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Rio Spring - Left fights local elections in next Olympic capital

29 September 2012, by **Iain Bruce**

The PSOL was formed mainly by former members of the PT who left or were expelled after the election of Lula as president ten years ago. In spite of many difficulties, internal and external, it has survived as the only serious attempt to build a broad party of the Brazilian left. In Belem, in the north, it has a strong chance of winning the city hall; its candidate, Edmilson Rodrigues (a member of the APS - Socialist Popular Action - current in the PSOL), was Mayor of Belem for the PT in the 1990s and put into practice one of the more radical versions of participatory democracy. In Fortaleza, Renato Roseno (of the Enlace, Fourth International current) has been bordering on 10% in the polls, while after two terms of an originally very left-wing mayor, Luisianne Lins, the PT has lost much credibility and is trailing badly in the polls.

One of the most spectacular advances of the PSOL comes in Rio de Janeiro, where the well-known human rights campaigner and current state deputy, Marcelo Freixo, is running second to the incumbent mayor, Eduardo Paes (who received the Olympic baton from London mayor Boris Johnson in July), representing a coalition of almost all the main capitalist parties, with the backing of FIFA and the IOC to boot.

IVP spoke to two of the PSOL's candidates for local city councillor, one in the city of Rio de Janeiro itself, the other in Niteroi, the city across the bay from Rio.

Renato Silva, known as "Cinco", a sociologist, is active in Rio's popular committee on the Olympics and in the campaign for the legalization of cannabis. Henrique Vieira is a protestant theologian and teacher of sociology in Niteroi, and active in

human rights campaigns. Both are members of Enlace and the Fourth International.

IVP: You went into this campaign for the municipal elections just weeks after the UN's Rio+20 Sustainable Development Summit and the People's counter-summit. What is your balance of that experience, and in particular how has it affected the social movement and the left in Rio?

Henrique In our opinion Rio+20 produced totally inadequate results. The framework of the summit did not address the structural changes needed in the economy, in the logic of extraction, production and distribution of resources at a global level. The political make-up of Rio+20, its ideological and programmatic premises, meant it came up with a very timid proposal for a green

economy, that is completely incapable of changing the productivist logic of capitalism, which in our view is the main cause of the destruction of nature and the inappropriate and irrational expropriation of natural resources.

IVP What about the People's Summit? What impact did that have?

Henrique The People's Summit managed to bring together a variety of social movements and fronts of struggle, mainly from Latin America, and I think that in this sense its achievement was very important. It ended with a public meeting that was historic for Rio de Janeiro, with I think more than 60 thousand people. So that was an important development, as an exchange and synthesis between very diverse experiences and struggles, and as a way of denouncing this 'green economy' that does not represent a real solution for the planet's environmental problems. The People's Summit really advanced this debate and gained an important space in the media, managing to dispute public opinion and show there is an alternative, coming from different directions, and that includes ourselves arguing for ecosocialism as a much better option for civilization..

Renato I think the balance sheet of the People's Summit is very positive, mainly because this summit had an anti-capitalist character. Even though it was very plural and diverse, I think the anti-capitalist idea was very clear, including in the documents. That was very positive. It meant rejecting the logic of the green economy and the notion that capitalism is capable of solving the problems of humanity and establishing a good relationship with the environment.

IVP Let's move on to the local, or municipal, elections themselves. These are happening in a context where president Dilma Rousseff of the PT (Workers' Party) is riding high in the opinion polls, even though there's been a sharp slow-down in Brazil's economic growth. What do you think is the significance of these local elections in the national context?

Renato It's really a difficult situation for the left in Brazil, because ever since the capitulation of the PT, there has been a vacuum in terms of the organisation of the left. And even though many of us have been trying to fill that space, the retreats of the last decade, with the capitulation of most of the social movements linked to the PT, leave us in quite a fragile situation. But now in Rio de Janeiro especially, with the PSOL's candidate for mayor, Marcelo Freixo [1], the situation is a bit different.

Because of the PT's policy of alliances, for the first time since the end of the military dictatorship, various left parties, or supposedly left parties, have no candidate of their own. Their coalition's candidate for mayor, Eduardo Paes, is from the PMDB (the biggest centre-right party and part of the PT's governing coalition). So the PT has no candidate of its own, the PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil, a former maoist now very moderate left and an ally of the PT in government) has no candidate of its own, nor does the PDT (coming from the old populist tradition) or the PSB (moderate socialist party). This opens a very interesting space for us to dispute in the municipality of Rio.

I know that in Fortaleza the PSOL's situation is also quite positive, where Renato Roseno as candidate for mayor has about 10% in the polls, and especially in Belem where Edmilson Rodrigues is in first place ahead of the first round. The situations in Belem and Fortaleza have their specificities, but certainly here in Rio the PT's policy has opened a space for us.

IVP And in Niteroi, Henrique, is the situation similar?

Henrique Yes, I agree with Renato's analysis at the national level, of how the PT has co-opted the leaders of the main social movements. Nonetheless, we have managed some advances. In Niteroi we have a situation that for me is historic. Because for almost two decades the former populist party, the PDT, has been the dominant force in the city's politics, applying a clearly neo-liberal logic in local government. But now that dominance is in crisis, with a local government that has an 80% rejection rate in public opinion

polls. At the same time, throughout this period, we have been building up our strength, alongside the social movements in the main struggles facing the city.

So in these elections there is a split between these groups who traditionally dominate the city, the PDT, the PT and the PSD (new name for a party of the traditional right), who are standing on separate tickets, even though they represent the same political project that led the city to this crisis and this widespread feeling of discontent. This situation means that the PSOL has been very well received in the streets, because it's managed to build up an image of being really an alternative to the existing local government. Of course we suffer from a blockade by economic power and media power. We have very little time on TV. The economic interests that clearly exploit the city have a lot of power and the city hall has many means of co-option at its disposal. So this is not an easy election. But the crisis that has emerged has combined with our ability to gain in strength through the different struggles in the city, for example against the privatization of the Antonio Pedro Hospital, against the increase in fares on the boats that cross the bay to Rio de Janeiro - that was really out of order and we took part in the struggle against it that had a big impact in Niteroi.

The consequence is that this election, though difficult, presents the best opportunity we have had for 20 years, to keep growing, to open up a broad debate around our alternative vision for the city, and to win some modest electoral successes that will be an important learning exercise and give more power and a stronger voice to popular struggles.

IVP Going back to those mega-events, the 2014 World Cup, the 2016 Olympics and various others that are coming to Rio in the next few years, you are very active on these questions, Renato. How far do these shape the context for these local elections, in terms of a struggle between different visions for the future of the city?

Renato Look, the World Cup, and

especially the Olympics, in Rio de Janeiro, have a big impact. Because there is a whole range of public investments that are being brought together in a particular project for the city. This is a project that dates back to 1902, a project of the ruling class of Rio de Janeiro, to create a city of "apartheid". A city where the south, and the barrios of Tijuca and Barra da Tijuca would be places for the rich and the middle class, and the north and west for the poor and for industry. That project was never realized 100% in the twentieth century, because of several contradictions within the bourgeoisie. For example, they wanted to pay miserable wages, to domestic workers and others, which ended up generating the favelas right in the middle of the southern districts.

The current proposal takes up that old project again in a dramatic and brutal way, to a degree that has not been seen in a long time, perhaps since the time of the military dictatorship of the 60s and 70s, or since even earlier. Now we see the mayor, the state government and the federal government, all working to expand that "sociological south", the territory of the rich and middle class, on four fronts.

One front is the "Porto Maravilha" project, a revitalization of the waterfront area in down-town Rio. Another is the project of the UPPs (Police Pacification Units, which are supposedly a proposal to displace the narco gangs that control most of the favelas, not through direct military confrontation, but through a permanent presence of "community" police), which in fact are much more an urban development plan, for expropriating desirable real estate, than they are a project for public security. Because the UPPs are concentrated in those favelas located next to the rich or middle class neighbourhoods. They create the conditions for the market itself to evict in a "non-violent" way whole communities, because they cannot afford to pay the increased cost of living in these slums, with higher rents and property prices, and rising prices all round. At the same time, in the rest of the city and especially in the most violent favelas, the policy remains one of violent confrontations

with drug gangs.

A third front, which has to do directly with the Olympics, is the coastal area beyond Barra de Tijuca. This area is now becoming much more accessible with the construction of the Transoeste tram system, which connects the Olympic area in Barra de Tijuca to the west of Rio. This means a wild, uncontrolled advance of land and property speculation in an area that was dedicated to agriculture and other small-scale activities.

The fourth front is where they will actually build the Olympic village, on the border between Jacarépagua and Barra de Tijuca, which is an area with many favelas and traditional communities, such as communities of African descent, like Quilombolas (originally communities of runaway slaves), who are now being evicted to make way for the Olympic facilities and access roads.

IVP How far do these mega-events and the evictions connected with them have an impact on the electoral situation in Niteroi, Henrique?

Henrique They have an impact here too, because Niteroi follows the same logic as Rio de Janeiro city, and also suffers indirectly the impact of these mega-events. Recent data shows Niteroi is the most unequal city in Brazil. There is a well-established elite, while 20% of the population are living in extreme poverty. This inequality, combined with the deterioration of public services, the big investments in real estate and hotels, this whole vision of a city designed to attract capital investment and to open new areas of business, has increased the widespread sense of insecurity in the city. And it is true that the rates of certain types of crime, such as robbery, have shown an increase. The official answer is the criminalization of poverty, with an increase in the number of police in certain sectors of the city, with the purpose of stemming this alleged increase in crime and giving a sensation, an artificial one of course, of greater security.

So, as a result of the increasing inequality, Niteroi has a logic of

control over the city's spaces, especially those where the poor live, those who cannot find a place in a city that is increasingly elitist, increasingly expensive, a city where public services are increasingly segmented. Because this is the logic of the current mayor: since the city has this image of being middle class, they want to segment everything that is public, split it up according to sectors, rather than make it universal and improve it as a right. And to do that, the answer for them is basically to increase the number of police. A few months ago there was a public hearing at the Faculty of Law at the Federal Fluminense University, which is here in Niteroi, dealing with precisely this issue: public security in Niteroi. And there you could see that for some people this question boils down to, "we want more cops in Niteroi". And it was up to us to make the counter argument, to dispute that view, arguing that public security is not about police numbers, but is the extension of rights. So this debate is out there, and a figure like Marcelo Freixo, with his record and profile as a fighter for human rights, has a real impact in the city of Niteroi. So in this election campaign we are denouncing that logic that thinks of public security as control, as repression, and we insist that security comes through ensuring rights and citizenship for everyone, through defending and improving everything that is public. So on a smaller scale, Niteroi reproduces the same tensions that exist in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

IVP So apart from that issue, what are the main issues in your respective campaigns?

Henrique Well I am a theologian and a teacher here in Niteroi, and in a sense, both of these are aspects of my campaign. The main strength of our campaign is its collective nature, which is a principle for us. My candidacy itself is the result of a collective experience. We created a group here in Niteroi called Collective Construction, which brings together young people, mostly students, and it was from this group, discussing the problems of the city, that we began the campaign, with people inside and outside the PSOL. This is the strength of our campaign, its collective nature and the presence of these young

people, from the local universities and high schools, who are beginning to rediscover their collective potential and their ability to change the direction of society.

Another front is the theological one, opposing what we call here in Brazil the "Theology of Prosperity", which is the domination of the gospel by capital, which makes individualism sacred. So I am part, in the theological area, of a whole movement that seeks to recover all the social and political character of the gospel, as a tool to denounce all forms of exploitation and violence. So within the world of Protestantism, we have built a whole movement that says 'No' to the individualization and privatization of the Christian faith, and that recuperates both its eternal and its historical sense of having an impact in society.

And of course, the issue of human rights is also very much present in our campaign, both because of my own activism in this area, and because of the historical situation we live in, with this criminalization of poverty, and the logic of systemic genocide of the poor. So the issue of revitalizing the struggle for human rights with a class perspective is also an important part of our campaign. And that combines, as I said, with the collective development of the campaign, with the strength of youth participation, and that perspective within theology that recovers the historicity of Christianity as an expression of liberation, always of course respecting and in dialogue with all other religious expressions.

IVP Talking of the criminalization of poverty, how far has it been possible to bring into your campaigns the communities that are most affected by the evictions and law and order policies?

HenriqueIn Niteroi this is complicated because in these communities the city hall and the mayor's office have always managed to install mechanisms of control and of so-called partnership, through various institutions and associations, which has made it difficult for us to develop a deeper political presence. However, as I mentioned before, now there is

this crisis and chaos within the local government. And in 2010, there was the tragedy of the rains and mudslides here, when more than 170 people died here in Niteroi. This, in a situation where 99% of poor communities live in a situation of risk, with the threat of landslides, etc., because of the total lack of an adequate housing policy. This situation really broke the hegemony of the mayor and city hall in those communities. For example, we helped to build the Committee in Solidarity with the Struggle of the Victims, allowing us much more contact, dialogue, and shared experience, with us learning from them and helping to build a common experience with those communities. So now we have won much greater acceptance among them, because there is a widespread sense of discontent with the current city government.

IVP

What about the central themes of your campaign in Rio, Renato?

RenatoOur campaign has two main axes. One is the city, the other is freedom. In the first, we're pushing that debate and struggle against the impact of these mega-events, and against the idea of the city as a commodity. That's an idea which has been central to Rio's city planners since 1992. So we denounce their attempt to use these mega-events to implement a model of the city in favour of capital. Because these mega-events really are the ultimate expression of this logic of the city as commodity, where the role of the mayor is to create the best possible business opportunities for capital. Against that idea, we advance the idea of the city as a right, where the role of the city hall would be to guarantee the rights of the population.

On the second axis, that of freedom, one of the most creative and original aspects of our campaign has been to develop a municipal policy on drugs. I have been a prominent activist for many years in a campaign for drug legalization, for legalizing marijuana. So now we had to think how to develop that struggle in the field of municipal government. What we did was open up a discussion with health workers, with social workers in the

municipality, together with our own experience, and we came to the following formulation. First, we must condemn the city's current perverse policy on the question of drugs. The city hall does not currently fulfil its basic duty to guarantee basic mental health care for those who are dependent on drug use. Worse still, since July last year, the mayor declared, through the municipal department of social welfare, the mandatory detention of drug dependent adolescents. We must denounce this policy not only because it goes against everything most progressive in the treatment of this issue but because of the arbitrary, brutal and ineffective way it is being applied - this is almost pure fascism. In fact we say this just another of the policies intended to cleanse the streets of Rio de Janeiro ahead of the 2016 Olympics and the 2014 World Cup.

But apart from denouncing it, we have formulated an alternative proposal. This alternative includes a policy to reduce drug use, municipal information campaigns to explain to users the risks and strategies to reduce those risks. We also advocate the installation of a network of health posts in the streets to serve users, teenagers and adults too, as an alternative to treatment through internment, along with an expansion of public mental health care.

IVP

What are your realistic possibilities in these municipal elections?

RenatoWith Marcelo Freixo's candidacy for Mayor of Rio de Janeiro, we see that this is a very difficult fight. The current mayor, Eduardo Paes, has the largest coalition of forces I have seen in my life for re-election, and also has the open support of the state government of Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian Federal Government, and the international sporting bodies like FIFA and the IOC. The Brazilian electoral system also means that access to time on TV is very unequal. For each minute that Marcelo gets, Eduardo Paes has about 14 or more. Despite all that, Marcelo is in second place, ahead of all the other traditional parties. [2] His campaign is really enthusing many

sectors of society, especially the youth, in a way we haven't seen for a long time. I think it will be very difficult to reach the second round, but we are in that battle, and certainly these elections will leave us much stronger politically, with much more support built up. Marcelo is really representing the opposition to neo-liberalism, the opposition to the hegemonic politics in our city, and he is the only one who can do this. And that could lead to a growth in the size of our group in the city assembly. In the last election we elected one councillor, and then we won another who came to the PSOL from another party. Now we have the possibility of electing three councillors, which would give us a total of four. It's hard to know for now but we have some optimism about my own chances. The last time I failed to win by a small margin, and our campaign has grown significantly in recent years, together with the social movements, and with my own profile in the media as one of the promoters of the "March for Marijuana" (for legalization), where I was imprisoned twice.

IVP And in Niteroi?

HenriqueIn Niteroi we have good prospects. Our candidate for mayor, Flavio Serafini (a member of Enlace in the PSOL) isn't a well-known figure in the city, but he has a very different profile from the other candidates, because the others all have professional political careers, they are all part of that same dominant logic in the city. Flavio has nothing to do with that machine, he is a candidate who comes out of student activism, as a teacher, in human rights campaigns, and as an adviser to Marcelo Freixo as state deputy for the PSOL and to the PSOL federal deputy, Chico Alencar. He was also one of the protagonists of that movement of solidarity with the victims of the landslides in Niteroi. So he really represents all that collective alternative. That is why, right at the beginning of the campaign, when his name had only just been put forward, he was already at 4% in the polls. We know that polls are unreliable, but that was surprising for someone relatively unknown. But the fact is that in the streets we are finding people are very receptive to this alternative

that Flavio and the PSOL represent. So it's certainly a difficult election, to get to the second round would be very difficult, but there is a lot of enthusiasm, Flavio is becoming increasingly popular, we are having an impact on the political debate in the city and our campaign is growing. Obviously that also has an impact on our campaign for councillors, and that has also grown a lot in these last few months, specially among the youth. And that's also because our campaign "looks" different, we are making a big effort to put the "enchantment" back into politics. For example there is a square in the city that we "occupy" every fortnight with cultural activities, rounds of poetry, and so on. It really is another way of thinking about the city and about how to do politics, and I think this creativity, as with Renato's campaign in Rio, means these are campaigns that are really "different".

So we are growing and we believe we have the possibility of increasing our PSOL group of councillors to three. We have two in Niteroi now and there's a real chance I could get elected to make it three.

Bernabe for Governor!

29 September 2012, by Antonio Carmona Báez

The PPT represents a radical break with traditional politics on the island, as it welcomes people who believe in social justice, democratic rights, (local) sustainable development and environmental protection, independently of the positions that individuals may hold concerning the country's political status.

Since 1950, the three conventional electoral choices were distinguished according to their line on the relationship that the 3,6 million residents have with the United States: colonial status quo by the Democratic Popular Party (PPD), full annexation into the United States by the New Progressive Party (PNP), and full

sovereignty establishing a Republic by the Puerto Rico Independence Party (PIP). Only the first two -Annexation and the Status Quo parties- have ruled the island, as voters have historically alternated their allegiance according economic performance and street crime issues. Following the economic down turn experienced since the late 1990s, however, the PPD and PNP have become indistinguishable as both have proposed exclusively neoliberal measures such as privatisation, and both have demonstrated equal levels of corruption. In addition, these two parties have seen to it that most local businesses go bankrupt in the face of corporate giants who use cheap labour in other countries and sell products

that can easily be produced on the island. Multinational corporations generate over US\$ 30 billion in profits annually from island manufacturing operations, mostly in the pharmaceutical sector, without paying taxes to the local government. Neither of the two traditional ruling parties propose even a modest tax on corporate earnings. Furthermore, while the country continues to fall into economic depression, with over 200.000 workers emigrating to the continental US in search of jobs over the last three years, politicians of both parties have passed legislation favouring the dismissal of thousands of public servants and the privatisation of public services.

Puerto Ricans may recall previous efforts to form political alternatives, whether on the streets or at the polls. In the 1970s, the Marxists-Leninist and pro-independence Socialist Party of Puerto Rico (PSP) got over 10,000 votes for their gubernatorial candidate Juan Mari Bras, who later in 1980 won 50,000 votes while running for the senate. That last experience of building a mass left party degenerated into factionalism, as debates on priorities -organising and mobilising workers versus avoiding annexation- pitted the organisation's cadre against each other. Since then, no serious electoral alternatives have been developed. Throughout the 1990s, left politics and radicalism were shaped on the streets among a wide array of social and environmental movements including trade union struggles against privatisation, students in defence of the public University of Puerto Rico (UPR), against militarisation, and in marginalised communities against gentrification.

Now, out of the social struggles that have sprung from more than two decades of neoliberal attacks, economic downturn and escalating social violence, a new political party is born, the PPT. The initiative was taken by socialists associated with or close to Puerto Rico's Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), which groups together radical trade unionists, students, feminists and environmental activists. The decision to build a mass party that breaks with the current political culture and institutes a programme not on ideological labels but on real concrete proposals for change, was welcomed by broad sections of the working class, including students, ecumenical groups, small and surviving businesses, and those concerned with human rights, agriculture and police violence. Those who founded the party understand that the political status of Puerto Rico will not be solved by the elections but by the mobilisation of the country's working class, and it is the demands of that working class that will shape the contours of their future.

The party's list of candidates is refreshingly young and diverse, and both legislative as well as executive posts are in the new party's sights. In the capital city of San Juan, the PPT is

running 31-year old filmmaker and community activist Tito Roman Rivera, for mayor. Born and raised in public housing and a graduate of the University of Puerto Rico Faculty of Education, Tito has won the respect of his peers, many grassroots organisations, world-renowned artists such as the Latin Hip Hop trio Calle 13, and the entire university community due to his long history of activism on campus. His political career began when the entire country was mobilised between 1999 and 2003, against the US Navy presence on the island of Vieques. Tito is supported by candidates for the local and national assemblies Rene Reyes (28) and Nicole Díaz González (26), respectively, who both studied at UPR as well, and come from working class backgrounds. Running for the municipal legislative assembly is 23-year-old Shariana Ferrer Nájera, a sociologist and Queer activist who has been fundamental in raising public awareness on violence against women and the LGBTQ community.

Beyond the metropolitan area a number of independent candidates have joined the ranks of the PPT, so that now 10 are running for mayor in their respective municipalities. Among them is Laylanie Ruiz of the industrial town of Barceloneta, who founded her own local, anti-neoliberal/anti-discrimination and eco-friendly party Echo of the People (Eco del Pueblo). The requirements for forming an alliance with the PPT are accepting basic class principles, being in favour of women and minority rights, and non-alliance with either of the two dominant political parties.

At the national level, the PPT has Rafael Bernabe as their gubernatorial candidate. Long time activist and public intellectual Bernabe, is a founding member of the Puerto Rico section of the Fourth International, Taller de Formacion Politica, the socialist organisation that later became the MAS. He is a prolific writer and ear-capturing orator who, since the electoral campaign began in July, has buried all other candidates in their political contradictions in televised debates. His stances on abortion, unionisation of both the public and private sectors of the economy, gay marriage and the

legalisation/medicalisation of the country's drug problem in order to combat drug trafficking are solid and consistent. His platform consists of defending the working class and getting the state to revitalise the local economy in the face of manufacturing industry relocating away from the island. This means supporting agriculture, cooperatives, small businesses and a democratised system of higher education that speaks to country's economic needs. Additionally, he is an ardent defender of immigrant rights. Bernabe is joined by his colleague Felix Cordova who is running for Resident Commissioner in Washington DC, teacher union activist Eva Ayala who is running for Representative in the legislature and Ineabelle Colon running for Senator. Also running for Senator is Ruthie Arroyo, a feminist lawyer and human rights activist from working class Bayamon, just outside the capital city. Arroyo has been active on issues concerning women's rights and sexual diversity, police brutality and community advocacy.

In the upcoming elections the PPT is not the only party challenging the historical bipartisan dictatorship. Just as he did during the last elections, in 2008, engineer Rogelio Figueroa will run for governor with a European Green-like party, Puerto Ricans for Puerto Rico (PPR), which emphasises citizen participation, the cleaning up of corruption, care for the environment and changes in the formulas dealing with the country's political status. Figueroa's campaign has been impressive in that, being Black, he has marked a sharp contrast with the usual image of the island's political leaders. However, his political programme has been void of class-consciousness or any real legislative proposals.

The other alternative in these elections is the MUS, or the Sovereign Union Movement, which advocates for Free Association, the last of the three options for decolonisation recognised by the United Nations after independence and voluntary annexation. The problem with this party is that, again, it places political status above class politics. Furthermore, the MUS openly supports making alliances with

candidates from the status-quo-PPD, which contradicts their programme for breaking with the bipartisan monopoly.

In total, six parties will be participating in the elections of 2012. The general elections will be accompanied by a two-part referendum where voters will be asked if they want to continue maintaining the current colonial status and secondly, would they prefer Independence, Annexation or Free Association. Puerto Ricans are US citizens but are not allowed to participate in US general elections.

According to the Marxist-Gramscian theoretician, Hector Meléndez, "Out of all the political formations participating in the 2012 elections, only the PPT proposes to construct a party of the working and popular classes, and that these classes should take control of the government of Puerto Rico."

The language used in the campaign may sound strange to traditional pro-independence and socialist activists, as some jargon is omitted, among them: independence, socialism and revolution. But self-determination, workers' power and radical social change are what the PPT is all about. Perhaps the jargon has been modified but the ideas have always been the

same. And although these grand ideas lie at the heart of the PPT, its campaign goes further to tackle concrete issues, that affect the popular masses on a daily basis: unemployment, violence against women, discrimination against sexual diversity, crime, corruption, failing health and education systems. The PPT is the party of social struggle; all its members and candidates for public office were activists before the party was formed. The PPT proposes to eliminate unnecessary government spending, like personal allowances, car allowances and bonuses for legislators. Although much of the party's leadership come from the independence movement, the PPT understands that voters have continuously been fooled into thinking that the political status can be changed by the elections held every four years. The working class has been divided according to empty promises of a political future with the United States and neither general elections nor referendum have been capable of promoting peace and security. The PPT leadership has been criticised by other radical groups for seeming to avoid the issue of the island's political status but for Nicole Diaz, "to unite annexationists, autonomists and pro-independence workers in one party is not to ignore the status. It is in the end, another way of finding how to resolve it."

The PPT campaign has made great advances by using social media, as well as by successfully infiltrating mainstream media. The key has been to have the party's candidates and militants present at every social forum and public debate possible, whether it be at a meeting of the country's cooperative association, a demonstration opposing the death penalty or at a forum on women's reproductive rights. Those working on the campaign have no illusions; it will be difficult to get more than a few municipal legislative posts, perhaps one or two representatives in Congress. At the same time, PPT militants are in for the long haul. More important than who wins the elections is the continued defence of working class interests in Puerto Rico. The PPT leadership hopes to win at least 3% of the vote, in order to keep its registration.

"Independently of who wins or who loses the elections, the rights of workers continuously need to be defended. The numeric outcomes of the elections are not crucial, what is crucial is the organisation, the preparation of materials and the access to those groups -the labour movement and non-organised workers, which represent the vast majority," says Raul Cotto, a University of Puerto Rico professor of political science.

25S: the salvaging of democracy

29 September 2012, by **Esther Vivas**

"They call it democracy but this isn't one" was the cry repeated in the squares and on the demonstrations. And as time went by, this slogan took on still more meaning. The stigmatisation and repression against those who struggle in the street for their rights has only intensified in recent times. The worse the crisis gets, the more popular support broadens for those who protest and the more the brutal repression increase. The thirst for liberty is being

smothered along with the current "democracy".

Recent days provide a good illustration of this. On Saturday, September 15, 2012, when activists were detained during the demonstration against austerity in Madrid, what was their crime? Carrying a placard with the slogan: "25S: Encircle Parliament". The next day, two wagon loads of police carried out identity checks on dozens of

people in the park at Retiro. The motive? Participating in a preparatory meeting for the said action. Five days later, several of these activists were charged with offences to the highest institutions of the nation and they could be jailed for up to one year.

What were the objectives of the "25S: Encircle Parliament" action? Its appeal expresses them clearly: "Next September 25, we will encircle Parliament to save it from a

kidnapping which has transformed this institution into a superfluous body. A kidnapping of popular sovereignty carried out by the Troika and the financial markets and executed with the consent and collaboration of the majority of the political parties". What will be the form of this action? Its organisers have said and said again: "non-violent". What kind of fear is it that dictates all these police measures? Fear of violence, or of freedom of expression?

As I said a few months ago at a social centre: "When those at the bottom move, those at the top tremble". That is the truth. Fear has begun to change sides, even if only partially. The repressive measures, like those we have mentioned, show the fear of those who exert power. The fear that the people rise up, organise, express themselves freely against injustice. The fear of a handful faced with the multitude.

Coup d'état?

The criminalisation of "25S: Encircle Parliament" practically began a month ago when the government representative in Madrid, Cristina Cifuentes, characterised this initiative as a "disguised coup d'état". The former minister and PSOE deputy José Martánez de Olmos compared the action to the attempted neo-Francoist coup by Tejero in 1981: "Occupying Parliament from the inside as Tejero did or from the outside as some wish on September 25 has the same goal: the sequestration of sovereignty". Words repeated yesterday by the PP secretary general, Dolores de Cospedal.

Coup d'état? The only putschists here are the financial powers who overthrow governments as they wish and replace them by their trusted henchmen. In Italy they have sidelined Silvio Berlusconi in favour of Mario Monti, a former consultant for the Goldman Sachs bank. In Greece, they have replaced Giorgios Papandreou with Lucas Papadémos, ex-vice president of the European Central Bank. Spanish Economy Minister Luis de Guindos is a former employee of Lehman Brothers. As the journalist Robert Fisk puts it: "The banks and the ratings agencies have become the dictators of the West". And when the "markets" come in by the door, democracy goes out the window.

It is difficult to believe today that Parliament "represents the popular will". A good number of ministers and deputies come from private enterprises, others return there as soon as their political careers end. The companies reward them generously for services rendered. Do you remember Eduardo Zaplana? First Minister of Employment, then consultant to Telefonica. Elena Salgado? Vice minister of the Economy, she became a consultant for Abertis. Not to mention Rodrigo Rato, former Economy minister, then director of the International Monetary Fund and finally president of Bankia. His adventures as head of the bank have cost us dear. Without forgetting former prime ministers Felipe Gonzalez and José Maria Aznar, the first becoming a consultant for Gas Natural and the second working for Endesa, News Corporation, Barrick Gold, Doheny Global Group and so on. So it goes.

More democracy

But democracy is, precisely, what the movement of the indignant is demanding, a real democracy in the service of the people and incompatible with the sequestration of politics by the business world or with the Spanish centralism which denies the right of people to self-determination. Paradoxically, it is the protestors who have been deemed to be "anti-democrats". Anti-democrats for symbolically "besieging" the Catalan parliament on June 15, 2011, during the budget debates which involved austerity measures which had not appeared in any electoral manifesto. Anti-democrats for organising meetings in the squares and stimulating public debate. Anti-democrats for occupying empty housing and putting it to social use. Anti-democrats, definitively, for combating unjust laws and practices.

And when there is more democracy in the street, there is more repression. Fines of 133,000 Euros are demanded by the Ministry of the Interior against 446 activists of 15M in Madrid; 6,000 Euros against 250 students involved in the "Valencia Spring"; hundreds of Euros against activists in Galicia, to mention only a few examples. Along with that, more than a hundred arrests in Catalonia since the general strike on May 29 and a modification of the Criminal Code to criminalise the new forms of protest.

The other face of austerity is the politics of fear and repression. Not so much a social state, as a penal state. Democracy is not on the side of those who claim to exercise it, but rather on the side of those who fight for it. History is full of examples of this, and "25S" will be one of them.

The Syrian people will not submit, nor the permanent popular revolution

29 September 2012, by Joseph Daher

The terrible repression against the Syrian population continues. Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory of the Rights of Man announced on August 23 that at least 24,495 people have met violent deaths since the beginning of the revolution, including a total of 17,281 civilians, while 6,163 soldiers have been killed, as well as 1,051 deserters who had joined the insurgency. We must add to this sad news some 1.5 million people who have been displaced inside the country and some 250,000 refugees in neighbouring countries.

Self-organization of the popular movement

Contrary to what some people have said, the popular movement in Syria has not withdrawn from the streets, the universities and the workplaces, despite the many-sided and violent repression, on both political and military levels, of the regime.

Since the beginning of the revolution the main forms of organisation have been popular committees at the level of villages, neighbourhoods, cities and regions. These popular committees are the real backbone of the movement, mobilizing the people for demonstrations. They have also developed forms of self-management based on the organization of the masses in the areas liberated from the yoke of the regime. Popular elected councils have emerged to deal with and manage the liberated areas, proving that it is the regime that causes anarchy and not the people.

The establishment of civil administrations in the zones that have been liberated from the armed forces of the regime has also taken place due to the absence of the state, in order to exercise its prerogatives in many areas, such as schools, hospitals, roads, water, electricity and communications services. These civil administrations are established through elections and popular consensus and have major tasks for the provision of public services, as cited above, security and civil peace.

The universities have also been important centres of popular resistance. The University of Aleppo, which has been a spearhead of the protest in the city since the beginning of the demonstrations in March 2011, witnessed major student demonstrations last May, and also earlier on. They were violently repressed by the security forces, which killed four people and arrested hundreds of others. The University of Aleppo also suspended its courses during the months of May and June for fear of an even bigger uprising of young people, while at the University of Homs bullets are more common than books. The voices and the songs of the students at the University of Damascus are often heard in the Presidential Palace, which is only a hundred yards away, while almost daily demonstrations take place in the universities of Deraa and Deir Al-Zor.

Students represent a quarter of all the martyrs in Syria since the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, according to the Union of Free Students of Syria (UFSS). Founded on September 29, 2011 to fight against the regime, in the life of the student movement the union is a bastion of political resistance and of the fight for a democratic society. The union organises free student demonstrations and popular resistance in universities across the country. The UFSS also played a major role in the campaign of strikes and civil disobedience in January and February 2012.

A free Syrian teachers' union also emerged in January 2012, declaring its support for the Syrian revolution and its commitment to restructure universities in order to turn them into beacons of science, justice and freedom. The union also adds that it is determined to purge the universities of the corruption of the regime and the security services.

It is in fact important to remember that the universities were the main sectors of society, along with the army, on which the regime imposed near-total control. It banned all political activities, except for the Ba'ath party. This party was the only political organization that had the right to organise events, conferences and public demonstrations on

university campuses or military barracks or even to publish and distribute a newspaper within the universities and the army.

Even the political parties allied with the regime in the National Progressive Front did not have the right to organize, conduct propaganda or have the slightest official presence in these institutions.

In the same way the regime imposed its domination over the trade union bureaucracy, and this has hindered and blocked the fight against the neoliberal and authoritarian policies carried out by the regime, particularly since the 2000 decade. Since then the standard of living of the majority of the population has continued to fall, while political repression has continued. For example, in May 2006, hundreds of workers in a public construction company in Damascus protested and clashed with security forces. At the same time taxi drivers were on strike in Aleppo to protest against their living and working conditions.

The working population has also been repressed during the revolution. During the month of December 2011, successful campaigns of civil disobedience and general strikes took place in Syria. They crippled large parts of the country, showing that the mobilization of the working class and the exploited is right at the heart of the Syrian revolution. It is for this reason that the dictatorship, seeking to break the dynamic of the contestation, sacked more than 85,000 workers between January 2011 and February 2012 and closed 187 factories (according to official figures).

We can see that the Syrian revolutionary process is a popular and democratic movement that mobilizes the exploited and oppressed classes against the capitalist elite which is linked to the world order (in a very similar way to their counterparts across the Arab world).

Is it necessary to recall the neoliberal measures undertaken by this regime, measures which have impoverished society and weakened the Syrian economy? Sixty per cent of the Syrian

population live below the poverty line or just above it. Is it necessary to recall that the Assad clan, especially around the person of Rami Makhlouf, through the process of privatization, has cornered more than 60 per cent of the economic wealth of Syria?

From economic centralism to an unrestrained and corrupt capitalism

The coming to power of Hafez Al-Assad in 1970 was praised and welcomed with great joy by the big bourgeoisie in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus. Moreover the beginning of the "corrective movement" initiated by Al-Assad also put an end to the radical policies of the 1960s, which had challenged capital and the political power of this big bourgeoisie. The objective of the Assad regime was in fact to ensure the stability of the regime, to ensure security for capital accumulation and to placate the powerful sectors of the business community, whose role has been growing steadily and more powerfully.

With the coming to power of Hafez Al-Assad a clientelist and authoritarian regime was established, where large-scale corruption of government officials and soldiers was used to ensure their loyalty.

Thanks to this generalized corruption, the state became a real machine making possible the accumulation of considerable sums of money, a real cash cow for the nomenklatura and especially for the close circle of the dictator, his family and his most loyal lieutenants. Informal networks of cronyism between the state apparatus and the business community multiplied, giving rise to a class of new bourgeois rentiers in Syria, which has had until today extremely negative consequences on Syrian society. The misallocation of resources and the proliferation of commercial enterprises and unproductive practices, not centred on employing labour, but lucrative, have dominated the country's economy.

This "new class", organically linked to the state, needed to invest its wealth in the different sectors of the economy. Decree No. 10 of 1991 was the springboard by which this class was able to "launder" its wealth. This law authorized investment in the private sector and opened up opportunities for import-export, but always under the control of the state, further enriching everyone and pursuing the system of generalized corruption. The transition from state economic centralism towards crony capitalism accelerated in the 1980s, with the progressive abandonment of centrally directed management of the economy.

The 1990s saw the emergence of this "new class" or hybrid class of nouveaux riches/new bourgeoisie resulting from a fusion of the bureaucracy and the survivors of the old bourgeoisie, the "private bourgeoisie".

The bourgeois features of the system have increased and accelerated with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies since the coming to power of Bashar Al-Assad in 2000. These policies have benefited in particular a small oligarchy and some of its clients. A cousin of President Bashar Al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf, symbolized this Mafia-style process of privatizations carried out by the regime.

The privatization process has created new monopolies in the hands of the family of Bashar Al-Assad, while the quality of goods and services has declined. These neoliberal economic reforms have made possible the appropriation of economic power in favour of the rich and powerful. The process of privatization of public enterprises was done for the benefit of a few people close to the regime. At the same time the financial sector grew, with the establishment of private banks, insurance companies, the Damascus Stock Exchange and bureaux de change.

The neoliberal policies pursued by the regime have satisfied the upper class and foreign investors, in particular in the Gulf region, liberalizing the Syrian economy for their benefit and at the expense of the majority of the Syrian

population, hit hard by continuing inflation and the increase in the cost of living. The neoliberal policies implemented over the last ten years have caused the collapse of the public sector and led to the dominance of the private sector, which has grown to cover almost 70 per cent of economic activities.

The main supporters of the regime who have benefited from these policies up to now are:

- the leading figures of the security service apparatus;

- networks of bureaucrats and crony capitalists, consolidated around the patronage of various sectors of public services, which have developed and enriched themselves more and more, particularly in the 1990s in the private sector after the implementation of Investment Law No. 10 in 1991;

- the bourgeoisie of Aleppo and Damascus, which has benefited from the neo-liberal policies of recent years, in particular since the launch of the so-called "social market economy" in 2005.

These sections of society have played a considerable role in the economic policies of the regime, shaping the parameters of reform and development. The consequences of these economic policies on Syrian society are harmful at every level.

Real growth of GDP and real per capita income have decreased since the beginning of the 1990s. The process of economic liberalization has created ever greater inequality in Syria. The poorest are struggling to cope in the new economy because of a lack of employment opportunities, while the "middle class" is in free fall towards the poverty line because its revenues did not follow inflation, which reached 17 per cent in 2008. There is now an unemployment rate of around 20 to 25 per cent, reaching 55 per cent for those under 25 (in a country where 65 per cent of the total population is under 30). The percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line rose from 11 per cent in 2000 to 33 per cent in 2010, while 30 per cent are just above this level. Thus, approximately seven million

Syrians live around or below the poverty line.

In agriculture, the privatization of their land suffered by hundreds of thousands of peasants in the North-east because of the drought in 2008 should not be seen as simply a natural disaster. In fact, the increase and intensification of the exploitation of the land by large agricultural contractors (agribusiness), including land previously kept for grazing, as well as the drilling of illegal wells and the installing of selective water pipes to meet the requirements of the new big landowners - all of this facilitated by the corruption of the local government - led to the agricultural crisis. "According to the UN, more than a million people have migrated from regions of the North-east towards urban areas. Farmers have no more income and no more food. Wheat production, considered in Syria as a strategic resource, is estimated this year at 2.4 million tonnes, compared with 4.1 million in 2007. We are going to import wheat for the third consecutive year», national consumption amounting to about four million tonnes a year, wrote the daily *al-Ba'ath* in June, 2010.

The geography of the revolts in Idlib and Deraa as well as in other rural areas, historic bastions of the Baath party, which had not participated on as large a scale as today in the insurgency of the 1980s, including the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo, show the involvement of the victims of neoliberal policies in this revolution.

The armed resistance

The Syrian people's movement began in a peaceful fashion, calling for reforms, but the regime responded with violence and all-out repression. Some sections of the Syrian population then organized armed resistance to defend themselves against attacks by the security services and the regime's thugs, known as *shabihas*. They also defended demonstrations and the secure organization of popular committees.

The armed resistance of the Syrian people is the expression of its right to defend itself against repression, and it has made possible the continuation of popular resistance in some regions in the face of the regime's attacks. Revolutionary councils have been formed across Syria, as well as coordinating committees for political and armed actions. Furthermore, a code of good conduct, respecting international law and against religious sectarianism, has been signed by most of the armed groups that are part of the popular armed resistance against the regime. The number of signatories has continued to increase day by day. These measures were taken after acts of torture and killings committed by certain armed groups of the opposition, which were, besides, not necessarily linked to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and which were condemned by the people's movement and the vast majority of the battalions of the Free Syrian Army. An FSA officer furthermore announced his determination to protect the objectives of the revolution and his total opposition to any sectarianism.

The Civil Resistance Unit (CRU), which was established in August in Damascus, is a branch of the FSA dedicated to organizing actions of resistance and to the unification of the popular forces to form a joint military corps. The efforts of the CRU are focused for now on Damascus and its suburbs. The efforts at unification made by the Free Syrian Army are constant, on the ground and throughout Syrian territory. For example, rebel groups from Damascus, Idlib, Hama, Homs and Deir Zor have announced the creation of the "Front for the Liberation of Syria" as the organizational framework, regrouping Ansar al-Islam in Damascus, the Soqour al-Sham brigade in Idleb and Hama, the Al-Farouq battalion in Homs, the Amro Bin A'as brigades and the Deir Zor Revolutionary Council in Deir Zor. Other announcements of armed opposition groups coming together under one banner have also been reported in other regions such as Homs and Aleppo.

Composed of soldiers who have deserted and civilians who have taken up arms, the armed popular resistance

has real popular roots within the insurgency. The most important section of the Syrian revolutionary movement is composed of rural and urban proletarians and the economically marginalized "middle classes" who have suffered from the implementation of neo-liberal policies, especially since the coming to power of Bashar Al-Assad. The majority of those who have joined the armed groups of the Free Syrian Army come from these social layers. It is therefore completely misleading and far from any materialist analysis to identify all these armed groups as acting on behalf of and in the interests of regional or global imperialist powers. Moreover, we have seen how different demands of the popular movement, including the unification of the FSA, the appeal against religious sectarianism and the call to preserve the objectives of the revolution, have been taken into account by the popular armed opposition. The campaign for "a revolution of dignity and morality" launched by the local coordinating committees (LCC) and supported by a large number of local grassroots organizations, at the end of August and the beginning of September 2012, focused precisely on these themes and on the principles and objectives of the Syrian revolution which the Syrian people in struggle is committed to respecting, including both civilians and soldiers.

Similarly, to consider the armed popular resistance as a group of Islamic militants acting independently of the popular movement is far from any reality. It is certain that the Sunni Muslim Syrians represent the majority of the armed popular resistance, but to consider each person in this community as an Islamist is false and especially Islamophobic. Indeed, being a Muslim does not mean being an Islamist. The popular armed resistance groups together all the ideological, ethnic and religious components of Syrian society.

Finally, although the presence of foreign troops is a reality, it is over-mediatized and has only a negligible influence on the ground. Most of the analysts of the region and most activists on the ground agree that these forces amount to no more than 1,000, whereas the armed popular

resistance consists of about 70,000 to 100,000 men. They are present only in a very limited number of groups. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that these jihadi elements are often not viewed favourably by local populations, and recently clashes took place between groups of the FSA and a jihadist group near the Turkish border.

The imperialist powers

Similarly, the so-called massive aid sent by the imperialist powers to the popular movement and the armed resistance remains to be demonstrated by real and tangible facts after more than 18 months of struggle. Most Western countries have refused any military aid to the armed revolutionaries, while promising non-military aid. The modest resources of the popular armed resistance come first of all from the army of the regime (weapons taken by soldiers who have defected, weapons bought from corrupt officers, spoils of war).

The big Western imperialist powers, other global imperialist powers such as Russia and China, and regional powers like Iran, as a whole, and without exception, continue to implement in Syria a Yemeni-type solution, in other words, cut off the head of the regime, the dictator Bashar Al-Assad, while maintaining its structure intact - as witnessed during meetings between American and Russian officials, or at the international conference on 30 June 2012 in Geneva. The only sticking point remains the Russian position of still trying by all means to keep Assad in power, but it could sacrifice him in the near future in order to preserve its interests in Syria. The United States, on its side, has repeatedly expressed its desire to see the military structure and the security services preserved intact.

In reality, the great powers have no advantage in seeing the regime collapse, for the above reasons and for the security of Israel, whose border with Syria has been quiet since 1973.

Refusal of religious sectarianism

The Syrian people has continued to repeat its refusal of religious divisions, despite all attempts of the regime to light this dangerous fire, which it has used in different forms since the seizure of power by the Assad clan in 1970. The popular movement has reaffirmed its unitary struggle, by developing a sense of national and social solidarity that transcends ethnic and sectarian divisions. Thus, the Kurdish and Assyrian populations have been in their regions the spearheads of opposition to the Assad regime since the beginning of the revolution. Similarly, the Palestinian refugees in Syria have participated in the demonstrations and in the fight against the regime and have given shelter in their camps to many Syrian families fleeing repression. Palestinian refugees have also suffered repression and count in their ranks more than fifty martyrs and hundreds arrested by the security forces. Several Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have been the target of shelling by the army of the regime.

In many demonstrations, we can see signs announcing "sectarianism is the tomb of the revolution or of the homelands" or "no to sectarianism!" Following each massacre by the regime or bombings for which no one claims responsibility, and which many people think are organized by the regime, the popular committees denounce them and call for the unity of the people. The local coordination committees (LCC) in Syria also organized last June a campaign under the slogan "freedom is my sect", in which the LCC carried symbols and placards rejecting the sectarian discourse of the regime and its murderous attempts to turn the Syrian revolution into a sectarian trap. In the town committee of Saraqeb, LCC protesters had placards representing the symbols of all the Syrian religions, while demonstrators in Daeel had a placard saying "In the future, in Syria, the policy of exclusion will be over".

At the beginning of the revolution, the

"Syrian revolution 2011" facebook group condemned repeatedly sectarianism and any form of discrimination among Syrians. This facebook group published, on March 24, 2011, a Code of Ethics against sectarianism in Syria. In October 2011, Syrian Christian activists supporting the revolution denounced the proclamation made by the Maronite Patriarch Boutros Ra'ad Bechara in France. He said that the overthrow of the Assad regime would be a threat to Christians in Syria. They reminded Patriarch Ra'ad that Christians have lived for "hundreds of years with their Syrian brothers without fear and nobody, absolutely nobody, deserves any credit for that: Christians are an indivisible part of this country".

These indicators reflect the political and humanist consciousness of a large majority of the popular movement. The Syrian people is aware that the fight against sectarianism means struggle and the overthrow of this criminal regime, and a radical change in society.

This does not mean that sectarianism does not exist in the popular movement in Syria. It exists and we should not deny its existence. In a revolutionary process, different ideologies are present and struggle against one another, and some groups in Syria have recourse to sectarian propaganda in their struggle against the regime.

The role of the revolutionary Left

So what is the role of the revolutionary Left in these circumstances? Should we leave the battle and wait for a social revolution that is perfect, as some do, and have done in the traditional Left? Or should we decide to be an integral part of this revolutionary process and throw our forces totally into this struggle to overthrow the regime, while working for the radicalization of the various elements of the revolution?

Lenin answered this question some time ago:

"To imagine that social revolution is *conceivable* without (...) revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie *with all its prejudices*, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. - to imagine all this is to *repudiate social revolution*. So one army lines up in one place and says, "We are for socialism", and another, somewhere else, and says, "We are for imperialism", and that will be a social revolution! (...) Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is" [3].

A revolutionary process is not all of one colour and never will be, otherwise it would not be a revolution. On the other hand, the role of the revolutionary Left is absolutely clear: to fight against the regime and to radicalize the popular movement!

The fight against sectarianism is therefore an essential part of the struggle for democracy, social justice, secularism and for establishing policies in solidarity with peoples struggling for freedom and dignity, and particularly the Palestinian people.

This break with the religious policies and practices of the regime is also in opposition to the Gulf states with their sectarian propaganda and also to sections of the Syrian opposition, - a minority there but nevertheless present - which support this kind of discourse. The Gulf states, it should be recalled, support financially some small armed Islamist groups, but not with the aim of seeing or allowing the victory of the Syrian revolution. Quite the contrary, it is an attempt to divert the Syrian revolution from its initial and always present objectives, that is to say, principally civil democracy, social justice and freedom, into sectarian war. The Gulf states in fact fear a spread of the revolution in the region that would threaten their power and interests. The transformation of the nature of the revolution into sectarian war would also enable them to frighten their own populations in the following way: any

change in the region is likely to descend into sectarian wars and therefore we must encourage the status quo, in other words, the maintenance of dictatorial powers.

The reactionary leaderships of these countries want to intervene in Syria to circumscribe the revolutionary process and limit the political, social and economic consequences of revolutions.

Some parts of the opposition parties have also attempted to build a local basis through humanitarian aid or funding of certain armed groups. The Muslim Brotherhood in particular has been condemned several times for such activities, and furthermore an officer of the FSA has denounced the theft of donations by the Islamist organization and its non-support for the Free Syrian Army but for other groups not linked to the FSA. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood has also been accused of using the funds of the CNS, whose distribution in Syria they control thanks to with their tight control of the humanitarian aid commission, to rebuild a popular and armed base inside the country, after three decades of exile.

Permanent Revolution!

The popular masses, faced with the political calculations and the hypocrisy of the global and regional powers, still want to overthrow the regime, 18 months after the outbreak of the revolutionary process in the country, but especially they continue to organize themselves and to organize peaceful or armed resistance in order to liberate Syria from tyranny. In this struggle, the popular movement repeatedly reaffirms its commitment to freedom, equality and social justice. Political and critical consciousness and practical experiences have continually increased within the movement, strengthening every day the freeing of the people from the authoritarian yoke of the regime and from the influence of its totalitarian ideology.

The formation from below of popular autonomous organizations across the

country, as centres of popular power, has also strengthened political consciousness and the experience of the movement of the fighting Syrian people itself in struggle.

The struggle of the Syrian people echoes the words of the Communist Manifesto: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win".

We say in all simplicity but with complete frankness and honesty: those who deny popular revolutions are incapable of envisaging emancipation from below and by the people! Therefore, they cannot be considered to be on the left. The support of the revolutionary Left for the revolution is part of the struggle for the emancipation of the Syrian people, and also of our support for permanent revolution.

Permanent revolution means opposing and overthrowing the dictatorial regime of the Assads, while at the same time opposing global and regional imperialism, which are attempting to hijack the Syrian revolutionary process for their own interests and against those of the Syrian people. For this reason, we reject and condemn all foreign intervention in Syria, whether it is the Western and Saudi/Qatari axis, or the Irano-Russian axis which supports the regime in its repression against the popular movement and in all its military and financial capacities.

The continuation of the revolution is also part of the determination to build a free, democratic, secular and revolutionary Syria that seeks to eliminate all social inequalities and forms of discrimination, ethnic, gender and religious, to support the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people, to respect religious and ethnic minorities, and to ensure democratic and political freedoms for all.

The revolution will be permanent because it also commits itself to make every effort to liberate the occupied Golan, to support the rights of the Palestinian people for the return of refugees and for self-determination on the territory of historic Palestine, and to assist the other peoples of the

region in their struggles against their dictators and imperialism.

“We are part of the different trenches emerging in every corner of the country”

27 September 2012, by Franck Gaudichaud, Marco Alvarez Vergara

First of all we would like you to present the current situation of social struggles in Chile. Latin America has seen many social movements emerge in the last decade, and over the past year, Chile has seen big social mobilizations, particularly among students. What, according to your assessment, is the state and the current dynamic of the Chilean social movement?

To understand the Chilean social political process, we have to take a little look at what has happened in Latin America in the last 15 years. The Hugo Chávez victory in the presidential elections of 1998 in Venezuela opened a new historic stage in the Latin American context characterized by two things. One is the advance of the broad progressive left across the continent that has led to different Presidents coming to power, which generates an almost absolute majority, changing the relationship of forces from the institutional political viewpoint. On the other hand, we should stress the emergence of new social movements, which have assumed an important role in the current stage through their radicalization and sustained advance.

These two features have predominated in Latin America. If we had to carry out a comparative analysis with what has happened in Chile, over a year ago we talked about a great mismatch in terms of what was happening with the rest of the countries of the continent, but this has changed, at least in terms of the social movement, with the emergence of the Chilean student movement in April 2011. It is

important to emphasize that the students aren't the only ones struggling, since there are different movements such as the ecologist and housing debtor movements, which unfortunately do not have the same visibility. But, staying with the student movement of 2011, different factors have triggered its appearance with the intensity and force we have seen, it being understood that this particular movement has existed inside the popular struggles for decades.

The first, in my view, is a political-structural factor generated through the imposition of neo-liberalism in Chile with blood and fire by the military dictatorship of Pinochet at the end of the 1970s and the subsequent legitimacy that gave the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia for more than 20 years in government through a negotiated democracy, carrying out a process of deepening this economic, political, social and cultural system. Thus, what happens in Chile is an endemic problem that recurs in the life of neo-liberalism, expressed by a radical critique by students and a large part of society against the market in education and its huge profits that have the character of usury. This political-structural factor can only be overcome with a radical transformation of the prevailing model.

The second factor behind the development and explosion of the Chilean student movement is of a political-conjunctural character; in 2009 there were elections in the country, bringing Sebastián Piñera to the presidency, embodying the two worst features of the capitalist system.

On the one hand the face of economic power and on the other the face of the traditional political class, which created better conditions in order to have greater levels of criticism and mobilization in the country. In the first year of his government, these mobilizations did not happen due to the earthquake and the tragedy of the 33 miners trapped by poor working conditions, which generated a sense of national unity and a mood of “no confrontation”.

The third factor is age. The majority of Chilean students are between 14 and 25 years old, very few were born during the military dictatorship and if they were born they do not remember, most were born in the periods of governments of the Concertación. The military dictatorship did not just exterminate the revolutionary organizations and truncate a historical process, but generated a process of subjective process among people of a fear of reorganizing, these young people do not have that fear, and they are not part of that generation, which means that their politics are more rebellious and fearless. They are the new generation Chile needed.

The fourth factor is international, it has to do with the “indignation” which has spread to every corner of the world, this is not mere coincidence, what has happened with the “Arab spring”, the indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, the student movements in Puerto Rico and Colombia and so on. This has to do with a general crisis of the capitalist system at the global level, and at the same time its antipode, which is the constant mobilization of the oppressed

in every corner of the world.

The student movement in Chile is long-standing: If we only look at the secondary student movement in the last 10 years, we have two examples of significant mobilization. In 2001, the students were mobilized by the reduction of school capacity and this movement was called the "mochilazo", a short but more or less radicalized mobilization and in 2006 there was the "penguin" revolution which was a movement of political character, but was curtailed by its leadership and coerced by the Coalition through a Presidential Advisory body led by former President Michelle Bachelet.

These different factors, which for me are the most important, joined together, led to the appearance of the Chilean student movement and a new generation of fighters and social activists for future struggles, already committed to a different Chile.

This social movement for education is outstanding, it has been maintained for months, it has a clearly political, and radical approach questioning the model inherited from the dictatorship and the neo-liberal system and was able to resume its demonstrations recently, after the summer break. All this with a very rich and varied repertoire of action: assemblies, occupations of schools and universities, big marches, popular and festive activities, and so on. What is your analysis of the current situation of these youth struggles in terms of their demands, difficulties and achievements, prospects?

If we were to characterize the Chilean student movement, we would have to start from its primary feature which is its temporary nature. Starting in April 2011 and until today it has remained mobilised independent of the inevitable processes of ebb and flow in the struggle. At the beginning of the 2012 there was a low intensity in the mobilizations, it was taken for dead, but a couple of days ago a wave of actions and demonstrations involving tens of thousands of students across the country took place. Temporality is a very important feature, which is based on the experience of past

struggles. Promises of any kind will be accepted. The student movement knows that the only way to change the educational model in Chile is keeping the mobilizations steady and not immersing forces in the future promises of the political class. There is a crisis of legitimacy in the Chilean model, which is expressed in a radical criticism of the political parties and representatives. What means the students will not rest until they achieve the demands raised, because they are confident that the future of Chilean education cannot be in the hands of those who sold it. Temporality is a very important feature especially in knowing that this is not going to be done overnight. And also the mobilizations are already planning for the future, for example some sectors have called for a boycott of the upcoming municipal elections.

Temporality is not the only feature, but also the mainstreaming of the legitimacy of the demands. Bourgeois surveys show 89% approval among citizens for the student demands. What are these demands? Free, quality education, better access, demunicipalisation in education and so on. The students have driven this platform of struggle and the majority of society supports them in the path of the recovery of education.

If we spoke of free education a year ago, the few that raised this demand were called crazy, voluntarist and utopian. The student movement raised the call for free education. I focus on this, because the ideas of the revolutionaries, at some point become reality and become those of the majority.

There are more features that animate the student movement and one of the most important is creativity in the sense of reaching the majorities. When we want to carry out radical transformation processes in society, we need to do so with majorities. Creativity has to assume a fundamental strategic position, through the most diverse activities that bring the people together. The student movement has a very good record on this feature, which we should learn from and understand in order to be able to build a new society.

Another feature is the massive size. 150,000 people marching in the streets of Santiago alone, without forgetting the other regions, and in addition occupations in school campuses and universities. Transformations are made with majorities from the same social movement. There was a lot of echo in the streets of Chile for the slogan of the 99% vs. the 1%.

Another feature is the autonomy of the student movement and respect for its internal democracy. The student movement depends on itself and no one else, and every time that an organization has tried to meddle or lower the mobilizations, this has been sanctioned. The best example is what happened with the Communist Party of Chile, which at the beginning of the 2011 held many of the university federations and today in 2012 has lost almost all university elections, including that of the University of Chile. And this happened because of the role played by the Communist Party, which did not understand the dynamics or links with the social movement, which the student body punished by not re-electing their militants as their representatives.

One of the great contributions of the student movement, beyond coordination with other sectors in struggle, is to have incorporated its platform of demands into the struggles in other sectors, because it understands that for the student movement to achieve its demands a radical transformation of Chilean society is needed. Therefore the rest of the demands that are on the table today are also part of the movement. They include the claim for a constituent Assembly in Chile, a new political system, for the renationalization of copper, a tax reform, and so on.

Now, to talk a little bit about the left, in particular the space of the Chilean anti-capitalist left, a political space that is still very fragmented and limited, when a part of the left and "progressivism" has already joined - totally or partially - the system and become institutionalized. You, from Libres del Sur, identify with anti-capitalism and ecosocialism:

how are you positioned within this field of the Chilean left?

The first thing that we propose is that to make another world possible, another left is necessary, that is our founding motto, to be able to carry out a process of construction of an anti-capitalist, revolutionary organization. In Chile, the oldest organization of the left is the Communist Party of Chile, founded in 1922, which is the reformist party par excellence, which mainly has a policy of alliances with sectors of which we have a radical critique, the neo-liberal left, which was involved in the process of transition to a negotiated democracy, which was part of the process of deepening of the neo-liberal system. These two lefts today have an electoral pact which is expressed in their programmatic agreement. On the one hand we have the neo-liberal left seeking refuge in some parties of the Concertación, and on the other the traditional left, represented by the Communist Party.

But also we have another type of left, of a more “delusional” character, which seeks to be the heir to the revolutionary left in Chile, which is not real. The revolutionary left in Chile, on its long journey, was a revolutionary political project and always tried to have an impact on national politics. Since the military dictatorship and until today, we do not consider the depth of the crisis of the Chilean left. What I can say is that the natural heir to the revolutionary left is not those small sectarian factions that are limited to a historical memory with a verbal radicalism, but with zero political impact, frozen in the slogans and leaflets of the 1960s. Another left that appears on the Chilean political map, is the “progressive” left, mainly composed of sectors that broke with the neo-liberal consensus and turned to the left. They are organizations that were born recently and are considered “progressive”. Their political action is not yet defined clearly and their commitment to a transformation of the current Chile is still subject to evaluation.

Also, we have a social left that would correspond to the majority of society, which is pushing in different trenches of struggle for the transformation of Chile. This social left is not usually involved in political organizations or left organisations and is critical of what they are. We also are part of this social left, we are part of the social movement, and we are part of the different trenches emerging in every corner of the country. We are partly represented in this sphere, but we also know that it is essential to promote an organic tool constituting a revolutionary contribution to the great socio-political alternative that should take shape inside the country. So we have decided to found our Organization, the “Libres del Sur” [“Free Movement of the South”], in April, 2012 through a process of reflection which lasted almost over one year and which is still going on.

Since we could not find a left alternative in Chile that met our minimum expectations as revolutionaries, we formed the Libres del Sur, but this is not an act of foundation, but rather the beginning of a long and complicated process of becoming a real alternative in future struggles, this will require “lots of water under the bridge”, we know that the class struggle and the processes of formation of real alternatives are slow, but we have to move forward.

And one last question, you are here at the Summer University of the NPA, you have also passed by Spain and met the comrades from Izquierda Anticapitalista and have seen a little of the European process: what is your view, from your experience in Chile (and Latin America), on what is happening here and also on the attempts to build the anti-capitalist movement?

My presence in Europe came through an invitation to make comrades aware of the experiences that are being developed. I've been in Spain with the comrades of Izquierda Anticapitalista, learning about its internal processes, mainly with respect to its links with

the movement of the indignant, as they have developed a revolutionary alternative adapted to the new times, since they come from a situation very similar to ours, in relation to the student movement, the mass movement, its relationship with workers.

Also we have done the same with the comrades of the New Anti-capitalist Party in France, which has also added to our thematic development around axes that have been worked on for a long time in Europe, like ecosocialism, LGBT work, feminism, the new internationalism. Also I have been discussing with comrades from different organisations such as Syriza from Greece, the Portuguese Bloco de Esquerda, and many others.

But if we were to do a comparative analysis between Latin America and Europe, they are wildly different things. What characterizes Latin America now is the advancement of its social movements, expressed at the institutional level in the electoral triumph of a broad left. In Europe today we have the example of Syriza, the coalition of the radical left, which obtained a high vote in Greek elections, giving certain hopes and dreams for the European anti-capitalist radical left to move forward. Also we have an objective issue, which has to do with the crisis in Europe: we find some countries like Spain with 25% general unemployment, the product of a crisis of capital and its political class, giving greater possibilities of making the enemies of the people visible. So these are quite different processes and customs, but we unite around the fact that today there is a crisis of global capitalism and therefore against that our response must be a revolutionary, anti-capitalist alternative at the global level, since it is not possible to see the fight from the local-national point of view, or even regional, in our case at the level of Latin American, but that our response has to be in all areas of society but from the global point of view. That is something that has also led me to my geographic trench of struggle, which is that “if the revolution is not global, it will not be”.

Electoral fraud and struggle

26 September 2012, by **Héctor Márquez**

In early September, the last doubts concerning the impartiality of the TEPJF were removed. The National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and the “Progressive Movement” electoral coalition, which supported the candidacy of AMLO, were definitively dismissed in their request for cancellation of the elections. Despite the evidence provided by the centre-left (without any claim to exhaustiveness, let us mention the massive buying of votes, the use of incredible quantities of money of illicit origin and the huge exceeding of authorised campaign costs), the TEPJF declared the elections valid and “exemplary”. After the frauds of 1988 and 2006 which prevented the centre left from coming to power, the resolution of the TEPJF probably puts an end to the hopes of those who thought that a transformation of the country by institutional means was still possible.

What does the PRI return to power mean?

Félice Calderón, whose militarist “war on drugs” policy, launched at the behest of the US government, has led to the death of 60-80,000 people and the displacement of tens of thousands more, left power after a disastrous six year term. Faced with the erosion of the National Action Party (PAN) after two successive governments, the neoliberal pro-Yankee oligarchy was betting on the return of the PRI, represented by Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN), to ensure the continuity of the regime and the continuation of policies in the service of transnational capital. Among the shock policies announced during his campaign was the revision of the Employment Law which would destroy the historic conquests of Mexican workers. by

rendering hiring conditions radically more flexible. Other anti popular measures like tax reform or the privatisation of oil also featured in the “structural reforms” that EPN intended to impose. All these measures would have the immediate consequence of rendering still more difficult the daily life of a population which has seen its conditions of existence and survival deteriorate in the extreme. Faced with this situation, an increased in struggles and social conflict is foreseeable in the short term. To contain an ever more explosive social situation, the continuation of the “security” policy decided in Washington appears as an absolute necessity for the regime. To do this EPN has engaged the services of the Colombian Álvaro Uribe Uribe, ex-Director General of the Colombian National Police. The latter in addition to belonging to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), is considered as one of the architects of state terror in Colombia. He is also suspected by numerous NGOs of having links with criminal organisations.

What left reorganisation?

The parties of the institutional left gathered in the “Progressive Movement” coalition were disheartened by the resolution of the TEPJF declaring EPN officially the winner. The priority for them was to put an end to the post-electoral conflict so as to be able to negotiate posts and positions with the country’s new strongman. They did not in any case have any intention of undertaking a frontal struggle against the regime. At a meeting held on September 9th, AMLO announced his separation with the parties making up the PM and the continuation of the work of building MORENA, which will hold a national

congress in November which will probably decide upon its transformation into a legally recognised political party. AMLO also announced that MORENA would not recognise EPN as President and presented a plan for “civil disobedience” which is striking in its extremely “legalist” character and which contents itself with denouncing in a symbolic manner the illegitimate character of the President while de facto renouncing a mass struggle to practically prevent his inauguration on December 1st.

AMLO’s announcement throws exclusive weight on the student movement “I am the 132” and on the “National Convention against the Imposition” to oppose the inauguration. It is obvious that to meet the stakes of the situation a united front appealing to the 16 million people who voted for AMLO would have been necessary. Instead, a proposal of a new cross-class party whose programme strongly resembles that of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) from its origins seems entirely inadequate

For the sectors of the anti-capitalist left who supported the candidacy of AMLO, the time to make choices has then come. Faced with the continuation of neoliberal policies the construction of an independent workers’ party with a mass base defending a class programme should be the priority. The new Political Organisation of the People and Workers (OPT), formed at the initiative of the Mexican Electricians’ Trade Union (SME), and since joined by other trade union and popular organisations, represents today the embryonic form of it. It is to the construction of an organisation of this type as an alternative to the parties of the institutional left that the revolutionary and socialist left should devote itself.

Freedom To Criticize Religion Is A Touchstone Of Free Expression

26 September 2012, by **Farooq Sulehria, Gilbert Achcar**

Q: A decade after your book *The Clash of Barbarisms*, written in the aftermath of 9/11, it seems that the situation has only worsened. A caricature in an obscure newspaper, an immature video: anything can ignite a ‘clash of barbarisms’ disguised as a ‘clash of civilisations’. How would you analyse the ongoing wave of protests against the ‘Innocence of Muslims’ video in parts of the Muslim world?

Gilbert Achcar (GA): The clash of barbarisms that I analysed should not be seen through the lens of such incidents, but rather through much more serious issues such as Guantanamo, the invasion of Iraq, the torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, the increasing resort of the USA to extra-judicial killings, etc. Such events do indeed represent setbacks in the civilizing process.

The reactive barbarism found in the Muslim world is mostly incarnated by al-Qaida and other ultra-fundamentalist currents such as the Taliban (whatever goes under this umbrella) and exhibited in much more serious events than the recent demonstrations, such as the dreadful and endless sectarian killings in Iraq, for instance.

These antagonistic barbarisms feed off each other. Of course, the main culprits remain the most powerful: the world powers, the Western powers as well as Russia, which have created this dynamic of adverse barbarisms in the first place.

Q: In Pakistan, at least, the mainstream discourse is to point out Western, especially US, hypocrisy when it comes to

freedom of expression. ‘Holocaust denial is a crime,’ is a common refrain. Your comment?

GA: First of all, let us set the record straight. Denying the Holocaust is a punishable offence only in some Western countries, not in all of them. It is not liable for punishment in the USA itself. Holocaust deniers freely publish their insanities in the US. This fact is disregarded by all those who use the ban on Holocaust denial as an argument against the USA.

As a matter of fact, there are laws against hate speech in all Western countries, except the US where the First Amendment to the Constitution prohibits any restriction to free speech. In upholding this principle, the US Supreme Court went so far, in 1977, as defending the right of the American Nazi Party to march through the village of Skokie a substantial proportion of whose inhabitants were Jewish concentration camp survivors. True, there have been violations of this right, particularly for Muslims in the US in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent surge of Islamophobia. But it remains always possible to fight back legally, and civil rights movements are active on such issues.

In Europe, when you feel you have been a victim of hate speech, you can resort to legal action. The question of Western double standard is usually raised with regard to Jews there, as it is much more difficult in Europe to articulate an anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic speech than an Islamophobic one. But this state of affairs owes to two factors.

The first is Europe’s sense of guilt with regard to the Jewish genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany during the Second World War with much

European complicity.

The second is that there are powerful Jewish institutions that react vigilantly against any gesture they deem anti-Semitic, often abusively by equating the critique of Israel with anti-Semitism. They are powerful, but note how they react. Not by holding violent demonstrations that would actually increase anti-Semitism, but by engaging in legal proceedings, publishing articles, and so on. Sometimes they even resort to what may be called intellectual terrorism in trying to intimidate critics of the Israeli state or Zionism with accusations of anti-Semitism.

This said, those who say that freedom of expression in the West is biased against Islam because it is less tolerant of anti-Jewish expression forget that the religion of the overwhelming majority in the West is not Judaism, but Christianity. When it comes to Christianity, Westerners are free to mock the Pope, Jesus Christ, or even God without fear of reprisals. Some of the major artistic and literary works in the West are satirical of Christianity or religion in general in ways that you can’t imagine nowadays when it comes to Islam in the Muslim world.

True, there are some Christian fundamentalist groups that can resort to violence every now and then against anti-religious works. But they are completely marginal. Their violence is punished by law and it never reaches the level of what has been done these last days in the name of religion, which is matched only by the violence of Jewish fundamentalist colonial settlers in Palestine. Moreover, one should not forget that freedom of expression in Europe - in

the UK in particular - has been of much greater benefit to Islamic fundamentalists of all brands who sought a refuge there fleeing oppression in Muslim countries than it has to people committing provocations such as those we are discussing.

Anyone incensed by symbolic violence, such as the video in the US or cartoons in France, should retaliate with symbolic violence in the same way or with peaceful protest. Not through physical violence. Resorting to physical violence against a symbolic act is a sign of intellectual weakness. You remember how the Taliban destroyed the gigantic Buddhas in Bamyán. These Buddhas were a World Heritage Site. Did Buddhists react violently? In Egypt and Nigeria, Christians and churches have been repeatedly and bloodily attacked in recent months. Did you see violent demonstrations of Christians worldwide retaliating against Muslim countries? People appreciate the difference between the lunatic fringe that carries out attacks on Christians and the general Muslim population. Muslims should also realise that the violent Islamophobic lunatic fringe in Western countries is marginal, actually much more marginal than the violent Islamic fundamentalist lunatic fringe in Muslim countries.

Crazy provocations like the "Innocence of Muslims" film or the burning of Korans by the crackpot Terry Jones are best ignored. They are so stupid that they don't deserve any reaction at all. The greatest service one can render to these provocateurs is to respond wildly to their provocations. Agitators are successful when they are able to arouse the feelings of the targeted group. This is why some people rightly argue that the ban on Holocaust denial in France, for instance, is counter-productive. Due to that ban, French Holocaust deniers have become very famous in France, whereas hardly anybody knows the name of US Holocaust deniers in the USA. Had nobody reacted to Terry Jones's damn-fool provocations, they would have remained unknown, as have thousands of such anti-Islamic utterances. Had nobody paid attention to him, he would not have carried on his dreadful farce. These lunatics have an

Islamophobic agenda. Muslim political forces that react in the violent way that we have seen actually reinforce the very Islamophobia against which they protest.

Salman Rushdie's kind of work falls into a different category, of course. It cannot be dismissed as rubbish. He is a major contemporary writer. However, his *Satanic Verses* are very innocuous indeed compared to satires of Christianity, or even Judaism for that matter, which are freely available in the West.

Q: Since the Salman Rushdie affair there have been the Danish cartoons, Geert Wilders' film, and now the film produced in the US. Every time we see wild massive reactions. How do you explain that?

GA: The fact is, very obviously, that certain political forces exploit such events to agitate for their cause, as Khomeini did in the case of the Rushdie affair. He never read Salman Rushdie's book, in the same way as most demonstrators against the anti-Islam film have not seen it. It is always the same story: some political forces exploit such occasions by stirring up the raw feelings of politically illiterate people in order to push their own political agenda. Fundamentalist forces have always seized upon such provocations. This is how they build their influence.

Q: In Pakistan, a common idea peddled by the government, Islamists and mainstream media is to demand worldwide UN legislation banning blasphemy? What do you think of this demand?

GA: I am hundred percent against it. The notion of blasphemy is a medieval notion. Those who make such a demand want to bring us back to the Middle Ages. If you want to prohibit criticism of religion, you will have to prohibit it for all religions. To implement a ban on blasphemy one will have to proscribe a huge number of works of literature, art and philosophy accumulated over many centuries in all languages, including Arabic of course. Such works are presently banned in the Arab world, but this is a testimony to the lack of

freedom of expression.

The freedom to criticize religion is a major touchstone of the right to free expression. As long as a society does not tolerate this freedom, it has not achieved freedom of expression. It is a duty of all people committed to democratic freedoms to raise their voices against barbaric reactions to lunatic provocations. Capitulation to religious demagoguery will entail a huge cost at all levels. Once set in motion this process of curtailment of free speech will have no limit. Who will decide what is blasphemous and what is not?

Q: The demonstrators in Pakistan targeted symbols of wealth (banks, cars, ATM machines) or Western culture (cinemas, theatres). Some people view these violent actions in the Muslim world as part of a wider political conflict between the West and the Muslim world. What is your opinion?

GA: I disagree. Violence can be understandable under certain circumstances when people are demonstrating against social and economic assaults on their livelihood or in protest against actual slaughter, massacres, invasions, or occupations perpetrated by Western powers, or the Zionist occupation in Palestine. And yet, the fact is that many real massacres committed by Western powers or Zionists did not lead to any comparable reactions. The truth is that the violence on display is above all a political exploitation by fundamentalists of a provocation for utterly reactionary purposes.

Q: The left in most of the Muslim countries is a small force and is often caught in a strange situation during such crises. While the left, in Pakistan for instance, condemns racist provocations, it advocates curtailment of free speech with regard to religion. What do you think of this attitude?

GA: We are reaping today the result of the left's failure over many decades to raise the basic secular demand of separation of religion from state. Secularism - including freedom of belief, religion, and irreligion - is an elementary condition of democracy. It

should be, therefore, an elementary part of any democratic project, let alone a left project. But most of the left in my part of the world, the Arab region, has capitulated on this issue.

For instance, in Egypt, large sections of the left, including the radical left, have all but dropped the term secularism from their vocabulary.

Ironically, when the "Islamist" Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited Egypt, he stated publicly that he stood for secularism, to the chagrin of the Muslim Brotherhood.

If the left wants to challenge the hegemony of Islamic forces and develop a counter-hegemonic movement in the political, social and

cultural spheres, it must fight resolutely for secularism as well as against gender oppression - another fight from which many on the left also shy away in fear of "hurting the feelings" of the believers. This is a self-defeating strategy.

From Viewpoint.

Biodiversity forgotten

17 September 2012, by Yves Dachy

The concept of biodiversity defended by the entomologist Edward Wilson at the Rio Summit (1992) is probably the most interesting idea that will remain from this forum. This concept goes beyond the classical view, where species are considered separately or as forming of composite populations. What was necessary was to "protect the species" sometimes restricted to a few rare, emblematic or spectacular animals and plants.

The concept of biodiversity is based on an integrated vision, taking into account the interactions of organisms with each other and with the environment. There is no hierarchy in the networks of living organisms, but interactions. It is a question of defending species without any ideological or cultural a priori and of considering the entire ecosystem of the Earth which is being endangered by one of its species: human beings. Despite the acuteness of the problem, anti-capitalist currents are reluctant, unprepared or argue that there is no urgency to take up the issue of biodiversity, which concerns the survival of human populations, in addition to other struggles, against barbarism, for a socialist horizon.

Seeing the disappearance of

species

In the twentieth century, motorists had at their disposal in petrol stations a bucket of water and a sponge to clean the marks of insects on their windscreens. As the insects became rarer and rarer in the 1990s, motorists stopped cleaning their windscreens so often and buckets disappeared from the petrol stations. In the Mediterranean region, the inhabitants had equipped the doors and windows of their houses with fine mesh screens to prevent the intrusion of insects. It was a compromise between the nuisance caused by the intruders and good natural lighting of the rooms. Since 2000, the inhabitants have been dismantling these protective screens because the insects are less of a nuisance.

Associations of naturalists have rewritten records of collections of insects on the basis of studies carried out a hundred years earlier exactly in the same way. The fabulous collections of nineteenth-century observers are no longer possible. Many species have become rare or are confined to certain localities! Spontaneous observations by inhabitants, farmers or foresters, confirm the seriousness of the phenomenon on land and in fresh water (we are not dealing here with the oceans). Farmers have noted the disappearance of the once common cornflowers and corn-cockles, and also of cockchafers and earthworms in soil

that has been treated with chemical fertilizer. Fishermen observe the scarcity of minnows, bullheads, perch, wild trout and pike in polluted rivers (60 per cent of the rivers in France); gardeners no longer see many mole crickets or cockchafer larvae. Endangered populations are maintained in areas protected by local conditions or protected in reserves. People are surprised by the arrival of "new" plants like the Jussies from Brazil, plants that were introduced to embellish the basins of the botanic gardens of Montpellier... and which now clutter up canals, lakes and rivers because their natural parasites and predators did not follow them.

Naturalists report more detailed observations and speak of "breaks in trophic chains" when a predator no longer finds its usual prey. Starting in 1970, there have appeared in scientific publications comments such as "has not been seen since...". "has become rare", "seems to have disappeared", "disappeared". The effects of pesticides began to be noticed. In 1966, near the city of Sedan, the Green-veined White butterfly "Pieris napi" was so abundant that I could find several individuals with abnormal morphology while crossing a field of lucernes." In the course of one day's collection, I had created a beautiful collection of individuals with an anomaly of development of the wing (teratological forms). Forty years later, the same fields, still covered with lucernes and

revisited by myself, provided scarcely more than one White butterfly per hectare! The situation is similar for other species that I had been able to observe in considerable number in the 1960s. In a very short time, the land has lost insects whose usefulness the farmers did not see... until the bees, major providers of pollen, began to disappear in their turn. The possible prospect of the disappearance of pollinators is a disturbing idea that has fortunately made its way into the public domain! This suggests the need to act.

In 1987, a team of German naturalists published a large book in order to sound the alarm over the endangered butterflies, which was immediately translated into French by Gérard-Christian Luquet [4]. Illustrated and with an effective didactic content, the book presents evidence on practices widely in use, such as burning embankments and other brushwood fires in spring, and the systematic use of chemical products, unnecessary and disastrous for species that had taken refuge outside the zones of cultivation. This indictment provoked no reaction on the part of political organizations and governments. As for biodiversity as a whole, it is economic, genetic, scientific, aesthetic and cultural capital that we are destroying. Butterflies, those emblems of futility, innocence and peace are disappearing because "butterflies can only exist in an opulent natural environment" (Luquet). The noisy laughter of the ignorant - and sometimes of activists - will be echoed by the hollow laughter of humans deprived of insects for their pollination-dependent plants!

The end of the cockchafer hunt

A characteristic event of the new and increasingly human-centred world in which we live appeared in the 1970s. We are speaking of the little-known and never-mentioned fate of the common cockchafer "*Melolontha melolontha*." This large beetle was historically feared by framers, nursery cultivators and gardeners, because it attacked almost all crops. The grievances of the peasants against the beetles have been known since the

development of agriculture in the Middle Ages. Its larvae often referred to as "grubs" develop in light soil that is not subject to flooding and is rich in organic matter. They eat the tender plant roots, full of sweet nutrition, and kill herbaceous plants. Pupation occurs near the surface and the adults emerge from the earth between the months of April and June. They attack leaves and buds in the spring. They eat the pistils of the flowers which precede the fruit, or nibble at the first fruits in May-June, making them unfit for marketing and good conservation. The activity of the common cockchafer was so great that it influenced the cultural practices of the peasants.

To combat the grubs, cultivated land was ploughed deeply, because the larvae go 60 centimetres underground to hibernate. This practice required powerful traction, with two- or four horse-drawn ploughs. It led to other problems, such as greater soil erosion and the useless mixture of fertile land with a substratum less rich in organic matter. It became necessary increase the amount of fertilizer used. The land that could not be ploughed was scratched before winter to destroy the eggs that had been laid and to injure the loosely buried young larvae. But the common cockchafers were so numerous that this practice, developed after 1945 with the introduction of tractors into the countryside, did not change the obsessive presence of these insects. Nor did it remove the "grub years", where these insects were able to proliferate in abundance, without anyone knowing why. To limit their abundance, the most effective solution remained the collection of adult insects by massive actions of the population.

It was the time of the cockchafer hunt: great popular and festive activities took place in the villages concerned, from France to Hungary (there were weddings). Available people, including schoolchildren, took part in the struggle. At break of day, when the cockchafers were numbed by the cold and the humidity of the night, men hit the branches with large poles and insects fell to the ground. All that remained was to collect them quickly, there were so many of them. Considerable quantities of collected

insects ended up in a trench or were used as fertilizer in gardens.

The common cockchafer typically represented a "pest" or "vermin". For centuries, everything was used to destroy the grubs, without ever reducing their population before the late 1970s - which if it had been done would have signaled earlier the end of the cockchafer hunt, perhaps without harming other species. Since the creation in France of the National Institute of Agronomic Research (INRA) in 1946, different laboratories tackled the problem of the eradication of the grub, without immediate success. First generation chemical insecticides such as DDT did not reach the buried larvae in the first years of being used. It was during the 1960s that the first observations of reduced populations of cockchafers were made, with the accumulation of pesticides in soil, water and organisms. Throughout the 1970s, the depletion of the grubs was confirmed. In the 1980s, cockchafer hunts disappeared in Western Europe. In the twenty-first century, the cockchafer hunt is just a nice bit of folklore that grandparents tell their grandchildren children about.

With the collapse of the populations of cockchafers, it is actually a long list of invertebrates living in the soil which is disappearing. Rose chafers (the larvae consume dead wood or decomposed mulch) and ground-beetles (which are carnivorous in all their phases), to mention the most spectacular insects, are no longer seen in gardens and have disappeared in regions of large-scale farming. There are now country people who have never seen cockchafers or rose chafers, and do not recognize them when a specimen is put before them. The invertebrates are suffering the same fate in an ecocidal dynamic [5] that is extending to all fauna. This phenomenon is resulting in an impoverishment of the common vocabulary as far as the environment is concerned, because we only name what we know. The empirical knowledge of farmers, based on a proximity with nature, which could tell the difference between disagreeable insects and those that were harmless, has been replaced by generic terms with negative connotations, such as "flies",

"mosquitoes", "wasps", "vermin", "smellies", "dirt", etc., encouraged by advertising, the media, hunting clubs... This evolution has been accompanied by many phobias, and even, among people still living in the cities, by a syndrome of "fear of all animals".

If invertebrates are disappearing from the farming areas, they are also disappearing from land that is not in use "at whatever distance from farms". Terrains sprayed with pesticides are so many traps laid for moths, dragonflies, beetles and birds, all of which fly. The molecules that are poisoning the biosphere are the famous POPs or persistent organic pollutants. They establish themselves in the fat of animals and are concentrated along the trophic chains, especially in top predators such as the polar bear and...humans. Herbivores accumulate them by grazing on polluted grass. In humans, contamination is through milk and fish. The pesticides used on the continents also poison the seas.

Cockchafers do not move around very much and their general population can only have been eradicated in areas not treated by chemical fertilisers by a natural movement of POPs (by wind, rain, or the movement of contaminated animals). A consequence of this observation is that if the products used on some crops are enough to affect by simple aggregation vast surrounding territories, it means that the amount used was over-calculated and poorly applied, like the clouds of pesticides spread by aircraft, particularly in the USA, which form a formidable mist that is dangerously carried by the wind.

In the course of a human generation, the dispersal of POPs, frantically diffused by humans, has spread across the planet and no one is immune to their effects. The Inuit women of the far North, who traditionally eat only meat, (seal, fish), are advised not to consume local products when they are pregnant, despite the total absence of toxic spills in these huge areas! On the threshold of the third millennium, a blood sample taken from no matter what European reveals the presence of several different toxic substances,

including dioxins! While we are more or less familiar with the effects produced by each pesticide on its own, we have at present no certain knowledge of the effect they produce in synergy. The growing dispersion throughout the world of millions of tonnes of biocides, antibiotics and substances which perturb the endocrine system form a cocktail that is uncontrollable and confronts biodiversity and human populations, which are vulnerable!

Despite the knowledge of the effects of persistent pollutants on the living, the amount of these agents was not reduced. They have permeated the soil ever more massively since 1945 and threaten sustainable groundwater with artificial molecules that nature does not know how to degrade, as confirmed by the extraordinary capacity of retentivity of POPs. Quite logically, capitalists encourage their consumption, and generate anxiety among users by demagogic propaganda and dishonest "scientific" communications! Farmers and gardeners reassure themselves by increasing even more the doses used, although the doses recommended by the sellers are already excessively large in relation to the expected effect. Such practices are quite incredible when the parasites they are used against have already disappeared. As for the capitalists who flood the market with products that are harmful for living organisms, their policy is summarized as follows: "after me the deluge." They also pollute spirits by spreading the idea that agricultural land must be as bald as a billiard ball between cultivated plants and the environment completely free from "vermin".

When crops are sprayed over large surfaces, we can consider in the light of the samples taken that it is the entire region that is being sprayed, including its urbanized zones and their inhabitants who breathe and ingest "high-performance multi-targeted" products. The present erosion in the species of cicadas - emblematic of the fables of La Fontaine - is evidence of the widespread influence of pesticides used in agriculture. Cicadas do not often frequent cultivated areas where there are no trees and which are too noisy for their long-living

larvae. As adults, several species gather on trees in cities, which are in principle not sprayed. But pesticides are reaching them everywhere, since they are disappearing.

Denounced for a long time by scientists, some of whom were repressed because of it, the impact of toxic agents on human health is beginning to be recognized. In February 2012, the guilt of the Monsanto Company in the contamination of a farmer exposed to one of its herbicides was accepted by the High Court in Lyons. In May, the French State was ordered to compensate a farmer exposed to pesticides in the course of his work. May 7, 2012 will remain in history longer than May 6 (the election of François Hollande) because of the entry into force of a French decree establishing, for the first time, a link between exposure to pesticides and Parkinson's disease, which is now recognized as an occupational disease in agriculture, subject to a period of ten years exposure! This bureaucratic restriction ignores the intensity of exposure and its hazard for farmers. The decree includes agricultural products, the case of inhalations or contact with crops, surfaces and animals that have been treated with pesticide (against parasites). So those who live near agricultural land, hikers and children circulating in a natural environment which we now know to be polluted everywhere, are exposed to the same pathologies as those that are beginning to be identified for farmers. Instead of recognizing occupational diseases after long conflicts, we would be well advised to stop the flow of cocktails of pesticides that generate these diseases.

To stop using pesticides will be a long battle, like the struggles to prohibit the industrial use of asbestos and to compensate its victims. But if for asbestos it took three decades of struggles in France, how long will it take to close the much more complex case of pesticides, which are multifaceted and used all over the world, when we know that we will need to relearn how to work the land, to rediscover the ecosystems and to reorient state aid?

Towards a world without wild animals

Severely affected by the loss of their prey, birds, bats, reptiles and amphibians are declining in their turn, and this movement appears to be accelerating at the global level. Counts of amphibians in the primal forests of Central America, large zones where there is no agriculture and no cities, show a deficit in the number of individuals per species of batrachian by as much as 90 per cent over 25 years. Populations of all these species are declining and conditions of famine are increasing along food chains. In these situations of famine, some predators are changing their diet by attacking new prey, as witness the stunning predation of cicadas by sparrows that naturalists have observed for several years in Europe.

Other strange and disturbing phenomena appear in large animal populations, such as pandemics with no known precedent that occur in various species: African herbivores, American bats, fish, European crayfish and freshwater molluscs on the continents. We have seen the disappearance of entire groups of batrachians on several continents, without the cause being clearly known. These disasters seem related to the dispersal of violent products acting in concert: dioxins, furans, PCBs, organochlorines, organophosphates, endocrine disruptors, etc. The considerable dangerous effects of this cocktail operating in synergy are strongly suspected. Endocrine disrupting chemicals, commonly used with great naivety, act in infinitely small doses and deregulate the delicate hormonal balances that determine reproduction in insects, but also in vertebrates, by causing spectacular deregulation of the reproductive system, leading to infertility. Their impact on our species is likely, as suggests, for example, unprecedentedly early puberty in teenagers and ongoing degradation of the quality of human sperm.

To all these agents whose functions are lethal, there should now be added

pharmaceutical products and those for veterinary use: antibiotics, estrogen, anti-inflammatory drugs, etc. Human and animal organisms degrade only a small part of the drugs they receive, the rest are found in nature, because water purification plants do not know how to eliminate drugs. Antibiotics are used all over the world to encourage the growth of cattle. The use of antibiotics, added in large quantities to their food over a period of years, contributes to the selection of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. In this way we have selected pathogenic bacteria resistant to all known antibiotics by evolutionary adaptation! Medicine now finds itself disarmed in the face of some antibiotic-resistant bacteria. In the case of DDT, the fact that is dangerous for human beings has been known since the 1960s. Yet the World Health Organization and the United Nations Programme for the Environment, controlled and funded by liberal governments, only envisage the total abandonment of DDT from the year 2020! Little used in Europe, DDT is still manufactured to be sold under at least 25 brand names, in Africa, South America and Asia! But the basic molecule remains DichloroDiphenylTrichloroethane (DDT). Few Governments are clearly opposed to this, following the adage: "there is no such thing as a small profit."

The mechanism of the collapse of populations of swallows and swifts (of which there are respectively five and three species in Europe) must be made known. These birds feed on the insects they catch in flight. Respected by farmers, they took advantage of work in the fields causing many insects to take to the air to catch them by hedge-hopping. With the advent of spraying, insects that take flight as the machine passes are impregnated with concentrated poison. It is in this state that the birds catch them and poison themselves, at the same time taking toxic food back to their brood. Their populations are in regression: a drop of 41 per cent in twenty years for the common house martin in France, (source: LPO, France). But over the whole period of the introduction of pesticides since 1945, this population has collapsed by 60 per cent. The Trogne and Pagano waltz "The return of the swallows", a classic for

accordion virtuosos, will no longer have the same resonance if those who listen to it have lost the memory of the wonderful swallows.

Seeking salvation from famine, species are turning to urbanized areas to take advantage of the crumbs of our civilization. Magpies are becoming people-friendly and settling in the suburbs. Foxes live in the interstices of European cities. Crows are proliferating in the capital of Japan. These species, emblematic in all cultures, which have taken refuge in the cities of their worst enemies, are defeated! Human pressure will make itself increasingly felt by these species declared "harmful": they will disappear.

Who would have thought that our untiring sparrows, always attached to an urban environment, would see their numbers drop so sharply in our time? These elves of the cities do not appear to be affected by toxic spraying, since they live in urbanized areas. This misconception is based on the belief that spraying only acts locally. However, the sparrows must reproduce, and their young are insectivorous. The process that led to the decline of swallows is being repeated. The number of individuals reaching sexual maturity in good health has collapsed. Villages without sparrows are appearing in the wine-growing regions. We are entering the era predicted by Rachel Carson in her book "Silent Spring", published in 1962 in the United States [6], whose relevance led to the banning of DDT in the United States in 1972, to the chagrin of American industrialists, who denounced Rachel Carson as a "Communist".

On the surface of the planet, there are vast agricultural regions devoid of wild animals, which we starved or exterminated by hunting and the destruction of biotopes. We are now discovering that our species is affected, that our bodies are accumulating carcinogenic or neurotoxic molecules. Bees, selected and looked after by humans, and all the insects that participate in the pollination process, show a worrying decline. Their disappearance opens a new chapter, with the prospect of the loss of plant species which are

dependent on a pollinator for their reproduction. What is surprising about that, since wild animals are dying en masse from poisoning and that this was the sought-after objective!

Political parties, which are not reacting to this generalised poisoning of the planet where we are confined, will face social mobilizations, whose motivations they fail to understand. New contradictions are appearing with the existence of various pesticide-resistant insects and wild plants with acquired resistance to glyphosate (the brands Roundup, Grassane...) making progressively pointless crops of patented plants that are tolerant to herbicides. The catastrophes of Minamata [7] and Bhopal [8] occurred in a situation of total unpreparedness of governments and social organizations. Nothing prevented these dramatic events from being planned for and countered - nothing except the pressure from governments in the service of powerful lobbies. In a documentary on Minamata at the time, we see scientists forced to testify, with their faces hidden, to the strong density of mercury in the flesh of the fish that poisoned the population! We often find that such facts about the health of populations are hidden or treated as "state secrets", sometimes without any logical reason, as in the case of the "Chernobyl cloud" whose existence the French government blandly denied!

Since these disasters, and others confined to one region, the diversity and the tonnage of harmful agents in the biosphere has grown steadily. The emergence of new pathologies in our species (greater occurrence of diseases that were formerly rare, degradation of human sperm quality, asthma...) foretell the occurrence of Minamata-type disasters on a large scale. We have seen that this is already the case for many animal species newly suffering from mass pathologies. I said that a blood test conducted at our time on any human being indicates the presence of toxic substances that have been introduced into the environment or the products of their degradation, which are just as dangerous (such as DDE for DDT). We also find in the blood of humans natural toxic products. These products (radio-isotopes, arsenic, mercury)

were locked in rocks where they were neutralized and kept safe for life, without danger for living species and groundwater, until geological and industrial activities carried out without precaution put them in contact with humans, wildlife and flora.

Poisoning and artificialization of the soil, urbanization...

The poisoning and the artificialization of soils are an essential chapter, not understood by the public, and by associations and administrations which increasingly build housing estates, car parks and warehouses at the expense of valuable agricultural land. In France, about 6 per cent of the territory is artificialized, i.e. urbanized, paved, tarred or covered with ballast treated with herbicides. This permanently sterile artificialized area has doubled in 20 years! The major industrialized countries are heading towards 10 to 12 per cent of artificialization in the same time frame. Finally, roads, brick walls, ditches and canals lead to innumerable sealed-off plots of earth which block the circulation of living organisms of life and genetic exchanges in soil.

The volume of biomass found in the earth is not less than that on the surface. These organisms, which come from many animal and vegetable groups, interact with plants, to which they provide essential elements (carbon, trace elements and major nutrients such as nitrogen). Earthworms recycle organic matter trapped in the soil and take it to the surface. Many invertebrates that we do not see, with predator-prey relations, are active in the environment; they enrich it and ventilate it, avoiding excessive compression of the soil.

The soil receives all the chemical products used by agriculture. The belief in the need to "weed" between rows of vines, fruit trees and various plantations is an unnecessary and

harmful practice that increases the amount of pesticides affecting the soil. Ultimately, these agricultural methods are always excessive and inadequate for the conservation of the species (up to 16 sprayings a year in orchards). Therefore, biodiversity is depleted and eventually disappears. This process leads to the necessity of increasing the intake of water and fertilizer. Soils that are badly treated in this way progressively resemble crops that are not rooted in the soil, but based on artificial input instead of the effects of the biodiversity of natural soils.

Polluted, impoverished, the soils accept progressively fewer plants on the surface and become bare. Another irreversible phenomenon then begins: the loss of humus and fine particles eroded by rain, wind and the flow of water. Crops on soil as bare as an egg in major wine- and fruit-producing regions, obtained by applications of herbicide, are contributing to poisoning the biosphere and those who work the land. On these bare and parched soils, the wind becomes full of pesticides and erosion lays bare the roots of plants. In addition, and it is not a secondary point, soils which lose their natural biodiversity cease to fulfil a function of carbon retention, since many organisms linked to the soil produce carbonates or capture the carbon of CO₂ and release oxygen.

These farming methods, which are more and more costly and dangerous for living organisms, result from a lack of information from governments and from normative behaviour among professionals who have been formatted by capitalist agrochemical pressure, because "growth" also concerns the use of pesticides by farmers and the public. Seeking to sell ever more pesticide, poisoning still more the biosphere, for purely capitalist incentives, confirms the profound perversity of the system. These are criminal practices and methods which are situated in the continuity of the "pioneering" disasters of Bhopal and Minamata. It is urgent to put a stop to this. To drive back this alienation is a challenge to all.

This article is a partial transcript of a lecture given in May 2012 on the theme "Biodiversity, pesticides..."

Right victorious as socialist illusions are shattered

14 September 2012, by **Willem Bos**

The SP has its roots in Maoism but evolved into a party left of social democracy. A few weeks ago, this party seemed to be the main challenger of the incumbent prime-minister. Some polls from mid-August even gave the SP 37 seats, predicting it could become the largest party in parliament. But in the end the elections became a duel between Rutte and the new PvdA leader, Diederik Samson.

Emptying out the flanks

The VVD scored the biggest victory in its existence with its most right-wing campaign ever, a campaign that was hardly discernible in content and tone from Geert Wilders. In this way, the liberals succeeded in capturing a portion of Wilders' support.

Something similar happened on the left-end of the political spectrum. Under Samson's leadership, the PvdA adopted a left-wing profile, trying to tempt SP voters. The SP wavered and Samson won out. VVD and PvdA are now almost certainly forced to form a government together, maybe with the support of a smaller centrist party. Both parties will have major difficulties meeting their voters' expectations. This will especially be a problem for the PvdA: after all, many leftists voted PvdA in a failed attempt to prevent a new VVD-led government, not to enable one.

Socialist disillusionment

The elections were a major disappointment for the SP: its leadership had set out to win

participation in government. In 2006 the party won 25 seats but was excluded from the government coalition and the leadership was determined not to let that happen again. Apart from a strong showing in the elections, this meant the party had to show it was ready to take part in government. Its election program adopted a moderate tone, and the socialists emphasized that in numerous cities and districts it took part in governing coalitions, together with the right. Their new leader, Emile Roemer, had shown as a councilor that he could cooperate effectively with the VVD in a coalition.

This approach seemed successful. In the period before the campaigns really gathered steam, the SP grew steadily in the polls. 'Rutte or Roemer', 'A liberal or a social exit from the crisis', that was the central message: 'you want to prevent a return of Rutte as prime-minister? Then vote SP.'

As could be expected, the bosses and the right viciously attacked the SP. But instead of retaliating, Roemer responded with complaints about the unfair character of the harsh attacks. When it also became known the SP had, in a rather back-handed way, withdrawn its rejection of an increase of the pension age, many potential voters turned away in disappointment.

The approach of 'us or Rutte' didn't call for people to vote for a program but for a future prime minister and against the VVD. As the PvdA gathered more and more support, the SP's strategy backfired and with more than a week to go until the elections it became clear the elections became a fight between Samson and Rutte. For people whose priority was stopping Rutte, Samson became the logical option. The SP was more and more

forced on the defensive.

The disillusionment of the SP was caused by more than a badly handled election campaign and a mistaken assessment of the possibilities. The fundamental question is what matters in left, socialist politics. The SP stands for a social exit from the crisis, for a break with neoliberalism. Such a break can not be realized by a combination of as many seats as possible plus concessions to the right to become an acceptable partner.

It was always unrealistic to think the SP had a good chance of joining the government and implementing a significant part of its program. The experience of the Danish Socialist People's Party shows to what a disaster such a strategy can lead. Their participation in a government under the social democratic prime minister Thoring-Schmidt led to a collapse of their popularity.

Of course the SP should aim to get into government. Politics is about power, power to determine policies and to implement a programme. But a serious left party also tells its supporters that this is not always possible. There are conditions that need to be met, participation in government depends on the relationship of forces. Left politics stresses the importance of changing the relationship of forces in society and the SP did this insufficiently.

Despite the recent disappointment, the SP is still one of the strongest parties left of social democracy in Europe. If it persists in its opposition to neoliberalism there is a great potential - maybe not for participating in government in the short term - but certainly for a strong movement against the neoliberal crisis management.

Hightide for the Indonesian workers movement

14 September 2012, by **Zely Ariane**

Early July 2011, at least 8000 Freeport McMoran worker's went on strike [9] for almost 4 months. It was the first time in Indonesia's post-Reformasi era that workers here went on strike. Workers blocked supply vehicles, mobilised their families and communities, asking for wage increases beyond the minimum wage. Eventhough they did not win their main demand, their strong message of determined resistance and the demand for a living wage left an impact on Indonesian workers.

This was followed by movements around the talks on the national minimum wage, end 2011 and early 2012. At least 300.000 workers were mobilised in 7 industrials zone in Bekasi district, West Java Indonesia 27th January 2012. Their protests culminated in a three day spontanous strike and a highway blockade [10]. Similar mobilisations continued in neighboring industrial areas such as Tangerang, Karawang and Purwakarta around Jakarta. Similar outbursts of struggle were seen in Batam, an industrial province near to Singapore that is famous for its free trade zone, and in several industrial zones in East Java. More than ten thousands of workers took to the streets [11].

The movement did not stop there. After the struggle for a decent wage, thousands of workers from Bekasi zone rallied against the fuel price hike in March 2012. Following student mobilisations in most of the big cities in Indonesia, workers from different trade unions showed played an important role in the mobilisations against the hike, showing considerable determination. Their involvement in such numbers in such a way a new development. The movement succeeding postponing the fuel price hike: after a dramatic parliamentary session the government decided on

midnight 30th March 2012 to delay the hike [12].

The struggle continues

Tens of thousands of workers again rallied in the streets to commemorate Mayday 2012 [13]. Demands for a living wage, against outsourcing and contractualisation, and for lifelong social security were among the most popular ones. On 12th July 2012 thousands of supporters of the Indonesian Trade Unions Confederation (KSPI) launched a campaign for the abolishment of outsourcing and against low wages under the acronym HOSTUM [14]. But the real start of this was movement in Bekasi.

From some time after mayday 2012, throughout June, July, August and until now the call been resulted in daily spontanous strikes in different factories and economic zones. It started as a call to the rank of file of the KSPI to mobilise and give solidarity to each other, but nobody could prevent spontaneous support from workers from other unions.

Over 4 months the pattern of mobilisations took the form of what is called "geruduk" or support mobilisations: actions in support of workers whose negotiations with management had stalled in order to pressure the bosses to give in. The main demand is for permanent employment for contract workers. But once the struggle starts, workers demands can easily radicalize and cover almost all immediate problems they face: low wages, layoffs, union busting, etc. Support is coming from different sectors, especially from workers who already won fixed

contracts. Through Facebook group and using Blackberries, workers and activists distribute minutes of negotiations and gather support [15].

There is no official data so far on how many workers have won permanent employed because of these activities. One source says it has been 40.000, but another names 18.000 workers. Regardless the number of workers that directly benefited from these struggles, one thing for is sure: they create a new feel of solidarity among workers, regardless their union affiliation. The slogan 'solidarity without limits' is becoming reality.

In this context the Indonesian Assembly of Workers Employees (MPBI), on August 2012 called for a strike between September and Oktober in order to demand the abolishment of outsourcing and wage increases [16]. KSPI is one of the leading confederations among that established MPBI. They called for a national strike of one million workers in 14 districts, and Bekasi zone is the heart of the mobilisation.

The call is supported by the Joint Secretariat of Labor (SEKBER BURUH), which consists of radical "red trade unions" that are not members of MPBI. Sekber argues that the 1 million strike can only be a succes if the strike involve as many as trade unions as possible. But MPBI only relies on itself, especially on KSPI, ignoring many independent federations that could have been approached to joint the call. And the the 'one million strike' could turn out to be noting more than bluff. SEKBER understands the importance of the campaign and the ongoing radicalization in Bekasi, in which it plays an active part, and that is why it supported the call.

Challenges

The call for a strike is in itself important. It's the first call for a national strike against low wages and outsourcing in the country. Since the Central Electricity Meter Readers Officers Alliance won their case in the Constitutional Court to partly abolish two articles in Labor Law on contractualisation last year [17], and the wave of 'geruduk' solidarity in Bekasi since the last 4 months, this call has gained real momentum.

The only worrying sign is the fact that MPBI has not yet decided on a date for the strike. It would not be the first time KSPI raises radical sounding demands but settle in negotiations with the bosses for far less. In different moments KSPI spokesperson said that they are not out to abolish outsourcing as such but are in favor of a moratorium as suggested by the Labor Minister [18], or limiting outsourcing to certain types of works, etc. It's not the first time they formulate radical demands, in order to mobilise rank and file's support, only to settle

for the the minimum in negotiations with the government.

Sekber Buruh, together with different local and factory-based unions in Bekasi, is working hard to maintain and deepen the radicalization in Bekasi push KSPI to unite with other unions. With or without KSPI, Sekber Buruh will try to maximize its role in this process. There's good hope real committee of workers movements across different industrial zones can result from this wave of struggles.

From [KPRM-PRD english blogspot](#)

Factories more like death trap than workplaces, workers treated more like slave than human beings

13 September 2012, by Nasir Mansoor

The fire accident at factory was not the first one in this factory or in other factories, its every day phenomenon but unnoticed till the most heinous crime was occurred and get lime light on electronic and printed media. More than 300 worker lost their precious live at the alter of capitalist greed and lust for more profit.

The society is so criminally brutalized in sense no one heed the voices and cries of downtrodden till the uncountable damage and the un imagine miseries inflict upon them. The same is the case with workers at Ali Enterprises ,a garment factory at Hub river road in SITE industrial area Karachi where couple of time fire broke out in past but no government agency took any stern action.

It is come to know that the factory was established illegally with our registered under factory act. It is an export oriented factory. Here in Pakistan majority of factories are not registered with factory act to avoid the rules and regulations and to deny the rights to workers.

The factory building was not approved PROPERLY from the concern Karachi Building Authority (KBA). The safety measures were seldom observed in any workplace the same was the situation in "Ali Enterprises" Where there was no exit point except one for more than 500 workers at the time of emergency, all the windows were iron grilled and doorways and stairs were stuff with finished or semi finished merchandises.

Generator was used as alternate source of electricity with our properly safety precautions and it was became the main cause of fire eruption along with the boiler blast which perished 300 young male and female worker with in couple of hours and many dead bodies are still in the rubbles. There was no fire fighting or fire extinguishing equipments and mechanism in the factory.

The majority of the workers were on third party contract and none of the worker has appointment letter (that way the identification of dead bodies were not ascertained and now doing it through DNA test), no worker

registered with Social Security and Employees Old age Benefit Institute (EOBI) and Worker Welfare Board/Fund. The Workers of the factory were not allowed to formed their union and have collective bargaining rights. The workers who survived the accident told that factory itself insured but workers were not and they also blamed that in past factory owner Shahid Bella himself planned fire to get huge amount in insurance claims.

The National Trade Union Federation Pakistan (NTUF) was the first to react against the accident and organized protest demo in Karachi and demanded to arrest the factory owner, registers criminal cases against concern departmental heads and resignation from labour minister, minister for industries, Governor and Chief Minister of Sindh due to severe negligence on their part.

The NTUF also demanded compensation of PR 1million for the families of died workers and 400,000 for wounded workers and free medical treatment. It also demanded to start

the strict labour inspection in coordination with workers representative bodies, register all the factories under Factory Act, observe health and safety laws in true spirit, abolishing of dreaded contract system, issuance of appointment letter to all the workers at the time of employment, registration with social security and old age benefit institutions and workers welfare schemes.

The NTUF also appeal to international

workers bodies to put pressure on international brands and labels to force the local manufacture of strict observance on labour related laws and work place safety standards envisage in ILO conventions and in country laws.

Latest:

*It is reported that 650 workers were in the factory at the time of fire

* basement is filled with very hot water up to 16 feet, it was also

informed that at the time of accident there was calls from workers in basement that they were 250 in number so it was feared that more dead bodies are still lying in basement.

* more than 100 were female worker who died in the fire

* There were also indication of death of some child workers

September 12 2012

Fundamentalism, a challenge for the Left

13 September 2012, by **Farooq Tariq, Zely Ariane**

Q: There has been a growing number of islamic fundamentalist groups threatening religious minority, women and LGBT's groups and democratic principles in Indonesia. As far as I know, no left forces take this development seriously or organise a significant response. These fundamentalist groups are growing in term of numbers, supporters, and activities, even though the number of people who really support Islam as a political idea and agenda in general is declining as was shown by the 2009 general elections [19]. So for us the violence of fundamentalist groups, such as the Islamic Defence Front (FPI) is a new issue. Their activities are creating new atmosphere in which we need to take them seriously. I would like to get a sense of your struggle in Pakistan as a socialist party which takes this issue very seriously.

But first, I'd like to go back to what you've raised during your lecture about the increase of fundamentalist forces in the world, particularly in South and South-East Asia after 9/11. What you can say about this?

Farooq: After 9/11 religious fundamentalism has been on the rise. All the efforts of the imperialist forces

to cope with the activities of fundamentalists by military means have failed. Fundamentalism in different shapes has grown. They've grown as political forces, they've grown as very militant forces, new groups have came up, new ways of suicidal attacks have taken place not only in Pakistan and Afganishtan, but even spreading to some African countries, and Indonesia as well. And the attack are promoted by religious fanatics as a means of resistance.

Fundamentalism as a force has to be countered on political grounds, it has to be taken very seriously. We cannot think that imperialism will do our job for us by repressing them, killing them, through their drone attacks, through their war on terror and so on. Osama Bin Laden was killed, but not his ideas, his ideas still survive. New Osama bin Ladens have come to the front, with different name and activities. Did their activities decrease after Osama's death? No. Things have even been getting worse after his dead, because the death of Osama was hailed by the US as a major victory for them. The president came on the air and said that Osama's death could be an end of the fanaticism . But we have seen since 15th May 2011, Osama was killed, that the fundamentalists have not decreased their acitvities. They emerged in different shapes, it took

little time for them to reorganise. In Pakistan there are more suicide attacks, there are more fundamentalists in different shape, and we have seen them increase in the parliamentary field, in Egypt they are coming to power, they lost narrowly in Lybia, they gained good results in Algeria, Tunisia. So you can see the progress they are making, also in Indonesia. The growth of fundamentalism has to be taken very seriously by the left.

I can tell you that we had a long debate in our party in 1998-1999 and 2000. There were debates on the growth of fundamentalism. We had two trends, one trend in the party was saying fundamentalism growth is orchestrated by imperialist forces and whenever they want, the imperialists can discard the fundamentalists. Fundamentalists, this trend said, are promoted by imperialism, and they will always be controlled by the imperialists. This was before 9/11. I was one of the leaders in the party who said fundamentalism will progress by leaps and bounds, because of the crisis of capitalism, and because of the inability of the capitalist parties to solve any of the problems of the people. So fundamentalism would become to be seen like an alternative. I did not realise the extent to which they would

go to attack America, 9/11 for instance.

It was argued by some comrades that fundamentalism was like a balloon with air inside: once you put a needle in it the balloon will burst, the air will go out and they will come to their own small size. We said no, it's not a balloon, it's a real problem, it's a real monster, brought up by imperialist forces but it has gone out of control. We said the fundamentalist would form their own movements, build their own strength. We have seen 9/11 and then in 2002 fundamentalism for the first time in Pakistan got over 50 per cent of the vote. Before, they never had more than three, four per cent. They could not beat this record 2008 because of several factors. There was the opposition from us and some of the fundamentalist forces were boycotting the elections while some were participating. So the fundamentalist forces split during the 2008 election. Paving the way to a PPP (Pakistan People Party) majority in parliament.

But it's a real phenomena we have to face it. And the left should not think it's not their problem. The left should not think someone else will handle the fundamentalists for them, the left should really take them seriously. Although they aren't the main enemy, which remains the capitalist system. But you should keep an eye on this growing enemy, which is threatening mainly the weakest section of our class, like women, and religious minorities. These sections are most threatened by the growth of fundamentalism.

Q: As you said the trend of suicide attacks is raising. In Indonesia it happened, and Jamaa Islamiyah Indonesia was accused of doing this, and maybe they did, but do you know of any possible connections between the Islamic fundamentalist forces in Indonesia and Pakistan? Sometimes the government says that Indonesian fundamentalists were trained in Pakistan.

Farooq: I think religious fundamentalist groups are believers in internationalism. They want to change the world into an Islamist world, so it's

not just national trends in Indonesia and Pakistan. There are different international groupings and regroupings of fundamentalist trends. There is Jemaah Islamiyah Indonesia, Jemaah Islami in Malaysia et cetera. There is also Jemaah Islami in Bangladesh. So there are different internationals, and fundamentalists are uniting on an international basis. And we have seen that a person responsible for the Bali bombing was arrested in Pakistan. One of them was recently sentenced in Indonesia to 20 years in jail, and he was arrested in Pakistan. He was arrested in the same city where Osama bin Laden was killed. So Indonesian fundamentalists have long standing contacts with Pakistan fundamentalists and that has to be exposed by left forces. Al Qaeda is not a national organisation. Their becoming more dangerous because they have an international, political agenda, agenda to take over the world. Indonesia is one of the countries where an absolute majority is Muslim. You can see from different aspects of life that fundamentalists are gathering support.

More moderate groups are paving the way for hard line fundamentalists. And that's a very dangerous trend in Indonesia, and I think Indonesian socialists must take that phenomena seriously.

Q: What can you say on the connection between the military and fundamentalist religious groups in Pakistan? In Indonesia, there is a history of such cooperation, but sometimes leftists simplify the phenomenon of fundamentalism as being just an invention of the military.

Farooq: Whenever the fundamentalists are growing, this explained by some of the left groups as the hidden work of the Americans or of the military, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Pakistan). In this view, the fundamentalist are only the running dogs of the military. To some extent it was true at one time, but now they are a real force, a political force. They are an established force, they have the sympathy of the majority of Muslims in Pakistan, they are being seen as anti-imperialist. It is the idea of religious fundamentalism which has

regarded the sympathy by many Muslims, because after 9/11 the policies of US have been paving the way for this. For Muslims all over the world life became much harder.

One thing which is true for Pakistan and I think also true for Indonesia that most of the forces of fundamentalists come from people who left the country. These fundamentalist groups collect a lot of money from the west, whenever the leader goes to the west he comes back with a bag full of money. Immigrants in the west feel the pressure of racism, identify stronger as a religious group and think they are contributing to a good cause case in their own country. So the tough life of the ordinary Muslims, the lack of alternatives from the bourgeois parties pave the way for the growth of religious fundamentalism. In Pakistan they have become very rich.

Q: Some people on the left who argue that fundamentalists are also part of the working class because most of them come from the poorer sections of society.

Farooq: I've heard this argument several times, claiming they are from the working class. It's a working class movement, and that we must be for them, we must join them in order to expose the idea of fundamentalism, the class basis of fundamentalism is a reason for the left to go with them and so on. I think these are all wrong notions. The class composition of religious fundamentalism is mainly middle class, upper middle class and it's not a class-based movement, it's a religious based movement. They want Muslims to join, they don't want workers to join them. They don't want any sort of class contradiction within their own ranks. In Pakistan these mistaken ideas are often promoted by some left groups who say that the Pashtun working class has gone to the Taliban and all that, but I think it's wrong and also in Indonesia. Thinking that because of the class nature of the fundamentalist we should have a very different attitude, even be positive towards them and that we should try to work with them is a mistake; it would mean a complete collapse of the left if the left went along with the fundamentalist groups.

I know the case of Dita Sari very well, we had a debate with her urging her not to to elect on the list of an Islamic party [20], even though that party was not a fundamentalist party, just a religious party. There's a very thin line between religious parties and fundamentalist parties. Because religious parties are the basis for fundamentalist parties, they are the home ground on which fundamentalists can play easily. The rest of the leadership PRD (People's Democratic Party-Indonesia) chose the wrong strategy of working with this religious party. I had a debate with Dita Sari in 2007 on this issue but she thought they could enter parliament and do anything they wanted. And I asked; 'what parliament?' This parliament will not really help your party to grow, it's only the class struggle, it's only the struggle on the street, the mass movement, people's struggle, the struggle against fundamentalism that will pave the way for the success of PRD. And now we see the total collapse of that party, very unfortunate. I had a lot of respect for Dita Sari and her sacrifice, and the whole party was really like a shining example for the parties in Asia who fought against dictatorship, who fought for workers rights. PRD was the example of the kind of party that we wanted to build in Pakistan. When we started the LPP we always had this idea of PRD, who can grow and make sacrifices. And when Soeharto was defeated we hoped this party would grow tremendously, and it happened to some degree, the PRD did grow and attract a lot of people. But unfortunately wrong choices can mean disaster. It was a crime, of the PRD leadership [21]. But I think even ignoring fundamentalism is also a crime. If you take them lightly, you will pay the price in the future.

Q: About the campaign against fundamentalism. Tell me about the experience of Labour Party Pakistan in the solidarity campaign for the Mayor of Punjab and for a converted Hindu woman. In Indonesia, we supported the alliance against FPI [22], support the petition against them, but no other part of the left joined this because the different reasons we've discussed.

Farooq: We always try to unite different trends against fundamentalism. Because this fight is big we need to have large forces to fight against them. We always try to bring together social organisations, NGOs, trade unions, political parties, in a national fight against fundamentalism. We have found a Joint Action Committee for People's Rights. It has no structure, it just a committee but it get together to act on various issues. It's a movement. At one time the LPP was considered as a NGO party because in a society which is controlled by feudalism and fundamentalism and imperialism, we need to do some social work with social organisations, and try to radicalize them. So we've been working with social organisations in this fight against fundamentalism, we always try to unite with the rest of the left, with trade unions, and various social movements.

When a Hindu woman in Sindh was forcefully converted to Islam [23], it was an LPP initiative to hold rally across Sindh [24]. So there was a rally in Hyderabad, the second largest city, and one in Karachi. But the Hyderabad rally was attacked by the Sunni Tehreek fundamentalist group [25] who said we were against the anti-blasphemy law and that marched against fundamentalism. They attacked us, we fought back. Police came in, the fundamentalists got together, and all of our comrades, around a hundred, were arrested. And this is just against the case of a poor Hindu woman who was forcefully converted to Islam. We are in favor of free choice but knew that this was forced on this woman.

And after 8 hours of detention our comrades were released from prison, and the fundamentalist failed making a case against us based on the anti-blasphemy law. The penalty for blasphemy in Pakistan is the death sentence. So that is one example of our strategy, we never compromise in defending the minorities in Pakistan which are mainly Hindu and Christian. It is our main task as socialists to defend the most downtrodden, and the minorities are among the most downtrodden.

Another case in Punjab last year was

the killing of the governor of Punjab. [26]. Punjab is the largest province of Pakistan. The governor was from PPP, Pakistan People Party, he sympathized with a Christian woman who was arrested and charged with blasphemy. He went to jail to meet her, he spoke to the press in favor of this woman. Fundamentalist said he had committed blasphemy by supporting the woman who was accused of making blasphemous comments. He was a liberal bourgeois who dared to defend this woman. And what happened to him? His own bodyguard, who was influenced by the fundamentalists, killed him. And People's Party, his party, refused to defend his memory because they don't want to take the fundamentalists, they want to close their eyes, they just kept quiet. So we took the initiative to organize a first condemnation, a popular condemnation. We said we will light candles in front of the governor's house [27] And thousands of people came to pay tribute. We had a lot of problems with this governor politically, but when we fight against fundamentalism we have to be united with the liberals... We must be together, we have to be very flexible in our tactics and adept to the situation. We should be flexible on tactics and firm, on principles. It's good that the family of the governor was quite happy with the initiative taken by LPP at that time.

Q: You said other parts of the left are also involved in the campaign against fundamentalism, it's not only your party. I'd like to know more about the latest left unity project in Pakistan.

Farooq: Since we established the party in 1997 we always tried to work with different left currents in Pakistan. Although we came from a Trotskyist background, we will not build a party which is a Trotskyist party. We want a Marxist party, a socialist party. So we took very an ordinary name: the Labour Party. And the idea behind this name was that it should be a class based party, and it should attract different trends, people from different backgrounds, and they should unite on forming the party, but at the same time they can disagree on historical questions. Because after the collapse of stalinism and the offensive of

capitalism after 1990s, the division among the left has become less important. It's not the same situation as before 1990. I remember a lot of sectarian attitudes we also had at that time. Also because the offensive of capitalism the left is threatened, so it must unite. And I think in a country like Pakistan, the ideas of Trotsky, the theory of Permanent Revolution won over many stalinists because it opposes alliances with the bourgeoisie. It argues against the stages theory of revolution, and that the bourgeoisie cannot repeat the historical role it had in the European democratic political revolution. The bourgeoisie cannot end imperialism, it cannot bring democracy or cannot unite the nation, neither can they separate the state from religion or stimulate industrialization.

So we have been working together with different parties and groups, we always try to unite. In 2006 we found the Awami Jamhoori Tareek (AJT) [28], I was secretary of that, with all seven left groups of Pakistan, and we organised very successful events. But

it did not go very far because of the sectarian attitudes of some of the groups. But still, we were together in the lawyer's movement, we were united in our fight against fundamentalism. Last year a discussion started of how to merge started between three parties: Labor Party, Workers Party and the Awami Party of Pakistan. All these parties have found their own merger committees. Labor Party also found a merger committee, in the last federal committee meeting held in Aktabaad, the city where Osama bin Laden was killed. We insisted that the unity of the left has to be on the basis of a socialist program, not on an anti-capitalist program. Anti-capitalism is not sufficient. So our argumentation successfully won and the other two parties agreed on this. It's scientific socialism that we are talking about and democratic centralism, leninist method of organisation and so on...

In August the talks will continue on organisational terms and then we'll go back to our own party. If the negotiation comes to a conclusion and

we have an agreement, then there will be a special federal committee meeting of the LPP. We don't want to take such a decision in a hurry, we have to be sure. Once you've merged, that's your party. And we experienced 20 years of problems in such projects, so we also need to learn from other experiences, both negative and positive.

An united left party in Pakistan would attract a lot of radicalized youth. At this time there is a lot of confusion about which party they should join, since all these different left parties are there. And they ask: what differences do you have? I hope that it will be a great step forward for the progress of left ideas if the merger negotiation succeeds and the parties agree. If we are able to form one big party of the left, it will have potential to grow and will possibly win some seats in the parliament as well.

This interview was first published on the English-language blog of the People's Liberation party Indonesia Partai Pembebasan Rakyat.

“Build networks of popular resistance around a democratic charter”

11 September 2012, by **Gilbert Achcar**

Some left activists fear the Islamisation of the revolution, which has led them to oppose it or in any case not support it. What is your opinion as a Marxist on the position to be adopted towards the Syrian revolution?

It is normal that all those who believe in democracy “and democracy obviously presupposes secularism” fear the arrival of a fundamentalist religious force which takes as its source of legislation sacred texts rather than the will of the people. We all fear that the great Arab uprising, on which we have based much hope, may be transformed into a reactionary regression. There is a historic

precedent to this: the Iranian revolution which began as a democratic revolution and led to a fundamentalist state. This fear is then natural for whoever believes in democracy.

I add to this that the religious forces are in the best position to assume power at this stage in the Arab region. The left and nationalist forces are too weak or have been too weakened. But in spite of everything we note, I remain optimistic. There is indeed an enormous difference between the coming to power of Khomeini in Iran and that of the Islamists in the Arab revolts. Khomeini was the head of the Iranian revolution, he was its real

leader, which is not the case of the current Islamic movements. They are not at the origin of the Arab revolutions, they have joined them. Also, as we can note in Tunisia and in Egypt, their coming to power coincides with the development of a very sharp critical spirit among the people in general, and the youth in particular.

Moreover, we are not talking about a finished revolution, but a protracted revolutionary process, which can last for many years and which is shaped by social-economic contradictions representing the main obstacles to development. These obstacles are linked to the profound nature of the

existing social-political system, and not only to the corruption which is visible on the surface and denounced by all. Indeed, the Islamic movements have no serious programme to change this. It appears clearly from reading their programmes that they adhere to neoliberal recipes in the manner of the existing regimes or those which have been overthrown. That is why the process will continue until the resolution of the contradictions I mentioned.

Is a class reading of the Syrian revolution possible?

If it is about analysing the Syrian revolution as a "pure" class struggle, between workers and the bourgeoisie for example, then my reply is no. The battle in Syria is waged against a hereditary tyranny: the movement is made up of workers, peasants and petit-bourgeois, and even fractions of the bourgeoisie. The Syrian revolution in its current phase is above all a democratic revolution, in the context of a dynamic shaped by the socio-economic contradictions I have mentioned. Resolving the latter over the long term will only be possible by discarding the current class structure, and by adopting development policies centred on the state, but in a popular democratic framework instead of a dictatorial one as was the case in the 1960s.

Eventually, when the people get rid of the tyranny, class divisions will inevitably appear in the revolutionary process. But for now it is the people in all its class components which wants to get rid of the tyranny. Whoever considers themselves of the left can only stand alongside the Syrian people in its struggle against tyranny.

You predicted the inevitable militarisation of the revolution from its initial phase. Why?

Look at Egypt and Tunisia where peaceful revolutions have succeeded. The appeal launched on January 25, 2011 in Egypt came as the culmination of big workers' strikes as well as political protests led by movements like Kifaya ("Enough!"), with a strong presence in the street of organised religious opposition forces. The demonstrations of January 25 set the

gunpowder alight, but it was the prior struggles which accumulated this gunpowder. In Syria, on the contrary, extreme repression was the main reason for the delay in the extension of the movement to the country's main cities, which had known no prior accumulation of strikes and protests as was the case in Egypt or Tunisia.

The delay of the extension was not due to the fact that these cities were loyal to the regime, as has been claimed. The reason for the delay of the entry into rebellion of the cities of Aleppo and Damascus is not so much the significance of the social base of the regimes as the massive deployment of the forces of repression and the absence of a prior accumulation of struggles.

I come here to the question of militarisation. I am not a fan of militarisation, I prefer peaceful revolutionary processes. Militarisation leads to colossal destruction and to a degeneration of the opposition that threatens the nascent democracy, because military organisations are rarely democratic.

However "since the beginning, as you have stressed" I have affirmed that the militarisation of the Syrian revolution was unavoidable. With the beginning of the formation of the groups of the Free Syrian Army, members of the Syrian National Council called for a direct foreign intervention which, in their mind, would have allowed militarisation to be controlled. This request is dangerous and I am against it. Others in particular members of the National Coordination Committee "called for the movement to confine itself to peaceful struggle, condemning militarisation.

From my viewpoint, these two positions reflect a strategic deficiency. The Syrian regime is fundamentally different from those of Egypt and Tunisia. In Syria, as previously in Libya, there is an organic link between the military institution and the ruling family, whereas in Egypt and Tunisia, Mubarak and Ben Ali originated from the military institution rather than being its creators. The reorganisation of the state, and in particular of its armed forces, by Gaddafi and Hafez al-Assad made the peaceful overthrow

of their regimes completely illusory.

It is well known that Hafez al-Assad rebuilt the Syrian armed forces on sectarian bases. In noting that, we do not at all condemn one specific religious community [Alawite]; we denounce rather the regime's sectarianism. It is not about replacing one sectarianism with another, but of reconstructing the state on non-sectarian bases.

In countries like Libya or Syria one cannot bet on the abandonment of the tyrant by elite military units. The peaceful overthrow of the regime in countries such as these is impossible. Revolutions, like national liberation struggles, cannot always achieve victory in a peaceful fashion. The strategy is not defined according to what is desirable, but according to the nature of the state. That is why I have said from the beginning that the overthrow of the Syrian regime could only be achieved through armed struggle.

However, the call for foreign intervention is a serious fault. I have listed the risks that such an intervention would create in my contribution to a meeting of the Syrian opposition in Stockholm, and in the article published subsequently in the Beirut daily "Al Akhbar". Indeed, some of these risks have led the Western states themselves to reject militarisation from the beginning. Western leaders view are very much worried today by the expansion of Al-Qaeda in Syria; they are very concerned. And if they begin now to envisage a direct intervention, this is certainly not out of love for the Syrian people, but solely because of their fear of Al-Qaeda and similar groups. In Libya too, it was a similar fear of a drift in the situation, as well as the attempt to take control of the process of change which motivated their intervention. But their attempt failed.

There is a third illusion in relation to Syria, propagated by the USA: this is the so-called Yemeni solution which Obama among others has advocated. That would consist in making an agreement with Assad's main sponsor, Russia, so that it sidelines him in the same way that the Saudis sidelined Ali Abdallah Saleh. This is a pure illusion.

As I have indicated, the central state apparatuses are organically linked to the ruling family in Syria and are built on sectarian bases. It is unthinkable that they would abandon power without being defeated on the ground, even if we posit a departure of Bashar al-Assad in the same way as Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen.

These three illusions are the result of a strategic deficiency in the apprehension of reality and the differences between Syria, on the one hand, and Egypt, Tunisia and even Yemen, on the other hand. Due to this deficiency, the Syrian opposition failed to take the initiative to organise militarisation on sound bases. At the end of the day, democracy in Syria will only win by breaking the regime's apparatus, that is by dismantling the armed forces in order to rebuild them on bases which are neither sectarian nor dictatorial.

Some think that militarisation will lead to civil war. Has Syria entered into civil war?

Certainly, for several months now. But civil war does not mean sectarian war. Civil war means any armed conflict opposing parts of the same society, as was the case in the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, or in France after the revolution of 1789, or Russia after 1917. Civil wars are not necessarily sectarian or religious wars. When I said more than a year ago that Syria was inevitably headed for civil war, I did not mean by that a sectarian war. I

wanted only to stress the inevitability of military confrontation without which the regime cannot be overthrown.

Besides, the regime sought, and still seeks, to unleash a sectarian war, aided in this by some reactionary forces in the opposition. We saw how from the early days the regime attributed the uprising to Salafist groups or Al-Qaeda. This propaganda from the regime delivered two messages: one addressed to the minorities and the other to the ordinary Sunni who reject Wahhabism, not to mention the third message addressed to Western countries. In reality, the more the conflict goes on, the stronger sectarian forces get. It is indispensable to prevent the sectarian logic from prevailing. For that the opposition should adopt a firm position against sectarian discourses.

On the other hand, the call for a strictly peaceful movement under the pretext of guarding against sectarianism, in the manner of some on the Syrian left, went along with a call for dialogue with the regime. It was obvious from the start that these calls would come to nothing. Left forces should have adopted a radical position from the beginning of the movement, they should have called for the overthrow of the regime and not for an illusory dialogue with it. Despite my deep respect and friendship for some members of the Syrian left, I believe that these calls were, and remain, preaching in the wilderness.

On the other hand, does militarisation not lead to the suppression of the peaceful popular character of the revolution?

I have already said that the main strategic dilemma of the Syrian revolution is to succeed in combining the peaceful mass movement with the armed struggle. It is not conceivable, faced with a regime of the nature of the Syrian regime, that the peaceful struggle can continue infinitely. That would be equivalent to advocating that peaceful demonstrators continue to get slaughtered like sheep, day after day.

It is a classic dilemma in popular revolutions against tyrannical regimes that do not hesitate to kill. Under such conditions, it becomes necessary to create an armed wing of the revolution to protect the peaceful movement, and wage guerrilla warfare against the forces of the regime and its murderous militias (the "shabbiha").

The slide to a sectarian war would lead, on the other hand, to the prolongation of the conflict and the widening of the Assad regime's base rather than its shrinking. The solution is to build networks of popular resistance around a democratic charter which clearly rejects sectarianism, of which we already see beginnings. That is crucial for the future of the revolution and the state in Syria.

After the elections, a slight hangover?

8 September 2012, by **Pierre Mouterde**

However the results we have come up against have at least the merit of reminding us of some unavoidable facts.

First note: a still

strong neoliberal right

At the social level, neoliberal hegemony had been strongly shaken during the spring of 2012, but at the political level the reflection of this phenomenon has only been partial,

finding a relatively distant echo in the ballot boxes. Certainly the Liberal Party has gone into opposition (with 50 MPs) and Charest was well beaten in his county of Sherbrooke, obliging him to resign (something which is not negligible!). But this defeat is not a disaster for the Liberals given that with 31% of votes obtained, they are

only 1% behind the Parti Québécois (with 54 seats) and remain a very powerful official opposition. And if we add the percentage of the CAQ (27%; 19 seats) to the Liberal 31% (= 58%), we realise very clearly how the weight of the neoliberal right remains preponderant on the Québécois political scene. Even if the PQ score is supplemented by the two seats won by Amir Khadir and Françoise David as well as the percentages for Qs and Option Nationale (32%+ 6% + 1.9% = 39.9%), we are still far behind.

Second note: a Parti Québécois ready to govern from the right

This first note should be strengthened by the fact that the PQ is little more than a shadow of itself: the flagship of sovereignty wrecked on the rocks of neoliberalism, prudence and identity politics. Henceforth it is a party of government, but being in a minority, and considerably so, it will have all the trouble in the world in advancing any progressive projects, in particular that of sovereignty. and to the extent that the Qs cannot bring it the sufficient votes which it lacks (it needs 63), it will be necessarily impelled to govern (thinking of the future provincial budget) to the right. The support given by Julie Schneider, wife of the neoliberal billionaire Karl Pierre Peladeau, to Pauline Marois on the eve of the ballot is in this respect more than symbolic!

Third note: a considerable step forward but a disappointment

As for Québec solidaire, it remains still in fourth place, far behind the three old parties with only two deputies and 6% of the vote. Certainly many factors explain such a score (the question of the useful vote, the distortions of first past the post, the bias of the mass media and in particular Radio-Canada). Of course also some very good scores were recorded in a dozen or so counties [29], and Qs has everywhere made a not inconsiderable leap forward in relation to 2008: in sum a doubling of its vote and parliamentary representation.

But for many activists the result could appear frustrating, with respect to certain "winnable" counties, as well as the effort made and above all the professionalism and political and organisational capacities shown by Québec solidaire throughout this campaign. It is enough to think of its electoral posters (so clearly demarcated from those of the others), its slogan STANDING UP (so in tune with the period), its militant county electoral machines, and overall the fact that it made no false moves during its campaign. Not to mention the very good performance of Françoise David during the debate of the party leaders and the undeniable positive media effect this produced in

all counties.

A dress rehearsal

That would undoubtedly be the sole positive side of this somewhat disappointing result: to remind us that for a party like Qs - a party clearly of the left and pro-independence - the struggle is not only organisational. It is first and foremost political. It is a struggle of great breadth and it is not only played - cannot only be played - on the electoral front. To counterbalance the power of the socio-political and media elites, not to mention the financial groups, Québec solidaire should rely on the social movements of popular origin (community, green, feminist, trade union groups and so on), on their resolute and united support as well as their unwavering commitment at its side on the social and political scene.

We are still far from that situation. Witness the hesitations of the trade union federations like the CSN, dithering over the useful vote, or the difficulties of the student movement in raising its demands with one voice in the electoral context.

Knowing that the fragility of the PQ minority government makes it likely that a new electoral battle will take place in the next 18 to 24 months, we have to work urgently in this direction.

That is the lesson to be drawn from this campaign of summer 2012... an indispensable and salutary dress rehearsal.

Supreme Court Storm Clouds

7 September 2012, by Against the Current

If right-wingers miscalculated in assuming that the Supreme Court's majority would strike down the "individual mandate" to buy insurance, many liberals are even more deluded in thinking that Chief Justice John Roberts is moving the

Court toward a more "centrist" or "moderate" stance. Quite the reverse, the Court may be poised in its next term to smash up generations of social justice and welfare provisions, beginning with the right to vote. Let's briefly explore why.

Roberts unexpectedly improvised a ruling that nullified the "individual mandate" as a regulation of interstate commerce, but turned around and upheld it as a tax (a penalty for not carrying insurance) that Congress is authorized to legislate. Many

conservatives, feeling cheated of the victory they'd expected to crush president Obama's credibility, responded that Roberts had turned traitor or was losing his mind.

It would seem more likely that Roberts made a sophisticated political calculation, then worked out the legal theory to gain the desired result. Undoubtedly, the individual mandate was always the law's Achilles heel, its least popular and most dubious provision. It was made necessary "along with the massive bureaucratic complexities of the law" by the failure to create the straightforward and simple single-payer (universal Medicare) setup that's really needed. But overturning the law would have thrown the already disastrous U.S. health care system into chaos, with unpredictable consequences.

A 5-4 Supreme Court decision to strike down or cripple the huge health reform law could also have threatened the Court's own public legitimacy especially coming on the heels of other rightwing rulings like the infamous Citizens United case, which overturned a century of federal and state campaign finance laws. The stench of the Court's Bush v. Gore decision, which ratified the theft of the 2000 presidential election, also continues to waft through the political atmosphere.

In short, finding a way to keep the health reform law on the books was the preferable outcome for the Court's standing and for the stability of the system as a whole. Constitutional law is flexible enough to pretty much allow for whatever opinion Roberts wanted to construct. At the same time, the ruling leaves plenty of room to sabotage the reform "by states opting out of the expanded Medicaid or refusing to implement the insurance exchanges, and by Congress blocking the funds to implement it."

When the Supreme Court in the 1950s outlawed legal racial segregation in the Jim Crow South, it ordered that public schools be integrated "with all deliberate speed." That infamous phrase was a covert poison pill enabling state governments to stall and ignore desegregation requirements for years on end, often

until federal troops were sent to enforce court orders. With today's state Medicaid opt-out, the Court has overtly ruled that implementing the health reform itself is "optional." The concept that health care should be a basic human right, not a "policy" question, has essentially dropped out of sight.

Much Broader Implications

The Supreme Court's agenda and impact extend far beyond the parameters of the health care debate. First and foremost, the Court over the past thirty years has evolved into the cutting edge of the rightwing offensive. In other periods, cases like Citizens United wouldn't generally come to the Court, because the authority of Congress and state legislatures to regulate corporate political spending had been accepted since the forced breakup of monopolies early in the 20th century.

When such cases did come up, the Court was expected to usually rule "narrowly" for example, to decide whether Citizens United's 2008 video attacking then-candidate Hillary Clinton could be aired during the campaign season under restrictive federal laws. The Court instead took on itself the role of wiping out all restrictions on "free speech" for corporate "personhood."

The Court is also operating in a period of austerity when budget and social service cuts have been accompanied by state legislatures' mass assaults on the most basic democratic rights that were won during the past half century or more. One leading example, obviously, is the wave of voter suppression laws in more than two dozen states, which could result in stealing elections not only in 2012 but for years to come.

The racial intent of these laws is utterly clear. The Supreme Court will ultimately be asked to rule whether many of them (voter ID, proof of citizenship, restrictions on voter registration drives, etc.) are constitutional under the terms of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The Court

could decide such cases on their specific merits "or it could choose to nullify much of the Voting Rights Act itself on the grounds that it has become "outdated" or unfairly singles out southern states, or that the explicit racist intent of state laws must be "proven," or some other lying pretext that the rightwing Court majority might cook up.

In the case of Arizona's infamous SB70 law, the Court threw out provisions that clearly "infringed" on federal prerogatives (e.g. to impose penalties for hiring undocumented workers), but upheld the vilest "show me your papers" part, which authorizes police to demand that anyone who's arrested or pulled over for a driving violation prove their citizenship or immigration status.

Republican state legislatures are enacting brutal anti-abortion laws that quite clearly violate the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision. Will the Supreme Court take the opportunity to overturn Roe v. Wade as several of its members clearly intend "or will the fear of a serious public reaction, threatening the Court's own legitimacy, hold it back from that particular obscene act?"

The Court will also be asked, as early as this fall, to outlaw any form of affirmative action by public universities to increase racial minority enrollment. The result "exactly as intended by opponents of affirmative action" would be to keep tens if not hundreds of thousands of African-American and Latino students out of higher education, where the reactionaries don't think they "belong."

In short, as Stanford professor Pamela S. Karlan puts it, even though the Court upheld the health reform, "the conservative majority also laid down a cache of weapons that future courts can use to attack many of the legislative achievements of the [1930s] New Deal and the [1960s] Great Society" including labor, environmental, civil rights and consumer protection laws "and to prevent new progressive legislation. Far from being a source of jubilation, the term may come back to haunt liberals." ("No Respite for Liberals," New York Times Week in Review, July

1, 2012: 1)

A Broken System: Struggle Will Decide

There's a secondary factor that gives the Supreme Court enhanced power: In a political system paralyzed by a rightwing veto over legislation and divisions over social policy, the Court tends to become a legislative branch of government in its own right.

The legal arguments presented to the Court and to public opinion do matter, because they reflect a struggle of underlying philosophies. The liberal case is excellently presented by Ronald Dworkin in his analysis of the health reform decision, based on a view of "political morality" underlying the constitutional text:

"The national power to tax is not just a mechanism for financing armies and courts. It is an indispensable means of creating one nation, indivisible, with fairness for all. The Affordable Care Act's mandate is not just another example of regulation of an interstate industry like cars or steel. It does not impose a tax in the ordinary political meaning. No one thought when the act was passed that Obama had broken his promise not to raise middle-class taxes: that claim is a sudden invention of opportunistic Republicans...But the act is nevertheless best understood as

in the long tradition of mandatory insurance for the sake of justice." ("A Bigger Victory Than We Knew," The New York Review of Books, August 16, 2012: 12)

Whether arguments based on social justice and "fairness" prevail is ultimately decided by the power of movements versus that of money and entrenched privilege. If that's true in periods of relative prosperity and political stability "as in the 1950s and early 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement rose up to challenge segregation and racist terror" it is all the more true now in a time of austerity, anti-democratic assaults and a broken political system.

The U.S. Congress today cannot adopt a federal budget, let alone discuss a decent immigration reform. The House of Representatives passes one after another resolution-to-nowhere "repealing Obamacare." The Senate can't ratify judicial or federal agency appointments, even if they're not controversial. It won't even do away with filibuster rules that prevent it from voting on much of anything. Dealing with climate change? Don't even think about it!

Most of this dysfunction will remain regardless of whether the corporate centrist Barack Obama or the appalling vulture-capitalist Mitt Romney and ultra-reactionary Paul Ryan occupy the White House in 2013. That Supreme Court "the Roberts/Scalito/Thomas Court, of all

monstrous things" holds center stage to such a great extent is a reflection of the realities of bourgeois politics and the even bigger crisis of social movements in this country.

With the Democratic Party in abject retreat on almost every question of economic and social justice since the Reagan era, the absence of militant movements has allowed the assaults of capital and the right wing to advance almost without resistance "even as the past decade demonstrated what a disaster the Wall Street agenda produced. It was the eruption of the Occupy movement in Fall 2011 that began to change the political debate and balance of forces, challenging not only the "one percent" but also the labor movement and all of us on the left.

As this issue of Against the Current goes to press, the Chicago Teachers Union is in the forefront of the struggle against austerity and cutbacks "taking on the destructive "education reform" agenda of Arne Duncan, Rahm Emanuel, the Obama administration, and the all-too-bipartisan profiteering charter school industry. It's a struggle that's absolutely necessary and emblematic of the period, part of the fightback that must be carried forward on all fronts, regardless of the outcome in November "and whatever new horrors the Supreme Court may have in store.

From [Against the Current](#)

Business as usual at Earth Summit

7 September 2012, by Terry Conway

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also referred to as the Earth summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 20. Rio+20 was larger, cost more than its predecessor 20 years ago and achieved nothing positive.

The situation facing us in terms climate change is much worse that it

was 20 years ago. Carbon emissions have risen by 50% despite the 17 annual international conferences that have taken place within the convention on Climate Change - COP17, which was the latest, took place in Durban South Africa last December.

And while the rest of the world has

seen a rise in temperature of 0.7% since 1950, the situation in the arctic is much worse at double that because of various feedback loops. Extreme weather events are becoming more and more frequent across the globe with particularly devastating consequences in the countries of the south - where poverty and lack of infrastructure mean that disease and

death are the almost inevitable consequence. While it is scientifically difficult to tie any particular typhoon, tsunami etc. to climate change, there is increasing evidence that the changing patterns can be thus attributed. Instead climate change is having the effect that the gaps between north and south, and those between rich and poor are becoming wider.

Big business uses green washing to profit from concern about the environment. The deepening privatisation of "nature" proposed by the main actors at Rio will increase this trajectory. This is not some unforeseen by-product - it is the search for greater profits that drives this forward.

The fact that key players didn't even pretend to take Rio's supposed goals seriously was apparent from the fact that of 190 countries represented only 130 were represented by their head of state. David Cameron, Angela Merkel and Barack Obama were among those who didn't bother to turn up, prioritising the subsequent G20 summit at Los Cabanos Mexico.

The statement of the Ecosocialist International in advance of the Earth Summit put it like this "The so-called "green economy" - the main proposal of the "Draft Zero," elaborated by the organizers - is nothing but a greenwashed version of "business as usual," a "green" fig-leaf hiding the naked ugliness of the existing capitalist market economy, which cannot function without destroying the environment, developing monstrous social inequalities, and moving, with increasing velocity, towards an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions driven by global warming and the resulting climate chaos. "

But the response of George Monbiot (The Guardian June 25) to the predictable failure of Rio+20 was a major mistake. Monbiot, as so often was accurate and incisive in describing the problem - the addiction of governments to consumer capitalism. But his conclusion was profoundly wrong.

He argues that the movement should

stop focusing on the need for binding international agreements. Of course, you could say it depends what this means. If the argument is that there are those who have placed too much confidence in the rationality of capitalism and capitalist politicians as distinct from the power of mass action to make the changes we so desperately need - then he is not wrong. But he goes much further than that when he concludes that the movement should go down the road of deep ecology - that our only strategy for the future should be of "rewilding".

Effectively this is a turn to life style politics and individual solutions which have no answers for the hundreds and thousands of people across the globe - particularly in the country of the south - whose lives are already being destroyed by man-made climate change.

Further such political positions, which have been raised by strands in the green movement for decades often end up siding with other reactionary currents with their view that science per se is anti-ecological - a view which is not only a contradiction in terms but has right wing consequences. Ecosocialism in one country is obviously an even greater illusion than socialism in one country - but again Monbiot's conclusions tend to move us away from international organising while in fact the need has never been greater to link up across the globe.

So it is clear that what is needed is a binding international agreement committed to huge cuts in emissions. Otherwise the tipping point of 2 degrees warming worldwide seems unavoidable. Still worse the Arctic is set to warm by a truly calamitous 3-6 degrees. But to achieve this, we need to defeat neo-liberalism and to transform the international political situation - obviously not a small challenge.

Climate campaigners can take inspiration from some of the positives that happened around Rio+20. There was a 15,000 strong counter summit. There was also the occupation of the Belo Monte dam construction site in

the heart of the Amazon. This monster dam, the third largest in the world is on the Xingu river in the Amazonian state of Para, 80% of which will be diverted from its original course if plans go ahead, displacing more than 20,000 people and destroying agricultural land and the fish supply in the river on which the indigenous people depend. A three week occupation of one of the four sites took place and on August 15 a federal judge ordered suspension of the work until the demands of the local communities were met.

Most significantly in terms of Rio+20 itself, there was the 50,000 strong demonstration calling for economic justice and effective action to save the planet - with a significant participation from trade unions, the landless and indigenous movements.

Campaigners in Britain and across the globe need to strengthen our links. Often those fighting back in the countries of the south have a sharper political analysis - understanding as they organise on the front line both the intersection of different aspects of the environmental crisis and how it relates to the economic disasters of neo-liberal capitalism.

An informal session of the UN convention on climate change is being held in Bangkok at the end of August. Campaigners issued a statement at the beginning of August which included the following statement: The agreements that came out of Cancun (2010) and Durban (2011) have not only moved so far away from getting developed countries to pay for their historical responsibility, they have also moved in the opposite direction of the original goal of addressing climate change and preventing the world descending into climate chaos. Instead, these deals have agreed to such little cuts of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) until 2020, that calculations have shown, this will lead to an increase in the global temperature from 4 to 8 degrees centigrade. Couple this with the disastrous results of Rio+20 that pushes for the "green economy" or a new way of privatizing nature and rebranding capitalism, then, you really have a future too bleak to imagine.

No to 'Brand Israel' Pinkwashing

6 September 2012, by Terry Conway

Pinkwashing is a component of "Brand Israel" - launched in 2005 after 3 years consultation between the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's Office and the Finance Ministry with American marketing executives to appear "relevant and modern" instead of militaristic and religious.

Pinkwashing has attempted to sell Tel Aviv as a top tourist destination for LGBTQ people - aiming particularly at men through graphic pictures of "hot" guys in swim suits on golden beaches. In 2010, the Tourism Ministry and Tel Aviv municipality invested \$92 million between them in this project of Hasbara (Hebrew for "explanation" or "propaganda"). Since then the Israeli state has continued to pour financial and political resources into this enterprise.

Isn't it good that Israel supports LGBT rights?

Israel does have some good laws on LGBT rights. But pinkwashing is not aimed at supporting LGBT rights at all but rather to cynically use our struggles for its own end. It promotes the idea that Israel is a great place for all LGBTQ people to try to enlist LGBTQ people outside Israel to defend it and to counter criticism of its occupation of Palestine.

Pinkwashing also plays on islamophobia, including islamophobia within LGBTQ communities. It counterpoises "modern", "civilised" Israel to the supposed sea of reaction around it. In fact homosexuality has been decriminalized in the West Bank since the 1950s, when anti-sodomy laws imposed under British colonial influence were removed from the Jordanian penal code, which Palestinians follow.

But this fact was no bar to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu telling the US Congress in May 2011 that the Middle East was "a region where women are stoned, gays are hanged, Christians are persecuted."

Pinkwashing ignores the Palestinian LGBTQ movement, particularly Aswat, Al Qaws and Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. It instrumentalises Palestine LGBTQ people who if they appear at all do so only as apparently helpless victims. As Haneen Maikey, director of Al Qaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, says, "When you go through a checkpoint it does not matter what the sexuality of the soldier is".

The reality that pinkwashing attempts to distract people from includes:

Palestinian citizens of Israel, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity, are second-class citizens, who face legally sanctioned discrimination and racism in all areas of life. Apartheid in Israel is reflected in institutions such as racially-based family reunification laws, racially-based municipal development practices, racially-based approval of building permits, non-recognition of Palestinian villages, and racially-based inequalities for Palestinian citizens.

Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are subjected to collective punishment, restricted freedom of movement, routine human rights abuses, detentions, and checkpoints. In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the manifestations of apartheid include Jewish-only roads; Jewish-only housing (i.e. colonies); and the application of different systems of law for Palestinians and Jewish colonists.

LGBT Palestinians in Gaza are living under siege. LGBT Palestinians living under the illegal Israeli occupation suffer alongside the rest of the

community, denied basic human rights that we take for granted - such as the right to walk down the street without fear of being shot, the right not to have your own home bulldozed or your land stolen.

As Haneen Maikey points out: "While Palestinians in Israel, Jerusalem, and the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza constitute one community, our different legal statuses and the different realities of each of these locations - including, for example, restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza - severely constrain our ability to meet as a community."

No Pride in Israeli Apartheid

But while the Israeli state has enormous financial and political resources to conduct its campaign of pinkwashing, it has not done so unchallenged. LGBTQ Palestinians have obviously been at the forefront of this but they have not stood alone. In 2009, when the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association announced an October Conference in Tel Aviv with the goal of promoting Israel as a "world gay destination", Helem, a Lebanese LGBTQ organization, responded with a call for a boycott. As their call points out:

"Tel-Aviv's flashy coffee shops and shopping malls, in contrast with the nearby deprived Palestinian villages and towns, serve as evidence that the Israeli society, just as the Israeli state itself, has built walls, blockades and systems of racist segregations to hide from the Palestinians it oppresses. The intersection of physical and societal separations and barriers have justly earned the term apartheid, referring to an historically parallel racist regime in South Africa against the indigenous

Black population of that country. Leisure tourism to apartheid Israel supports this regime. It is not neutral, and it certainly is not a step toward real peace, which can only be based on justice.”

Anti-pinkwashing campaigning has also taken off in other places. For example, In Toronto, Canada queer activists started organising around the issue in 2008 and formed Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. In 2009 they successfully resisted attempts by Zionists to have them banned from the World Pride march which took place in that city. In the US, Queers undermining Israeli Terrorism has been active for around five years.

In Portugal there has been campaigning by LGBTQ and other pro-Palestine activists against the acceptance of Israeli sponsorship for the annual LGBT film festival in Lisbon. In 2010, Canadian film maker John Greyson withdrew his film after learning of the sponsorship saying:

“As both Palestinian and Portuguese queer activists have pointed out, this funding violates the 2005 call of

Palestinian civil society, which urges artists and academics of conscience to boycott the Israeli state, in protest against the ongoing occupation.”

In 2011 the organisers of the festival Queer Lisboa dropped the sponsorship in a victory for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaigners.

In Britain, the fact that World Pride was being held in London in July 2012 was a spur for a number of activists to come together to set up a no to pinkwashing

group to raise awareness of the issue. The main focus of the group so far has been to make solidarity with LGBTQ Palestinians visible at World Pride – which we did through handing out “No to Pinkwashing” cards and carrying Palestinian flags and anti-pinkwashing placards. Hundreds of people took postcards and the reception we got was overwhelmingly positive. But the highlight of the day came at the festival at Trafalgar Square after the march. As Israeli performers tried to put over classic pinkwashing messages we waved a sea of Palestinian flags and placards – and MC Gok Wan tweeted a photo showing

this which was seen by hundreds of thousands. Later, GLF campaigner Frankie Green took the stage together with other veterans of the first London Pride in 1972, wearing a Free Palestine T-shirt.

On an international level, Pinkwashing will be a key focus of discussion at the next World Social Forum on the topic of Free Palestine to be held in Porto Alegre in Brazil in November 2012. This will be an important opportunity for anti-pinkwashing activists to come together internationally and share experiences of our successes and challenges.

Say no to pinkwashing and stand in solidarity with Palestinian LGBTQ organizations and with the Palestinian people.

For further information see;

[no to pinkwashing](#)

[no to pinkwashing britain](#)

[Sarah Schulman on the history of pinkwashing](#)

From [Socialist Resistance](#)

Why Race Matters in the 2012 Elections

6 September 2012, by **Malik Miah**

Yet the primary target is people of color. Not since the days of Jim Crow segregation in the Deep South, where poll taxes were used to prevent African Americans from voting, has such an orchestrated effort taken place across the country. After the Civil Rights laws were adopted in the 1960s, the state and federal governments took steps to increase voter participation, not suppress it.

No wonder many believe the current campaign is racist, with a broader goal of rolling back many of the social and economic gains won by African Americans and other ethnic minorities. Attorney General Eric Holder correctly calls the new voter suppression laws a new “poll tax.”

Too Simplistic Analysis

Yet it is too simplistic to say that new voter suppression laws reflect a rise of racism among whites in general. In fact, the proportion of whites who voted for Obama in the 2008 election was on par with other (white) Democratic presidential candidates since the adoption of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Obama will likely get 40% of the white vote again.

What’s new is that the far “Tea Party” right has taken over the Republican Party and both major capitalist parties have shifted to the right on most

issues.

Obama’s policies on war are fundamentally no different than those of George W. Bush. Obama says it is perfectly legal to assassinate American citizens abroad if he alone declares them “terrorists” without charging them and holding a trial.

Obama’s domestic agenda is also conservative in the traditional sense, including on the issue of health care. With the exception of Gay rights, his positions on most issues are more conservative than recent Republican presidents including Richard Nixon. He’s done little to improve the condition of African Americans with double digit unemployment, inferior

schools and housing. He's also stepped up deportations.

The far right, however, sees the first Black president as an opportunity to advance an agenda they could not accomplish under the last Democratic president, Bill Clinton "to suppress votes permanently and roll back civil rights and other social gains.

No Counter Offensive

Meanwhile it's clear that the traditional Black leadership is more concerned about having Obama's back than pushing state institutions and Wall Street on issues of concern to African Americans. There is no serious counteroffensive against the Tea Party agenda, no viable or visible independent civil rights or left movement responding to the far right's attacks.

Racism and extremist positions are more common, even though they don't reflect majority public sentiment. The right is heavily funded and backed by the courts. Race and racial solidarity, in that context, are tools that the far right uses to advance its anti-Obama and anti-civil rights campaign.

The extreme right has no problem with Black conservatives who agree with them. They will vote for those African Americans such as Allen West in Florida who agree with their ideology. Under legal segregation, West could not vote and his conservative views did not matter.

Institutional and psychological racism nevertheless remains deeply embedded among a large minority of the white population. When pundits say Obama can't connect with "blue collar workers," they mean white workers. Black and Brown blue collar workers are never mentioned.

White workers, like all voters, think about their self-interests. They see

their interests as protecting white advantages "getting an edge" over other ethnic groups in the labor market. Poor and working-class whites, especially, see the gains won by Blacks as an immediate threat to their position. It's why many white unionists have opposed affirmative action programs, busing to desegregate schools and other steps to level the playing field.

At United Airlines where I worked as a mechanic for two decades, Blacks had to file legal action in the 1970s in order to force the company to change its hiring and promoting process to allow qualified African Americans and others to become pilots and mechanics. The unions opposed the court-ordered consent decree. Instead of seeing the workers below them on the economic ladder as potential allies to take on the boss, many white mechanics circled the wagons to keep African Americans from advancing.

The prevalent false view was that the pie is only one size, and for mechanics to get better wages and benefits must mean taking from lower paid co-workers. These divisions within the class are exacerbated among racial groups.

It is no accident that the Republican Party played the race card in the 1970s after Blacks won back the right to vote in the South. Whites of all social layers saw it as giving Blacks more political influence and power, and quickly changed party affiliation from Democrat to Republican to keep Blacks down.

Today, in fact, a vast majority of Democratic elected officials in the South are in gerrymandered Black districts. The same is true in states where Latinos, especially Mexican Americans, are a growing minority. The right preaches individualism and "Americanism" to attack those who support diversity, ethnic culture and immigrant reform.

Narrowly perceived white self-interest

determines their opposition to many economic and social programs, even though white people also benefit from them. They're conscious that backing certain candidates is intended to prevent minorities from achieving more political power.

For the same reasons a majority of whites are willing to accept discriminatory practices to "protect" real advantages of being born white. (How many whites are stopped by cops for "Driving While White?") "White skin privilege" is unique to Americans who are Caucasian.

Organize and Mobilize

Why is all this important to understand? Racial divisions and tensions can begin as benign. The danger is that fascist-like demagogues can mobilize physical violence against minorities. It was racist vigilante groups attacking freed slaves that eventually led to African Americans being disenfranchised in the South by the 1890s.

The fundamental problem, however, is not that there is white skin privilege or reactionary nationalism "it's that working people don't have a mass independent political party representing their true interests and capable of uniting the racial and ethnic groups.

The challenge is to look beyond the 2012 presidential election where 95% of African Americans (those who are allowed to vote) will vote for Obama and 60% of whites will vote for Romney.

The key immediate task is organizing and mobilizing to defeat the far right "by utilizing the tactics of mass pressure, civil disobedience and focusing demands on the institutions of the state.

From [Against the Current](#)

Social Movements in South Africa

5 September 2012, by Zachary Levenson

It was only after a well-known leader of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign told her that a fire would provoke arrests that she relinquished the kindling. With the burnt asphalt of Symphony Way easily visible from the previous few days' protests, it seemed obvious where this was going, but this time no tires were torched; the critics of the tactic won out.

Instead, residents of Blikkiesdorp and Tsunami formed a line and continued dancing, blockading the thoroughfare through Delft South on the eastern periphery of Cape Town just east of the airport.

This was one of hundreds of so-called "service delivery protests" that have occurred over the past decade in South Africa. As the post-apartheid promise of housing for all "a guarantee enshrined in the country's constitution" proved to be empty rhetoric, residents in shack settlements around the country have begun to demand change.

With grossly inadequate access to potable water and sanitary toilets in major metropolises including Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, not to mention the unlikelihood of legal electricity connections, the number of such protests has grown remarkably over the past few years, combining demands for municipal service provision with disgust over the dysfunctionality of post-apartheid housing delivery. [30]

According to analyses now circulated around the internationalist left, South Africa has the highest per capita number of uprisings of any country, a rapidly intensifying "rebellion of the poor" marking it as the "protest capital of the world." [31]

But even if a purely quantitative analysis of these gatherings suggests escalating unrest, does their content match the hype? While certainly one

can find instances of cumulative organizing and the emergence of sustained challenges to a rapidly degenerating welfare state, can these protests reasonably be described as "rebellions"?

I asked the woman who was prevented from lighting the tire what she was hoping to achieve and why she thought this might be an effective tactic. She told me that all of this "the blockade, the tires, the confrontation with police" was an effort to attract the ward councilor for Delft South.

Trying to Get Attention

Hardly a rebellion in the standard sense then, this was actually an attempt to engage an elected official, as heterodox as it might appear. According to numerous residents with whom I spoke, the councilor had never set foot in Blikkiesdorp despite having been in office for the better part of a decade. All they wanted, I was told, was to get answers.

Lest this be dismissed as an isolated incident, I witnessed similar modes of engagement by peri-urban shack residents across the country. Last November, 700 members of the youth league of Abahlali baseMjondolo, reported to be the country's largest shack dwellers' organization, marched on Durban's City Hall through the pouring rain, and I marched with them.

Some brandished plastic sjamboks "heavy whips" and others carried a mock coffin reading "Down with Nigel Gumede!" in both English and isiZulu, which they would subsequently bury in a staged funeral.

Gumede remains the Chairperson of the Housing and Infrastructure

Portfolio Committee for the municipality, and he was reported to view Abahlali's political independence as an affront to his African National Congress (ANC) support base, going so far as to physically threaten Abahlali leaders during official meetings. Suffice it to say that this was a fairly militant march.

When we arrived at City Hall, people gathered around the front steps, waiting for Gumede to appear. Instead a representative of Mayor James Nxumalo emerged, gave a brief speech in which he promised to address people's concerns regarding inadequate housing and service provision, and then agreed to sign a memorandum, the delivery of which had been the purpose of the march.

People chanted militantly, or so it appeared, though they were actually shouting, "Sign it! Sign it!" in isiZulu. When the representative signed, agreeing to issue an official response within fourteen days, the chant became, "He's signing! He's signing!" No response from Nxumalo was ever issued.

Did either of these instances constitute a "rebellion of the poor"? Even if the widely cited quantitative assessment of Peter Alexander indicates an increase in number, this tells us little about the political content of these assemblies, marches, and protests. Indeed, with few exceptions, even apparently charged actions are all too often limited to making demands on a degenerate welfare state "and even these tend to be ignored.

We might conceive of service delivery protests, then as a new grammar of politics fitted to the nature of the post-apartheid state. If the militancy of the mid-1980s was institutionalized in the form of a bourgeois democratic state led by the ANC, complete with the preservation of revolutionary imagery,

rituals and rhetoric, its engagement with citizens has likewise maintained a pseudo-revolutionary guise.

Thus the very making of demands on the state – the delivery of memoranda to City Hall, the scheduling of meetings with elected representatives, requests for more adequate municipal services, open critiques of local policy implementation – all take the form of protest, pairing confrontational tactics with more typically reformist strategy.

Revolts and Social Realities

To label the majority of these uprisings “reformist” is hardly to dismiss them as insignificant. Instead, it offers a realistic assessment of the aims and logic of precarious politics in contemporary South Africa. [32]

Far too many leftists have begun describing increasingly spontaneous uprisings as a coherent revolt against neoliberalism, privatization and the like, failing to distinguish between rare instances of organized anti-capitalist politics on the one hand, and the majority of cases on the other. Very much related to the pitfalls of populism is a tendency of many writers to treat social movements as representative of precarious politics more generally, covering every move of the Unemployed People’s Movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, the Landless People’s Movement, and others as representing service delivery protests in general.

If only most actions took the form of such organized and sustained mobilization! Instead, localized instances of sabotage, displays of discontent, and (all too often) engagement with the state must be considered in addition to these more exciting developments.

If a “rebellion of the poor” is what we would like to see transpire, projecting this label onto a present that it does not adequately describe is an illusory move, deceiving ourselves into believing that revolt is already here rather than an aim that must be

brought about. It is essential that solidarity be shown not to representations of these movements, but to the movements themselves.

Let me illustrate the point by way of the shock I experienced when I first encountered the Protea South branch of the Landless People’s Movement (LPM) in Soweto last fall. I was familiar with many left academic accounts of this movement, from its inception in 2001 to its role in the formation of the anti-electoralist Poor People’s Alliance a half decade later, popularizing the slogan, “No Land! No House! No Vote!”

Protea South was one of the few active branches in peri-urban areas, and its chairperson Maureen Mnisi seemed especially adept at attracting middle-class sympathy. The neighborhood itself is located on the southern boundary of central Soweto, with proliferating shack settlements just across a dirt road from so-called “bond houses,” meaning the modest homes of those whose incomes are high enough to qualify them for a loan.

In the popular imagery of many of the more militant shack residents, loan recipients stand in for the bourgeois class enemy, though these residents are “privileged” only in the sense of regular access to formal employment. The parallels with Fanon’s privileged proletariat are quite clear:

“In the capitalist countries, the proletariat has nothing to lose and possibly everything to gain. In the colonized countries, the proletariat has everything to lose...These elements make up the most loyal clientele of the nationalist parties and by the privileged position they occupy in the colonial system represent the –bourgeois’ fraction of the colonized population.” [33]

But the class divisions are not as stark as they immediately appear. In addition to bond houses and shacks, “RDP houses” line the adjacent streets. RDP is a reference to the ANC’s Reconstruction and Development Program of 1994, with redistribution and poverty alleviation a central goal immediately following the transition.

While many of the social welfare underpinnings of the RDP were jettisoned following the passage of the ironically named Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) plan of 1996, the national Department of Human Settlements (formerly Department of Housing) continues to fund a provincially administered housing delivery program. Despite the delivery of more than 2.6 million formal homes since the transition in 1994, the backlog has continued to grow, and the number of shack settlements has increased nearly tenfold over this period. [34]

The irony then is that while these RDP homes reproduce the bourgeois ideal of homeownership, they simultaneously guarantee a legal space for squatting or low-rent shack erection. Behind nearly every RDP house in Protea South, one finds multiple self-built shacks of corrugated sheet metal, thinning tarps, and pressboard. This phenomenon of backyarding (as it is standardly called) is now so common that Cape Town Mayor Patricia de Lille recently proposed installing water taps behind RDP houses for use by backyarders.

It is not just the RDP house/backyarder couplet that complicates the spatial arrangement of the class structure here. The social background of the recipients of RDP houses is itself quite varied. In interviews conducted in settlements in South Africa’s three largest municipalities, I encountered numerous shack residents who claimed to have been on the housing list for thirty years, preceding the demise of apartheid by more than a decade.

While the veracity of these claims cannot be confirmed, just about anyone you talk to in a South African shantytown will scoff at the promise of an RDP home. One squatter in Mitchell’s Plain in the Cape Flats told me that she has been on the list for a dozen years, whereas her neighbor, a card-carrying ANC member, was given a house after a mere two.

I heard this type of story too many times to count. Suffice it to say then that the category “RDP residents” is a

motley bunch, ranging from unemployed former shack dwellers to formally employed party cadre.

Amidst this complex assortment of formal workers, the precariously employed, informal producers and the altogether unemployed, the LPM had its broadest constituency among shack dwellers annoyed at watching bond house owners guaranteed electricity while they themselves often lacked access to potable water. In late May 2010, several residents burned down a central electricity transformer. As one participant would later tell me, "If we can't get electricity, no one gets electricity."

The Homeowners' Association collected 100 rands (about \$12) from each bond household and used the money to hire vigilantes to take out some of the LPM's key organizers. One such organizer abandoned his shack and took refuge as a backyarder a mile down the road. He later took me to his former shack and showed me the bullet holes lining his front door. Even walking around the neighborhood more than a year after the incident, he insisted on carrying a small knobkierrie.

Solidarity with What?

A few weeks after the attacks, press releases proliferated, one even eventually making its way onto the most widely circulated blog of the California student movement at the time. [35] This "call for urgent solidarity with the LPM" was of course a movement press release, by definition a slick piece of PR, but even Bay Area insurrectionists seemed to be taking notice, and the LPM started to be discussed as a leading light of the South African left. Admittedly those hyping the organization had little knowledge of its actual politics, but the international solidarity was well intentioned.

It was to my surprise then when the LPM comrade leading me around Protea South told me that the group was all but defunct. Maureen Mnisi, the chapter's long-time chairperson, was running for ward councilor with

the DA "a party indisputably to the right of the ANC" and had taken the majority of the membership with her. Since my contact was a longstanding left critic of Mnisi's leadership, I thought he might be putting me on, but as we turned a corner, I saw an election poster plastered onto the side of a shack, complete with DA logo. "See?" he laughed. "I told you!"

As we made our way down the path, rancid water eroding its sides into makeshift gutters, he stopped a woman on the road. "She's LPM," he insisted. She nodded. He then spoke with her briefly before she produced a DA membership card. I asked him how many others had joined the DA. "Only two or three of us stayed out of it," he replied.

This small faction, two of whom were actually elected to a new leadership, attempted to hold LPM meetings, but whenever they would call one, Mnisi would schedule a meeting at the same time, using her power of minor celebrity and control over the group's financial resources to overpower their opposition.

Other than the fact that these people were landless and a movement, was there anything worth supporting? Would discerning Bay Area leftists, all but sectarian in our local context, support such a group if they knew they were aligned with the openly neoliberal DA?

Realistic Assessment Needed

The point of this discussion is not to engage in a round of "reformism" accusations, nor to scorn the persistent efforts of those organizations currently speaking what I have called a new grammar of post-apartheid politics. This is important and necessary work, and those critics who would dismiss groups like Abahlali Mjondolo as doing the work of the state miss the point.

Even if certain branches are "merely" demanding access to basic municipal

services or durable housing, who would dare fault them for that?

What's required, however, is a realistic assessment of the content of social movement politics in contemporary South Africa, beyond the limited quantitative tallies indicating that this year will be the biggest yet, or that next year will put us x uprisings closer to the revolution. Without this kind of analysis, we might end up cheerleading a bunch of ward councilor meetings and DA affiliates, under the false impression that this constitutes some sort of political novelty worthy of the label "rebellion of the poor."

Indeed, without proper critical engagement with the content of politics, our engagement as members of the internationalist left cannot but constitute cheerleading, and cannot (by definition) supplant this form of limited support. Real solidarity requires genuine engagement with the politics of these movements; the extolling of all poor people's politics as "revolts" is an insult to poor people's politics.

A proper analysis needs to take stock of qualitative developments "in terms of forms of organization, class bases, shifting geographies of struggle, the emergence of new historical blocs, the formulation of programs" and must provide a realistic assessment not as a desperate search for any action whatsoever, but as a longitudinal mapping of the shifting terrain of struggle.

While some analysts would tout 2011 as the year of the greatest number of per capita protests since the demise of apartheid, active organizers "those actually involved in South African social movements" cannot possibly take these claims seriously.

In the wake of the virtual collapse of the Anti-Privatization Forum, the fragmentation of the Anti-Eviction Campaign, and the dissolution of the Landless Peoples Movement, the post-Mbeki left is running on fumes. [36]

Far from cause for withdrawal, such a realistic assessment will enable South African revolutionaries to take proper

stock of the prevailing conditions and ready their forces for the battles to come. But counting spontaneous

service delivery protests and “Malemaite” populism [37] as indications of a new wave of social movements is mistaking the

aftershock for the wave.

From [Against the Current](#).

The Left and South Africa's Crisis

4 September 2012, by **Brian Ashley, David Finkel, Dianne Feeley**

Against the Current: Please tell us about the magazine Amandla! — what's your orientation and perspective, and what's your audience in the overall framework of the South African left?

Brian Ashley: Amandla! was initiated in 2006 as the crisis in the country was deepening, as neoliberal policies exacerbated the divisions of apartheid and as the crisis in the African National Congress (ANC, the governing party — ed.) and its alliance partners (South African Communist Party and trade union federation COSATU) deepened. It initially drew the active involvement of leftists inside and outside the ANC Alliance, although those of us outside the Alliance led the initiative.

The idea was to establish a open forum on the left and to facilitate a non-sectarian discussion on left strategy given the crises (social and economic) in the country and the popular upsurges that were unfolding in poor communities, in view of the failure of the state to deliver basic and essential services and given worker struggles against job losses and privatization.

However, the left in the Alliance essentially liquidated itself into one faction of the ANC led by then deputy president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, who is now president of the country. Having seemingly won the struggle for hegemony in the ANC, the ANC left saw less need to relate to left forces outside the ANC Alliance. Differences within the Amandla! Collective occurred as a result and were

sharpened by a growing shift to authoritarianism and intolerance by the Zuma-led ANC.

Key initiators of the Amandla! project were expelled from the SACP for their critique of the view that the Zuma leadership represented a shift to the left. In this context Amandla! shifted perspective towards promoting alternative left strategies and to supporting processes aimed at building independent working-class struggles and initiatives.

ATC: The African National Congress has obviously been the dominant political party since the fall of apartheid. Is its trajectory along the lines of European social-democratic parties that have turned “social-neoliberal”? Or is it more complicated? What are the contending forces within it, and the state of the “tripartite alliance” with the trade union federation COSATU and South African Communist Party?

BA: The ANC is a broad nationalist movement in which different political and ideological currents have been at play. There have always been bourgeois but mainly petty bourgeois forces that played a dominant role in the organization. The SACP and the ANC's alliance with trade union movements has ensured a strong working-class influence, which became greater during the popular upsurges of the 1980s.

However, after winning political freedom in 1994 and as a result of the indigenization of the public service and the policy of Black Economic

Empowerment, bourgeois nationalist and petty bourgeois forces have predominantly shaped the ANC's direction.

Many ANC leaders are now major investors in the finance, mining, telecommunications, armaments, fishing, agriculture and a host of other industries. They use their political position in the ANC and in the state to leverage lucrative deals whereby they become, almost overnight, dollar millionaires.

In accounting for the ANC's failure to redistribute wealth and its implementation of neoliberal policies, one should not lose sight of the impact that the changed international balance of forces has had following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of globalization. Nevertheless, the key explanation for SA's neoliberal transition lies in the power of South African capital and in the ANC's initial reluctance to confront capital and redirect its wealth through taxation, enforced investment programs and even nationalization to overcome the legacy of apartheid and underdevelopment.

Instead there is gradual co-optation by big business through Black Economic Empowerment programs where politically connected pro-black business interests become junior partners of big business in unbundling and restructuring deals.

ATC: Jacob Zuma ostensibly represents the ANC's “left” at least rhetorically. Has his government dealt with the economic and social conditions of the black majority

“ and how would you characterize the economy and levels of inequality in SA presently?

BA: It was a major tragedy for the left when COSATU and the SACP and other left forces in the ANC, desperate for an alternative to the neoliberal policies pursued by the AIDS denialist Thabo Mbeki regime, rallied around Jacob Zuma and helped get him elected President of the ANC and subsequently the country. Zuma is a consummate politician who has consolidated support by simultaneously putting himself forward as a man of the left while taking on the mantle of Zulu nationalism from the Inkatha Freedom Party.

There is nothing left about him. At a personal level he is a homophobe, misogynist and polygamist. His administration continues with neoliberal economic policies, pursuing such policies as monetarism, inflation targeting and labor flexibility. This explains the increased alienation of COSATU from the regime that it helped put in power. The most recent indication of the rupture between the Zuma's government and COSATU was the massive 12 March 2012 general strike led by COSATU, against the tolling of Johannesburg's motorways and the failure of the government to ban labor contractors.

Two worlds separate township and suburban life, and an even greater divide separates life in the former Bantustans from the major metropolitan cities. Our country faces extreme difficulties in dealing with mass unemployment and poverty. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is still devastating in its spread and impact, even if the age of AIDS denial is over. Nor can we stay aloof from the crises of our education, health, water and housing systems. As a result crime and violence continues to shake our society and numb our senses.

Unequal Society, Declining

Economy

Mass unemployment and poverty wages lie at the center of the social crises our people face. More than a quarter of the work force is unemployed. When those workers who have given up looking for work are taken into account, the rate of unemployment is a massive 40% of the total work force. According to government Minister Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission, more than one third of all workers earn less than \$120 a month, while half the work force earn less than \$300.

Underpinning this social crisis is the decline of the South African economy. South Africa recently joined the BRICS, a grouping of leading emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India and China. The irony is that while SA's economy dominates the region and the wider African continent, it can be considered a declining as opposed to a rising economy.

This is essentially as a result of the exhaustion of the apartheid mineral and energy growth model and the failure, after the end of apartheid, to diversify the economy into new growth sectors. The opening up of the South African economy failed to attract the foreign investment that was hoped to stimulate sustained growth in the productive, job-creating sectors.

At the heart of South Africa's decline are three interrelated factors, namely SA's declining resource base, weak internal markets and demand for consumer goods, and a policy framework that has encouraged an open and externally oriented economy that facilitates financialization and capital flight.

While the post-apartheid literature has focused on both the structural weaknesses of the South African economy and the neoliberal policy framework as barriers to sustained development, less attention has been centered on SA's declining resource base.

In South Africa there is a common pattern of resource depletion across a wide range of key resource sectors,

such as energy, minerals (for example coal reserve estimates have been revised downwards to just one fifth of original estimates), water (by 2004, 98% of the total water resource had already been allocated), and soil fertility (land degradation has already occurred on 41% of cultivated land).

Even South Africa's biodiversity and environmental infrastructure are under extreme stress from industrial processes and climate change. The resource depletion of these key sectors will have an adverse effect on South African exports and drive up the input costs of locally produced goods further undermining the economy. Unless economic growth is decoupled from rising rates of resource use and negative environmental impacts, economic development will suffer with negative consequences for society and the environment.

Against the background of the global crisis, South Africa's vulnerability to external shocks from the global economy have been successively demonstrated through currency crashes, capital flight, export declines and massive job losses. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009 alone, a million jobs were lost.

All of this has contributed to making SA one of, if not the most unequal country in the world. Measured by the Gini co-efficient SA has a 0.73 measure, where one represents absolute income inequality. [This is a statistical measure of how much income is concentrated at top layers. By comparison, in the United States, the most unequal of major industrial economies, the Gini coefficient is between 0.46 and 0.47 ed.]

The almost doubling of the rate of unemployment since the end of apartheid is a major reason for the rise in inequality. Seventy percent of the unemployed are under 35 years of age and more than 60% of the unemployed are women.

Women in the rural areas, especially the former Bantustan areas, are the most affected by unemployment and poverty especially because of the government's failure to redistribute land. Of the 30% target for land redistribution by 2014, less than 7%

has been placed in the hands of black people. Much of this land is not being farmed productively due to the failure of government to support communities with inputs and agricultural extension services.

Inequality is also represented in the unequal access to water, electricity, sanitation, housing, education and health services. This has led to a wave of militant service delivery protests, which has made SA the country with the highest incidents of protests per capita in the world. [See an account by Zachary Levenson in this issue.]

Toward an Alternative

ATC: What is the Democratic Left Front, and to what extent is it an alternative force? What are its strategic priorities and its level of support within the working class?

BA: The Democratic Left Front (DLF) is an anti-capitalist political united front of social movements, trade unions, community organizations and political currents which was formally launched in January 2011. It has structures in most of SA's nine provinces and although it did not participate in the 2011 local government elections has 20 elected councillors working with it through affiliated organizations.

Its main strategic priority is to link and bring solidarity to the thousands of grassroots struggles that have erupted around the country in view of the government's failure to provide basic and essential services to poor people. In the face of mass unemployment (40% when discouraged workers are included) and a huge housing backlog of more than two million units, the DLF has launched a campaign that brings these two issues together. We call for a massive housing program that can stimulate downstream industries and create millions of jobs in construction, plumbing, carpentry, etc.

Given the DLF's orientation to eco-socialism we support the campaign for "One Million Climate Jobs," which are

understood as jobs that bring down the emission of greenhouse gasses (GHG) that is leading to runaway climate change. Since SA is the 12th biggest emitter of GHGs in the world it is urgent that we switch to renewable energy (mainly solar and wind), build a decent public transport system (thereby take polluting trucks and cars off the roads), retrofit buildings to be energy efficient, and shift our agriculture from industrial to small-scale organic agriculture.

In this way millions of climate jobs can be created and reorient our economy away from the current extraction-based one, toward a more diversified industrial economy addressing the most urgent needs of our people. It is in this way that climate change can be brought to the attention of working people on any mass level. Otherwise climate change is too remote in time and space and is drowned out by immediate crises of housing, education, health and of course decent work.

The DLF is growing into a significant force, especially in Gauteng, the heartland of SA's working class. However, we see it as important to relate to COSATU, the dominant mass trade union movement in the country, which is currently in alliance with the ANC and the SACP. We believe as tensions increase in the ANC Alliance the possibility for an even broader regroupment with the left of COSATU and other social movements will be the basis for a mass political alternative to the ANC.

Since this development remains some few years from being realized, it is important to build the DLF in current struggles and fill the vacuum on the left, especially since the SACP has liquidated itself into the ANC and ceased to act as an independent force that mobilizes working-class communities.

ATC: Cape Town is the only major city ruled by the Democratic Alliance (the liberal opposition party) and the Cape is the only area where people not classified "black" in the former color lines under apartheid are "Coloreds," Indians and whites are the majority. We understand that

many blacks (not just supporters of the ANC) see this as a problem. How true are those sentiments? What is the social composition of the Democratic Alliance? Are DA's black supporters mainly from the professional and wealthy classes? Is it a serious threat to the ANC in the longer term?

BA: The majority of people in Cape Town and the Province of the Western Cape are what was termed "Coloured" by the apartheid regime. It is necessary to bear in mind that under apartheid Cape Town was also treated as a "Coloured labour preferential region." This meant that migration by so-called Africans from the Bantustans was highly restricted. This explains its peculiar demographics.

Furthermore, from a historical perspective one has to understand that Cape Town is the oldest city of South Africa and was home of several waves of colonialism (Dutch, British) as well as home to the first African and Malaysian slaves.

Cape Town has a rich history of resistance, trade unionism and militant struggles. So-called "Coloured" people played a leading role in the anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist movement in the Western Cape. However, the role and contribution of this section of the oppressed people were not fully integrated in the post-apartheid assertion of African Nationalism. African nationalism defined itself too narrowly to integrate and give so-called Coloured people a sense of being part of the Nation-in-construction.

Since this section of the population was slightly better off in terms of wages, housing and living standards, affirmative action and the indigenization of the state after the fall of apartheid led to fears that "Coloured" people would lose out to "Africans." This heightened processes of polarization and the weakening of a common black identity (as pursued during the liberation struggle) and fueled sentiments of a separate identity.

Little has been done to overcome the legacy of spatial apartheid, separate

development and other barriers (language, education, sports). People from the "Coloured" community continue to live in the same townships and their children attend the same schools as they did under apartheid.

These conditions fueled the flames of insecurities and fears in working-class communities as they experienced the brunt of neoliberal policies: massive shrinkage of public sector jobs in municipal services, education, health and the service sector generally. Mass unemployment and deprivation in many "Coloured" townships have given rise to a deep level of alienation from the society, particularly among the youth.

This has fueled very high levels of gangsterism, crime and substance abuse that resemble some areas of the Afro-American ghettos. It is largely based on the insecurities flowing from this situation, as well as the phenomena of mass unemployment, that alienated the "Coloured" vote from the ANC. However, the Democratic Alliance (DA) only gained this constituency through a series of mergers with smaller parties such as the Independent Democrats and the former National Party (old apartheid party).

The DA's core constituency remains middle class whites. However, as people are made more desperate by rising unemployment and the failure of government to provide basic

services together with increasing corruption, the DA, as the main opposition party, is making some inroads into the black townships.

It is likely in the next election that an alliance of smaller parties, including the breakaway from the ANC at the time of the toppling of Mbeki, the Congress of the People (COPE), will form an electoral alliance with the DA and thereafter merge. In this way the DA could get greater support in some African townships. Nevertheless, black middle classes support mainly the ANC and are mobilized through a chauvinistic African nationalism.

ATC: How do you in South Africa view the spectacle of U.S. politics from a distance?

BA: Well, we are very impressed with the emergence of the Occupy Movement as the movement of the 99% as opposed to the 1% elite that dominates all aspects of life in the USA. Its emergence as Occupy Wall Street was inspiring and created great excitement given the role of Wall Street in the financial crisis and sustaining neoliberalism.

Much of the details of the Occupy Movement, what are the different forces at play and various ideological predispositions, are lost on us through our distance from the USA, even though the Internet brings everything closer together.

There were initially great illusions amongst large layers of black people

in SA regarding Obama's triumphant election as the United States' first black president. Among progressive layers this has collapsed as Obama continued to pursue Bush's war on terror and interventions in the Middle East. Many South Africans were angered by the USA's defense of Mubarak during the Egyptian uprising and the deployment of U.S. military forces to Africa.

The emergence of the Tea Party and other reactionary forces in and around the Republican Party are mainly lost on us. It is when Romney emerges as a presidential candidate and accuses Obama of pursuing socialist policies, and it is reported that 40% of the U.S. population believe that to be true, our eyes glaze over and we tend to give up making sense of politics in the USA.

What makes things especially difficult for us to understand is that with the impact of the economic crisis, the millions of people who have lost their homes and life savings due to the crisis and the role of the 1%, we would expect mass working-class demonstrations, protests and even general strikes. We find it difficult to understand why there are not more Wisconsin moments and why these are not more successful in stopping the elites. After all, they are just the 1%!

(For articles from Amandla! and subscription information [here](#).)

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