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Consolidation of the left

31 January 2013, by **Dominique Lerouge**

Since the spring of 2012, the Tunisian political landscape has been marked by a growing polarization between two major poles:

1. The first consists of the Islamists of Ennahda, the Congrès pour la République (Congress for the Republic - CPR) of President Marzouki and Ettakatol led by the social democratic President of the Constituent Assembly, Mustapha Ben Jafaar (Ettakatol is now the official Tunisian grouping of the Socialist International);

2. The second pole strives to bring together various forces, essentially the 17 parties emerging from the break-up of the parties of Ben Ali and Bourguiba, who, within the logic of "everything but Ennahda" have fallen behind Nidaa Tounes (the Call of Tunisia) led by Caâ'd Essebsi (a prominent minister under Bourguiba who was prime minister from February to December of 2011). Talks began in late spring 2012 between Essebsi's party and the forces involved in the governments of Mohammed Ghannouchi immediately after the fall of Ben Ali, like for example those emerging from the PDP (Parti démocratique progressiste - Progressive Democratic Party) and the "modernists" around Ettajid (which traces its origins to the old Communist Party). Currents from the Parti du travail tunisien (Party of Tunisian Labour - PTT) led by Badoui were added. The primary objective of

Essebsi was to bring together former leaders and activists of the RCD.

The Tunisian left, whose activists had played a leading role in the revolution of December 2010 - February 2011 was marginalized during the elections of October 2011. Grouped inside the January 14 Front, the various left and Arab nationalist political organizations made the choice of contesting the elections alone, when they lacked the material means to be visible. Their capacity to intervene in the struggles was diminished.

In the spring of 2012, discussions started to reconstitute a January 14 Front on new bases, open to other parties as well as independent individual activists (not belonging to any political party). The challenge was to build a third political pole simultaneously opposing the two poles situated in the framework of neoliberal capitalism.

When asked about this in July 2012, the leader of the Parti des travailleurs (Workers' Party, the former PCOT) Hamadi Ben Mim explained: "the revolutionary political forces that formed the January 14 Front in the days that followed the fall of Ben Ali have largely contributed to the fall of the first two interim Governments. When Caâ'd Essebsi then became Prime Minister, on February 27, 2011, the PCOT favoured bringing him down and replacing him with a government

in the service of the workers. (...) But there was no consensus on this point between the revolutionary parties: Essebsi threw some bait to the left organizations, and some of them fell for it. The January 14 Front then exploded. (...) It is now necessary to recover and bring together again the revolutionary forces of the left, whether Marxist or nationalist. It is necessary to build a new coalition, on the basis of a revolutionary new program to combat the polarization between Ennahda and the forces led by Essebsi.

To achieve this, we want to revive the January 14 Front, in another form. The conditions for such an association are now met, because most of those who had previously agreed to enter into the framework put in place by Essebsi have learned the lessons of it. (...) Exchanges between the Parti des Travailleurs and the Trotskyists of the LGO face two main problems: first, the LGO would like the UGTT to rebuild the Front and the latter would be around it. The Parti des Travailleurs is opposed to this tactic, and thinks you must start by grouping the Marxist left and nationalist political organizations. Secondly, the LGO considers that the backbone of any front must be the UGTT. The Parti des Travailleurs thinks that the constitution of this front does not have to wait until the UGTT agrees to participate. Especially as the UGTT seeks, in its latest initiative, a consensus between

government and opposition.” [1]

In July 2012 Chedli Gari, then responsible for trade union work inside the PTPD, also drew a negative balance of the break-up of the Tunisian left: “the division of the political organizations of the left was catastrophic at the October 2011 elections. We made the calculation with Jmour and Hama Hammami: If we presented unitary lists, the PCOT of Hama Hammami, MOUPAD of Chokri Belaïd and the PTPD could have come in second place. By adding the Arab nationalists, we would have remained second but with more seats. Three weeks before the elections, we were still trying to achieve common lists, but each organization has finally contested the elections alone thinking it would get the lion’s share”.

In the summer of 2012, Gari explained the reasons for the break-up of the PTPD: “it is necessary to break with the very right-wing political orientation of Abderrazak Hammami and the majority of the political bureau reflected notably in periods of flirting with Ennahda, Essebsi, Chebbi, or Ettajid. Abderrazak Hammami has indeed tried to reach out to the major parties and has pushed for a break with the radical left. He wanted the PTPD to be perceived as the organization safeguarding the revolution from its extremist tendencies: thus he met with Rached Ghannouchi (the founder of Ennahda) and Essebsi as well as the Ennahda human rights minister”. Gari presented thus the orientation of his current since its split with the PTPD: “our focus for the coming months is as follows: strengthen the process of unification with the MOUPAD, with whom a fusion congress is scheduled from August 31 to September 2; Rebuild a Front including the Arab nationalists, who are very attached to Muslim identity, which is why Ennahda seeks to win over some of them. We are not located in the Islam-secular debate posed by Ennahda and Ettajid”. [2]

Meanwhile, Néjib Sellami, one of the main leaders of the UGTT’s secondary school teachers and a known activist from the MOUPAD, said last July: “a peasant woman told me last week: the Tunisian revolution is like a

watermelon on a table. It is indeed not in a stable situation, it fluctuates and may fall to earth at any time. This image pleased me very much. We had an authoritarian regime in the Palace in Carthage in the hands of Ben Ali, today, another authoritarian regime is being established at the Casbah in the hands of Jebali, the Islamist Prime Minister. This party practices a form of double-speak: it claims to be democratic and civil, but its practices are reminiscent of Ben Ali’s RCD. It wants to decide everything and Tunisians today fear the return of a dictatorship in a religious form. Faced with Ennahda, a grouping has formed around Essebsi with old Bourguibistes and former RCD members. They are joined by forces of the centre, or even exits from the left. Ennahda and the US and French Governments want to push the Tunisians to choose between two poles: Ennahda and the parties originating from the old regime. These two forces are well structured and have lots of money. But a third pole is taking place rejecting this polarization. It is made up of left-wing and Arab nationalist parties. They want not only to prevent any return to a dictatorship, but also to achieve the satisfaction of the demands for which the people made the revolution. The objective is to restore what existed previously under the name of the January 14 Front”. [3]

A member of the leadership of the Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers’ Left League - LGO), Jalel Ben Brik Zoghلامي, summarised the conditions of reconstruction of a January 14 Front this summer: “this Front will be meaningless unless several conditions are simultaneously met: 1. A firm base in the current social mobilizations, the political left is currently lagging behind the social mobilizations; 2. Establish a programme of struggle and mobilization around the essential points: against the line of Ennahda, reactionary, anti-democratic and opposed to women’s rights, cancellation of the debt and the agreements of association with imperialist forces, for the campaign against unemployment and for the right to work, the establishment of a system of development favouring the disadvantaged classes and regions... 3. To clearly oppose the antisocial, pro-

imperialist and undemocratic policies of the government of Muslim Brotherhood of the Ennahda party and their puppet allies. And to combat illusions around the liberal pole of the old RCDistes (around Sebsi) and their ally Najib Chebbi. 4. To call for the fall of the current government and start to discuss the nature of a popular government. For the LGO, it should be based on a popular and democratic workers’ front, with the spinal column or the UGTT; 5. Opening up to and working with independents, notably leaders in the struggle in the trade union movement, in the regions, among women, the unemployed and young people”. [ibid.]]

An initial agreement was announced on Monday, August 13, 2012 between twelve parties, announcing the creation of the Popular Front for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution. The daily newspaper “Le Temps” noted: “At a time when observers of national political life believe that a polarization between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes is now inevitable (...), the Front, bringing together left and Arab nationalist parties, considers that Tunisians are not forced to choose between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes” [4].

This new Front brings together organisations from various traditions:

- Marxist-Leninist: Parti des travailleurs (Workers’ Party, the former PCOT, led by Hama Hammami), Parti des patriotes démocrates unifiés (Party of United Democratic Patriots, resulting from the recent merger of the MOUPAD led by Chokri Belaïd and the Jmour current of the PTPD), the Parti patriotique socialiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Socialist Patriotic Party, led by Jamel Lazhar), and the Parti de la lutte progressiste (Party of the progressive struggle, PLP - led by Mohamed Leban);
- Trotskyist: Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers’ Left League - LGO);
- Socialist: Parti populaire pour la liberté et le progrès (People’s Party for Freedom and progress, PPLP, led by Jalloul Ben Azzouna);

-Marxist Pan-Arab: Front populaire unioniste (Popular Unionist Front, led by Amor Mejri);

- Nasserite Arab nationalist: Mouvement du peuple (Movement of the people - Hrakat Echaab, led by Mohamed Brahmi);

- Baathist Arab nationalist: Mouvement Bath, led by Othmane

Belhaj Amor, Parti de l'avant-garde arabe et démocratique (Party of the Arab and Democratic Vanguard, PAGAD, led by Khereddine Souabni);

- Others: Tunisie verte (Green Tunisia, led by Abdelkader Zitouni), Mouvement des démocrates socialistes (Movement of Socialist Democrats), RAID (ATTAC and

CADTM).

Many independent activists also participate in the Front.

At its first national conference in September 2012, the Popular Front adopted a draft political charter and elected the historic leader of the PCOT, Hamma Hammami, as spokesperson.

"The mobilisation can weaken or even directly challenge the government"

31 January 2013, by **Jalel Ben Brik Zoghlami**

Two years after the beginning of the "Arab spring" where are we?

It is a revolutionary process for dignity, liberty and social justice.

What has fundamentally changed is the relation of the population, essentially the popular classes to the regime and to politics. The people have lost their fear of the dictatorships. And this is something the Tunisians share with their brothers and sisters of the Arab region.

The first specificity of Tunisia is its specific history marked by:

- the importance of the organised working class inside the UGTT,
- the weight and a certain experience of the popular and working class left,
- the gains at the level of women's rights.

The second specificity results from the elections of October 2011. They led:

- on the one hand to the setting up of a government dominated by the fundamentalists of Ennadha,
- on the other to the pursuit of struggles and mobilisations of the popular sectors faced with the failure to consider the demands which lead to the outbreak of the revolution.

This combination opened up a new phase of the revolutionary process marked by the reorganisation of the democratic, workers' and social movement. The latter is in frontal confrontation with a neoliberal fundamentalist government supported by the US, the EU and Qatar.

Today we are at a crossroads:

- on the one hand, faced with a plan for the liquidation of the revolution,
- on the other, faced with real possibilities of advance, towards a popular, democratic and anti-imperialist regime.

Even if the current government is in the hands of Ennadha, the latter have not succeeded in getting a grip over the working class, the unemployed graduate youth, the students, women, the populations of the deprived regions, the poor of the popular neighbourhoods, the artists, the peasantry, the petty bourgeois layers and so on. Very much to the contrary, we are seeing a strong remobilisation of these diverse sectors.

What has changed at the level of democratic rights?

We have won the freedom to express ourselves and organise. These rights have been imposed on the ground, before being recognised in legislation.

Under the government of Caïd Essebsi, which had preceded that led by Ennadha, Tunisia ratified several international Conventions concerning notably women's rights and democratic rights. There was also the installation of parity on electoral lists. It was notably demanded by the women's movement, the UGTT and the parties of the left. Ennadha had to accept it.

The game is not yet over. The Ennadha regime, on the ground and through its constituent majority, manoeuvres energetically to bring the legal system, press, public space and administration under its diktat. The democratic movement, hand in hand with the UGTT and the combative youth, fights tooth and nail to defend and expand rights and democratic space. We are seeing big mobilisations against the attacks of the government from the social movement, the UGTT, journalists (on October 17, 2012, they led a general strike for the first time in Tunisia), the judges and so on.

What has changed at the social level?

The successive governments since the fall of Ben Ali have followed the same neoliberal economic choices, in liaison with international capital. Inflation is high, and there are around 200,000 more people unemployed than at the

time of Ben Ali. As for the development of the regions of the interior, we face an almost total absence of state and private sector investment. So poverty is increasing. The new partnership agreement with the European Union will deepen the neoliberal policy, increase the destruction of the economic tissue, and above all will attack agriculture.

What about the situation of women?

Today women are facing an offensive by Ennadha and the Salafists to push them out of the public space. Certain currents are even campaigning to threaten the freedom of woman to choose their husband, the age of marriage, as well as the ban on polygamy. We note that in the section on human rights, the new agreement with the European Union refers to the international Conventions, but with the hypocritical blessing of the Europeans, there is an exception on women's rights, in not mentioning the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In the context of the writing of the future Constitution, Ennadha seeks to replace the notion of equality between men and women by that of "complementarity".

How have struggles developed over the past two years?

Since December 1, 2010, we have been in a revolutionary process which has been like a switchback. The struggles were particularly significant between December 17, 2010 and February 27, 2011: Ben Ali had fled, and the two Ghannouchi governments which followed him had to resign. Significant advances were imposed, like the ban on Ben Ali's party and the election of a constituent assembly.

After February 27, 2011, struggles for social rights took place, essentially in the mining basin as well as in regions of the interior like Sidi Bouzid or Siliana. In posts and telecommunications, the state had to withdraw its plans. Then the situation changed: many activists concentrated on the elections, initially planned for July 2011, and finally taking place in October. Then the mobilisations resumed, beginning in the mining

basin. Not a day passed without a strike or a demonstration, even in small localities. Mobilisations notably took place around wages.

Incapable of resolving the social and economic problems, the government has from early 2012 tried to attack the backbone of the social movement, the UGTT. That led to big mobilisations in its defence, and the regime had to back off. The struggles also affected precarious workers, subcontracting as well as the unemployed graduates in the Union des diplômés-chômeurs (UDC).

Mobilisations have also taken place for the defence of civil liberties, including freedom of expression. Tunisia has seen its first general strike of journalists. A victorious strike in particular took place at one of the main Tunisian newspapers against the director imposed by Ennadha.

The fight for the defence of women's rights has notably been marked by significant street demonstrations, on August 13, 2012, the anniversary of the promulgation of the Personal Code recognising an extended legal equality for women in 1956.

That said, significant differences exist between sectors since they do not all have the same experiences of struggle. This is evident between the regions. Some regions are very much in advance of others, like for example that of Sidi Bouzid and numerous towns in the interior.

Inside the working class certain sectors are more combative than others, like posts, telecommunications, teaching or public health where strikes also affect doctors.

Social struggles have above all concerned the sectors organised by the UGTT. In the public sector the government has been forced to negotiate nationally, and wage increases have been won. Advances have also taken place in the private sector.

At the end of November, in the region of Siliana, big popular mobilisations took place, supported by a general strike called by the regional UGTT.

Fierce police repression followed, with more than 200 wounded in the initial days. This radicalised the population of Siliana and gave rise to big mobilisations of support in all regions. These mobilisations can open real perspectives, to weaken or even directly challenge the current government.

What repression has been used against the social movement and activists?

Repression is especially significant in the regions of the interior. It is organised by three types of forces:

- First the state apparatus of the Ben Ali period, which remains intact. Martial law remains in force, giving the police and army important powers. That allowed a strong-arm intervention in Tunis on April 7, 2012, against a demonstration by unemployed graduates. The same thing was repeated two days later against a demonstration for the defence of democratic rights. In recent months, the police intervened violently in the regions of Menzel Bouzaïane, Hencha, Gabes, Djerissa, Kasserine and elsewhere. And in a horrible way in Siliana.

- There has been a multiplication of intimidation. Left activists or sympathisers have been arrested. Certainly, there have been mobilisations which succeeded in having them released, but the threat of being brought to court continues to weigh on their heads.

- Repression is also exercised by the militias of Ennadha, organised at the local level and claiming to act "in defence of the revolution". In particular they attack the political meetings and demonstrations of the UGTT. They bear responsibility for the death of a leader of Nidha Tounes during a demonstration in Tataouine, in the south of Tunisia.

- The third instrument of repression is constituted by the Salafists and jihadists. They have declared a "holy war" against the UGTT, democrats and women who do not respect Sharia. These are violent groups who sometimes confront the police. They have established their law in some

popular neighbourhoods, and their first victims are women and the poor. They are at the heads of demonstrations attacking certain artists.

What balance sheet do you make of the government led by Ennadha since autumn 2011?

If this government took the baccalaureate, it would have scored zero in every subject. It has neither the competence nor the necessary experience. Ennadha's leaders have spent years in prison or in exile. They did not expect the old regime to fall. They didn't believe it was possible to overthrow it and were ready to negotiate with it. They have shown the people that they practiced the same clientelism as Ben Ali's party.

On the social level, they boasted of being able to create 500,000 new jobs, and we have 200,000 more unemployed. In terms of relations with international capital, Tunisia constitutes a key player. The country has suffered from structural adjustment plans which have impoverished it, destroyed a great part of its economic tissue, through hundreds of thousands of people into unemployment, with some of them having to take to the seas, often dying there.

The government has made the same economic choices as Ben Ali. It has even gone further than him in negotiating a partnership agreement with the European Union. The parties in government are increasingly criticised. They are isolated on questions like the independence of the judiciary. The same goes for the organisation of the elections scheduled for 2013, where they are in conflict with the Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'Homme (LTDH - Tunisian Human Rights League), the parties of the Popular Front, the parties of the centre and so on. As for international policy, the government is also very much criticised for its alignment with Qatar or the Western countries, notably the USA.

What are the relations between Ennadha, the Salafists, and the jihadists?

A small part of the Salafists and jihadists are linked to the Wahabists or to Al-Qaeda. Some have been to fight in Afghanistan. But the others, above all the youth, generally are at the service of the Ennadha strongmen. They are manipulated by them as well as the political police, to attack women, artists, the UGTT and so on.

In particular we see them going into action when the police and army have difficulties in dealing with mobilisations. But they also confront the forces of order when the government is in difficulty at the social and economic level. Fundamentally and strategically, nothing fundamental distinguishes these three currents. But Ennadha is by far the biggest numerically, with ten times more members than the Salafists and jihadists put together.

What balance sheet would you make of the past attitude of the organisations of the political left? Why did the January 14 Front break up in 2011?

Before the elections, the different components of the January 14 Front did not have a good appreciation of the relationship of forces. The main organisations very much overestimated their influence. With their heads turned by the role accorded to them by the media, some thought that it was possible for them to make an electoral breakthrough running on their own.

The result of the elections of October 2011 was a real cold shower. Then, discussions took place and the organisations have begun to work together. The first reason is that the activists who had participated in the January 14 Front had a long tradition of working together since the time of Ben Ali, for example inside the UGTT, the UDC, on student or feminist questions, or inside the LTDH. Their links were strengthened in the first revolutionary phase from December 17, 2010 to February 27, 2011. The second reason for this rapprochement is the gravity of the current situation. The third is the need, in this context, to confront the two blocs around Ennadha and Nidha Tounes.

What would be your initial balance

sheet of the new Popular Front?

Today the Popular Front has an undeniable presence, notably in the most advanced sectors of the working class. It is present in all the regions, among the unemployed graduates, as well as in a series of organisations like the UGTT, the LTDH or the Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates (ATFD - Tunisian Association of Democratic Women).

Since it was founded, a coordination has been created in which numerous independents participate. The meeting organised on October 16 was one of the most significant that Tunisia has seen since the elections of October 2011. Even if it has few financial resources and no offices, the Popular Front is present in most of the social movements and mobilisations, where its activists sometimes play a leading role.

Its platform is democratic, progressive, anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal. It explicitly demands parity between men and women. For the first time, the activists making up the Front pose the problem of taking power, on an anti-neoliberal and anti-fundamentalist orientation. It is a broad workers' and popular front which, for the LGO, prepares the way for the UGTT to then play such a function. The Popular Front is fully involved in the democratic and social mobilisations. And it will run lists at the 2013 elections. These two aspects are complementary.

What do you expect from the World Social Forum which will take place in Tunis in March 2013?

This Forum should be an effective time to express loudly the rejection of neoliberalism as well as the diktats of the EU and the USA. We expect a significant presence from all the movements opposed to neoliberalism and fighting for the emancipation of oppressed peoples.

On December 13, 2012, Tunisia was due to experience its second general strike since independence. The strike was called off on December 12. In what context was the strike call made?

Just before there were the mobilisations in Siliana. After weeks of mobilisations organised by the regional UGTT, the latter launched an appeal for a strike on November 27 which led four days later to fierce repression. On December 1, the government partially backed down, notably by dismissing the governor, whose departure had been demanded.

With the Islamist attack on the UGTT office of December 4, the plan by Ennahda to unleash violence against the UGTT became apparent. All the more so inasmuch as it was the sixtieth anniversary of the killing of Farhat Hached, the great leader of the national movement and the trade union movement. Choosing this date was something that was resented by the population.

The UGTT immediately organised regional strikes in Sfax, with around 50,000 demonstrators, Tozeur, Siliana, and so on. On Sunday big meetings took place where there had been no strikes. As usual, the

bourgeoisie and above all the most coherent elements among them, namely the army and police, have used a very common device: calling for national cohesion saying that blood had flowed and a great danger threatened the country. They also launched a hate campaign against the UGTT, according to was damaging national cohesion and the economy of the country. It was in this context that the UGTT decided the next day to call a general strike for December 13.

On what basis did the UGTT leadership cancel this strike?

Certainly, the administrative ban on militias wasn't obtained. But the main thing is that Ennahda and the government were exposed. They recognised that the UGTT had been attacked, and they denounced this attack. They also accepted the constitution of a commission of enquiry.

The UGTT showed that it did not only defend the immediate interests of the working class or the union, but also

liberties and the Tunisian people against the violence of the fascist militias of Ennahda. At the same time, the UGTT pushed to the limit the contradictions inside the bourgeoisie, whether in the opposition or in power, and even inside Ennahda. Following the cancellation of the strike, the UGTT did not appear as an adventurist leadership, striking for the sake of striking, but as a leadership which defended the Tunisian people against violence. The government has been shown a yellow card: if it recommences such attacks, a general strike will then be legitimate in the eyes of all. Beyond the ban on militias, the possibility of overthrowing the government would then be open.

The UGTT emerges from this trial with a reinforced social and democratic weight and strength. To reassure its activists, Ennahda wishes to put over the message that the UGTT backed down, whereas it was them that backed down. It would be a serious error to say the same thing as our enemies.

A second page opens in the revolutionary process

31 January 2013, by Chokri Belaïd

Two years after the outbreak of the Revolution its direct and distant causes are still there. They have deepened, whether at the level of social demands, employment, regional development, social justice or political reality. The police repression and that of the militias is reproduced with the Ennahda movement.

The current government is that of the foreign agenda. It is devoted to the choice of foreign forces unrelated to the national interest of Tunisia and the Tunisians.

Official violence and that of the militias is present, with the political assassination in Tataouine, and

warnings and calls for the liquidation of political competitors without the authorities responding. The situation that gave birth to December 17, 2010 is still current.

The revolutionary process experiences ebbs and flows. October 23, 2011 was the date of the provisional victory of the anti-revolutionary forces represented by Ennahda. The situation that prevailed before December 17, 2010 continued. Hence the popular protest movements and the gathering of militant political forces with the constitution of the Popular Front. Disputes have affected the entire territory and all sectors of society. Tunisia is opening a second page in

the revolutionary process, against the despotic Ennahda project protecting corruption and consecrating dependency.

The political, social and economic situation is stifling. There is unanimity around the diagnosis. It is the responsibility of the Ennahda government who turned their backs on all promises made during the election campaign. It has led the country into a dark tunnel.

The political, social and security instability requires the formation of a restricted government of national jurisdiction, with ministers who have not been involved with the former

regime. They should not stand as candidates in the next elections so that they may exercise their functions without any electoral considerations.

This government will be called on to take urgent measures, such as the fixing of a specific road map, the completion of the drafting of the

Constitution, the adoption of the election law and the establishment of three bodies (responsible for elections, the judiciary and information).

Urgent measures are to be taken for the control of prices, employment, the solution of the problems of the wounded of the Revolution and the

families of the martyrs. Urgent decisions are to be taken for the benefit of the poorest regions. Transitional Justice should be implemented without political manipulation. A restricted and competent government is the only hope for the remainder of the transitional period.

“Fundamentally, nothing has changed”

31 January 2013

- The aspirations of the Tunisian people for freedom and democracy are still current, given that they have been little realised. Apart from the freedom to organize and publish a newspaper, nothing has been done. Public freedoms are still flouted. There is a return to torture and arbitrary arrest. Demonstrations are suppressed. In the regions and to some degree everywhere, we have returned to the abusive use of repression and weapons. The government has turned a deaf ear to the practices of the League for Protection of the Revolution and the acolytes of Ennahda.

- At the political level the balance sheet is very thin. In the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), we are still awaiting the Constitution. At the same time there are attempts at non-democratic legislation such as that of the so-called immunization or that of the ethics of the judiciary.

- Worse still, at the level of economic and social issues, Tunisia is still in a recession with no light at the end of the tunnel. The indicators, inter alia, of production, prices, and foreign trade lead to anxiety. Our balance of trade is very much in deficit. Inflation has stabilized at more than 5.5% and is expected to rise to 6%. The budget deficit is growing. The share of the debt is a cause for concern. In the time of Ben Ali indicators were better. The government does nothing. It follows the same solutions as the old regime.

- Social problems have become acute. Unemployment is above 700,000. The inland areas are still left out. This is generating uprisings such as that at Siliana and demonstrations nearly everywhere. The poverty rate is above 20%.

- Nothing has been done in the fight against corruption. The Court of Auditors has revealed the

maintenance of the same practices of corruption and abuse of power.

- The government still refuses to engage in Transitional Justice. It wants to use the old do-it-yourself measures.

- On the external side, Tunisia has placed itself in the reactionary axis of the Arab world. The country advances towards a status of a protectorate of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Turkey. The government has taken initiatives to make Tunisia a privileged partner of the European Union. It will open the doors of the country in the areas of agriculture and services. We expect that the Tunisian economic fabric will receive some damaging blows.

Overall, the balance sheet is very negative. This situation cannot be explained only by international economic difficulties, but also by the choice of the government.

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31 January 2013, by **robm**

What should the class struggle left do?

28 January 2013, by Dave Kellaway, Sinistra Critica (Critical Left)

The February 24/25 general election is a real anomaly in the political history of our country.

The contest between the three main coalitions [See box below "Short guide to the main Italian political forces involved in the election" - DK] is in fact a gigantic smokescreen attempting to conceal from the electorate that they all supported the Monti government. A government that in its shortlived 14 months led a fierce, uninterrupted attack on the rights and the main gains of working people: destroying key areas of the welfare system (the worst pensions â€"counter reform' in the whole of Europe); the abolition of Article 18 and the reintroduction of the â€"freedom' to sack workers without legitimate cause; the selling off of state property; privatising public services; massive cuts in local council spending, education and the health service; and increasing taxes on people with modest and low incomes. All these measures, which have resulted in deeper exploitation, increased unemployment and a rise in poverty, have been supported by the parties led by Berlusconi, Bersani, Monti and Casini. ((see below, short guide to main Italian electoral slates))

These parties have also voted for the regulations and treaty agreements that have tied our country into the diktats of the EC Troika, thereby accepting for decades to come that there will be deep cuts in public spending and attacks on basic rights. They all support the fiscal compact and the counter reform that embeds balanced budgets into the constitution.

Obviously even the SEL party, (Socialism, Ecology and Liberty), while not participating in the outgoing legislature, in order to confirm its strategic, electoral alliance with the

PD (Democratic Party), has made a commitment to support all the agreements with Europe. In fact the SEL leader, Vendola, has said he is ready to collaborate with Monti on â€"constitutional reform', as if this makes it all acceptable.

So what these parties are saying about employment, development, equality or public services is all just so much electoral hypocrisy in order to deceive working people. However, this substantial convergence between the main centre-right and centre-left political coalitions is not something that has just started but is a distinctive feature of the last fifteen years.

Those are the pro-austerity parties. Let us now examine the other electoral slates.

The Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Stars Movement - led by comedian Beppe Grillo) is truly a new phenomenon in the Italian political landscape. It is putting itself forward as the only alternative, hoping to build a solid electoral base through its absolute denunciation of the parasitical and corrupt political caste. Grillo is effectively surfing the wave of deep contempt of broad sectors of people against all politicians.

However this absolutely correct denunciation of the politicians ignores those people who are really responsible for today's austerity policies: the bankers, big companies and financiers who after benefitting from the connivance of politicians are today taking advantage of mass discontent to dismantle the political system as a place for democratic debate, for involving people or winning mass support. It is not accidental that Grillo has organised â€"his' movement in a totally top down way where he has the final say

or veto on every policy and on the political line. Again it is absolutely logical for him to criticise the trade unions not because of their bureaucratised character but rather because there are supposedly holding back economic development. At the same time he shamelessly tail ends the mood on the street so he has taken ambiguous positions on immigrant rights and is wrong when he makes favourable statements about a fascist organisation like CasaPound.

Faced with this desolate panorama a new movement emerged during the last months of 2012 which aimed to build an electoral coalition that was a transparent and clear alternative to all the other political forces that have been in government in the last decades.

Thousands of political, trade union, ecological and movement activists responded to an appeal to action called Cambiare si puo (Yes we can change things). A series of well attended, broadly based meetings were held and there emerged the possibility for an alternative project to see the light of day as a slate in the upcoming elections.

But the internal contradictions of the appeal's promoters and especially the electoralist assault of parties like the PRC, PdCI, the LdV and the Greens who were terrified about the possibility of not regaining some parliamentary seats, led this process into a dead end which has seriously disillusioned many activists. The subsequent selection of candidates - with a striking and embarrassing lack of women - had confirmed the worst methods of these parties. The slate is a result of a haggling session between parties and the â€"promotion' of representatives from â€"civil society' directly chosen by Ingroia and his entourage. A huge number of activists

and even people thinking just about voting for the slate have been put off by the whole process.

As a result of our negative evaluation of these events and, despite being fully involved in the two national meetings and in dozens of the local ones in order to support a radical alternative, Sinistra Critica decided on December 28 2012 to not participate in this electoral project and therefore has not been involved in any 'negotiations' over the candidates, nor have we proposed any candidates.

In the December 28 resolution we stated "our eventual position on whether to call for a vote for the emerging slate would depend on the final list of candidates and the definitive political profile of the coalition."

Today the political profile of the 'Ingroia-Rivoluzione civile' slate has been substantially defined and although it has taken on some of the points put forward by 'Cambiare di puo' it is still very ambiguous politically without any clear class position and an exaggerated over-emphasis on the fight against organised crime as if this was the force responsible for anti-working class austerity policies.

Furthermore Ingroia's coalition maintains a fundamentally ambiguous position in relation to the PD, seeking a discussion with it about possible programmatic agreements. This political approach is also shown in the clumsy attempt to open a negotiation with Bersani for some sort of electoral agreement between the slates for the Senate elections.

Looking at how the candidates were selected, this was done without any rank and file involvement in back room meetings between the parties and some of the well-known personalities associated with the coalition. The fact is that at the top of the slates (and therefore more likely to get elected if they get through the threshold -Tr) are three ex-ministers from the previous centre-left government, which had followed a social-liberal economic policy and made a military intervention in Afghanistan. These politicians are

joined by whole range of other dubious personalities who are cloaked in the banner of 'civil society' representatives. All this practically eliminates the political impact of a significant number of candidates who do come from the political and social movements.

Consequently Sinistra Critica will neither directly nor indirectly support the Ingroia-Rivoluzione civile slate.

So in this election Sinistra Critica will not support any slate nor call even for a critical vote for any of them nor will it get involved in any abstentionist campaign. We will not be presenting our own slate. Today the political and organisational conditions do not exist for our own slate nor for an effective, broad-based anti-capitalist electoral coalition. Such a coalition more than ever is going to be built through struggles and the social movements - that is the only way we can produce a strong enough response to ruling class attacks.

The organisation will use all the means at its disposal to explain the reasoning behind our political stance to supporters and all the people we come into contact with.

In any case we are certain (unfortunately) that the government which emerges from the February elections whatever its precise political colours, will unleash a new phase of austerity in line with the diktats of the Troika and Confindustria (employers body - Tr.). Sinistra Critica will therefore continue wherever it exists to build a movement of struggle and resistance to these policies. It will be our main task in the coming period.

Rome, 24 January 2013

translated by Dave Kellaway

political forces involved in the election

Berlusconi Partito della Liberta/ Lega Nord

Berlusconi, who precipitated the end of the Monti government by withdrawing his support, has managed to get an agreement with the Lega Nord which is a rightist populist force in favour of independence of most of Northern Italy - Padania. The latter had been in a big crisis due to falling electoral support and corruption scandals involving the historic leader Bossi and his entourage. Berlusconi's manoeuvres have resulted in a fragmentation of his party, the PDL (the party of liberty). He has been omnipresent on all his TV networks and is demagogically opposing some of the austerity measures that he had formerly supported as well as taking a more anti-European stance. He has even stated that he would be happy not to be the prime minister again. He realises he is very unlikely to defeat Bersani so is interested above all to be a 'player' in the post-election manoeuvres, he is talking about a wide pact including the PD. Of course he has ulterior motives, it helps his legal situation and his business empire if he is in parliament with a group. His latest outrageous statement made on Holocaust memorial day (!) is that Mussolini did some good things apart from the racial laws.

Monti has formed his own coalition linking up with traditionally centrist forces like Casini and his UDC (Union of the Democratic centre). Despite being strongly advised by perceptive commentators such as *La Repubblica* editor Scalfaro not to get his hands dirty in party politics because his great political usefulness was that he was not formally a member of the political caste, he has nonetheless allowed his name to be used for this coalition and is currently attacking both left and right of centre forces. He would like to limit the size of any Bersani victory. If Monti picks up a reasonable score (say 10% plus) and Berlusconi manages to reassemble his electoral base to some degree then

Short guide to the main Italian

Bersani will be more constrained. In any case Bersani has consistently said he wants a government of all the progressive forces, all the pro-Europeans.

Partito Democratico/Socialismo, Ecologia e Liberta

Bersani's PD is in alliance with Vendola's SEL. The SEL is one of the remnants of the old Rifondazione Comunista. Like all the other components to the left of the PD it lost its parliamentary representatives in the last general elections in the debacle of the Rainbow coalition. Vendola has a high public visibility as the governor of the Puglia region and as Italy's best known gay politician. His party opposed Monti's austerity but is now in close alliance with one of its main supporters. Bersani went through a two round primary election in which over 3 million people voted. He defeated Renzi, Florence's mayor and the leader of the modernising even more rightist wing of the PD. Vendola also participated getting a respectable 18% on the first round. The candidates on the PD/SEL slate were also mostly selected via primaries. It is also the only slate that does not have a person's name on the ticket which as Bersani has correctly pointed out says something about the state of Italian politics. All the polls currently suggest Bersani will be the winner of the elections. He has already indicated on many occasions that he sees a role for Monti in a future PD led government and has reassured international capital in newspaper interviews that the PD would be guarantor of stability and sensible economic management.

Beppe Grillo - Movimento Cinque Stelle

A few months ago the polls were giving his movement around 18% of the vote. This appears to be reducing to something like a third of that but is likely that he will have representatives in the new parliament. Everything is reduced with Grillo to democratic questions and protocols for preventing a political caste forming. So his programme is all about rules concerning salaries, expenses, the number of periods in office you can have, opposition to slate systems. Alongside that is the modernising myth about how the internet revolutionises politics and breaks up the political castes. For example all his candidates were selected through online votes. However as the movement has grown inevitably the lack of normal political structures has led to bitter internal disputes where elected representatives have been purged and occasionally subjected to misogynist attack - one councillor was accused of wanting to go on the TV a lot because it was like her 'g' spot. The internet organisational system also lends itself very well to his rather authoritarian methods since he controls the website. Undoubtedly there does seem to be a social base for this tendency as the traditional networks of the left workers parties and trade unions have become weaker and the numbers of young people who spend longer and longer trying to get into a stable job grows.

Ingroia - Rivoluzione civile

Ingroia is an investigative judge (a bit like a district attorney in US terms) who has been involved in a struggle

against the Sicilian mafia. He is following the example of Di Pietro, the leader of the IdV (Italy of Values) who is also part of this coalition, by going from law into politics. The concerns of the labour movement are consequently put more into the background. The other components of this coalition are another remnant of Rifondazione, the PRC (they kept the name) led by Ferrero who has taken an anti-austerity line although on a local level often governs in PD coalitions. The PdCI led by Diliberto was previously in Rifondazione but left in a split well before the final break up. It was in a electoral federation with Ferrero but had broken with it over the PdCI's willingness to look for an alliance with the PD. Then along came the opportunity with Ingroia and so they are all back together. The Greens are also in this coalition and like the other party components see it as the main way of getting back into parliament. Interestingly the overwhelming majority of the original signatories to the Cambiare si puo appeal voted against the final Ingroia project after it had been taken over by the parties. There was a majority of online votes in favour of it though. Many people think it will break up once the elections are over. It is unclear whether it will pass the 4% threshold and current polls see it oscillating around that figure. Some of the issues involved in trying to set up this coalition are not dissimilar to issues here in the Britain about how to democratically organise such processes and the relationship between even small scale party apparatuses and the non-aligned.

Dave Kellaway

We oppose the French intervention

23 January 2013, by Christine Poupin, Olivier Besancenot, Philippe Poutou

Olivier Besancenot, Christine Poupin, Philippe Poutou

What did you seek to prove in using these words? That you were commander in chief, a leader in war.

And above all that you wholly assume responsibility for the war in Mali. It's sad to note that the rare area where

you do not authorise hesitation is that of war. In the highest tradition, you follow the steps of your predecessors. You also aspire to the stature of president of *Françafrique* (France "A fric" [a source of cash] to take up the expression of the association *Survie*). As it is worrying to see the usual retreat behind humanitarian motivations - which only occur to you according to circumstance - to hide from the public the real colonialist interests that France defends in this conflict.

So yes, Mr Hollande, in the north of Mali, religious fanatics seek to impose an odious regime on the Malian people. And yes, there are reasons to be moved and feel solidarity with the Malian people. The only question which matters then is whether your military intervention, carried out alone, will improve or worsen the situation.

To pose this single question is disturbing. And with good reason. The initial applause, ritualistic at the beginning of a war, which greeted your initiative, has rapidly faded and the murmur of the first doubts has already started.

Have we, on this subject also, lost the memory of our recent history? The various foreign military interventions of this type over the past 20 years in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia or Libya have led to a political situation which is unmanageable and chaotic and most often a civil war combined with a humanitarian catastrophe.

Because the lugubrious counting of thousands of deaths does not stop with the cease fire decreed by the Western powers; it inexorably claims its batch of new victims, announced for a few seconds only during our evening news broadcasts.

At the end of the day, these wars which claim to stop, even "destroy" terrorism, have very often only strengthened the position of the most determined, the most extremist, and most radical among them. As for the defence of women's rights, who would dare to say that it has improved? And where? In Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia or Libya?

Mr Hollande, the political world now garlands you with laurels. One can be carried away by this élan of national unity which was probably sought. To the point where a sense of proportion gets a little lost. You can only note the ridiculous nature of the situation when, without laughter, you take on your new role as the universal shining knight of democracy, proudly proclaiming your fine values - human rights, women's rights, the implacable struggle against religious obscurantism - to justify this war, during a press conference held in the United Arab Emirates? Where legislation is applied according to Sharia and adultery, blasphemy or homosexuality are punishable by stoning.

But what does it matter. The delegation of the CAC 40 emerged satiated with juicy contracts. And we all want to believe that the summit on defence of the environment sponsored by Total and Exxon came up with some hard hitting and sensible proposals. Unhappily, one subject has however poisoned your undertakings: final agreement on a price with the presidency of the Emirates for the sale of 60 Rafale planes. The Dassault group is well aware that waging war is a business.

In the United Arab Emirates as in Mali, you inexorably follow your mission of ensuring France's trading position. We discover then that Sahel is not only a desert but also the geostrategic confluence of numerous exchanges, both legal and illegal. It is also the key to the fragile border entry which gives access to the zones France seeks to secure, in the first place the uranium mines operated in Niger by Areva, jewel of the French nuclear industry.

You are not a disinterested hero in this war. Nor a volunteer fireman who has come to put out a fire which, remember, was maintained knowingly by successive French governments since the early 1980s. The neoliberal policies and structural adjustment plans linked to the Malian debt, whose repayment particularly interests France, have disoriented Malian society, depriving it of its public services, industries, and service enterprises. The state has been

sundered, to the point of virtual disappearance in the north of Mali.

Also the recent events are directly linked to the war in Libya. The French military intervention in Libya did not consist in graciously delivering arms to the legitimate revolution of the Libyan people. France intervened militarily as an external power to remind the future regime of its dependency, and hoped for gestures in return, notably in relation to the oil market. It thus dispossessed the Libyan revolution of the possibility of politically appropriating control of the regions taken militarily. Thus, the region of the Sahel was brutally destabilised and an influx of over-armed combatants returned to their countries of origin, notably in Mali.

Finally, you are well placed to know that the French state has not looked kindly on the overthrow in March 2012 of the corrupt regime of Amadou Toumani Touré, by a military mutiny which became a coup d'état. Since then, France has deprived the Malian army of its own logistical support. The Economic Community of West African States, led by Alassane Ouattara, who owes a great deal to France for his accession to power in the Ivory Coast in 2011, thus decided last summer to impose an arms embargo on the Malian military, immobilising tanks, munitions and heavy weaponry in the ports of Dakar in Senegal, and Conakry in Guinea. Self defence necessarily became more complicated.

Mr Hollande, the fate of Malians is a matter for Malians. And if a war is to be waged, it is surely not up to France to proclaim itself the saviour of Mali. French paternalism in Africa has gone on too long.

In France, the state concerns itself with Malians above all through expelling them. Has this France suddenly been touched by sincere humanitarian feelings? This France which has not even recognised its responsibility in the Tutsi genocide which took place in Rwanda in 1994. Do not deprive the Malian people of a political solution which voices in that country are insistently demanding: the deputy Oumar Mariko from the organisation Sadi (Solidarity, Africa, democracy, independence), for

example, or the former minister Aminata Traoré, who some months ago launched a manifesto against this war in the name of women's rights. Because political, trade union and civil society is an unavoidable reality in Mali.

In France, apart from the doubts expressed over the French mandate or the desultory parliamentary debates, national unity seems to have contaminated nearly all the parties,

with rare exceptions. The best way to help the Malian people to lead its own fight against religious obscurantism, Mr Hollande, is that the French state stops speaking in the name of others.

January 18, 2013

PST statement on hostage taking

23 January 2013, by PST - Socialist Workers Party of Algeria

Five days after the invasion of Mali by French colonialist troops on 10 January 2013 with the unnatural, clandestine and inadmissible support of Algeria, the taking of hostages on the Tigantourine gas field at In Amenas, by "around thirty armed Islamists led by a one-eyed man" and which is attributed to yet another grouping, "Those who have signed in blood!", sheds a little more light on French imperialist goals in the region and the new relationship of forces being imposed on the peoples.

For the PST, beyond the condemnation of this criminal operation, it is obvious that it benefits French imperialism. The operation at In Amenas legitimates its military intervention in Mali, exerting a greater pressure on Algeria to get more involved in its military, and above all financial plans, and crystallises an international consensus on the "benefits" of this French

colonial reconquest effort.

The episode at In Amenas is indissociable from the large scale colonialist manoeuvres inaugurated by NATO and France in Libya in 2011 with massive destruction. The Serval operation in Mali strengthens the Epervier system established by France in 1986 in Chad, relying on Sabre operational helicopters stationed in Burkina Faso and Mauritania. In other words the whole Sahel region is coming under the boot of "Africa's gendarme", France.

Although the "Islamist threat" in Mali is indeed real and cruel, it originates above all from the social and economic impasse of the neoliberal policies imposed by France and imperialism which mortgage development and condemn the peoples in Africa and the world to poverty and domination.

For the PST, beyond the technical-military considerations on the

correctness or otherwise of the ANP's military intervention to free the hostages at In Amenas, the intolerable interference and injunctions of the imperialist powers in London, Tokyo or Washington which we have witnessed reveal the level of selling out of our national sovereignty much as our wealth has been sold off and our economy destroyed in the name of neoliberalism.

***No to the colonial war in Mali and its consequences in Algeria!
French troops out of Mali!***

No to the opening of Algerian air space to French bombers!

For a political solution guaranteeing the democratic and development rights of all components of the Malian people!

Algiers

20 January 2013

The national situation after December 1st

20 January 2013, by Héctor Márquez

At dawn, the first clashes between groups of ultras and the forces of the police began at San Lazaro, around the Parliament building where the

new president would take the oath. "Clashes" is certainly not the most appropriate word, because at this point the police were just stoically

taking the blows. It was around seven o'clock in the morning, when the first student contingents of the "I am 132" movement [5] arrived on the spot, and

while the groups of ultras were withdrawing, the order was given to the police to retaliate strongly with tear gas and rubber bullets, causing many demonstrators to be injured, two of them seriously. Following an apparently well-prepared scenario, the repressive apparatus, under the responsibility of the Federal government and the "progressive" government of the capital, which thus demonstrated its allegiance to the regime, fell on peaceful demonstrators. Pictures showed people dressed like members of the ultra groups moving freely, without being challenged, among elements of the police in the protective perimeter that was inaccessible to the protesters, clearly illustrating the presence of infiltrators who played the role of provocateurs.

The people who were arrested were picked up much later and far from the scene of the morning clashes. Among them, and there are also some pictures which prove this, were peaceful demonstrators, but also many passers-by who were going about their business in the city centre and who were caught up in the impressive police dragnet. The message of the new government was therefore extremely clear: it could have been you...So better stay at home. Some of those arrested have been released for lack of evidence, while fourteen of them have been released on bail pending a trial in which they will have to face charges, of a political nature, "of disturbing the public peace". Despite the aggressive lynch-mob politico-media campaign against the protesters, a movement for the release of the political prisoners and the prosecution of those responsible for the excesses committed by the police was immediately set up and has demonstrated on several occasions, obtaining the release of all those detained.

**A movement that
is in reflux, but
has not been**

routed

Although they were not massive, demonstrations refusing the imposed election of EPN took place in many cities in the country. The big movement that arose in the pre-election period, whose aim was to prevent a return to power of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) [6] and which turned into a movement against electoral fraud and the imposed election of EPN after the elections of July 1st, has therefore entered a phase of relative reflux that may well be temporary.

In the course of its history, Mexico has experienced episodes of massive repression and the crushing of big movements, followed by long periods of reflux. This was the case of the movement of railway workers at the end of the 1950s, and of the student movement in 1968, which was drowned in blood. Nothing like that has happened this time. Despite its authoritarian character and the repressive inclinations that it has never abandoned, the regime today faces a popular movement which, although fragmented, has conducted numerous battles and accumulated large forces over recent years. The weakening of the Convention against the Imposed Election is mainly due to the refusal of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) [7] to work with it and to initiate a consistent fight against electoral fraud. It therefore fell to the "I am 132" movement to take on the awesome responsibility of conducting this battle. Meanwhile AMLO bears the heavy responsibility of having channeled into the institutional labyrinth the huge civic and popular movement that his candidacy had aroused, thus preventing the trial of strength with the regime that had been foreseen.

The need for an alternative policy

The PRD, after having betrayed AMLO for the first time in 2006 by endorsing the fraudulent election of Felipe Calderón [8], lost no time in doing it for the second time, this time pushing things to their logical conclusion by

signing a "Pact for Mexico" with the PRI and the PAN. The PRD has thus completed its mutation by quite openly rallying to the neo-liberal, authoritarian and repressive agenda of the Mexican oligarchy. An important part of the institutional Left which did not want a candidacy of AMLO had to reluctantly accept it because of the momentum created by the Movement for National Regeneration (MORENA), while trying to impede it whenever they could.

After a series of local and state congresses, the National Congress of MORENA was held in late November in Mexico City. This congress, after a consultation process, which was not without problems from a democratic point of view, took the decision to launch the process of obtaining its legal recognition from the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). Some of the cadres of the future party are relatives of AMLO, who were co-opted and not elected, on the pretext that they were "respectable" people. It should be noted that the National Congress took place without debate, the only speech being made by AMLO. Due to its multi-class composition and to a programme that attempts to reconcile strongly conflicting interests, MORENA will therefore have all the features of a new PRD.

In the context of this important process of political recomposition, the decision taken in mid-December by the National Executive Committee (CEN) of the Political Organization of the People and the Workers (OPT) [The OPT, a proletarian alternative to the crisis of political parties] to attempt to obtain legal recognition from the electoral authorities is also of particular importance. The OPT, whose origins lie in the struggle of the Mexican Electricians' Union of (SME) but which now includes other social forces, represents the backbone of what could become a future workers' party (in the broad sense, not just the industrial working class), equipped with a classist programme for a break with the capitalist regime. The OPT will therefore embark on this costly and difficult battle and attempt to meet the drastic and strongly anti-democratic conditions imposed by Mexican legislation.

This battle is doubly important at a moment when sectors of the population who participated in the election campaign of AMLO, disappointed by his climb-downs and by the conciliatory orientation adopted

by the future MORENA party, could choose to join a party rooted in the struggles of the most advanced sectors of the working class. The socialist and revolutionary Left must understand the full importance of this battle and become fully involved in it,

because it represents the opportunity to see a part of the working class break away from the social-liberal Left, come out of the fold of the PRI and finally conquer its political independence.

When buying cheap turns out expensive

20 January 2013, by **Esther Vivas**

Mango, Zara, H&M, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Stradivarius, Gap, Oysho... They talk about savings and, more so in the sales, low prices. What they don't tell us and what is hidden behind the label 'made in China/Bangladesh/Morocco' is how they achieve such prices. Industrial relocation is the response: manufacturing while paying the lowest possible price for manual labour, and consequently, violating human rights and basic labour laws. This is exhaustively explained and documented in several reports by the Clean Clothes campaign. Practices that are, of course, also present in the big brands that sell products a bit more expensively or at the top end. The logic is the same. Behind the "glamour" or the "luxury" is hiding the sweat of badly paid workers.

The report, "Spanish Fashion in Tangiers: work and survival of clothing manufacturers" by the Clean Clothes campaign of the Spanish organisation SETEM is one of the many investigations that showing the situation in black and white. The report analyses what the situation is for textile workers in Tangiers working for important international companies and it discovers the working conditions in Moroccan factories: 12 hour working days, six days a week, a salary no more than 200 euros a month, and even on occasion under 100 euros a month, arbitrariness in hiring and firing, restrictions on union activity: a situation that can be found in many other countries. It's no accident that our clothes are produced in Asia,

Central America, Eastern Europe and Africa.

But it's not only those working in factories overseas who are losing out, also here the employees in shopping centres and sales outlets are subject to precarious, flexible working conditions with difficulties for union organisation... And the pressure to achieve the lowest possible costs also falls on them. Those responsible for the unemployment and the precarious situation in the north are not the workers of the south, but rather a few economic and business elites who are trading in our lives, just as much here as on the other side of the planet.

So, Amancio Ortega, the owner of Inditex which numbers among its portfolio of brands; Zara, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Stradivarius, Oysho and Massimo Dutti, was in 2011, according to Forbes, the third richest man in the world, despite or thanks to the economic crisis, depending on how you see things.

And the same story is repeated in the production, distribution and sales of home appliances, technology and even food. And it's not just that a few are taking advantage of precarious or non-existent working conditions but also they take advantage of extremely weak environmental legislation. So the current production system of consumer goods is exploiting finite natural resources, making employees or entire communities ill and/or polluting where eyes don't see. Everything, evidently, at zero cost.

Then they tell us that we can buy

cheaply. And the January Sales are the highest exponent of this practice. But is what we are buying so cheap? The current production and consumption model counts on a series of hidden costs that all of us end up paying for. Labour exploitation, precarious conditions, miserable salaries, weak or non-existent union rights... whether they be in the south or in the north they generate poverty, inequality, hunger and home evictions... and it's the State that has to respond to such situations and conflicts with everything that implies in terms of social and economic costs.

The same happens with businesses that pollute and exploit without control or limits to natural resources, generating climate change and environmental destruction with their practices... Who pays for the fragmented and delocalised production and the petrol addicted transport system that generates the green-house gases? Who pays for displaced communities, sick workers and uninhabitable territory? Who bears the consequences of an agricultural and food production model that does away with agrodiversity in farming and makes us addicted to junk food? We do. For the company it's free. These are the invisible costs of abusive practices which it is supposed no one pays for. Stubborn reality shows us the opposite, it's society who pays, and a lot.

And the most scandalous part is that to carry out these practices, multinationals count on the active

support of those in those institutions that design the economic, social, environmental and employment policies... at the service of interests of the former. As has been repeated countless times in the streets, our

democracy has been kidnapped. And even though they tell us time and again that "buying cheap everyone wins", the reality is otherwise: "buying cheap turns out expensive". And in the end we, the majority, pay the price.

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Stop the French military intervention in Mali! No to Algerian cooperation!

18 January 2013

After the Ivorian episode in 2010, the French military intervention in Mali, with its colonialist overtones, is above all an expression of France's determination to regain its "African garden", which is being gnawed away at by China and other powers, in a context of a major economic crisis of the capitalist system on a world scale.

The "terrorist" alibi of Bush in Afghanistan and Iraq is being used again by Hollande, who tells us with a straight face that "France has no political or economic objectives" in its Mali campaign, and that its Rafales and its armada, without witnesses and without visual evidence, "are in the service of freedom", alongside troops from Ecowas countries where there is no freedom. This "altruism" of France clearly reminds us of its "civilising mission" in the nineteenth century, of which the Algerian people was a victim during the long colonial night.

But the Algerian regime, whose eyes

are riveted on the 2014 presidential elections, has eventually yielded to imperialist pressure. Mr Bouteflika has authorized French bombers to use our airspace and ordered the closure of the border. This unacceptable about-face in the Algerian position seriously contradicts the historical fight of our country for emancipation and the dignity of peoples. At a time when we are still celebrating the 50th anniversary of our independence, the about-turn of the Algerian regime, which is cooperating with France in its warlike enterprise, is the expression of a political turning point that reduces national sovereignty and locks Algeria into an unholy alliance of colonial reconquest.

Like the uprisings of the peoples in the Arab countries and even in Europe, the Malian crisis has its roots on the one hand in the economic and social disaster caused by liberalism, imposed by the imperialist powers and institutions, and on the other hand in

the dictatorial regimes which act as guarantors of their interests.

The Malian people, whether in the North or the South, needs development, dignity and prosperity and not bombs and servitude. It is for the people of Mali to drive out a few armed Islamist gangs which want to impose their laws. It is for the people of Mali to freely decide its future.

- Stop the French and imperialist intervention in Mali!
- No to the colonial war in Mali!
- No to the opening of Algerian air space to the French bombers!
- Solidarity with the Malian people and the refugees!
- For a political solution guaranteeing democratic rights and development to all the components of the Malian people!

Muslim Brotherhood coup and popular reaction

16 January 2013, by Chedid Khairy

The current rebellion against president Mohammed Morsi and the

Muslim Brotherhood has taken the form of a mass confrontation. The first

president elected in a truly pluralistic election has tried to protect his power

and consolidate the position of the fundamentalist regime as a hegemonic political force.

Attempt to force passage

The firing of the Attorney General, a relic from the Mubarak era, already appeared as a measure to assert the authority of the Brotherhood over the judiciary authority. Morsi hoped to profit from the outrage caused by the verdicts in the trials of thugs or police officers, which almost all ended with the acquittal of the accused.

On November 22, with his new Constitutional Declaration, he increased his powers. The first point of his statement referred to the renewed investigations into police violence and the new judgment of those responsible. He thus protected the Constituent Commission and the Senate from dissolution by the Constitutional High Court. And then he speeded up the process of drafting a new constitution, leading to the conclusion of the work of the contested Commission and deciding on the organization of a referendum on December 15 and 22, 2012. All these decisions were intended to consolidate the position of the fundamentalist current as a hegemonic political force.

The Muslim Brotherhood in power feels able to pursue such an orientation. The international recognition they have earned from the United States, Europe or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), undoubtedly favour this. They played a decisive role in the cease-fire agreement in the Israeli aggression against Gaza. They have resumed discussions with the IMF, seeking a loan and defending neo-liberal economic policies.

The extent of the protests resulted in a climb-down which was in fact fairly limited. The weight of the protest led a crisis at the top. Cronies of the president resigned. Mahmoud Mekki, the Vice President, announced that the Presidency was prepared to delay the referendum if the opposition accepted dialogue. This favoured the

moderate wing of the opposition ready for negotiations.

Issues of the draft Constitution

The Commission of One Hundred, responsible for the drafting the Constitution, is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. Its work is highly opaque, since it has held more than 50 sessions in camera. It is boycotted by most of the non-Islamist parties. Coptic representatives and liberals have walked out, accusing the Islamists of rejecting any consultation and according too many references to Islam. Manal al-Tibi, head of an NGO, even talks of “ideological intimidation”.

This draft is very problematic because it is dominated by its ambiguities. Its many fudges leave the door open to drift. The mark of the Islamists is strong. Many problems exist in the area of the rights of women and Copts, not to mention social rights. It may even appear as a backwards step [9].

The effective powers of the president pose a problem. The army sees its special status maintained with a few changes. Its budget (estimated at \$5 billion) and economic activities (assessed at 25% of the gross national product) are beyond the control of Parliament. Article 197 establishes a National Defence Council, chaired by the president, which includes the most important ministers, the head of the secret service, the Chief of the General Staff and the main army figures. It must ensure “the protection and the security of the country and the armed forces budget”. This Council, which is not under the control of the Parliament, must be consulted for any project concerning the army. The minister of defence, who must be an officer, is commander in chief of the armed forces.

The Consultative Council becomes an important centre of power. Article 131 grants it the right to exert sole legislative power in the event of dissolution of the Assembly. The text neutralizes appeals against the composition of the Consultative

Council before the Supreme Court. The Council must approve the appointment by the president of the heads of the bodies of control. These can only be suspended with the approval of the majority of the Council. This is in contradiction with the powers of these agencies of control of public funds, including those of the Consultative Council. All of this works to the detriment of the Supreme Court.

The trial of civilians before military courts is maintained with article 198. The military retain the right to try civilians with the code of military justice, an old tool of repression against the opposition. Guarantees against arbitrary detention and torture are recognized, but there is no criminalisation of the use of torture.

As for freedom of the press, article 48 does not prevent the imprisonment of journalists and does not recognize the press as an “independent popular power”. It allows the closure and the suspension of newspapers by court decision. The press must respect the “requirements of national security”. Article 47 threatens the right of access to information which should not oppose “national security”.

There is no progress for women’s rights. Section 33 prohibits discrimination and states that “all citizens are equal before the law” and “have the same rights and public duties”, but women are not explicitly mentioned. The formula “without distinction based on gender” was removed at the last minute. Women’s rights are mentioned only in article 10... as mothers!

As regards Sharia law, article 2 States that “the principles of Islamic law are the main source of legislation”. The attempt of the Salafists to impose the “precepts of Sharia” formula was unsuccessful. Article 219 explains that “Sharia principles” include “the fundamental rules and the jurisprudence of the Sunni doctrines”. This leaves the door open to a multitude of interpretations, not to mention the risk of intervention by the Islamists in the criminal law.

The Al-Azhar religious institution is recognized as having a political role

with article 4, which gives it the task of interpreting the Sharia: "the opinion of the Council of Al-Azhar must be taken in matters relating to Sharia". The word "matters" is more than hazy. This could give this institution a right of scrutiny over laws that will only come into effect after their adoption by the Council of senior Al-Azhar scholars appointed by the president.

A disputed referendum

With the referendum on December 15 and 22, 2012, Morsi was looking for additional legitimacy. It was very far from the success expected despite the official result of 64% in favour of the draft. First, the ballot was marked by many irregularities, to the extent that Baha Eddin Hassan, head of the Cairo Human Rights Centre, speaks of "a referendum in the Mubarak style" [10]. The list of irregularities is long: lack of judicial control, replacement of judges by observers from an NGO close to the Muslim Brotherhood, detentions, intimidation, theft of ballot papers, premature closure of polling stations and so on. Also, abstention was very strong, at about two thirds of those registered to vote, with peaks as in Aswan, where 86% of the electorate did not take part in the vote. This is the lowest participation rate of any poll held since January 25, 2011.

A keen resentment was translated into powerful mobilizations against the authorities across the whole of the territory. Resistance immediately gained a popular echo expressed with the response of the judges, the interventions of artists concerned about pressures and censorship or again media, television and newspapers, concerned for freedom of expression and the independence of the press due to multiple pressures and harassment by the Islamists since June 2012. Young football fans still affected by the bloody repression in Port Said at the beginning of the year are mobilizing, not to mention employees increasingly confronted with an authoritarian policy which seeks to block protests and independent trade unions.

Demonstrations are important. Slogans reappear like "bread, social justice and freedom" or "the people want the fall of the regime", a sign of the depth of anger. The authorities are trying to assimilate the judiciary to the Mubarak regime. If some of the senior judges are indeed from the camp of Mubarak, many of them fought for the independence of the judiciary and participated in the democratic challenge. In Egypt, judges have a certain credit, appearing as a recourse in a context of inequalities. Hence the importance of legal battles.

At first, the authorities remained inflexible. They tried to regain the initiative, playing to a virulent "antifeloul" (remnants of the former regime) demagoguery. They organized a counter-demonstration on December 2 and then from December 3 began an encirclement of the Constitutional High Court to prevent it from ruling on the unconstitutionality of the Senate, the Constituent Commission and Morsi's decrees. The use of the referendum was based on the argument of the need for the purging of pro-Mubarak elements and counter-revolutionaries from the judiciary, and the defence of the country threatened by these "feloul" and their allies in the judiciary.

The protests continued to grow. A historical event took place on December 4, 2012, converging on the Presidential Palace in Heliopolis although there were many other demonstrations around the country. Various offices of the Muslim Brotherhood's Party of Freedom and Justice were targeted. In Cairo, the protesters surrounded the Palace, the president opting to leave. The next day, Muslim Brotherhood supporters from across the country attacked demonstrators in Heliopolis and elsewhere. Violent clashes left seven dead and hundreds injured.

Sharp objections

The power of the Brothers, which remains significant, is the result of a slow and patient work of penetration of the social body and taking root since the 1970s after their suppression and marginalization in the Nasserite period. Their electoral

successes, their place in the professional unions, their place in society, and their ability to mobilize attest to this.

But with this episode of deep discontent that they are undergoing, it is clear that they are far from being invincible. The discontent is impressive, especially in provincial towns where it may prove to be more complicated to oppose them. Their policy errors have led to the present dissatisfaction. Their retreat is clear, even if it is found to be limited to the cancellation on December 9, 2012 of the controversial decree. Of course, Morsi did not yield on the essential, namely the referendum on the constitution. The mobilizations have created difficulties for the Muslim Brotherhood but they have not at all disappeared. Far from it.

Faced with the regime and its offensive, different currents regrouped in the National Salvation Front (NSF) from October, taking up the demands of the movement for another constitution, justice for the martyrs, the judgment of those responsible and economic reforms. The NSF brings together liberal, secular and left organizations. This includes the nationalists of the Egyptian Popular Current led by the Nasserite Hamdân Sabbahi, liberals like the Party of Free Egyptians, the Wafd, the Party of the Constitution led by Mohamed El-Baradie, young groups like the Democratic Front of April 6, the left with the moderate Egyptian Social Democratic party, Tagammu' (gathering), the Socialist Popular Alliance, the Socialist Party of Egypt and the Revolutionary Socialists, and the National Association for Change.

The NSF has actively participated in the large mobilizations, demanding the annulment of the Constitutional Declaration, the non-holding of the referendum and the establishment of a new constituent assembly. Not without hesitation, a few times, between refusal and negotiations. This broad grouping nevertheless has internal tensions notably in relation to the presence of "feloul". Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, a former Muslim Brother and presidential candidate, refused to join the alliance for this reason. The presence of Amr

Moussa, former Foreign Affairs minister under Mubarak, is a problem. The risk exists that the NSF becomes a simple gathering of those hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood. This question is tricky. Not to mention the differences: some sectors seem disposed to negotiate and to return to the formal process, risking the objectives of the revolution.

The left, in its different components, participates in the mobilizations. Divided and fragile, it does not have a real independent influence. In addition to the differences and rivalries, its last attempt, in September, to regroup with the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (RDA) had no tangible results. It includes the Socialist Party of Egypt, the Socialist Popular Alliance, the Tagammu', the Workers and Peasants Party, the Egyptian Communist Party, the Egyptian Coalition against Corruption, the Socialist Revolutionary Movement (January), the Union of Socialist Youth and the Mina Daniel Movement. Ahmed BahaChaban, a leading figure in the ESP, considers that it is not a simple electoral coalition but a long term project to build a bloc capable of intervening. The future will decide.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the exercise of the power

These recent developments reflect a sharp decline in the popularity of the Brotherhood. They had won a majority in the parliamentary elections and raised huge hopes of meeting expectations in terms of democracy and social reforms. It is their management of public affairs that is at issue. They appear authoritarian, even autocratic, with their desire to ensure the control of power. However, initially, they did not go in this direction. After a short cohabitation with the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), on 12 August Morsi dismissed several minister-generals and gave the impression of going towards the end of the military regime. In fact, behind-the-scenes negotiations had led to the decision.

A turning point occurred in autumn. On October 10, 2012 after the emotion caused by the acquittal of the leaders of the "battle of the camels" (when thugs had charged the demonstrators in Tahrir Square), Morsi attacked the former officials acquitted, promising that they would be retried. He dismissed the Attorney General, who refused to resign, and called on his supporters to take to the streets. But on October 12, the Muslim Brotherhood were driven from Tahrir Square by stone-throwing. On November 18, during the commemoration of the victims, protesters tried to remove the blocks of concrete closing off access to the Ministry of the Interior. The police repressed them. The demagoguery against the judiciary intensified.

This strong disillusionment with the Muslim Brotherhood is expressed in radical hostility: Morsi is compared to Mubarak or is referred to as "Morsilini". His resignation and his departure are demanded. The new tone is similar to the first challenges to Mubarak.

The regime chose to win the good graces of imperialism. Morsi committed himself to respecting the international agreements signed by Egypt. The United States demonstrated a real "political pragmatism" (in the words of Abdel-Moneim Saad, former CEO of Al-Ahram), first looking for the maintenance of their strategic interests. Support for the regime is given in return for the guarantee of the security of Israel, local and regional stability, continuation of privatization and foreign investment, and the security of the Suez canal through which about 8% of world trade passes. Washington says nothing about the Constitutional Declaration, but covers Morsi with praise over Gaza. According to political scientist Hala Moustapha, the United States and the Muslim Brotherhood officials have concluded arrangements, no doubt with the help of Turkey and Qatar. The conciliatory attitude of Europe is based on strategic rather than democratic calculations. The IMF also seems well disposed as shown by the discussions between Morsi and Christine Lagarde in the summer, while the Government has advanced

towards an orthodox policy with a possible devaluation of the pound, reducing subsidies and higher taxes.

Social struggles and the trade union question

A deep social discontent is expressed constantly. The social struggles, by their magnitude and their consistency, are a factor of importance in the overall situation, with more than 2,000 strikes in September and October of 2012.

The protests take many forms: strikes, sit-in protest, blockades of roads or railways, or administrative or official buildings, occupations of public places, or even attacks on state buildings, kidnapping of officials or refusal of payment of water or electricity bills. This can go all the way up to riots. These struggles are often partial or local; sometimes they affect a whole sector. General strike attempts have failed. The complaints are mainly economic, concerning increases in wages, the hiring of precarious workers, sometimes nationalization. But they can take a political character as with demands for the dismissal of managers of firms, particularly those linked to the army, or the former regime [11].

Employees must face an increasingly authoritarian policy. An SCAF decree on May 8, 2011 criminalized social resistance with heavy fines and prison sentences. In June 2012, it was estimated that more than 20,000 Egyptian workers had been dismissed since January 25, 2011 for social protest. Repressive measures are multiple: judicial harassment, imprisonment, disciplinary sanctions, and arbitrary changes because of strike or trade union activity.

The dynamic independent unionism which has developed on a significant scale must now face serious obstacles. Its existence remains precarious. Its legal recognition is far from being acquired, not to mention the persistence of the old official Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which the Muslim Brotherhood are looking to

maintain and control.

The future trade union law is an important issue. After the hopes of the beginning of the process, with a first draft drawn up in summer 2011, the signs are now worrying. The first draft has been shelved by the SCAF, and then by the Parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter have prepared another text which, de facto, bans the formation of more than one trade union in an enterprise "to avoid duplication of effort, without limiting the right to unionize" according to Islamist MP Khaled al-Azhari, now minister of labour. The next union elections will be a test. Initially planned in November, they were postponed for 6 months. Supporters of trade union pluralism were opposed and demanded, firstly, the adoption of a law on trade union freedoms.

The Muslim Brotherhood are also trying to ensure control of the unions with amendments to the law on the ETUF. These amendments will facilitate the take-over of the regime of the official unions. In the meantime, the current members of union leaderships who have reached the age of retirement will be replaced by others. The replacements are to be selected on the basis of the results of the previous (rigged) union elections or appointed on the administrative decision subject to ministerial endorsement. The trade union activist Saber Barakat, a member of the Egyptian Committee for the Defence of Workers' Rights, believes that this

will promote the hegemony of the Muslim Brotherhood over official unionism: nearly 80% of leaders are over 60! It amounts to a clash between the supporters of the former regime and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Obstacles and challenges

Political and social conflict is strong in Egypt. Nothing is settled. The past few weeks attest to it. The overall situation is characterized by its volatility. Several serious obstacles exist to an evolution favourable to democratic and social demands.

The general evolution of the political situation is the decisive factor. Its complexity is great because it is not just a conflict between fundamentalists and secularism [12]. The questions of the break with the Mubarak regime and democratisation are still ongoing. Between an evolution towards greater democratic space or more closure, the options are many. Everything will depend on mobilization, on the rootedness of democratic forces and the balance of forces. Right now, the opposition to the Islamist forces has failed to impose a favourable balance of forces. Structuring of the workers and youth remains very low. Hence the leading role of liberal or nationalist forces.

The level of social protest is high. Attempts to stop the social protests have failed so far, but they are continuing. Strong social conflict has

not managed to impose a favourable relationship of forces. The independent trade union movement, while in full swing, remains fragile and marked by divisions and disparities in terms of experiences and rootedness. In the recent street mobilizations it has not played an autonomous role, even though it took part in the movements.

One of the most positive elements is the appearance of a new generation of activists, both in the youth groups and trade union networks. One of the issues is the ability of the combative poles to take root and develop into a force able to weigh on the overall situation and to advance democratic and social demands for rupture and real change. A huge task, which is far from being accomplished.

Recent events demonstrate that Egypt since January 25, 2011 is still a land of unexpected developments and large mobilizations. The setback suffered by the Muslim Brotherhood and their retreat prove that the game is far from being settled in favour of the Islamist currents. However, they remain influential.

Institutional issues have become key to the political future of the country. Not to mention the sharpness of the social question. The worksite opened by the departure of Hosni Mubarak is still under construction. Nothing is yet stabilized. Despite its complexity, the situation is rich with enormous risks and important potential. The revolutionary process continues.

Harvesting discontent

14 January 2013, by **Mercia Andrews**

Rebellion on the farms

The protests and mobilisation that started in the small town of De Doorns on the 6th of November galvanised the anger of farm dwellers against

decades of discontent at extreme exploitation and oppression that persist on farms, rural towns and the agricultural sector as a whole.

De Doorns is not dissimilar from hundreds of small rural towns across the Western Cape and South Africa. The grievances and problems that the

farmworkers and rural poor speak of extend well beyond the Hex River Mountains in the Western Cape to the borders of South Africa in Limpopo and Mpumalanga. However, the De Doorns uprising has to be seen an important moment. Like Marikana in the mining sector, "De Doorns" has

ignited the imagination of farmworkers and the rural poor. As with the mineworkers demand for 'R12 500 per month', the farmworkers demand of 'R150 per day' has become the rallying call of this struggle.

In fact, mining and agriculture, the historical backbone of South African capitalism, have been severely shaken.

A historic strike

The spontaneous protests and often self-organised actions of farm workers that unfolded on farms and in rural towns are historic, inspiring and has indeed stunned the rural establishment. Even the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests, Tina Joemat-Pettersson Joemat recognised this when she said, "farms and agriculture in the Western Cape will never be the same again".

The significance of what has been unfolding in the Western Cape is that a people who have been labouring under all most feudal conditions, yet remained poorly organised (union representation stands at less than 5%), rose up spontaneously on some of the wealthiest and most productive farmlands in the country, demanding a living wage and radical transformation of the countryside.

A new generation of farmworkers has grown up in the post apartheid South Africa. These are young workers who challenge their parents for not standing up to decades of oppression on the farms. They've had better education, and if one uses De Doorns and Robertson as examples; the use of cell phones and social media, such as Mixit, played an important role in motivating and facilitating neighbouring farmworkers to join in action. Access to popular organisations, television and the radio contributed significantly to overcome the isolation and marginalization of farmworkers and allowed for co-ordination - however tentative.

Rural women, many of them seasonal workers, have played a leading role in mobilizing at community level in townships and informal settlements on the outskirts of farms. In many

instances they led the protests, giving confidence to the men to follow suit. These women often earn less than the men and have more insecure conditions of employment and tenure.

Behind the strike

It is important to ask what ignited the struggles in De Doorns. What has given rise to this historic awakening in the rural areas? And why has the strike and protests been able to spread to many of the surrounding rural towns in the Western Cape in a relatively short space of time?

It relates in essence to a range of objective and subjective reasons that gave rise to the protests and the strikes. Key among these is the fact that despite the changes in labour relations since 1994, little has changed on South Africa's farms. Rather one can describe much of the current labour relations as a continuation of the Apartheid era of "baasskap" or feudalistic social and economic conditions of master servant relations. Massive human rights violations continued, as highlighted by many local reports as well as the recent Human Rights Watch report Ripe with Abuse. The new Labour Relations Act as well as other labour legislation supporting equity and decent work has been largely ignored by farmers.

The Department of Labour, which is supposed to monitor and undertake inspections on farms, is unable to cope. They have very limited access to farms and, even worse, sometimes collude with the farmers against the workers.

Conditions of abuse

Over these past few weeks in meeting after meeting farmworkers told stories of how they work and live:

"This week my pay was only R240, 00 and I don't know why. I don't get a pay slip." (Bonnievale)

"When I joined the union I was told that I must fuck off from his farm, he

wants no trouble makers." (Francois, Ashton)

"They are so rude and abusive, they are racist and speak very badly to us." (Betty, De Doorns)

There are many stories of violence and intimidation:

"A group of us were huddled together taking shelter from the rain and the farm manager marched up to us and ordered us to go back to work. Suddenly he started beating us with a spade." (Gawie, Ashton)

"Just before the strike was to resume the farmer lined us up against the fence, pointed his shotgun at us, told us he will shoot the lot of us if we join the strike."

From many of these testimonies it was also clear that a substantial number of farmworkers earn well below the R70 per day minimum wage that is the bone of contention. "I work on an apricot farm on the road to Montague where I am paid 89c for every 25kg drum of apricots I fill, and if I want to earn a lousy R89 per day I have to fill over 100 drums with apricots. At the end of such a week all my limbs ache and I can barely stand straight." (Margriet, Montague)

These are stories of hardship and suffering. Many have similar tales of how they are constantly humiliated, belittled and even beaten: "My boss has seven farms but we don't have toilets and when we demanded toilets, he said he would rather buy an additional farm than install toilets... All their children go to university and have cars. We cannot afford anything, not even school shoes."

The problems of organising farmworkers

Today there are just over 500 000 farmworkers in South Africa of which the largest proportion, 121 000, are employed in the Western Cape. Very few farmworkers, both permanent and seasonal, are organized. In fact, only three to five percent are unionized. The history of the labour movement in

South Africa suggests that it was extremely difficult to organise farmworkers during the apartheid era given the strong state controls in rural areas, which made access to farms, where most of the farm workers lived, very difficult.

Those parts of the Western Cape where the protests and strikes have been fiercest are also the regions that are most organised with a stronger presence of small unions, popular movements, farmers(workers' associations and NGOs.

Democratic South Africa has introduced a battery of progressive legislation including the Constitution that guarantees the right to freedom of expression and association. While in theory everyone has the right to belong to a union of their choice and the right to strike, most farmworkers have been denied these rights through the prevailing conditions of fear and intimidation that is the everyday reality of South Africa's farming system. Joining a union often leads to eviction or retrenchment.

Another difficulty that confronts those organising farmworkers is the very isolation of the farms and workers who reside on them. Unlike urban workers, farm workers struggle to meet with other workers regularly. There is a lack of access to public transport and resources to link up and organize.

Deepening poverty

Behind the strike also lies a tale of deepening poverty, ironically entrenched by rising food prices. Low wages and increasing costs have served to intensify the desperation to the point that farmworkers had little to lose by rising up.

Farmworkers complain that they spend the bulk of their meager income on food, yet still go hungry. This is a complaint from both those living on the farms and the contract and seasonal workers. Those who live on the farms very often buy food on credit from the shops set-up by the farmer on the farm itself. Here, they also buy electricity for pre-paid meters that were recently installed in their shack-like homes. They often also have to pay rent and an additional amount for children living with them, but not working on the farm.

The result is direct deductions from their wages against the balance of what they owe. This farm 'credit system' has left thousands of workers in a cascading debt trap. Over and above this, farmworkers also have to pay school fees, and in some cases, boarding fees for hostels. This burden of feeding and fending for the family as well as the extended family piles additional pressure meager incomes.

Inequality is extremely stark where impoverished farmworkers live in such close proximity to the farmer and his family. Glaring disparities in living conditions, sanitation, transport and mobility, access to health services, etc. are right in your face. The

farmworker is made to feel sub-human as cause and effect become confounded. The more the farmworker does not have, the less deserving he or she is considered to be. For example, denying their farmworkers decent sanitation in the vineyards and fields, serves to entrench the farmer's perception of their employees as animals. This much is apparent as one goes from farm to farm.

These difficulties notwithstanding, the sleeping giant has stirred. A new period has dawned. Farmworkers in more than twenty towns across the Western Cape have mobilized and started to organise themselves both on the farms and in the informal settlements where many contract workers live. The protests and strike have seen contract workers and seasonal workers (including those who live on the farms and those who are brought in each day) making common cause. Perhaps the words of Marx should be invoked when we see the truckloads of workers traveling to farms daily: "capitalism has produced its own gravedigger".

The protests have also unlocked new forms of self-organization on the farms as farmworkers establish farm worker committees. Significantly, alliances between small farmer organisations, contract workers and community groups have cohered to not only support the protests, but also to make new links between the basic demands of the farmworkers and those who demand a radical transformation of the countryside.

Neoliberal land & agricultural policies at heart of farm strikes

14 January 2013, by **Mazibuko K. Jara**

The land and agriculture policy framework since 1994 has roundly failed to extend labour rights and a minimum wage to farm workers. In addition, the labour relations framework actually favours

commercial white farmers over workers. The Department of Labour has far too few labour inspectors to effectively monitor working conditions and compliance with labour laws on farms. In many of the farming

districts, there is massive collusion between farmers, the police and magistrates.

Instead of respecting labour laws and paying even the measly minimum

wage, many farmers have responded to post-1994 regulations and other pressures by labour shedding. From a high of more than a million farm workers in the 1970s, agricultural employment is now estimated at just 600,000. The highest rate of decline in agricultural employment occurred in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Between 1993 and 2002, total employment declined by 14%, regular employment declined by 26%. A 2005 report by Nkuzi and Social Surveys revealed that more than one million people were evicted from white commercial farms in the decade from 1995 to 2005. This shows how weak the tenure security laws are.

This was part of a wider structural shift in the post-apartheid economy towards temporary, seasonal and subcontracted labour. At the heart of this was the squeeze many farmers felt from liberalisation and deregulation which exposed them to global competition from subsidised farmers in the north. In turn, farmers turned the screws on their labour force in order to sustain profits.

One consequence of this is the slave-like conditions almost all farm workers and dwellers endure. Farm workers do backbreaking work under unsafe and unhealthy conditions to produce food, earning starvation wages while living with minimal provision of water, sanitation and electricity. They face the constant threat of evictions, violent physical and verbal abuse and intimidation at the hands of the bosses.

The market-based land reform programme has also failed to ensure widespread redistribution of land. As the 2005 Nkuzi and Social Surveys' report on farm evictions shows, the very social base that should have benefitted from redistributive land reform has actually been displaced from land and has lost access to even the minimal livelihoods that living on farms may have provided. In fact, the more than one million people the survey found had suffered eviction, greatly outnumber those who benefitted from the land reform programme.

In addition, during the era when post-

apartheid land reform should have redistributed land to more people, there has actually been a consolidation of farm sizes and increased concentration in farm ownership. The number of farming units declined from just over 60,000 to 45,000 in the six years between 1996 and 2002, and then to 37,000 by 2011. Ruth Hall of the University of the Western Cape has argued that this is a process of the consolidation of landholdings into larger units of ownership and production, as farms are acquired by neighbours and become part of a larger farming enterprises, or as larger agribusinesses buy up farms in an area.

In some cases, these farming units consist of separate farms that are operated as a single unit. In many instances a single owner (whether an individual or a company) owns more than one farming unit. Hall has also shown that alongside this consolidation of land parcels, another process of consolidation appears to be underway in the distribution of agricultural capital in primary production and upstream and downstream industries. Input trends have changed as production has become more capital-intensive and less labour-intensive. This is complemented by the intensification of high-cost forms of agriculture, with ongoing mechanisation and heavy reliance on pesticides and fertilisers across the horticulture, field-crop and livestock sectors.

The land reform programme has not been accompanied by an associated agrarian reform programme which would restructure the entire agricultural value chain to ensure that the beneficiaries of land reform have conducive conditions and structural power. This policy regime has not empowered farm workers to become owners and producers on redistributed farms within a restructured agricultural value chain. Large-scale commercial farmers and agribusinesses have actively promoted and benefited from these untransformative land and agricultural policies. They have used their monopoly control over most of our food and their contribution to export

earnings through agriculture to blackmail the country into believing that there are no alternative agrarian policy options. At the same time, they have managed to portray the rather feeble market-based land reform policies as a huge attack on agriculture.

They have also successfully redefined land reform in their own interests: to become a limited programme of black commercial farmer settlement. White farmers are aware that, unlike the mass of the rural landless, these aspirants are unlikely to constitute a large and powerful interest group that can challenge the dominant interests within the sector, but rather will be absorbed into it. The narrative here is that 'only commercial agriculture is real agriculture'. In line with this, AgriSA has defended the property rights of landowners as absolute. These efforts have been aided by the inefficiency of the state and a political strategy of using the DA as an effective political mouthpiece to challenge any possible radical changes as irrational.

The farm worker strike marks the beginnings of much-needed mass struggles to challenge and defeat white baaskap, starvation wages, slave working conditions, market-based land reform and liberalised agricultural policy. The awakening farm workers and dwellers need to realise that their organised social power is the key to break the strategic advantage of agrarian capitalists. The farm worker committees that have emerged must combine with the radical independent trade unions like CSAWU and the organised bodies of farm dwellers such as the Mawubuye Land Rights Forum and the Citrusdal Farm Workers/Dwellers' Forum. It will also be important for farm workers and dwellers to link up with allies in urban areas and other countries. Shared concerns about high food prices are potentially unifying. Urban consumers have the power to put pressure on farmers. Urban consumers must take action now to build solidarity with farm workers. Urban consumers must also work out boycott strategies to demand produce from farms that respect worker rights and pay a living wage.

“The dynamic of the victorious struggle of the workers in the sugar industry has spread to other areas...”

10 January 2013, by Jean Nanga

Jean Nanga: In terms of the technical structure of capitalism, Mauritius is one of the best-performing economies of Africa; in other words, it's a neoliberal "success story". In addition, the International Labour (Office ILO) places it in the top 10 African countries as regards the minimum monthly wage. [