Feyzi Ismail**, **Jorge Costa**

FI : What kind of mobilisations has Portugal seen in recent months over the financial crisis and austerity drive?

JC: The most recent mobilisation was on 12th March this year. In response to an appeal called on Facebook, over 200,000 people demonstrated in central Lisbon against rising unemployment and attacks on wages and pensions. This is a huge number of people in a metropolitan area of around 3.5 million. The organisers were four young people. From that

date until today, it's small groups of young people that are mobilising and it's just beginning, but we have big expectations.

FI : Can you describe the IMF intervention and the current political situation?

JC: The political climate is very subdued in the country for the moment. Of course it was already quiet because of summer but generally speaking we are still living

the aftermath of the elections and the victory of the right. Elections were held in June after the resignation of the Prime Minister, José Sócrates, of the Socialist Party - the equivalent of New Labour in Britain. The government is now a coalition made up of the main bourgeois party, the PSD (Partido Social Democrata), which is conservative, and the PP (Partido Popular), which is even more rightwing.

There were austerity measures in

place throughout the socialist government, with wage cuts and cuts in welfare. But last year there were two new austerity packages introduced, which included rises in VAT, freezes on pensions, further wage cuts, cuts in public services and a big plan of privatisation. So half of the Greek-style austerity package was already introduced before the IMF coming in, during the socialist government, and now the other half is being implemented through the IMF directly, by their presence here, and by the current government.

The IMF is loaning Portugal €78 billion from this year, for three years. It's going to condition every aspect of society: wages, pensions, welfare, public services, labour laws and so on. Unemployment benefit will be reduced by a third. All this together will produce an even bigger rise in unemployment and the recession will deepen.

FI: What is the public mood over the bailout?

JC: Many people believe that things will be better after this. That was the spirit that led them to vote for the political parties that support the troika - the EU, European Central Bank and the IMF. Most people think the left is correct in theory, but that it has no policy to answer the blackmail of the bankruptcy, and so many people voted for the parties that brought in the IMF. Soon I believe people will understand this policy is wrong and it will not answer their problems. They will understand that it will not pay the debt and it will lead us to a situation in which we have a bigger debt and fewer resources to address it.

There is also fear. Unemployment is exploding - we are now reaching figures of 800,000 unemployed, which is 12 percent of the population. So it's very high and this produces a social fear of course. We feel it in a very real way. So we are living in a moment when people are waiting to see what happens. The impact of the cuts will be felt more deeply in the coming months. Further wage cuts and tax rises will be implemented from next month, and Christmas bonuses will be cut from this Christmas. So this will change the political and social

situation. The left must prepare itself and discuss ways of mobilising amongst the widest section of the population under these new conditions.

FI: Do people look at Greece and say that it only delayed another crisis?

JC: There are people looking at Greece. But the mainstream media tells people that Portugal is not Greece, that we should not behave like them, and that we're not in as much debt as Greece. So people feel that the situation looks the same but they are told it's not the same, that we have more options. Ireland is also shown as an example of how the economic crisis is not unfolding like in Greece - it's portrayed as a success.

These are times of intense media propaganda. There are news programmes on TV telling us how to cook for €2 per person. They are explaining to people how they can feed themselves for less money, because they will be earning less money. And so the mainstream media is assuming a role in this process of mass manipulation of the facts and of the future of this IMF intervention.

There's a big transfer of wealth taking place, from the working class to the financial sector and the bosses. The media operate to build a consensus to push these policies forward. And this all builds an atmosphere of inevitability: let's try to adapt, save and so on. So the conditions for mobilising are not very easy. We need to be aware that times of foreign intervention are times of very harsh conditions for activists.

But against expectations and every prediction, the way that people rose up in the streets last March shows that we have to be ready to answer people and help them find ways of resisting. Spain is a good example. There have been mass mobilisations on the scale we haven't seen in years. These mobilisations are spontaneous and have a direction of their own, which has its problems, but the mobilisations also have a very deep credibility in society. And they can develop. We need to encourage them to develop into mass coalitions to fight the cuts and fight unemployment and

build more permanent forms of organisation and participation. In the squares of Barcelona and Madrid and elsewhere they are signs of that possibility. We hope that we can move in that direction in Portugal in the short-term.

FI: What has been the Left Bloc's response to the IMF intervention?

First, we want an audit of the debt. We want to identify its elements, understand who our creditors are, how much we owe, for what and what the money has been spent on. In short, we want know what is being demanded of Portugal. And how we got here.

Second, we want to renegotiate the debt. Because there are parts of the debt that are the result of corruption, and therefore illegitimate and shouldn't be paid. So we need to renegotiate the whole debt - the size and terms of the debt, the interest and the time in which it should be paid. Because even if we had a very strict austerity plan for the next 20 years, and by some miracle these austerity policies brought us 4 or 5 percent economic growth a year, even in that case we wouldn't pay the debt in the time the IMF is proposing. So we are working on science fiction. The debt is not feasible even under the most ideal circumstances. So we must renegotiate the debt and do it now because we will be in a weaker condition to do it afterwards.

At the same time we are demanding the development of financial economic instruments on the level of the EU to address the economic crisis and help the peripheral countries find solutions to their debt crises. Parts of these debts should be mutualised, mainly through the creation of Eurobonds, and this has to be done on a European scale by way of developing a European level fiscal policy, so that we can build the resources to redistribute wealth.

Of course we know that the EU today is not an institutional space where this can happen. So this has to be built by a mass mobilisation on a European scale. It's a very difficult situation for the left when the European bourgeoisie is organising a mass transfer of wealth from workers to

themselves, and when they have developed the institutional architecture to facilitate this - from the monetary plans to the financial institutions to the political establishments, which are built to organise this transfer - it's very difficult for the left to present an alternative to this framework. But that's what the Left Bloc is trying to do.

FI: Are there circumstances in which the Left Bloc would argue that the debt should not be paid at all?

JC: The troika is building the conditions for that. They are creating an economy in this country that will bring us to a level of indebtedness that will obligate us to refuse the debt. That's for sure. But our position for the moment is to renegotiate the debt with our creditors, refuse the illegitimate parts of this debt and make huge fiscal reforms to generate the resources to face the social crisis.

FI: What further mobilisations are planned and how are the unions involved?

JC: On 10th September there is an appeal for a demonstration in support of teachers, whose numbers are now being reduced dramatically. The unions calculate between 15 and 25,000 teachers will lose their jobs starting this September because class sizes and working hours are being reduced. Over the past few years there have been tens of thousands of teachers contracted by the state under very precarious conditions, and now we are seeing the first victims of this policy. So the demonstration on 10th September will be very important.

Also the organisers of the 12th March demonstration are now calling another demonstration, which is an international appeal, together with other movements, including those of precarious young people and the unemployed, on 15th October. It's just beginning as a grassroots initiative, so the Left Bloc is in solidarity with it. We will help mobilise for it, and participate in it, and some of our members are helping to organise it, but we want it to live and create its own space in society.

We believe Europe can turn 15th October into a continental-scale mobilisation against cuts and austerity. But we also need to develop new forms of permanent, direct, democratic participation, which are not necessarily the old trade unions, or not necessarily the old associations. We should learn from the good experiences that workers and mass movements have made in the last century to understand what should be done to fight.

We should not be conservatives and say that the old forms of organisation are the only effective ones, but we should also not worship the cult of the new. We should see new tools and forms of expression, participation and democracy as ways of avoiding the same mistakes, of finding better ways of engaging people - and large numbers of people - to have a say and develop their consciousness. At the same time we need to build antagonistic organisations, the Counterfires. We need more than 'likes' on Facebook. We need to have our own media, we need to have our own organisation, not just in the squares but also inside workplaces and schools - to put fear into the ruling classes, which is the sentiment on the streets of Greece.

FI: How does the Left Bloc organise and what has it been doing specifically around the IMF intervention?

JC: We organise in local groups and across sectors, including the environment, youth and students, media and others. The website in particular is important for us - at peak times we have over 10,000 visits a day. At a national level, we also co-ordinate amongst the municipalities, and our members participate in various campaigns. We have a free newspaper that comes out every two months with a circulation of 150,000 copies. This has been a real success for us. In the past there has been a tradition of selling the paper, but we lost it. The fact is that people have had enough of it, they are used to free papers, and of course there is the web. We reach more people and that's the point. People respect it as a paper and take it, and members engage with it because it's a big job to produce and give out.

We also have co-ordination meetings, assembly meetings and we organise public meetings. There are hundreds of initiatives locally and Lisbon-wide. And we have branches across the country in all the main cities and in most urban areas. We have elected people at local level and have two MPs in the European Parliament. The founding organisations of the Left Bloc organise as associations, with their own activities and publications. There are three associations of this kind: a group that split from the Communist Party, known as Manifesto, UDP (União Democrática Popular), which has Marxist-Leninist roots, and PSR or Revolutionary Socialist Party, which is part of the Fourth International. The Left Bloc is organising its annual socialism conference 9-11th September and a conference on debt the first week of November.

The Left Bloc is also participating in an audit commission on the debt. The idea was along the lines of a Citizens' Audit Commission, like in Greece, based on the voluntary participation of union activists, left activists and critical economists that can analyse parts of the debt, understand what's been spent on specific things, like soccer stadiums, submarines, corruption, health and so on, and produce a report on the kind of debt we have. So our critique of the debt is informed. But it's only just beginning.

FI: Most economists who understand the financial crisis in Europe talk in apocalyptic terms. What do you see happening?

JC: Yes, the possibility of a total crisis in Europe, with the disintegration of the Euro and an even deeper recession than the one we have now, is a possibility. It's even a possibility worldwide because of the repercussions that the recessions in the US and Europe can have on emerging economies. But in Europe they are playing a very risky game. The German bourgeoisie is leading the process in a risky and arrogant way since they are trying to transfer as much as they can and as quickly as possible into their own pockets. And although they are being told by every Nobel prize-winning economist and even moderate politicians to watch out - you could be bringing Europe's

financial system to a point of no return - they are still trying to take it as far as they can. The German and French banks are mainly the ones going in this direction.

The problem is that German and French banks were the ones that built the debt of the peripheral economies. These banks lent money to the Portuguese banks so they could lend, in a very easy way, to ordinary people: to buy houses instead of renting them, to build new houses instead of renovating them. If you go to the centre of Lisbon houses everywhere are abandoned. Ask the German banks how this was possible.

Mass private debt has been created over the past 20 years, but mainly in the last decade. Germany was able to produce a high degree of capital accumulation over this period mainly for two reasons - they were selling technology to emerging countries and

at the same time cutting wages in Germany. So they put this capital on the financial markets and lent it to the peripheral economies to favour credit policies that in the end went wrong. And the bailouts have been transferred to the state. In Portugal, the way public debt has risen is very visible. The banks pay almost no taxes in Portugal - they find ways of avoiding or minimising taxes. Last year they paid around 5 percent. The Left Bloc has had some important interventions around this but there is no mass campaign against it.

There will be more demonstrations in Athens very soon, and in Spain the possibility also exists for this movement to develop. In Portugal there will be a movement. The ruling classes in Europe are turning to repression in a very harsh way, and they will do it across Europe. What happened in Britain after the riots will

be followed elsewhere. That's why we need mass mobilisation at a European level, to stop the assault of the ruling classes and defend democracy.

The Left Bloc will definitely have a presence at the European Conference Against Austerity in London. We are very interested in building wider unity and popular participation around the crisis. And we must build this unity across borders and on a European scale. That's why this conference is so important.

This interview was conducted by Feyzi Ismail for Counterfire [<http://www.counterfire.org/index.ph...>].

The European Conference Against Austerity will take place on Saturday, 1st October at the Camden Centre in London, with a range of international speakers, debates and workshops.