



## IV469 - February 2014

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## All power to the plenums?

26 February 2014, by **Mate Kapovi?**

It's been two weeks since the start of the Bosnian rebellion. [1] A recent poll has shown that 88% of the people in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina support the protests. These protests are still going on, but they are peaceful now and hence the media attention is no longer as great, even though the protests remain a much discussed topic in the region. However, perhaps the main locus of the protest movement has now switched to the direct democratic plenums (general assemblies) emerging all around Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### The plenums

General assemblies in their various forms are a very old means of direct democratic organization of the oppressed during times of protests, rebellions, strikes and revolutions (like the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia, 1936 in Catalonia or 1956 in Hungary). The earliest versions of

some kind of general assemblies were already present in ancient Athens, while many 'theorists of utopia' imagine some kind of general assemblies in their blueprints of potential democratic societies in the future.

The sudden emergence of the plenums in large parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken everybody by complete surprise. One could even say that the plenums themselves are the greatest positive development in the protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina so far. The first plenum appeared in Tuzla, the center and starting point of the protests, where the protesters were most articulated and most organized from the start. After that, plenums started to appear in other cities as well, taking Tuzla as their example.

The following cities now have their own plenums: Sarajevo (the capital), Tuzla, Zenica, Mostar, Travnik, Br?ko, GoraÅ%ade, Konjic, Cazin, Donji Vakuf,

Fojnica, OraÅije and Bugojno. Right now, regular sessions are taking place where people discuss political problems and make demands on the government (the most common being the revision of privatization issues, various social demands, taking away the privileges of the political class, and so on). There are also efforts ongoing to try to coordinate all the already existing plenums on the state level in order to develop universal and not just local demands. The first joint plenum is also planned in Sarajevo, with the arrival of the delegates of local plenums.

This is not the first time that the word plenum is used in the region with this concrete meaning, referring to a direct democratic 'general assembly'. The first time the word was used in reference to general assemblies was during a great wave of university occupations in Croatia back in 2009. The same term later appears during the 2010 university occupations in Austria and Germany

(though it's not clear if this has some kind of direct link to the Croatian student movement or if it's just a very strange coincidence), and in 2011 during the university occupations in Slovenia and Serbia (where there was a direct influence of the Croatian student movement).

The protesters who are organizing the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina openly acknowledge that they are using the experiences of the Croatian student movement and their how-to-make-a-general-assembly manual called The Occupation Cookbook. Of course, all these plenums are very similar to the general assemblies the world witnessed in 2011 during Occupy Wall Street and elsewhere, so one can also indirectly relate them to the "Occupy tradition" of the last couple of years. In any case, it is quite clear that one can find common patterns of horizontal organization around the world, which have very old roots, but have also been reinvigorated in recent times.

## What is to be done?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the plenums have certainly shown to be a highly useful method in organizing the protesters and articulating their demands. In the last couple of days, there are signs of evolution in the plenums, with their structure becoming more complex. Thus, just like in the Croatian student movement or during Occupy Wall Street, the plenum in Tuzla has organized working groups that are to deal with special issues, mimicking the ministries of the Tuzla canton: education, science, culture and sports; development and entrepreneurship; spatial planning and environment protection; coordination with workers, administration of justice and governance, industry, energy and mining; interior affairs; health care; agriculture, water management and forestry; commerce, tourism, transportation and communications; work and social policy; finances; war veterans' problems; legal problems.

But the plenums are not without their faults. First of all, they are indeed a

useful way to organize protesters, but they are not really representative of the general population. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are reportedly plenums with more than 1.000 people in attendance and in many cases there are also live online feeds. However, 1.000 people at the Sarajevo plenum cannot really be representative of the whole city, which has more than 300.000 inhabitants. Not to mention the fact that the plenums are usually taken to represent not only one city but whole cantons, while for people living outside of the canton centers, getting to the plenums can be costly in terms of both time and money.

Of course, even if everybody could come it would be impossible to have a general assembly with tens of thousands of people. While bearing in mind that bourgeois representative democracy also has many flaws of its own and that it remains at best a very limited kind of democracy, still one should strive at making direct democracy as expansive and participatory as it can be. The unified plenums on the level of a city or canton are a great and completely legitimate way to start organizing during the protests, but they can hardly be a final solution. Even now there are plenums in smaller cities (like Cazin, Fojnica or Donji Vakuf), which are not cantonal centers and are concerned with more local issues (and not with canton-wide politics in general), but there seems to be no strict coordination between lower and upper level plenums (which is not necessarily a surprise in this early stage of plenum development).

There are a number of problems at stake here. One is whether the plenums can maintain their numbers after the protests subside (which has to occur at one point or another) and after their aura of novelty has gone. This appeared to be a great problem in the Croatian student movement, where the plenums have in time "diminished and slowly ceased to function, in one case only after a couple of years, but still (though it must be noted that, at least at some universities, the plenums still exist in a way, as they can always be assembled when deemed necessary). The future of the plenums in Bosnia

and Herzegovina will partly depend on their successes. Some victories have already been achieved: in Tuzla the politicians, responding to the demand of the Tuzla plenum, have already given up some of their privileges (a yearly wage after they go off duty).

Still, it is generally difficult to expect a mass presence at the plenums forever. People have their own personal interests and, indeed, they have to work for a living (if they are lucky enough to work, since the unemployment rate stands at about 45% in Bosnia and Herzegovina). You cannot really expect someone working 8 hours (or more) per day to spend a couple of hours at a general assembly afterwards (if we want to achieve some kind of direct democracy we should obviously be striving towards a reduced working day). Also, it is hardly realistic to expect that everybody will want to decide on everything all the time.

That said, however, the idea of direct democracy is not that everybody has to decide on everything all the time. The point is that direct democracy should provide everybody with the possibility and the means of deciding directly on certain issues (if that is what they want to do). Thus, in theory we can indeed vote directly on everything, but in practice we'll do it only when we want to and when there's a very important decision to be made.

In bourgeois representative democracy, that is usually not possible (exceptions like Switzerland, with its many referenda, are rare), because almost all the decisions (except for a referendum here and there) are taken by the chosen representatives, who can do basically whatever they want during their elected term. In a direct democratic system, the difference would reside in the fact that the chosen representatives would not so much make their own decisions (except in the case of small, technical, everyday affairs), but would rather act upon the general decisions agreed upon by the assembly, which they would just carry out.

These "representatives" would be more like some kind of administrators who would be recallable at any time

(again, through general assemblies, referenda, or other direct democratic means) if people do not approve of their work. How many decisions would in practice be left to the “administrative autopilot” (if we’re pleased with it) and how many decisions would be taken directly by everyone – at local, city, region or country level – would be a matter of choice, concrete circumstances and political needs.

## Should the plenums be institutionalized?

It is clear where the political legitimacy of general assemblies (plenums) comes from. It is simply the case of people joining together, in completely open assemblies where everyone can talk and vote under the same conditions to decide on their livelihoods. Thus, the plenums do not ask their legitimacy from anyone – they take it. At the present moment, the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina have no official legal power, but their influence stems mainly from the government’s fear that a complete disregard of the demands of the plenums would perhaps again lead to the type of violent protests that left government buildings burning all over the country.

However, the big question is whether the plenums can overcome what they are now – organizational bodies of protest – and become permanent bodies of political decision-making. Can the plenums go on even after the protests stop? An additional problem is whether their potential future functioning will be informal (as it is now), as a kind of parallel unofficial political body trying to articulate the interests of the 99%, or whether they are to become some kind of officially legalized political bodies (which seems far-fetched at the present moment). Many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are enthusiastic about the plenums and are taking part in them on a daily basis. However, there seem to be no demands for the plenums to be officially recognized by law and given real powers (not to mention the absence of calls for the

possibility of organizing plenums in the working places).

Although it is quite possible to make an immediate demand for direct democracy in general (without providing details on how this would function), it would be good if the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina were to evolve more towards the local level (below the level of the present city/canton-wide plenums) and toward the state level (above the level of the present city/canton-wide plenums). There is no need in rushing things prematurely while the plenums are still a political novelty, but one should perhaps already start thinking about trying to organize local plenums (on the level of local communities, municipalities, districts, and so on), coordinating them to city and cantonal levels and thus replacing the currently existing (and less representative) unified city/cantonal plenums.

Of course, the problem could lie in the feasibility of these smaller plenums – it’s very possible that there wouldn’t be enough interest for participation in smaller, local plenums, so one should probably hold on with trying to organize these until real need for them organically appears from below. The next step would then be to try to coordinate or even federate the plenums on the level of the whole country, if possible. As already mentioned, there are currently some efforts going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina to try to coordinate all the already existing city/canton unified plenums, which is definitely a great start.

It’s quite clear that something like this can hardly be done overnight and that it would in any case be quite complicated. The “plenum democracy” from the local to top level would definitely be rather complex, just as the existing representative system is also very complex. The system could be made to work in a number of different ways and in combination with other types of direct democracy, like referenda on various levels – from local municipalities to the whole country. It is also rather clear that we should expect a lot of experiments in trying to figure out the most effective manner for this kind of decision-making process to work.

However, if we want the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina to survive, such experimentation seems to be a necessity. A way to start could, for instance, be to try to organize as many local plenums as possible, to try to arrange local discussions on a number of important topics and then to try to get to a common conclusion and/or demands on the level of the whole country. This kind of system would inevitably be far from perfect, at least in the beginning, but it would nonetheless be far more democratic than any kind of decision-making processes existing now in the frames of bourgeois representative democracy (or capitalist parliamentarism, as Alain Badiou calls it).

In any case, we can only hope that some kind of demand for the institutionalization of the plenums (or direct democracy in general) will be included in the future demands of the movement. Of course, one should refrain from being too naïve or optimistic, but this goes for unnecessary pessimism as well. For instance, one of the outspoken protesters from Tuzla has said in an interview that he does not believe that the plenums can function on the level of the whole country, but that it may be possible that in the future there will be a technology that will “enable us to equally take place in the decision-making process even on state level”. However, this technology already exists: it’s called the internet and it has already proven very important in organizing the protest and plenums thus far.

While it’s clear that the internet cannot give us an opportunity for the whole country to be part of one giant general assembly (that would be ludicrous in any case), it can help a lot in coordinating separate plenums on lower levels. With the technology we have now, there is no need to send the decisions of local plenums through mail or delegates, as was the case in Russia in 1917 or Catalonia in 1936. The internet can also help us in referendum decision-making. If there are already cases of e-voting in the frame of representative bourgeois democracy, and if we can today transfer bank funds from one account to another quite safely via the

internet, why would it be impossible to vote on e-referenda and coordinate democratically the demands and decisions of different general assemblies through the internet? Needless to say, we should avoid unnecessary technological fetishism, but it's ridiculous to act like we're still in 1871. If anti-systemic forces are to win, they have to be more modern than the powers that be.

The technology is already here, the problem is mostly in using it in order to make our societies more democratic. Of course, one of the biggest problems would be how to deal with those who are profiting from the present situation, namely the political and capitalist oligarchy. Direct democracy would certainly go directly against their own particular material interests, and there's no doubt that their resistance to it would be great (as is already the case).

## Direct democracy and capitalism

It is also clear that direct democracy by itself is not a means to an end. A struggle for a more democratic society is necessarily connected with a fight for social justice and equality, i.e., with a struggle against capitalism. Just having a kind of direct democratic system, but with the wealth, resources and the media still in the hands of the capitalist class and their liberal hegemony still intact, would not change much and is in any case not really possible. Just as the 'democracy' we have now is perverted and subverted to the needs of the maintenance of the status quo, direct democracy could be subverted as well. We can see a glimpse of this

in the cases of Switzerland or California, which have rather frequent referenda, but where the interests of capital are still firmly protected through their ownership of the mainstream media, their resources for making public campaigns, and so on. Hence the 'unexpected' and unprogressive referendum votes where California decided to vote no on GMO labelling in 2012 (which was helped by the \$45 million spent by Monsanto on the no-campaign) or vote against wages limits in Switzerland in 2013 (also helped by a ferocious public campaign of the 1%).

Capitalism, which is by definition legalized corruption, is incompatible with real democracy. The maintenance of a non-capitalist society, as the experience of really-existing socialism in the 20th century clearly shows, is also impossible without some kind of (direct) democracy to prevent the concentration of power " just as it is impossible to have a non-capitalist society in one country only. Thus, a fight for direct democracy is necessarily connected with anti-capitalism, and general assemblies should not be demanded just for municipalities, cities and countries " but for firms, factories and companies as well.

Of course, the problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that the rebellion there is hardly openly anti-capitalist. There are indeed a lot of unconscious and 'organic' anti-capitalist sentiments there (for instance when discussing the problem of privatizations), but it is still a far cry from being an open and conscious anti-capitalist movement. Still, that does not mean that fighting for direct democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a waste of time, since direct democratic practices are in essence also part of a wider anti-

capitalist struggle.

Needless to say, it is impossible to predict the future. Only two weeks ago it would have been impossible to imagine that general assemblies would be popping up all over Bosnia and Herzegovina. Right now, it is completely unrealistic to expect any kind of fast development of a stable political infrastructure based on general assemblies; some kind of (at least informal) plenum democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But there is no need to rush things. A deepening of the democratic process can evolve in the midst of the struggle for social and economic justice, just as the insistence on the development of the plenums does not mean that other forms of organization (such as militant unions, various formal or informal anti-systemic initiatives or even anti-capitalist political parties) are to be disregarded.

In any case, even if it were all to stop right now in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a lot has already been achieved. One has to remember that major political and societal change cannot happen in one day and that real progressive transformations are always arduous and troublesome, with lots of missteps, stumbling and failures. A revolution cannot occur in one day; it is first and foremost a long process. This is something that a lot of protesters in Bosnia and Herzegovina still have to realize. In any case, the international Left should have its eyes on Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are major things going on over there. Things not only important for the citizens of that country and its region, but also for the world " as an inspiration and a good lesson on how we can and should struggle for a better world.

## "A mass revolt for democracy"

25 February 2014, by **Zakhar Popovych**

Can you tell us about the situation on the ground in recent days, notably the political forces playing

## **a role there?**

The first attacks against the anti-riot police of the Berkut were organised mainly by the neo-Nazis of Pravyi Sektor, who are still more radical than the far right Svoboda movement. But it is also true that in the following days, many ordinary and very different people have entered the struggle. Thousands of them have brought tyres and oil to feed the huge fire. Among the activists, I have seen very different people mostly Russian speaking, many youth from the suburbs of Kiev. This was very different from the people at Maïdan square, who were mostly Ukrainian speaking people from villages in western Ukraine.

After the introduction of emergency laws most of the citizens of Kiev were very angry. And after the killing of the activists, still more so. Maïdan square, frequented on a "normal" evening by a few hundred people, was invaded by several thousand people who stayed all night. This mass mobilisation probably saved Maïdan from the "cleaning" which was clearly being prepared by the police.

Everybody was sure that the Berkut would attack. According to the new laws voted for the same day, the demonstrators were all considered as criminals. Among them far right groups were present, but also some left radical groups (mainly anarchists). Most demonstrators were critical of the opposition and the xenophobic far right. Many stones and molotov cocktails were thrown against the police, with several of them being injured. Unfortunately, many young people behaved as if it was a game, even after some of them had been killed. Nonetheless, it was a mass revolt of Ukrainians, of different nationalities and ethnic groups, for democracy in Ukraine. The far right were certainly present, but in the context of a much broader movement.

## **What was the government's reaction?**

Confronted with such an impressive mass mobilisation, the government decided not to use force against the demonstrators. Any attempt to evacuate the square would have ended up with many wounded and perhaps

even deaths. However, this mass action, which had prevented the introduction of new anti-democratic emergency laws, also gave impetus to the most anti-democratic elements of the Maïdan movement. After the first battle against the police, far right neo-Nazi groups strengthened themselves and felt strong enough to proclaim themselves leaders of the movement.

Despite the armistice declared by the opposition leaders and the proposal by President Yanukovich that Jacenuk become Prime minister, the violence did not stop. The majority party in Parliament, as well as Yanukovich himself, tried to win time and had no intention of organizing new elections or introducing radical change. However, the opposition leaders are not ready to organize radical actions and had no idea what more they could do. The people at Maïdan were increasingly angry with both. Unfortunately the most likely scenario is the establishment of a right wing, authoritarian and nationalist regime. Even if the Svoboda party can pacify or indeed crush the most radical nationalist groups, the entry of this party into government will lead to the systematic oppression of the progressive radical left. Despite the strengthening of the left and progressive forces in recent days, the Svoboda party remains the most organised and powerful force at Maïdan. It will seek to negotiate with the government so as to calm the situation. On Sunday February 16, it renounced occupying Kiev town hall, but some hours later the building was reoccupied by the "self defence" forces of Maïdan, many of them neo-Nazi activists from Pravyi Sektor. Condemned officially by their leaders but nonetheless tolerated, these far right groups are becoming increasingly more violent and less manageable.

## **Your organization Left Opposition recently published a manifesto. [2] How do you defend your orientation inside this movement?**

Despite a difficult situation the left is accepted at Maïdan, much more than before, and we intervene systematically at the House of Ukraine, a student centre mainly

organized by left and progressive activists. Left books and leaflets, including thousands of copies of our 10 point manifesto, are distributed here and we participate in the public debates.

Our proposals, including workers' control and the deprivation of electoral rights for all millionaires, get a good reception. Unfortunately, this does not mean that many people have joined left organizations, still too weak to attract a significant number of new members. On the other hand, the attempt to organize the unity of the left and the anarchists in the "self defence" guard of Maïdan has not succeeded, because of the violence of the attacks of the far right groups. At this time, the violence against the left is again developing, recalling the attacks suffered recently by the activists of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine, attacks which were coordinated, sometimes personally, by the Svoboda leaders.

## **What does the Left Opposition say on the question of the rival international agreements with Russia and the European Union?**

Both paths are bad for the Ukraine. The main problem is inside the country. The grip of the oligarchy on politics has as a consequence a zero tax rate for the big companies. All taxes are paid by the workers and small companies. Thus the state's coffers are empty, although there are sufficient resources in the country. The choice of integration into one bloc or another will not settle this problem.

## **What links do you have with the anti-capitalist and internationalist left in Russia or in Europe? How can we help you?**

Can the European left press put pressure on their governments by insisting that it is possible to carry out investigations into the offshore companies which hold capital in the Ukraine? Is it possible to wage a campaign for sanctions not only against the representatives of the government but also against the oligarchs? Is it possible to show that the Ukrainians demand the seizure of the bank accounts of the oligarchs in Europe? Is it possible to show that this



zero tax rate, as well as the total “oligarchisation” of politics, are not acceptable for Europe? If it was possible to do all this, it would be very good!

Finally, it is of course important to show zero tolerance for the far right, which is present in the Ukrainian opposition movement, and are in fact

neo-Nazis. European activists and personalities are also welcome in Kiev to talk about these problems. It is still possible to speak here in conditions which are still relatively safe.

# Ukrainians fighting for a better society

23 February 2014, by **Ilya Budraitskis**

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**Ilya, you're active in the “Socialist Movement of Russia” and were in Kiev to observe the recent protests. What was the reason for your visit?**

We have strong links to the left in Ukraine and I travelled to Kiev two weeks ago in the wake of anti-demonstration laws that rendered Ukraine a virtual police state.

**How did the movement respond to this?**

It radicalised. There were several clashes with the police and the people stormed the parliament. Several protesters were killed. There were also barricades erected along the border of the city government quarters.

**Has the movement seen any victories?**

Yanukovych was forced to recognise that repression would not quash the movement and instead attempted to co-opt the movement with offers of positions within the regime. The offer was rejected as one of the conditions was an end to the protests – a retreat the movement was unwilling to accept.

**What are your impressions of the movement?**

The people are incredibly determined. They've occupied the central square of Kiev for over two months and defended it against constant police

attacks. They've constructed four metre high barricades, and occupied key building such as the mayor's house, the trade union headquarters and the city art gallery. Apart from that people in the square have organised food and clothing provision, an information centre and a makeshift medical centre. The self-organisation of the protest camp is very impressive.

**Are the protesters afraid?**

Not really. The people get around with batons and helmets and if they see a cop, they beat them up. That's why there aren't any more cops in the street! The government knows they have two choices – to provoke civil war or pull back.

**What are the political forces in the movement?**

The organised political forces are mainly from the right – from the free-market opposition party to the far right, ultra nationalist “Right Sector”.

**What is the “Right Sector”?**

It's a coalition of far right groups with military like structures. Amongst them are experienced fighters from the Ultra fan clubs of Kiev's Dynamo football club.

**How have the protestors responded to the far right?**

It's been mostly positive. Not because they support them ideologically but because they seem to be the most combative and militant section of the movement. Then again, there are some that consider them extremists that cast a negative light on the

movement.

**One of the biggest opposition forces is “Svoboda” ...**

That's the strongest far right party in Ukraine, with 10% of the vote at the last election. Their rise to prominence was a by-product of the fact that the previous president, Viktor Yushchenko, cultivated ultra nationalist sentiment during his term.

**What does that mean?**

Well, for example, Yushchenko argued that during the Second World War, the Ukrainian SS were in fact patriots because they fought against foreign domination of the Soviet Union.

**Are you kidding?!**

It's really only comprehensible if you understand the nature of Ukrainian nationalism. In Ukraine today there are roughly 20 statues of Stepan Bandera, who was one of the most prominent leaders of the SS. This far right interpretation of Ukrainian nationalism has managed to dominate mainstream politics and it's because of this that parties like Svoboda now occupy such a central position in the movement.

**Would you say the movement is fascist then?**

I think that's a simplification ...

**What do you mean?**

Fascism arose in the post-World War One period in response to crush a militant and revolutionary workers movement across Europe. Fascists played the role of smashing the

workers movement and saving capitalism in places where the democratic state could not. This was the case in both Germany and Italy.

### **And today?**

Today there is neither revolutionary workers movement nor a Fascist movement intent on smashing it. Also, there isn't a crisis of liberal democracy and mistrust between the capitalist class and the state that would push the former to put their faith in Fascism, at least not yet.

### **What is the nature of the movement then?**

At Maiden, there are people fighting from different oppressed groups in society: workers, unemployed, the poor and students. They oppose the state and the elites. The term fascism doesn't apply because the class composition of the parties is quite distinct.

### **But there are Fascists at Maiden?**

Clearly. The ideology of the "Right Sector" is fascist. And this group is attempting to establish its hegemony within the movement. So far, however, it hasn't worked because the core of the movement has nothing to do with fascism.

### **What is it about then?**

It's hard to define. This movement is the product of a post-Soviet society in which class consciousness and protest had been virtually eradicated. This means protest movements can be extremely heterogeneous and can transform ideologically very quickly - to the left as well as the right.

### **How did the Maiden protest develop into its current form?**

At the moment it has a nationalistic, anti-communist character. This is because the right is best placed and organised to intervene in the movement and because of the disastrous role played by the Ukrainian Communist Party.

### **The Communist Party got 13 percent at the last election?**

Yes. Subsequently, their priority has

been to establish themselves within Yanukovych's Regime. For example, they voted for the anti-demonstration laws. Without their vote the laws wouldn't have passed. Unfortunately most Ukrainians associate the "left wing" entirely with the Communist Party.

### **What's their attitude towards the Maiden movement?**

They criticise the nationalism but not from an internationalist perspective. Rather, they counter-pose Russian chauvinism! It's despicable.

### **What is the real left doing?**

The left has had a mixed and ambivalent response to the movement since the beginning. Some maintain that the movement is foreign, far right and argue against participation. Others have participated and attempted to push the political terrain to the left.

### **Is that challenging?**

Yes. The far right confronts the left activists. They take their leaflets and flags and sometimes beat them up.

### **So there's no room for the left?**

Of course there is! Precisely because of the dominance of the right ...

### **You want to argue with Nazis?**

Maybe with some, but the main thing is that the vast majority of the protesters are politically active for the first time and aren't ideologically committed to any side yet.

### **Why is nationalism such a big part of the movement?**

It's bound up with the way that Ukraine was founded as an independent nation - through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. That's why nationalism is such a popular ideological persuasion. The mentality is like that of a former colony. Most Ukrainians think that the most important thing is not to be dominated by a foreign power.

### **But isn't the movement strongest in West Ukraine?**

Yes, well, Ukrainian politics is very divided between east and west both culturally and economically. In the east most people speak Russian as their first language. Even Vitali Klitschko speaks Ukrainian with a heavy Russian accent.

### **And in the west?**

... Mostly Ukrainian is spoken. In one of the poorest countries in the whole of Europe there are clearly more poor and jobless in the west than in the Industrial areas of the east around Kharkov and Dnipropetrovsk. West Ukrainians emigrate to Czech Republic and Poland, because the wages are substantially higher than in their homeland.

Also, in the west, is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate. The church split in 1991 and now its Priests are speaking on the podiums in Maidan square, whereas in the east the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is more common and their Priests are normally support of Yanukovych.

### **What does this mean for the movement?**

In the west 99 percent of people support the protests. People have taken buses to Kiev so they can live in Maiden square and partake in the protests. They are worried about being controlled by Russia and are prioritising the fight against Yanukovych, whom they see as returning the Ukraine to a Russian colony.

### **Do you think this worry is unfounded?**

Not necessarily. The Russian state tries constantly to make the Ukraine dependent on it, for example, by turning the natural gas off in winter. You can't really blame the Ukrainians for having no confidence in Vladimir Putin.

### **So the alternative for the movement is the EU?**

The movement is directed particularly against the Yanukovych government and the question of the EU is secondary to this. It also naturally appears to be the only achievable

alternative to the Russian orientation. In addition to this many Ukrainians believe in the illusion that the approach to the EU would bring with it the prosperity, freedom and democracy that exists in other states that are members of the EU.

### **Who is it that is arguing for the Ukraine to become part of the EU?**

Some oligarchs that have control over a few of the oppositional parties are making promises that it would be good for business. But in the negotiations there was no talk of your average person and the issues they want to see addressed, neither the fight against political corruption nor for political and social reforms. It was above all about allowing EU interests access to the Ukrainian market.

### **Could an alliance with the EU not reduce the economic crisis of the Ukraine?**

The destiny of our East European neighbours speaks against it. Take the example of Romania and Bulgaria, incomes there have not risen but the prices have. There are ever more young people emigrating to find work in and around Western Europe, where they work for the lowest wages and are used to force down the wages of the people that live there already. The excitement about entry into the EU was short lived in these countries because even though all countries in the EU are supposed to be equal, some are more equal than others.

### **Why does Ukraine have such strong illusions in the EU then?**

The trigger for the protests was that Yanukovich decided not to sign an agreement with the EU at the last moment in November last year. Up until then not only the opposition parties but also the government campaigned for the Ukraine to become part of the EU.

### **An unsigned agreement led to a mass movement?**

Yanukovich had not prepared any propaganda for his change in strategy. Literally overnight the whole government's position changed from that of saying that the only way to save the Ukraine from the position it

was in was to sign the agreement to the position that the EU contradicts profoundly the national interests of the beloved nation.

### **A serious PR disaster...**

... This was decisive, for the spontaneous outbreak of the protest. Everyone thought that Yanukovich was leading the Ukraine in the direction of the EU and then suddenly, Putin whipped out his credit card and made an offer that couldn't be refused. It was also so similar ...

### **... and the opposition parties have used this cleverly ...**

Because the oligarchs that control them stand to make more profits. It is, however, crucial that the oligarchs and their parties have had difficulty steering the movement. It has become its own political centre of power, around which it would pay the left to fight for.

### **Are the east Ukrainians all on the side of Yanukovich?**

Even in the east, if there was a vote about a union with Russia, most of the people would vote against it. They also have no faith in the Russian government. Nevertheless, Yanukovich still has backing in the east.

### **Is his government remaining stable then?**

No. What is weakening Yanukovich, apart from the mass movement in the west, is the oligarch system itself. Some sponsors of Yanukovich's party of the regions demand his resignation now internally. If the oligarch's should make this position public, the president would also lose his remaining support in the population quite quickly. According to a current survey Klitschko would get a large majority with a ballot against Yanukovich for the presidential office. That means, basically, many Russian speaking east Ukrainians would vote for Klitschko.

### **Is Klitschko also the star of the movement?**

What the media mostly conceal is that the movement is basically extremely

critically towards the politicians and other self appointed leadership figures. Klitschko is one of the few who is barely booed when he speaks at Maidan square. But this definitely does not make him into the star of the movement.

### **Where does the criticism of the other oppositional politicians come from?**

Many opposition politicians, for example, the imprisoned Julia Timoschenko, have already proven that they are corrupt. Klitschko, not yet. Nevertheless, he depends on the same economic bosses as the other politicians.

### **You speak over and over again of the "oligarchs". What makes them so different, compared to say multi-millionaires somewhere else?**

An "oligarch" does not only have a lot of influence over the economy and society, but also direct control over one or more political parties. Hence, an oligarch can move their finance capital into direct political power.

### **Which Parties are controlled by the oligarchs?**

All parties in the parliament are financed considerably by oligarchs. Even Svoboda wouldn't have been able to become so influential without the oligarchs.

### **What do the media have to say on this?**

The oligarchs own all the big television broadcasting stations and influence directly their contents. Thus politicians from Svoboda were already invited on to important talk shows even though the party only reached 0.8 percent of the vote. At the same time, it is inconceivable that there would be any left winger invited to speak.

### **To what extent does the conflict in the Ukraine take place between different parts of the ruling class?**

The elite always try to abuse mass movements for their own benefit. If we, particularly in Eastern Europe, wait for a movement that is free from



the influences of capital and is led completely by the working class, we would be waiting forever. To have any of these movements develop we need a different form of society to what we have now.

**A “different society”, so that there can be a movement?**

Exactly. Since every protest movement reflects the contradictions of the society in which they are fought. We have strong nationalism and extremely mighty oligarchs on one side and no tradition of self organisation and class consciousness on the other side. What sort of protest should we expect to originate from this?

**Is there no perspective?**

Yeah, there is, but first we must discuss the left: How can we act under these circumstances? Should we condemn the movements because they are too difficult for us to work in? Should we go home because at Maiden Square the demonstrators allow the national flag to wave everywhere and sing the national anthem?

**What is it that you suggest the left do?**

Plainly speaking, if you say at Maiden Square that you are a Marxist, you run the risk of getting bashed. But the program and the character of the

movement are to a large extent in being developed. The people taking part in the struggle change politically enormously fast and they are very open to politik.

**What has given you this indication?**

Even in December, much more people had faith in Klitschko at that time. No one could even imagine the battles that they would be fighting in January.

**Where can the left build?**

The majority of the people at Maiden Square want to organise. They want direct democracy and no negotiations behind closed doors. It is these ideas that the people are fighting against the police for, even though the other day some of their comrades-in-arms were murdered. This is the place where the left must bring their ideas

**How could the left in Kiev do things better?**

We have to learn to engage more with the concrete situation. Slogans have to relate to where people are at. Also, it's irresponsible for some on the left to abstain.

**Irresponsible?**

Yes. Since, if we stay away, we leave the people to the “right wing “ that we so severely hate. Nobody will thank us for it if we do not go where the right

wing extremists are, except the right wing extremists themselves.

**Practically speaking, is this possible?**

Of course. It means that I may have to leave my beloved red flag at home because it doesn't get a good reception. So what? I want to come into political contact with people, radical is what brings success. The fact that a red flag is unpopular lies not with us, but with the communist party. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge this fact and react to it sensibly.

**Is it possible for the movement to win?**

It depends what you mean by win. The movement can succeed in bringing down Yanukovych. Sooner or later he will lose his power. But many demonstrators want to change the society and the political system. This cannot be achieved by this movement.

**Then is everything in vain?**

Not at all. Many will be disappointed, but they will also gain experiences on which they can build. Some will recognize also that a social fight is necessary to improve their life. If it achieves this in the next little while, then it would be a great success.

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# On Seattle, Kshama Sawant, Elections and the US Left

22 February 2014, by **Andrew Sernatinger**

In the weeks that followed her victory, very different parts of the US left have weighed in on what the election of a socialist to office in a major US city means. As Nate Hawthorne has pointed out [3], most observers have fallen into two camps: those who welcome Sawant's victory and look to it as a model for the future struggle,

and those who are skeptical or even suspicious that this is a cooptation of radical ideas and working class anger. The core debate is really not that new and these positions play forward age-old debates, but they take on a special kind of importance because for the first time in recent history Sawant represents a measurable impact of the

radical left.

Since I think its fairly self-evident that you're not going to vote socialism into power in the United States, I'd like to spend the bulk of this article talking about why I'm generally supportive of the Sawant campaign and respond to the criticisms posed by Black Orchid

Collective [4] and others. After interviewing Sawant and her campaign assistant Anh Tran, I'm convinced that the campaign is genuinely interested in using elected office to build movements, that Sawant and Socialist Alternative have no delusions about the role of the capitalist state, and that the Sawant victory was the result of revolutionaries taking advantage of an opening in the political system and not an accommodation by capital.

## The Political Crisis Since 2008

Part of what has caught everyone's attention about Kshama Sawant winning as an open socialist is that it represents something very different in the political culture of the United States. We are used to entrenched anticommunism and Tea Party right-wing populism, so to see a socialist woman of color win an election should throw up a red flag. So what happened to make this possible in the broader political climate?

As we know, the financial crisis in 2007-2008 created widespread anger. The big debate on the left at the time was what would happen in the aftermath. Some hoped that Obama would create a kind of New New Deal, others expected to see worker backlash like in Argentina in 2002, and many radicals hoped for a growth of a new radical movement and something akin to the formation of the CIO. Apart from some pockets here and there, that didn't happen.

Capital's response to the crisis has been unified in pushing for austerity and gutting social programs. Naturally, this pisses people off: polls show overwhelming disapproval of Congress and a lower opinion of both parties than usual. The institutions that have typically represented the working class however have been totally disoriented when dealing with a regime that has no interest in negotiation. Without political expression, popular anger manifested in the semi-spontaneous movements of 2011: the indignados, Arab Spring, Wisconsin Uprising and Occupy. Those movements were resoundingly

defeated in 2012, and in the US political energy returned to its regular rhythm and the pragmatism of a presidential election year.

This to me is an important political duality: on the one hand you have a popular rejection of austerity and immiseration represented by Occupy, but on the other hand you have elections that present no substantial alternative and in fact naturalize the process. For most people, both standpoints exist simultaneously and unevenly, which Gramsci referred to as dual-consciousness and Marx explained by saying, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force." What's more, people learn political lessons from experiences in their lives: if you struggle hard and don't see a result, most people feel powerless and think that struggle wasn't worth their valuable time. On the other hand, if you see an indisputable victory, it makes you bolder and want to fight for more.

The curious absence of a sustained popular movement in response to the crisis and austerity is part of why these conversations are so important. Black Orchid's explanation to this phenomenon is that capitalism develops "shock absorbers" in the institutions of "social democracy", trade union bureaucracies, NGOs and the like that soak up the natural growth of anger and revolutionary fervor. If only that were true, our lives would be much easier.

Instead, the problem is that the neoliberal period has seen the withering away of organic communities, popular institutions and what Alan Sears calls the "infrastructures of dissent" [5], which allow conscious reflection, analysis and planning for more methodical struggles. Richard Seymour has infamously characterized the neoliberal conjuncture [6]:

"[W]e have to face is the serious diminution of the left's infrastructure over the decades. I don't want to rehearse what we all already know – the decline of trade unions and their bureaucratisation, the decline of the

Labour Left, the disappearance of several left-wing organisations and publications. And it's not just the Left; there has been a general withering of popular voluntary associations, the decline of politics as such, and an increasing privatisation of social life. You know, we can talk about the rise of social movements, and I agree that has been an extremely important fact of the last forty years or so. But the striking thing about these movements is that they rarely leave much behind. They rise, there is a moment of euphoria, of expanded possibilities – and then the ruling class, the state, the police and so on, adapt, change tactics, find ways to shut it down, and there's little to show for it. None of the successes are institutionalised, while the losses leave a psychic residue that warns people off."

Rather than having a high degree of struggle that's coopted or suppressed by "shock absorbers" on the left, the period seems to be characterized much more by fewer, more episodic struggles with low capacity and less left behind. The situation seems to become only more desperate as austerity policies grind working people even further while creating a sense that these are individual rather than class problems.

## Politics in Seattle and Washington State

This is where Kshama Sawant comes in. With Occupy in decline, Sawant and Socialist Alternative decided to "occupy" the political space reserved for elections in American society rather than retreat with the movement and wait for the next uprising. They presented an intelligent, charismatic candidate who was part of a popular movement and created a savvy campaign interpreting the message of Occupy for specific issues in Washington State. Sawant addressed economic issues that were invisible in mainstream politics and presented alternatives that were bold but realistic – they ran under a socialist banner, but they weren't caricatures of socialists comically calling for the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Electoral rules were arguably more favorable to Sawant in Seattle than they would be in other US cities. Officially, Seattle has nonpartisan elections, which force races to be only between two candidates after a primary but don't require party sponsorship for ballot access — a rule that routinely prevents third parties from making the lists. City alders are elected at large so Sawant was able to run for any seat that became available, rather than waiting within her district. She could then campaign throughout the whole city, making her candidacy a larger issue and rallying more of the city to her side. In terms of the actual voting process, ballots in Washington State are mailed directly to voters giving them a longer window to cast their votes (days rather than hours) without having to worry about scheduling around the working day or waiting in lines. This last point became important in the final days of the vote count because the results were staggered by mail-return, and it gave activists more time to track down disqualified ballots in their favor, awarding them the election.

But while Sawant and the Seattle elections are part of the general mood may be a microcosm of the national mood, the specific political arrangements in Washington State I think are what made this victory possible.

Back in 2012, Sawant pointed out that there is a delicate balance of power in Washington State. The Democrats have been the singular ruling party for years (though Eastern Washington is Republican ruled). In Western Washington city politics are essentially no-contest races; the only real races are primaries within the Democratic Party. Sawant made that point to explain that the liberal Democratic Party with ruling power has not done anything to address needs in Washington, which was the starting point for a strategic socialist election campaign.

People in Seattle may be unhappy with Frank Chopp, Richard Conlin or any other Democrat, but given their predilections they aren't going to penalize them by voting for a Republican. Electorally, this situation

creates a kind of liability when there's no "guard" against voting to the left of Democrats, but until Sawant it hasn't been an issue that's seriously needed to be addressed; does it need to be pointed out that there is a dearth of serious left candidates? In Seattle, Sawant could not "spoil" the election for a Democrat and award it to a Republican, as would be the case in most US elections, which is the greatest protection against left candidates.

Dan La Botz has also pointed out that both Kshama Sawant and Ty Moore in Minneapolis ran in cities with a higher concentration of young people [7]. Polls consistently show that young people have more liberal or even left wing views, so these candidates were able to draw upon a pool of voters potentially more inclined to vote for a left candidate when given a fair opportunity.

When someone like Sawant is able to present themselves as a legitimate candidate in these conditions, addressing issues people actually care about without the threat of "making things worse", they can take advantage of this opportunity and potentially win against the establishment. However, contrary to some of what Socialist Alternative has said, these are important factors for determining whether similar campaigns could be successfully replicated in other parts of the country.

## The (capitalist) state

What's interesting in the whole discussion about Kshama Sawant is that no one doubts her character or her intentions. Often when progressives or left-leaning candidates run for election, they have very uneven positions, contradictory worldviews or conflicting interests that mean we have to put them at arm's length. But Sawant is an avowed revolutionary socialist, and even for her critics on the left they don't doubt that she means to do what she says and isn't running for her own personal interest.

The problem that anarchist and autonomous-leaning leftists have with Sawant tends to be more of a structural or strategic nature: using "the state" will coopt movements in struggle, corrupt leftists in office, and ultimately can't deliver revolutionary transformation. There are nuggets of truth in these criticisms, but for this situation I think they are more misleading than actually helpful.

Starting with the concrete, we have to look at the Sawant election in its time and place. For all intents and purposes, the Occupy movement defeated by the end of 2012 when the camps were cleared. The left retreated with the movements since the environment of mass struggle quickly disappeared. Morale dropped, activists hunkered down, returned to ongoing projects or hoped for a next upsurge; many far left groups that oriented themselves to the higher degree of struggle that Occupy seemed to embody started to splinter or fall apart when this episode concluded and things went back to "normal". And with the lower movement energy, the election calendar did what it always does and eclipsed popular dialog for pragmatic politics.

With this in mind, I'd argue that the Sawant campaign did the best thing for the movement as a whole. In their own words, they "took the message of Occupy to the elections", using the political space typically reserved in elections to not only preserve the common sense that came with Occupy but even to extend it into concrete proposals for Washington State. Sawant's campaign for Washington State House of Representatives was the testing ground, and when it was more successful than they expected they ran again for Seattle City Council less than a year later. Their campaign linked with the \$15 Ordinance for the nearby city of Sea-Tac, with Boeing workers fighting the company's threats to move, and then became a kind of national icon as an alternative to austerity politics, which has since birthed copycat campaigns in other cities. Given that the movement was in a low ebb and that the oppositional class consciousness brought out by Occupy could have been lost, it seems to me that for the moment it was in



Sawant's election was the best thing to foster social struggles in Seattle and the US.

But then there's still the deeper issue of relating to the capitalist state. The critics are right to point out that you're not going to vote socialism into power in the United States — the rules of the political system are in fact designed to keep government positions in the hands of ruling elites. Even if we somehow imagine radicals winning the majority of the government, I agree that the form of the capitalist state isn't suited to revolutionary transformation. Lenin, following Marx and Engels, tried to explain that this was the reason that the capitalist state needed to be smashed in the course of a revolution and that new, actually democratic institutions should be erected in transitioning society.

On its face that presents a contradiction: if you can't win power through elections, if the capitalist state has a history of seducing movement people, and if you can't use the state for revolutionary transformation, why bother with elections? The simplest answer is because you can't ignore them. Elections and positions of office are real to most people, including activists, even if we understand them to be social relationships in the absolute sense. Policy, laws, taxes and all the rest have actual effects on the lives of working people and as a result working people have a material interest in engaging with what decisions will be made, even if they understand the whole structure to be broken — it's a pragmatism that helps reproduce the social order.

Movements on the ground shape mass consciousness, but they can't go on forever and will eventually need to have something to show for all their effort. Without victories, capitalist hegemony tends to be reinforced — the sense that there isn't an alternative starts to solidify and the time we put in the movement feels like a waste when you think about how you could have spent it on survival activities (working more; reproducing yourself; enjoying your free time; whatever).

Revolutionary socialists trying to navigate these waters I think look at elections as a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Breaking the political monopoly the Democrats hold isn't so that there can be a new political duopoly with a socialist party, but it is to dismantle the pragmatic chokehold the Democratic Party has over working class issues. Changing the political system and forming an independent party are conceived of as a precondition to allow for more struggles and more victories, just as smashing the state is a precondition for socialism.

Revolutionary movements develop when workers and the oppressed understand that change cannot come through existing channels and that the whole order needs to be overturned; part of running in elections shows that it's not the problem of any individual politician but the organization of society that is the issue itself. Therefore, even while it's critical to deliver some gains in office, the larger goal is to educate about the system and build greater organization. The point of having revolutionaries in office is to lend the credibility, legitimacy and resources the office holds to movements that are ignored, demonized or suppressed and act as a guard against maneuvers by state officials when possible, recognizing that ultimately mass movements will bring about social change and not political offices.

## Sawant and Socialist Practices in Office

The last part of this equation is the effect that actually being in office will have on a person. Unfortunately, there seems to be more visibility for former New Leftists who have, to borrow BOC's formulation, become Democratic Party officials, union bureaucrats or heads of NGOs. What's to say that something similar won't happen with Kshama Sawant?

After interviewing her, seeing her tour and watching some of her speeches, I'm reasonably convinced that Sawant is acting in the older communist

tradition rather than the Popular Front "insider strategy" that the Communist Party adopted in the late 1930's and that Maoists later took up as well. Rather than seeing the state as an abstract, absolutely corruptive force, you start by looking at the structures or practices that the capitalist state deploys to seduce elected officials, revolutionary or no. There is more to say on this than a single essay can really do justice to, but for the sake of argument we can name out some of these features that create a corruptive environment: a complex bureaucracy; undemocratic appointments; high wages that make officials stop identifying with working people and see the post as valuable in itself; a military/police force without public accountability.

Historically, revolutionaries have sketched out this machinery to begin to develop political practices to address it and Kshama Sawant seems to be following in this tradition almost to a tee. Like communists in the old CIO unions or socialists in some European parties, Sawant intends to take only the average worker's salary and donate the rest of the money to movements. Seattle pays its city councilors the second most in the country after Los Angeles [8], where a typical councilor would make over \$117,000; Sawant will be accepting only \$40,000 of that sum [9]. (Whether Socialist Alternative will be the main beneficiaries of the rest of that money is another question...)

The parts of her platform that don't relate directly to economic issues like the \$15 minimum wage, rent controls, or public transportation are actually about confronting some of the worst state practices in Seattle. Sawant has called for a moratorium on drone surveillance and for a citizen review board over the Seattle Police Department in large part to confront the SPD's extrajudicial killings. These seem like fairly clear cases of the things revolutionary socialists have typically done at their best, and seem to only have shaped a common sense of what's right and what should be done for people in Seattle and anyone who's followed the case across the US.

Even if the surface pressures of office prove ineffective on Sawant, she will

still have to deal with the institutional pressure [10] of effectively delivering for her constituency while being an opposition candidate on the city council. If other councilors and major investors in city development decide that Sawant can't be worked with, they could decide to isolate her, withhold financing or use her as a scapegoat for new problems the city will inevitably face. Sawant has not been explicit about this particular dilemma, quite possibly because its terrible propaganda, but she does seem aware that the success of her position rests with the activity of workers and social movements "if Sawant can reasonably state that she has no choice but to hold fast because of the militancy of her constituency, she has a greater capacity to withstand these institutional pressures and remain a steadfast advocate.

## Conclusions

I've tried to analyze the specifics of the Sawant election to show what its value has been for movements at the present moment and for shaping the common sense about what people deserve and what can be done. I'm not a member of Socialist Alternative and I disagree with many of their ideas and pronouncements, but whether or not you agree with their politics isn't

the point here if we look at what they've done and the effect its had.

It seems to me that Sawant and Socialist Alternative constructed lively campaigns that drew on the energy from Occupy and kept the movement from being pushed into the annals of history. The cities in which they've run campaigns have all had a much younger demographic, potentially with fewer structural ties to the Democratic Party. In Seattle, the Democratic Party was probably at its weakest due to its electoral rules, movement activity and political history that left it without a right-wing guard, which would render Sawant a spoiler and prevent her from being a serious candidate. For those reasons, I don't think that Sawant's campaign will be very reproducible in other cities, but there does seem to be a growing interest in independent political campaigns, such as the labor candidates in Ohio [11] and the Chicago Teachers' Union political initiative [12]. Given that each US state has very different rules and political cultures, those initiatives will have to look different place to place to suit the needs of the time and place.

While most of the criticisms and concerns about Sawant's election have focused on the corruptive influence of holding public office, I'm reasonably

confident that Sawant has taken the proper precautions to guard against being seduced by the position and its absurdly high pay. What seems like a greater issue to me will be whether she will be able to make enough progress on the issues that got her elected. Sawant is one city councilor among nine, and an open socialist who regularly denounces the Democrats and the way city business has been handled. The danger seems to be that the other eight officials and the mayor will attempt to encircle her and frustrate her attempts to introduce legislation in order to pressure her into accepting compromises and deliver the message that only Democrats can get things done in the city. Given how much what a symbol she's become, Sawant's successes or failures will have a greater impact on the left and independent politics.

Luckily, Sawant as a revolutionary socialist has been very clear that ultimately the most important factor in social change will be workers in their workplaces and movements on the ground. The best-case scenario is that winning some of these reforms will embolden movements, give them the confidence to demand more, develop more militant struggles and form new and stronger organizations.

[The North Star February 10 2014](#)

# The Exceptional Meaning of the Tuzla Plenum

22 February 2014, by **Workers' Struggle**

The most significant gain to date of the workers' uprising in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the foundation and daily activities of the Tuzla Plenum. It's natural that in the town where the uprising began, where from the very beginning the strength of the movements' working base was most clearly expressed - which had gathered around it the students, the unemployed and pensioners - would be the first to introduce into the life of

the country a new political form in the service of the oppressed.

Unlike all other governments' and parliaments, which by their very nature are necessarily bureaucratized, corrupt and represent a tool in the hands of politicians allied with tycoons and capitalists of all stripes, the Plenum is a body of the very people it represents and of their interests. For this reason, the Tuzla Plenum

represents the most important political event of recent decades, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but in the whole region. The layer of petty-bourgeois "analysts' and 'journalists,' who are limited by the horizon of their "national colours' and identities, can let rip their hyena-like laughter as much as they want when hearing these observations. The meaning of the Plenum isn't temporary, nor does it represent a



one-off episode. However the movement develops in the following weeks and months, no one will be able to erase its existence from the memory of the working class. Whenever in the coming years workers and other oppressed groups – not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and beyond – find themselves, in their own struggles, before the question of how best to organize themselves, the way shown by Tuzla's workers will stand before them.

The plenum mode of organizing workers and allied groups has been around since the beginnings of the modern workers' movement. The first time such a forum was organized at the scale of an entire city was in St. Petersburg in 1905. In our region, in recent decades, the plenum form of organizing can be seen in the student movement – from the meetings held during the occupation of the university in Belgrade, to the plenums that were created during the blockade of universities in Croatia. However, it is precisely in Tuzla that the whole story was raised to a new and immeasurably higher level. The workers of failed enterprises in Tuzla, in cooperation with activists involved in organizing the uprising, convened a plenum at the scale of the entire town, in order to define the demands with which they will present before the Parliament of the Tuzla Canton. The extraordinary significance of the Tuzla Plenum flows from three things. First, the working-class is dominant within the Plenum, the only class that is able due to its strength and social role to put forward the framework for the creation of a new society (as opposed to the student population, which till now has been the only one represented in the organization of plenums). Besides, this Plenum doesn't represent the interests of a narrow group, but is open to the broadest masses. Finally, it seeks to realize the interests of the people in the entire city, and with its decisions has openly involved itself in the political life of the country, demanding the formation of a new government.

The Plenum has finally found the recipe in practice that would respond to the question of how the oppressed can organize outside of participation in parliaments, without appealing to corrupt governments and asking for the mercy of the ruling classes. It represents a consistent expression of understanding for how the oppressed can't rely on existing institutions and political parties, but need to self-organize and through struggle protect their interests. The Plenum, thus, isn't an organization or an informal group, or a body that should only have a consultative and temporary character. The Tuzla Plenum is a new political institution. Just as presidents, ministers, governments, parliaments exist – which serve the elite, create corruption, crime, and the impoverishment of the people – so too, on the other hand, there is the plenum, which expresses the interests of the ordinary person, and which by the way it functions prevents the abuse of power, acting as the fighting body of the movement.

The development of the uprising in Bosnia, which would truly bring about considerable and decisive change in social and political life must include the country-wide spread of the plenums, their strengthening, networking and the creation of a joint government based on the plenary system. Parallel to this, in every place and neighbourhood local plenums should be organized, which would send delegates to the plenum for the whole city – it's only in this way that it will be possible to create a democratic and effective functioning of the plenary system. The solution cannot be based on replacing people in current governments, nor simply banning their renomination (thought this can be used). The conditions in Bosnia aren't a result of corrupt politicians and greedy capitalists, but are a product of the existing economic and political system that will continue to produce such individuals as long as these systems exists. The only

alternative – all power to the plenums!

At moments when the plenums pass through their natural birth pangs, and when they're only beginning to be build, it's natural that it wouldn't be fully aware of its importance and unmeasured political power. There will be many of those – some of whom will participate in its work – who will wrongly insist on its temporary and frivolous character, and its possible that occasionally a majority of its participants – unaware of their own power and significance – will seek 'real' answers again within the framework of existing institutions and models. There will be those, as well, who will insist on its form, not on its content, who will want to transform some particular experiences and settings [of the plenums] into a fixed dogma. The plenum shouldn't be a slave to any forms, rather its rules and manner of functioning should be determined and changed according to the their efficiency and the current context of the work being done (obviously, never losing site of its directly democratic and class character).

On the other hand, all the forces seeking to preserve the current order, will want to immediately wipe the plenums' off the face of the planet and to return everything to 'normalcy' – in the embrace of the old institutions that protect their interests. It's therefore important to vigilantly protect the Plenum as the focal point and backbone of the movement. Workers, the unemployed, students and pensioners of Tuzla, be conscious of the fact that you are the embryo of a new government that is emerging from the people and demand that this government arise from the Plenum! Let the new government of the Tuzla Canton be chosen, accountable to, and at any movement replaceable by the Plenum. Let the government of the plenum forever prevent the return of the old order of things and begin building a new society!

*February 13, 2014*

# A racist vote?

19 February 2014, by **Paolo Gilardi**

Surrounded by a pseudo discourse which was both social - the generalised undercutting of wages, the rising cost of housing - and ecological - the overloading of trains and road axes - the draft law voted on certainly has its roots in the ideology of the "fight against Ueberfremdung", the alleged "foreign overpopulation", inaugurated by the Swiss authorities after the First World War.

This same ideology gave rise to the xenophobic wave of the 1970s, which four times subjected to popular ballot proposals to repatriate foreign workers. The roots of this are moreover not purely ideological, since a quasi direct link can be established between the initiators then and now. There is no doubt about the nationalist and xenophobic nature of the text subjected to the vote.

Its content has found a natural audience in rural Switzerland or, as some analysts have noted, among those located at more than 700 metres altitude, whereas the towns have rejected it. As elsewhere in Europe, it is the regions where foreigners are least present which have most strongly protested against "foreign overpopulation".

These layers formed the hard core of Sunday's result as they have in the past 40 years in the areas of immigration and asylum. But they could not alone form a majority, albeit one of only 20,000 votes. To this hard core several other phenomena were added. First, among certain layers of youth there has been an increased prevalence of nationalist discourse, identification with "national" values, with other forms of identification, social or class based for example, already not very present among the youth of this country, being systematically reduced.

This is the result of a long process of the political and structural integration

of the workers' movement, in both its political and trade union aspects, into the state apparatus of the Swiss bourgeoisie and its subordination to the interests of national capitalism symbolised by the practice over eight decades of the policy of "labour peace" (In July 1937, the main trade union federation and the engineering employers' organization signed the so-called "labour peace" agreement involving the total renunciation of strike action to guarantee the international competitiveness of Swiss export industry. After the Second World War this policy was generalised, accompanied by the minority and constant - except for less than ten years in the 1950s - participation of the Socialist Party in the coalition government, as well as the cantonal governments and local executives, notably in some big towns, where both the Greens and the so called "left of the left" also participate in coalition governments).

Still a relatively minority phenomenon, this revival of nationalism among youth is evident notably in the emergence of young right wing cadre, whether in the youth organisations of the Union of the Democratic Centre - the most employer friendly and anti-worker of the bourgeois parties - or in those of the Radical Liberal party. Present - certainly marginally, but nonetheless present - among school students, these forces take on weight given the shift to the right of the epicentre of political debate. Thus unlike in the 1990s - and also afterwards - in terms of spontaneous demonstrations in the schools against the nationalist backlash, this time there was nothing. This was certainly not the decisive factor in the outcome of the vote, but the disarray created among youth has probably played a role. It is in any event the absence of public initiative, in contrast to the other vote of the week-end, that on the right to abortion, which has left an empty space.

This disarray was still greater when, apart from some rare experiences of organisation of independent left campaigns against the xenophobic initiative without real visibility, no content has come from the left. And it is precisely at this level that another strata, represented by what was a little too quickly called the "workers' vote", was added to the traditional nationalist core. I will return subsequently to the necessary prudence with respect to the "workers' vote" but it should be recognised that the protectionist discourse has largely penetrated the popular layers.

At the base of this vote, undoubtedly, is the generalisation of policies of wage undercutting practiced by employers who, fortified by an unlimited availability of labour power - the industrial reserve army, to employ a concept which makes sense - and the preventive capitulation of the trade union movement, can do as they like. In Tessin, for example, a peripheral canton suffering from a marked regional under-development, the unlimited exploitation of an immigrant border-crossing work labour force, paid peanuts, exerts a constant pressure on the popular layers. It is in this canton that the figure of the "Polish plumber" of other days takes on the traits of the "electrician from Reggio Emilia", paid at the rates prevalent in Reggio Emilia.

Faced with this situation the institutional left, both political and trade union, has been totally incapable of contributing even the beginning of a response. It is confined, in the continuity of subordination to the interests of Swiss export industry, to relaying the employers' discourse explaining to hundreds of thousands of workers worried about their purchasing power and workplace, "the importance of immigration for our wellbeing" and "the necessary

opening to Europe, pledge of our prosperity”.

It was indeed this latter aspect that was essential for Swiss capitalism, since the challenging of the agreements with the EU could signify major restrictions for its access to European markets. Faced with this situation, the silence of the parliamentary and institutional left has been more culpable inasmuch as it has at no time been capable of denouncing the fact that it is employers who cut wages, not immigrants, that it is capitalists who lay off workers, not immigrants, that it is landlords who increase rents, not immigrants. But obviously such words would have had as consequence a commitment to class confrontation that this “left” avoids like the plague.

Thus, it is the vacuum left by the so-called “left” which has given room to the reassuring discourse of the UDC, which promises to re-establish

“protections” by control over the migratory flows; this is the vacuum which has been filled among the popular layers. It is the legacy of a “left” which, under the pretext of the “progress of civilisation” did not wish to fight in 2005, during the vote on the bilateral agreements with Europe, to impose strict conditions - mandatory extension of employment contracts, minimum wages to be respected, employment of work inspectors - on the alleged “free circulation”. And whereas it adheres to these “values of opening” without giving them social content, a part of the layers most exposed to the effects of commodity globalisation seek a response among the xenophobes.

Unlike what happened in recent months, in the 1970s xenophobic initiatives were countered, in the three regions of the country, by unitary committees of Swiss and immigrant workers, the CUTSIs. They led the campaign from an angle of the community of interests, of class, between workers whatever the colour

of their passport. It is moreover in struggle that this community of interest was able to leave traces, notably in the form of integrated structures of Swiss and immigrant employees.

And it was where these experiences of struggle were most advanced, supported by a permanent anti-capitalist propaganda and political agitation, that the xenophobic initiative of February 9 was least successful, the “workers vote” in its favour not having the same weight as where the institutional left had deserted the ground. That’s why it is first through the construction of a social, class conscious, internationalist opposition that we will fight the nationalist and xenophobic discourse. Because the abstract denunciation of “racism” inevitably ends up in the concrete stigmatisation of those who, through despair and the lack of an alternative, give credit to the xenophobic discourse.

This is a long term task which must imperatively be taken on.

## **Social revolt in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**18 February 2014, by Catherine Samary**

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a real mini-Yugoslavia, was particularly torn apart and destroyed by the decomposition of the former Federation, something which has not erased close regional (and even family and national) relations. To the 1990s of “war-ravaged transition” - three years of ethnic cleansing and some 100,000 dead - have been added the disasters of the “peaceful transition” - close dependence on foreign capital, with the new private banks - but also a Euro-Atlanticist control that is more visible than elsewhere.

Between 2003 and 2008, the growing dependence of the Western Balkans on the EU could be seen as beneficial. But in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was not even a state capable of claiming legitimacy on nationalist

bases. The unity of the country was maintained with forceps. Its constitution, written in Dayton (USA) in 1995 is still in force, reflecting the ethnic division by war. The state is stuck in a pseudo “sovereignty” under international domination, especially embodied by the “High Representative” of the UN, who is today a European, a real “proconsul.” Croatian and Serbian nationalists periodically threaten secession and block any overcoming of ethnic divisions, which also results in discrimination against citizens (including Roma and Jews), who are not part of the three peoples recognized by the Constitution (Bosno-Serbs, Bosno-Croats and Muslims, who are called Bosniaks - all of them are Bosnian citizens).

### **Towards overcoming national divisions**

However, last year, the first source of massive mobilizations went beyond national divisions: the “babies revolution” set citizens of all the “entities” against the negligence of the ruling parties, which were unable to agree on personal registration papers, in particular preventing a little girl, six months old, from getting medical treatment abroad.

At the same time, the country has over 40 per cent unemployment (more than 60 per cent for young people). There is massive poverty, in the face of endemic corruption. After a deep

recession in 2009, it experienced only stagnation and setbacks until 2013, echoing the difficulties of its neighbours and major trading partners - Slovenia, Italy and Croatia. The IMF, which had conditioned its "aid" on the resolution of a government crisis that lasted for 15 months, went back on the attack in September 2012, demanding structural reforms, austerity and privatizations, particularly in the areas of health insurance and pensions.

These attacks come on top of years of privatizations, today denounced as "criminal" - especially in the most industrial region of Tuzla, where the social explosion started: between 2000 and 2010, former state-owned enterprises, which employed the majority of the population, were sold to private owners who stopped paying workers, filed for bankruptcy and sold off assets - under the control of the Cantonal Agency for Privatization. As result, a large number of workers no longer benefited from social security contributions. They are now deprived of social rights, including being able to retire, because they do not have the minimum number of years of contributions that are required.

## Politicization of the revolt

From the third day of the "revolt", political slogans appeared. From Tuzla, the movement has spread to Sarajevo, Bihac, and other cities. A growing number of assemblies are working out platforms of demands. This exercise in direct democracy is expressed on social networks and also encourages the creation other assemblies that bring together young and old - the oldest are not the least determined: the press has sought to discredit the movement, speaking of hooliganism and agitators from outside. The response of the "Front", which has established itself independently of all political parties, was clear: "whoever sows poverty will reap anger." And it is being transformed into a self-organized force.

"We who took to the streets express our regret for the injuries and damage caused, but we also express our regret concerning the factories, public spaces, scientific and cultural institutions and human lives destroyed

by the actions of those who have been in power for twenty years. "

"The workers and citizens of Tuzla call for:

- Maintaining public order and peace through cooperation between citizens , the police and civil protection, so as to avoid the criminalization, the politicization and the manipulation of demonstrations;

- The establishment of a technical government, composed of apolitical experts, never having held a government post, [ in] the Canton of Tuzla, until the next elections (...) . [It] will submit weekly reports on its work and proposals. All interested citizens can follow [its] work;

- [Concerning privatizations ] (...) The government will be able to confiscate property acquired fraudulently, decree the annulment of privatization agreements, give the factories back to the workers and restart production as soon as possible;

- Equalization of salaries of government officials with those of workers in the public and private sector, a stop to the payment of bonuses of all kinds and to the payment of the salaries of ministers and other representatives whose term has ended."

## Tokyo Elections and the Future of the Anti-Nuclear Movement

**18 February 2014, by Kenji Kunitomi**

On 9 February, amidst the biggest snowfall in 45 years Tokyo held its gubernatorial election. Only 46.14% of eligible voters turned out, the third lowest turnout on record. The winner was former Health and Welfare Minister Yoichi Masuzoe who won with 2, 112,979 votes, with the backing of the ruling Liberal Democratic (LDP) and the New Komeito parties.

Kenji Utsunomiya, an attorney and former President of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, came

second. Utsunomiya came second the last time he ran for governor, in 2012, winning some 970 000 votes. The 2012 gubernatorial election was held on the same day as the general election due to the then Governor Shintaro Ishihara's abrupt resignation. Despite the 16% drop in voter turnout - 140,000 fewer votes were cast than in the 2012 election - this time round Utsunomiya still managed to win 982,594 votes and exceed his 2012 efforts. Former Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa, backed by former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, ran

on a single-issue platform of eliminating nuclear power. He came a close third receiving 956,063 votes.

### An Ultra-Rightist Surge

Toshio Tamogami, retired General and former Chief of Staff of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force and head of the ultranationalist group Ganbare Nippon, was endorsed personally by former Governor Shintaro Ishihara,

and received 610,865 votes. According to Asahi Shinbun's exit polls, people in their 20s voted mainly for Masuzoe (36%) and then Tamogami (24%). Tamogami took 17% of the votes from those in their 30s, against Utsunomiya's 15%. Even the conservative LDP look on Tamogami's 600,000 votes with some caution.

What can we make of these results? How should we understand the split in the antinuclear debate? And how should we fight against the Abe administration's political attempts to change the Constitution and reactivate nuclear power plants?

## Elections and the Anti-Nuclear Movement

Utsunomiya and Hosokawa – both of whom ran on antinuclear platforms – won a combined total of almost 1, 940, 000 votes, as against pro-nuclear Masuzoe's 2,100, 000 votes. If both antinuclear campaigners had united under a single banner there may have been a chance to beat Masuzoe.

But is this the way that we should understand these results? According to opinion polls, a majority of people is opposed to nuclear power: is a single-issue focus on the nuclear question the most effective way to rally these people? Whose interests does Koizumi and Hosokawa's antinuclear stance serve, and what kind of relationship should the left hold towards this grouping?

We need to examine these issues in a concrete way during the debates and discussions that will undoubtedly occur.

## Maneuvers on the Right

AbeMasuzoeYoichi Masuzoe focused his campaign to make Tokyo the world's No. 1 metropolis for the 2020 Summer Olympics. He refashioned himself for the voters as someone who cared for his elderly mother, an expert on welfare from his days as Minister

for Health, Labour and Welfare.

When the Democratic Party came to power Masuzoe criticized his former party and stated, "The LDP has completed its historic role," leaving the party and to form the New Renaissance Party. Given his expulsion, some in the LDP were wary of supporting Masuzoe's candidacy. However, the previous Governor Naoki Inose's abrupt resignation amidst allegations of a funds scandal involving receiving 50 million yen from hospital chain Tokshukai, laid to rest this hesitancy. Inose had won the election by a landslide just one year earlier with more than four million votes, endorsed by the LDP, New Komeito and Restoration parties. Inose's dramatic fall from grace meant that attempts to recruit parliamentary candidates from the LDP, such as Hakubun Shimomura and Yuriko Koike (former Minister of Defense), to the gubernatorial elections were abortive.

The LDP decided to endorse Masuzoe because they feared that if they lost the Tokyo gubernatorial elections this could hurt the seemingly invincible Abe administration. The LDP made a strategic decision to jump on Masuzoe's bandwagon.

Once the LDP decided to support Masuzoe, the LDP and New Komeito went into full-scale electioneering mode. They put all their strength into the Abenomics growth strategy of investment in development for the Tokyo Olympics.

The Abe administration felt that they had to stop the victory of an antinuclear candidate at all costs. They were even willing to postpone a cabinet decision on the continued reliance on nuclear power as the basis of their Draft Energy Plan to focus on the gubernatorial election!

## The needs of the people

UtsunomiyaKenji1The first candidate to put himself for election after Inose's resignation was Kenji Utsunomiya.

At the 2012 election, Utsunomiya was

endorsed by the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the New Socialist Party, the Green Party, and even by sections of the Tomorrow Party and Democratic Party. Utsunomiya could not, however, swim against the tide of reaction – the massive victory of Abe's LDP and a return to the old regime, and the breakthrough of the far-right Japan Restoration Party. Utsunomiya could not manage to win even one quarter of Inose's votes. This setback produced a negative response towards Utsunomiya's campaign within the antinuclear movement. There was also criticism of the Communist Party, which had supported Utsunomiya from an early stage.

Against this backdrop, there were moves in the antinuclear movement to forge a relationship with former PM Koizumi, who had been proactively pushing the antinuclear platform from the previous year. As an electoral strategy this made sense. Discussions to unify Utsunomiya's campaign with Hosokawa and Koizumi's campaign surfaced and intensified this year when it became apparent that former PM Hosokawa would enter the gubernatorial race with the support of Koizumi. It soon became obvious, however, that this unification amounted to unconditional support for Hosokawa's candidacy at a stage when Hosokawa's exact policy framework was unclear.

In Kakehashi, newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist League, on 3 February I expressed my objections to Hosokawa and argued against unifying the campaigns of the antinuclear candidates. It was obvious that the meeting held by Citizens for a Governor against Nuclear Power (CGANP) was simply an attempt to drop Utsunomiya in favour of Hosokawa, even when his full policy platform remained unclear. The CGANP meeting favoured Hosokawa over Utsunomiya's antinuclear platform because Utsunomiya, they argued, had given the antinuclear policy the same status as his other policies and thus, in effect, Utsunomiya's antinuclear policy was lower in priority compared to Hosokawa's.

CGANP argued that running a single-issue antinuclear campaign was the



best way to rally an extensive network of people and stop the Abe administration reactivating nuclear power plants.

But the antinuclear campaign can only become a lived reality – and gain true power and social support – if it connects and combines with the range of compelling issues facing ordinary people: employment, poverty, human rights and peace. These issues need connected to the antinuclear campaign. On this basis I continued to support Utsunomiya's candidacy.

I do not think we can stop Abe's strategy to promote nuclear power, Abenomics, constitutional change, the war state, neo-liberal deregulation, and fight against increasing poverty and inequality by focusing solely on an antinuclear platform.

The results from the gubernatorial elections and exit polls show that people care about a variety of issues including welfare, employment, nuclear power and peace. People were not voting for a single issue but were basing their decisions on a wide range of policies.

Starting from the first Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident, the campaign has linked this accident to problems in the political, societal and economic system that creates nuclear power in the first place. Through the campaign, people have become conscious of, and made links to, other issues surrounding the standard of living, work, and rights. As the campaign spreads, people's consciousness to link other issues will expand and deepen. We should not stop this process but encourage it. This is a different argument from simply rejecting a conservative politician in the antinuclear movement.

## For United Front to overthrow the Abe administration

Utsunomiya Kenji<sup>2</sup> After Masuzo secured his election victory, Abe re-launched his policy of reactivating nuclear power plants. During the gubernatorial elections, Abe refrained from using the term "reactivate" in order to avoid a debate on nuclear power plants. In an answer to a question from LDP Policy Research Council Chairman Takaichi Sanae, Abe stated, "We will present a viable energy mix promptly, while taking into account how many reactors are restarted and how much clean energy is introduced in the new energy plan."

Masuzoe's victory has given the Abe cabinet and LDP the "green light" to reactivate reactors. Prior to the victory, however, the ruling elite was concerned that the combined votes of Utsunomiya and Hosokawa would exceed Masuzoe's votes. Now, they may attempt to reactivate nuclear power plants this summer.

It is nearly three years since the accident at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Far from things improving, the current situation at this power plant is dire. Leaks of highly contaminated material continue, and people's health and wellbeing are threatened – there have been cases of thyroid tumors in children, not to mention the atrocious work conditions of those taking part in the decontamination and clean up. Despite this, the government is promoting the situation as "safe and secure" and is encouraging residents' hopes they will be able to return home. The government is forcing reactivation without having a clear idea of what caused the Fukushima disaster in the first place, or even

conducting an actual investigation into it.

On 8 March there will be meetings held to commemorate three years since the accident in three Fukushima locations: Fukushima city, Koriyama, and Iwaki. We need to mount a fight that connects the struggles of the people on the receiving end of the threats to reactivate the power plants in areas such as Sendai, Ikata, Genkai, and Ohi, as well as doing our utmost to rally campaigns across the country against nuclear power and reactivation, and for victim support.

For this to happen, it is essential that we overcome the split that occurred in the antinuclear movement during the gubernatorial elections, and carefully continue to discuss and build on political strategies for our campaign.

The issues surrounding the changing of the constitution for the right of collective self-defense; the construction of the new Henoko US military base; Abe's plans to change the constitution to expand Self-Defense Forces; the deteriorating conditions for casual workers and the attacks on employment under Abenomics are all intimately intertwined with Abe's Energy Plan for reactivation.

We have our work cut out for us: a crucial part of the fight to stop reactivating nuclear power plants must be joint action to overthrow the Abe administration.

*This article first appeared in the 11 February edition of **Kakehashi**, joint newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist League and National Council of Internationalist Workers. English translation by Shomi Yoon for [International Socialist Organisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand](#). Sub-headings added in translation.*

## The last stand of a system in crisis

**18 February 2014, by Salvatore Cannavò**

After last year's election and the recognition of the 5 Star Movement's explosive entry into parliament the Italian establishment thought it would be able to deal with it by rallying around President Napolitano's model: broad cross-party agreement, technical governments, absolute respect for the European parameters, complete rejection of any social struggles. This experiment has failed.

Napolitano has failed and even more than Letta has now been defeated. The fact that the experiment was not working was demonstrated first by Renzi's clear victory in the PD primary elections, the nth expression of people wanting to shake up the political system - even those from a responsible and obedient electorate like the PD's. Secondly Letta has only been able to distribute a few crumbs to people on the right or left, who are privileged or excluded but who are suffering really badly from the crisis. The epitome of this political uselessness has been the budgetary law. At this point we have seen growing discontent from the Confindustria (main bosses' organisation), other sectors, the banks and the trade unions. But this disquiet has also spread to those few politicians who are still lucid and understand the degree of people's alienation from politics.

In this framework we can see that Renzi's manoeuvre is to present himself as the man who, more than anybody else, given his past and using his eloquence and skills, can stand up to the anti-caste tidal wave that has been sweeping Italy. The Florentine mayor will do it in his own way, he has already begun, but in the name of the system as a whole. Even on behalf of the right of centre forces who have been torn apart by his move. In reality the real person defeated by Renzi is not Letta but Berlusconi, who had been attracted by the bait of the electoral reform, but has thereby opened the door for the PD leader to win credit within the right of centre supporters who are his true electoral target audience.

Renzi will lead a system he will try and renovate with continual shock tactics, he will try and get a breathing space from the European Union and bring about a liberal modernisation, a renewal of the system in response to some of the external pressures. In this sense it is a project of transformation, dressed up in contemporary clothes, and it signifies a new phase has opened up. Stripping off the clothes of a PD party leader and taking on the serious attire of a prime minister, Renzi will be free to speak to the

whole country and build a new moderate political bloc from both the left and right that he will define as a "fortress" he will lead against the siege of the "new barbarians".

In this way he is carrying out both a new and old political shift which is both skilful but also desperate. If the entire parliamentary spectrum is hoovered up by this drive forward the manoeuvre could succeed in reorganising the political framework. If it does not work out Renzi will just be the latest leader to be chewed up by the crisis.

What we have to understand is how to correctly analyse the whole operation. Notwithstanding the various manoeuvres Renzi will make, the fireworks he will concoct and the propaganda that goes with it, the meaning of his government is already defined in the hypothesis of the electoral reform agreed with Berlusconi: shore up governability at all costs, reduce political space, build up a personalised and authoritarian democracy. A model which was finally unsuccessful for Silvio Berlusconi but which he used for the twenty years of his regime. Today Renzi is the first post-Berlusconi figure to really fill the political stage. But he also is the first to re-interpret and use the ideological detritus of that period,

## **The complexity of the revolutionary process that is underway**

**17 February 2014**

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**Permanent Revolution: The first phase of the revolt against the**

**Syrian regime, which had a peaceful character, gives the impression of having been a global popular movement, which was joined by people of all religions and faiths, all walks of life, all**

**ages, of both sexes, etc., But when it began to become militarized the religious and denominational character took over, especially in its military component. What do you think of this phenomenon and**

## what are the causes?

**Munif Mulhem:** The militarization was not a choice of peaceful protesters for freedom and dignity. It was the violence by the regime against the peaceful movement, whether by firing on protesters in the streets and squares, or arresting them and torturing them to death, which prompted the revolution to take up arms. And during the first months, the bearing of arms was exterior to the revolutionary field. It was due to the desertion of soldiers who refused to kill their own people, or who assumed their responsibility towards their people, who were facing violence that was unprecedented in the world. The military formations that were set up at that time then took on religious names - such as the Farouk brigade [13] - but they were not, however, religious formations.

The change that took place within these formations is the result of the course followed by religious currents present on the Syrian scene before the revolution, or which formed themselves after the beginning of the revolution, who created their own structures, acting for their own account and for their political orientations, after having been unable to contain the military formations led by the officers and the soldiers who had deserted the regime and because they believed that the regime was on the point of falling, as it seemed to be at the end of 2011. Also, they created their own militias as a means of pressure, for the future, on the components of the revolution, in order to gain hegemony over them, through these militias, inspired by the Libyan experience in every sense, and taking advantage of the flow of funds and weapons from states, individuals and organizations in the Gulf.

That is how the dissident officers were marginalized and how there emerged brigades making no secret of their religious ideology and their objectives, which differed from those that the revolution had adopted. The uncontrolled inflow of funds from abroad excited the envy of every kind of adventurer or anyone who aspired to create his brigade or raise his standard in the name of Islam, or under a banner that would make it

possible to obtain material gains, in money or weapon, because he claimed to represent Islam. The course followed by the regime for 40 years, aiming to destroy the social fabric of Syria and to give the popular movement a religious sectarian character after the beginning of the revolution, and with that aim indulging in every kind of sectarian killings and arbitrary actions; all of this opened the road to these forces, and they emerged with the orientation they have.

**Permanent Revolution: In a previous interview of last January, which you gave to the publication *Murassiloun*, you said we could not avoid the use of military force to overthrow the regime, whereas many people in Syria, with at their head the Coordinating Committee, called for the rejection of a military solution, and for reliance only on peaceful struggle to get rid of the regime. How do you explain your point of view?**

**Munif Mulhem:** From the late 1970s and early 1980s, the battle between the regime and religious forces was transformed into an armed struggle. These forces, which were then called the Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood, represented the spearhead of the struggle against the regime. The transformations in the structure of the regime in the late 1970s took on qualitative dimensions, particularly with the establishment of security apparatuses within the structures of the army and the creation of the State Security, which had a religious sectarian character. These transformations convinced us, in the Party of Communist Action to which I belonged at that time, that the overthrow of this regime would not be peaceful - regardless of the strength of the mass movement that would work to get rid of it without resorting to military action - and would take the form of desertions from the army, which would be the main factor confronting the violence of the regime and its sectarian apparatuses, which resembled militias more than military units.

Several months after the outbreak of the revolution, and of all the violence which accompanied it, which is

unprecedented faced with a peaceful movement, with the first desertions from the units of the army, all that confirmed what I thought: that the regime would not go through peaceful methods. I began to think: how can we limit the number of victims in this conflict?

But the character of the militarization of the revolution, which I spoke about in my first answer, went against all predictions. Instead of strengthening the military forces of the revolution, we found ourselves faced with forces which were fighting the regime and which were counter-revolutionary before their victory.

That is why it makes no sense to ask if you are for or against militarization. The overthrow of the regime is the only way to get rid of the conflict that is taking place today and is the first step to take in order to get rid of the armed counter-revolutionary forces. Maintaining the regime would mean the continuation of the civil war for the next hundred years ...

**Permanent Revolution: Some analysts consider that the main factor that has catalyzed the popular movement since the beginning was the demand for freedom and human dignity in the confrontation with this repugnant dictatorial regime, while others emphasize the socio-economic factor and make that the decisive factor in this process. How do you see this question?**

**Munif Mulhem:** There is no doubt that the last decade has seen substantial socio-economic changes in Syria, changes which began in the late 1990, and that the late 1980s represented the biggest step in these transformations, whose basis was the victory of the regime in its confrontation with the Syrian opposition. After the defeat of the Islamist armed forces, the regime sought to destroy all the currents of the opposition, whether they were the democratic forces or those of the Left, and a climate of fear and terror was established throughout society. We can say that Syria at the end of the 1980s had become a big prison and a dreadful prospect for its people.

The victors, whether we are talking about the governing bureaucracy or civilians and soldiers, considered that they had to be paid for their victory. Corruption spread in a way that was unprecedented, wealth was accumulated and a new rich layer emerged which openly exhibited the billions it had accumulated and led a luxurious life that was provocative for the mass of people who saw their conditions of existence deteriorating rapidly. The middle class, the bulk of which was made up of state functionaries, was eclipsed. Similarly, the new liberal transformations, through the opening up of markets and the abandonment by the state of the guarantee of opportunities for graduates of universities and institutes, the enactment of legislation establishing a market economy, all that dealt blows to the middle class, artisans and small manufacturers. The Human Development Report for 2005, published in Syria in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, showed that poverty was spreading to the point that almost one third of the inhabitants of Syria were living on the threshold of poverty and nearly three million were living below it. It is well known that the majority of them are concentrated in rural areas, particularly in the North.

Socio-economic transformations in Syria were an important factor in the outbreak of the revolution, but in my opinion they were not the main factor. The blind and savage repression, the violations of the slightest forms of freedom and human dignity, which reached their peak in the 1980s, the fear that was instilled in society, religious discrimination between citizens, are essential factors in the unleashing of the revolution.

And the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain opened the doors for activists to break down the wall of fear built up by the regime for four decades. Thus, the slogan of the revolution for freedom and dignity was the most consistent expression of the wishes of the revolutionaries.

**Permanent Revolution The dissident elements of the regular army, and especially the officers, were sidelined in the brigades and combat units, whether in the so-**

**called Free Syrian Army, or on the level of brigades and other units. How should we understand this phenomenon and to what extent is it fair to establish a link with a regional tendency, to be more precise, for differentiation based on religious sectarianism to dominate the character of the struggle?**

**Munif Mulhem:** What was strikingly evident in the first months of the revolution, what was the feature that was most widespread among peace activists, was that there was no affiliation to a political force or parties that existed prior to the revolution. Most of the soldiers who had deserted from the army at the beginning of the militarization of the revolution did not belong either to a political current, even as sympathizers, with the exception of the Baath Party, which all volunteer soldiers were required to join if they wanted to stay in the army and to get promotion. This experience dissuaded them from any kind of commitment on the political and organizational level.

For this reason, the Islamic forces, supported by regional forces, organized themselves to create their own specific military formations, which can be considered to be the most influential and to be hegemonic over the revolution. We witnessed the training of hundreds of units and brigades with an Islamic ideological character. The regime in turn freed hundreds of Salafists who had been arrested in the first months of the revolution (many of whom became leaders of Salafist units and brigades) and at the same time it was arresting thousands of young peaceful activists. The regime claimed from the first months of the revolution that it was fighting religion-based military organizations and takfiris (Salafists). These regional and local forces provided the regime with what did not in reality exist. And they contributed to the marginalization of units and brigades created by military deserters, and in some cases physically liquidated those who demonstrated their refusal of practices that were far removed from the objectives and the moral content of the revolution.

**Permanent Revolution: How do you**

**explain the absence of an effective Left in the leadership of the movement, especially after its militarization? What is the Left's influence on the general course taken by the current process of the struggle?**

**Munif Mulhem:** It is no secret for anyone that the influence of the Left in Syria before the revolution was weak, due mainly to two factors. The first is specific: it is the result of the repression that struck the Left over the past decades. The second is general and relates to the state of the Left on a world level after the collapse of the "socialist bloc" in the 1990s. The intensity of the repression against the popular movement, which forced it to move from pacifism and civil struggle to militarization, closed the door to all that remained of left forces to have a presence and to have influence in the revolution. I think the Left will only be able to play an effective role in Syria and go back to the democratic stage of peaceful action after the fall of the regime. Syrian society, even if it appears, from a distance, to be overwhelmed by the forces of the Right, keeps in reserve, in my opinion, a quantity of forces capable of moving society forward - towards the building of a modern democratic civil state - and of repairing a society that has disintegrated.

**Permanent Revolution: Do you still believe, as you have said in the past, that the scenarios of division, in which Iran is participating, could lead to the establishment of a Alawite micro-state, if the current regime lost any possibility of maintaining itself? What are the chances of a partition?**

**Munif Mulhem:** To be precise, this is what I said in the interview cited on this subject: "The fall of the regime is an unavoidable outcome and the situation opens up all the possibilities, the worst being partition, which can be envisaged because it suits regional forces, principally Iran, which would like to see the creation of an allied Alawite state. But the chances of partition are not great, because a large part of the reasons for an intervention by regional or international forces in the Syrian



situation is an attempt to weaken Iran in Syria and erase it definitively from the region."

Today, following the developments in Syria, in particular the role attributed to jihadist extremist forces and the role played by international forces, the risk of partition is much smaller than before. This unlikely outcome, if it materialized, would not result in an Alawite state, but in cantons for the armed forces, of which the Alawite canton would only be one among many.

**Permanent Revolution: In the interview in question, you said that you had supported, in the beginning, albeit critically, the Syrian National Council. Is that still your position now with the emergence of the "National Coalition" which does not, it seems, enjoy the confidence of a significant part of the Syrian people, nor the general recognition of the fighting units and brigades, judging by what they have recently published? Do you consider that there is an urgent need to crystallize a different leadership structure that actually represents the interests of the Syrian people, that manages to polarize it, to organize its struggle, to unify its ranks, which could then lead to victory? And if this is on the agenda, what do you think are the conditions for achieving it?**

**Munif Mulhem:** To be clearer: after the establishment of the National Council and the Coordinating Committee, I announced during a conference that the Council did not represent me but that I strongly supported it. The critical position is supported, including in an organization to which I belong. It is a different thing to support a political party that circumstances force you to support in order to confront the other party that you would like to get rid of. This is what is happening at the present time, whether it is a question of the Council or the Coalition, in the absence or the impossibility of constituting an alternative leadership of the struggle to get rid of this regime, in the present circumstances. I was convinced then that political

activity of democratic forces, in the shadow of ongoing armed conflict, would have no effective value, which has been confirmed by developments since the beginning of the year 2013 in the conflict in Syria. Peaceful democratic activity in the so-called liberated areas (areas under the domination of armed force) suffered from the same problems as it did in areas under the control of the regime, if not more. As long as we have not got rid of the regime and we have not disarmed the militias, any democratic action will be limited.

**Permanent Revolution: Do you think there is a chance of holding Geneva 2, for which the Russians are exerting pressure - especially after the developments relating to chemical weapons which the regime used last summer and which have weakened its position in the conflict - to push the conflicting forces to take part? Knowing that this weakness on the part of the regime is concomitant with the sharpening of contradictions among its opponents? What is your opinion on the proposal by some people in the Syrian opposition, about the need, according to them, for a Syrian Taif agreement? [14]**

**Munif Mulhem:** Geneva will take place sooner or later, but we cannot anticipate its success or its failure. Geneva is suspended from the participating parties. While the forces of the revolution are working for Geneva to dissolve the regime, establish a pluralist democratic state and build a modern civil state for all its citizens, without discrimination or exclusion, active international forces (the Russians and the Americans) are taking a first step to get rid of chemical weapons, as an element of the threats to the "state" of Israel, regardless of the state that exists in Syria today or will in the future, and to confront the extremist Islamist forces. And that means them maintaining Assad in power at this stage, on condition of creating the conditions to get rid of Assad subsequently, while keeping his regime.

As for talking about Taif, or comparing Geneva to it to end the conflict in Syria, that is not acceptable. Political

"Maronism" in Lebanon, despite its defects, is less bad than the regime that has existed in Syria for decades [15]. The regime that ruled Lebanon after independence saw the greatest degree of political freedoms, if we compare it to all the regimes in the Arab region, and "political Maronism" was based on control over the workings of the state, considering that it was a state whose institutions were shared out from a religious perspective. In Syria it is very different, the state institutions are cardboard cut-out structures. What significance has a Prime Minister or a President of the Parliament? The revolution is coming, not to share power, but to eradicate a dictatorial regime whose worst achievement was to break the social fabric. A "Syrian Taif" would not bring back the cohesion that was broken by the regime, but would consolidate the situation in different forms. It would be worse than partition, in my opinion.

**Permanent Revolution: Despite all the distortions of the uprising of the Syrian people, we have talked up to now about its multiple forms and manifestations of their leaders, whether in terms of the practices of the existing regime or the practices of groups that are confronting it on the ground. In your answers you use expressions such as "revolution" or "revolutionary forces". Can you clarify exactly what are the "forces of revolution" that you are talking about? Furthermore, what do you think of the forms, even embryonic and persecuted, of self-organization, in areas outside the control of the regime? Is there in your opinion a possibility of them developing, in the service of the revolutionary process in Syria?**

**Munif Mulhem:** I think the main point, on which Syrians were agreed from the beginning of their movement in March 2011 until the end of that year (before the formation of the various Islamic brigades) was that whatever and whoever demanded the fall of the regime and the building of a state of freedom and dignity, a state without discrimination between its citizens, was a force of the revolution. These forces included all the layers,



classes and sections of society, as well as political forces, to differing degrees.

As regards the possibility of building self-organization in areas outside the control of the regime, I said, at a conference I attended in May 2013, that we could not speak of "liberated areas," especially those from which the forces of the regime had been

evacuated. Well, the recent period proves that the expression does not correspond to the reality of these areas. It would be more appropriate to speak of "areas under the control of the armed opposition." The hegemony of armed force over these areas, alongside legitimate structures, makes the question of human rights something whose achievement is difficult. So if respect for human rights is difficult to achieve how could

self-organization of the forces of the revolution be possible? Experiences on the ground, by activists in Raqqa, in the suburbs of Aleppo, in Idleb, in the Ghouta neighbourhood in Damascus, have made it clear that such a project was almost impossible in the presence of the domination of armed forces.

*Interview conducted on 1 December 2013*

## Under Obama, Inequality and Greenhouse Gases Increase in the United States

17 February 2014, by **Barry Sheppard**

First, it has agreed to a new budget with the Republicans that didn't renew benefits for the long-term unemployed. This will immediately impoverish 1.3 million workers. Every day a new batch of the unemployed becomes part of the long-term unemployed.

Even if the unemployment benefits were now somehow enacted (unlikely), Obama was only asking that they be extended for three months. But an extra three months wouldn't make a dent in what has become a hallmark of the weak recovery - the growth of the long term unemployed. Obama's solution? He recently called together a group of CEOs of major corporations and pleaded with them to hire more of the long term unemployed. They promised to think about it.

The new budget restored some of the sharp social spending cuts directly affecting workers that went into effect under the bipartisan "sequester" agreement of last year. But not all, so many of those cuts remain.

Second, a new bipartisan farm bill continues massive subsidies to Big Agriculture, while cutting food aid ("food stamps") for the poorest section of the working class by nearly \$9 billion, coming on top of the sequester cut to the program of \$5 billion, which

was not restored in the new budget. These cuts in already inadequate food aid will hit 1.7 million, many of them children. Black and Latino people will be especially hard hit.

One example: Raymond Garza, who had a good job as a plumber, became disabled a few years ago. On January 29, he had to go to a church charity in Oakland, California, near where I live, for a free bag of food. His food stamp ration of \$176 a month had just run out. "Every day I wake up, I'm struggling to eat," he says. "I got my food stamps on the 10th [of January]. Today's the 29th. I got another ten days before I can go buy some food again."

Before the sequester cuts, his food stamp allotment was \$206 a month. Now it will be cut even below \$176, which is less than \$6 a day for a 30 day month, about enough for one cup of coffee and a pastry at Starbucks.

The new cut was reached in a "compromise" between Republicans who wanted to cut \$39 billion, and Democrats who wanted to cut "only" \$4-5 billion. This shows how politics works in the U.S. today. Republicans make outrageous proposals to impoverish workers, Democrats look good by only wanting to impoverish them less, and then they

"compromise."

Walmart, which caters to working class customers, complained of a loss of revenue in January because the earlier sequester cuts to food stamps meant that poorer workers did not have much money left for anything else.

It was largely the Occupy movement of 2011 that raised public awareness of growing inequality. One movement that has come out of that is a struggle to raise the minimum wage. This has two aspects. One has been strikes and demonstrations at Walmart and fast food outlets for such a wage increase. The other is demonstrations and ballot measures at the city and state levels to raise the minimum wage by law. Some Democrats have supported such efforts, but not all, and the Republicans are opposed.

It's not only the capitalists in the low-wage sector who resist raising the minimum wage, but the owning class as a whole, since raising the minimum wage will have the effect of raising all wages. The present federal minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour, well below its historic level. Obama proposes a minimum wage raise to \$10.10 an hour, still below the historic level. He can make that proposal knowing full well that it cannot pass Congress. The

two-party shell game goes on.

On Obama's promise to reduce carbon emissions, there are two things to note. Shortly after his State of the Union address, a report was issued by the State Department that the proposed X-L pipeline to bring tar sands oil sludge from Canada over 1,000 miles down to the Gulf Coast for refining would have no impact on carbon emissions. The report's reasoning was that even if the pipeline isn't built, the tar sands oil would be sent anyway, by truck or train, so there would be the same effect on carbon emissions if the pipeline was built or not.

The whole process of extracting oil from the tar sands sludge itself adds to pollution in general to the water and air, and to carbon emissions in particular. Tar sands oil is especially dirty. Even after the process of liquefying it so it can be transported, it is so dirty that the refining process produces more pollution. Whether it comes by truck, train or pipeline there will be leaks, fires, and explosions to boot.

The tar sands oil should be left in the ground, and not transported across the U.S. or Canada in any fashion. Obama will not issue such a ban, of course. While it would be a partial victory if Obama is forced not to approve the pipeline, the struggle would have to continue.

Obama's real program was contained in another major portion of his address. There was triumphal boasting that U.S. production of

natural gas and oil had reached new levels, and would continue to expand, due to new technology. That technology is fracking, [16]. although he did not use the word because it has become associated with pollution of water and the triggering of earthquakes. Obama promised greater and greater reliance on and production of fossil fuels - bad news for the environment.

Growing inequality between the capitalists on the one hand, and the wage workers and other producers on the other has accelerated since the Great Recession. But it has been developing over decades, under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

This has resulted from the workings of the capitalist system itself, which is based on the existence and furtherance of inequality. It has been made worse over these decades by the erosion of the labor movement, which has been unable to counter the capitalist offensive against workers, either economically or politically, as it remains tied to the capitalist Democratic Party.

The slow but sure destruction of the environment has also proceeded apace. Obama's boast about new oil and gas production in the U.S. means it has a leg up on its imperialist competitors. Energy costs for industry in the U.S. is 50 percent of what it is in Europe. The imperatives of capitalist competition inexorably drive to increase fossil fuel production and weaken environmental regulations.

Already there is talk in the European Union of cutting back on its regulations.

Multibillionaire Warren Buffet, who sometimes tells the truth, said back in 2006, before the financial collapse, "There's a class war, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." The editors of Monthly Review wrote in January's issue:

"What should the response of the U.S. working class and the working class in the rest of the advanced capitalist world [be]? ....The only possible answer to capital's unlimited decades-long assault on labor is to unleash a class struggle from below in response.

But economic resistance alone is never sufficient; and all the less so in those cases where workers are economically hemmed in as at present. The 'very necessity of general political action,' Marx wrote in *Value, Price and Profit*, 'affords the proof that in its merely economic action capital is the stronger side.'

The revolt of the underlying population therefore must take the form of a general political offensive against what is an unequal and irrational system. If the future of humanity and that of capitalism can be said to have coincided at one time, this is certainly no longer the case today. All reality and all hope demand a new system of production and consumption, beyond capital and beyond mere wage labor."

*February 7, 2014*

## **Economic and Ecological Crisis ?in Greece - The Global Context and Syriza's Solution**

**17 February 2014, by Natassa Romanou**

A second misconception has to do with the impact of the crisis on our societies. Discourse and response typically focus on the economic

impacts alone, where the most immediate emergency is created by rising unemployment, severe wage cuts, and deteriorating conditions and

benefits for the working class. Other attributes of this crisis, however, receive less urgent attention. The societal crisis manifests itself with

growing, uncontrolled consumerism, which leads to overconsumption of natural resources, but also to the emergence of hyper-nationalism and eventually racism as competition for resources becomes tighter. The political crisis reflects a democratic deficit, when growing public discontent and resistance cause abuse of authority, police brutality, and state repression.

Another major side effect of the crisis, however, is the ecological contingency, the frantic race to extract ever more natural resources (oil and gas, but also gold and other precious metals), using increasingly more dangerous methods such as the extraction of oil from tar sands, the search for deep ocean oil and increased gas drilling, and the development of fracking. Massive land grabs and resource privatizations also lead to increasing environmental degradation. Above all, however, climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere appears to be the ultimate triumph of capitalist greed over nature. Human activities such as fossil fuel burning, unsustainable transportation systems, rapacious deforestation driven by overconsumption, unrestrained resource exploitation, and the desire for profit maximization have led to unprecedented levels and rates of global warming that threaten life as we know it on our planet. Capitalism is responsible for climate change and is waging a war against rationalism and science to avoid dealing with it.

The impacts of climate change—perhaps better known as “global warming”—are expected to be huge, particularly in areas such as Southern Europe. Projections show desertification of subtropical zones following significant annual rainfall decreases of 10%-20% and temperature increases of about 3 degrees Celsius. More droughts, water shortages, heat waves, and flash floods will become the norm. Economies, like those of Greece and other coastal countries in Southern Europe, which rely mainly on tourism and fisheries as well as shipping, will be heavily impacted by the projected sea level rise, the changes in the ocean’s chemical balances (acidification), and droughts leading to

soil erosion and forest fires. Given the magnitude of these impacts, which threaten the survival of the system itself, one would expect that societies would readily address global warming and seek mitigation strategies to combat it.

Climate change is not the first ecological challenge that capitalism ever had to face. Smog-related deterioration of air quality became a serious threat to human health in London, Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, as it is in today’s Chinese metropolitan and industrial complexes. The stratospheric ozone depletion in the 1970s and 1980s was attributed to the man-made introduction into the atmosphere of chlorofluorocarbons, artificial substances that were used in refrigerants, aerosol sprays, and chemical solvents. Acid rain is a third example of man-made pollution, resulting from emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide during electricity generation from coal, factories, and motor vehicles ; it has caused widespread ecological damage.

Unlike global warming, these previous occurrences of more localized climate change were addressed quickly and effectively. Legislation such as the Clean Air Act was designed to restrict airborne particle pollution in the United States and succeeded in doing so through a series of amendments that spanned the period from the 1960s to the 1990s. The Montreal Protocol, a UN treaty that aimed to protect the ozone layer by phasing out the production of substances responsible for ozone depletion, was signed in the late 1980s by numerous countries as well as polluting industries, in what is an example of exceptional international cooperation. With regard to acid rain, several regional treaties and protocols were agreed upon to force the polluting industries (mostly coal-fired power plants) to seek and enforce technical solutions that remove sulfur-containing gases from their emissions.

All these measures, and the international cooperation they required, were achieved because the problems (smog, ozone hole, acid rain) were occurring in real time and were

local to the sources of production, endangering business and profits and, coincidentally, the people who lived, worked, and voted in the areas that were polluted. Capitalists were essentially protecting their own businesses by seeking solutions. By contrast, global warming is a more complicated issue. It is a problem created by the greenhouse gases emitted by industrialized countries which are typically northern, developed, and affluent, but it harms most countries in the tropical and subtropical regions (the global South) that make comparatively little contribution to the problem. Moreover, the impacts of global warming, such as desertification, sea level change, water cycle changes, and extreme events such as heat waves, take time to manifest themselves in everyday life, and the most serious impacts are expected in the upcoming decades. There is therefore no local or temporal urgency for the problem to be addressed by those who cause it, primarily the rich countries.

## The Greek Reality

As global warming mostly impacts the low-latitude (Global South) regions of the world, Greece, located at the tropical-subtropical boundary, is one of the few industrialized countries that has the most to lose from climate change ; it also relies heavily on coal for the production of its electricity. So Greece should be at the forefront of climate change mitigation efforts.

Such efforts have to involve energy solutions. Greece imports about 64 percent of the energy it consumes, while the European average is 46 percent. Furthermore, 91 percent of the energy Greece uses comes from fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas), which are among the most damaging energy sources for the environment, and Greece has higher releases of carbon dioxide per capita (8.4 tons) than any other country in the EU and significantly greater than the EU average (7.2 tons). The current government in Greece, serving the neoliberal directives of the Troika (the IMF, the EU Commission, and the European Central Bank) instead of turning towards renewable energy

sources, is planning for more fossil fuel exploitation in the eastern Mediterranean, south of Crete and in the Ionian Sea, through large-scale, privately funded projects and further privatization of existing national energy companies. There are also plans for “green energy” production (solar or wind) on a massive scale, but again under the neoliberal directives : private funding and ownership, and no public control. Such mitigation strategies, together with highly unsuccessful market-based approaches such as carbon emission trading, carbon credits, and carbon markets, or geo-engineering solutions, essentially represent the efforts of the capitalist system to reinvent and save itself. This so-called “Green Capitalism” is a false systemic solution that will eventually lead to the same problems and crises inherent in capitalism today.

## A Radical Left Solution

At the same time, one very encouraging prospect emerges : the spontaneous but powerful environmental movements against extractionism and privatization of natural resources. These movements are based on grass-roots activism with little political affiliation and guidance, self-organized along the frontlines of capitalist expansionism.

New and old lignite-fired power plants have been strenuously opposed in several regions of the country with some success, particularly before the onset of the recent crisis. Privatized waste management plans and new landfills such as in Keratea, a small town 40 kilometers west of Athens, were finally disrupted after the local community united against them, despite an extreme display of state authoritarianism. Other flashpoints of opposition were the privatization of the public water supply company in Thessaloniki and perhaps most notably the anti-gold-mining movements in Skouries, a village in northern Greece, as well as in Milos, a picturesque island in the Aegean Sea. Similar social movements opposing state or private plans to downgrade the environment, public spaces, and

natural resources have occurred globally : in South America, the United States, Canada, and perhaps most powerfully in the massive anti-government demonstrations that spread across Turkey in 2013, ignited by an initially small protest against erecting a shopping mall in a historic park in the heart of Istanbul.

The rise of environmental activism is very encouraging, because it focuses on the degradation of the natural environment, opposes private interests and state oppression, and empowers people to fight for a better quality of life. These movements, however, are not politically conscious and mature, in that they do not frame or even seek the deeper causes that lead to the systemic degradation of the quality of the environment and ultimately of life. They are regional and fragmented both in scope and in regional extent, they lack political leadership and political awareness, and they do not establish connections among themselves on a larger scale—i.e., they do not articulate explicitly the fact that effective global environmental activism and climate change mitigation require limiting overconsumption and abandoning fossil fuels and the associated lifestyles, all of which are in the end threatening capitalism itself.

Unlike other examples worldwide, in Greece a new political power of the progressive left has taken heed of the urgency of the situation and the message of the grass-roots movements. Syriza, a coalition of radical left parties, has been present and an ally in the struggles of local communities against the neoliberal demands for land and resources. Syriza in its programmatic plan advocates ending austerity and reversing the policies that led to more taxes for the middle and lower classes, layoffs, privatizations, and reductions in worker rights and benefits. Syriza has pledged to rebuild and radically transform the economy in a way that is both societally and environmentally balanced and fair.

A decentralized, small-scale, local, community-controlled renewable energy model could then be at the heart of Syriza’s energy proposal. The state’s role would be to coordinate

regional, municipal, and worker-owned energy cooperatives ; to rebuild and maintain a modernized energy distribution grid ; and to oversee price and export regulation. Syriza must commit to phasing out fossil fuels by a certain date, say 2025, which is consistent both with European and international protocols already adopted by Greece and, more importantly, with the ideology of the left and the fight against the exploitation of nature and the degradation of the environment. Syriza must pledge to develop and promote solar, wind, and perhaps geothermal as the primary energy sources, support energy diversification, and aim to achieve energy self-sufficiency for the country. Natural resource exploitation must be carried out judiciously, with public consent and control, while minimizing the impact on the environment. All fast-track decisions made by the present government must be reviewed and reversed, and any regional alliances (for example, those with Russia, Turkey, the United States, and Israel) must be reviewed and appraised against geopolitical gains and costs. The sale of public property and spaces to private interests must be blocked, forests and natural reserves must be protected, and tourism cannot be used any longer as an excuse for ever-expanding development, construction, and privatization of public land. Public dialogue and transparency must be institutionalized, and control should be handed over to the people, the workers, the consumers. Such a model would motivate public participation and provide jobs and a new vision for the country. Greece, given the small extent of its energy requirements compared to other countries in the region and its lack of significant fossil fuel reserves other than coal, could and should try to make this plan work.

In conclusion, the left worldwide, and in particular in Greece, has to make ecology central to its discourse and struggles. Climate change is a global problem but requires local solutions. Syriza must continue to add to the momentum of the activist movements in Greece, gain from them, and help them grow into a resistance movement and a political force. As more people participate and connect the pieces of

the puzzle, i.e., local ecological catastrophes, to the larger picture, i.e. climate change and capitalism, the

political awareness of these ecological movements will be awakened and will be successfully expressed through the left.

[New Politics, Winter 2014 Vol:XIV-4 Whole # : 56 :](#)

# Reproductive Rights Assaulted

**16 February 2014, by Dianne Feeley**

The next day she returned with painful contractions, bleeding and elevated temperature. She was given two Tylenols and, after her temperature went down, sent home.

Later that night, in excruciating pain, she returned for the third time. Once again she was told nothing could be done.

As staff prepared the papers for her discharge, she began to deliver. Only then did they deal with her miscarriage. She gave birth to a premature son, who died shortly afterward. Her medical records show that once her water broke the previous day, infection had set in.

As a Catholic hospital, Mercy Health Partners adheres to the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services." Under that U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' directive, "Abortion...is never permitted. Every procedure whose sole immediate effect is the termination of pregnancy before viability is an abortion."

Means was never informed of any option: "They didn't tell me what was happening to my body. Whatever was going on with me, they discussed it amongst themselves. I was just left to wonder, 'What's going to happen to me?'"

Yet this is a teaching hospital, the second largest health care organization in western Michigan, and the only hospital in the county. How can religious directives dictate medical care?

One out of every nine U.S. hospital beds is in a Catholic hospital,

governed by a document that guides various medical practices, including reproductive health issues. Some of its dictates contravene standard practice. For example, although the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 88% of all women of reproductive age use some form of contraception, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 43-page guide requires hospital personnel to remain silent regarding contraception information.

Tamesha Means survived to initiate a suit with the aid of the American Civil Liberties Union in federal court against the U.S. Conference of Bishops for a policy directive that denied her emergency medical care. But Means is certainly not the only woman in America kept in the dark about the need to terminate her pregnancy.

Given that between 10-20% of all diagnosed pregnancies end in miscarriages, the unwillingness of Catholic hospitals to take appropriate and immediate steps to end a pregnancy endangers women's lives. Women may face loss of blood, infection, the end to fertility or even death.

Of the seven million U.S. women who become pregnant each year, one million will have an abortion. About 70% will pay for their abortion out of pocket. The procedure costs somewhere between \$300-\$1700, depending on how early it is performed. (Throughout the country there are formal and informal networks of women who contribute to funding poor women's abortions.)

How do the number of abortions today

compare to the past? Before abortion was legalized in 1973, it was estimated that there were between 200,000 and 1.2 million procedures each year. Abortions peaked in 1996 at 1.6 million and have declined ever since. The percentage of pregnancies that end in abortion has also dropped, from a high of 30% in 1979-86 to half that today.

Yet more than 40 years after abortion in the United States became legal, both federal and state legislation limit women's access. And women with the fewest resources have the least access. Certainly the 1976 passage of the federal Hyde Amendment, which denies women on Medicaid abortion except in cases of rape, incest or a life-threatening condition, made that clear.

This article focuses on the continuing assault on reproductive justice in 2013, particularly at the hands of state legislators. Twenty-two states passed 70 new restrictions, adding to the more than 135 passed in 2011 and 2012. (See "Reproductive Justice Needed!" [ATC 163, March/April 2013](#).) Dominant were restrictions on providers, bans on abortion after 20-22 weeks of pregnancy and outlawing contraception or abortion coverage in various insurance plans.

## Fights Under "Obamacare"

One positive regulation which emerged over the last few years is the federal Affordable Care Act's mandate that private health insurers provide contraceptive coverage at no out-of-pocket expense.



Religious nonprofits had objected to this provision and were granted an exception. Nonetheless The Little Sisters of the Poor, Catholic nuns, requested an emergency stay of its implementation; U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued a temporary stay at the end of 2013. In fact the nuns would only have to request an exemption, but they object to doing even that.

Additionally several employers demanded the same exception, citing personal objections. By the fall of 2013 eighteen for-profit companies had filed petitions for waivers in federal court, including Domino Farms, whose CEO, the ultraconservative Catholic ideologue Tom Monaghan, has described all contraceptives as “gravely immoral.”

At the end of November the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear two cases: *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores* and *Conestoga Wood Specialties v. Sebelius*. Both claim they are willing to offer insurance plans that cover some types of contraceptives, but not what they consider “abortifacients.” *Conestoga* objects to offering emergency contraceptives, while *Hobby Lobby* also objects to the use of intrauterine devices.

Despite this one regulation, and more talk of funding day care, the assault on women’s access to a range of reproductive rights continues. Twenty-three states have banned insurance coverage for most abortion services under an opt-out provision of the ACA. They claim this is needed since the basic health plans sold on the health care exchanges will be subsidized by taxes.

In December 2013 the Michigan legislature went further, passing an initiative submitted by Right to Life of Michigan that requires women who want abortion coverage under their insurance policy to purchase it as a rider to their regular policy. The Michigan law contains no exceptions and will go into effect in March 2014.

The National Women’s Law Center, which advocates for women, researched how many people bought riders in those states where the law was already in effect, and came up

empty handed. “There are no statistics because they don’t exist,” reported Gretchen Borchelt, the center’s state reproductive health policies director. Even North Dakota, which has had such a law since 1979, could not point to any abortion rider.

## New Restrictive Legislation

Twenty-seven states have at least four different restrictions on abortion. These govern the majority of all U.S. women.

Historically hospitals have been reluctant to provide abortion facilities, so clinics have taken up that task. However the current assault against women saddles them with unnecessary regulations.

Fewer than 0.3% of all abortions require hospitalization, so the idea that clinics should meet the same standards isn’t logical. Yet 13 states now demand that clinics have hospital-sized rooms and corridors.

Virginia’s law prescribes the number of covered entrances and parking lots. Fourteen require affiliation with a local hospital, although Ohio, which previously had that law, reversed itself and now forbids such a relationship. Eight states, including Alabama, Indiana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin passed clinic regulations in 2013.

While ultrasounds are not medically necessary for first-trimester abortions, several states have passed legislation requiring the procedure for all abortions. Early in the woman’s pregnancy the ultrasound probe must be administered vaginally “a procedure that meets the legal definition of rape. Such an unnecessary and humiliating requirement is an attempt to sway the woman into continuing her pregnancy. Last year Indiana and Wisconsin passed this law, bringing the number of states requiring ultrasounds to 10.

Since the 1980s some states and the Veterans’ Administration have used long-distance medical conferencing in

rural areas. Five years ago Planned Parenthood began using this method for the “morning after” pill, which has a 92-95% success rate if taken as directed within the first two months of pregnancy.

A woman seeking an early abortion could come to a clinic where a nurse would take her information, which would be passed on to a doctor. With the nurse present, the doctor would teleconference with the patient. At the end of the process the doctor would press a button to open a drawer where there were two medications. The woman would then take the first and use the second two days later, as directed.

Returning to the clinic two weeks later, she would have a follow-up appointment. In case of a problem, she was to report directly to a hospital.

Although telemedicine had never before been challenged by a state legislature, the idea that rural women would have access to abortion rubbed legislators the wrong way. In 2012 Michigan outlawed teleconferencing for abortions “a serious attack in a state where 22 out of 83 counties have no practicing OB/GYN.

Alabama, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin banned teleconferencing for this procedure the following year.

Unsuccessful at stripping Planned Parenthood of funding at the federal level, the right has also been successful in getting 10 states to restrict or ban clinics that offer abortion counseling or abortions.

Along with passing these restrictions, the right wing is now directly challenging the flawed *Roe v. Wade* decision. The January 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling overturned laws outlawing abortion and established a trimester approach. During the first trimester, the court ruled, a woman and her doctor were in the driver’s seat. But during the second and third stage the state assumed more control, particularly so after fetal viability in the final trimester.

However, even in the third trimester,

laws were to function to preserve the life and health of the woman and empower her physician to make medical decisions without other physicians having to confirm them.

Much subsequent legislation simply disregards these criteria. In fact, that decision has already been weakened by the 1992 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, where “undue” restrictions were permitted. These included parental consent, 24-hour waiting periods between consultation and the procedure, and mandating counseling. Twenty-six states have enacted a waiting period, 39 have parental consent laws and 17 mandate counseling that functions to scare women by providing misinformation: five states require that the woman be told abortion leads to elevated rates of breast cancer, eight maintain there may be mental consequences, 12 insist that, if aborted, the fetus suffers pain.

All these restrictions fall more heavily on poorer women. They also perpetuate violence: women are ordered to follow rules about what they can and cannot do. They reinforce the power a partner might be able to exert over the woman, forcing her to stop taking the contraceptives she needs to control her fertility, forcing her to bear children she can't nurture, forcing her to remain in a relationship that destroys her self-confidence.

## Death by A Thousand Cuts

Those who oppose abortion understand that most people believe that women must have a degree of autonomy over our own bodies. There is majority support for contraception and abortion being legal and available.

Instead of a frontal assault against all abortion, the right wing attempts to carve out space where people are invited to judge the pregnant woman, and decide whether her reason is “good enough.”

Through this method they seek to roll back a medical procedure by a thousand cuts. The right has been

most successful in three areas: reducing abortion and contraceptive access to women on Medicaid, limiting access to young women through the passage of parental consent laws, and failing women who do not live in urban centers.

The most rabid rightwingers now dare to question whether women who have been raped were really raped. In the summer of 2012 Todd Akin, then Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate from Missouri, answering a question in a TV interview about allowing abortions in the case of rape, stated that “If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.”

A firestorm broke out over this ridiculous remark. But the remark represents the far side of what the right is attempting to do in their demand that laws judge women who dare to seek abortion.

Over the course of the years since the *Roe v. Wade* decision, state legislatures have proved helpful to the right, and have seen themselves amply rewarded. Especially since the rise of the Tea Party, many politicians have followed their instinct for self-preservation by escalating the attack on reproductive rights.

The right has also been successful in setting up a network of “alternative” clinics, usually called Crisis Pregnancy Centers. These are usually situated near to clinics that offer a range of reproductive services “but their alternative is to scare and dissuade a woman from seeking an abortion.

They have been most successful limiting late-term abortions. One might think, “Well that's not so bad, after all 91% of all women obtaining abortion do so within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, 99% before 21 weeks. Maybe if you are pregnant that long, you should just complete the pregnancy.”

Of course, that erases the problems of incomplete miscarriages and fetal abnormalities “the reasons for most late abortions!

Fetal testing for major birth defects is performed around 18 weeks following

the woman's last menstruation. That's when testing can reveal hydrocephalus (water on the brain), anencephaly (severe brain malformations), major heart defects, missing organs and limbs, etc. This represents about 2% of all pregnancies, with another half a percent having a chromosomal defect, such as an extra or missing DNA segment. These raise emotional and health issues women would want to examine.

Yet in these complicated situations, legislators dare to consider themselves better equipped to make decisions than the woman herself. This is codified in federal legislation the right has termed “partial birth abortion.” A law signed by president George W. Bush in 2003 outlaws certain medical procedures “maintaining that they are outside the law even when they might be the best option for the woman to end a late pregnancy. Nineteen states have similar laws.

In 2013 Arkansas, North Dakota and Texas joined Alabama, Arizona, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Nebraska, North Carolina and Oklahoma in banning most abortion after 20-22 weeks. While the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling allows some restrictions on second trimester abortion, clearly these are direct challenges to *Roe*.

Last year Colorado repealed its pre-*Roe* law in believing the time is right to challenge *Roe v. Wade*. Louisiana, Mississippi, North Dakota and South Dakota legislatures have announced that if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned, they would move to ban abortion outright. Eight others promise to restrict abortion to the maximum extent of the law.

Additionally 12 states have pre-*Roe* bans that remain on the books for resurrection (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Vermont, West Virginia and Wisconsin) while only seven permit abortion before viability. What Next?

In 1994 Congress passed and president Clinton signed into law the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances

(FACE), which prohibits property damage, physical obstruction or threat of force against clinics.

This was passed after the firebombing and blockades of clinics and the murders of several physicians who performed abortions. (Dr. David Gunn had been killed just the previous year in front of a Florida clinic.) The law specifically exempts picketing, chanting and passing out leaflets in an attempt to draw a line between protest and harassment.

A few states subsequently passed legislation against blocking entrances or threatening and intimidating staff and patients. Half a dozen have “bubble zones” of a specific distance in order to protect patients from protestors. I expect the right will launch suits against these laws in the coming year (a Massachusetts law is now in the courts under a “free speech” challenge.)

After the passage of state laws that are clearly thumbing their noses at both the Affordable Care Act and *Roe v. Wade*, these will wind their way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Does this mean that the political elites have joined the right wing to drive women back into their homes, leaving us pregnant and barefoot?

I don't believe that's possible. It fits neither what late capitalism needs, nor what women will tolerate. But how far can the two cooperate? How much can the right to reproductive justice be gutted in practice?

From the point of view of women, the large majority of whom are working

class, and our allies, the fight for reproductive rights seems more integral to the other political, economic and environmental issues than ever before.

Indeed, every mobilization in defense of reproductive justice is large and diverse. Despite decades of right-wing propaganda, the majority of people consistently support contraception, abortion and the right of women to make the decisions regarding our bodies. Whenever women tell our stories, the complexity of our lives and our struggle for justice is overwhelming.

However, the organizations that represent women, whether unions or nonprofits, remain in a defensive mode. They celebrate the defeat of each horrendous law – such as Albuquerque voters' 2013 rejection of a referendum that would ban abortions after 20 weeks – but do not call for national mobilizations. If we compare the women's rights campaigns with those of the LGBT community, we see how much further ahead the LGBT struggle has moved.

Capital needs to continue to repress working people, but doesn't want to face a social explosion. I don't predict the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, but without a sustained counter offensive, there will be a continued assault that narrows the ground for reproductive justice.

The reality is that the women's movement that fought for abortion rights did not demand a trimester approach, but an integrated view of our reproductive rights. It called for

free, 24-hour quality childcare, for free abortion when needed, for an end to sterilization abuse and for the development of safe contraceptives.

Today that program needs refashioning to include a reduction in the work day, so that we can all participate in the raising of the next generation and caring for the older one – and to call for meaningful and environmentally appropriate work at a living wage.

#### Resources:

Detroit News,

Guttmacher Institute  
<http://www.guttmacher.org/>,

National Women's Law Center  
<http://www.nwlc.org/our-issues/heal...>,

SisterSong <http://www.sistersong.net/>.

For information about Catholic hospitals, see The National Women's Law Center, in their 2011 study, “Below the Radar: Health Care Providers' Religious Refusals Can Endanger Pregnant Women's Lives and Health,” which documents this problem:

<http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/f...> and “Miscarriage of Medicine: The Growth of Catholic Hospitals and the Threat to Reproductive Health Care,” by Lois Uttley & Sheila Reynertson of the MergerWatch Project and Lorraine Kenny & Louise Melling of the ACLU: <https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/g...>

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## New faces, same austerity

16 February 2014, by **Dave Kellaway**

Renzi, who openly sees himself as the Italian Tony Blair, will renew the coalition government with the different wings of the right – Alfano's New Centre Right (NCD) which split from Berlusconi, who has since

refounded his Forza Italia (FI) party, and Monti's small Civic Choice (SC) group.

Renzi talks a lot of rhetoric about a new phase, decisiveness and a

constituent legislature until 2018 that will reshape Italy and bring it out of the crisis. However a key element in his decision to move now, when only weeks ago he was telling Letta publicly to relax and carry on, was the

convivial and very old-style ‘bosses’ meeting he held with Berlusconi to stitch up a new electoral law. Renzi had no complexes about validating the political importance of a man who is a convicted criminal and banned from public office. This means that a Renzi government will benefit from a non-aggression pact from the Berlusconi MPs and so will retain a majority. Napolitano, as always expertly representing the interests of the dominant sectors of the Italian ruling class, does not want elections but rather a continuity that will allow the austerity programme to continue without any democratic accountability. Despite benefiting from the adulation of the media and having an inflated belief in his own electoral attractiveness, Renzi is clever enough to know that elections now are a risky business after the earthquake that put 120 M5S (Five Star Movement – Beppe Grillo’s supporters) MPs into parliament last time. Of course he also needs the legislative time to make sure the new electoral law is implemented. That will make it much harder for parties like M5S or any other more left wing or critical current to get represented. It aims to establish a more stable two party alternating political system.

On the other hand leading a government in the present crisis is not necessarily going to increase his electoral appeal – look what happened to both Monti and Letta. Renzi cannot completely rely on Berlusconi or other right of centre forces sticking to their side of the bargain until 2018. Social struggles may erupt. Then there is the unknown trajectory of support for Grillo and the M5S movement. He has deliberately adopted some similar rhetoric as the latter when he emphasises the need to scrap all the older political generation who have ‘put Italy into such a mess’. His nickname is indeed the ‘scrap merchant’. Renzi believes he can appeal to the younger demographic that is supporting Grillo.

In the real world beneath all the machiavellian manoeuvring the harsh consequences of the cross party coalition are there for everyone to see. Official unemployment is 5 percentage points worse than in Britain at 14% with youth unemployment at around

40%. Despite all the cuts in public spending, pensions and wages the deficit is still £1.6 trillion. Every friend I talked to last week in Italy had a younger son, daughter or relative who was desperately seeking something, anything to get a start in the world of work. Many were leaving the country. Teachers have forgotten the last time they actually had a pay rise and several old friends were lamenting the extra years they were having to work to get their reduced pensions. If my relative’s shop is anything to go by most small businesses which do not go bankrupt are just surviving with growing debts and through not paying a wage to themselves. It was announced that Electrolux in Italy had given an ultimatum to their workers to accept a near halving of their salaries if they wanted to keep their jobs. There are over 120 workplaces that are threatened with closure where the government, bosses and unions are in negotiations – normally over the ‘cassa integrazione’ (around 75% of basic rate wages paid for a year or more) deals that can be won but which are being increasingly restricted. Italy is experiencing the sort of de-industrialisation that Britain saw under Thatcher with the similar negative fall out on the combativity of the unions.

Given the union leaderships’ close links with government parties, particularly the PD, we have seen very little organised resistance to austerity – the odd orchestrated demonstration. Worst there has been a concerted attempt to limit and control which unions and which policies workers can freely vote for in the workplaces. The CGIL union, which is the biggest and is closest to the PD, did a deal 6 months ago with the government, bosses and other unions to ensure all negotiations go through their alliance making it hard for dissident, more combative union branches particularly in the FIOM metalworkers union to represent workers. The model for this was in FIAT where massive restructuring, accepted by the CGIL and others, has been achieved and the FIOM sections have been regularly excluded from the right to represent groups of workers. Debate inside the CGIL at recent congresses has become very heated and Stalinist reflexes are

back in town as left activists like Cremaschi who head up an opposition to Camusso’s moderate CGIL leadership have been prevented physically, at times physically, from speaking or intervening in meetings. A left wing CGIL NEC member, Fabrizio Burattini, is being currently witch hunted by the Camusso leadership for expressing dissent. Ironically the reward for agreeing to FIAT’s restructuring has been the usual tax avoidance set up where the headquarters have been transferred to Holland where corporation tax is lower. The government is happy to allow FIAT to avoid taxes while increasing the tax burden on the ordinary voter.

What about the opposition to the government? At least in parliament the M5S has been the main expression of this. They reject Renzi and have denounced the recent taxpayer bailout of the Italian national bank and the anti-democratic electoral law. Moreover they have taken some direct action in parliament – blocking committee work by occupying corridors and making scenes in the chamber. Their reasonable argument is that the new laws are being rushed through parliament through the guillotine procedure and this is anti-democratic. Nearly everyone has denounced these tactics. PD spokespeople have called them squadist or fascistic – conveniently forgetting the similar protests their forebears made in the 1950s against analogous electoral stitchups (la legge truffa). Unfortunately the M5S does not help their case when one of their people made unacceptable sexist comments aimed at Boldrini, the female speaker of the house, during the fracas which was amplified by disgusting sexist content (shortly later removed) on their website. This allowed the PD and others to cover up their anti-democratic actions in the house. Most people I talked to, on the days these events happened supported the fuss the M5S were making but did not agree with the sexism – these people included left activists and working class trade unionists. However the actions betray the limits of the M5S who paradoxically increase illusions that politics and the real decisions are made in parliament or that the constitution is some sort of

shield against these reactionary governments. The Grillo people really think that the solution to nearly everything is to clear out the old parties from parliament and establish a cleaned up one, with their new majority via a transparent direct internet based link. Hence, despite supporting the No-TAV campaign (anti-high speed train link in Piedmont) and some workers struggles like the recent transport struggle in Genoa, their attitude to the trade unions is to lump them as institutions into the same bag as the corrupt political parties. A further difficulty is the unclear messages they send out on migrant workers. On the one hand the parliamentary group and the online vote went against Grillo's ambiguity on the question and supported rights for migrants born in Italy but on the other hand individual representatives come out with racist statements without being censured. It does not provide a coherent alternative for working people so it could find further progress more difficult, particularly if Renzi can prise away some of its electoral base. Nevertheless the media and mainstream parties' frequent announcements that the M5S is a busted flush is wishful thinking. If Renzi hits trouble they could still benefit from many Italians' extreme alienation from the political caste.

Is there any opposition to Renzi inside the PD? He won the national leadership meeting 136 to 16. Civiati's and Cuperlo's groups opposed him although some walked out or abstained. Renzi does not take prisoner and Cuperlo was recently roundly attacked in a leadership meeting and resigned in protest. It was said that although Renzi won a massive majority in the primary elections where millions of vote he did not win a majority of the activists in branch meetings. However the left inside the PD generally rolls over and takes it so it is unlikely that there will be any split. Individual resignations are taking place - I talked to one whom had been loyal for many, many years who just could not stomach Renzi. The meeting with the criminal

Berlusconi was the last straw. In any case Renzi wants an American style party where he is free to make the decisions without an activist base and real party democracy.

As for the left of PD forces there is still much disarray and weakness. Indeed the very success of the M5S is due in part to the implosion of Rifondazione which regrouped nearly all the radical left. Nichi Vendola's SEL (Socialism, Ecology and Liberty) party, which saved its apparatus by hitching itself to the coat tails of the PD in the last elections and winning dozens of MPs, is confronted with a new dilemma. Already it is embarrassed by the fact that the Boldrini, the speaker, responsible for using the anti-democratic guillotine, is a SEL member. Now it has the Renzi problem. They could make a (weak) case that the previous PD leadership at election time was to the left of Renzi although it had fully supported the Monti government. Today it would have to tie itself to the Italian Blair. The first statement from Vendola said that he opposed a Renzi government. Whether he will really lead his party towards links with an independent opposition remains to be seen. The new electoral law will make it even more difficult to get MPs if you are not within a coalition (and even then the threshold has been raised). SEL has blocked with the M5S on some issues in parliament but has all sorts of compromises with the PD and its left in local government and in the CGIL which makes it unlikely that it will really build a left alternative

A group of left intellectuals who were close to the Ingroia slate in the last elections have launched an appeal to support a list in the European elections headed by Syriza's Tsipras which would have an anti-austerity line. The SEL and remainder of Rifondazione are supporting this and there is a good chance that the slate will be made. However just as with Ingroia's previous slate there is still to some degree a sense in which this is still a pressure group on the left of the PD to push it to the left or an abstract

campaign in defence of the constitution and democracy rather than something that will lead to the development of a fighting alternative. Nevertheless it may well be that this will be the only way of expressing something of an anti-austerity, anti-government vote.

Apart from this there is the attempt to build a political alternative called Rossa based on the left opposition in the unions, the social movements and other small left currents. Cremaschi is the most well know figure leading this. There has been a national meeting of 600 or so members but it is still early days. Other independent left currents involved in projects such as Communia are more sceptical of this and suggest, given the state of things, that the main priority is to build the independent left networks through the movements rather than recreate another 'traditional' Rifondazione type regroupment. Last October there was a weekend of national mobilisations bringing together tens of thousands of activists through the COBAS, independent unions and social movements that was organised by both these left currents so there is an audience for a clear political alternative to the PD. To some degree the debate we have in Britain between Left Unity and currents in the Labour Party is similar to discussions between the currents we have discussed above.

The press in the UK have joined in the uncritical acclaim for Italy's next young hope - there is even an admiring editorial in today's Guardian. We should be clear that just like Blair he is the enemy of working people and will pursue even more rapid austerity policies. Unfettered with any traditional links with the trade unions, having come from the Christian Democrat wing of the PD, he has already stated that his policies were not going to be constrained in any way at all by the trade unions.

*15th February 2014*

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# What remains of the Arab Spring?

14 February 2014, by **Gilbert Achcar**

Let us start with this latter argument. The idea that the deeply iniquitous and despotic old order was a bulwark against "Islamic extremism" is as foolish as the belief that alcoholism is a prophylactic against liver disease! The manifestations of religious extremism that we see here or there are but symptoms of a trend that has been at work for decades, a trend produced both directly and indirectly by the same regional order that imploded in 2011.

Let us take Syria for example. It is obvious that the transformation of the armed forces by Hafez el-Assad into a Praetorian guard of the regime, based on minority religious sectarianism, was likely to feed sectarian rancours within the majority. Let us imagine that the Egyptian president were Coptic Christian, that his family dominated the economy of the country, that three-quarters of the officers of the Egyptian army were also Coptic and that the elite corps of the Egyptian army were close to one hundred per cent Coptic. Would one be astonished to see "Muslim extremism" thriving in Egypt? Yet the proportion of Alawites in Syria is comparable with that of Copts in Egypt, that is to say approximately one tenth of the population.

Besides, only poorly informed people are unaware of the fact that Bashar al-Assad's regime deliberately fed Syrian Sunni jihadism, by facilitating its intervention in Iraq at the time of the U.S. occupation as well as by releasing its militants from Syrian prisons in 2011, at the very moment when the regime was brutally repressing and arresting thousands of democrats of the Syrian uprising.

The proliferation of

ultrafundamentalists in the Middle East is actually the direct product of the disastrous heritage of the rival Baathist dictatorships of Syria and Iraq, combined with the no less disastrous effect of the American occupation of the latter and the fierce competition that has pitted against each other the two rival bastions of regional Islamic fundamentalism: the Wahhabi Saudi kingdom and the Khomeinist Iranian republic. As one might expect, this proliferation is in full flow given the deep destabilization that naturally and inevitably accompanies any political rising. When an abscess is punctured, the pus escapes from it. It is quite silly to believe that it would have been better to keep the abscess.

Let us now return to the question we started with: what remains of the Arab Spring? The answer is straightforward: the regional revolutionary process is still only at its beginning. It will take many years, nay several decades, before the shock wave that sprang out of the depths of the irremediably corrupt regional order leads to a new stabilization of Arab societies. And this is indeed why the expression "Arab Spring" was mistaken from the outset: it was inspired by sweet illusion that the regional uprising was driven only by a thirst for democracy that could be quenched by free elections.

To believe this, one must ignore the fact that the mainspring of the 2011 explosion is socio-economic: this mainspring is decades of blockage of regional development, resulting in record rates of unemployment – in particular among young people and graduates. The corollary of this observation is that the revolutionary

process that began in 2011 will end only when a solution is brought forward that makes it possible to come out of the socio-economic dead end – a solution which could be progressive as well as regressive, of course, because the best is never certain, alas, but no more than the worst is certain!

This is indeed why the "Islamist winter" in Tunisia and Egypt, in which the doomsayers hastened to see the final result of the process for these two countries, proved so brief. The failure of the Nahda and the Muslim Brotherhood governments was determined above all by their inability to find the slightest solution to the socio-economic problems in a context of worsening unemployment. This failure was foreseeable, and it was foreseen. Likewise, one can today predict that the restoration of the ancien régime implemented by General Sissi in Cairo will fail for the same reason, the same causes producing the same effects and similar economic policies leading to similar results.

For the Arab uprising to lead to a true modernization of Arab societies, new leaderships embodying the progressive aspirations of the millions of young people who rose up in 2011 will need to emerge and impose themselves. It is only on this condition that the revolutionary process will clear its own original path, equally distant from both the ancien régime and the reactionary oppositions that the ancien régime itself generated.

February 2014

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from "*Que reste-t-il du Printemps arabe??*" in **L'Orient Littéraire**.

# Dualities of Latin America

13 February 2014, by **Claudio Katz**

## I. Economy and Class

The evolution of South America offers many arguments for theses of autonomy and the course of Central America does the same for the diagnosis of dependency. The same contrast applies if we generalize the trajectories taken by Venezuela or Mexico. The new margins of independence of the region are relevant when the accent is put on the geopolitical dimension, while the peripheral reintegration leaps to the eye when economic evaluation is prioritized.

"Pos-liberalism" and "Consensus of commodities" are two concepts that synthesize both visions. The first notion notes the emergence of a new stage marked by independent foreign policy, the multiplication of progressive governments and the regression of the right [17]. The second term emphasizes the uniform reinforcing of models centred on the export of primary goods [18].

Which is the correct characterization? The answer requires evaluating the great economic, social and political transformations registered in the region over the last two decades.

## AGRO-EXPORT AND MINING

Neoliberal restructuring in Latin America strengthened from the 1980s a pattern of export specialization that recreated the international insertion of the region as a basic product supplier. This renewed weight of commodities implied a deep transformation in agriculture, based on the promotion of cultivation for export and the decline of local supplies. In all countries a business

model was reinforced that runs rural businesses with capitalist criteria of intensive accumulation. The old oligarchy headed this reconversion, in close association with the big companies of "agro-business".

The small producers must put up with increased inputs, greater competitive pressure and increasing transfer of risks, through contracts moulded to the rules of export. They must adapt their activity to new requirements of refrigeration, transport and agro-chemical inputs, to generate products moulded to global marketing. Frequently they become indebted, sell the land and end up joining the masses who emigrate to the cities.

This pressure to increase yields undermines the remainders of non-capitalist agriculture and dilutes the old discussions on the articulation of distinct modes of production in this sector. Under the discipline imposed by external demand the borders between the primary and secondary sector are reduced and the weight of wage labour with Taylorist modalities is extended.

Soya is a typical example of this new agricultural scheme. It has spread in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, destroying other cultures, by means of a genetically modified model of direct sowing and dependency on Monsanto as seed supplier. As it requires little labour power to produce oil or animal foods, each 100-500 hectares generates only one job [19].

But the same transformation can be seen in other regions and products. The fruits and wines of Chile are grown with new parameters of external sale, increasing rural concentration and the sub-contracting of temporary workers. Flowers in Ecuador and Colombia are cultivated with intensive techniques of irrigation and high exploitation of female manual labour, displacing traditional

nutritional production. The new winter vegetables in the plantations of Central America are exported at the cost of traditional production and they are already generating a dramatic increase in basic food imports [20].

This same specialization in primary exports is seen in mining with the new mode of open cast operations. In order to extract minerals mountains are dynamited and the rocks are dissolved by means of chemical compounds (fracking). As these techniques replacing the old pits require greater investment the presence of foreign companies, which obtain many tax breaks, has increased. Canadian companies - together with Australian, Belgian, Swedish and American firms - control most of these undertakings.

Chile is a paradise of this activity. Copper is no longer extracted only by the state-owned CODELCO. Other companies also participate, paying low taxes (7.8%) and obtaining high yields (50%). The same is true in Peru, which is developing an extractive project of gigantic scope in the region of Conga [21].

This mining uses enormous volumes of water which affects agricultural enterprises and increases contamination. This reinforces the environmental disasters which are affecting the region in the face of the melting of the Andean glaciers, the deforestation of the Amazon basin and coastal flooding. Export-oriented extraction accentuates all the effects of climate change [22].

## INDUSTRIAL REGRESSION

Industrial decline is the other face of the agro-mining boom. The weight of the secondary sector in Latin American GDP has fallen from 12.7% (1970-74) to 6.4% (2002-06) and the

gap with Asian industry has widened in production, productivity, technology, registry of patents and research and development expenditure [23].

This backward movement is frequently identified with the “re-primarisation” of the Latin American economy. But industry has not disappeared and it would be more accurate to point to its readjustment to a new dependent reproductive cycle. The development is very evident in Brazil and Argentina, the two most representative economies of post-war industrialization.

In Brazil productivity has fallen, costs have increased and the external industrial deficit has expanded, in a context of stagnant investment and much deteriorated infrastructures of energy and transport. Some analysts consider that the Brazilian industrial apparatus has been reduced to half the size it attained in the 1980s [24].

The same regression is seen in Argentine industry, despite the recovery registered in the last decade. This sector occupies a smaller place than in the 1980s (from 23% to 17% of GDP) and is highly concentrated in five sectors, with foreign predominance, increasing imports and low integration of national components.

In Mexico, traditional industry - built through the substitution of imports to supply the local market - has been replaced by the rise of the maquilas in the free trade zones. This type of factory prioritises export and operates through networks adapted to the norms of flexible accumulation. They began with clothing and electronics, then expanded to cars, and they already represent 20% of Mexican GDP. The emblematic location of this model is the US border. The 50 initial plants in 1965 grew to 3000 factories by 2004, located on both sides of the border zone.

Developing as assemblers with lowly qualified labour, these factories contain many characteristics of the basic specialization that affects the whole Latin American economy. Its main input is the cheapness of labour power. The companies recruit workers

of rural origin and criminalize unions. Whereas productivity is similar to the levels in the parent companies, wages are several times lower than the average US level and they are below the Mexican unionized sector.

This cementing of the model in labour exploitation is more visible in the new generation of companies located in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala or Honduras. There they contract young people subjected to an exhausting discipline. The pressure to increase productivity is permanently recreated by Asian competition.

## REMITTANCES AND TOURISM

The model of specialization in basic exports creates few jobs, accentuates emigration and has generated in the small countries of the region a new type of dependency around remittances. Latin America is the major recipient of these funds, which constitute the main income of the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica and Nicaragua. These transfers are the second biggest source of foreign currency for Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Surinam. They have replaced the primacy of coffee in El Salvador and bananas in Honduras [25].

With remittances an unprecedented dual situation is established of income produced in one country and consumed in another. Labour power remunerated at one point is responsible for the reproduction of its peers in another zone. Global communication and the reduction in price of transport have created a stable multinational space of people who live at the same time in two worlds, since the connection of immigrants with their locality of origin stays, forging a double pattern of life in certain communities [26]. This process powers the fracture between countries that export surplus population and economies which absorb that flow selectively. The movements are multidirectional, but the regions abandoned and the destinations sought are always the same, as shown by the 30 million

Latinos currently residing in the United States.

Also tourism has become essential for the survival of the small countries of the region. This service has already displaced bananas as the main export of Costa Rica and is the second biggest activity for Honduras, Guatemala and the Caribbean. Based on the standardization of services, Latin América has become attractive for its readily available cheap labour, its auspicious natural environment and its rich cultural patrimony.

Neoliberal capitalism has replaced the old rules of social tourism by individualistic criteria, that naturalize the division between rich (with the right to leisure) and poor (with obligation to serve). The mass media heighten the attraction of the exotic, homogenizing culture and turning the Third World into a “periphery of pleasure”. The middle-class accedes to these new experiences internalizing the myths of free trade, without registering the increasing inequality that surrounds this business. In reviving racism and elitism, global tourism has a very significant ideological impact.

## PERSISTENCE OF THE MODEL

Neoliberal globalization has reconverted Latin America into an economy with high centrality of agro-export, mining and services, at the cost of industrial development. But most evident is the continuity of tendencies in the recent period of global crisis.

This persistence reflects the intermediate effect of the worldwide financial tremor on the region. Both in the period prior to the crisis (2003-2008) and in the later phase (2008-2013), the Latin American rate of growth has been above the international average. That average has declined in recent years without becoming derisory. It went up to around 3.2% in 2013 as opposed to 3% in the previous year [27].

In comparison to the devastating collapses undergone between 1980

and 2003, the crisis has until now had a limited effect on Latin America. Neither bank collapses nor explosions of the external debt have taken place. This neutralization was more significant in the south than in the centre of the region, but the region has not experienced the strong recession registered in the central countries.

The contrast with the depression of the 1930s is illustrative. During that collapse Latin American exports declined by 65% and imports by 37%, whereas most countries underwent a financial decline, that forced them to suspend payment of the external debt. That fall was reversed with the increase in exports and the accumulation of reserves that accompanied World War II [28].

The continuity of the pattern of export specialization also has been facilitated by the high level of prices maintained by commodities. Prices fell in 2008, but they recovered quickly. An improvement of the terms of inter-trade has subsisted, with the tripling of prices of raw materials registered in the last decade. Oil has doubled in price, while copper has quintupled and soya has risen by a factor of 2.5. This appreciation stimulated an increase of 55% in volumes exported [29].

Divergent interpretations exist on the causes of this rise in raw material prices. Some explanations note the incidence of financial speculative movements, others emphasize the expansion of agro-fuels while some consider that Chinese demand has established a new level for prices. But in any case this process has stimulated the deepening of the preceding neoliberal transformations.

Finally, the flow of foreign investment has operated as determinant of the continuity of tendencies. This income totalled 173,000 million dollars in 2012, surpassing by 6% the rate for the previous year and doubling the highest amounts of the decade. Capital inflows and the value of exports facilitated the increase of reserves and a reduction of the ratio of indebtedness [30].

The picture of recent decades and the

recent crisis corroborates the diagnosis that emphasizes the centrality of commodities in the Latin American economies. Through this weighting the region is less vulnerable in conjunctural terms (balance of payments, reserves, debt), but its structural fragility has increased.

## CHANGES ABOVE

The consolidation of the region as a basic product exporter has also affected the profile of the dominant classes, reinforcing the conversion of the old national bourgeoisie into a local bourgeoisie. The first model corresponded to industrialists who manufactured for the internal market, with import controls and subsidies which privileged the expansion of demand. The second profile is that of a sector which no longer restricts its activity to manufacture, and does not advocate self-centered development. It promotes export rather than the internal market and prefers the reduction of costs to the extension of consumption.

This transformation has accentuated the enrichment of an elite of millionaires. Some emblematic names in this ascent are Slim (Mexico), Cisneros (Venezuela), Noboa (Ecuador), Santo Domingo (Colombia), Andrónico Lucski (Chile), Bulgheroni, Rocca, (Argentina), Lemann, Safra, Moraer (Brazil). Their fortunes go back to the past, but they have registered a great increase through the export business of recent decades.

As a whole Latin American capitalists constitute a minority sector of the population. An enormous divorce exists between their power and the number of their members. The proprietors and receivers of utilities of the companies do not exceed 1-2% of the active economic population. This percentage is increased to 10%, if we include executives and professionals who administer and control the work force or exert some strategic role in the companies. Through those functions they participate in the confiscation of other people's labour [31].

The reconversion of the last decades has increased the concentration and

internationalization of the main capitalist groups, that come together as regionalized conglomerates. New multi-Latin companies arise, from wealthy families who have expanded their companies, with global management and regional priorities. The conglomerates of Brazil and Mexico head this tendency, followed by Argentina and Chile.

The traditional diversity between land-mining, industrial and banking fractions has not disappeared, but interconnection has increased as a consequence of the great competitive pressure introduced by neoliberal globalization. This rivalry has modified the composition of the 500 biggest Latin American companies. Between 1991 and 2001 the participation of state companies fell (from 20% to 9%) fell and the weight of foreigners was increased (27% to 39%) [32].

The local groups have reorganized their activity with greater external financing and stock exchange capitalization. This entry onto the share markets has coincided with the increase of shares circulating in the so-called "developing" countries (from 80,000 million dollars in 1981 to 5 trillion in 2005). This has increased the penetration of international capital in the ownership structure of Latin American companies.

Today's companies are more powerful, but the capitalist class of the region has not overcome its secondary global role and has lost positions faced with the new competitors from the East. This outcome has been congruent with specialization in basic branches and distancing from manufacturing activities. For this reason the industrial gap with Southeast Asia has been transformed into an irreducible fracture.

The local bourgeoisie has increased its links with foreign capital, but has not disappeared as a differentiated segment. It maintains pretensions of specific accumulation that overflow the national framework and project onto the regional scene. Bourgeoisies more associated with foreign companies have been forged, strengthening a process that began in the 1960s in Brazil, continued in the 1980s in Argentina and consolidated



in the 1990s in Mexico. This sector had industrial origins and has extended to agro-mining and services [33].

The recent incorporation of Mexico, Brazil and Argentina to the G20 marks another leap in the relation of the present bourgeoisies with foreign capital. But between the sectors there is a relationship of antagonistic cooperation, combining closer connections with the maintenance of differences between the greater partner of the North and the smaller one of the South [34].

Although trade with foreign capital has multiplied, the country of origin persists as operational base, privileged source of profits and centre of decision-making by the local bourgeoisies. The internationalization of credit, markets, and share ownership has not eradicated the territorially-based character of the main capitalist groups.

## ERRONEOUS CLASSIFICATIONS

The local and associated bourgeoisies that head up export specialization, sharing profits with the foreign companies, do not conform to a “new oligarchy”. The pre-capitalist characteristics which characterized that sector are extinguished before the advance of the capitalization processes. The old Latin American elites - who resorted to archaic modalities of operation and domination to usufruct their agro-mining properties - are losing weight.

Some approaches emphasize the transnational character of the dominant groups that choose to globalize their businesses [35]. But here association is confused with fusion, forgetting that the internationalization underway develops from existing classes and states. Neoliberal globalization does not annul those structures, nor does it eliminate the priority interconnection between capitalists of the same national origin.

Full trans-nationalization is limited for the moment to cosmopolitan

managerial sectors or fractions of the higher bureaucracy of the globalized bodies. Company ownership remains, however, rooted in differentiated geographic zones and national states persist as the only instrument with the certain legitimacy to discipline the workers.

The Latin American local bourgeoisies are not satellites manipulated by the metropolis. They act as capitalist classes, combining usufruct of the agro-mining rent with the surplus value extracted from the workers. They behave like dominant classes and not as parasitic, comprador or tributary layers of foreign capital. Their incapacity to develop the region does not imply a lack of interest in that objective.

The Latin American economy is governed by patterns of competition, investment and operation. As those norms differ significantly from looting it is a simplification to use the term “lumpen-bourgeoisie” to portray the bourgeoisie [36]. This term only corresponds to sectors that accumulate capital in the margins of the legal circuit. Drug trafficking, for example, earns fortunes and this income is partially laundered in financial or productive activities. But it conforms to a marginal segment not integrated into the stable club of the dominators.

Also it is erroneous to generalize the specific situations of small enclaves. Latin America constitutes an analytical unit, but characterizations based on Honduras or Panama are not valid for Brazil. Only in the first cases are “neo-colonial bourgeoisies” remote controlled by Washington prevalent.

The turn towards commodities sharpens the profile of the Latin American oppressors. They are capitalists who economically exploit wage-earners, bourgeois who politically subject workers and dominators who ideologically subordinate the dominated. The same functions developed by its peers at other points of the planet.

But they also possess the weak authority of a sector that did not lead national struggles, did not recruit

significant personnel to its domination and did not facilitate the mobility of the middle class. Also these weaknesses have been accentuated under the new pattern of accumulation of exporting specialization.

## CHANGES BELOW

The transformations of the Latin American social structure have also altered the configuration of the dominated classes. As an axis of this change is located in agriculture we see a loss of cohesion of the old peasantry, affected by the increasing exodus towards the urban centres. For this reason the tensions in agriculture present another aspect.

The old large estates that recreated peasant misery, obstructing the management of an agrarian bourgeoisie, are decaying in the face of capitalist companies that dispossess agriculturists of their land, contract precarious wage labour and force the transit towards the cities.

This increases the huge displacement of the mass of the urban excluded with little work and very low incomes, in a context of few employment outlets for the surplus population of Latin America. For that reason informality becomes the norm, whether the extractivist economies are in recession or are prospering. Emigration - the escape valve for the imbalances of European accumulation at several moments of the 19th and 20th century - contributes little relief at the present time. The young of the region can find jobs neither at home nor abroad.

A direct consequence of this exclusion is the exponential increase of criminality. The drug-based economy has become a refuge of survival for the sectors pushed into marginality. The region records the highest rate of homicides in the world. Delinquency grows alongside social fracture and the obscene promotion of the consumption and pleasure enjoyed by the rich.

As the extractive model creates jobs of low quality, the precarity of labour in Latin America surpasses the averages in the central countries. This

informality is no longer recreated in the pre-capitalist agrarian circuits, or the familiar reproduction of the work force. It extends together with the penetration of capitalism in all the spheres of social life. Some investigations consider that the precarious sector involves 46% of Latin American workers [37].

Another key factor is the extension of poverty, which in Latin America goes beyond the informal sector. It also affects a broad segment of stable workers. Unlike in the developed economies, the universe of individuals with incomes too low for the satisfaction of basic necessities is not limited to the excluded here. It extends to the exploited workers of modern companies. The percentage of poor children (45% of the total) shows the magnitude of this scourge [38].

The extension of informality is also a consequence of the maquilas and industrial regression. In the regional manufacturing scenario, the acceleration of technological change increases the segmentation between specialized and unqualified workers. The stable positions with social protection decrease, in comparison to contracted positions without any safeguards.

The magnitude of this fracture is the outstanding characteristic of the labour market. The typical male unionized worker of the post-war period tends to be replaced by more flexible female workers. This decline of the formal sectors is pronounced in the maquilas. The extension of the industrial working class has lost its preceding impetus. The manufacturing proletariat has not disappeared, but its incidence has diminished.

In the present model of primary exports the traditional narrowness of the Latin American middle class in comparison to the advanced countries persists. This segment continues contributing a very meagre mattress to the abyss that separates the well-off from the impoverished ones. In addition, the old middle class is persisting in relation to the new segments of this category. Many layers of small retailers and self-employed entrepreneurs persist and the numbers of highly qualified

professionals or technicians are not growing hugely. This infra-development reflects the narrowness of industry.

Certainly the middle sectors are increasing their consumption with the extension of credit and advertising and the arrival of the big commercial chains. But in economies so tied to basic product export, the productive foundations of spending power are very fragile.

Many analysts also emphasize the reduction of poverty, unemployment and inequality during the last decade, without registering the narrow scope of an improvement derived from the cyclical rise of the level of activity.

The biggest novelty has been the generalization of social assistance to alleviate poverty. But the official aid has only protected the abandoned temporarily, without altering the causes of the problem. These plans coexist with greater precarity and confirm labour segmentation.

On the other hand, the slight diminution of the inequality does not modify the place of the region at the top of the global indicators of inequality. The Gini coefficient that measures this polarization is in this zone higher (51.6) than the world-wide average (39.5), double the averages of the advanced economies, and Latin America includes the four countries that head the world-wide barometer (Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras, Brazil). The income of the richest 20% of the Latin American population surpasses by almost 20 times that of the poorest 20% [39].

## EXPLANATIONS WITH PROBLEMS

The post-liberal diagnosis not fit the present economic context of Latin America. Across the region a schema of productive specialization prevails, based on agro-export, open cast mining, the decline of traditional industry, remittances and tourism. This model implies a generalized peripheral or semi-peripheral reintegration in the international division of labour.

In conjunction with these tendencies neoliberalism has strengthened the transformation of the national bourgeoisies into bourgeoisies which are local, but internationalized and linked to foreign capital. The same change has strengthened the peasant exodus, the precarisation of labour, urban marginality and the weakness of the middle class.

This scenario is more consistent with the counterposed vision of a "commodity economy" throughout Latin América. But this second characterization is not purely descriptive, since it postulates the existence of a "consensus" around extractivism. Hence it goes beyond the sphere of the economy and has political implications, which require evaluating what has happened in the geopolitical and governmental spheres. We will develop this analysis in the second part of the text.

## SUMMARY

The validity of the concepts of Post-liberalism and Commodities Consensus is elucidated by analyzing the changes in the region. Capitalism has spread in agriculture and megamining is booming, emphasizing the primacy of basic exports. Industry supplying the domestic market has fallen back in relation to the maquilas, remittances are means of survival and tourism is a key income for small countries. These economic trends have been reinforced since the beginning of the global crisis.

The national bourgeoisie privileging demand has been replaced by the local bourgeoisie, which prioritizes the lowering of wages. Its minority status was consolidated through partnership with foreign companies. Its pre-capitalist features are extinguished and new oligarchies are not created. It maintains its bases of accumulation without becoming a trans-nationalized group. Only marginal fractions amount to a lumpen-bourgeoisie and neo-colonial dependency does not extend to medium-sized countries.

The expansion of informality, the peasant exodus and the stagnation of the new middle class reconfigure the dominated classes, in a context of

poverty, unemployment and inequality. The economic scenario does not corroborate the post-liberal diagnosis, but the opposite view should be evaluated by incorporating the political dimension.

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# Open Letter of support for Citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina

13 February 2014

We, the undersigned, express our full support for the legitimate demands and justified outrage of citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their cry for a decent life, true democracy, solidarity that knows no borders—be them ethnic, national or religious, social equality and justice—resonates throughout the world. In a similar fashion to the citizens of Tahrir, Zuccotti Park, Taksim or Syntagma, the Bosnian protestors showed a courage to go beyond all institutional obstacles and all limitations that governments around the world impose on their citizens and reclaimed their streets and squares. The people of Bosnia-Herzegovina are standing against the system of exploitation, injustice and inequality that has been serving only and exclusively a tiny political, economic and financial elite.

One hundred years after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and when imperialist European leaders pushed their nations into a mutual destruction, Bosnia is sending a strong wake-up call to everyone. The world we live in is a world of divisions, expanding fascism, growing political and social apartheid, unrelenting capitalist destruction of both nature and common wealth of all. The citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina have been experiencing all of that on an everyday level over the past 20 years. After the nationalist war between 1992 and 1995, in which 100,000 people lost their lives, the institutional peace settlement restored the capitalist system, destroyed the working and middle classes, and entrenched not only ethnic but also social divisions that have been successfully exploited by political elites. They said

‘enough’ and we say ‘enough’ with them.

We voice our support for their legitimate efforts to create a just and equal society in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We call upon all progressive political and social forces to stand with the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina in this decisive struggle for a better future of us all.

Signatories

**Tariq Ali**, writer and social activist, UK

**Gil Anidjar**, scholar, University of Columbia, USA

**Vladimir Arsenijevi?**, writer, Serbia

**Etienne Balibar**, professor emeritus,

University Paris Ouest, France

**Franco Berardi Bifo**, philosopher, Italy

**Alida Bremer**, writer, Germany

**Wendy Brown**, political theorist, UC BUSA

**Boris Buden**, University of Weimar, Germany

**Noam Chomsky**, linguist and social activist, MIT, USA

**Goran Fejic**, writer, France

**Karl-Markus Gauss**, writer, Austria

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**Eric Toussaint**, economist, CADTM, Belgium

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**Slavoj Å½iÅ¼ek**, philosopher, Slovenia

# The People's Uprising : A Break with Dayton Bosnia ?

13 February 2014, by **Andreja Zivkovic**

Beginning with the revolt of workers from Tuzla against the privatised massacre of industry, angry workers, unemployed youth and war veterans have risen in solidarity, burning cars and government buildings across the Bosnian Federation, and demanding the resignation of the Federal and cantonal governments. The graffiti, "He who sows hunger reaps anger", is the writing on the wall for a political class that has lorded over an entire society without work, with an incredible 63% of those under 24 jobless, while sharing in the spoils of office, the looting of the former state sector, with a small class of parvenu tycoons.

Like a flare over dark skies, the revolt illuminates the real relations of power in the federation.

## Neo-Colonialism and Neoliberalism

Speaking on Austrian TV, Valentin Inzko, High Representative of the Western Powers threatened : "...if the hooliganism continues EUFOR [EU] troops may be asked to intervene". [40] As if in echo, the Director of the Directorate for the Coordination of Police Units in the Bosnian Federation, Himzo Selimovi?, tendered his resignation and, admitting the inability of the police to ensure the safety of members of the Bosnian Presidency, called on the international community and the European Union to consider deploying the international military forces in Bosnia if events were to repeat

themselves. [41]

While Inzko and Selimovi? revealed that the EU is the real power behind the state, Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska (RS), congratulated the citizens of the Serb entity for not being "provoked" into action by the protests sweeping the Federation, thus exposing the nationalist structures of divide and rule built into the federation. Meanwhile Alexander Vu?i?, First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, called in party representatives from RS to warn them not to cause any trouble, thereby demonstrating not only the continuing expansionist ambitions of the Serbian political elite, but also the fundamental class solidarity of the Bosnian political elite, normally unable even to agree on whether or not the federation should



exist, against the peoples of Bosnia.

Moreover the political class of Bosnia and the EU do not just stand together in defence of privatisation, but have also been imposing an IMF austerity programme now in its fifth year to make the workers of both entities pay for economic collapse. Under the two Stand-by Agreements, budgets have been frozen, public sector pay cut repeatedly, consumption has collapsed, growth flatlined and external public debt has doubled, reaching 32% of GDP. Normally unable to agree on any federal legislation, the federal government last year passed the IMF-inspired Global Fiscal Framework (GFF) for 2014-16, which sets parameters for the entities' budgets and hardwires cuts to reduce the budget deficit for the next two years, rendering neoliberal austerity immune from democratic challenge at the forthcoming elections. And since, as the IMF admits in its latest country report, none of this will actually restore growth and thus revenues, legislation is planned to raise the pension age, increase labour flexibility, and continue with privatisation. [42]

Neo-liberal reform will not overcome the crisis but will only deepen it. As in the rest of the Balkans and peripheral Europe, the economic model is based opening up to foreign capital. Until 2008 foreign capital flows fed growth based on imports and consumer debt, but at the same time destroyed industry and created the present debt crisis. On the one hand, an overvalued currency pegged to the Euro enabled the borrowing needed to pay for imports; but on the other, it acted as a disincentive to investment in the real economy and made exports uncompetitive. [43] Given the economy is completely dependent on external sources of growth, and the financial crisis of emerging markets triggered by Argentina will no doubt lead to further reverberations in the Eurozone, Bosnia now finds itself at a turning point.

The political elite is united in its determination to impose neoliberal reforms on which EU accession has been made conditional. It faces a popular uprising that could easily spread to RS, if not across the

Balkans. If it is unable to overcome the crisis, which is also a crisis of legitimacy of federalism, then it will, as it did in the 1990s, start to bang the nationalist drum to stay in power; if this happens then the federation could implode, once again opening the door to Great Power interference and nationalist struggles across the region.

It is precisely this historical pattern that we must recall if we are to understand the origins of the present crisis of political rule and the conditions under which the uprising can create a lasting alternative.

**The Yugoslav Legacy : Market Integration, Nationalist Disintegration and Great Power Intervention**

The war of the nineties cannot be viewed outside the context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia induced by the debt crisis of the eighties. In the 1980s Yugoslavia fell under the tutelage of the IMF and pioneered the kind shock therapy and market liberalisation programs that were to become the norm in post-Soviet Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The IMF imposed the closure of inefficient industries and an end to subsidies from the richer to the poorer republics and regions. Faced with widespread worker discontent, and later, menacing strike waves in all the republics, the various republican party elites, starting with the Serbian elite under Milošević, unleashed a wave of nationalism to hold onto power.

In order to impose the market discipline necessary for the repayment of the debt, the IMF and the EEC demanded the recentralisation of the Yugoslav federation. As a reward for successful reform the EEC dangled the carrot of closer integration. In practice this meant the alignment of the EEC with the positions of Milošević and Greater Serbian nationalism which sought to improve the competitiveness of the Serbian economy through Yugoslav recentralisation. But the promise of European integration also gave heart to the rich northern republics which wanted to improve their competitiveness by ditching the poor south and joining the EEC. In this way, European integration accelerated the

nationalist disintegration of the federation. [44]

The Western powers were divided over the question of Yugoslavia's survival. Following German support for separatists in the western republics of Slovenia and Croatia, Bosnia was destabilised as Belgrade countered with an agreement with Zagreb to partition the republic. The European powers whetted these appetites through successive peace plans that recognised the facts of ethnic cleansing, until the US took advantage of the divisions between the European powers to extend its domination into the vacuum of receding Russian power, intervening militarily on the side of the Croat-Muslim coalition it had concocted to end the war.

## **The Geopolitics of the National Question in Dayton Bosnia**

The Bosnia that emerged under the Dayton Peace Agreement is a Western neo-colonial protectorate, whose internal policy is largely dictated by the US and EU. The country is divided into two parts : the Federation and RS. It is impossible to make decisions without the consent of both entities. Nevertheless the persistence of the neo-colonial regime, led by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, is legitimised by the claim that the preservation of unified Bosnia requires external coercion. In fact it is the federal structure imposed by the Powers at Dayton without any democratic consultation that creates a new framework of nationalist competition which constantly recreates the need for the protectorate as the real executive government and guarantor of territorial integrity.

The multiple "ethnic veto points" and complex power-sharing mechanisms built into the constitution mean that nationalist politicians can paralyse the federal government at will over any issue. For example, for the last two years Bosnia and Herzegovina has

been without an effective government, and this was the cause of last June's mass protests in Sarajevo over delays in adopting a law granting infants access to basic health and social services. Furthermore institutions represent citizens only as members of one of the three constituent peoples, force them to identify themselves with one of the three constituent ethnic groups and thus create a party system based on nationalist lines. The resulting paralysis opens the space for the High Representative to act as both legislature and executive, exacerbating both nationalist tensions and the crisis of legitimacy of the political system.

In response to this crisis, the West has sought to radically revise the Dayton agreement, that is, to preserve a united Bosnia by means of its integration within the EU and NATO. It wants to recentralise the federation, to effectively abolish the autonomy of RS in order to counter the return of Russia to the regional scene on account of its new status as an energy superpower. Following on from the US imposed "independence" of Kosovo in 2008 and the Russian veto in the UN Security Council, the conflict between the Great Powers is once again reshuffling the nationalist pack of cards. While the Bosniak elite eventually rallied to Dayton, it now supports the recentralisation of the federation ; and while the Bosnian Serb elite was originally opposed to Dayton it now oscillates between defending Dayton and seeking closer ties with Russia to keep the door open to secession.

If the divisive intervention of the Great Powers is in continuity with that of the 1990s, then at the level of political economy the resemblance is uncanny. Recentralisation is being loudly proclaimed by both EU and IMF as the necessary complement of economic reform. The neoliberal cry as before is that there is too much "big government", placing an excessive burden on the economy, and preventing the kind of integrated market attractive to foreign investors. And while, as in the 1980s, all the nationalist politicians fervently support market reform, they are divided over the recentralisation of

fiscal powers. At the same time, the political paralysis of the system is doubled with the failure of market reform to overcome the economic and social crisis. Under these conditions where huge external economic and military pressures collide and combine with nationalist struggles, the conditions are once present for disintegration.

## **The Way Forward : End the Protectorate, Defend the equality of the peoples of Bosnia, Support the Workers' Uprising !**

Any progressive alternative has to face the barbarism at work in the present state of affairs. So far the protests have been pure class protests with little or no sign so far of nationalist contamination. In fact the visible political weakness lies elsewhere, with a widespread call, initiated by the Tuzla workers, for a non-party technocratic government, a government that would inevitably under the conditions of the protectorate be pulled between the nationalist veto and the diktat of the High Representative/IMF. However the major problem is that protests have not spread to RS, although a solidarity rally in Banja Luka of 300 is significant. The strength of the Dayton system of divide and rule is that it acts against this kind of inter-ethnic class solidarity. Thus protests against the IMF austerity programme have never been co-ordinated ; the public sector general strikes of 2009 and 2013 were limited to, respectively, the Federation and RS. Equally generalised working class anger at the political elite can easily be manipulated and transformed into its opposite, support for EU integration as the solution to "corruption" and failure to "reform", as was the case with the recent

Bulgarian protests. In this way the system constantly generates a current which naturally switches from nationalism to support for the protectorate, and thus for Great Power intervention, all the while generating an ever greater charge of crisis and despair.

The way out of this vicious circle is to link the social struggle against the nationalist political class with a democratic struggle to overthrow the imperialist "protectorate".

If we return to the beginning of our argument, the social movement faces a political front taking in the EU, the High Representative, the IMF, all local nationalist politicians, together with Belgrade and Zagreb. In order to weaken this alliance, the movement has to call for the abrogation of the IMF agreement, for the expulsion of the High Representative and EUFOR, and for the rejection of any changes to Dayton not based on agreement between the peoples themselves. If the movement develops a practical opposition to imperialist meddling and economic dependency, then it will be able to expose the posturing of the nationalists. For neither support for Dayton, nor opposition to it on the part of the nationalist elites constitutes anti-imperialism : it is always a move in favour of either Russian or US-EU intervention ; and it is always a demand for more neoliberal destruction.

On this basis the movement can legitimately defend the rights of all the nations, including the minorities, like the Roma, who are not represented under the Dayton order. By linking the social question with the national question, it will be possible to take the first steps to overcoming mutual suspicion between the peoples, to creating a trend for unity within the labour movement. In order to move forward the left must show that social equality is inseparable from national equality, and that neither can be realised without an internationalist struggle against the alliance between the nationalists across the region and rival Great Powers. [45]

*10 February 2014*

[LeftEast,](#)

# Ukraine's Protest Movement: Is a 'Left Sector' Possible?

12 February 2014, by Ilya Budraitskis

The revolution's chief, unmistakable, defining sign – the emergence of the insurgent masses – is the driving force of this story. Those who continue to characterize the events in Ukraine as a "conflict of the elites" or a "clash between bourgeois clans" miss the most important thing: the Maidan collective (which includes activists in half the regions of Ukraine who are challenging the country's administration) has become an independent political factor that neither the authorities nor the leaders of the parliamentary opposition can easily manipulate. Without the perseverance and sacrifices of these people over the last month, there probably would have been a dozen "appeasement" scenarios ranging from a police dictatorship to some kind of collusive agreement between Yanukovich's enemies – either of which would satisfy the aim of removing Yanukovich from power and from the monetary backing of Ukraine's political and financial elites.

The appeal to Yatseniuk to head the government over the weekend was followed in short order by Azarov's resignation and the cancelation of the scandalous "January 16 laws," and, finally, the opposition parties' sincere help in restoring control of administration buildings occupied by protestors – the true signs of a consensus on both sides. Yanukovich, the opposition, the European Union, and Putin are all united in a bid for the "normalization" of Ukraine. The only unpredictable and incomprehensible item standing in the way of negotiations towards mutually beneficial agreements is the fact that thousands of determined people refuse to leave Maidan. Their determination unmistakably looks more than anything like a democratic instinct: citizens remain citizens as long as they stick together and are

able to respond with violence to whoever seeks to destroy their armed unity.

This direct democracy, though born from direct experience, has no political continuation. Further, its forcefully organized shock troops – which helped the majority of protesters to do away with the remains of whatever respectful distance they kept from the state and the police – became a fundamentally anti-democratic force. Paradoxically, without the ultra-right proponents of a "national dictatorship" from the Right Sector, there would never have been any barricades on Hrushevskogo or occupied ministries turned into "headquarters of the revolution." There would not be, full stop, any of the events that actually prevented the consolidation of a "party of order" and the establishment of a "state of emergency" from above. The realization of this simple fact cannot but terrify – not only mass dissatisfaction with the sitting government, but the far-right's willingness to overthrow this government and establish its own, rapidly monopolizing the political space and transforming it into one of extreme reaction.

One's first moments on Maidan are like being in some kind of political Wonderland: there are street fighters doing battle with police, self-managed campgrounds, information centers, points of mutual aid, self-organized "emergency services," and hot meals. It is a paradigmatic example of an infrastructure of urban uprising, each element of which breathes an authentic revolutionary consciousness, painted in some strange, unusual color – a kaleidoscope of propaganda from every possible ultra-right-wing party and sect, with countless "Celtic" symbols and runes on the walls. The

incredibly sickening dissonance between the revolutionary content of the process and its reactionary form represents circumstances demanding not squeamish ethical evaluations, but action aimed at changing such an ugly equation.

Of course, nobody in this revolution reserved any space for leftists – that being, for those who could really come up with an alternative to the entire established order that gave birth to poverty, corruption, lack of transparency, and state brutality. In fact the order that gave birth to all of the factors, without exception, that led people to the streets and to begin their resistance. Today's crisis in Ukraine is really a crisis of the society we want to change. Society is degraded, embittered, disintegrating. It experiences any optimism about itself only slightly, and rarely at that. The products of this society and its rare – and therefore crucial – optimism are the current revolutionary events. Nationalism (which at this point is still more civil than ethnic), a strange belief in the power of "European integration," parliamentary institutions, the lack of resistance to chauvinism, and a desire to find and neutralize viruses in the healthy "national" body: all of these reflect Ukrainian society's current consciousness, which in any case is not static or incapable of change. And despite the fact that initial conditions were far more favorable to the expansion of the ultra-right, the outcome for this battle for consciousness and a revolutionary program was never predetermined – and cannot be conclusively summed up even today.

I understand completely how vulnerable my reasoning will look, but I still feel that this conversation – about the necessity and possibility of a

"Left Sector" and its struggle for hegemony in the protest - is important not only in the contemporary Ukrainian context, but also for the future, in which we will face similar (if not worse) circumstances every time.

I remember well how, just after the first mass rally on Chistoprudny Boulevard on December 5, 2011, a meeting was organized between the representatives of virtually every Moscow leftist group in existence. After a stormy debate, and regardless of the differences in ideological traditions and approaches, a majority of the participants agreed about the following: 1) the incipient protest was ours, and we would participate in it, and 2) understanding full well its political and social heterogeneity, we would fight for our place in it. This was the necessary minimum amount of political unity, the result of which was the systematic presence of the radical left in the protest movement, and, most importantly, the movement's participants' perception of leftists as an organic part. The movement's emerging "red pole" clearly contrasted itself with the conservative approach of the Communist Party, which was actually working for the restoration of the lost stability of the political "managed democracy" machine.

As far as I know, nothing of the kind happened in December 2013 in Kiev. Ukraine's radical leftists embraced the nascent protests only skeptically, resigning themselves to strictly passive or peripheral roles. Those who decided to support the movement and to participate in it did so only

individually, without coordination. Meanwhile, ultra-right groups could boast the best potential in terms of personnel - even better than that of their Russian colleagues - and as such the best opportunities from the very beginning. They systematically forced small groups of left-wing demonstrators out of the fray. What would have happened if, from the very beginning, gathering all its available forces (I think this could be several hundred people), the radical left had consistently asserted its right to be on Maidan and openly promote its position? It is likely that, if faced with such an organized mass leftist presence, the right would have abstained from open conflict due, ultimately, to the threat of a negative impact on its public image among the majority of non-partisan protesters.

Staking out space for a Left Sector would be crucial not only for the current moment, and not only for the search for supporters among the hundreds of thousands of protesters. It would allow for the construction of radical left forces in the post-revolutionary situation - which will probably be in the near future - when, finally, the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) puts a close to its ignominious existence. The current demand for a ban on the KPU (along with the Russian-speaking Party of Regions) - the protesters' call for which is growing louder all the time - is connected not only with the anti-Communist tradition, but just as much with the KPU's political program, which has linked its fate inextricably with the oligarchic clans and the

reactionary pro-Russian lobby. From the very beginning of the crisis, the KPU unequivocally opposed the protest movement, calling on police to exact reprisals and, of course, supporting the "January 16 laws" unconditionally. Meanwhile a Left Sector, representing itself from the start as a part of the protest movement, could have rightfully challenged the accepted conflation of socialist alternatives in Ukraine with the bastard party of Petr Simonenko. A Left Sector could not only have been strengthened the movement from the inside, but could have also offered it an agenda, developed its radical-democratic vector, and supported and given a conscious political dimension to the creation of the "people's councils" in the occupied regional administrations.

Alas, today, much is lost. The forces of stability, obviously, will prevail, and Ukraine will return to the shaky model of oligarchic consensus of competing clans and electoral parties. At the same time, nothing will be the same: having destroyed the fear of government force, the taste for resistance will remain in the flesh and blood of a politically active generation along with the experience of building barricades on Maidan. And this means that, more likely than not, history will provide Ukraine's radical left with at least a few more chances to learn from its mistakes.

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## Our North is the South. Notes on the Camp of the Anti-capitalist Youth of Brazil

12 February 2014, by **Marco Alvarez**

The country of samba and soccer was, in June 2013, marked by important mobilizations against the soccer World Cup. More than the Cup in itself, this

footballing country par excellence was protesting against the stratospheric infrastructural investment in the coming sports events in the country,

as the popular sectors have seen the cost of living rise, the most concrete example being the rising cost of the public transport.



Once the mobilizations started, there was no delay in the reaction from the militarized police in the service of the government and the employers, brutally repressing the mobilizations in Latin America's biggest country. The shouts of "the cup, the cup, the cup bores us, I want my money in health and education" have awoken a people which is lively and rebellious by nature.

The giant green lung of "America Morena" has entered a state of alert of mobilizations, opened by a new cycle of popular struggles in the country. Like the Arab spring, the Chilean student movement or the movement of the indignant in Spain in 2011, a new flood of struggle has begun in Brazil, which makes the anti-capitalist organizations protagonists in a new political and social scene.

In this context, the first camp of the anti-capitalist youth of Brazil was held from January 20-24, 2014. In Niteroit, a "dormitory" city of Rio de Janeiro connected by a bridge of 13 kilometres, more than 800 young people from various states in Brazil met in a very significant encounter.

More than 30 groups of Brazilian anti-capitalist youth, three of national scope, have taken a giant leap, breaking with the recurrent fragmentation and making the much discussed "anti-capitalist unity" a reality. These unified groups have initiated the way to rise to the level of the new Brazilian context and mark an example worthy of replication at various latitudes.

The Federal University of Fluminense was the venue for the meeting of anti-capitalist youth, who participated in five days of revolutionary fraternity, political education, collective deliberation and cultural recreational activities. The camp officially began on January 21 with an exciting "mystic", who remembered those

assassinated by the repressive state in Brazil at different stages and also touched on sexual and gender discrimination among other things.

Diverse forums across the camp dealt with "the explosion of youth struggles around the world". Thematic meetings and those dealing with particular sectors of struggle were held continuously. The feminist struggle had a fundamental space at the camp and a deep commitment to end patriarchy and its enabler, capitalism, was evident in every corner of the camp.

As this was a self-managed camp, the anti-capitalist youth were organized through brigades. Rotating brigades were responsible for cleaning, decoration, security, food and all that allowed for the smooth operation of the collective space.

The night-time cultural celebrations were a space of relaxation from the intense days of work. Thematic celebrations of women or LGTB breaking with hetero-normality were a tonic at night. And the last party at camp ended virtually at sunrise, with hundreds of anti-capitalists in the swimming pool of the university.

The last activity of the camping was a plenary session where concrete advances for the struggle of Brazilian anti-capitalist youth were envisaged. Here an important manifesto for the new organization was approved and the new name of the group was discussed heatedly.

"Retomada", "Juventud Anticapitalista", "Enfrente" and "RUA" were some of the ten names proposed for the new organization. The previous day the proponents of the different names made an artistic presentation in support their option. Also in the plenary a couple of minutes were given for the political defence of each name before voting. By a narrow margin the option of "RUA" was

adopted - I voted for this option, but as the majority was a relative one it was decided to take a new vote through the network that can count on the participation of some groups that could not come to the camp.

Also the structure of the new body was reviewed, defining the various areas of struggle like "mobilizations for the World Cup", "the university and secondary student movement", "women", "LGTB", "black", "popular and favela culture", "countryside and ecology" and "anti-prohibitionism". Collective coordinations for each front were established and a calendar of mobilizations for 2014 was adopted.

The camp also served to strengthen Latin American revolutionary integration. Between the Brazilian anti-capitalist youth and the international delegations that we were present, we decided to strengthen our fraternal relations through systematic joint work. A joint magazine in Portuguese-Spanish with emphasis on youth and Latin America, to strengthen communication channels and the initiation of the first camp of Latin American youth for January 2015, tentatively in the south of Brazil, are some of the important advances that we took away from the camp.

The deep collective conviction that "our north is the south", will help us advance in the construction of a free and popular Latin America.

More than 500 years ago the Spanish and Portuguese invaders pillaged our main natural resources and wanted to eradicate our cultural identity, but also left their languages to us as an inheritance. Although most Latin American countries have a language different from that of Brazil, our fluid communication is possible through good "português". For that reason the Latin American revolution will be transmitted in "português". I believe that there was great agreement on this at the camp.

## Debt Crisis with Caribbean Taste

## 12 February 2014, by **Daniel Munevar**

The history of how the island has reached this point is relatively simple. Given its status as a territory occupied by the United States, Puerto Rico has access to a series of fiscal benefits and exemptions which are very attractive to U.S. investors. Although it is not a state of the Union, bonds issued by the government of Puerto Rico have the same legal standing as U.S. state and municipal bonds. In order to facilitate access to funds at preferential rates, interest payments on these bonds is tax-exempt. In that sense the key difference between Puerto Rico and the states of the Union is the interest rates that they pay. Thus, while a state with fiscal problems such as California issues debt at 2.37 % interest, Puerto Rico does so at 8 or 10 %. [46] In a context characterized by low interest rates on a global level, this yield is very attractive to investors. There are two further benefits. First, according to the laws of Puerto Rico, interest payments must be considered a priority over any other government expenditure. Secondly, there was an implicit understanding that the government of Puerto Rico could count on the support of the U.S. federal government. Given these features, financial markets came to see the island as good and secure opportunity to increase their profits.

From the perspective of Puerto Rico, the availability of external funds made it possible to temporarily mask the fiscal problems, thus postponing difficult decisions. Between the 2007 and 2012 the economy contracted year after year. [47] The shrinking of the economy reduced government earnings and accentuated the need for external financing. At its worst moment, in 2009, the state budget

deficit reached 6% of the GDP. [48] This risky balance lasted until 2013.

In July of 2013 the declaration of bankruptcy by the city of Detroit changed everything. Investor's trust on state and municipal bonds vanished. When markets began to shed Puerto Rico's bonds the island's debt had already reached \$70 billion (102% of GNP). [49] Given the incapacity of issuing new bonds since July 2013, Puerto Rico has been forced to seek short term financing from banks that charge higher interest rates, given the possibility of a default. This has only increased the doubts regarding the government's capacity to come out of the crisis without a default and an eventual restructuring of its debt.

Given this difficult situation, the government of Puerto Rico has presented a series of austerity measures as an original and innovative way to deal with the crisis. As may be expected, austerity in its Caribbean version does not differ much from its European version. Placing the payment of the debt above all else, the government has frozen state pensions, increased taxes and tariffs for public services. [50] Given the negative impact on future economic perspectives, financial markets retain a skeptical attitude regarding Puerto Rico's fiscal health. This has increased the rumors regarding the need of a federal rescue of the island territory, coordinated by the U.S. Congress.

While the investors wait, Puerto Ricans suffer the consequences of the austerity measures. The unemployment rate is now 15 % and

an estimated 45 % of the population lives under the poverty level. [51] Around 50% of the population receives some sort of federal government aid. [52] It is estimated that during the last five years 65 thousand persons have emigrated each year in search of better opportunities in the continent. [53] The population that stays behind includes older people and those with least qualifications, a fact which further darkens future prospects for the island.

To conclude, it should be pointed out that the country can hardly find a solution to its problems within the logic of financial markets. In the specific case of Puerto Rico the relation between sovereignty and debt obligations must be taken into account. It is possible to argue that given Puerto Rico's condition as an occupied territory the debt has an illegitimate character. Thus, the people of Puerto Rico have no obligation to pay it. Ironically, the United States established this legal principle in another Caribbean island in 1898. After the Spanish American War, the United States argued that due to its colonial status, Cuba was not bound to pay its debt to Spain. It would be a lovely turn of fate for the oppressed to now wield this argument against their oppressors in order to cancel their debt. In that sense the struggle for a free and independent Puerto Rico, both from the debt and from the U.S. occupation is one and the same struggle for justice.

CADTM

*Translated by Rafael Barnabe*

8 February 2014

## **The search for a new, independent electoral**

# politics in the United States

11 February 2014, by **Dan La Botz**

Tired of Republican billionaire Michael R. Bloombergâ€”seventh richest person in the United States, thirteenth richest in the worldâ€”a mayor who had catered to the rich at the expense of the poor, New Yorkers voted in November for de Blasio who ran on a platform opposing the growing economic inequality in the city. A former activist who had been in Nicaragua as a supporter of the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s, de Blasio had evolved into a mainstream Clinton Democrat. But with a populist platform he won the support of the city's multiethnic working class voters.

At the same time, and perhaps more important in the long run, Americans are witnessing new sorts of political campaigns, manifestations of a search for independent politics. The combination of the economic crisis of 2008, the austerity drive by both Democrats and Republicans, and the continuing racism against African Americans have led various left, labor, and black groups to reject the existing two-party political model and to create novel political vehicles. Some of these efforts are merely local, others are small in scale, and almost all have a tentative character, but they may represent an emerging trend in a country dominated since the 1920s by two capitalist parties, a society where the underdogs have seldom had their own political voice.

Many radicals and leftists still believe that progressive social-political movements can and must be built within the Democratic Party. In Jackson, Mississippi, a city of 175,000, 59 percent white and 37 percent black, Chokwe Lumumba, a civil rights attorney and longtime black nationalistâ€”a former leader of the Republic of New Afrikaâ€”stood for mayor in the spring of 2013. His campaign was built by the Jackson People's Assembly, itself a project of

the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. The assembly's "Jackson Plan," called for participatory democracy, a solidarity economy, and sustainable development combined with progressive community organizing and electoral politics. Lumumba won five out of seven wards and defeated his closest opponent by 3,000 votes. While his campaign never mentioned socialism, the Maoists who supported him believe that it represents a step in that direction. Other leftists criticized the campaign for its failure to break with the Democratic Party.

One of the most interesting developments is the more independent role being played by unions. Historically the AFL-CIO and other labor unions have supported the Democrats almost exclusively and fought fiercely against any attempt by unions to move to the left, arguing that independent campaigns divide the left and lead to Republican victories. Yet in some regions local unions have been willing to defy the AFL-CIO and their own national unions to support Green, socialist, and independent labor candidates.

In Syracuse, New York, the Civil Service Employees Association, an affiliate of both the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the AFL-CIO, defied tradition and supported Howie Hawkins, a former Green Party candidate for Governor, for a seat on the city council. Hawkins lost to the incumbent. Similarly in Seattle, Kshama Sawant, the Socialist Alternative candidate for the city council succeeded in winning support from several local unions: AFSCME, the Postal Workers, the America Federation of Teachers, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Sawant won in a victory that surprised both her opponents and her supporters.

In Lorain County, Ohioâ€”just west of Clevelandâ€”the local labor council decided to run its own candidates after the mayor overturned the city's agreement to use local, minority, and union labor. "It took us three years to negotiate this historic agreement, and it took them three days to kill it!" said Joe Thayer of the Sheet Metal Workers Union. Faced with betrayal by the local Democratic Party, the unions decided to run their own candidates. "This was a step we took reluctantly," said Lorain County AFL-CIO President Harry Williamson. "When the leaders of the [Democratic] Party just took us for granted and tried to roll over the rights of working people here, we had to stand up." With the support of the unions, an immigrant workers center, and a student group at Oberlin College, the labor slate won two dozen seats on the city council. "Running independent wasn't our first choice, but hopefully this can help bring the Democratic leaders to their senses," said Machinist Art Thomas. "If not, we've shown them that we can work with our friends and elect our own!"

In the United States, most social movement and labor union activists still tend to be more supportive of Democrats like de Blasio, or inclined to support left candidates like Lumumba who run in the Democratic Party. But things appear to be changing as a result of the experience of the crisis, of austerity, and of the occupy movement. We have seen the growth of a far left, multi-ethnic milieu of young people who reject not only the two-party system but also corporate domination of the society, consumerism, and environmental degradation. The new left either rejects politics altogether or its inclined to support radical new political alternatives. Most important, some workers in the unions now believe that when the Democrats betray them they have to organize their own alternative political option.

# Swedish socialist weekly celebrates 40 years

10 February 2014, by **Hakan Blomqvist**



Russian, Iranian and Syrian comrades greeted the occasion with warm solidarity. Aleksey Sachnin from the Russian Left front thanked for the support of *Internationalen* and the Swedish section for the imprisoned Bolotnaja-demonstrators. Mehrnosh Safie from the Iranian Shora stressed the need for tightening the bonds with persecuted labour activists in today's Iran. And the ovations would hardly stop when Nadia Driai from the Syrian Democratic People's party embraced the Swedish comrades for their solidarity with the Syrian democratic revolution. Directly from the party in Syria came the message:

*"Dear Comrades! We appreciate your solidarity with our people during the*

*fight against oppression and in the fight for freedom and dignity. Our people are sacrificing their lives to change Syria from a dictatorship to a democracy. Our people are trying to stop all criminal activities committed by a terrorist regime, and their actions come as a reaction to the regime's crimes. We hope for more cooperation for the benefit of our parties, our people, and our countries Sweden and Syria. We sincerely thank all your efforts to help Syrian refugees in Sweden. We hope that our collaborative efforts help left wing and democratic movements and ensure the victory of freedom and justice for all. Please accept our warmest regards and respect for your party."*

Greetings to the celebration also came from Alain Krivine from the NPA

(France); Jan Malewski for *Inprecor* and Penelope Duggan for *International Viewpoint* and the bureau of the Fourth International; and comrades in South Africa engaged in building the new socialist mass movement in the midst of the new miner's strikes.

There were not only speeches on the program. The result of an impressive cultural project to digitalize the photo archive of the paper was presented, with more than 13 000 photos from the first decades. After the red choir of "Extra Salt" performed Swedish labour hymns together with songs of Brecht and Pete Seeger, the tones of the "International" in Swedish, Russian, Persian and Arabic expressed the deep sentiment that *Internationalen* and internationalism is alive and struggling for the decades to come.

## Austerity U: Preparing Students for Precarious Lives

4 February 2014, by **Alan Sears, James Cairns**

Politicians, bureaucrats and business leaders are clamoring for these changes on the basis of three key claims about colleges and universities. They argue that the post-secondary system: 1) is not preparing students for the contemporary job market; 2) costs too much in public funds; and 3) is horribly out of date, particularly in the age of information technology. The combination of technological change, high levels of unemployment or underemployment among younger people, and the recent wave of cuts to social programs and working conditions (also known as the austerity agenda) seems to present

governments a compelling case for moving very quickly to transform post-secondary education.

In the face of these calls for change, we cannot simply defend the system as it is or casually dismiss criticisms of post-secondary education. Many students are desperately anxious about their futures and critical of the education they are currently receiving in massive classrooms that feel more like processing plants than places of learning. The standard curriculum continues to place the knowledge and history of the elite layer of the population of European powers above

those of indigenous peoples, people of colour, poor people, and other marginalized groups. We cannot deny the feeling many people share that universities are out of touch institutions run by a privileged layer who do work of limited social value at great cost.

Of course, this does not mean that the austerity agenda on campus is inevitable or that it should be embraced. Students have mobilized impressively against the agenda of governments and employers, ranging from mass struggles in Chile to occupations at the Cooper Union



school of the arts in New York and Sussex University in Britain, to the remarkable mobilization and strike of 2012 in Quebec. These movements have expressed bold visions of the future on and off campus in slogans like "No to profit" (in Chile) and "It is a student strike, and a popular struggle" (in Quebec). They have won some important victories, such as the reversal of the planned tuition increases in Quebec.

These movements show us the best way to oppose the austerity agenda in post-secondary education, which is to develop a different strategy for transformation based on accessibility, democracy, decolonization, and a commitment to good jobs and equity-oriented employment. We can't simply defend the university as it is. Nor can we resign ourselves to a reform agenda that will make the system much worse. We need to show that a better world is possible.

## **Walking the Tightrope Without a Net**

If you scrape away at corporate and government criticisms of the university system in Canada, the core of the austerity agenda becomes clear. Employers and policymakers believe universities are out-of-control institutions that are doing a bad job of preparing students to walk the tightrope of life in austerity capitalism without a net.

Students graduate from university with a legitimate expectation of a somewhat better life than they might have had otherwise. Many take on debt and work grueling jobs in order to pay the high costs of school on the assumption that they're doing what needs to be done in order to survive after graduation. But increasing numbers of graduates are facing brutal conditions: high unemployment among younger workers, the disappearance of well-paying, stable jobs, a lack of social programmes, and ever-increasing expenses for housing and other necessities.

Governments, business leaders, and

their supporters in the media are blaming universities for these problems, arguing that post-secondary education is simply not preparing students for the real world. A recent column in the *Globe and Mail* was headlined: "Student debt crisis? No, expectations crisis." Its author routinely accuses universities of offering irrelevant degrees and students of foolishly enrolling in irrelevant programs, depriving themselves of the skills necessary to compete on today's job market. Yet, with the possible exception of a quite limited number of skilled trades jobs, there is simply no basis for claiming that there is an actual skills shortage among university graduates seeking employment.

The real shortage is good jobs. The real culprit is corporations and governments that have spent the last 30 years gutting the workplace, wiping out jobs with some degree of security, decent pay and benefits, and replacing them with various forms of precarious employment. It is common to hear students talk about having to work unpaid internships in order even to be considered for entry-level paid positions. They are keen and capable; it's the opportunities for well-compensated work that are missing.

Yet from the point of view of employers and governments, the problem is not a lack of decent jobs available to young people but the hopeful attitudes of students and recent graduates. The key to preparing students for the real world they face upon graduation would be to shatter their expectations of a decent life by teaching disenfranchisement either openly in the curriculum (for example, through entrepreneurship education) or through the structure of the system (for example, through user pay, sharp tuition increases, and ever-expanding class sizes).

Ultimately, the goal of this transformation is a university system that, along with certain skills and knowledge, teaches students: "You are entitled to nothing. You have no right to anything you cannot afford, and you will only be able to afford things through a life of constant hustle."

The pay wall of higher tuition fees

broadcasts this message clearly. The introduction of new teaching technologies and increased use of distance education together with the mass classroom methods already in use make for a form of less-human learning, in which feelings and bodily presence are detached from information and knowledge of the subject matter. The focus on more practical entrepreneurial and commercial skills pushes an ethos of survival of the fittest and intense competition. This focus corrodes the cultivation of a sense that all people have certain rights, including access to what they need for a decent quality of life. Innovation and entrepreneurship are about creating profit for a handful of people, rather than sharpening experience in problem-solving in the service of human needs. The rapid development of Austerity U is about establishing a new normal in which individual students are forced to take on all the responsibility for coping with the harsh realities of increasingly difficult and precarious life chances.

## **Elite Formation**

In Canada, at least, this agenda of disenfranchisement faces one serious impediment. A small layer of students must still be trained to rule or assist those who rule. The elite-in-training, who come mainly from very wealthy backgrounds, go to university to learn the craft of running things and extracting profits from the labour of others. So while Austerity U is largely about breaking the hopes of the many, it also requires ways to reproduce the privilege and power of the few.

In the United States and Britain, universities accomplish elite formation by segregation. The elite simply attend different institutions. The student body at Ivy League schools in the US or Oxford/Cambridge in Britain is disproportionately made up of students from elite backgrounds who went to private schools. There they are trained to rule, largely through a fairly traditional liberal arts education.

In Canada, the publically funded system is less stratified. This makes it harder to maintain a traditional liberal arts curriculum for elite formation

while at the same time developing a different kind of education for the mass of working class students. This is part of the reason that "differentiation" has become a key word, and a key policy goal, in Ontario's restructuring of post-secondary education. Structures and expectations that support a more equitable system must be replaced by structures and cultures that reproduce hierarchy.

From the start, universities were developed to do the work of elite formation, preparing the rulers to rule by enhancing their abilities at analysis, communication and calculation. The first universities were formed in Europe between the 11th and 13th centuries. There were models of higher learning in other places, but the university as it is now constituted is a development of this European model spread around the world through relations of imperialism and capitalist globalization.

Universities focussed primarily on elite formation until roughly the middle of the 20th century. Between the 1940s and 1960s the system was expanded in many places around the world as part of the growing welfare state, which introduced massive, publically-funded social programs in areas such as health care and education. On the one hand, new forms of employment associated with the expansion of state services and new layers of technical and professional workers in corporations required a new kind of preparation through extended education. On the other hand, people began to demand educational inclusion, with particularly important struggles being waged by African-Americans and women. Educational access became a widely accepted marker of social justice associated with the welfare state.

In Canada, the period of the welfare state produced a university system that, by global standards, was relatively undifferentiated. For example, a student who did well at a lower-reputation university could gain admission to graduate school at a higher-reputation institution. That simply would not happen in the United States. So to design a system that can

efficiently shatter the expectations of the bulk of working-class students, it is necessary to hive off a special place of learning to build the capacities of the elite. Ontario is at this moment implementing a post-secondary education differentiation framework.

## Remaking Campus Politics

Government policymakers, corporate management and university administrations face serious obstacles when trying to make their reform agenda work. One reason is that traditions of faculty self-regulation combined with a high level of unionization are an obstacle to rapid change (for better and for worse). Tenured faculty members' resistance to change tends to be driven by a desire to protect their own freedoms and living standards, which makes it difficult to build alliances with groups in less-secure, lower-status positions. That said, many faculty members are suspicious about university restructuring and have shown some willingness to challenge recent proposals. The growing numbers of contract faculty, who are extremely overworked and underpaid, have led faculty criticism of Austerity U.

A second, and much more important obstacle, is student resistance — real and potential. Universities have, since the 1960s, accepted a relatively high level of political freedom on campus. This space of freedom was won by the mass student struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The greatest fear of governments and administrations is that students will use their political freedom, knowledge, and collective power to fight back against restructuring.

This fear explains why the austerity agenda includes attacks on campus freedom of expression, imposing regimes of labour relations focussed on casual labour, and new managerial modes of university governance. The attacks on campus freedom of expression range from disciplinary measures against activists at Sussex University in the UK to the shut-down of Students Against Israeli Apartheid at York University, to the mass arrests

of protesters during the Quebec student strike of 2012, to coercive student conduct and use-of-space policies that deny students the ability to assemble freely on campus. These attacks go along with a range of changes in employment relations and university governance.

Of course, at some level Austerity U is about dramatically shutting down campus politics altogether as the proportion of university revenue coming from government grants shrinks — making tuition fees, corporate dollars and other sources of revenue ever more important — and universities become increasingly like corporations. The logic of decision-making will then be primarily commercial, whether that means casting student as customers or assessing the value of university research in terms of its contribution to corporate profitability. This logic is already deep-set into the planning processes of many universities that are using cost-benefit analysis as the key tool in setting campus priorities.

The key to fighting the austerity agenda for the universities will be our ability to remake campus politics from below, to challenge the restructuring from above. This cannot be done simply by defending the way things were in some imagined golden age of the university. Rather, it will be done by building campus coalitions for democratic, accessible and decolonized education built around good jobs and equity-oriented employment practices.

Quebec students during the 2012 mobilization raised important visions of a more democratic and accessible education, with very different models of governance and learning. The racist and colonialist perspectives that are hard-wired even into the definitions of knowledge that apply on campuses need to be challenged and remade. The austerity agenda will not be shaken by a defence of the good old days of the university, but by a powerful mobilization from below with the audacity to develop a real sense of where collective learning and solidarity can lead.

*First published in the New Socialist Webzine.*

# Judge Stops US-record Frack Wells in Michigan

3 February 2014, by **Ellis Boal**

**Solidarity Webzine: Your article reports on an important legal victory against fracking. For our readers who may not know much about fracking, could you explain briefly what it is and the problems it causes?**

Ellis Boal: "Fracking" — an industry term — is short for "hydraulic fracturing." In its most alarming form these days fracking is done in wells which have been drilled first vertically, and then after a right-angle turn at the depths, horizontally. The vertical and horizontal legs can each be two miles or more in length. Wells in Michigan are that big.

In fracking, a slurry of water, sand, and chemicals is pumped down at very high pressure to create fractures or expand natural fractures found in the rock. The slurry may sum to millions of gallons, 31½ million in three of the 13 Department of Energy Quality-approved wells which were just enjoined here. The purpose of the sand is to hold open the fractures once they are created and the water pressure relieved — in effect making impermeable rock permeable.

The chemicals used may vary from one well to the next, and have a variety of different purposes (for instance, to reduce friction or to kill organisms which live at the depths). Some which are frequently used are carcinogenic or are endocrine disrupters. Some have ingredients which the industry refuses to disclose on the ground they are trade secrets. One with a secret ingredient used in Michigan — called "acid inhibitor 2" — is a flammable liquid and vapor, which may explode or flash back from a source of ignition, according to the manufacturer. It is fatal if swallowed and may be fatal if inhaled.

There are a variety of other harmful side effects of fracking too, including dangers in the "plowback" material that comes back up and in the disposal of that material.

Once the fracking process is done the well can start producing. Propped open by the sand, the fractures expose surface area, allowing gas to flow into and up the wellbore under its own pressure. In Michigan fracking is done primarily for natural gas. In other states such as North Dakota it is done for oil. One of the problems with gas — a problem aggravated by the fracking process but still a problem even with non-fracked gas — is that some inevitably escapes to the air unburned, either at the wellhead or in the pipelines some of which are decades old. Most of the gas is methane, a tremendously destructive greenhouse gas.

Most people consider the threat to underground water sources as the most important drawback of fracking. I consider the threat to climate to be greater.

**S: You won an injunction against Encana Corporation. What exactly did you win? How likely is it to hold? It is clearly an important symbolic victory, at least—is it more than that too?**

E: The process is slanted in favor of tracking well operators; it is a two step process and Encana can appeal to the second step if it loses but Brady can't if he loses. The judge sent Brady into the process anyway. But at the same time the judge understood that once Encana starts to drill there is no going back. So he enjoined the wells till the process is over and Brady has a chance to come back to court. That would probably be this summer. The chances of the injunction becoming

permanent? As the article says, not bad if Brady handles himself well in the hearing. But even if he wins, the company can re-apply and provide good data to show non-interference. That is, provide good data if it has any. It didn't try to produce the data in court. Even if it does have data, the wellheads would still have to be separated by 660 feet. That requirement might induce the company to pack up and go away.

Meanwhile a separate problem has arisen. The DEQ is now proposing new rules which could go into effect this year after a public hearing. The new rules would eliminate the requirements of 660-foot surface separation and proof of non-interference. But even if new rules go into effect, the judge has power to insist on the old rules.

**S: As you say in your article, "court battles based on regulations cannot prevent the onslaught." What could prevent it?**

E: A "people's injunction" — or an initiative — as described below. The wording of our initiative would ban horizontal fracking and storage of frack waste in the state, and repeal the state's 75-year-old statute requiring DEQ regulators to "foster" the oil-gas industry "favorably," and to "maximize" oil-gas production. Maximizing production maximizes oil-gas profits as well as Michigan's contribution to global warming. For the exact language of our measure, see the Let's Ban Fracking website.

**S: You refer readers to the [letsbanfracking.org](http://letsbanfracking.org) website to help win a "people's injunction" against fracking through a referendum. What would the initiative do? How likely is it to succeed?**

E: Not every state constitution gives citizens the initiative power. But Michigan's does, a result of progressive-populist agitation the early 20th century. Our constitution says if we get a certain percentage of the voters to sign petitions for a measure, it must go on the ballot for an up-or-down vote. This year the percentage works out to 258,000 signatures, which have to be verified by state canvassers. Before going on the ballot the legislature gets a chance to enact it without need for an election. The legislature can also put a conflicting measure on the same subject on the ballot. Or it can take no action, which then automatically places our measure on the ballot.

If voters put a ban into effect the governor cannot veto it, and the legislature cannot repeal it except by a 3/4 vote of both houses. In Michigan, unlike in Vermont, New York, and New Jersey, the legislature — both Republicans and Democrats — have no stomach for a frack ban. Just the opposite. Almost all of them are for increasing gas production. But polls in Michigan and regionally are showing a shift in our direction. See here and here.

**S: How do injunctions and referenda fit in with other strategies activists are pursuing, including direct action, mass demonstrations, and trying to mobilize unions and community groups? Are there any organizations working to build resistance to tracking in your area, or attempts to build such organizations?**

E: There is but little direct action in Michigan. I wish it were otherwise.

**S: What do you think are the next steps, or how do you plan to follow up on this legal victory and push the advantage?**

E: What the legal victory did was embarrass Encana and the DEQ, as well as give some breathing space for people in Kalkaska County. Other suits are in the works which could produce similar results. The main task now is the ballot initiative. It got 30,000 signatures in 2012, and 70,000 in 2013, using an almost- all-volunteer

force of over 500 petitioners. The industry took us seriously. The state chamber of commerce mounted a billboard campaign against the initiative, collecting \$425,000 from the industry according to state records. We have to start over again each year; signatures must be collected in a 180-day period. We will collect in 2015 for the 2016 ballot. This time we are fundraising to hire paid circulators. We have found paid collectors can do a better job.

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A state court judge ordered an injunction in October against Encana Corporation, stopping eight big horizontal frack wells in Kalkaska County, Michigan. The injunction was later extended to five more wells. An administrative hearing is to follow, conducted by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the agency which had permitted the wells.

The order, signed by Judge Clinton Canady III on November 13, held Encana "shall not commence drilling operations" pending the administrative hearing.

They would have been deep shale wells, four miles in measured (vertical + horizontal) depth, in Michigan's Utica-Collingwood layer.

Encana plat of proposed 2013 development, showing 4 existing wells and 13 proposed new wells, on well pads A, B, and C.

The suit, brought by nearby landowner Paul Brady under the state's environmental protection act, highlighted two violations of Michigan regulations: 660-foot surface spacing required between adjacent wells, and the DEQ's failure to investigate the possibility that fractures from the wellbores might interfere with each other underground.

Encana, a Canadian corporation with worldwide assets, has capitalization of US\$14 billion. At \$8 million each, the company would have spent over \$100 million on the 13 wells.

Encana's applications estimate that the 13 wells together would use 387,660,000 gallons of water for fracking.

Three of the wells are in Oliver Township on pad C (see above plat). At 31,500,000 gallons of water each, Brady declared in an affidavit they would be the largest frack wells he knew of in the world. Recently a larger Encana well in British Columbia's Horn River Basin was noted, at 45 million gallons. The Oliver wells would set merely a US record.

The cited regulations apply to all wells, vertical or horizontal, when an operator seeks a "spacing exception."

Administrative regulations "sometimes also called "rules" are enacted by state agencies after public hearings, a process less formal than that used by the elected Michigan legislature for enacting statutes. Typically statutes reflect broad social policy while regulations are more detailed and technical. Once enacted, an administrative regulation or rule has the force of law unless overruled by a court.

Violation of the 660-foot rule was apparent on the face of the DEQ permits. The 13 wells were to be on three pads along Sunset Trail in Excelsior and Oliver Townships. Platted surface separation of the wellheads proved to be far below the limit: 50 to 55 feet.

But proof of DEQ failure to investigate interference was problematic. It was uncovered by a request last summer under Michigan's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by Ban Michigan Fracking (BMF) for information about the permits. DEQ refused at first. BMF threatened a separate suit and sanctions. DEQ relented and said BMF could have it, but for \$516. BMF narrowed the request to include only documents about the spacing exception. Finally 396 pages of FOIA documents arrived, for free.

Brady filed the pages and cited them in his affidavit. None show DEQ examination or discussion of any data on the interference issue. This nailed the case.



# The two regulations

What is the reason for the regulations?

As to spacing, Cornell University's fracture mechanic engineer Anthony Ingraffea says disturbance of young cement due to adjacent drilling activities on the same pad is a key negative influence on well structure integrity. The city of Dallas Texas recently adopted a 1500-foot setback requirement between wells.

As to interference "also called communication or a frack hit" fractures can travel over a mile creating a channel between adjacent wellbores. Communication through the fractures can result in spills and environmental problems at the surface. Brady cited the following: Encana frack operations in New Mexico last fall blew out an old producing well a half-mile away. Two hundred barrels of oil and wastewater went onto the ground.

An oil well being fracked in Alberta in 2012 caused a geyser of oil and frack fluid in another well 3900 feet away. Twenty thousand gallons of oil and frack fluid went on a farmer's field, coating 100 trees with a fine mist.

The Excelsior-Oliver well sites are in pristine woods of the Père Marquette State Forest, an area frequented by hunters, hikers, and snowmobilers. Brady has a young family. He lives 2-3 miles from the involved wellpads and frequently snowmobiles by them. The endpoint of one well was to be a half-mile from the main buildings and lake of the Boy Scouts' 1200-acre Camp Tapico. The Cranberry Lake boat launch and the North Branch of the Manistee River are nearby.

When Encana applied for the 13 wells it claimed the wellbores would be "at least 900 feet apart." This proved to be false. BMF's FOIA documents contained reports called "anticollision" reports. They show the geometry and distances between wellbores (not between fractures). These reports showed the maximum "distance between centers" for two of

the wellbores was 854 feet, at least 45 feet less than what Encana said. Similar discrepancies were found for the other wellbores.

Encana makes corporate presentations every month for investors. It has its eye on Michigan. Early in 2013 the presentations highlighted the company's 429,000+ net acres and 500+ well locations in Michigan's Utica-Collingwood play. The play covered most of the state's northern lower peninsula.

In January 2013 the presentation listed the play's number of well locations even higher, at over 1700.

## Encana arguments

DEQ did not oppose the injunction. But Encana did. Here were its arguments:

First, the company attacked Brady, saying he had no real interest in the case. The possibility he might be injured due to a blowout as he went by on a snowmobile, or that he might have to slosh through thousands of gallons of frack fluid on the forest floor, or that he might have to see the trees coated with a fine mist "none of these were environmental issues, the company brief said: Permits for wells which are too close and might communicate "cannot harm the environment."

When Encana applied for the wells it claimed that data from three nearby comparator wells (pictured here, here, and here) fracked in 2011, proved that underground interference was impossible. But it never actually gave DEQ data from the 2011 comparators. Even if it had, the comparators were not as deep as the 13 new wells and there were no wellbores nearby at the time they were fracked. No promise was made to frack the 13 at the same or lower pressure as the three comparators. When it came to court the company shifted the explanation. It provided one-page "well completion" records for two different wells fracked in 2012 on the same pad as one of the three comparators, and said the two had had "no detrimental effect" on the one. But the 2012 completion records had no technical microseismic, tiltmeter, or streaming

pressure data. There was no 3-dimensional diagram or map of the fracture planning zone. The records did not state distances between the wellbores. They said nothing at all about interference. So which was it, three comparators or two? Shifting explanations are evidence of lying. And even if there were no accidents in 2012, at most this shows Encana was lucky at one pad. Moreover, the applications for the 2012 wells had cited the same three 2011 comparators, and similar to the 13 wells at issue for Brady, they provided no actual microseismic or other hard data. Had he started the suit a year earlier the two 2012 wells could have been enjoined too.

Though the regulation explicitly defines the "location" of a well as measured at the earth's surface, Encana asked the court to measure spacing at the level of the bores' 2-mile deep "productive" portion. Current Michigan regulations do not even define that term.

Encana claimed that DEQ has a good record since 1952 regulating 12,000 frack wells in the state. But it ignored that the great majority of the historic wells were vertical, not horizontal, and they typically used only 50,000 gallons of water. This is a sixth of a percent of what Encana planned for the huge wells on pad C. Stated otherwise, the 13 wells at issue in the case would use as much water as 7,753 of the traditional vertical wells. The DEQ's past record with small vertical wells is irrelevant to whether it has the ability to control the beasts Encana was planning for Sunset Trail.

It claimed that if Brady's case succeeded the end result would be an increase in the number of wellpads and forest impact, contrary to the environmental interests he purports to assert. But equally, the result could be Encana will not drill at all, because of the expense of siting so many wells on separate pads.

Encana's 2012 wells, under construction on well pad C. Photos: LuAnne Kozma.

On October 25, five days before Judge Canady's announcement, Encana applied for two additional nearby wells in Oliver Township. On

November 14, two weeks after the hearing, it withdrew those applications.

## DEQ precedent

The case established a legal precedent. In three of its court briefs the DEQ said:

A party that seeks to challenge the DEQ's decision to issue any permit under [the oil and gas law] has the right to challenge that decision administratively.

There is a Michigan statute which allows administrative appeals of permits, but the statute only allows a producer or owner to invoke it. An "owner" means a mineral owner, which Brady isn't. However the DEQ brief was not referring to that statute. It was referring to "part 12" of its administrative rules for oil and gas operations.

Encana supported DEQ's reasoning (and made no objection to Brady's administrative standing). Judge Canady agreed with both of them.

The surprise result is a member of the public can force a part 12 hearing over any well. No Michigan court has ordered or allowed a permit-objector into part 12 before.

At first glance the ruling looks like an empowering win for citizen activists. Part 12 hearings are under Michigan's Administrative Procedure Act (APA) with discovery and subpoena power. APA hearings must be conducted in an "impartial" manner. They are open to the public. Unlike in a court, the objecting party need not hire a lawyer. The proceedings typically take a year or more. In the meantime the objector can find something improper in the permitting process and get a court injunction.

What is important about the principle is that the DEQ stated it, not just that Judge Canady agreed. When another permit case arises the DEQ has to be consistent and say the same thing.

This is interesting because last summer a governor-approved fracking assessment by the Graham Institute at the University of Michigan said the

opposite. It said ordinary citizens have no right to intervene while a permit application is pending. In a detailed policy/law technical report, one of a series on fracking, it wrote:

Unlike many environmental permitting programs, oil and gas well programs do not historically give the general public the formal opportunity to review and comment on permit applications, or require agencies to respond to comments.... Michigan law gives local governments the opportunity to comment, but not the general public.....

This gave the deflating impression that Michigan law gives citizens no power. The head of the DEQ's Office of Oil, Gas, and Minerals, Hal Fitch, sat on the Graham assessment steering committee and met with the report author before this passage was written. Presumably he endorsed it.

It's true citizens have no power, but not just for the reason in the Graham report, which took no notice of part 12 in relation to permits.

Administrative hearings under part 12

Consider the specifics of part 12:

Its stated purpose is to "receive evidence pertaining to the need or desirability of an action or an order" of the DEQ. Hearings are conducted under APA standards. The APA covers both rulemaking and contested cases. Receiving evidence about the need or desirability of an action is a rulemaking procedure, not a procedure to resolve a contested case. In fact, part 12 makes no mention of contested cases. Commonly it is used to decide whether compulsory pooling is necessary over a mineral owner's objection. DEQ does have a different set of rules for deciding contested cases, but by its terms this set does not apply to oil or gas permits.

Nothing in part 12 prescribes when it may be invoked. The desirability of a permit application which has not yet been granted fits part 12's wording perfectly. Accordingly if part 12 applies to permits at all, Brady need not have waited. He could have started the hearing process while Encana's permit applications were

pending.

Part 12 is expensive, cumbersome, and industry-oriented. Brady argued that Judge Canady should not send him there:

DEQ will itself be the decider of the "need or desirability" of wells it already approved. The proceeding can hardly be termed "impartial."

"Need or desirability" of a permit is not the same as the question whether it complies with existing regulations. Compliance is the standard DEQ is supposed to use to grant or deny a permit. Two different standards means there is a moving target, which the industry knows how to exploit.

One of the part 12 rules says objectors have to submit well production, testing history, and reservoir and geological data when they start the proceeding. A nearby landowner typically has no interest in that kind of information, or access to it without trespassing or hiring an expensive expert. For industry people on the other hand it is their stock in trade.

Part 12 says the objector has to front substantial funds for a legal notice in a trade publication. Industry-controlled Michigan Oil & Gas News is the only such publication in the state. It charges \$22/column inch. The MOGN publisher has the right to refuse a legal notice from someone like Brady who does not subscribe, according to an affidavit in the case. MOGN's refusal would abort Brady's hearing. Part 12 says he must also pay to publish the notice separately in a general newspaper.

The hearing will be a waste of time. Brady's evidence is expected to include the incriminating plat and FOIA documents which are already in the court record. Encana's evidence will be its one-page "good-luck" completion records (see above), also already filed in court. It cannot retroactively present new evidence in support of a permit already issued.

A part 12 hearing has two steps. According to the rules Encana can appeal to the second step if it loses at the first because it is an "owner or producer." As a non-owner non-producer, Brady does not enjoy that right. If somehow he were granted the right anyway, he would have to pay for expensive new legal notices in the

newspapers.

Given the problems with part 12, Brady might find himself back in court sooner than anyone thinks.

A Democratic bill was introduced in the Michigan House in 2013 under which interested people would be able to get a public hearing and have comments considered before a well permit is issued. The precedent established by DEQ in this case means a part 12 hearing requirement is already the law, though the procedures are different than those contemplated by the bill.

## DEQ surrender

DEQ had an explicit duty under the regulations to examine and judge interference data. It had an explicit duty to prohibit wells closer than 660 feet. Why did it suck up to the company instead? This was like a guard giving a prisoner the keys and saying "Let yourself out when your term is over."

The answer does not lie in corruption, intimidation, negligence, or incompetence.

On November 1, two days after Judge Canady's hearing, DEQ published several regulation revisions it is planning to implement in 2014. The particular regulation in Brady is R 324.303(2). The planned revision of this rule will jettison the spacing-exception requirement of 660-foot spacing and review of interference data.

A public announcement of regulatory changes and public hearings had been made on October 22 before the court hearing. The announcement summarized changes which would be made only on other subjects. After the hearing was when DEQ revealed it was targeting the spacing and interference requirements.

This tells us the decision not to examine Encana interference was deliberate, a pre-figuring of what DEQ was already planning without telling anyone.

The only justification for such an end run would be the state's policy "to

legislated into statute in 1939 "requiring DEQ regulators to "foster" the oil-gas industry "along the most favorable conditions" and to "maximize" oil-gas production.

Encana and the Canadian frack industry generally claim to take the issue of well communication seriously. According to voluntary best practices in Canada, interwellbore communication can lead to unintended surface or subsurface flow, or a blowout. To prevent that, frack operators delineate a fracture planning zone. The zone must be based on an estimate of the maximum predicted fracture distance or influence. The number is then doubled. Every other well within that radius is then identified and evaluated for risk methodically.

Michigan doesn't have anything like that even on a voluntary basis, and now the plan is to reduce what little it does have to zero.

The governor-approved Graham policy/law report ignored the whole issue.

The DEQ proposed a second under-the-radar rule change in November. It would permit an operator to drill and frack in a unit that is not totally leased or pooled if the operator claims a "good faith" effort was made to obtain voluntary consent from mineral owners. When production is ready to start the operator can then start a part 12 proceeding to compulsorily pool the unit. Like building the gallows before holding the trial, this is to intimidate hold-outs, including environmental hold-outs. To soften the blow, the term "compulsory pooling" will be changed to "statutory pooling."

## After the hearing

Ordinarily a judge will not order an administrative hearing if it would be a fruitless task due to the result being forgone. But this is what happened here. The end result of the hearing is already written on the wall. Fortunately, when the process ends the injunction will stay in effect for 30 more days, to allow Brady to come back to court.

Under Michigan's environmental protection act, even after a loss in the administrative hearing and even with a new emasculated regulation, Judge Canady has power to reject the hearing result and apply the old standards. He can hold that Encana has to prove its case if it wants the wells. He can hold a showing of past good luck is not sufficient.

One alternative, always open to Encana on the interference issue since Brady started the case last June, was to withdraw its applications and file new ones, spoonfeeding the DEQ complete, rigorous, and truthful data. Meanwhile if the proposed new DEQ spacing regulations go through in 2014 and the company gets around the judge, it could have a clear path on that issue as well. The result would be uncontested permits, and a threat to the enjoyment of hunters, hikers, snowmobilers, and Scouts in the state forest.

One reason why the company didn't re-apply and produce good interference data could be the data just doesn't exist. All Encana has shown are the one-page completion reports from two lucky wells, and those two shouldn't have been permitted either.

As mentioned, the company has its sights on a large swath of northern Michigan. As also mentioned, the state's policy at least for now, is that oil and gas are state-favored special interests.

A Michigan citizen temporarily did put on the brakes. Only time will tell if the injunction holds. Even if it does, Encana still has hundreds more places to try.

Michigan is under threat by many operators in addition to Encana. Court battles based on regulations cannot prevent the onslaught. Far-thinking activists in Michigan are seeking a "people's injunction" "a permanent statewide ban of horizontal fracking. Go here to help.

## Legal Filings

Affidavit of Paul Brady " 10/23/13

Affidavit of Ellis Boal â€” 10/23/13

Supplemental Brief for a Preliminary  
Injunction â€” 10-24/13

Order â€” 11/13/13

Plaintiff's Response to Motions for  
Summary Disposition and

Second Affidavit of Ellis Boal â€”  
10/30/13

*January 30, 2014*