



IV482 - March 2015

IV482 - March 2015 PDF

31 March 2015, by **robm**

IV 482 March 2015 PDF Magazine available to download

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The making of neoliberal Mexico

30 March 2015, by **Edgard Sanchez**

IT'S MORE than 20 years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, and Mexico has not become the developed country that was promised back in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, on the political front, what was considered a democratic opening with the end of the 70-year reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) defeated by the National Action Party (PAN) in 2000, has closed—12 years later, the PRI is back. Why was the PRI able to return to power?

THE REFERENCE you make to NAFTA is very useful in answering this question. Many analysts even talk about the "restoration of the PRI," but we in the Revolutionary Workers Party don't consider the return of the PRI as a "restoration" as such. This is not the return of the same PRI of the 20th century.

Even though the current president, Enrique Peña Nieto, is part of the

Atacomulco group [a political clan inside the PRI], this is not a restoration of the PRI from the times of the welfare state and revolutionary nationalism. This is not the PRI that we characterize as a Bonapartist regime after the Mexican Revolution. [1]

That Bonapartist regime saw itself as the heir of the Mexican Revolution and as a revolutionary government. It didn't just elaborate an entire ideological discourse, but it also implemented a politics typical of Bonapartism, which gives way to some popular demands. This coincided with the implementation of Keynesianism and the rise of welfare states in other countries throughout the world.

Today, Peña Nieto has nothing to do with that. On the contrary, the structural reforms that he pushed through Congress in 2013 and 2014 aren't just reactionary and neoliberal—they are actually counterrevolutionary, since they push

the country back to before 1938. This was the case with the energy "reform" law he pushed through, which will allow the return of American and British oil companies that were expropriated in 1938.

So this is the return of the PRI, but it has nothing to do with the PRI from the 20th century, from the period known as revolutionary nationalism. On the contrary, this is a neoliberal PRI.

The Bonapartist regime ceased to exist in the 1980s when the neoliberal wing took over the PRI. This new generation of PRI leaders, such as Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Manuel Camacho Solás, Luis Donaldo Colosio and Ernesto Zedillo—this whole group of the "Chicago Boys," as we would call them, returned to Mexico, took control of the party and began to change the regime. The process began with the former President Miguel de la Madrid, from 1982 to 1988, but it wasn't consolidated until the

imposition of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the election of 1988.

This neoliberal regime came to power pushing a neoliberal project in terms of the economy and society, but also with a whole discourse about democracy and the end of one-party rule. However, neoliberalism isn't democratic, and that was proved here in Mexico with the imposition of Salinas through electoral fraud of 1988.

HOW DID the Salinas candidacy and then his presidency reflect these changes in the PRI?

SALINAS HIMSELF had many criticisms of his party, the PRI. He often argued that the concessions that had been made historically to the peasantry or the unions had become a burden on the state. Salinas instead emphasized "solidarity" through a social program, called "solidaridad." He even went as far as to flirt with the idea of founding a new political party—the Solidarity Party—in order to break free from these historic concessions to the popular sectors and to corrupt union leaders.

Salinas' anti-corporatist discourse even attracted some figures from the left to his side. His whole discourse emphasized the rights of the individual over those of "special interests groups" like unions and peasant organizations. In the end, Salinas was unable to found a new party and instead relied on the PRI's anti-democratic structure and its connections to unions and peasants to pull off an electoral fraud in the election of 1988.

In fact, as soon as he came into power, Salinas jailed Joaquín Hernández Galicia, alias "La Quina," the head of the national oil workers' union, as a sign that the government would no longer tolerate corrupt union leaders. Peña Nieto did exactly this in 2013 when he jailed Elba Esther Gordillo, the corrupt boss of the teachers' union.

In the case of Salinas, however, it should be made clear that he jailed "La Quina" first of all, to punish him for supporting the candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas [the son of

former Mexican President General Lázaro Cárdenas well known for nationalizing Mexico's oil industry—it is widely believed that the presidency was stolen from him in 1988 due to massive fraud engineered by the PRI].

Secondly, we're talking about the oil workers' union—the most important in the country because of the power of those workers—but also because this is the oil industry. This was the beginnings of an attempt to tame the nationalist tendencies within the union so that it wouldn't get in the way of its privatization.

HOW DID the rise of neoliberal politics in the PRI affect the political arena? How did the left react?

THIS BROUGHT about a transformation of the political regime and all of the other political forces. We often speak about the crisis of the left at the onset of neoliberalism, but it wasn't just the left. All the major political parties were transformed—first of all, the PRI as it left behind its nationalism and became neoliberal.

This transformation within the PRI is what provokes the break by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas [who founded the Party of the Democratic Revolution in 1989]. Cárdenas actually represents the old PRI and its revolutionary nationalist project. Cárdenas himself acknowledged this when he was running on the Democratic Front ticket against Salinas in the 1988 election. He said that the main goal was to save and defend the historic program of the PRI against Salinas and the neoliberals.

This is why it was impossible for us as the PRT to support Cárdenas' candidacy in 1988. He argued that the goal was to return to the old PRI, the regime with which we had been fighting since before the neoliberal wing took over—since the student massacre of 1968, since the student massacre of 1971 known as "El Halconazo," since the legalization of the left, since the disappearances of the "dirty war," since the aftermath of the Mexico City earthquake of 1985.

Throughout that whole period, Cárdenas and his group remained in the PRI. So when Cárdenas came out declaring he would save the old PRI, we rejected his project completely, because not only are we an alternative to the neoliberals, we are also an alternative to the old PRI.

It must be said, though, that back then, we perhaps didn't fully grasp the neoliberal transformation underway in the PRI. This shift also had consequences for the PAN, as well as for the left.

In the case of the PAN—a bourgeois party following the line of Christian democracy—there was a split, just like the split in the PRI between Cárdenas and Salinas. The split in the PAN was between the orthodox wing which followed the line of Christian democracy and which acted as the historic opposition to the PRI, and the neoliberal wing led by Diego Fernández de Cevallos, Manuel Clouthier and a group of northern businessmen who put forward a more pragmatic view of politics.

After the 1988 presidential election, the PAN came out with a thesis arguing that a political regime that isn't democratic in origin can still legitimize itself through its actions once it is in power. This led to a historic agreement between the PAN and the PRI. The PAN effectively made peace with the PRI. At the root of this agreement was the neoliberal turn in both the PRI and the PAN.

WHAT DOES this agreement consist of and how does it benefit the PAN?

THE ALLIANCE between the PRI and the PAN resulted in the so-called "concertaciones," which were a series of secret meetings, where the Salinas administration and the PAN leadership would negotiate the PAN's rise to power in gubernatorial races. From these negotiations, the PAN "won" its first governorships in the states of Baja California and Guanajuato.

In exchange, the PAN recognized and supported Salinas' government—it had won through electoral fraud in 1988, and Salinas needed an undisputed

control of government. So in effect, these two parties decided to negotiate on democratic rights—and for the first time suggest the possibility that the presidency could change hands. This provided a cover for the idea that democracy is advancing.

In fact, the PAN wanted something like the American model—a two-party system. In practice, however, both the PRI and the PAN represented the interests of the bourgeoisie, and they both competed for the support of American imperialism, seeking to prove which one was most capable to push forward those interests.

In the end, there aren't any substantial differences between the PRI and the PAN. It's therefore irrelevant if the PAN comes to power or if the PRI remains in the presidency because they serve the same interests.

For example, when Peña Nieto pushed forward the neoliberal structural reforms, the PAN was, in fact, upset because they had wanted to push these reforms since the times of Vicente Fox [the first non-PRI president in 71 years, elected in 2000] and Felipe Calderón [Fox's successor, who won the 2006 election over Cárdenas on the basis of widespread fraud]. The PRI resisted the reforms when the PAN proposed them—not because they were against privatization but because they wanted to be the ones pushing forward the reforms.

Furthermore, the PAN claims that the shifts within the PRI are a historical cultural triumph for the PAN—meaning that privatization and the break with unions and peasants organizations had always been a centerpiece of the PAN project.

WOULD YOU say that this transition to a new political status quo had been planned beforehand? And how did the neoliberal project manifest itself when the PAN came to power in 2000?

I WOULDN'T say that this political-ideological transition was planned beforehand, in a Machiavellian way. But it was a transition that had always aimed to do away with the Bonapartist regime and was marked by the arrival

of a neoliberal oligarchic power structure that pushed out the old regime.

So in the so-called transition to democracy when Fox became president in 2000, he made a famous statement that his government would be "a government of businessmen, by businessmen and for businessmen." This officially marked the point when the bourgeoisie took over from the Bonapartist regime. From this point forward, the personnel of the bourgeoisie took control of the state, arguing that politicians are corrupt and that's why they put forward Vicente Fox—someone who's not a politician, but a businessman.

The PAN promoted Fox as an individual, exalting the neoliberal principle that what matters are individuals, not parties or programs. For example, Fox was more informal, unlike the PRI. He didn't dress formally like PRI politicians—in fact, he wore cowboy boots and a big belt buckle that said "Fox" on it. And he didn't speak like a politician. So it appeared that he was independent as an individual, rather than a representative of his party. But this was just the cover. After winning office, Fox's first act was to go to mass in the cathedral and walk into the national Congress bearing the cross.

Fox's argument was that businessmen aren't corrupt like politicians, because the wealth of their businesses was the result of their own work. This is, in fact, a mystification because as the saying goes, "Private property is theft." The PAN, however, claimed that they weren't thieves, like the PRI politicians. We argue, of course, that class exploitation is also theft.

Once the PAN was in power, however they also became vulgar thieves, like the PRI. One example was the sons of Marta Sahagún [Mexico's first lady during Fox's presidency, who reputedly used her influence to help her sons' company get large contracts with Mexico's national oil company]. Another is Zhenli Ye Gon [a Chinese businessman implicated in a drug-trafficking scandal in Mexico in 2007], who was discovered with mountains of cash in his living room and who was dealing with Javier Lozano Alarcón,

the secretary of labor in the Calderón government.

Lozano Alarcón is also responsible for the destruction of a national electricity company Luz y Fuerza del Centro [dismantled by the Calderón administration in 2009—its workers, organized in the SME, have continued the struggle to get their jobs reinstated]. He basically became public enemy number one for the Mexican working class. His case clearly speaks to the complicity between the political class—the party and the government—and organized crime.

HOW DID the neoliberal turn affect the left? What became of the project of the PRD, formed by Cárdenas after the fraudulent election in 1988?

THIS TRANSITION wasn't planned beforehand, but it took place at a historic coincidence—the entire system of political parties was transformed by the arrival of the neoliberals in the PRI, which then affected the whole opposition. So the transition to "democracy" took place at a time when the alternating rule of the two parties was irrelevant, because their neoliberal project is the same.

The Party of the Democratic Revolution came out of a crisis in the left, a crisis similar to that of the PRI and the PAN, when the entire socialist left in Mexico—be they Communists or Maoists—dissolved into a different kind of party following cardenismo. The strategic goal of this party was to push the PRI out of power through elections, and to make taking their turn in power the main priority.

As these left parties abandoned their socialist programs, the goal of entering government became a goal in itself—they had become part of a party for a democratic revolution, instead of a social or socialist revolution. Therefore, these parties came to identify the democratic revolution as having a turn at leading the government.

All the shortcomings that PRD members find in their party aren't the defects of individuals lured by

corruption, but rather this shift where all social demands were left by the wayside in a search for votes—since votes and posts in government are what would make the democratic revolution.

The PAN didn't like this project, because they would rather be one of two parties in a two-party system. The PRD aimed for a tri-party system, but one that excludes a political project of the left linked to the working class.

To come full circle to the first question, once Peñón Nieto came into power in 2012, the PRI came back with the argument that they were better in charge of government than

the other party that had taken its turn in power, because after two terms of the PAN, the country was in a state of collapse as a consequence of the drug war. So the PRI made a comeback, but it was the return of the neoliberal PRI.

What we have in power today is a new neoliberal oligarchy. It is no longer the Bonapartist regime where a political clique administered the state and the bourgeoisie was outside of it. Today, the neoliberal oligarchy has at its service several parties that support the neoliberal project. This is best shown by the Pact for Mexico [signed in December 2012, the day after Peñón Nieto took office], a treaty

between the PRI and the PAN, but also the PRD.

Thus, the changes that took place in Mexico were in-depth transformations that also changed the nature of the system of political parties. It's important to mention NAFTA here because it marks the rupture with the past. While the whole discourse of economic development that accompanied NAFTA was false, a historic shift did take place in the political regime of Mexico—and consequently the nature of Mexico's political parties.

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Andalusia: a step in the process

28 March 2015, by Manuel Garí

Teresa Rodríguez didn't claim victory because the PSOE maintained its 47 seats, while it lost 250,000 votes in comparison with the election of 2012; the PP crumbled yielding almost 200,000 votes to the PSOE (a historic landmark in Andalusia) but with its 33 deputies it was not surpassed by Podemos; and Ciudadanos appeared as an emergency replacement for the right that, with 368,000 votes, the majority from the PP, won 9 seats.

The leader of Podemos in Andalusia was not complacent about this important electoral advance for a force which is newly born, without financial means, organizational structure or previous institutional experience in a territory where the Socialist Party maintains strong clientelist networks that still have a significant weight on the electoral roll. However, it is important to highlight some positive aspects of the Podemos result. In its first electoral test after its appearance in the European elections of 2014 it won 590,011 votes, which represents 14.84% of the total in Andalusia, exactly 300,000 more than last year, or an increase of 300% in one year in Andalusia. The Podemos vote came from several

sources: old PSOE voters (around 200,000), former Izquierda Unida voters (another 200,000), greens from Equo (almost 20,000) and the rest from the radical left and former left abstentionists. We should stress the positive cooperation during the campaign between green activists and the "Podemistas" which, unfortunately, did not result in seats for any of the Equo candidates. Podemos achieved the broadest popular mobilization across the campaign with more than 200 rallies and public events, and it's worth noting that the final rally in the velodrome of Dos Hermanas (Seville) brought together 16,500 people, exactly 6,500 more than the sum of those attending the rallies held at the same time by the PSOE, PP, IU and Ciudadanos.

The offensive of the political right and the media against Podemos, fraught with lies and slanders, has been a first sample of the media battle to be waged at the coming elections on May 25 in other regions and in the municipalities and, of course, in the general elections at the end of the year. The economic powers around the big companies in the Ibx 35 have

three goals at the state level that have already been embodied in Andalusia: to stop the advance of Podemos, prepare a replacement for discontented PP voters through support for Ciudadanos and press for a stable grand coalition government between the PP and the PSOE that can be translated into a shared cabinet or a cabinet of the winner supported by the other party. In the case of Andalusia capital's main option is PSOE leader Susana Díaz.

But the Andalusian elections have shown that it is difficult to curb the desire for change by an important part of the working classes who are not resigned, who have abandoned old loyalties and look to Podemos as a means of electoral struggle. The organization of the activists in the Circles, the organization of the Podemos base, is the main political capital of the new organization. Change has begun in the Spanish state. It has begun in Andalusia. And a good symbolic example of this is that Teresa Rodríguez, publicly known as a Trotskyist (environmentalist and feminist) activist in Anticapitalistas, won the most votes in her city, Cadiz, for 20 years governed by Teofila

“Normalization” underway in Tunisia

27 March 2015, by **Dominique Lerouge**

A government to try to bury the revolution

The profile of the key members of government summarizes its function: try to “close the revolutionary parenthesis opened on January 14, 2011”.

Overseeing it all, the president of the Republic Beji Caïd Essebsi, founder in 2012 of the Nidaa Tounes party: a kind of republican monarch, responsible for all the important decisions. Minister of Defence and of the Interior under Bourguiba, he embodies above all the desire to maintain the bourgeois order. A function that he particularly filled in 2011 as prime minister, from February 27 to the end of December.

Under his direct orders is the Prime Minister, Habib Essid, who participated in the Ben Ali and Essebsi regimes as well as that of the Islamists. A former magistrate, the minister of the Interior has also been a zealous servant of the regimes of Ben Ali and Ennahdha.

Symbolizing the “historic compromise” between the neoliberal “modernists” of Nidaa and the Islamists of Ennahda, a ministry has been granted to Zied Laâçdhari, the spokesperson of Ennahda. He is flanked by three secretaries of state of his party.

Embodying a certain continuity with the Ben Ali regime, this government also contains three ministers from the UPL party led by the dubious operator Slim Riahi and three ministers from the ultra-neoliberal Afek Tounes party. This government has a total of 42

members, a little less than half officially representing political parties: Nidaa (19%), Ennahdha (9.5%), UPL (7.1%), Afek Tounes (7.1%) and FSN (2.4%). The other ministers are listed as “independent”.

About the new government, a few comments from the Tunisian left

- The press release of the Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (Workers’ Left League - LGO) of December 28, 2014: “The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière (LGO) refuses to participate in the government of the parliamentary majority, not only because of the alliance scheduled between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes with the participation of the Islamists in the government, but especially in terms of rejection of the economic and social program hostile to the interests of the broad masses as was found in the disastrous budget recently adopted by the Assembly. The Ligue de la gauche ouvrière refused to grant its confidence in the expected governmental composition because its program and its components will only work to restore the old regime in its major choices and orientations. The LGO calls upon the members of the Front populaire to move away from the logic of the imaginary political polarization between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda within and outside of Parliament”.

- Hamma Hammami (Parti des travailleurs (Workers’ Party) and spokesperson of the Front populaire (Popular Front)): “Some people accused in cases of terrorism and assassinations are part of the Essid

government Essid. Activism continues in order to reveal the truth around the assassination of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi, as well as the truth concerning the affairs of terrorism and the martyrs of the revolution”.

- Zied Lakhddhar (Parti des patriotes démocrates unifiés (PPDU - Party of United Democratic Patriots) and Front populaire): “In the sharing of ministries, where there is not a representative of Nidaa Tounes there is a representative of Ennahdha or of a political formation close to this party, as if through a desire to keep closed some of the shadier files of the Troika in the areas of agriculture, equipment, industry, health and areas of the state. For this, each minister of Nidaa Tounes was flanked by a secretary of state from Ennahdha or close to the party, such as health, agriculture, and so on”.

- Mbarka Brahimi (Courant populaire and Front populaire): “In substance and form, this government represents an alliance between the neoliberal forces, personalities from the former regime and the remnants of the Troika”.

- According to Maghzaoui (Mouvement du peuple), the Tunisians are victims of a deception on the part of Ennahda and Nidaa: “Throughout their election campaigns, they presented themselves to the voters as enemies whereas today they find themselves side by side within the same government”.

- In the opinion of Fathi Chamkhi (LGO and Front populaire): “Whether they call it “modernism”, Islamism or frankly neoliberalism, they are only in fact differences of facade. They know it very well! None of them truly has a program, still less a project for this Tunisia which has rejected austerity

and neo-liberal restructuring, and which continues to refuse to bear the costs of it. What counts for them is to convince the real masters of Tunisia, namely foreign capital, that they represent a viable alternative to the former dictatorial regime. It goes without saying that they are pursuing its neo-liberal policy, without worrying about the right of Tunisians to dispose freely of themselves. Their differences of facade are disappearing. It's the end for Nidaa's calls for the broad alliance of democrats for the defence of "civil society" against the "Islamist threat", which have enabled it to build and then to win the elections. The end also of the discourse of the Islamist party on the need to defend the revolution against the representatives of the former Ben Ali regime. Once the election is over, the masks have fallen. It's time for the "sacred union". It is clear that the various expressions of the counter-revolution prepare themselves, by joining together, to go on the counter-offensive against the working classes and the youth who demand a better life and a future".

The new minister of the interior is considered to be a symbol of the desire for "normalization" of the new government. For Kalthoum Kannou of the Association of Magistrates of Tunisia, the appointment of Mr. Najem Gharsalli as minister of the interior is "the worst choice that Habib Essid could make", because he "has played a role under the dictatorship in the harassment of honest judges". In the opinion of Ahmed Seddik (Baath Movement and Front populaire), "The new minister of the interior in the government of Habib Essid, Najem Gharsalli is not authorised to handle the dossier on political assassinations. Najem Gharsalli was involved, under the former regime, in serious violations of human rights, particularly with regard to the infringement of the rights of magistrates in assembly and expression as well as his attempt to overthrow the legitimate structures of the Association of Magistrates of Tunisia". Mbarka Brahimi said: "Najem Gharsalli has been designated to ensure the safety of the Tunisians, but we cannot trust him knowing that it will be difficult for him to discover the assassins of the martyrs Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi".

Concerning the economic and social policies of the government, Fathi Chamkhi says: "The train has already started! It continues in the same direction without outcome, while trying to go faster. Specifically, the government wants to continue the implementation of the second structural adjustment plan dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, as well as the new free trade agreements with the European Union. The social holocaust will continue, which is likely to lead again to an explosive situation".

The "historic compromise"

After having spent their time demonizing each other for nearly three years, Essebsi and Ghannouchi (respectively chairmen of Nidaa and Ennahdha) got serious in the aftermath of the second round of the presidential elections. The premises of a final alliance between Nidaa and Ennahdha were in fact visible since summer 2013: in the aftermath of the assassination of Mohamed Brahimi the presidents of the two parties went to Paris for a secret meeting. Subsequently, other meetings had followed. A second index of this orientation was Ennahdha's failure to submit a candidate for the presidential elections against Essebsi, and its advocacy of "neutrality" during the vote. In acting thus, the Ennahdha leadership opened the door to participation in the future government.

Certainly, Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha have long been opposed on some topics such as the relationship between religion and the state, or on the rights of women and their place in society. But each of the two parties had made the observation that unable to eliminate the other as demonstrated by the results of the legislative elections: despite its unpopularity following two years in power, Ennahdha won only 7.8% fewer deputies than Nidaa. On the economic and social levels nothing fundamental differentiated them. And obviously, what united them was more important than what divided them. Such a rapprochement between the two

fraternal enemies was naturally made under the benevolent eye, indeed more or less friendly pressure, of the major powers and international institutions.

The only thing that had prevented the two old foxes from implementing too quickly this project of "historic compromise" was the problems that such a policy was likely to cause in their respective parties. Both needed time to limit the damage. Simultaneously, the leaders of the two parties tended to their respective bases to reassure them and improve their reciprocal relationship of electoral forces prior to the parliamentary elections.

The choice of the king

A large part of those who had voted for Nidaa Tounes at the parliamentary elections, and then for Essebsi at the presidential election saw this choice as an effective way to "get rid once and for all of Ennahdha and its ally Marzouki". They have paid the price. For Nidaa, the participation of Ennahdha in the government has been difficult to swallow, particularly among women. Fathi Chamkhi explains: "many, especially among those who voted for Nidaa, feel betrayed by this alliance which has returned to the government the Islamists that they wanted to remove, by voting for Nidaa. The argument for the "useful vote" against the "Islamic threat" had allowed Nidaa to siphon the votes of several parties, as well as a portion of those of the Front populaire".

According to a Nidaa leader, nearly 80% of the members of this party were in mid-January opposed to the participation of Ennahdha in government. The same was true of 90% of the Executive Bureau. But Essebsi decided to the contrary and on February 5, only one member of Nidaa opposed the vote of confidence in the government including the Islamists. In acting thus Essebsi wanted to have the votes of Ennahdha who, with 69 members, represent 32% of the Assembly. He hoped thus to shelter his parliamentary majority from the

mood swings of its different components, all the more so in that:

- A majority of two-thirds will be necessary to pass certain laws to be implemented in conformity with the Constitution passed in January 2014;
- The government will have to be strong enough to face the social mobilisation aroused by the implementation of neo-liberal measures dictated by the IMF and the World Bank.

Why the Ennahdha leadership backed Essebsi

If the leaders of Ennahdha have decided to give allegiance to Essebsi, who they had previously fiercely fought, it is above all because the Islamists wanted to absolutely keep a place, however modest, inside the executive. In doing so, they intend to protect themselves against the fate suffered by their Egyptian cousins. They hope also to perpetuate the many jobs in the administrations they have provided to their clientele during the two years they have been in power. Being in government should also facilitate the stifling of at least a part of the abuses to which they are linked: multiple assaults by Islamist militias, repression of the uprising in Siliana, the attack on the national headquarters of the UGTT, the assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi and so on.

The price to pay for such a reversal is high in the ranks of Ennahdha. A large part of its members and of its electorate wanted to vote for a candidate of the party at the presidential election. They rejected the position of "neutrality" and actively campaigned for Marzouki. Fathi Chamkhi commented: "Ennahdha helplessly witnesses the narrowing of its electoral base. Its ideological discourse, which had enabled it to win the elections of 2011, is falling apart. After its failure in power, its alliance with Nidaa has lost it any credibility in the eyes of broad layers of the popular classes who had fallen, three years ago, under the

charm of the Islamist ideology".

Some historic figures, like the former secretary general and former Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, have left. But, finally, no member of Ennahdha refused to vote confidence in the government. During the vote of confidence on February 5, the parliamentary opposition comprised 18.6% of members:

- 9.3% representing the left-wing opposition to the government: essentially the Front populaire, the Mouvement du peuple (Nasserite), the MDS deputy and the independent deputy Adnen Hajji. All voted against confidence in the government,
- 4.9% originating from the "troika" in power in 2012-2013: the CPR of Marzouki and the Courant démocratique (a split from the CPR) who voted against confidence; and the dissidents of Ennahdha who abstained.
- 2.5% of Nidaa dissidents: one of them voted against confidence, the other abstained.

The position of the Front populaire

This coalition, which operates by consensus, comprises most of the left and Arab nationalist forces. It was set up in autumn 2012 on the basis of the rejection of the policies of both Ennahdha and Nidaa. In the wake of the assassination of Mohamed Brahimi (one of the national leaders of the Front), on July 25, 2013, the Front nevertheless participated in an ephemeral National Salvation Front alongside Nidaa Tounes. The Front has nevertheless subsequently managed to successively meet several tests:

- Refusal in January 2014 to vote confidence in the government which succeeded that of the Islamists of the CPR and the social democrats of Ettakatol;
- Reaching a consensus on the heads of list for the legislative elections of October 26;
- Increasing by 2.5 the number of its

deputies in the Assembly;

- Then increasing its vote in the first round of the presidential elections by a magnitude of 2.4 in relation to the votes obtained in the parliamentary elections;
- Affirming the need to fight both Nidaa and the Ennahdha-Marzouki duo (in power in 2012 and 2013), contrary to the supporters of "anyone but Ennahdha and its ally Marzouki";
- Fighting the austerity budget and refusing to vote for it in the assembly;
- Refuse to vote confidence in a new government, or participate in it.

Reaching a consensus on these various points was not inevitable in advance given the heterogeneity of the Front, the different political trajectories of its components, some mistrust inherited from the past and the memories of the explosion of the first experience of regrouping following January 14, 2011. Politically, the challenge to the Front was simultaneously to:

- Not become a satellite of Nidaa;
- Defeat the manoeuvres of Nidaa who wanted to justify their reversal by claiming falsely that it was the refusal of the Front populaire to be allied with them which forced them to turn toward the Islamists to constitute a majority in Parliament;
- Adopt a discourse understandable to that part of the electorate and those militants of the Front that supported a vote for Essebsi in the second round of the presidential election, as well as for abstention - or even a yes vote - during the vote of confidence in the future government. After a long internal debate, the Front's refusal to participate in the government and vote for confidence in it was based on three additional arguments:
- The rejection of the presence of representatives of Ennahdha;
- The rejection of the presence of powerful symbols of the old regime;
- The incompatibility between the program of the Front and that of the new government.

On Thursday February 5 by voting unanimously against confidence in the new government, the Front populaire asserted itself as the pivot of the left political opposition to the government.

An assessment of the first phase of the Front populaire

In an interview on February 8, Fathi Chamkhi said: "In a situation of serious social crisis, having 15 members out of 217 (or less than 7%) is not enough. I regard this as a defeat. We are well behind Nidaa (86 members) and Ennahdha (69 members). The Front populaire is even behind the UPL (16 members)... Certainly, the score of the Front populaire could have been worse given its organizational shortcomings, its weaknesses of analysis of the concrete situation, its wavering policies and its repeated hesitancy. The fact of being trapped by Nidaa, after the assassination of Mohamed Brahimi in July 2013, into the National Salvation Front (FSN) was an error. This is very clear today. Nidaa has derived great political benefit, thanks to its manoeuvres within the FSN, and then the way the eviction of Ennahdha from power took place in January 2014.

"The negative impact of the tactical errors of the Front populaire and its lack of strategic clarity have been mitigated by the attitude of its political opponents. In a certain way, the Front populaire was saved by them on several occasions. There has been, for example, an intense debate within the Front around the question of electoral alliances: a part of the Front favoured a "useful vote" and a broad electoral alliance against Ennahdha. Nidaa finally helped to resolve that debate by deciding to run alone in the elections. The same thing took place concerning the vote of confidence in the new government where the Front gave the impression of hesitating about its participation in the government alongside Nidaa. At the same time, Nidaa was much more tempted by an alliance with

Ennahdha. It is true that a minority current, within Nidaa, was opposed to this alliance with the Islamists and wanted to reinforce its position by seeking a rapprochement with the Front. But, in the end, Nidaa opted for the alliance with Ennahdha".

"What is positive is that even if the Front populaire has made mistakes, it has managed to overcome them. Now, all the forces having voted confidence in government will try to isolate the FP. But the FP has sufficient resources to tighten ranks, improve its organization, deepen its ideas and advance its own solutions. I remain optimistic about its future, even if it is not decided in advance. The situation is difficult, but the FP showed that it could manage its tensions and correct its mistakes. It has gained in maturity, even if weaknesses still remain at the level of its analyses. The Front has in its ranks activists with the skills and experience necessary to formulate a coherent and understandable project. It should not limit itself to acting at the level of Parliament, but take its full place in the mobilisations against the social and economic crisis that the country is going through".

The projects of the new government

The government headed by Nidaa Tounes wants Tunisia to fully resume its place in the policies desired by the foreign and Tunisian investors, the European Union, the United States, the World Bank, the IMF, and so on. In continuity with previous governments, the new regime intends to:

- Continue the repayment of the foreign debt, accompanied by drastic cuts in social spending (for example on health, education and so on);
- Develop free trade in the agricultural sector, services and public contracts, which has impoverished millions of Tunisians, in particular in the deprived areas of the interior;
- Lower taxes on company profits, leaving a gaping hole in state revenues;

- Privatize companies confiscated from the Ben Ali clan;

- Continue the compression of social expenditure by reducing subsidies to staple goods;

- Impose "social order" in the major workers' centres, in particular the mining basin as well as in private sector firms where trade union structures were created in the wake of the revolution.

A new cycle of struggles?

After having been in part overshadowed for a long time by the bipolarization between neoliberal "modernists" and neoliberal Islamists, the social question has returned to the first level. Workers in stable employment are today "very affected by the deterioration of their purchasing power. They are really in the process of becoming poorer. Their priority is purchasing power, the cost of the schooling of children and then of the aid to provide them with then when they are unemployed graduates, and so on", says Abderrahmane Hedhili. He continues: "It is manifest at the level of the rate of participation in strikes. Previously, we reached figures between 60% and 90%. Now, it is often 100%, such as for example among teachers or in transport. Never has the rate of strikers have been so high".

For 2014, at the end of October the total number of strike days had already exceeded the record figure of 2011. Since then, numerous strikes have taken place; the level of mobilization is such that some have been triggered without respecting the obligation of filing of notice provided for in the legislation. This has for example been the case in public transport in Tunis and in some regions.

Also "the most precarious are those who work in the shipyards, many of whom earn less than the minimum wage, or again the unemployed graduates, and the unemployed non-graduates that we seldom talk about but which are much more numerous.

This category will not sit idly by. They have waited for four years in the hope of a roadmap taking into consideration their situation. But there has been nothing”.

Evidence of this is the effect of the strikes of precarious workers in the mining basin. Symbolizing the convergence between these two sectors of the population, significant mobilizations were held, particularly in the deprived areas of the south of the country, including local general strikes. In this area, the attitude of the UGTT will play a decisive role. In 2012 and 2013, its national directorate had been mainly absorbed by its desire to ensure a smooth departure for the Ennahda government. Hence its motor

role in the establishment of the consensual framework leading in January 2014 to the adoption of the Constitution and the establishment of the provisional government of “technocrats”, charged notably with preparing for the elections. This policy was accompanied by good neighbourly relations between the UGTT and the employers’ federation, UTICA.

Now that the political objectives that the UGTT leadership laid down have been for the most part achieved, it remains to be seen how its internal relationship of forces will evolve, between those who do not want to “obstruct” the new government in the name of the “national interest” and those who consider that the resolute defence of workers’ interests remains

the basis of trade union action.

It also remains to be seen how the political, associative and trade union left will insert itself in the struggles and meet the expectations of those who have been among the main engines of the revolution: the youth, the unemployed, workers, women and the poor of the interior of the country. The same is true concerning the defence of liberties (which are to this day the only real achievements of the revolution) and the environment. The essential remains today to work among the masses to stimulate their organization and awareness, in order to meet the needs of the new cycle of struggles that will be played out above all at the social level.

We are Steaming Ahead: NUMSA’s Road to the Left

26 March 2015

SA / NPV: Those who are not in South Africa may think that NUMSA is responsible for undermining COSATU and working class unity. How would you respond to this?

KC: When COSATU was established in 1985, NUMSA was in the centre of the unity talks. COSATU was a product of collective struggle and the federation shook the South African landscape under apartheid and played an important part in the 1994 democratic breakthrough. But COSATU, particularly over the last eight years, has almost totally shed its independence. It has become embroiled in factional politics within the ANC and the SACP. The COSATU that used to be a campaigning formation has become an organisation unable to take forward critical struggles - around precarious work, unemployment, the privatisation and commodification of services. We are challenging legally our expulsion and we have appealed for the convening of

a COSATU Special National Congress (SNC). COSATU’s history is not something you walk away from easily.

SA / NPV: How has COSATU got into such a situation, given this history?

KC: Today COSATU is limited to forming part of the ANC’s election machinery. Beyond that, it has a real struggle to influence policy. That has been the case over the last 20 years, since what happened to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). [2] It was a COSATU sponsored idea which originated within NUMSA. We felt the new government should do certain things to reconstruct our country, to move away from white minority rule at the expense of the black majority and to have redistributive policies to address the skewed ownership and control of the economy. The RDP became a compromise between the alliance partners but even after the compromises the RDP office in the

government was closed down, without consultation. A new economic framework was introduced in 1996 and since then the ANC government has followed a neoliberal path. Today the National Development Plan follows exactly the same pattern. COSATU is a mere rubber stamp for neoliberal policies. It is useful for the ANC government to have a labour federation allied to itself, but one which will not make too many noises.

Secondly, there is the old question of wearing too many hats. You have several members of the Central Executive Committee who have multiple leadership roles. The President of COSATU is also a member of the SACP Central Committee, a member of the SACP Politburo, and a member of the ANC’s National Executive Committee. So COSATU can today take a position, but then you leave COSATU and you go and sit in the ANC NEC, and you are persuaded differently. And what happens invariably is that you

compromise COSATU's position.

The third problem is that the ANC and the Party have started to say to COSATU that its outlook has become 'oppositionist', that we speak a language which is anti-ANC and anti-Alliance, and that as a trade union movement we have become 'too political'. That contestation has become factionalised - with one faction supporting the status quo coming from the ANC and SACP, and the other faction saying that our loyalty is to the membership, and to our resolutions, campaigns and programmes.

SA / NPV: Do you think the unity of COSATU still can be saved? Or has the time come for NUMSA, and the unions supporting it, to build a new independent federation?

KC: A couple of things need to be mentioned here. Firstly the dominant faction within the 'voice of reason' brigade is constituted by the public sector unions. That is interesting for a number of reasons. In June 2013 at the SACP 13th National Congress there was a paper delivered that called for a different way of organising in the public sector, along the lines of 'take responsibility for the revolution' - i.e. unions must not be in opposition to government programmes. They must be for better public service delivery, even if it is under austerity measures. So your role must be different to those in the industrial sectors or mining. And that perspective plays itself out within COSATU and it relates to my earlier point about the president of COSATU being a senior member of the SACP. A divide has developed between private sector unions like NUMSA and the public sector unions where there is no tolerance of dissent. This has brought many in the public sector to realise that the leaders have turned against their own constitutions and members. Democratic practices are thrown out of the window. People have decided it is time to challenge the dominance of a conservative, right-wing and corrupt leadership in these unions who behave as though they are shop stewards of the ANC and the SACP.

This is the reason behind the call for the formation of a new public sector

union. This has nothing to do with NUMSA, it would be wrong for us to call for this, but I do think that people were inspired by the resolutions taken at the December 2013 NUMSA Special Congress.

In COSATU at the moment you have eight other unions against the NUMSA expulsion. They decided to demand the unconditional reinstatement of NUMSA back into COSATU and said they will not participate in any of COSATU's structures unless that happens. COSATU's President says over and over again that NUMSA is expelled but metal workers must remain within the federation; some have gone to the extent of building a rival to NUMSA that has applied for membership.

We decided to go to court to expose the deliberate project to get NUMSA expelled and because we want to ensure there is respect for the rules of the federation. NUMSA's view is to fight to reclaim COSATU even if you need to use the courts, but if all else fails we must begin the process of building a new labour federation. It is painful, when you give birth to something and you are no longer a part of it, but you have to move on. The reality is that only 30% of workers in South Africa are organised into unions.

SA / NPV: Why do you see a need to return to the mass democratic politics of the 1980s, and how do you see the United Front going forward?

KC: South Africa is the service delivery protest capital in the world; the neoliberal policies imposed on our people are resisted, but that is a leaderless resistance. It has no direction. Sometimes the protests get violent and the anger is not properly directed. We need a new United Front [after the United Democratic Front of the 1980s] to bring together workplace and community struggles.

One day the SACP says that NUMSA is a 'workerist' formation, the next day they say we are too political, go back to the workplace. But we have always believed in community and workplace struggles coming together. We should bring communities into

worker action and worker action into communities. This is a re-awakening; we have got to take our power back. We have been hijacked by a small, black elite who feast on the state through corrupt means. If we don't get onto the streets, we are not likely to change things.

SA / NPV: We have already seen an aggressive response to developments in NUMSA. Phones have been tapped, cars and offices broken into, and three shop stewards were murdered in 2014. How do plan to take on this very clear opposition?

KC: It will never be easy to build an alternative to the ANC, a 103-year-old national liberation movement. In Africa and Third World countries you find huge sentimental attachment to the party that liberated the people. We have no illusions that it will be hard work. But it is necessary work politically to get people to regain confidence. Many who have remained loyal to the ANC this time around decided not to vote. If you hone into some of the metros [large municipalities], the ANC has lost its grip. This is what we must discuss at the launch of the United Front: are we ready to field candidates for local government elections in 2016, and on what platform, or would a Workers' Party have to contest elections?

SA / NPV: How do you see NUMSA going forward as a trade union of metal workers? How far should NUMSA try to steer all these different struggles?

KC: NUMSA will remain a trade union and not transform into a political party. We see de-industrialisation and we think there is no better time to re-industrialise. Beneficiation [of mineral resources] is all talk but there is no action. NUMSA has a task. We have bargaining in all the metal and engineering sectors and autos. We have a plan up to our national congress in 2016 that requires internal union work to service the membership but also to speak to broader socio-economic issues.

On all fronts an alternative is necessary, but NUMSA must never change the foundation on which it

rests - fighting oppression, discrimination and exploitation wherever it is in society and ensuring working-class control in the economy, dealing with gender inequality, taking up shop floor issues. NUMSA is probably the only growing union in South Africa. We said in 2012 that by 2016 we ought to be 400,000 and we are getting closer. In July 2014 we had 346,000 members. You can't feed workers with political slogans. This is why we insist that being a union, responding to the needs of workers, is central and nonnegotiable.

SA / NPV: How do you situate NUMSA in relation to other

international attempts to resist neo-liberalism?

KC: We do international work on the basis of respect for others' independence and political views, and their respect for ours, but realising we are fighting a common enemy. We have links with many countries. In Brazil, we have relationships with the MST and CONLUTAS, but we are not walking away from CUT or PT. Old friends and new friends must appreciate that we will work with anyone who shares our perspective. We are not going to shed our relationship with IG Metall in Germany but we are making new

friends in Die Linke. We are working with comrades in Bolivia and excited about the return of Morales; in the US we have many connections, and we recently received a big delegation from UNITE in the UK. In particular countries there may be tensions; we will not interfere but nobody must choose for us who we will work with. We are doing an international study tour in as part of exploring the new Movement for Socialism; and will be convening a national conference on socialism. We are steaming ahead

Global Labour Column Number 196, March 2015 University of the Witwatersrand

Of rape, censorship and national honour

25 March 2015, by **Praful Bidwai**

The film powerfully depicts, mainly through her parents' narration, the life and aspirations of the 23-year-old paramedical student who was barbarically raped, grievously assaulted and left to die. It's also a quietly celebratory story of the tidal wave of anti-rape protests that followed. Not least, it's an account of how the rapists, their lawyers, and many others, justify brutal violence against women.

India's Daughter isn't a voyeuristic film, nor does it glamorise rape even indirectly, the way many Bollywood films do. It impels the viewer to reflect on the pathologies that afflict Indian society, which viciously discriminates against women and finds a hundred rationalisations for doing so.

That's why the hysterical reaction to the film from the government and the Bharatiya Janata Party is so deplorable, indeed revolting. So is the charge that film-maker Leslee Udwin violated the conditions set for interviewing Mukesh Singh, the convicted rapist, and other prisoners.

BJP MP Meenakshi Lekhi claimed the film would affect tourist arrivals. Urban development minister M

Venkaiah Naidu smelt an anti-India "conspiracy" in it. And home minister Rajnath Singh muscularly declared that his government wouldn't allow anyone to single out India for an anti-national attack related to rapes.

However, Udwin didn't violate any conditions. She showed the full raw footage to the prison authorities, and also the 15 minutes-long edited material used. They raised no objections. Besides, the film doesn't single out India as uniquely rape-prone. Rape, like wife-beating, is prevalent in all countries. This is a testimony to the power of patriarchy everywhere. Rape is grossly under-reported in India because of the stigma that's perversely attached to its victims, rather than to its perpetrators.

Yet, India has recently witnessed a large number of rapes, in particular extremely violent gang-rapes. These have caught the world's attention, not least because of attempts by India's police and political leaders to minimise their incidence and to proffer advice on how women should dress and conduct themselves, or how they should avoid strangers.

But rape has nothing to do with how a woman looks or how "provocatively" she dresses. That's why 82-year-olds or disabled women are raped, as are six-year-olds. Most rapists aren't strangers, but men known to the victims. Rape isn't about sexual attraction; it's about male power, violently exercised to subjugate women. The official responses to the film solely focus on the image it supposedly conveys, and ignore the object—the reality of India, with mass killings of female foetuses, which have left more than 40 million women "missing" over a century. In India, sex-based discrimination begins in infancy with deprivation of food, and carries over into adulthood in countless ways.

Such extreme forms of patriarchy and male-supremacism set the context in which women are pervasively viewed in society as inferior. The dominant view oscillates between seeing women as worthy of worship (an epic hypocrisy this, based on a glorified but mythical notion of motherhood!), and regarding them as sources of temptation and objects of carnal desire, who deserve to be mercilessly exploited: that's their karma.

Common to both is the notion that

women are inherently weak and inferior. They must either be sexually used and enslaved, or be protected and defended by men. But they must never have equal status, independent agency or human dignity.

Thus, ML Sharma, a convict's lawyer, told Udwin: "A female is just like a flower... But on the other hand, a man is like a thorn... The flower always needs protection..." He also said: "In our society we never allow our girls to come out... after 6:30 or 7:30 or 8:30 in the evening with any unknown person... We have the best culture. In our culture, there is no place for a woman."

Another lawyer, A P Singh, declared: "If my daughter or sister engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself... I would most certainly take her to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight." Rapist Mukesh Singh said: "It takes two to clap"; since the victim was not a "decent" girl and was out in the streets late at night, she "asked for it"; had she not resisted, she wouldn't have been killed.

These views are shocking, but by no means confined to these men. They are aired day in and day out by khap panchayats, police officials, Sangh Parivar luminaries, judges and ministers, including most recently, Haryana Chief Minister and long-standing RSS functionary ML Khattar.

These same people now see India's Daughter as an attempt to malign India, and a "conspiracy" to tarnish the rising nation's image and prevent it from developing and equalling the West in wealth, stature and prestige. This speaks to a sick kind of nationalism.

The same nationalist argument was used by the Intelligence Bureau and the home ministry to justify the offloading of Greenpeace activist Priya Pillai from a plane to London where she was going to testify before an all-party committee of MPs on the violations of environmental regulations and poor tribals' rights in

Central India by Essar, a corporation headquartered in the UK.

Pillai, they told a court, would indulge in "anti-India" propaganda aimed at hindering India's "development" and prosperity by prejudicing Western investors. They stooped to trying to drive a wedge between Pillai, and other activists such as Aruna Roy, Medha Patkar, PV Rajagopal, Admiral Ramdas, Nandini Sundar and myself.

They claimed we never testified before a foreign/international committee, but "relied on all the institutions of India's vibrant democracy...", using methods like dharnas, fasts and marches, litigation, and the print and electronic media. This is an invidious distinction, which some of us refuted (scroll.in/article/707224). We pointed out that many good activists like Dalit anti-caste campaigners have used UN and even European Union and US forums, as is legitimate. However, the official argument shamelessly justifies and invites the exploitation of India's vulnerable Adivasis and mineral resources by foreign corporations. So much for "nationalism"! It also victimises those who try to enforce India's own environmental laws and fundamental rights. Mercifully, the Delhi High Court has just quashed the ministry's order.

The Indian state since colonial times has used its "sovereign" power not to defend and extend the rights of the people in whom real sovereignty lies, but to limit, circumvent and violate these rights, whether by banning publications and activities, by refusing visas to progressive scholars and activists, or by shielding corporate criminals and communal thugs.

This is true with a vengeance of the Bhopal disaster, in which the government imposed an unethically paltry settlement on the victims and betrayed them. It also applies to the deportation of Japanese activists who wanted to share the experience of the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe with the protesters at the Koodankulam atomic project. It holds true of scores of people's movements and NGOs now being harassed under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act.

The Indian government's international conduct often shows an admixture of hubris, insecurity and paranoia. It dishonestly but selectively presents much of what it fears, or what it's uncomfortable with, as a "trap" or "conspiracy" designed to prevent India from exercising its sovereign options and advancing its legitimate interests.

Take the nuclear issue. India in the 1960s opposed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on the ground that it created "Atomic Apartheid", or a division between nuclear and non-nuclear-weapons-states. Beneath the lofty moral stand was the crass intention to keep open the option of acquiring nuclear weapons, revealed in India's 1974 test.

In the mid-1990s, India similarly demonised the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which Nehru had pioneered in 1954. New Delhi denounced it as a "trap" to eliminate its sovereign security options after arguing for decades, including in a case before the International Court of Justice, that nuclear weapons never give security and nuclear deterrence is "morally repugnant".

Two years after rejecting the CTBT, India brazenly embraced deterrence with five nuclear blasts and joined the "Apartheid" system, on the side of its masters!

This reflects, and in turn reinforces, a toxic, bellicose, blind nationalism. This is disseminated through textbooks, school prayers, soap operas, newspaper articles, TV debates, and "Mera Bharat Mahan" slogans painted on trucks and autorickshaws.

Such toxic nationalism holds that it's India's unique destiny to be the world's greatest nation "never mind persistent mass poverty, malnourishment of half its children, and hideous inequalities. This is exactly the kind of hubris that inspired Hitler's and Mussolini's fascism and brought disaster upon their peoples. We must fight it resolutely.

Republished from the author's [blog](#).

In case of illegitimate debts creditors can be contravened

21 March 2015, by **Éric Toussaint**

KB: Most of the arguments against debt restructuring and cancellation are based on the conviction that agreements and laws have to be respected. You claim that debts can be illegitimate and their cancellation necessary to ensure the rule of law and respect of constitutions. What are legal frameworks and arguments do you base your arguments on?

ET: The first lesson of history should be that debts have often been written off. The major debt cancellation in the 20th century was the London agreement about the German debt in 1953, when 62 percent of the German debt was written off [3]. The creditors furthermore agreed to give up their demands for German reparations for the occupation and destruction of the Nazi regime during the Second World War. This was a very important debt write-off agreed on by the creditors. Later the Polish debt was written off when Poland decided to leave the Warsaw Pact under the presidency of Lech Walesa. In 2004 creditors canceled 80 percent of the Iraqi debt. There are numerous examples of debt cancellation.

The legal basis for the debtor country to decide as a sovereign state not to pay back the debt is its constitution or the fact that there are priority obligations a State has to meet. These are mostly connected to its duty to guarantee the human rights of its population. This obligation has priority over any obligation to repay a debt and therefore, if repaying debts impedes the possibility for the government to guarantee public healthcare, public education, peace and security for its population, the said government can decide not to repay the debt.

Moreover, if the debt claimed by creditors is an illegal debt then the contract of indebtedness is null and void. In this case it is possible for the sovereign state to tell its creditors that what they are demanding to be paid back is in fact illegal. In the case of the Eurozone we can claim that at least parts of the loans given by the Troika of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund in 2010 to Greece and Ireland, in 2011 to Portugal and in 2013 to Cyprus, are illegal. In the case of Greece I would claim that the loans are illegal in their entirety.

But the majority would say that the Greek government agreed to the conditions of the debt and even requested the loans. Why do these arguments not convince you?

In 2010 the Greek government did not abide by the Greek constitution. They accepted the loans given by the Troika without consulting the Greek parliament. Besides, as a party to the contract, the Troika had an obligation to oversee and control that the constitution of the debtor country be respected; that is, that the other party of the contract abides by the law.

Furthermore, we can consider the actions of the states that are the creditors. In 2010 fourteen states, all members of the Eurozone, gave bilateral loans to Greece for an amount of €53 billion. However, article 125 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that no state can engage its finances to support the finances of another member state of the EU. This Article, i.e. the constitutional basis of the EU, was breached.

Therefore we have a situation in which the Greek government did not respect

the Greek constitution while these fourteen states of the EU did not respect the constitution of the EU.

This is important because the new government brought to power by democratic elections in Greece can now say that neither the constitutions of Greece nor the EU constitution has been respected. Moreover, the Statute and the rules of the IMF have not been respected during the bailout of Greece, in which the IMF participated, thus there is a legal basis to claim that the debt is illegal and should not be paid back.

But are there legal tools to enforce such legal arguments? The Council of Europe has found that the effects of austerity measures breach the standards of the European Convention on Human Rights yet nothing has changed. The European Parliament has concluded that the acts of the Troika were outside of any legal framework. Yet, in February we saw pure force used to ensure that such illegal situations continue.

There is no European institution which could intervene and give support to and reasons for the SYRIZA government not to repay the debt. There is no one with the authority to say that they authorize the new Greek government not to pay back their public debt. However, what a democratic government could and should do in such a situation is take a sovereign act based on legal arguments. A sovereign act is an acceptable and recognized action inside the international community. However, the government has to take responsibility for its sovereign act and be aware of the consequences. This is a viable option. Especially, since such government could not be expelled from the Eurozone because there are

no legal definition or mechanisms to expel a Euro-member state.

But the sovereign act would mean a one-sided decision to stop repaying the debt, followed by a default, and not an agreed debt cancellation as happened with Germany after the Second World War?

But if we look more closely at the London agreement about the German debt we see that Germany had been in default since 1932. Consequently it was in the interest of the creditors to agree to the write-off of the debt in 1953. On the other hand, if defaulting is based on good and sound reasons and is done to defend the international law and the state's priority obligations, to guarantee human rights of all its inhabitants, then defaulting creates a new correlation of power with the creditors. Their power exists only as long as debt is paid back to them. When one decides to suspend payment, creditors have a problem. It sounds trivial but it is real. John Maynard Keynes said, that if you have a debt of £1,000 to your bank, which you cannot repay, then you have a problem. However, if your debt to your bank is 10 million, which you cannot repay, then this is no longer just your problem. If you suspend payment, it becomes the bank's problem. This is the fact of life and this reality should be used so as to meet human rights.

I do not advocate suspension of debt payment in situations when this is not done in the name of international law and in defense of human rights. However, as shown in the book AAA that we coauthored with Damien Millet, Greece was trapped inside the EU and the Eurozone. I have shown in my works that the Troika gave loans to Greece during the first bailout between 2010 and 2012, demanding that this money be used to repay the French, German, Belgian, Italian and other private banks that had lent money to Greece. The Troika loans were not given to boost the Greek economy to benefit the Greek people. The money given by the Troika to Greece had only one aim: to immediately repay the private banks that were responsible for lending Greece money before 2010 without

controlling Greece's capacity to repay. This is something that is very important for European citizens to know and understand. There are many lies, constructed and spread to falsify what really happened in Greece and to present the Greek as lazy, corrupt... We witness this totally unjust stigmatization of Greece.

It is crucial for people to understand that the construction of the EU and of the Eurozone actually aims at the satisfaction of the particular interests of the very few and of a privileged minority in the EU, represented by big, private corporations. They do not aim at a real integration that would be in favor of the people of Europe. We need to be conscious of what the EU and the Eurozone really are because this is the precondition if we wish to make any proposal for a real change of the situation.

But do you see the possibility that the EU and the Eurozone could be reformed and changed, as they are constructed and as they operate today?

With the victory of the neoliberal ideology and policies in the 1980s, the definition of the EU, its framework, and with the elaboration of the new EU treaties, the construction of the EU integration has been totally taken over and defined by the private interests of big corporations and major economies of the EU. However, people at the time were not conscious of this shift. The official discourse did not say that they, the leaders of the EU, were giving priority to satisfy the private interests of the small minority. The official discourse talked about the creation of an immense zone of prosperity, where many jobs would be created, that would be a space of peace and democracy. If only the countries of former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe enter the EU and the Eurozone they will be given a guarantee to have prosperity and peace.

Now people see that this official discourse was a lie and they are ever more conscious of the reality and of what is in fact happening. We could see this in the results of the last European elections, where participation was low while at the

same time among those who voted there was a high support for a critical stance towards the EU.

We continue to face the question of how to change this EU and it is a very complex question. However, in some ways the answer is simple. We cannot change the EU from inside the imprisoned EU institutions. These are based on a certain model: therefore, the European parliament has no real power. The power is given to the Eurogroup, to the Commission and to the major powers inside the EU. If Germany, France, Italy and Benelux agree on a position, they will succeed on imposing it on others as well. Therefore, we need a refunding of Europe. We need a government capable to disobey what the Commission is asking it to do, if this implies that the human rights of the people in this country will not be respected and guaranteed.

A change could thus come from a democratic government taking the initiative to say that they want to stay inside the EU or the Eurozone but they do not accept the continuation of the same, undemocratic policies imposed by the European Commission. They should enact and demand respect of their sovereign decisions that would be in favor of respecting the human rights of their population.

Are you disappointed in the new Greek government in this respect?

I still have great expectations of what the Greek government could do. The story continues and we will see what happens in the next months. There might still be a chance that they take a stronger stand with the massive support of citizens across Europe. However, it is clear that this is not easy. It clearly implies confrontation with the current centers of power.

How destructive though are the centers of power inside the EU? The arrogance in February seemed immense. At the same time many warn that default opens up a totally uncharted territory.

There is a fear to take sovereign decision. The fear is based on the fact that nobody knows what the next step will be. All the consequences are not

and cannot be known. However, the lesson of history is that when certain opportunities appear one should take the risk. Big changes and progress in the world have been the results of strong and confident decisions.

Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, for example, closed the US banks for ten days to redesign the functioning of the banks and to relaunch the US economy. It took a strong decision and he was not even a leftist. He took this decision because he was confronted with a desperate situation. If at certain times in history this kind of a brave decision is not taken, you lose a historical opportunity. Undoubtedly there is the fear of what will happen if a government takes a strong decision of suspending the repayment of its debt but I am sure that if it has a coherent plan of what it will do, then it can face even such a situation. The first step would be to take control of the banks and guarantee the deposits, then to control capital flow, stop its evasion. This is possible and it has been done already. In March 2013, when the crisis hit Cyprus, provoked also by the policies of the EU and Eurozone leadership, the government in Cyprus decided, with the support of the Eurozone countries, to control the movement of capital. In Iceland since 2008 there have been such controls of capital and it is considered a success story.

Therefore, there are examples in the 20th century and in the last decade of strong decisions taken by governments in Europe and the USA. If we look further afield, examples multiply. In 2007 and 2008 I was the adviser to the Ecuadorian government when they decided to make an audit and suspend the payment of their debt. There is also a story of a great success. The situation of their economy today is good, the level of unemployment is low, living conditions of the population have improved. They had confronted their creditors with good reasons.

One of the aims of my works is to make such examples of successful disobedience, alternatives and resistance more broadly known. They

prove that alternatives can and do exist. People who say there are no alternatives are wrong. What is needed is only to be brave enough and able to implement them.

Let's return to your argument that debts should be canceled on the basis of constitutions and human rights. However, constitutional courts have frequently defended austerity and European fiscal treaties in the name of protecting human rights in the long run. In their interpretation keeping financial markets happy is a precondition for the fulfillment of the state's obligation to meet human rights. How do you respond to such argumentation?

In many countries the constitutional court is controlled by conservative forces. The constitutional court can thus give reasons and arguments for the actions of the executive power while the parliament is similarly under the government's executive control. The situation is similar on the EU level, where the Commission has control over the European Parliament and the member states.

If we again turn to the American experience with the New Deal in the 1930s we see that several decisions taken by Franklin Roosevelt were at first considered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the USA. When Roosevelt enforced a minimum wage, based on a federal law, the Supreme Court abrogated his decision. Roosevelt however, persisted and for several years struggled against the Supreme Court. In the end, he succeeded in imposing the New Deal thanks also to the great support of the population.

This proves that Supreme and Constitutional Courts can and often give interpretations of the constitution, accepting and confirming some laws, which are in contradiction with the spirit and the letter of the constitution. They submit their decision and adjust their final judgments to what the executive power is asking of them. Therefore the participation and mobilization of the citizens, to create pressure and

support the democratically elected government, which wants to change the situation, can make the difference and contribute to the needed change.

If we turn back to Iceland, we can see that between 2008 and 2012 this was exactly what happened. People were mobilized; they stayed on the streets and put the institutions under immense pressure. Only so could they succeed. Today, Iceland remains the only country that put in jail private bankers following the financial crisis. No other European country did this. It happened because of people's mobilization. Therefore, this combination of peoples' mobilization and democratically elected government, which wants to change the situation and has for this the support of the people, is crucial. Citizens need to remain active and they must truly want to change the situation, otherwise the conservative institutions and powers will only continue with the same conservative, neoliberal and undemocratic policies.

Do you see that this peoples' support and mobilization can still grow or are we already at the point of normalization, with people embracing stability?

I think there is still at a very good momentum. Especially, if we look at the increase in the consciousness of the populations about what is happening. I expressed my disappointment about some actions of the Greek government. However, the majority of Greek people did not have this reaction. They believe that Alexis Tsipras and his government succeeded in imposing a ceasefire with the Eurogroup. The Greek people see this as a first victory. What happens in the next months has not yet been written. We will see... what happens in Greece, in Spain... There is a growing support for the fundamental change of the situation. It will take time, years and it is not easy but I remain confident. There is still a possibility for a positive change.

Translation by Éric Toussaint, in collaboration with Christine Pagnouille

Four years after Fukushima, India is flogging a nuclear dead horse

21 March 2015, by **Praful Bidwai**

In reality, there was no breakthrough—only sleights-of-hand to substitute administrative memoranda for proper laws enacted after prolonged legislative debate. This trick, meant to please US nuclear suppliers at the expense of India's public, falls foul of Parliament's intent. But it still won't work. Westinghouse and GE, now owned by Japanese capital, are unlikely to sell reactors to India so long as an element of liability exists.

As for the projected capacity tripling, it belongs to an established pattern of extravagant promises and poor performance: if the Department of Atomic Energy's 1967 projection had materialised, India by 2000 would have had 43,500 MW in capacity; it had 2,700 MW! Tripling assumes that 19 reactors would be started and completed in six years, when average global construction time is 10 years. Eight reactors are to imported, an unlikely prospect given that companies like "nuclear champion" Areva, for which the Jaitapur site is earmarked, are on bankruptcy's verge.

More important than all this is Indian policy-makers' and -shapers' disconnect from reality and obsession

with nuclear technology, inherited from Homi Bhabha. Contrary to pet myths, nuclear power is rapidly shrinking worldwide. Its share in global power generation has declined from a peak of 17.6 percent in 1996 to 10.8 percent. Its contribution to the world's commercial primary energy production has also fallen from the 1984 trough of 4.5 percent to a new low (4.4 percent).

The number of nuclear reactors operating worldwide peaked in 2002 at 438. It now stands at 390. [4]. Nuclear has witnessed no major technological innovation for decades: 170 reactors (44 percent of total) are 30 years old/older. But only 65 new reactors are under construction, four fewer than a year ago. Reactor capital costs have more than doubled over a decade. Operating costs have risen 16 percent in three years in some countries, just as renewable wind-power and solar photovoltaics get cheaper every month.

Fukushima, the world's worst-ever nuclear accident [5], has probably sounded the death-knell of the global nuclear industry. It brutally exposed the unaffordable nature of nuclear risks even in developed societies, and has made atomic power publicly

unacceptable everywhere. In 2014, no nuclear reactor generated power in Japan—for the first time since 1963. The Fukushima clean-up will take four decades and cost \$200 billion. No bank or insurance company will back nuclear—unless crony-capitalist governments subsidise it.

India would commit a historic blunder by expanding nuclear power generation, given both its generic and domestic safety record (itself appalling), its high costs—Jaitapur power will cost Rs 15-plus a unit and bankrupt Maharashtra's consumers—and the popular opposition it faces at every site. This last is the greatest barrier to nuclear activities everywhere: it pits the nuclear establishment directly against the public and raises serious questions regarding the democratic content of decision-making about energy, people's needs and their right to veto projects they consider unsafe.

Nuclear has nothing going for it—not when wind and solar energy annually grow worldwide at 25 and 40 percent-plus, when their generation costs fall to those of gas- or coal-based power, and their modularity and flexibility establish their unparalleled versatility.

Feminists in El Salvador Continue Fight for Justice for Women Imprisoned for Obstetrical Complications

19 March 2015, by **Kathy Bougher**

With the support of the Salvadoran feminist group *La Agrupación Ciudadana por la Despenalización del Aborto* (Citizen Group for the Decriminalization of Abortion), Guadalupe was granted a pardon and freed from prison in February 2015 after serving more than seven years. They mounted a campaign on April 1, 2014 to gain pardons for 17 women (“Las 17”) imprisoned under strikingly similar unjust circumstances. While Guadalupe’s release is cause for great personal and political celebration, she was the only one of Las 17 to receive a pardon. The *Agrupación* is asking why and demanding justice for the other 15 still serving sentences of 15-40 years. (Another woman was released because she had completed her sentence.)

The 1997 Salvadoran law banning abortion under all circumstances is one of the most punitive in the world. One of the extreme consequences is a political climate and legal mechanisms which permit prosecutors and judges to convict poor, young women for terms of up to 50 years when they experience obstetrical complications, have unattended births resulting in the death of the neonate, and then seek emergency treatment in public hospitals. Medical personnel accuse them of abortion and turn them over to police. Then charges are amended to aggravated homicide. Against this draconian landscape the *Agrupación*, formed in 2009, works to free women who are unjustly imprisoned on abortion-related charges and to reform the laws banning abortion.

The Salvadoran Supreme Court’s decision on Guadalupe’s pardon noted “judicial errors.” [6] Once the Supreme Court approved her request for a pardon, the matter went to the National Legislature. In a nail-biting vote that yielded just the bare minimum number of votes necessary, the 31 leftist FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional) representatives and eight centrist allies in the Salvadoran legislature voted to grant her pardon. Within weeks President Salvador Sanchez-Ceren signed the pardon and Guadalupe was freed after more than seven years in prison.

The United Nations Human Rights

Office called the decision to pardon Guadalupe “ground-breaking.” [7] They also urged a review of the legislation banning abortion. Rupert Collville, spokesperson for the UN Office of the High Commission on Human Rights, emphasized that several human rights organizations “have regularly expressed serious concern about the total ban and criminalization of abortion in El Salvador.” [8]

Systematic pattern of rights violations

The *Agrupación* has always maintained that what happened to Las 17, along with other women accused of and incarcerated for abortion-related charges, comprises part of a systematic pattern of violations of human rights based on misogyny as well as class and social prejudices. Harvard sociologist Jocelyn Viterna and Salvadoran lawyer Santos Guardado published an extensive analysis of the violations of rights in *El Faro Académico*. [9] They described how in the women’s trials, prosecutors controlled the narrative in court and organized their version of the story to drive it toward a “logical” conclusion of a guilty verdict. The accused women did not testify, and their versions of their stories, which expert reports from physicians who reviewed the 17 cases find to be credible, are never heard.

Viterna and Guardado also found that:

- The police who investigated the alleged crimes only gathered evidence that would incriminate the women, and consistently failed to gather evidence that would corroborate the women’s story.

- The doctors who treated the women post-partum routinely failed to investigate likely birth complications.

- In some cases [prosecutors] did not present evidence that favored the defendants’ innocence, even when they had it in their possession.

They cited the story of Teresa, one of Las 17, a factory worker and single mother. She didn’t know she was

pregnant until she gave birth in a latrine, passed out, and found herself in the hospital charged with the death of the infant. Viterna and Guardado document numerous contradictions in the medical and legal records. The fetal autopsy says the baby was full-term, but it was never weighed because, the records say, “there was no scale.” Teresa’s story, which would put the pregnancy at about six months, was never heard in court. Nor were witnesses who could have corroborated her story allowed to testify. The judge told Teresa that it was not reasonable that she did not know she was pregnant, even though during those months Teresa went to two doctors, and neither diagnosed her pregnancy.

The judge relied heavily on a “floating lung test,” used as decisive evidence in eight of the 17 women’s trials. Forensic medicine expert Dr. Gregory Davis reviewed the cases and emphasized that the test has been known to be highly unreliable for more than one hundred years. [10] At the same time, the judge ignored the government autopsy report’s finding that the neonate died from perinatal asphyxia, “a medical condition and not a criminal act,” according to Viterna and Guardado. In Guadalupe’s case, Viterna and Guardado noted that after listening to incomplete and contradictory testimony and evidence, the judge provided this description of the unspecified “action” that he alleges Guadalupe took to cause the death of her son:

“In accordance with the evidence obtained in the present case it is determined that the defendant, CARMEN, [Guadalupe], performed an action that affected a legally protected life, given that the defendant actively produced the death of a NEWBORN, who was her son...”. [emphasis added]

Abortion rights in El Salvador

El Salvador’s twelve-year civil war between the U.S. backed Salvadoran rightwing government and military and the leftist FMLN guerrillas ended in 1992 with the signing of the Peace Accords, and the FMLN became a

political party. However, the rightwing ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) party maintained control of the government, dominating from the last few years of the war until 2009.

The fight for abortion rights in El Salvador has complex roots, tightly interwoven with the profound religious and social stigma around abortion and the reluctance of the traditional male-dominated left to take on the issue. The struggle for abortion rights has been included in the feminist agenda since the early days of the movement in the late 1980s, but not always as an action item. The tremendous social stigma, varying relationships with the left, and differences in visions around strategies play into the political complexities.

In 1997 feminists went to the Legislature to attempt to decriminalize all abortions. [11] At that time abortions were permitted only under three circumstances: when the life or health of the woman was at risk, when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest; and when the fetus had abnormalities incompatible with life outside the uterus. However, rightwing politicians, the Catholic Church and right-to-life groups organized a vociferous opposition to decriminalization and shocked feminists by managing to tighten the criminal code so that abortion was completely criminalized under all circumstance. The law abolished those three conditions and imposed a penalty for abortion of two to eight years in prison. [12] Additionally, medical personnel who participated in an abortion could be sentenced to six to 12 years in prison.

Then, religious fundamentalism won another round in 1998 when the legislature amended the Constitution to declare that life begins at conception. The FMLN split its vote, with some voting in favor of the constitutional reform, which allowed it to pass.

As Elaine Freedman explained in the Nicaraguan publication *envio* [13], the FMLN feared having a pro-abortion vote used against the party in upcoming elections. The Constitutional change created the

mechanism whereby prosecutors could amend abortion charges to aggravated homicide, which carries a prison term of 30-50 years. More recently, when the *Agrupación* asked medical personnel why they reported women to police, several replied “off-the-record” that they felt strongly pressured to do so by prosecutors who had visited public hospitals to remind them of the law.

The vague 1997 law also includes prison terms of two to five years for those who “induced” a woman to have an abortion or who “facilitated” an abortion through economic or other means. Even many feminists feared that this meant that publicly advocating for legal changes could lead to imprisonment. However, the organizing continued over the years, sometimes more covertly than overtly.

Over time Salvadoran feminist organizations and other allies in the social movements have taken on the issue and spoken publicly. There exist diverse opinions within the feminist movement regarding strategies. Some groups favor working toward complete decriminalization right away, rather than starting with the reinstatement of the three conditions that were legal before 1997.

The Importance of Data

Reliable data concerning abortion and the application of the anti-abortion law are hard to come by in a country where the practice is criminalized, miscarriages and stillbirths fall under the umbrella term “abortion,” and even saying the word aloud is stigmatized. However, the *Agrupación* took on the task of attempting to quantify and interpret data on abortion-related criminal charges. That meant visiting every courthouse in the country and manually reviewing all cases that might be relevant.

In 2015 the *Agrupación* is in the process of updating the data. According to their 2013 publication, *From the Hospital to the Jail*, during the period 2000-2011,

- 129 women were charged with

abortion-related crimes, 49 were convicted, and 26 are serving prison terms—all with convictions for homicide. Most of received prison terms of three years or less, which were usually suspended.

- 68 percent of the women charged with abortion-related crimes are between 18 and 25 years old. What is particularly alarming is that 25 percent of the women are between 18 and 20 years old. Twenty-seven percent are illiterate or have no more than a third-grade education, while 52 percent have no income and the rest have minimum wages jobs. [14]

Understanding that the law has only been applied to poor, young women who rely on public hospitals means understanding that women with the economic means utilize private clinics and hospitals or travel outside the country to receive appropriate medical care.

Prejudices and myths

Just what constitutes the crime of “abortion” is not clearly defined in the statute. Additionally, the term abortion is highly stigmatized in Salvadoran society, and for many even pronouncing the word aloud is shameful. Abortion is synonymous with “assassin” and “baby-killer.” The word abortion remains a catch-all to name a broad swath of possible events including miscarriage, stillbirth, precipitous birth, or other obstetrical complications that result in termination of a pregnancy. The more precise terms and phenomena are not part of the popular lexicon in the society, nor that of most of the medical and legal personnel involved in the women’s cases.

Elaine Freedman explained some of the patriarchal myths that feminists associate with criminalizing abortion. “[M]otherhood is women’s most important role and therefore, since it is their ‘natural’ duty, all women should be mothers. Another is that every woman’s duty is to sacrifice herself for her children.... Collaterally, a third is that a woman who thinks about herself is ‘irresponsible.’”

Therefore, says Freedman, feminists perceive anti-abortion politics not as a way to save babies' lives, but as a way to "keep women in their traditional roles." This helps clarify why so many of the judges and prosecutors justified convicting Las 17 by accusing them of not doing everything possible to save the life of the child, even when the woman was in shock or unconscious. [15]

The Case of Beatriz

The horrifying realities in El Salvador gained international attention in 2013 with Beatriz, a young mother with life-threatening illnesses who became pregnant. Her doctors determined that in addition to the medical threat to her life, the fetus was anencephalic (lacking a brain) and would not survive outside uterus. Based on her doctors' advice, Beatriz requested an abortion, which was of course illegal in the country. With the support of the *Agrupación*, she took her case to the Salvadoran Supreme Court, which ruled against her, and then to the Interamerican Human Rights Court, which eventually ruled that the Salvadoran government had the responsibility to take the necessary actions to protect her life and health.

At 26 weeks of pregnancy, doctors performed a procedure to deliver the baby, which lived five hours before dying. Beatriz survived, although her health remains precarious. Beatriz became dinner-table conversation and pushed Salvadorans to talk about a real woman and a real story and to try to imagine what they would do if they or a family member were Beatriz. Her story helped shift the narrative from the fuzzy fundamentalist fear-mongering to the stark realities Salvadoran women confront. By then the FMLN held the presidency for the first time in history, and feminists pressured President Mauricio Funes to make a statement. At a public event feminists displayed a banner reading, "If Beatriz were your daughter, what would you do?" Funes stated that Beatriz "has the right to decide about her life." [16]

Beatriz's struggle was an

uncomfortable one for the government, and most officials stayed silent, with the notable exception of the Ministry of Health. The physicians treating Beatriz and the highly respected Minister of Health at the time, Dr. Maria Isabel Rodriguez, actively advocated on Beatriz's behalf in spite of the fact that the only legal avenue for the *Agrupación* to take the case to the courts was to file suit against those same physicians for not performing an abortion. [17] The major efforts to get justice and save Beatriz's life came largely from the *Agrupación* and not from the government that is charged with protecting the life and health of its citizens.

From Beatriz to Las 17

The campaign for Las 17 has again brought the issue into the public storm, and the political landscape is evolving little by little. A few days after the *Agrupación* filed the pardon requests, the FMLN legislative block sent an official letter to the *Agrupación*, signed by every member, stating their support. Three months later, on July 1, the *Agrupación* convened a large demonstration in front of the National Legislature and attempted to speak directly with legislators. The date marked three months since the filing of the petitions and the end of the time frame legally specified for a response.

Despite requests for appointments two weeks earlier, not one legislator was available. However, in December 2014 Sigfrido Reyes, President of the National Legislature, took the public position that "the cases of the women should be reviewed, and in some cases pardoned." [18] Then, when the petition reached the Legislative, the FMLN voted unanimously in support, even with legislative elections looming just six weeks later. Those 31 votes, along with 12 other independent votes, provided the bare minimum necessary for passage. The legislative plenary sessions were marked by vicious comments against Guadalupe from ARENA legislators.

The discourse from the right

The Salvadoran right is notoriously conservative, fundamentalist and misogynist, as evidenced by their actions and statements. They control mainstream media, and columnists representing groups such as Si a la Vida, an anti-abortion group, and the Catholic fundamentalist group Opus Dei, have easy access to the opinion pages. In addition, members of Opus Dei and Si a la Vida hold key positions in governmental institutions that make decisions about accused women. [19]

The right-controlled media utilize provocative and hateful rhetoric, highlighting and distorting the most sensationalist details of Las 17. They continually deny that any woman is imprisoned for abortion, and all are heartless assassins of their babies, who were all born alive. While technically none of Las 17 was imprisoned for abortion, all of their convictions grow out of the existence of and misapplication of the anti-abortion law coupled with extreme misogyny.

This writer analyzed examples of this type of inflammatory discourse in the media in RH Reality Check [20]:

"Tragic occurrences do happen, but they are not always the result of a deliberate action. [Rightwing columnists] extract from their proper context particularly lurid autopsy details. The context lacking is not just textual, but also the social and political contexts in which the women live. The document utilizes passive constructions such as, 'In many cases asphyxia occurred,' conjuring a terrible image of a woman asphyxiating her baby without explaining how asphyxia can occur before and during birth and omitting the distinct possibility that it happened without any criminal action. Medical professionals concur that asphyxia can be the result of complicated, unassisted births, which all of Las 17 experienced. [21] This reflects extreme poverty, not criminal intent."

Moving forward

In March 2015, President Salvador Sanchez-Ceren of the FMLN, called for an end to “machismo” in the country. [22] Although he did not specifically mention abortion, *Agrupación* President Morena Herrera responded to his declaration by calling on the President to assume “public responsibility for the grave situation of

violations of human rights, such as that of 15 women whom [the Supreme Court left imprisoned].” [23] Herrera affirmed the position of the *Agrupación*, that the Salvadoran State has the responsibility to correct the errors that have been made and to secure justice for women unjustly convicted and to be sure that the situation does not repeat itself.

However, with longtime partners such

as Amnesty International [24], the *Agrupación* also moves forward with plans to explore other national and international strategies for freeing the rest of Las 17 and changing the law. As Guadalupe pointed out in a press conference following her release, “the world is paying attention.” [25]

18 March 2015

Republished from *Solidarity USA*.

Water: The straw that broke the camel’s back

18 March 2015, by **John McAnulty**

Quite simply it was the straw that broke the camel’s back. It was the final imposition, after years of cuts, charges, job losses and migration, imposed at a time when the Irish government proclaimed an economic recovery to a working class struggling to survive. Yet a limited uptick in economic activity is based partly on the savage cuts in labour costs, partly by cheap money from the European Central Banks and partly on creative accounting by a government facing an election. In reality the programme of austerity will continue until 2054.

The overwhelming success of the austerity has been to make Ireland one of the most unequal societies in the world, as the local kleptocracy concentrate wealth in their hands.

Adding to popular anger was a level of corruption exceptional even by Irish standards. The Irish national pension reserve was raided to install water meters. Denis O’Brien, who became rich through the privatisation of the Irish telecommunications industry, won the contract to fit meters while his newspaper empire attacked water charge protestors. Hundreds of Millions were spent on consultancy fees. In the background was routine corruption that left the water service to decay over decades. In some areas water losses from leaks are over 60% and it was proposed that people be charged for water that was unfit to drink.

A slow rebellion

So what has to be explained is not why the Irish have rebelled, but why it took 6 years to bring about an explosion.

The answers are complex. Industrial struggles and rank and file organization in the trade unions declined sharply with the development of “Social Partnership” in the 1980s. The settlement of the struggle in the North demobilised a layer of left republicans and left as the dominant ideology a form of nationalism that stressed Irish dependence. The main concern of the Irish government since the banking bailout has been to preserve tax subsidies for transnational companies and this policy has gone largely unremarked and unopposed. An extra factor was the lack of social housing. People had to obtain mortgages to have a home, and were persuaded that they had caused the property bubble and that “we” capitalists and workers, were all equally to blame.

In fact there were demonstrations and strikes led by the trade unions, but each demonstration was followed by partnership agreements with government and employers, further austerity and further demoralisation. In fact key union leaders were centrally involved in discussions around the Irish government’s decision to guarantee the banking debt. The trade union leadership

managed the austerity hand in hand with government and the Troika. If workers voted against they were forced to vote again until they produced the right answer.

The majority of Irish socialists adapted to this environment and supported a Keynesian economic programme and a wealth tax within the narrow confines of the Troika programme.

However demoralisation did not lead to a break with the union leadership, but rather to workers clinging on with greater desperation to traditional organizations.

right2water

For that reason the revolt against water charges came through existing leaderships and was subject to their weaknesses. The first force to react to the gathering storm was the left trade unions, who sat up “right2water”.

The unions had the authority to bring together the spontaneous movement of over 100,000 that sparked off the revolt. However they remained within the social partnership structures of the trade unions. It was revealed that they had collaborated in the establishment of Irish water and overseen the transfer of their members from public authority contracts to become employees of Irish water.

For that reason they walked a narrow ground. Their demand was for no charges but not for the abolition of Irish Water. Their only tactic was to petition the government, moving away from street protests when concessions were made and returning when the realized that the mobilization was continuing. They ignored the right wing of the union bureaucracy even when they attacked the mobilizations but joined in right wing condemnations when demonstrators harassed politicians or groups installing water meters.

The contradictory nature of the movement meant that no democratic national structures were built. A loose alliance left the unions with a free hand. The socialist groups accepted this as they themselves had a sectional perspective focusing on elections - the Socialist party staged a silent split to focus on a non-payment campaign. Sinn Fein allied itself to the campaign but its main contribution was to project itself in government, with a promise to repeal water charges.

Carrot and stick

The government strategy has been to try to demobilise the movement through a combination of carrot and stick. . In this case the government response was avoid the immediate use of water meters, promise a low flat charge, offer a bribe to those who registered and offer assurances that water would not be privatised.

The purpose of the changes was to save Irish Water. If it could be preserved as a commercial government company the Troika programme would be maintained and in the long term privatisation would be assured - Irish water is tasked with a €6 billion renovation of infrastructure to be raised in loans.

Once in hock to banks and bondholders there will be no turning back.

Alongside the carrot of reduced charges a programme of repression was unleashed by the government. In working-class areas residents came out to confront gangs installing water meters. Local groups would also picket and harass government politicians when they attended events. The government used the Garda to escort the water meter gangs and the courts to serve injunctions on protestors and form a 20 meter exclusion zone around meter installation gangs. The garda then staged a series of dawn raids. Those who had broken injunctions were swiftly jailed.

The arrests included elected representatives of the Socialist Party and the republican group eirigi. The state indicated that the protests could be reclassified as major crimes - blocking a government limo was described as kidnap and unlawful imprisonment!

The only viable response would have been to build a campaign of civil disobedience focusing on disrupting government, judiciary and the police.

A loose network

Unfortunately, despite a significant mobilization when militants were jailed, the movement remains a loose network pursuing different policies. The trade union left have organized a new demonstration, but it remains focused on a strategy of lobbying. The left focus on a non-payment campaign. Both groups focus on electoral intervention.

Of course the campaign should have

an electoral intervention. However at issue is the old dilemma facing socialists. Is the campaign to service electoral campaigns or are the elections to be used to build the mobilisations?

Popular discontent has seen a sharp fall in support for government parties and a rise in support for socialist and republican groups. Around a third of the electorate would vote for independent candidates. However much of the discontent is won by populist or right wing groups. A viable electoralist project would need to include Sinn Fein. They are now in crisis over a history of supporting austerity in government in the North of Ireland and the threat of political collapse if they do not agree to more sweeping cuts.

The overwhelming need is for a national conference of the resistance to set up democratic structures and a series of strategic goals. The immediate aim must be to force the closure of Irish water. If it survives as a commercial company then privatisation will follow.

In a more democratic structure we could interrogate the union leaders and seek to directly approach the majority of workers in Irish water who are in fact seconded from local government contracts and who could close the company tomorrow by returning to their original contracts.

In many ways the Irish working class are now in the mainstream of the European workers' movements. There is now no choice but to fight back. There is a widespread understanding than traditional leaderships have failed. Now the class is experimenting with various forms of resistance, seeking an effective weapon against capitalist oppression.

Tribulations and quagmires of the independence process

18 March 2015, by Josep María Antentas

In reality, the Catalan political system has imploded under the dual impact of 15M and the rise of the pro-independence movement, causing an unparalleled crisis of the CiU, PSC and PP. A particular political architecture has disappeared and another is in the process of consolidation. The moment of truth, 2015 promises to be a momentous year for the outcome of the prolonged political crisis in the Spanish state and for the Catalan independence process. The succession of electoral consultations will be a test, at the Spanish level, of the ability of the PP and PSOE to withstand the impact of Podemos and, at the Catalan level, to determine the relative strength of Mas and the ERC in the fight for internal hegemony over the independence process, as well as the strength or weakness of the latter.

Throughout this long election cycle, the 27S and the succeeding general elections have condensed popular hopes in Catalonia. For some, all depended on a majority in the key independence plebiscite on the first date. For others, it is the victory of Podemos in the second which opens the door to the future. Clearly, there is a bifurcation of possible futures. But are they simply parallel paths, or is it possible to envisage a convergence?

This is nowadays the strategic debate, surprisingly virtually nonexistent, that must be addressed from any perspective that wants to build a popular majority for change in Catalonia and which facilitates the achievement of democratic scenarios and rupture in the Spanish state as a whole.

The current impasse of the independence process is the result of the weaknesses of its foundational discourse, based on the disconnection of the demand for independence from any substantive social content and specific measures for social improvements for the popular classes. The strategic mistake committed by the Asamblea Nacional Catalana (ANC Catalan National Assembly), and long

signaled by the political sectors, like the Procés Constituent or the Candidaturas de Unitat Popular (CUP), has been the construction of a broad majority and a transversal movement of "national unity" without a specific social dimension, considering that the mere demand for "independence" was already enough for an aggregate majority. The approach of "national unity" puts the abstract nation above the concrete, but providing the independence process with a citizen rescue plan does not divide or fragment it -on the contrary, it strengthens it. Catalan society is profoundly divided, torn by reality, by four years of austerity policies and more than three long decades of neoliberalism. There is no possible unity for what is fractured internally if you obviate the causes of failure, and even more if those who must steer unity they are perceived by many citizens as being responsible for the social debacle.

To obviate the immediate social emergencies and uncritically accept the leadership of Artur Mas is what divides and confronts the social and the national, giving oxygen to the Catalan right and leading to apathy toward the pro-sovereignty process among those segments of the people of Catalonia with less political-cultural identification with Catalanism. A unity that artificially tries to eliminate the contradictions of all sorts that permeate Catalan society ends up shooting itself in the foot. The combination of a national demand emptied of express social dimension and Artur Mas as political head of the independence process has been lethal to any expansion of the latter's social basis beyond its initial momentum.

How would things have been if the slogan of independence of 11S in 2012 had been accompanied by a basic social emergency program? What would it have been like if the "V" of 11S in 2013 had, apart from the demand for independence, expressed the desire for an emergency anti-crisis package? What would have happened

if next to the "President, to the polls" of Carme Forcadell there had been a "President, apply a social emergency program!"? Where would we be if the signing of the decree calling the 9N on 27 September 2014 had been accompanied by a battery of basic measures of citizen respect?

The answer is clear: the forces of the left or centre left present in the independence process, such as the ERC or CUP, would have operated in a more favorable context, and all the social and political organizations outside the independence process (from the major trade unions to the alternative social movements), and their social bases, would to a greater or lesser extent have become involved in it. The social support for the process would have been widened in its popular and working class aspect. Of course the operations behind the scenes of the Catalan financial oligarchy to slow down the sovereignty process would have been even more intense, as would the contradictions that the CDC would have to support. But it would have been very difficult for the latter to climb down and, if so, it would have self-destructed.

The discussion on the enlargement of a popular sovereignty process could appear (erroneously) abstract in the first stage of the process, from the 11S of 2012 up to the 9N of 2014. But the current impasse and, above all, the consolidation of Podemos and Podem make it very specific and tangible. Those who defend only independence (or at least over-determine everything else from this) and are not in sympathy with 15M or the citizen mareas, are forced to confront a quite unequivocal reality: the urgent strategic need to expand the social base of the sovereignty process. This is the challenge that the ANC must openly address if it wants the process to be strengthened.

And, in parallel, those of us situated in the camp of the emancipation of the people at the bottom, in the synthesis between the social and national, in the

fight against all kinds of oppression and inequality, face a challenge that,

at the same time, points to

unprecedented opportunities and a thrilling risk.

“Neither the 13th nor the 15th represent us”

16 March 2015, by **Insurgencia**

Both dates called by the government and the right are set-backs and represent cul-de-sacs for the working class

The 8 March, International Women’s Day, began well, with thousands of women taking to the streets to demand their rights, reaffirm the struggle for equality and denounce the machismo that is deeply rooted in society. These were demonstrations of courage and hope. Very different from what would follow that night, when 8 March came to a sorry end.

In an attempt to capture the moment, President Dilma made a disastrous announcement, whose main aim was to defend the fiscal adjustment already underway and ask the people to show even more patience. A contradiction in itself, because these measures roll back the rights of all the working class, and affect women even more profoundly.

As the president was speaking, saucepans were banged loudly in middle-class neighbourhoods and condos in at least 12 states. Organised on social media, the protest called for her impeachment and shouts of “Dilma Out!” rang from the balconies, some of them quite luxurious, along with much ruder terms and often overtly sexist language. But even if its epicentre was in the upscale neighbourhoods of some regional capitals, it had a political impact and

raised expectations ahead of the demonstrations called for the 13 and 15 March.

But this return towards reaction, with a strong dose of class hatred, which is probably what an impeachment would mean, with the PSDB (the main party of the neoliberal right in Brazil) being the one to benefit, does not mean that it is possible to defend the Dilma government. On the contrary, it is increasingly impossible, because that very announcement by Dilma was to defend precisely what has been distancing the government more and more from the working class, youth and women.

The two dates that mark the polarization between government supporters and the right are both cul-de-sacs for the working class. Each represents its own kind of set-back.

The government has undertaken a brutal attack on workers’ rights with its neoliberal adjustment measures. It used the increase in electricity and gas prices to make the population pay for the crisis in the existing energy system. It raised interest rates and cut public spending, putting the country on the verge of recession and pushing household budgets to the brink of bankruptcy. And at the same time people see important party leaders and public figures up to their necks in plundering millions of dollars at Petrobras.

On the other hand, the demonstrations in posh districts are strengthening Brazil’s traditional right, with strong overtones of class hatred. The move is, moreover a cynical one, because they say nothing about other cases of electoral manipulation, like that of Alckmin in Sao Paulo (Geraldo Alckmin of the PSDB was elected in 2014 for

the fourth time as Governor of Sao Paulo state), they bang no pans against the big cuts programme of Governor Beto Richa in Parana state, and they are certainly not arguing for any extension of rights and progressive reforms in the country.

But it is a strategic mistake to imagine that indignation is limited to the elite. A mistake that is only too common among the most alienated government supporters. In fact, there is a process of corrosion underway at the very base of society, driven by a combination of austerity, cuts, price increases for energy and for food, rising interest rates and the choking off of credit for most people. No government can remain popular with all this going on. And while the government and its defenders underestimate the impact of their unpopular measures, they cede more and more space for the traditional right to win support among broad layers of the population.

The central problem here is this: the socialist left, and all of the left that wants to fight, cannot allow itself to be imprisoned by this polarization.

The political challenge is a strategic one: to build, starting now, a third camp, of political and programmatic opposition from the left, that points towards a different solution for the country, one rooted in the struggle against cuts, in defence of rights, and for popular and structural reforms. We have to create the conditions for another vision of the country to be able to occupy the streets, one that is not hostage to either the Dilma government’s neoliberal adjustment policies, nor to the reactionary alternatives promoted by the right-wing opposition.

Our place is in the streets. Firstly to fight for an end to neoliberal austerity measures - wherever they come from - and to support all social struggles in defence of people's rights; and in the

process to raise high a programme of changes and reforms that point to another kind of future for the country. This is the basic minimum that allows

us to explain that we will not be taking part in the marches of a reactionary, white elite, but nor will we march to defend a government that has again shown it is simply indefensible.

Frank Fried (1927-2015)

15 March 2015

Frank was attracted to the political views of the Socialist Workers Party in Chicago as a teenager. He joined the SWP in 1944 just before he entered the U.S. Navy. It was not a propitious time to be joining the party. Its leaders, including those who led the famed 1934 Teamsters strike in Minneapolis and the SWP's founder, James P. Cannon, were in the federal prison in Sandstone, MN having been unjustly convicted in 1941 of "violating" the Smith Act.

After the end of World War II and his discharge from the Navy, Frank became an active member of the party's Chicago branch. His mentor was Milt Zaslow (publicly known as Mike Bartell), its organizer, and under Milt's guidance Frank became one of the party's youngest leaders.

Frank and the other party members became active in various progressive struggles in Chicago, including the effort to end segregation at the "White City" amusement park on the city's South Side. They played a central role in the "Hickman case," a long-forgotten struggle that only recently was rescued from the mists of history by Joe Allen in his book *People Wasn't Made to Burn* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

Along with Milt Zaslow, SWP members Leon Despres (later a famous member of the Chicago City County), Mike Myer, Carl Schier, the novelist Willard Motley and the actress Tallulah Bankhead, Frank played a key role in the fight to free James Hickman, an African American who had been convicted of murdering his landlord after Hickman's family had been burned to death in 1947 when his

apartment was destroyed in a fire started by the landlord.

Joe Allen begins: "I want you to write about the Hickman case,' Frank Fried told me, gripping his cane with one hand and gesturing with the other. "It was the best thing we ever did and nobody knows about it."

Frank was indeed right about the central role that the SWP played in the Hickman case, but, characteristically, in the account of the case that he provided to Joe Allen, he underplayed his own role in the struggle to gain Hickman's release.

Between 1947 and 1953, Frank played a role in other activities that the Chicago SWP was involved in. However in the early 1950s he joined a minority current led by Bert Cochran, Harry Braverman, George Clarke and Milt Zaslow that had developed political differences with the leadership and James P. Cannon about strategy and tactics in the trade union movement and the best means of building the party.

In 1954, after several years of intense internal debate, the minority, which became known as the Cochran group (named after its leader Bert Cochran), including Frank, left the SWP. The group founded the magazine *American Socialist* and Frank became an active supporter of the publication.

Music and Political Activism

During this period, Frank was fired from his industrial job at the U.S. Steel Works in Chicago after the FBI pressured his employer to discharge him "a widespread FBI practice

against militant socialists in the 1950s. And subsequently, as with other socialist militants, the FBI made it difficult for Frank to obtain another job.

Interested in music, especially folk music, Frank began assisting folk music clubs in Chicago, including the "Gate of Horn," by doing their publicity work. At first he provided assistance gratis and eventually for a small fee. While involved in such activities in the late 1950s, he acquired an intimate knowledge of the music promotion business.

In the early 1960s he formed a partnership, Triangle Productions, with Fred Fine, a former member of the Communist Party. And when the Beatles first came to the United States in 1963, Frank and Fred organized a concert by them at Comiskey Park.

The concert was an enormous success, exceeding all expectations, and Frank and Fred made a small fortune, which launched Frank's career as a music impresario. Triangle Productions went on to organize concerts for performers such as Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Pete Seeger and Frank Zappa.

Frank became one of the most successful and well-known music promoters in the country. But in defiance of Marx's observation that "being determines consciousness," Frank never lost his commitment to revolutionary socialism.

He maintained contacts with revolutionary socialists who had been members of the Cochran group and with those who had been his comrades

in the SWP. He also developed relationships with younger socialists, myself included. I got to know him in 1974 when he lived in Evanston, a few blocks away from where I was living. We had many political discussions that eventually cemented a friendship that would continue for the next 41 years.

It was shortly after his very successful Beatles concert that Frank began sharing the wealth that he had accumulated (and would continue to accumulate) with various socialist and progressive organizations, a process that would last until the end of his life.

One of his initial major financial contributions was to Ed Sadlowski, who ran for president of the United Steelworkers as an integral part of an effort to democratize the Steelworkers

union. Over the course of the campaign, Frank developed a close friendship with Sadlowski.

Frank financially supported many other socialist endeavors, including Solidarity after it was founded in 1986, and became a sympathetic supporter of the organization for almost 30 years, eventually joining Solidarity shortly before he died. He also supported the Fourth International and the political work of the late Peter Camejo's Green Party candidacy for Governor of California, and his North Star Network.

During the 1980s, he broadened his role as a music impresario and developed the Rosemont Horizon in a northwest suburb of Chicago as a major venue for music performances and athletic events. Among the

performers he brought to the Rosemont Horizon were the Rolling Stones.

He became associated with Madison Square Garden in New York City and eventually became the president of the famous Delta Queen Mississippi River steamboat company in New Orleans.

Preceded in death by his first wife, Françoise Nicolas, and his elder sister, Vivian Medak, Frank is survived not only by his wife Alice, but his children Pascale, Isabelle, Bruno, Troy and Teasha, and many grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

With Frank's passing, we have lost one of the very best of that generation. We salute Frank and the legacy he bequeathed to future generations of socialist militants.

Year-end Snap Election and Political Situation

14 March 2015, by **Tsutomu Teramoto**

TERAMOTO Tsutomu

The election was called after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe abruptly decided to dissolve the House of Representative in order to outflank the opposition parties and secure the absolute majority for four more years. DP, the main opposition party, was still in a deep crisis after its catastrophic failure during 2009 - 2012 when it was the ruling party. Other opposition parties were also hit by internal crisis and splits.

The table below shows the number of seats won by each party.



The success of LDP represents a real danger of further rightist turn and destruction of people's rights and livings. Now that LDP secured four years of its control over the

parliament, they will redouble their efforts to clear off what they call "post-war regime" and revise the constitution.

In the election campaign, the ruling coalition systematically avoided debates over controversial issues like "national security", U.S. bases in Okinawa, nuclear power plants, TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement), and the revision of the Constitution. In fact, because of the total capitulation of the majority of the Democratic Party over these issues, only the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party challenged the ruling coalition over these issues.

LDP focused on the "success" or the "progress" of the dubious economic policy called "Abenomics". Although the economic situation were getting worse, most of the people had no expectation for changes. Thus the voter turnout was only 52.6%, the

lowest in the postwar period.

Criticism against the policy of the coalition government was expressed mainly in two ways:

1) The Communist Party increased the number of votes and seats dramatically. CP increased its seats from 8 to 21.

2) In all of the 4 districts in Okinawa, voters supported candidates who rejected the plan to build a new U.S. base in Henoko beach area.

In order to objectively analyze the situation represented by the result of the 2014 election, we have to look into the behavior of voters carefully. The House of Representatives in Japan is composed of 295 seats representing single-seat electoral districts and 180 seats elected from 11 proportional-representation electoral districts. Each voter have two votes - one for a candidate for single-seat district and

one for a political party (or one of the candidates for the political party) for proportional-representation electoral districts. The number of seats doesn't necessarily represent the support for the parties. Single-seat districts are usually fought among only a few candidates. The number of votes for proportional-representation districts gives more objective and accurate picture of the political choices of voters.

Changes in political landscape from 2012 to 2014

The table below summarizes the result of three recent national elections - House of Representatives in December 2012, House of Councilors in July 2013 and House of Representatives in December 2014 - in terms of the number of votes for proportional-representation districts. Some parties were divided or absorbed into other parties during the period. The categories of the parties shown in the left-most column are based on the author's perception.



There are many political parties, only six of them ran for proportional-representation districts in all of the three elections. The voting rates for 2013 and 2014 were almost the same.

We can observe some interesting trends from this table:

- 1) The combined total of the votes for "Liberal/Mid Left" and "Left" are stable - at around 8 million.
- 2) Failure of the far-rights to increase their presence in the parliaments.
- 3) The success of LDP is not so "overwhelming".
- 4) Collapse of the "third pole".

Forces of

"Liberal/Mid Left" and "Left"

1) The combined total of the votes for "Liberal/Mid Left" and "Left" are stable - at around 8 million.

The definitions of "liberal/mid left" and "left" are controversial. In the context of the current political dynamics, the attitude on issues like the revision of the Constitution, nuclear power plants, environment, TPP and so on can be a touchstone to determine the orientation of political parties. So, in this analysis, the parties which oppose the government's policy on these issues are included in "liberal/mid left" and "left".

In the general election of 2012, three parties - Tomorrow Party ("Mirai"), SP and CP - represented this group and got 8.5 million votes in all. In the election for House of Councilors, five parties - People's Life Party ("Seikatsu"), Green Wind, Green Party, SP and CP got 8.2 million votes in all. In the general election of 2014, three parties - People's Life Party, SP and CP got 8.4 million votes in all.

Apparently, the combined total of the votes for liberal/mid left and left is always around 8 million regardless of the voting rate. These voters seem to have strong concerns over the aggressive policies of Abe and LDP toward the revision of Constitution, restart of the operation of nuclear power plants and so on. They are ready to express their concerns in their voting.

Further analysis of the dynamics among this support base of liberal/mid left and left is needed in order to "intervene" politically.

As regards Democratic Party, the score for 2014 election was at the same level as for 2012 if put together with the votes for New Party - The Earth ("Daichi") which allied with DP in 2014 election. Although DP is the biggest opposition party, it lacks consistent policies on critical issues because of its internal contradictions. Some of the "liberal" components of the party got out of the party and formed Tomorrow Party in 2012, and

then People's Life Party in 2013. In addition, even their critical support base in trade unions has been largely undermined.

Failure of the far-right to increase their presence in the parliament

Innovation (Ishin) Party split into two groups - Osaka group led by Toru Hashimoto (Mayor of Osaka City) and a group around Shintaro Ishihara (former Governor of Tokyo). Later, Osaka group absorbed a group which came from Everyone's Party and maintained the third position with 41 seats. I will discuss the implication of this absorption later. On the other hand, Ishihara's group reorganized itself into an ultra-nationalist party, Next Generation Party.

Next Generation Party was said to be very popular among young people. Their new hero, Toshio Tamogami, former Chief of Staff at the Self Defense Forces, boast of his popularity on internet. His aggressive and anachronistic remarks over internet echo the frustration and aggressiveness among people. At the election for Governor of Tokyo last year, Tamogami got 600,000 votes.

Next Generation Party intended to establish an axis of ultra-nationalists to the right of LDP in order to pull LDP further into this direction. However, their challenge proved to be a total failure. They had 20 seats before the election but got only 2 seats. In fact, they were the biggest loser.

According to a conservative author, Tsunehira Furuya, who has been writing about young people's drift to the right, "although not all the supporters of Next Generation Party accept discriminatory remarks and hate speech by far-rights, it is obvious that those who are supportive for discriminatory remarks and hate speech actively supported the party in the election campaign". He pointed out that the failure of this party signifies that voters rejected the

presence of forces to the right of LDP.

It is too early to predict the dynamism of far-right political forces. But, at this moment, some kind of balance seems to be working to contain the excessive antagonism in the society and in the region.

LDP - “overwhelming victory without fever”

The success of LDP is not so “overwhelming”

Although LDP got nearly two-thirds of seats, their victory was said to be “overwhelming victory without fever”. According to an opinion poll by Yomiuri Shinbun (a conservative daily newspaper) just after the election, the cabinet support rate was 51%, 2%’s increase from the rate at just before the election. Usually, this rate would jump up after such an overwhelming victory. As regards the support rate for LDP, it decreased to 36% (5%’s decrease).

According to the same poll, in response to the question “what do you think was the reason for the victory of LDP?”, 65% of responders chose “because LDP is better than other parties” (even among supporters of LDP, 64% chose it), while 14% chose “because there was high expectation to Prime Minister Abe” and only 10% chose “because its economic policy was acknowledged”. In other words, only few people found positive reasons for the victory of LDP.

The findings of this poll correspond with the observation of Furuya, He says, “the verdict of Japanese people through voting was that they don’t fully support Abe government nor categorically oppose it. But they would reject the excess. Two years are too short to have a definite estimation, so they gave him more time.”

In this regard, it is important to notice that many of conservative leaders including high-rank officials have been expressing their concern over the right-wing shift under Abe

government and increasing tensions with China, Korea and even U.S. government.

Contradictory results for the “third pole” parties

There have been a lot of talks about the “third pole” political forces. They were expected to refresh the electoral scene after the much heralded “two-party system” proved to be nonfunctional. Innovation Party and Everyone’s Party, which presented themselves as the champion of the third pole, got 17.5 million votes altogether in 2012 and 11.1million votes in 2013. After a series of regrouping in 2014, these forces, which are now represented by Innovation Party and New Generation Party, got 9.8 million votes in 2014. In other words, they lost half of their votes in these two years.

As regards the third pole, we have to look at both the trend in the number of votes and the changes in their political orientation. The question is whether there are significant changes in the political orientation of Innovation Party after its split with Ishihara’s group (now, Next Generation Party) and fusion with a group of former Everyone’s Party.

According to the questionnaire by Mainich Shinbun, a moderate daily newspaper, the new MPs of Innovation Party are divided evenly over their attitude on the revision of the Article 9 of the Constitution (renunciation of war). It is quite interesting because most of the MPs of this party were proponents of the revision after the election of 2012.

Besides these four observations based on the overall analysis of the number of votes, we can notice some interesting development.

Effect on the time

schedule for the Revision of Constitution

Prime Minister Abe, a grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, who was a controversial prime minister in late 1950s to early 1960s , has an extraordinary desire to revise the Constitution during his tenure. For this personal desire, he intended to secure enough seats (two-thirds majority in both houses) for four more years by outflanking opposition parties. In addition, he intended to secure potential allies within the third pole forces so that his unreliable ally, Komei Party, as well as moderates within LDP cannot obstruct his way.

The result was not so favorable to him. According to the same questionnaire by Mainich, the percentage of MPs who support the revision of Article 9 decreased from 72% to 57% (on the other hand, the percentage of MPs who support the “rights to collective self-defense is 62%, while 23% of MPs oppose it).

Here is an interesting comment on the result of the election on Sankei Shinbun, a daily newspaper featuring right-wing commentators and editors. It deplores, “Although LDP won in the election, it tasted sour for Prime Minister Abe. (...) What Abe wanted in the year-end snap election were not only a victory for LDP but consolidation of the forces of revising Constitution as a whole and further marginalization of the pro-Constitution forces. Although the coalition secured the two-thirds majority, the revision of Constitution seems to have become farther. Now the question is how to reconsolidate the forces of revising Constitution”.

Defeat of LDP in Okinawa

Despite the maneuver of avoiding the debates over controversial issues in the election, the issue of U.S. bases was the focal point in Okinawa. As the result, in all of the 4 districts in Okinawa, LDP was defeated. This

shows the degree of anger of the people in Okinawa against the government which has been ignoring the clear will of the people expressed in a series of elections including the recent election of Governor in November 2014. Even conservative forces rejected the capitulation of the former Governor over the building of a new U.S. base in Henoko district. A coalition was formed among almost all political forces in Okinawa from CP to local leaders of LDP. This coalition is quite important because it is based on the ongoing movements of resistance which have broad mass base in the local society.

After the election, the government renewed its attack on the movement in Okinawa and the confrontation in Henoko is now the focal point of the struggle against the aggressive policy under Abe government.

The success of a broad coalition in Okinawa encouraged progressive people in the whole country. We have to discuss what we can learn from the experience of the struggle in Okinawa and whether it is possible to apply this "model" to other part of the country.

Innovation (Ishin) Party still dominant in Osaka

The result in Osaka also contradict with the general trend. If we focus on the results for proportional-representation electoral districts, Innovation Party of Mayor Hashimoto is still dominant. As regards 19 single-seat electoral districts in Osaka, LDP prevailed.

The number of votes for Innovation Party in Osaka Prefecture was 1.46 mil, 1.05 mil and 1.14 mil for 2012, 2013, 2014 respectively. Adding the votes for Everyone's Party in 2012 and 2013, and Next Generation Party in 2014, the number was 1.69 mil, 1.25 mil and 1.22 mil, respectively.

As regards the opposition parties in both City and Prefectural councils, the number of votes are as follows,



In other words, there were not significant changes between 2013 and 2014 (voting rates were also around the same level) for all the parties.

If we compare the result of 2014 with that of 2012, we can see some changes.

☞ Innovation Party (plus Everyone' Party or Next Generation Party) lost 470,000 votes in these two years.

☞ DP lost 80,000 votes. This is partly because DP could not run for 14 single-seat electoral districts in 2014. In addition, local governmental workers were banned to participate election campaign by bylaws introduced by Innovation Party. In the past elections, they provided resources to candidates of DP.

☞ Only CP increased the number of votes. An increase of 130,000 votes.

☞ The votes for LDP as well as Komei Party kept the same level despite the difference in voting rates.

Referendum on Osaka metropolis plan - unprecedented battle in disorder

It is obvious that Innovation Party has lost the momentum. After they won elections for Governor and Mayor of Osaka Prefecture and Osaka City, respectively, in November 2011 and made a breakthrough at the general election in 2012, of that year, conflicts within the party, increasing criticism over its ignorance of democratic processes, a series of scandals by hand-picked administrators of wards and public schools, and aggressive remarks over war-time sex slave by its leader, Hashimoto, undermined the party's support base. "Osaka metropolis plan", which has been the flagship program of Hashimoto, faces difficulty after the party's defeat in the election of Mayor of Sakai City in 2013. Both prefectural council and city council rejected the master plan for Osaka Metropolis.

"Osaka metropolis plan" is, in itself, a neo-liberalist initiative to promote competitive ability of Osaka through big projects like casino, linear motor

train, advanced medical treatment and so on. In order to secure financial resources for these projects, a series of privatization and reduction of public services are planned. Osaka city will be divided into five special wards which have very limited power.

In the prefectural council and city council, all the opposition parties - LDP, Komei, DP and CP - oppose this plan but Innovation Party has been trying to bypass the resistance in the councils by calling for a referendum over this issue.

The result of the general election encouraged Innovation Party because the party managed to maintain nearly as many seats as it had before the election. Especially, the fact that Innovation Party is still the most popular party in Osaka brought about ripple effects on the LDP-Komei coalition. Abe wants to coopt Hashimoto as his potential ally in his drive for revising constitution. On the other hand, MPs of Innovation Party in Tokyo are talking of allying with DP. Komei Party is in dismay. It is said that Soka Gakkai, a religious organization which backs Komei Party, put pressure on the Osaka Headquarter of the party to support the referendum called by Hashimoto. The government confirmed that it will fully cooperate Hashimoto in facilitating the "Osaka metropolis plan" if he wins the referendum.

Grassroots resistance to Hashimoto and Innovation Party has been developing and efforts to unite the forces against the "Osaka metropolis plan" have been increasing.

The referendum to be held on May 17 will be an unprecedented battle beyond party lines. Like the continuous struggle in Okinawa, broad and united struggle is needed. It is not a choice between LP-Komei coalition and Innovation Party, What is needed is a united struggle to oppose both Abe and Hashimoto.

This article was published in the February 2, 2015 issue of "Kakehashi", weekly publication of JRCL, Japan Revolutionary Communist League.

Translated and supplemented by

“What we want to socialize is the possibility that we are all happy”

14 March 2015, by **Miguel Urbán Crespo**

Miguel Urban has participated in Podemos from the beginning of its history, but has never clung to the official line of the party. Number seven on the Podemos list for the European elections, he says he feels uncomfortable when ranked as a critic, but it is certain that he has defended until the end a political and fundamentally organizational model different from that which Podemos adopted at its constituent assembly in October 2014 by an overwhelming majority of votes. The text included the prohibition of dual organizational membership, which prevented Miguel Urban from standing for the leadership of Podemos until this week, when the other organization in which he is active, Izquierda Anticapitalista, decided that it would no longer be a political party, but a movement under the name Anticapitalista. With this obstacle overcome, the candidate for the post of secretary general for the Community of Madrid with the list Podemos Ganar Madrid, made up of 32 members with a certain influence in the organization, faces more than three weeks of campaigning against Luis Alegre, a candidate very close to Pablo Iglesias. [26].

Why has there been no convergence with Luis Alegre and his team?

You would have to ask them. There never is convergence if the two forces do not want it, that is obvious, but some have more responsibilities than others. We wanted it, and we have demonstrated this, as Luis Alegre recognized himself in several interviews. All our meetings have been open, whoever wanted could participate. But, in addition, we expressly invited them. We have

begun to speak with them on January 4, 2015, and we have negotiated with Luis Alegre when we did not know yet that he was going to be the candidate. They came to the meeting of January 11 and told us that they were interested. In fact, it is curious because the people that we had proposed on that day then received calls from them. Not only did they come, but they noted the names that we proposed for the list.

But they did not give you their reasons for refusing this convergence?

They have not given their reasons. They came to the meeting and then there was silence. We have launched appeals and we have shown goodwill. But, on their side there has not been this goodwill and it is they who should provide explanations. They also said they wanted to have a list with those who are in agreement with the documents that were voted for at the Si Se Puede meeting in October 2014.

Does it bother you being ranked among the critics?

No. I am critical, but not of Podemos, I am against the policies of the PP and Ignacio Gonzalez, and I believe that Luis Alegre is also.

But you have also been critical of the Podemos formation?

Rather than being critical, I am positive. One thing does not preclude the other. Rather than criticize the other model, I would say that I have proposed one which seems to me better. When it is the first which has been chosen by vote, I have accepted it, as have between 90% and 100% of Podemos members. When they say

that I am critical, I would answer yes, but of the policies of the current government of the Community of Madrid, and not of Podemos; among other things because we must let them prove it in practice.

Is there a concentration of power in a specific sector of Podemos?

I believe that there is a concentration of functions which seems absurd given the quantity of persons of value that there are within Podemos. Absurd and not very healthy. If Luis Alegre is elected secretary general of Podemos Madrid, I think he will hold about eight positions within the formation.

What differentiates your project from that of Luis Alegre?

I do not know, I told you a moment ago. We will have to see what he proposes, but I do not think that there will be a lot of differences. The only thing I know from day to day is that we have done everything publicly, in a transparent way. They have been able to see our political and organizational documents. They could propose amendments and participate in the drafting of these documents. I do not know the text that they are preparing, I do not know who prepared it or how they have done it, or even if they are going to submit under the name of Claro Que Podemos, although everything indicates that this is what they are going to do. In any event, we are moving in a similar framework, a more or less common way of doing things, although perhaps we should pay more attention to some things.

Which?

Rank and file participation is fundamental for us, as is the

participation of organized civil society and social movements, within the specific structure of Podemos, but without having to integrate into it. I think that is a question of respect for the social movements and therefore an element of difference. On another point, I am adventurous perhaps, but we give a lot of importance to advancing programmatic proposals for Madrid. We want to obtain a regional parliament which, after the election, works immediately to bring down Ignacio Gonzales with clear proposals and throughout the next three weeks, we are going to move in this direction.

Does your list reflect more the left within Podemos?

No, because we are all involved in Podemos. I am on the left, but I agree with the position that exists in Podemos according to which we are not interested to talk so much of left and right because that would lock us into a political space which does not correspond to the social majorities who are suffering from the crisis. By this I do not mean that we are embarking on a journey to the centre, or that the social majorities are in the centre: there are political proposals at the centre of the political debate. We want restructuring of the debt to be at the centre of the political debate because this will be the only way to get out of the crisis. Joseph Stiglitz himself has said this, a Nobel Prize Laureate for Economics who is not exactly on the left. Thomas Piketty also says this. That means that our proposals are not only realistic, but also essential to emerge from the crisis.

How does the Podemos of today differ from the organization that you wish to build?

I have been involved in the construction of an alternative organizational model which clearly establishes my position and I think that all this must pass the test of practice. The majority of people are not in agreement with the complete lists (Listas planchas, that is, lists that have as many names as there are positions to be filled). This is seen in Plaza Podemos or in the fact that many lists of Claro Podemos have not been completed, as has happened in

Murcia, in Malaga and Seville. I am against complete lists with a list template already filled in because this eliminates plurality within the Citizen's Council. In Barcelona, all the lists that did not emanate from Claro Que Podemos obtained 49% of the votes, but because of the majority they had not a single seat on the Council. This seems to me to be a little schizophrenic. I think it will be necessary to revise this in the next national assembly, because it is vital to respect plurality.

Do you see chances of winning? If so, will you be presenting your candidacy in the primaries to select the Podemos candidate for the elections in the Community of Madrid?

I believe that we have every chance of winning and people see it, because here it is possible to follow the debate in a public manner. I do not want to beat Luis Alegre, but Ignacio Gonzalez, and if I am the secretary general, the first thing I will do is see how I could integrate Luis Alegre and his team to bring down Ignacio Gonzales. But I have not yet taken any decision about the regional elections.

There have been three successive PP leaders at the head of the Community of Madrid with their grandiose projects and their privatization of public health - where to begin?

The first thing we will do is talk with the civil society and the social movements which have withstood the various neo-liberal policies applied here, in order to know what emergency program is needed for the first 100 days of government. There will be a proposal to develop the program which we will present at the elections to unseat the mafia of the PP and Ignacio Gonzalez. We have a proposal regarding a citizen rescue (as against the "rescue" of the banks] and throughout the campaign we will have the opportunity to be even more concrete. We will speak of realities such as hidden privatizations and those who have been only too visible. In any event, there are the national bodies and those of the region, but I believe that we will win the elections, both in Madrid and at the level of the

Spanish state, which will allow us to develop, little by little, the policies that we are proposing. We must defend what we consider as something more than public services, what we can consider as common rights, such as water.

The autonomous community must also have the competence to fight energy poverty for the people of Madrid. We can no longer count the number of people who can afford neither electricity nor heating. We must encourage more the development of a productive fabric different from that we have known it up to today, through a green economy, which creates more jobs and is more profitable from an economic point of view. We have to finish with the brutal wage differentiation that we are experiencing in the Community of Madrid, the worst in all the country. 52% of the population of the capital earns less than 900 Euros per month. It is barbaric and we must find solutions. Sometimes, I am told that in Podemos we want to nationalize and socialize. But what we want to socialize is the possibility that we are all happy and this is not without importance. For this, it is necessary to settle a series of essential material questions.

What about the air? The pollution measurements in January in Madrid have triggered all the alarms

There are two questions here, that of the productive system and the system of transport. Madrid does not have only three million inhabitants because there are a lot more people who use the transport system of Madrid that those who live there. In reality, it is more than double. In the planning of Madrid private transportation has been promoted to the detriment of public transport. The M30 motorway is an example. We must address these issues through a reflection and a collective participation. There is a need to develop public transport, it is fundamental. See how the metro has degraded, because the municipal councillors never use it.

And how do you propose to redistribute wealth?

There are studies that show that in 150 years the income scale in Madrid has not changed, nor its geographical distribution in the city. This also applies to the entire Community of Madrid. It isn't the same thing to live in Móstoles, in Pozuelo or in Las Rozas, there are major differences. The greatest increase in income in the east of Madrid has occurred in Rivas-Vaciamadrid, one of the six cities of the Community where the per capita income is the highest. This demonstrates that the public policy that is applied, in this case that of Izquierda Unida, also has a social influence.

The public policies that Izquierda Unida has applied in the Rivas municipality so are positive?

There have been some positive elements and negative elements. Are there more positive elements than negative? Of course, if we are talking about the PP you find more negative elements than positive in its management.

It would be necessary to analyze the whole of the policies that have been applied over the last fifteen years, which is a big task. For example, I believe that the policy on public housing in Rivas was very interesting, because this is the Spanish municipality which has built the most public social housing, in absolute figures, not in relative figures. But it has also privatized the public housing enterprise which is now bankrupt, which seems to me to be bad. I believe that in Rivas there are a lot of things that can be improved, but this does not detract from that was very good.

Returning to Podemos, you are number seven on the party list for the European elections. Will you sit this year?

I do not know, it will not depend on me. I do not know if I should go to Brussels as a European member.

At the time Pablo Iglesias, Teresa Rodriguez or Pablo Echenique return, it will be your turn to sit.

Has the leadership of the party said anything to you about this?

Nobody has said anything to me.

If you are offered the chance to sit in the European Parliament and you must choose: Madrid or Brussels?

I will speak first with Pablo Iglesias to see where he thinks I am the most useful. I have not thought about it yet, I will have to think about this with my comrades of my party.

Madrid is one of the key locations for Podemos, and as Iglesias pointed out on Saturday Andalusia is another. How will the early elections there affect Podemos's schedule?

First we will have to see if they finally take place or not. Anyway, Teresa Rodriguez has been saying for three months that we are ready with the best list and the best project to transform Andalusia when the time comes. We will be ready.

Priests fill the political void on the left

14 March 2015, by **Dan La Botz**

The Catholic Church was from the 1500s to the mid-twentieth century among the most reactionary forces in Mexico, always allied with the landlords and the government. There were famous exceptions, such as Father Miguel Hidalgo y Castillo and Father José Manuel Morelos y Robles, both of whom led the radical wing of the Mexican Independence movement of the early 1800s, still by and large the Church and the priests were arch-reactionaries. But after John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, some Mexican prelates and priests moved to the left, embracing not only church reform but also the Theology of Liberation. Today one finds Bishop Raúl Vera calling for overturning and replacing the Mexican government with a new democratic government to be built

from the grassroots up.

One might expect such demands to come from the left—and sometimes one does—but the largest left party, National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is focused on winning elections and raising him to the presidency in 2018, and while it has criticized presidential corruption in the “white house” affair, has not attempted to lead the most recent wave of protests over the killing and kidnapping of the Ayotzinapa Teachers College Students on September 26. Though small left political parties, clandestine guerrilla groups, and armed self-defense forces appear to abound in Mexico, none of them has the credibility or the mass following to put itself forward as the leader in the current prolonged political crisis. The

National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE) of the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), strong in the southern and western states, has played some role in organizing a mass opposition to government policies, but it is not a political party capable of putting forward a genuine political alternative. Many Mexicans, especially young people, don't believe in Congress, don't believe in the election authorities [27], simply do not trust any political party [28]. So, now the Catholic Church has taken up the task of social and political criticism as well as the proposal of alternatives.

Padre Goyo

Each of the Catholic priests who have taken on the role of defender of the

people has his own political roles and has carved out his own political space. The nearly 50-year old Padre Gregorio López [29], better known as Padre Goyo, heads a parish in Apatzingán, Michoacán, a territory controlled by the Knights Templar drug cartel. (He is not to be confused with another Padre Padre Goyo, Gregorio López Gorostieta [30], who was found murdered, presumably by one of the cartels in the town of Tlapehuala, Guerrero on December 26, 2014.) Padre Goyo, who at home wears both a clerical collar and a bullet proof vest, has become famous in Mexico for fingering drug cartel figures to the Mexican police, among them the mayor of Apatzingán who was subsequently removed from office. An erstwhile defender of the region's armed self-defense organizations and of their most prominent leader, Dr. José Manuel Mireles Valverde the community of Tepalcatepec, Goyo also criticizes other self-defense organizations that he believes are fronts for the cartels.

Goyo has also created the Citizens Council Responsible for Promoting a Healthy Fabric of the Social Order or CCRISTOS, made up of local businesspeople and professionals; with that group and the Federal Police has carried out raids on Knights Templar center in Apatzingán. His method had been to organize the middle class and to seek an alliance with the government and the police authorities. His flamboyant behavior and outspoken manner led the Church to send him to Rome where he is supposed to have met with the Pope who reportedly set limits to his activities, though he continues to be kept at arm's length by Mexican church authorities.

Padre Goyo recently traveled to the United States speaking in Mexican communities from Los Angeles to Chicago to New York. When I heard him speak in Queens, a tireless if sometimes rambling speaker whose discourse was filled with anecdotes about the drug lords' many murder victims and tales of his own struggle for justice; he lashed out against the cartels, promoted his own strategy of organizing middle class reform organizations such as CCRISTOS, and insisted that people had to demand

that the political authorities and the police do their job and end corruption. He denied that he had sold out the movement or Dr. Mireles while meeting with the Mexican Minister of the Interior, presenting himself as a necessary broker between society and government. Goyo ended his talk by explaining that he was heading off to South America to speak with prominent leaders, seeking to join forces with others fighting against such violence.

Padre Solalinde

Altogether different is Padre Alejandro Solalinde [31], a 69-year old priest with a calm manner who runs the Brothers on the Road migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, and who has become a leading human rights spokesperson in the last few years. While still a seminarian in the Carmelite order [32], Solalinde and a group of fellow students left the order over ideological differences and disappointment in their education. Solalinde went off to earn bachelor's degrees in history and another psychology as well as a master's in family therapy at the Ecclesiastical Studies Institute of Higher Learning. He subsequently spent 30 years as a parish priest before being asked by the Mexican Bishops' Council to undertake work as the pastor for migrants in the southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. Now a monsignor, he has been awarded the prize for Peace and Democracy and the Pagés Llergo prize for Democracy and Human Rights. He left Mexico in 2012 because of death threats, but subsequently returned to continue his work.

Thoroughly disgusted with the Mexican authorities, Padre Solalinde recently said [33], "Peña Nieto, you should know that your government has reached the point that it is only a question of time, before we carry out a peaceful change, we are going to do what you and the three levels of government— and especially the legislators who represent no one— have failed to do." In the struggle for peaceful change in Mexico, Monsignor Solalinde has been cooperating with Bishop Raúl Vera López in working to bring about a

Citizens Constituent Assembly.

Bishop Raúl Vera López

Bishop Raúl Vera López [34], today organizing to replace the Mexican government with a better one, has had a distinguished career. Born in 1945, he studied chemistry at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and after graduating in 1968 went off to join the Dominican order, taking his vows in León, Guanajuato in November 1969. From there he went to Bologna, Italy to study theology, later graduating summa cum laude with a degree in theology from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome. He was ordained in the priesthood in June of 1975 by Pope Paul VI. He served in the most important leadership councils of the Dominican order in Mexico until he was named bishop by John Paul II, serving for a while as auxiliary bishop to Bishop Samuel Ruiz García in Chiapas during the Mexican government's peace talks with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1995.

In 2000 he became the Bishop of the city of Saltillo in the State of Coahuila on the U.S.-Mexican border where he put much of his emphasis on human rights work. He has spoken out frequently on the situation of the state's miners, as well as that of other workers, and established the Border with Justice project to deal with the many human rights issues on the Coahuila-Texas border. He also established the Fray Juan de Larios Human Rights Center to monitor and to denounce human rights problems in the region. He has won many awards for his work and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. Now he has taken on the struggle to create a new government in Mexico.

Vera has called for a Citizens Constituent Assembly. A constituent congress is the term used for a national representative assembly that undertakes to create a new government and to write a new constitution. The two most famous such assemblies, also called constituent congresses or

constitutional conventions, were the American Federal Constitutional Convention of 1787 following the War of Independence and the National Constituent Assembly of France created at the time of the revolution of 1789. Mexico has had several constitutions and governments created over the years [35], the most recent adopted in 1917 in the midst of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1920. While that constitution was in many respects one of the most democratic in the world at the time “at least in theory” the government that it established evolved into an authoritarian one-party state, the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that held power from 1928 to 2000, followed by a brief conservative government interregnum and the a return to the

rule of the PRI, which is where we are today. At the time of the Chiapas Rebellion of January 1, 1994, the EZLN [36], [Twenty Years Since the Chiapas Rebellion: The Zapatistas, Their Politics, and Their Impact.] also called for a constituent assembly and in August of that year held a so-called National Democratic Convention in the jungle, though it was neither really a convention or democratic. While left parties have also suggested a constituent assembly, none of them has the authority of Bishop Vera whose recent call has eclipsed the proposals of the far left.

Taking advantage of the February 5 anniversary of the adoption of the Mexican Constitution of 1917, Vera and his supporters, many of them leading advocates of human rights in

Mexico, presented their Citizens’ and Peoples’ Constituent Assembly project to the public [37]. Speaking at the Fray Angélico University Cultural Center near the UNAM in Mexico City, Vera argued that the country’s executive, legislative, and judicial branches had “usurped power,” and he called upon the Mexican people to organize and take it back. The group also published a manifesto [38] (see translation below), together with a similar effort called the National Popular Convention [39], declaring that they were not any sort of political vanguard but rather that it, “It will be the people of Mexico who together, free and conscious, will achieve the transformation of our country.”

February 18, 2015

[New Politics](#)

Jobs, Ecology, and Survival

13 March 2015, by Lars Henriksson

I don’t have any great success story to present, just a few thoughts about solving the old contradiction between jobs and the environment, in the special case of the auto industry, which I came up with as we were facing the dual crisis of economy and ecology.

It began in 2008, the year after Al Gore and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and climate change had been a worldwide top story. But with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the auto industry in free fall, the climate crisis quickly disappeared from the general discussion and even more so among us who work in the auto industry.

In the debate about the crisis ridden auto industry, two positions crystallized:

“Let it die!” Represented by the remnant of true believers of the invisible hand and creative destruction “a rapidly shrinking flock at the time.

“Support the industry!” Unions, Social Democrats, many governments “and naturally, the industry itself. They advocated subsidies of various kinds, from “Cash for clunkers” to the involuntary quasi-nationalization of GM and Chrysler. (And of course, sacrifices from us who work in the industry.)

Of course the “Let it die” position “notoriously articulated in the United States by Mitt Romney “was no alternative for us in the auto industry. It would have huge social implications in an economy where unemployment was rocketing, and especially in a auto dependent city like Gothenburg.

It would also be an enormous social waste. The auto industry is not just some buildings, robots and assembly lines. It’s first and foremost an organization of people, who together make up an industrial machine built and perfected for nearly 100 years. If you take it apart it’s no more an industrial machine than a car that’s taken apart is a car.

Most important for us, of course, it would dissolve auto workers as a collective. I’ll be back to this aspect.

If cars were a social necessity, I wouldn’t per se be against the second position. Governments support all sorts of things like education, health care, culture, etc. The problem is that cars are not necessary. On the contrary the present transportation system, based on mass auto transit, is completely unsustainable. It’s a threat.

Transports, and primarily road transport, stand for a large and increasing share of the CO2 emissions that threaten to push the globe over extremely dangerous thresholds. Transport is also a sector that is growing faster than the rest of the economy with globalization and just-in-time production.

The talk of the green, fuel-efficient car running on renewables is an illusion. I won’t go into the details here. You can find them in my book if you know Swedish, and in a short version in my

chapter "Cars, Crisis, Climate Change and Class Struggle" (in *Trade Unions in the Green Economy: Working for the Environment*, eds. Nora Rathzel and David Uzzell, foreword by Tim Jackson. Routledge: Earthscan 2013 2nd ed).

Basically, there is no way to substitute biofuels for fossil fuels at the present scale of consumption. And since two-thirds of electrical power comes from burning coal, oil or natural gas, the electric car is in most cases just a slightly more efficient fossil car.

The transportation system has to change in three ways:

• It has to change from private to public.

• It has to change from roads to rail.

• It has to be drastically reduced.

This of course has huge implications for the auto industry. It's not possible to keep pumping out 70 million units a year. Basically it's the end of the industry as we know it.

So facing the choice of seeing the jobs of my co-workers and myself go down the drain or demanding subsidies for pushing the earth further down the highway to hell, I opted for a "none of the above" alternative. Instead I've been trying to argue for conversion of the auto industrial complex as a way of saving both jobs and the planet.

At first it was more of a quick one-liner when journalists called and wanted me to comment on the crisis, but as I dug deeper I found that the case for conversion was very strong that it's actually a viable strategy against both unemployment and climate change, both practically and politically.

The Practical Perspective

In the first place, to break free from the fossil economy it won't be enough to decide so (even though this decision itself is deplorably absent). It would also be necessary to replace material things that constitute the fossil fuel

society, like the present means of transportation and energy production. This has to be done quickly and on a large scale.

Secondly, conversion of the auto industry is technically feasible. The auto industry is what comes to mind for most people when you say "mass production." They're almost synonymous. The assembly line was perfected there and it was mass production that changed the car from a luxury item into the main means of transportation in industrialized countries and the foremost symbol for mass consumption.

If mass production is the auto industry's first basic feature, conversion is the second. Ever since GM challenged and overtook Ford using a never-ending flow of new models as a method to market cars, the constant change of products has been a hallmark of the industry.

This has made the industry extremely versatile. It was no coincidence that the auto industry was the only branch of U.S. industry that was completely converted to the World War II effort. Only months after Pearl Harbor, the assembly lines of Detroit stopped producing private cars and started churning out tanks, planes and guns.

This knowledge, both of mass production and conversion, permeates the auto industry. Even at the lowest level, where I work, there is a deep but often tacit knowledge of the art of mass production and the methods that are used. And of no less importance, we are accustomed to change.

In short: The auto industry is not a coal mine. It's a flexible production machinery that society could use to produce almost any kind of technical equipment on a large scale. Send us the blueprints of socially useful stuff and we'll make it!

The Politics of Climate

But if these two practical reasons are good enough reasons in their own right not to let the auto industry die, but to use that amazing machine for

the best of society, they are not even the most important reasons for why I think conversion is an important demand.

It's because the climate question is not about technology. At bottom it's about politics, relationship of forces, class struggle.

As the IPCC keeps rubbing in, the climate issue is not on its way to being resolved. Despite the increasingly alarming reports and the scientific consensus that we have to drastically cut CO2 emissions, this isn't happening. On the contrary, in the 22 years since 192 governments signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, there has been a tremendous increase in greenhouse gas emissions that threatens the existence of mankind.

The reason is, of course, that reason isn't enough. The interests tied to the fossil fuel economy are so gigantic that the only possible solution, "keep the oil in the soil," would mean not only opposing the fundamental logic of the capitalist system, but also a head-on confrontation with the most powerful corporations of the world "telling them that they no longer can access the assets they build their value on, thus rendering them worthless.

However reasonable this may be from humanity's point of view, there's no way they're going to accept this. When it comes to the climate issue, as in so many other cases, reason stands against the power of mighty interests. And in a struggle between reason and power, power wins 100 times out of 100.

To stand a chance, reason has to be armed "armed with social power. And I think that auto workers' fight for jobs could be a part of arming reason, if we connect it to a conversion of the industry.

Instead of accepting the usual contradiction between jobs and environment, voluntarily delivering ourselves as hostages of the corporations, to fight for our jobs with a conversion strategy could create a focus point for a broad social movement for conversion of the whole

society.

There are several arguments for this strategy. If we are to win anything at all we have to keep the collective together as much as we can. More traditional demands of replacement jobs and job training tend to move the initiative away from the shop floor and make it an issue between the individual workers and the government or some employer.

Conversion of an existing industry or plant, on the other hand, is something we can fight for together, as a solution for all, through our unions and together with other social movements. This is essential, both to be able to win and keep the momentum if we make progress in the fight, not leaving the initiative to state bureaucrats or the like. Think Lucas! (The British Lucas Aerospace unions' alternative energy plan (1976) is described [here](#).)

I don't think that this kind of process is possible on a local level alone. The auto-industrial complex is too big, and the things we could replace the present production with "like wind turbines or equipment for rail traffic" would need decisions and investments on a social level to guarantee the outlet.

But I think it's necessary that the fight has strong shop floor roots, both for political and practical reasons. After all, it's we who are running the machine today. Who would be better than we to lead and oversee the conversion?

It's important to stress that I don't think that auto workers are the climate conscience of the world. In the spring of 2008, as the crisis was gaining steam, I took part in a debate on national Swedish radio, with, amongst others, the Minister for Enterprise and Energy Maud Olofsson. When I criticized the auto industry and its products and spoke in favor of conversion, the journalist asked me if I wasn't cutting off the branch I was sitting on.

We're not better or more inclined to make sacrifices for the common good than the next person. And that's not the question. I answered the journalist that it's the other way around: If we cling to the present unsustainable production and act as a support group for the owners of the industry (as our union leaders did at the time), that's cutting off the branch we're sitting on.

What I say is actually the opposite: With a strategy for conversion, we in the auto industry can actually be a crucial part of solving the most important task of our time "not by sacrificing ourselves but by fighting for our own immediate interests.

It's Up to Us

I'll finish with two things that I came to think about at the seminar earlier this morning.

One speaker touched on the concept of "socially organized denial" that surrounds the climate issue. The problem is so immense that we tend to be unwilling to think of it at all, since

we wouldn't know what to do about the whole thing.

Conversion of our jobs could be a way to put the issue inside everyday reality, within reach for workers, as opposed to looking to distant "world leaders" to fix things for us (which they won't do).

Another point that was mentioned was the idea of "the commons." And I think it's reasonable to argue that the auto industry, as any large organization, is a part of our common good. It is a part of society, it has grown out of society, and should be treated as a social asset.

What today is the corporate elite's business opportunity should be transformed into our common asset, as something that produces use values for society, not profit for private owners.

The powers that be have failed to solve the climate question. They are neither willing nor able to challenge the dominance of fossil capital and the accumulation of capital that is the driving force of both this economic system and global warming. The change has to come in confrontation with their power, from below.

Demonstrations and gatherings by activists in the streets are good, but not enough. The fight has to involve millions and millions of people in our everyday life. The case for conversion is about turning every possible workplace into a battleground against climate change.

Women Under the Gun, 2015

12 March 2015, by **Against the Current**

According to police records, almost one-third of female homicide victims are killed by their partners. Each year an estimated 1.3 million women suffer domestic abuse; one of every four women will experience domestic violence during her lifetime.

Witnessing violence between parents (or other caregivers) is the strongest risk factor in transmitting violence from one generation to another.

Breaking this epidemic of violence against women, just as breaking with

cultural assumptions about race, requires reexamination of social assumptions, a rejection of power and control over others, and the capacity to be a contributive member of society. It means power and control over one's own body and life, and

mutual respect for the rights of others. That's certainly a tall order in the vindictive and violent society in which we live, and in which the majority has little effective control over their own lives.

We're constantly told about horrific abuses committed against women in Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria. Yet the current atmosphere of a never-ending "war on terrorism" can only nourish the violence there as well as in our own society.

The roots of violence against women, however, run much deeper than PTSD or brain trauma resulting from war. It is a much larger social issue, arising from a socially induced need to dominate. Class societies, and capitalism as an economic and social system in particular, need hierarchies of control "and see those with a different view as deviants needing to be reined in.

We can see this also codified in a variety of legislation, including on issues of reproductive rights where they remain a major political battleground. While regulations on banks and industries are relaxed, those on women's rights are being tightened.

Like racism, violence "and particularly violence against women "is a mechanism of control. And the left, whether in Occupy or in our own political organizations, has found that it must also deal with these issues, through education and the development of internal processes.

Legislative Obsessions

Despite the reality that most women work outside the home, have higher college and graduate education rates than men, and are certainly witness to a wider spectrum of gender, sexuality and cultural norms than their mothers and grandmothers, women find their very personhood under scrutiny. In fact, by looking at the work of the legislative and judicial systems, one could conclude that the law is obsessed with controlling women's bodies.

This is true whether we examine what kind of sex education is mandated, whether contraceptives are part of public health and insurance coverage, how legislation deals with unintended pregnancies, what coverage exists for paid parental leaves, and what social legislation is in place for women with children, including provisions for low-cost, high-quality child care.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court Roe v. Wade decision in 1973, hundreds of laws have been written, some of which have sustained judicial scrutiny. (For a survey of the state of U.S. reproductive rights in 2015, see Dianne Feeley's article at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/n...>)

Most importantly, the Hyde Amendment (passed annually with the budget) precludes Medicaid payment for abortion except in cases of rape, incest or where a woman's life is in danger. This amendment, along with parental consent laws, targets the most vulnerable population.

Although the majority of poor women are white, public perception, reinforced by politicians and the media, portrays them as African Americans, Native Americans or Latinas "the undeserving "other." In our society poor women who are sexually active and become pregnant are fair game for demonization as irresponsible and lazy. That is also true for young women who become pregnant.

In 1992 the U.S. Supreme Court, in its Planned Parenthood v. Casey decision, ruled a variety of restrictions constitutional as long as they did not place an "undue burden" on a woman. Of course the question of what constitutes an "undue" burden has been up for grabs ever since.

Just since the 2010 midterm elections, 231 restrictions have passed state legislatures, with 70 passed in 2013 and another 26 in 2014. Most recently 26 state legislatures now require clinics where abortions are performed to meet the same standards as ambulatory surgical centers. Such legislation also forces clinic physicians to have admitting privileges at local hospitals, a difficult task when more and more hospitals have a religious

affiliation.

The media-savvy rightwing lobby and their political allies frame these restrictions not as attacks against women who need abortion and contraceptives, but against providers "clinics, health care workers and the drug industry "as if they were unsafe and unscrupulous.

The right wing talks about the need to provide a pregnant woman with "information," but loads the dice by demanding a script be read about fetal development whether or not the woman requests it. These scripts are usually scientifically bogus, designed to scare women into backing away from the procedure. A mandated ultrasound "a procedure not necessary for every pregnant woman and a bodily invasive procedure in the early stages of pregnancy "is one of the latest tactics. Driving up the cost of an abortion, there is no accurate measure of whether these new tactics persuade women to change their minds.

Abortion Battlegrounds

While doing nothing to improve patient care, these laws have been successful in forcing clinics to spend considerable funds to meet mandated standards "driving up the cost of abortion "and a number of clinics have shut down. In Texas, there were 42 clinics throughout the state before the passage of a law that had four provisions:

• Physicians at the abortion clinic must have admitting privileges in a hospital within 30 miles.

• Abortions beyond 20 weeks are banned. (This is a direct challenge to Roe v. Wade, which outlines abortion as a procedure available through the 24th week of pregnancy.)

• Severe restrictions on the use of medical abortion ("the abortion pill") are imposed.

• Clinics that perform abortion must meet the requirements of an ambulatory surgical center.

The first three parts of the law went into effect in November 2013, but Federal Judge Lee Yeakel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit held the first section unconstitutional. Seventeen clinics remained open, although located in fewer areas of the state. The fourth provision was to become effective on September 1, 2014 "to result in 10 more clinics being forced to close" but Judge Yeakel ruled that provision unconstitutional as well.

If all the provisions were in effect, 900,000 Texas women seeking abortion would have to travel more than 150 miles from their home, and given the waiting period, would have to stay more than one day, again driving up the cost. For example, a woman seeking an early abortion through "the abortion pill" would need four clinic appointments. Providers point out that these restrictions are based on a Food and Drug Administration protocols from 2000.

In early January 2015 the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals held hearings on the Texas law. If they rule the law to be constitutional, there will be no facility west or south of San Antonio. ([See map.](#))

By the end of January the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals refused to reconsider Ohio's restrictions on medical abortion. It requires that mifepristone (RU-486) can only be administered in the same exact dosage as approved by the outdated FDA protocol, and criminalizes its use after the first seven weeks of pregnancy.

By 2014 the Guttmacher Institute noted that 27 states have passed hostile legislation, with 18 considered extremely hostile. Several states, including Texas and Michigan, have already banned the use of telemedicine for abortion. Telemedicine, developed 50 years ago, is extremely important in servicing rural areas for a variety of medical conditions, from providing and monitoring prenatal care to disease management. With the development of RU-486, it too became a telemedicine procedure for early-stage abortion. Despite the lack of any data that suggesting this method is unsafe, it has been outlawed.

While the rightwing drive was successful in legislating a federal ban on a particular late-term medical procedure for abortion that some physicians considered safer than other methods "and in 2007 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the ban constitutional" only women with severely abnormal fetuses or those unable to come up with the money earlier in their pregnancy have late abortions. Most seek the procedure as soon as they know they are pregnant. Therefore the right's victory with this federal ban applies to fewer than one percent of all abortions. Since abortion was legalized, nine of out 10 abortions have been performed during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

The Hyde Amendment has had the greatest impact, with one out of four pregnant women on Medicaid forced to carry the fetus to term. But most women who have decided that they need an abortion will jump through the hoops to obtain one. It is true that the abortion rate has declined, but the birth rate has declined as well. More women at risk of an unwanted pregnancy are using birth control, and using more reliable methods.

New Points of Attack

Currently the anti-choice forces are focused on regulating clinics out of existence and fighting to reduce earlier-stage procedures. Like Texas, other state legislatures have passed abortion bans that challenge Roe v. Wade with the intention of whittling down or overthrowing the 1973 decision. Denying funds to Planned Parenthood for providing abortions is another tactic, even though the organization's work ranges from providing sex education and birth control to reducing the spread of sexually transmitted infections and cervical cancer screening.

Another avenue of attack has been to target the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), which promised coverage to millions who have no medical insurance. True, none of the 10 essential benefits outlined for women's health cover abortion "and the Hyde Amendment continues to

reign. But the ACA does mandate contraceptive coverage under Medicare as well as through insurance providers that are available on the exchanges that have been set up.

The Obama administration exempted religious institutions from contraceptive coverage for their employees, but the U.S. Supreme Court has broadened that ruling in its *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* decision. Under this ruling, family-owned corporations are also exempt. Supreme Court Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr., writing the majority opinion, claimed that the ruling was limited in its scope, and that if the government had a compelling interest in making sure women have access to contraception it could find ways to provide the coverage. A likely outcome, you think?

The fight over women's bodies is also evident around sex education. Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education, with another 13 requiring education around HIV/AIDS. Only half require medically accurate instruction. In most cases contraception is addressed; all cover or stress abstinence, and 19 emphasize the importance of sex only within marriage. In the 12 states where sexual orientation is discussed, three are negative toward non-heterosexuality.

North Dakota, which has the most restrictive abortion laws, has no sex education apart from a policy to cover abstinence. A Utah law specifically prohibits teachers from responding to students' questions in any way that conflicts with a curriculum stressing abstinence and sex only within marriage. However, as women continue to demand reproductive justice, some clinics are training a new generation of physicians.

The reality is that with so many sex (mis)education mandates, U.S. teenagers are generally unprepared to know their own sexual desires or to figure out the language of another's. To lay the blame for sexual oppression and violence on a repressive world is not to deny each individual's agency "but it does help explain the mechanisms by which hierarchy and

Pushing Back Civil Rights

11 March 2015, by **Malik Miah**

When President Obama gave his sixth State of the Union speech on January 20, the mass media focused on its rhetoric and the likelihood that few if any of his proposals would be adopted by the Republican-controlled Congress.

What the Black media noted, at least, was on target – Obama’s failure to lambaste the violence of the police across the country directed at Black men and boys. Obama’s only reference to police killings:

We may have different takes on the events of Ferguson and New York. But surely we can understand a father who fears his son can’t walk home without being harassed. Surely we can understand the wife who won’t rest until the police officer she married walks through the front door at the end of his shift.

No mention was made of the killings of Black boys and men every 28 hours by cops. No mention of the racism of the far right and its reflection in mainstream policies. No mention of the new “Black Lives Matter” movement demanding justice now.

Selma and Civil Rights

Every gain won by the civil rights revolution in the 1960s and 1970s is now under assault. As Selma eloquently portrays, it was the self-organization and mobilization of working-class and poor African Americans that defeated Jim Crow segregation. Without Blacks leading the struggle, putting their lives on the line, significant support from whites would not have occurred.

Yet Selma has been criticized by many

“establishment” white defenders of president Johnson, who in their view was the primary reason for the civil rights legal victories. The direct actions led by Martin Luther King, and what millions of former slaves, sharecroppers and workers did to fight centuries of racial domination and exploitation, are relegated to second chair.

How could an African-American director (a woman at that!) have the audacity to place the victory on the shoulders of genuine Black Power and agitation and its leaders and not the white president?

DuVernay does not deny Johnson’s legislative role, but correctly focuses on the raw power of the streets. It is a common trademark of liberals to believe that elections are decisive to fundamental changes, not mass action. This is an old narrative of American history – the leading role given to white liberals instead of the independent actions of the oppressed themselves.

What’s striking since Obama became president in 2008 is how far the various institutions of the state (city, state, Congress and Supreme Court) have stepped up attacks on and moved to roll back the civil rights revolution. Every gain has been weakened beyond what almost anyone thought possible when Obama took office.

Major civil rights decisions have been targeted – the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. While the overturn of the legal justification of Jim Crow segregation is not on the table – it is not necessary to return to “whites only” signs – voter suppression legislation and moves to justify housing discrimination are big steps toward limiting the gains for

working-class African Americans.

Obama has been transformational – but not for African Americans. The winners are the powerful white supremacist politicians based in the South who found his presidency (and his failure to fight against racist forces) a useful cover to lead the rollbacks of laws that stood for some 50 years.

Supreme Court

The Supreme Court under Chief Justice Roberts has led the way in overturning or eroding the laws of the civil rights revolution. By a narrow majority it gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013. It is posed to roll back the 1968 Fair Housing Act this year.

That law states that the fact of discrimination is proof to seek remedy; it is not necessary to prove conscious “intent” by the landlord or employer.

The self-serving argument of Chief Justice Roberts that “the only way to end discrimination” means in practice pretending that discrimination does not exist – a denial of 400 years of history – to justify the real-life everyday status quo of white advantages.

As Ferguson and Cleveland have shown, the lives of young Black men and boys are seen differently than white lives. How many whites are shot down carrying a toy gun or holding an air gun in a WalMart store in an open-carry state (Ohio)?

Obama’s view unfortunately emphasizes, as does his African-American Attorney General Eric Holder, that progress should be

measured by the real gains of the educated talented tenth and the end of legal segregation in the South, more than the suffering of poor African Americans.

The vast majority of African Americans' lives under Obama have gotten worse rather than better on every socio-economic level. The reasons are clear, yet Obama presents a false reality by stating that the country is more united and non-racial than ever before.

The Police “Unions”

The so-called police unions are reactionary. These “unions” are at best associations (like employers' groups) or cartels. The function of police is to “serve and protect” the ruling establishment. It is to protect big business, private property and uses force against striking workers and working people who march and rally for civil rights and civil liberties, and economic and social justice.

Their “union” is a tool to defend rogue and killer cops from prosecution, and to squeeze the public for more money and protection from prosecution. It is not an accident that the police are rarely arrested for crimes and prosecuted for what District Attorneys call “justifiable” killings of Blacks.

The social composition of the police is not decisive. New York City's police force is now majority nonwhite. Black cops defended the murders in Cleveland and Staten Island.

Whites rarely face police brutality over petty issues. White youth are routinely given the benefit of the doubt. Blacks are assumed to be “thugs” or other expletives when police look for a suspect “even if on a college campus or driving a BMW. Most whites, including unionized white workers, don't understand this since it is not their reality.

What's called institutional racism is actually structural discrimination based on national oppression and class exploitation.

While many Obama supporters blame the obstructionism of the Republican Party for many of Obama's failures to help African Americans, the reality is much simpler. Obama serves and defends the interests of the ruling class. That's his job. In that sense he must be colorblind.

The key lesson of Martin Luther King, and of the more radical Malcolm X and Black Power advocates of the 1960s, is that mass struggle brings radical change.

King never waited for presidents Kennedy or Johnson to act on any issue “civil rights, the Vietnam War or economic justice for the working poor. It's why he worked with James Bevel and Diane Nash on the Selma march in 1965, soon after winning the Noble Peace prize and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

The Black Lives Matter Movement

The role of cops in killing African Americans is also not new. What's new is the response by the Black community “something not seen since the 1970s.

The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after the Ferguson, Missouri death of Michael Brown in 2014 is a significant rebuttal to those who rely on electoralism or believe in the nonracial myth.

These leaders are young Blacks who likely voted for Obama. Yet they see the lesson of the civil rights era as the government taking action only under mass pressure. The Black Lives Matter young leaders stand on King's shoulders. They are the true

descendants of the activist wing of the civil rights movement and the militancy of the 1960s.

This emerging young generation understands the why and the solution to police violence. They recognize that the cop unions are fraudulent and obstacles to justice and equality “a reality the official labor movement refuses to grasp.

The 1965 and 2015 dates are important because each reflects the progress and failures in the fight for civil rights. It is clear that the Voting Rights Act and Selma march represented the power of Black-led street protests on the ruling class.

The year 1965 showed the contradictory realities of repression and reform in racial and class-based capitalism. The violence of the police state with the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X “the most far-sighted representative of the left wing of the movement “showed what the police, FBI, CIA and government through its COINTELPRO terror was prepared to do to stop what J. Edgar Hoover termed a “messiah” from leading the Black population.

King's assassination in 1968 was the bookend of that terrorism against Black leaders. The legal victories of 1965-68, nevertheless, showed the fear of the ruling class of mass street protests and urban rebellions from Watts to Detroit. Reform came about because repression alone was failing to suppress rising Black anger and radicalization.

The same contradictions continue even with the first Black president and more Blacks in positions of authority. But the working-class Black majority that appears invisible has a hidden voice and potential power that one day will explode. That's why the incipient Black Lives Matter movement and other forms of resistance to the status quo points the way forward.

[Against the Current](#)

Something That Might Be Called Neocon:" Hillary Clinton & Corporate Feminism

10 March 2015, by **Kevin Young and Diana C. Sierra Becerra**

Such depictions have little basis in Clinton's past performance. While she has indeed spoken about gender and sexual rights with considerable frequency, and while she may not share the overtly misogynistic and anti-LGBT views of most Republican politicians, as a policymaker she has consistently favored policies devastating to women and LGBT persons.

Why, then, does she continue to enjoy such support from self-identified feminists? Part of the answer surely lies in the [barrage of sexist attacks](#) that have targeted her and the understandable desire of many feminists to see a woman president. But that's not the whole story. We suggest that feminist enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton is reflective of a profound crisis of U.S. liberal feminism, which has long embraced or accepted corporate capitalism, racism, empire, and even heterosexism and transphobia.

Making Profit and War

All issues of wealth, power, and violence are also women's and LGBT rights issues. For instance, neoliberal economic policies of austerity and privatization disproportionately hurt women and LGBT individuals, who are often the lowest paid and the first workers to be fired, the most likely to bear the burdens of family maintenance, and the most affected by the involuntary migration, domestic violence, homelessness, and mental illness that are intensified by poverty.

Hillary Clinton's record on such issues is hardly encouraging. Her decades of

service on corporate boards and in major policy roles as First Lady, U.S. Senator, and Secretary of State give a clear indication of where she stands. One of Clinton's first high-profile public positions was at [Walmart](#), where she served on the board from 1986 to 1992. She "[remained silent](#)" in board meetings as her company "waged a major campaign against labor unions seeking to represent store workers," as an ABC review of video recordings later noted.

Clinton recounted in her 2003 book that Walmart CEO Sam Walton "taught me a great deal about corporate integrity and success." Though she later began trying to shed her public identification with the company in order to attract labor support for her Senate and presidential candidacies, [Walmart executives](#) have continued to look favorably on her, with Alice Walton donating the maximum amount to the "Ready for Hillary" Super PAC in 2013. Walton's \$25,000 donation was considerably higher than the average annual salary for Walmart's hourly employees, [two-thirds](#) of whom are women.

After leaving Walmart, Clinton became perhaps the most active First Lady in history. While it would be unfair to hold her responsible for all her husband's policies, she did play a significant role in shaping and justifying many of them. In her 2003 memoir she boasted of her role in gutting U.S. welfare: "By the time Bill and I left the White House, welfare rolls had dropped 60 percent" and not because poverty had dropped. [Women and children](#), the main recipients of welfare, have been the primary victims. Jeffrey St. Clair at Counterpunch [notes](#) that prior to the

welfare reform, "more than 70 percent of poor families with children received some kind of cash assistance. By 2010, less than 30 percent got any kind of cash aid and the amount of the benefit had declined by more than 50 percent from pre-reform levels."

Clinton also [lobbied Congress](#) to pass her husband's deeply racist crime bill, which, observes Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, "escalated the drug war beyond what conservatives had imagined possible," expanding mass incarceration and the death penalty.

Arguably the two most defining features of Clinton's tenures as Senator (2001-2009) and Secretary of State (2009-2013) were her promotion of U.S. corporate profit-making and her aggressive assertion of the U.S. government's right to intervene in foreign countries. Reflecting on this performance as Clinton left her Secretary post in January 2013, Bloomberg Businessweek [commented](#) that "Clinton turned the State Department into a machine for promoting U.S. business." She sought "to install herself as the government's highest-ranking business lobbyist," directly negotiating lucrative overseas contracts for U.S. corporations like Boeing, Lockheed, and General Electric. Not surprisingly, "Clinton's corporate cheerleading has won praise from business groups."

Clinton herself has been very honest about this aim, albeit not when speaking in front of progressives. Her 2011 Foreign Policy essay on "[America's Pacific Century](#)" spoke at length about the objective of "opening new markets for American businesses," containing no fewer than ten uses of the phrases "open

markets,” “open trade,” and permutations thereof. A major focus of this effort is the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) involving twelve Pacific countries that is now being negotiated secretly by the Obama administration with the assistance of over 600 corporate “advisors.” Like Bill Clinton’s [NAFTA](#), the deal is intended to further empower multinational corporations at the expense of workers, consumers, and the environment in all countries involved. Lower wages and increased rates of displacement, detention, and physical violence for female and LGBT populations are among the likely consequences, given the results of existing “free-trade” agreements.

Clinton’s article also elaborated on the role of U.S. military power in advancing these economic goals. The past “growth” of eastern Asia has depended on “the security and stability that has long been guaranteed by the U.S. military,” and “a more broadly distributed military presence across the region will provide vital advantages” in the future. Clinton thus reaffirmed the bipartisan consensus on the U.S. right to use military force abroad in pursuit of economic interest—echoing, for instance, her husband’s Secretary of Defense William Cohen, who in 1999 reserved the right to “the unilateral use of military power” in the name of “ensuring [uninhibited access](#) to key markets, energy supplies, and strategic resources.”

In the Middle East and Central Asia, Clinton has likewise defended the U.S. right to violate international law and human rights. As Senator she not only voted in favor of the illegal 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq—a monstrous crime that has killed hundreds of thousands of people while [sowing terror and sectarianism across the region](#)—she was an outspoken advocate of the invasion and a fierce critic of resistance within the United Nations. Since then she has only [partially disavowed](#) that position ([out of political expediency](#)) while speaking in [paternalistic and racist terms](#) about Iraqis. Senator Clinton was an especially staunch supporter—even by the standards of the U.S. Congress—of Israel’s [illegal military actions](#) and settlement activity in the

Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Hillary Clinton and Benjamin Netanyahu.

As Barack Obama’s Secretary of State, she presided over the expansion of illegal drone attacks that by conservative estimates have killed [many hundreds of civilians](#), while reaffirming U.S. [alliances with vicious dictatorships](#). As she recounts in her 2014 memoir *Hard Choices*, “In addition to our work with the Israelis, the Obama Administration also increased America’s own sea and air presence in the Persian Gulf and deepened our ties to the Gulf monarchies.”

Clinton herself is widely recognized to have been one of the administration’s most forceful advocates of [attacking or expanding](#) military operations in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria and of strengthening U.S. ties to dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, and elsewhere. Maybe the women and girls of these countries, including those whose lives have been destroyed by U.S. bombs, can take comfort in knowing that a “feminist” helped craft U.S. policy.

Secretary Clinton and her team worked to ensure that any challenges to U.S.-Israeli domination of the Middle East were met with brute force and/or various forms of collective punishment. On Iran, she often echoes the bipartisan line that “all options must remain on the table”—a flagrant violation of the UN Charter’s [prohibition](#) of “the threat or use of force” in international relations—and brags in *Hard Choices* that her team “successfully campaigned around the world to impose crippling sanctions” on the country.

She ensured that Palestine’s UN statehood bid “went nowhere in the Security Council.” Though out of office by the time of Israel’s savage 2014 assault on Gaza, [she ardently defended it in interviews](#). This context helps explain her recent praise for [Henry Kissinger](#), renowned for

bombing civilians and supporting regimes that killed and tortured hundreds of thousands of suspected dissidents. She writes in the *Washington Post* that she “relied on his counsel when I served as secretary of state.”

Militarization and Its Benefits

In another domain of traditional U.S. ownership, Latin America, Clinton also seems to have followed Kissinger’s example. As confirmed in her 2014 book, she effectively supported the 2009 military overthrow of left-of-center Honduran President Manuel Zelaya—a “caricature of a Central American strongman”—by pushing for a “compromise” solution that endorsed his illegal ouster. She has advocated the application of the [Colombia model](#)—“highly militarized “anti-drug” initiatives coupled with neoliberal economic policies—to other countries in the region, and is full of praise for the devastating militarization of Mexico over the past decade. In Mexico that model has resulted in 80,000 or more deaths since 2006, including the 43 Mexican student activists disappeared (and presumably massacred) in September 2014.

In the Caribbean, the U.S. model of choice is Haiti, where Clinton and her husband have relentlessly promoted the sweatshop model of production since the 1990s. WikiLeaks documents show that in 2009 her State Department collaborated with subcontractors for Hanes, Levi’s, and Fruit of the Loom to oppose a [minimum wage increase for Haitian workers](#). After the January 2010 earthquake she helped spearhead the [highly militarized](#) U.S. response.

Militarization has plentiful benefits, as Clinton understands. It can facilitate corporate investment, such as the [“gold rush”](#) that the U.S. ambassador described following the Haiti earthquake. It can keep in check nonviolent dissidents, such as hungry Haitian workers or leftist students in Mexico. And it can help combat the influence of countries like Venezuela which have challenged neoliberalism

and U.S. geopolitical control.

These goals have long motivated U.S. hostility toward Cuba, and thus Clinton's recent call for ending the U.S. embargo against Cuba was pragmatic, not principled: "It wasn't achieving its goals" of overthrowing the government, as she says in her recent book. The goal there, as in Venezuela, is to compel the country to "restore private property and return to a free market economy," as she [demanded of Venezuela](#) in 2010.

A reasonable synopsis of Clinton's record around the world comes from neoconservative policy advisor Robert Kagan, who, like Clinton, played an important role in advocating the 2003 Iraq invasion. "I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy," Kagan told the [New York Times](#) last June. Asked what to expect from a Hillary Clinton presidency, Kagan predicted that "[i]f she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue, it's something that might have been called neocon." But, he added, "clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else."

Women's and LGBT Rights, Narrowly Defined

What about Clinton's record on that narrower set of issues more commonly associated with women's and LGBT rights—"control over one's reproductive system and freedom from discrimination and sexual violence? Perhaps the best that can be said is that Clinton does not espouse the medieval view of female bodily autonomy shared by most Republicans, and does not actively encourage homophobia and transphobia. She has consistently said that abortion should remain [legal (but "rare")-<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/13/nyregion/13hillary.ready.html?pagewanted=print&r=0>] and that birth control should be widely available, and when in office generally acted in accord with those statements. She has recently voiced support for gay marriage rights. These positions are worth something, even if they are mainly a reflection of pressure from

below.

But nor does her record on these rights merit glowing praise. In addition to [partly capitulating](#) to the far-right anti-choice agenda in Congress, with disproportionate harm to low-income parents, Clinton and other Democrats have also actively undermined these rights. Some observers have argued that Clinton's repetition of the Democratic slogan that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare" [reinforces the stigmatization of those who choose that option](#).

Her narrow definition of reproductive rights—"as abortion and contraception only"—does not allow much in the way of material support for parents or young children. She insists that abortion must remain "rare," but has also helped deprive poor expecting parents of the financial support they would need to raise a child (for instance, through the [1996 welfare reform](#) and the [fiscal austerity](#) regarding social programs that has become the bipartisan consensus in Washington). She has supported the further militarization of the Mexico border and the arrest of undocumented immigrants, undermining the reproductive rights of women who give birth [in chains in detention centers](#) before being deported back to lives of poverty and violence.

Regarding non-discrimination, Clinton's record is also worse than her reputation suggests. Her old company Walmart, widely accused of discriminating against [women employees](#), was recently praised by the Clinton Foundation for its ["efforts to empower girls and women."](#) Clinton has given little serious indication that she opposes discrimination against LGBT individuals in the workplace (which is still legal in the majority of U.S. states). Her very recent reversal of her opposition to gay marriage came only after support for the idea has become politically beneficial and perhaps necessary for Democrats. At best, Clinton in these respects has been a cautious responder to progressive political winds rather than a trailblazing leader.

Clinton's foreign policy record is even more at odds with her reputation as a

champion of women's and LGBT rights. Her policy of support for the 2009 coup in Honduras has been disastrous for both groups. Violent hate crimes against LGBT Hondurans have skyrocketed. In mid-2014, leading LGBT activist Nelson Arambáñez reported [176 murders against LGBT individuals since 2009](#), an average of about 35 per year, compared to just over one per year in the period 1994-2009.

Arambáñez located this violence within the broader [human rights nightmare](#) of post-coup Honduras, noting the contributions of U.S.-funded militarization and the post-coup regimes' pattern of "shutting down government institutions charged with promoting and protecting the human rights of vulnerable sectors of the population"—such as women, children, indigenous communities, and Afro-Hondurans." Clinton has been worse than silent on the situation, actively [supporting](#) and [praising](#) the post-coup governments.

In a review of her work as [Secretary of State](#), Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes concludes that while "Hillary Clinton has been more outspoken than any previous Secretary of State regarding the rights of women and sexual minorities," this position is "more rhetoric than reality." As one example he points to the U.S.-backed monarchy in Morocco, which has long occupied Western Sahara with U.S. support. Two weeks after Secretary Clinton publicly praised the dictatorship for having ["protected and expanded" women's rights](#), a teenage girl named Amina Filali [committed suicide](#) by taking rat poison. Filali had been raped at age 15 and then "forced to marry her rapist, who subsequently battered and abused her."

Although Clinton's liberal supporters are likely to lament such details as exceptions within an impressive overall record ("She's still much better than a Republican!"), it is quite possible that her actions have harmed feminist movements worldwide. As Zunes argues:

Given Clinton's backing of neo-liberal economic policies and war-making by the United States and its allies, her advocacy of women's rights

overseas...may have actually set back indigenous feminist movements in the same way that the Bush administration's "democracy-promotion" agenda was a serious setback to popular struggles for freedom and democracy....Hillary Clinton's call for greater respect for women's rights in Muslim countries never had much credibility while US-manufactured ordinance is blowing up women in Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Threading Needles

This summary of Clinton's "enormous contributions" (Feminists for Clinton) is just a partial sampling. On almost all other major issues, from climate change to immigration to education to financial regulation, President Hillary Clinton would likely be no better than President Obama, if not worse. [As in the case of Obama](#), it is of course necessary for Clinton to "call it something else," in Robert Kagan's words. The stark disjunction between rhetoric and policies reflects a well understood logic. Mainstream U.S. political candidates, particularly Democrats, must find ways to attract popular support while simultaneously reassuring corporate and financial elites.

The latter, for their part, usually understand the need for a good dose of "populism" during a campaign, and accept it as long as it stays within certain bounds and is not reflected in policy itself. One former aide to Bill Clinton, speaking to The Hill last July, compared this rhetorical strategy to [threading a needle](#), saying that "good politicians" and I think Hillary is a good politician "are good at threading needles, and I think there's probably a way to do it."

Hillary Clinton faces the challenge of convincing voters that she is a champion of "people historically excluded," as she claims in her 2014 memoir. The Hill reported that "Clinton is now test-driving various campaign themes," including the familiar progressive promises to "increase upward mobility" and "decrease inequality." Her memoirs, for those who dare to suffer through them, include invocations of dead

leftists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman ("one of my heroines"), and Martin Luther King, Jr. (referenced nine times in Clinton's 2003 book).

This public relations work requires that her past record be hidden from view, lest it create a credibility problem. Here Clinton has enjoyed the assistance of many liberal feminists. One former Obama staffer, speaking to The Hill, notes Clinton's successful efforts "to co-opt the base groups in the past eight years."

Rhetoric is not totally meaningless. The extent to which politicians like Clinton have been compelled to portray themselves "however cynically" as champions of the rights of workers, women, LGBT people, and other "historically excluded" groups is an indication that popular pressures for those rights have achieved substantial force. In the case of LGBT rights this rhetorical shift is very recent, and reflects a growth in the movement's power that is to be celebrated. But taking politicians' rhetoric at face value is one of the gravest errors that a progressive can make.

The Feminists Not Invited

Liberal feminists' support of Hillary Clinton is not just due to credulousness, though. It also reflects a narrowness of analysis, vision, and values. In this country feminism is often understood as the right of women "and wealthy white women most of all" to share in the spoils of corporate capitalism and U.S. imperial power. By not confronting the exclusion of non-whites, foreigners, working-class people, and other groups from this vision, liberal feminists are missing a crucial opportunity to create a more inclusive, more powerful movement.

Alternative currents within the feminist movement, both here and globally, have long rejected this impoverished understanding of feminism. For them, feminism means confronting patriarchy but also capitalism, imperialism, white

supremacy, and other forms of oppression that interlock with and reinforce patriarchy. It means fighting to replace a system in which the rights of people and other living things are systematically subordinated to the quest for profits. It means fighting so that all people "everywhere on the gender, sexual and body spectrum" can enjoy basic rights like food, health care, housing, a safe and clean environment, and control over their bodies, labor, and identities.

This more holistic feminist vision is apparent all around the world, including among the women of places like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, whose oppression is constantly evoked by Western leaders to justify war and occupation. The courageous Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her feminist advocacy, has also criticized [illegal U.S. drone attacks for killing civilians and aiding terrorist recruitment](#). Yousafzai's opposition to the Taliban won her adoring Western media coverage and an invitation to the Obama White House, but her criticism of drones has gone virtually unmentioned in the corporate media. Also unmentioned are her comments about socialism, which she says "is the only answer" to "free us from the chains of bigotry and exploitation."

The [Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan \(RAWA\)](#) has equally opposed the Taliban, U.S.-backed fundamentalist forces, and the U.S. occupation. While liberal groups like [Feminist Majority](#) have depicted the U.S. war as a noble crusade to protect Afghan women, [RAWA says](#) that the United States "has empowered and equipped the most traitorous, anti-democratic, misogynist and corrupt fundamentalist gangs in Afghanistan," merely ["replacing one fundamentalist regime with another."](#)

The logic is simple: U.S. elites prefer the ["bloody and suffocating rule of Afghanistan"](#) by fundamentalist warlords "to an independent, pro-democracy, and pro-women's rights government" that might jeopardize "its interests in the region." Women's liberation "can be achieved only by the people of Afghanistan and by democracy-loving forces through a hard, decisive and long struggle".

Needless to say, Clinton and Obama have not invited the RAWA women to Washington.

A group of Iranian and Iranian-American feminists, [the Raha Iranian Feminist Collective](#), takes a similar position in relation to their own country. In 2011 it bitterly condemned the Ahmadinejad regime's systematic violations of women's rights (and those of other groups), but just as forcefully condemned "all forms of US intervention," including the "crippling sanctions" that Hillary Clinton is so proud of her role in implementing. The group said that sanctions "further immiserate the very people they claim to be helping," and noted that few if any genuine grassroots voices in Iran had "called for or supported the US/UN/EU sanctions."

In Latin America, too, many working-class feminists argue that the fight for gender and sexual liberation is inseparable from the struggles for self-determination and a just economic system. Speaking to NACLA Report on the Americas, Venezuelan organizer Yanahir Reyes recently lauded "all of the social policy" that has "focused on liberating women" under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, those evil autocrats so despised by Hillary Clinton. Reyes emphasized the importance of independent feminist organizing: "Women from the feminist struggle have effectively brought to light the importance of dismantling a patriarchal system," thus pushing [Chavismo in a more feminist direction](#). "It is a very hard internal fight," says Reyes, but "this is the space where we can achieve it" "under a government

sympathetic to socialism, "not in a different form of government."

This tradition of more holistic feminisms is not absent from the United States. In the 19th century, Black women like Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth linked the struggles for abolition and suffrage and denounced the lynching campaigns that murdered black men and women in the name of "saving" white women. In contrast, leaders of the white suffrage movement like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony refused to include people of color in the struggle for citizenship rights. Unfortunately this history continues to be distorted. In 2008 Gloria Steinem, the standard bearer of liberal feminism, said that [she supported Clinton's campaign](#) over Obama's in part because "Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot."

The assumption that all women are equally oppressed by patriarchy (and that all men are equal oppressors) was fiercely challenged by U.S. women of color, working-class women, and lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists of color analyzed their gender and sexual oppression within the larger history of U.S. slavery, capitalism, and empire. In New York the women of the [Young Lords Party](#) pushed their organization to denounce forced sterilizations of women of color, to demand safe and accessible abortion and contraception, and to call for community-controlled clinics. They redefined reproductive rights as the

right to abortion and contraception and the right to have children without living in poverty.

In recent years, a radical LGBT movement has fought for reforms like marriage equality while also moving beyond marriage and condemning how the state, from prisons to the military, is the biggest perpetrator of violence against gender and sexual non-conforming peoples, particularly trans women of color and undocumented queers. These queer radicals [reject the logic](#) that casts the United States and Israel as tolerant while characterizing occupied territories, from U.S. to Palestinian ghettos, as inherently homophobic and in need of [military and other outside intervention](#). They condemn U.S. wars and the Obama administration's persecution of [whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning](#) (who helped expose, among other U.S. crimes, military orders to ignore the sexual abuse of Iraqi detainees and the trafficking of Afghan children).

A more robust vision of feminism doesn't mean that we shouldn't defend women like Hillary Clinton against sexist attacks: we should, just as we defend Barack Obama against racist ones. But it does mean that we must listen to the voices of the most marginalized women and gender and sexual minorities "many of whom are extremely critical of Clintonite feminism" and act in solidarity with movements that seek equity in all realms of life and for all people. These are the feminists not invited to the Hillary Clinton party, except perhaps to serve and clean up.

Israel, Jews and Arabs: the revolutionary perspective of living together

9 March 2015, by [Henri Wilno](#), [Michel Warschawski](#)

Michel Warschawski has been politically active in Israel for many years. He retraced his biography in one of his books, *Sur la frontière*

(Stock, 2002). After spending his early years in Strasbourg, he decided at the age of sixteen to go to Jerusalem, where he undertook Talmudic studies.

In 1968 he joined the Israeli Socialist Organization, which had been founded in 1962 by expelled members of the Israeli Communist Party and older

activists influenced by Trotskyism. The group was best known by the name of its newspaper, *Matzpen* ("Compass" in Hebrew). *Matzpen* was a revolutionary organization that regarded Zionism as a colonial project and fought for coexistence between Jews and Arabs on the basis of complete equality. As of June 1967 *Matzpen* called for the full, immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israel from all the occupied territories and affirmed its support for the Palestinian people's right to fight for its freedom.

Despite a limited membership, the actions and positions of *Matzpen* had an echo that made it an "enemy within" denounced by Zionists of both right and left, whose activists were frequently arrested. Although composed mainly of Jewish activists, *Matzpen* tried both to mobilize Israeli Jewish youth and to develop ties with the Palestinians of Israel, as well as Palestinian left organizations and those of Arab countries.

In the 1970s, a debate began in *Matzpen* on its perspectives. *Matzpen* and activists of the Palestinian Left decided in 1984 to create the Alternative Information Center (AIC), an organization providing information and solidarity, of which Michel Warschawski is the director. *Matzpen* subsequently ceased to exist as an organization, although many of its activists remain active in various movements. In 1989, Michel Warschawski was sentenced to several months in prison for "providing services to illegal organizations" (for printing leaflets). H.W.

In something you wrote in the summer of 2014, you speak of "fascism" in Israel. What are the roots of this process? Is it just the product of the state of war? Can we say that it is now the far right that governs?

I am speaking of a long process that dates back to the campaign of hatred and delegitimization that preceded the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. The assassins of the Prime Minister took power and have in fact been in power since then. I include the episode of Ehud Barak (1999-2001) who was admittedly the candidate of the Labour Party, but who defended

far-right policies and did everything he could so that Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister, with himself as his Minister Defense.

So we have had twenty years of continuous power of the Right, which has changed the situation, not so much in the field of the colonial policy towards the Palestinians, but in the internal regime of the State of Israel.

Racism has been unleashed, in political discourse, in the streets and in legislation which culminated in the proposal to amend the "Basic Law - Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people." A series of extremely repressive and openly discriminatory laws against the Palestinian minority in Israel have already been adopted; others, even worse, are on the way. The Supreme Court, which was for many years the guarantor of a system that was juggling between "Jewish state" and "democratic state", has for some time been the object of violent attacks by far-right members of parliament. Several bills are aimed at reducing its power.

The government relies on a bloc of three far-right parties, a bloc in which Netanyahu appears as a moderate!

If for a year I have been talking about fascism, it is because on top of everything I have just mentioned we have to add violence against democratic activists and organizations, from small fascist groups or even passers-by. Far-right government + draconian laws + violence aimed at terrorizing any words of criticism = fascism.

Israel is now one of the countries where social inequalities are greatest (including among Jews), and where neoliberal policies are dismantling social gains. And yet looked at from the exterior, social and political debate among the Jewish section of the Israeli population seems to be completely polarized around two themes: religion and "security." Is that correct? Have social issues disappeared from the landscape?

Israel is indeed, in the group of industrialized countries, in second place concerning the gap between rich

and poor: a very rich bourgeoisie and many very poor people. According to data from the Israeli social security authorities, 32 per cent of Israeli children - Jewish and Arab - live below the poverty line! The dismantling of the welfare state and its achievements has been done with such brutality and speed as would have made Margaret Thatcher green with envy.

However social struggles, particularly trade-union struggles, remain extremely limited. There are three reasons for this: the economic success of Israel, which makes it possible to leave some crumbs for the workers; the fact that the unemployment rate is very low (less than two per cent); the absence of trade-union traditions and organization worthy of the name. Fifty years of absolute power of the Histadrut, which had nothing to do with a trade-union organization, even a class-collaborationist one, has prevented the formation of class consciousness, even of a primitive kind. Although there are struggles, they remain confined to one enterprise (usually over lay-offs) or take place in more privileged and better organized sectors (nurses, teachers).

Do the popular classes react to austerity policies? What has happened to the movement of the "Indignados" of two years ago? What does the Koach Ovdim ("Workers Strength") union, which seems to be getting strongerto the detriment of the Histadrut, represent?

The movement of the Indignados was a flash in the pan: a gigantic mobilization that drew in hundreds of thousands of people for a return to the welfare state but only gave birth to a national commission (the Trachtenberg Commission)... almost all of whose recommendations were rejected by the government. Koach Ovdim, which is the first trade union confederation independent of the Histadrut, remains a small organization compared to it, but it has been able to organize strikes and other economic struggles by some of the most neglected sectors, among others maintenance workers in in some major civil service departments and workers in a quarry near Jerusalem.

For the majority of Israeli workers, the positions they adopt, including their identities, are first of all determined by the political and "national" and, far behind, by what social class they belong to. If you ask someone what he or she is, they will answer: Jewish, then Israeli, then of Tunisian or Russian origin. Then they will say "religious" or traditionalist. Very rarely will they say "worker" or "employee".

What has become of the "peace camp"? Is it in a position to exert any kind of influence?

About 3,000 people demonstrated against the war of aggression on Gaza. This is very little and represents especially what in France is called the far left. In this sense, the mass peace movement that we knew in the 1980s and 1990s has not yet recovered from its rout in August 2000. This date should be remembered because it marks a break, a sort of August 1914 of the peace movement: when Ehud Barak came back from the negotiations in Camp David (which he sabotaged with the collaboration of the Clinton administration), he, who had been elected on the basis of an alternative to the policy of occupation of the Right, succeeded in convincing his own camp that Yasser Arafat was using negotiations to lull Israel to sleep, creating lines of fracture with the aim of finally driving the Jews into the sea (sic!). He added: the Right was right, it was us, the pacifists, who were wrong.

The problem is that this mega-lie was received loud and clear by the peace movement... And Sharon was elected with a large majority, to undertake the reconquest of the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority and the few gains resulting from the negotiations between Israel and the PLO. The peace movement has not recovered from that rout, and we are still far from seeing a rebirth of it as a mass movement capable of influencing the political choices of the government.

You have explained, I believe, that by its ignorance of social questions, part of the Israeli Left and the peace camp had thrown the Sephardic Jews into the arms

of Likud and the far right: is this definitive?

The popular classes, and especially the poor Jews who came from Arab countries (wrongly called "Sephardic"), have, since the late 1970s, made the choice of the Right, not by identification with its ideology of Greater Israel but because it represented the opposition to the absolute, totalitarian and racist - against non-European Jews - power of the pseudo-left.

The "Left" has no chance of winning back the popular electorate because its reality and its image are bourgeois, and its anti-oriental racism is glued to its identity. The massive immigration of Russians has also reinforced this fault line. To regain a foothold in the popular classes, a new Left has to be built, but this is the task of the next generation.

Having said that, inter-community marriages are becoming more numerous, and I think attachment to ethnicity, in the Jewish-Israeli community, is tending gradually to lose its relevance.

What does the far left represent in Israel? Anarchists against the Wall? Other movements? What we call here the radical left is very modest, defined primarily by its position on political issues (colonial conflict and wars), even though in general the far left also defends an anti-capitalist orientation. It does not have, in the Jewish population, a party within which it could organize, and it is in collectives that we find it, whether on political issues (occupation, racism) or social ones (economic refugees, women's rights, housing ...) When there are elections, it votes by default for one of the "Arab parties", in particular the Communist Party. Besides, this party denies being "an Arab party," even though 85 per cent of its electorate comes from the Palestinian population of Israel.

Anarchists against the Wall, some feminist organizations, various groups fighting against the occupation or social injustice, or again the Alternative Information Center (AIC), are to be found in specific campaigns (against the Wall, against the fascist

groups, for undocumented workers, etc.), but there are no permanent structures.

One of the problems we face is what I called years ago the "NGO-ization" of politics, groups of people employed by small organizations, which are often well financed for their activities by European foundations or governments. NGOs certainly do a good job concerning information and awareness, but they can in no circumstances be the basis of a mass movement. Some people might even say that they are, involuntarily, an obstacle.

How is discrimination against Israeli Arabs evolving? Is the secession between Israeli Jews and Arabs now complete? Or are there common spaces of cooperation and struggle?

Since 2000 (in October 2000, Ehud Barak ordered a bloody crackdown on the solidarity demonstrations in Arab localities with the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories), we have witnessed a breakdown of the Jewish-Arab front that characterized the movement of opposition to the occupation and to discrimination against the Palestinian minority in Israel (which is 20 per cent of the population). The Palestinians no longer come to Tel Aviv to protest and have chosen to mobilize in their towns and villages. That explains why the protests in major Jewish cities have decreased from tens of thousands to a few thousand.

Behind this choice there is also expressed a desire for autonomy, because in the "Jewish-Arab front", the Communist Party was pushing towards Jewish hegemony, of which the presence of Israeli flags and the over-representation of Jewish speakers were the external signs.

The Arab minority is represented in the Knesset by three parties of more or less equal influence: the Communist Party (in the form of the Front for Peace and Equality, Hadash), the National Democratic Assembly (Balad - radical nationalists) and the Unified Arab List (conservative nationalists).

An amendment to the electoral law may push the Arab parties to constitute a joint list in future if they want to be elected, and if this perspective is realized, there could be in the next Knesset an Arab parliamentary group of around fifteen deputies (out of 120 ...) Unless the attempts of the far right to prohibit certain Arab parties from running are successful. On this question, the coming weeks will be crucial [40]

For the Jewish-Arab front to be rebuilt, it is essential that Jewish activists agree to abandon their objective of being hegemonic and become a force in support of a

movement that is primarily an Arab national movement.

What echo does the AIC have in the present context?

The specificity of the Alternative Information Center is to be, three decades after being established, still the only joint Israeli-Palestinian organization. The AIC brings together activists, known and recognized, from the Palestinian Left and Israeli anti-Zionists. Although, as its name suggests, it conducts work of information and political and social analysis (especially on its website alternativenews.org), its originality and its importance reside in its choice

to be a breach in the wall that separates the two societies, including the activist world, and to promote a perspective of cooperation and partnership between movements on both sides of the "green line".

In a context where separation is seen as an almost absolute value, the perspective of living together is eminently revolutionary, and it leads to the necessity of a common struggle.

*This interview was first published in **Revue L'Anticapitaliste** n°61, January 2015, monthly review of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in France.*

Bhopal's Fight for Memory

5 March 2015

Over 5000 persons from the area immediately adjacent to the factory died in the 72 hours following the gas "leak," and over 20,000 persons died subsequently as a result of severe health complications from the toxic air.

To this day, 30 years later, toxic materials (wastes, by-products, solvents, polluted water) dumped by the plant have not been assessed or cleaned up and there are few warning signs in the adjacent areas. The waste has entered the water supply of the city.

More than 600,000 persons continue to suffer severe health problems and physical deformities now present in the third generation of survivors of the catastrophe. Dow Chemical, which subsequently acquired Union Carbide Company, denies liability for damages.

Survivors and activists rally in Bhopal every year on the anniversary in their battle to have Dow Chemical and the governments of India and Madhya Pradesh face their culpability, clean the site, provide free health care, undertake epidemiological and environmental research, as well as

regulate chemical plants across the country.

Sara Abraham, advisory editor of *Against the Current*, spoke in December 2014 to Nityanand Jayaraman, an environmental activist from Chennai, and member of the Bhopal Memorial Trust, who travelled to Bhopal for the 30th anniversary meetings and protests.

Against the Current: What is the ongoing importance of the struggle for justice in Bhopal?

Nityanand Jayaraman: The struggle in Bhopal, firstly, underscores the importance of memory as a weapon or tool to get justice and to hold corporations and the government accountable.

The one thing that the government wants is for Bhopal to be forgotten, and the one thing that the Bhopalis know is that they need to fight for memory of Bhopal. It is that classic fight of memory against forgetfulness, as stated by Milan Kundera.

The fight is to keep the memory alive, not only through holding the

anniversary but by having significant victories and defeats and ongoing struggles as the subject of each anniversary. It is a stock-taking effort, and also an invitation for people to come to Bhopal to witness the rehabilitation work and the struggle, to see the strengths and the fatigue, and to see firsthand the extent of damage that has been caused by one corporation's pursuit of profit.

There have been struggles against corporations in India and abroad "powerful pitched battles against employers. In those cases, there was no attempt to extinguish the life of the corporation or to damage its business.

Bhopal brought in the realization that corporations are not merely about jobs, welfare and the creation of wealth, and that the damages caused in the pursuit of a corporate agenda are not just small externalities but can be disasters and can resemble a small war. This was something that was not firmly in people's minds.

It is more than 50 years since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which talked about the toxic chemicals that corporations produce that harm the

foundation of life. In Bhopal we see that in an incident of a few hours the city witnessed a death count of several thousand and 30 years later the city is bursting at its seams with evidence of ongoing damage.

The Chingari Trust (rehabilitation center ed.) has about 200 children who are affected by a variety of congenital disorders, a large number having cerebral palsy, compromised motor skills, compromised mental development, others with physical deformities, and this is in the third generation.

The harm to the people of Bhopal did not really hurt Union Carbide. It managed to pretty much save itself, barring the marginal nosedive that the share prices had during the disaster. The 1989 settlement was rewarded with an upsurge in the stock prices of Union Carbide.

Bhopal also makes it very clear on whose side the state stands and how the language and procedure of law is stacked against victims of industrial disasters and the poor. That the Indian Supreme Court endorsed a shameful settlement, about one-seventh the original demand, and authorized the quashing of criminal charges against the accused indicates a compromised nature of the judiciary. The fact that they reviewed the judgment and reinstated the criminal charges two years later only underlines how the Indian Supreme Court can screw up on such important matters.

The other ironic upshot of the Bhopal disaster was that the Union Carbide crime was a bonanza for other multinational corporations (MNCs) that are equally polluting and carry equally dangerous chemicals. The pharmaceutical industry in particular is one of the biggest beneficiaries of the widespread morbidity in Bhopal administration of symptomatic interventions (drug treatments ed.) only improves the health of the companies, not the patients.

Over the years we often heard people who came and suggested that perhaps the survivors ought to try this trick or that. Well-meaning people, solidarity workers have come offering

suggestions like a new legal forum, approaching shareholders at the annual general meeting, or a direct action like dumping toxic waste on Union Carbide or Dow headquarters.

Many of these suggestions have been taken up and executed, to a point now that very few new ones coming in; a large number of options have been tried, some with success and many without.

The package of survivors' demands has remained largely unchanged over the last three decades. And the breadth of the demands indicate the breadth of interventions that have been necessary to give survivors a fighting chance to return to a life of dignity.

The demands have revolved around economic rehabilitation, medical rehabilitation, social rehabilitation including support for the disabled and the aged, criminal punishment, environmental rehabilitation and financial compensation.

One other lesson that can be drawn from the Bhopal struggle is the importance of pursuing the government to set up medical infrastructure, and equally the importance of communities to monitor these. Through a series of public citizen-led audits of medical infrastructure and medical practices, the Bhopalis have underscored the importance of eternal vigilance.

No Justice in Court

ATC: Can you tell us about the shifts and twists in the legal cases against Union Carbide and Dow Chemical?

NJ: Bhopal survivors' organizations have to be credited for predicting very early on that the government stands resolutely on the opposite side. That is the reason why they had the wisdom to insinuate themselves in the ongoing criminal case as interveners.

Left to itself, the criminal case would have died in 1989 when the Indian Supreme Court rubber stamped a settlement that included a condition that all criminal charges against all

accused would be dropped. A subsequent review petition filed by alert survivors' organizations resulted in the reinstatement of the criminal case in 1991.

Subsequently the criminal case was split into one where the Indian accused were tried, and another to pursue the charges against the foreign accused all of whom were declared absconders in 1992. Once again the perfidy of the Supreme Court came to light when Chief Justice Ahmadi allowed the petition by the Indian defendants to reduce charges to one that drew a maximum prison sentence of two years.

The case against the foreign accused was the one of utmost concern for the government, and an agenda item in the bilateral discussions between the governments of India and the United States.

In the early 2000s the then National Democratic Alliance (right-wing) government went so far as to propose that charges against Warren Anderson, CEO of Union Carbide, be reduced from "culpable homicide not amounting to murder" to "rash and negligent act," a charge normally aimed at people guilty of causing traffic accidents.

The fact that this was proposed by then home minister L.K. Advani, without any public request by the accused, again goes to demonstrate the preoccupation of the government with the welfare of U.S. corporations and their agents.

The manner in which Bhopalis have checked the bad moves of the government, and prompted and pressured it to make the right moves through their acts of civil disobedience, demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the interaction between public and legal fora.

Bhopal's history very clearly demonstrates that a case is never fought only in the courts. Street battles are as important if not more to ensure that courts and the government do the right thing.

Bhopalis have also never left their

guard down and have been always been on the lookout for new opportunities to hold the corporation liable.

In February 2001 Union Carbide attempted to put Bhopal behind it through its merger with Dow Chemical. Bhopalis saw this almost immediately as an opportunity to enforce Union Carbide's appearance in the criminal case.

After several years of denial by Dow Chemical that it would assume any of Union Carbide's liabilities in Bhopal, Dow Chemical is now faced with a situation where it has to appear before the magistrates' court in Bhopal to explain why it should not be charged with abetting the fugitive Union Carbide Corporation in its attempts to evade criminal charges.

They did this as UCC continued to do business in India through a series of front companies including Dow Chemical's subsidiaries in India and abroad.

Unlike Union Carbide, which has no assets to be attached to enforce its appearance in India, Dow Chemical has millions of dollars worth of assets and can potentially be forced to make an appearance.

This fact puts a lie to the cocky assertions of the company in past shareholder meetings that Union Carbide's liabilities will have no bearing on the material well-being of the company. [41]

(After Dow failed to appear for a court hearing on November 12, survivors' organizations have demanded that prime minister Modi compel it to comply [42])

Thirteen years after its acquisition of Union Carbide, Dow finds itself in a position where its plans for pumping a billion dollars into India within a decade and to use India as a manufacturing hub (Dow is in the automotives market and India is going through a domestic automobile boom) and springboard to Asian markets has been a non-starter, solely because of its association with the Bhopal disaster.

Medical Neglect and Health Crisis

ATC: Can you tell us about struggles on the health front?

NJ: In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, medical authorities in Bhopal were totally in the dark regarding the nature of the chemical that caused the health effects that they were observing. As a result they did not know how to treat the problems of the thousands of patients who were pouring into the hospital.

Only symptomatic treatment was given. If people had burning sensation in their eyes they were asked to wash their eyes or were given eye drops; oxygen respirators were used for people with breathing distress; etc. Even in the days that followed, Union Carbide refused to reveal the exact nature of the toxic chemicals that had escaped that night, or the nature and extent of damage it could cause to human tissue.

It took a large number of post-mortems and educated surmises for medical professionals to conclude that a cyanide-based chemical was the main agent of poisoning. When it became known that it was MIC and cyanide chemicals, Union Carbide's doctors downplayed the extent of damage that these chemicals could cause.

The most criminal act in all this was that of the Madhya Pradesh state government. Within a month of the disaster a German doctor recommended an injection of sodium thiosulphate to effectively chillate cyanide-based compounds circulating in the blood stream. If the poisons had been chillated with the help of this drug the likelihood and the intensity of longterm effects among the exposed population would have decreased dramatically.

However, the success of sodium thiosulphate would have also effectively proven that the poisons had entered the bloodstream and reached virtually every nook and corner of the body. This in turn would be contrary to Union Carbide's claims that the

poisons would have a localized and temporary effect on eyes and lungs. This in turn would mean a very heavy compensation bill.

Acting at the behest of Union Carbide, the state government banned the administration of sodium thiosulphate, calling it an unproven remedy. Not only that, they busted a health clinic set up by activists that was administering the drug despite the ban, confiscated the supplies, ransacked the clinic and arrested and jailed the activists and doctors for 18 days.

In 1996, the setting up of the Sambhavna Trust Clinic (Bhopal People's Health and Documentation Clinic) with entirely private funding set a new benchmark for modern medical treatment of survivors. There have been other previous instances of such medical facilities in India, such as the Shaheed hospital and the Jan Swasthya Sahyog set up by mineworkers in Chattisgarh.

Sambhavna offers free medical treatment incorporating an integrated treatment protocol that draws from Ayurveda, yoga, panch karma, and allopathy. The clinic stresses the importance of data collection, research and community-based work with volunteers drawn from the community.

As with Shaheed hospital, this too has a robust community outreach and preventive medicine program. A team of community workers visit different parts of the affected areas daily at their camps. The clinic also has its own medicinal garden spread over an acre of land, where 150 different species of plants are grown.

Sixty percent of the garden's produce is formulated locally and administered to the patients. The remaining 40% is handed in raw form to patients with instructions on formulating powders or decoctions (purified liquids) for their use.

Sambhavna has an extensive outreach program to popularize the cultivation and use of medicinal herbs by affected communities. Fifteen medicinal plants have been identified as part of a package based on three criteria "â€"

ease of cultivation, ease of formulation and effectiveness of commonly reported ailments. Five community gardens have been set up which are cared for by local volunteers.

The medical interventions by Sambhavna are interesting for a number of reasons. For instance, cultivating community gardens poses community health care as a community issue as opposed to a private problem.

Second, through encouraging cultivation of herbal medicines by patients themselves, people retain some control over their own well-being.

Thirdly, the introduction of systems of medicine that are historically associated with the Hindu community such as yoga and Ayurveda were introduced tentatively among the survivors, who included a large number of Muslims. These were eventually adopted quite wholeheartedly after their successes, especially the exercises such as pranayama (breathing control) for treating respiratory disorders.

That clinic, however, cannot begin to and did not intend to treat all the survivors, who number over 600,000. It was set up as a model for the government to adopt. Thus far the government has begun to computerize patient records, introduced pulmonary physiotherapy, and agreed to adopt antibiotic treatment protocols. It has done little else, but it can no longer say, as it used to, that nothing can be done.

Creativity in Struggle

ATC: What have been some of the campaigns launched by the Bhopali survivors over the past 30 years?

JN: Starting from the time when a consumer boycott of Everready batteries, a popular Union Carbide brand name, was launched in 1985, Bhopal survivors and their supporters around the world have engaged in a variety of direct action that have

drawn from principles of civil disobedience, satire, theater, legal actions and also daredevil acts.

There have been more than 100 hunger strikes, including several indefinite hunger strikes. In 2002 an indefinite hunger strike that had to be terminated due to the ill health of one of the fasting survivors was revived when a solidarity activist " Diane Wilson " decided to fast unto death on behalf of the survivors from her hometown in Seadrift, Texas. [43]

Working closely with the Bhopalis' vast network of international volunteers, the prematurely terminated hunger strike was converted into a global relay hunger strike where more than 4000 people from various parts of the world signed up to fast along with Diane for a day or longer in a show of solidarity. This was the earliest use of social media by the Bhopal campaign, where a separate webpage was set up where people could do more than just sign a petition.

Another action in 2002 that was proposed by and largely executed by women survivors and their women supporters from around the world was the jhadu maro Dow ko ("Sweep Dow Chemicals") campaign. Bhopali women had a bumper harvest of more than 5000 used brooms, donated by irate families, which were collectively handed over to Dow.

A third campaign was prompted by revelations of an investigation by survivors into Dow's attempts to win the support of the government of India to rid itself of Union Carbide's liabilities.

An explosive collection of documents retrieved by the Right to Information Act exposed the long list of people who were acting on behalf of Dow Chemical. This list included then vice chairman of the planning commission, Montek Singh Aluwahlia, Indian Ambassador to the U.S. Ronen Sen, then Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, BJP Spokesperson Arun Jaiteley, Congress spokesperson Abishekh Manu Singhvi, Tata Sons chairperson Ratan Tata, and Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries.

All these luminaries had written urging the Prime Minister to exonerate Dow and facilitate its business in India. The papers also revealed that the PM had set up a high level U.S.-India Business Council involving industrial leaders from the United States and India. One of the 13 agenda points of this committee was the resolution of legacy issues such as Bhopal with the intent of assuring untrammelled trade between the two countries.

Bhopalis reacted by organizing the 2007 Mir Zafar award ceremony. Mir Zafar was the infamous traitor who betrayed Siraj-ud-daulah in the Battle of Plassey (1757), paving the way for the East India Company to consolidate its hold over India. The satirical award ceremony pilloried the above luminaries for their collusion with Dow.

Bhopal has also inspired several documentaries, one novel and at least two full length feature films, the latest being Bhopal: a Prayer for Rain [released on November 7, 2014 in the United States and December 5, 2014 in India, starring Rajpal Yadav and Martin Sheen].

Bhopal Express was the first Bollywood film. All these productions have been substantially influenced by the survivors and their supporters. In some instances survivors had to prevail quite forcefully on the film producers to ensure their voices were not distorted. [44]

Shaping Activism

ATC: How has Bhopal shaped the work you do as an environmental activist?

JN: I went to Bhopal in 1995 to write a story on water contamination. By that time, the campaign had already coined and popularized long lasting slogans such as "No More Bhopals," "Remember Bhopal" and "A Thousand Bhopals."

After several years of intimacy with the campaign, I could not help seeing a Bhopal-like situation unfold in every corner I turned. The situations involved rampant industrial pollution, a helpless affected community, a

collusive state and a corporation that went ahead with impunity.

In my home state of Tamil Nadu, in 2001 we uncovered a toxic mercury dump by Anglo Dutch multinational Unilever, which operated a mercury thermometer film in Kodaikanal. As with Bhopal, this MNC had run a sub-standard facility that polluted the environment and hurt the workers and families. [45]

It is now 13 years since the factory has closed and our efforts and the efforts of the workers to get Unilever to clean up the site and compensate

affected workers and their families are still ongoing.

Our experiences with the courts has been dismal. A case filed by workers in the Madras High Court has inched ahead to nowhere in the last seven years, in the course of which at least 25 workers have died. We are not approaching the courts for environmental remediation, as we have learnt from the Bhopal case that the courts lack the sensitivity and understanding of complexity of remediating contaminated sites.

We are working with communities in similar toxic hot spots in Thoothukudi,

Cuddalore, Mettur " all places where local and foreign industries have already caused significant damage to the environment and people. In all these places, public campaigns and awareness material have invoked Bhopal in one way or the other.

You can say that Bhopal is no longer a place alone, but a symbol for corporate greed and impunity, government collusion, toxic pollution, and peoples' struggles against all of these.

[Against the Current](#)

Solidarity with the students and parents of Ayotzinapa. We want them back alive!

4 March 2015, by Fourth International

Since September 26, 2014 the demand has been the same: "They were taken away alive! We want them back alive!" We denounce the clear participation and responsibility of the state at all levels and in particular the involvement of the 27th Infantry Battalion of the Mexican Army in the disappearance of our comrades.

The government of Peña Nieto has not only given no response to the demand of the social movement in Mexico, but has also attempted to hide the deep social crisis the country is going through. Ayotzinapa features in this crisis, not as an isolated deed, but as the consequence of a deliberate state strategy which has militarized the country and unleashed a wave of violence which can only lead to tragedies of this type. To this type of drama, we should add the increase in killings of women and violence against women in general, the dozens of journalists assassinated in recent years and the growing violence of criminal groups against immigrants and national or central American immigrants, to complete the panorama of a country in full social

decomposition.

Parallel to this, this government has liquidated the final social conquests that the Mexican revolution of 1910 had bequeathed in a political Constitution which is now dead. Simultaneously, Peña Nieto as well as the leading figures of his government has been implicated in scandals of corruption and conflicts of interest.

That is why the social movement of solidarity with the students of Ayotzinapa rejects the version of the government, which attempts to make this a "local" affair, and rejects any return to the institutional road and participation in the intermediary parliamentary elections in June. These elections will take place in the midst of a crisis of legitimacy of the electoral and political institutions of the country and when the movement points clearly to the responsibility of the state and demands the departure of Peña Nieto.

The defiance towards all parties and political-electoral institutions has

reached an unprecedented level. We call on all the left and trade union forces and social movements in our country to pursue actions of solidarity with the Mexican social and popular movement and to maintain world pressure on the government of Peña Nieto whose international credibility is at its lowest.

We hail with enthusiasm the mass demonstrations and multiple forms of mobilization, struggle and expressions of solidarity developing in Mexico.

We support the demands for the reappearance of the students alive, the punishment of those responsible both intellectually and materially for these deeds, as well as the growing demand for the resignation of Peña Nieto.

The state is responsible!

Peña Nieto out!

They took them away alive, we want them back alive!

Statement by the International Committee of the Fourth

A death in Argentina

4 March 2015, by **Claudio Katz**

The commotion caused by the death of Argentinian prosecutor Alberto Nisman doesn't simply revolve around the question of how he died. Questions abound: Why was he given the gun, why were his guards absent, why was medical help slow to arrive, and why did it never seem like a suicide?

His death added a new mystery to those that arose after the bombing of the Mutual Aid Association of Argentina (AMIA) in 1994, which left 85 people dead. In fact, this prosecutor was intimately involved in covering up clues in the investigation of who was responsible for the attack, and it's not at all clear how he got caught up in this trap.

Twenty-five years after the murder of 85 people, no one has been held responsible, sent to prison or even indicted. The only thing that has been talked about is whether or not the government has engaged in negotiations to absolve the Iranian state of any responsibility, based on the assumption that the Ayatollahs were behind the attack. Nisman made this accusation without any evidence, and the majority of the media went along, silencing other more likely possibilities.

All traces of the attack were immediately erased by the Israeli, U.S. and Argentine governments. They diverted the investigation to focus on Iran, rejecting signs pointing to Syria and providing a cover for any local connection.

In the mid-1990s, Israel was negotiating with Syria for the eventual extension of the peace agreement signed by Egypt, and it wasn't convenient for them to involve their negotiating partner in what had taken place in Buenos Aires. The AMIA and the DAIA (Argentine Delegation of

Israeli Associations) subordinated themselves to Zionist diplomacy and helped deceive the victims' family members.

The U.S. threw blame onto Iran, its principal geopolitical adversary in the Middle East. Then-President Carlos Menem—a longtime power broker in the Justicialist Party, which is based on the legacy of Juan and Eva Peron—backed this cover-up in order to hide his own responsibility in the massacre. Some analysts argue that the explosion was revenge for breaking a promise during arms trafficking that the ex-president oversaw. Others have suggested that Menem broke commitments to transfer nuclear or missile technologies to foreigners who provided funding for his electoral campaigns.

These theories coincide with a string of scandals that accompanied his administration. The tragedy at AMIA cannot be separated from the sale of arms to Croatia, the violation of neutrality in the conflict between Ecuador and Peru, the privileges extended to the drug trafficker Monzer al-Kassar, the explosion at the Rio Tercero arsenal or the strange helicopter accident which claimed the life of the president's son, Carlitos Menem, in 1995.

Intelligence and judicial agencies worked together to obscure what had taken place at the AMIA. They cleaned up the crime scene, destroyed recordings of telephone conversations and protected the real suspects, while inventing accusations and bribing witnesses. Claudio Lifschitz—a former secretary of Juan José Galeano and the first presiding judge in the AMIA investigation—was kidnapped and tortured.

Current Argentinian President Cristina Fernandez de Kircher raised these irregularities during her time in the Senate, but after becoming president, Cristina, who succeeded her deceased husband Néstor Kirchner, maintained the cover-up and continued to harass Iran (as her husband had done). Both gave speeches at the United Nations putting their complaints against Iran on par with their claims to the Malvinas Islands, which Britain had seized from Argentina during the so-called Falklands War in 1982. And both of them validated the unlikely reports that Nisman received from his superiors in the CIA and the Mossad.

The Kirchners (who also come from the Justicialist Party) initially upheld a governing pact (less open hostility between the factions in exchange for impunity) that had been made between Menem and Eduardo Duhalde, Menem's one-time vice president, who was subsequently elected president himself in 2002 after the collapse of the Argentinian economy. Later, this same agreement was invoked to improve relations with the U.S. and Israel.

The inconsistencies in the accusations against Iran led to one embarrassment after another. One person, who was supposedly involved in the attacks and who carried out diplomatic functions and Argentina, was detained and then immediately released in Europe for lack of proof. Meanwhile, senior Israeli officials boasted of having killed those responsible for the crime.

But the story put forward by Nisman began to fall apart over the course of the last two years for other reasons. The government distanced itself from manipulations by the U.S. and

moderated its complaints against Iran, exchanging their arrest warrant for negotiations that culminated in the signing of a Memorandum between the two governments.

This turn coincided with the new situation created by talks undertaken by the U.S. and Iran with the aim of dismantling the latter's nuclear program. Israel continued to advocate bombing these installations, but Washington began to prioritize its campaign against Syria, up to and including the demolition of the country, following the precedents set in Libya and Iraq.

In this new context, Nisman found himself out on a limb and someone encouraged him to raise the stakes. He floated speculations of a ridiculous charge against Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, accusing her of pardoning the Iranians (lifting the "red flags" at Interpol) in exchange for increased trade of grain for oil. Nobody believed this nonsense. Nisman lost an important U.S. supporter (Ronald Noble, who left his post as Interpol chief), the complicity of key Argentine judges (Rudolfo Canicoba Corral and MarÃa Servini de CubrÃa) and the security services (Antonio Stiusso).

The right has tried to present Nisman as a crusader seeking the truth. In fact, the U.S. embassy was mixed up in the investigation, as reported by WikiLeaks. The presence of the main representative of the U.S. diplomatic delegation at Nisman's wake is enough to remind us of this close relationship.

The right-wingers are working to once again realign Argentina's foreign policy with that of the U.S. and Israel. Thus, they are proposing the creation of an international commission, established in Washington, D.C., to find out what happened to Nisman.

They also aim to block an upcoming trial focused on how the attack was covered up and involved several figures among Menem's supporters, the Justicialist Party, the DAIA and insiders in Mauricio Macri's Buenos Aires city administration. In addition to Galeano and Ruben Beraja (former

president of the DAIA), Fino Palacios, one of Macri's close advisors, could soon be parading through the courts.

In order to conceal their complicity, the right is trying to blame Nisman's death directly on Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's government. ClarÃn, Argentina's largest daily newspaper, which is critical of the current president, is aiding and abetting this campaign by claiming that inconsequential telephone conversations between Kirchner aids (Luis D'ElÃa) and people close to Iran constitute a felony. The aim of all this is to demonstrate—at a minimum—that the president cannot handle the current crisis.

Meanwhile, the government appears confused. The president polemicizes by Twitter, first suggesting Nisman's death was a suicide, and then later a crime. At the same time, she has accused Diego Lagomarsino (an IT specialist in the prosecutor's office who lent Nisman the gun that killed him) without even checking with the powerful chief of the intelligence services.

Aside from all this, presidential support would have been sufficient to pursue a serious judicial investigation. But the death of the prosecutor came a few weeks after a major conflict had arisen between the president and the higher-ups in the security services. And the government has also recently been at odds with judges investigating hotels owned by the Kirchner family and their connections to money laundering.

These palace intrigues aren't designed to punish corruption. They always proliferate when the end of a presidential term comes close and confrontations erupt between the various groups who are fighting for preeminence in the state apparatus.

Nismans death may also have an impact in the electoral arena. Until Nisman's death, the government had regained the initiative with its anti-vulture funds campaign (U.S. investors holding discounted Argentinian bonds who are demanding billions of dollars in claims) and plans

to promote the presidential candidacy of Fernandez de Kirchner's former vice president Daniel Scioli in this year's elections.

In a context of recession and high inflation, the president intended to resume borrowing, peg the dollar, postpone cutting subsidies and revive consumption—all in order to pass along any cutbacks to the next president. Will she be able to stick to this plan in the new context?

In the middle of all this turmoil, the president has proposed a reform of government services in order to overcome what she calls the "great democratic deficit." She forgets to add alongside this pronouncement that she has governed for an entire decade without addressing it.

Her real aim is to simply change the names, but leave the structures of spies in tact. The old SIDE (State Security Secretariat) was changed into the SI (Secretariat of Intelligence) and will now be called the AFI (Federal Intelligence Agency), maintaining its existing personnel and its enormous budget. The National Congress would appoint the intelligence directors under the new plan, but the executive could then replace them. No changes are envisioned for military or police agency spies, and judicial supervision will only be extended over some controversial wiretaps.

All of this means that the supposed dissolution of the SI is really nothing more than a reorganization. As there will be no investigations or clearing out of the old staff, it represents cosmetic change in place of real transformation. The project also eliminates previously announced plans for the declassification of intelligence files. Likewise, it is worth remembering that there have been several spy scandals over the last decade and none of these diminished the security service's power (bribes in the Senate in 2001 and the dismissal of Justice Minister Gustavo BÃeliz in 2004).

Moreover, Army Chief CÃesar Milani has been confirmed as the new strongman in the security services despite the serious allegations

brought against him for the disappearance of a soldier during the dictatorship. Officialism (a term describing the Justicialist Party) has not talked a great deal about Stiusso and his fortunes. This may be because this super-spy has compromising files on hand that he could use against the party's leaders.

But for the first time, the huge network of informants, operating as a state within a state, is being forced to the surface. This apparatus has built up its own businesses and is involved in numerous crimes. Its officers and outside agents are involved in drug trafficking, police protection rackets, looting and the murky management of prisons. They resolve their disputes through murder and grease the wheels of power that connect them to mayors, governors and political bosses.

Clarifying what really happened at the AMIA could be the first step toward dismantling this Mafioso structure. This case concentrates all the nefarious spies and their actions into one place. The formation of an Independent Investigation Commission, as suggested by the Council to Investigate the Unpunished Massacre at AMIA (APEMIA), might open such a path.

The Congress and the Justice Department have demonstrated their total incapacity for fulfilling this task. As was the case with the National Commission for the Disappearances of Persons (CONADEP), only an independent body with broad powers and staffed by well-respected public figures and family members of the victims will be able to conduct this investigation.

This is the moment to act quickly and with conviction. There is a generalized

feeling of indignation in the face of governmental impunity. The left and progressives must take the initiative in the face of dangerous attempts to manipulate the protests by the right wing, middle-class activists and the DAIA. Parliamentary actions or meetings with the government's ministers are not enough. Congress has never been the central arena for the people's demands.

The most important thing is to prioritize mobilizations. This week will see the first march in a series of demonstrations that must grow. The powers-that-be need the security services to hide their outrages, but the people want transparency, democracy and justice.

Translated by Todd Chretien.

[Socialist Worker](#)

[46]

The Murder of Boris Nemtsov

3 March 2015

We demand a transparent investigation and an immediate end to propaganda that incites hatred.

It's difficult to say just yet how the Friday-night murder of Boris Nemtsov will change the situation in this country - but something will happen, without any doubt. Regardless of who pulled the trigger, this act of terror is inextricably tied to the unbridled and chauvinistic Kremlin propaganda that, for years now, has accompanied a foreign policy of aggression. One of the main facets of this propaganda since President Vladimir Putin's speech on the accession of Crimea has been hatred of the "fifth column," a group of "national traitors." And it is around this hatred, the current rhetoric goes, that the nation must unify in the face of hardship. The "internal enemy" has never been left anonymous: he has several faces, constantly visible on billboards, and a few names, endlessly repeated on

television. One of these "enemies" was Boris Nemtsov. And even on the eve of his death, NTV was preparing the next of its foul "investigations," this time on the "Russian Maidan." In this one, Nemtsov was once again in line to play a front-and-center role.

It is true that Nemtsov was one of the main operators among the Yeltsin elite in the late 1990s, and that he is largely responsible (along with, for example, Putin) for many of the social catastrophes and political crimes of that period. His views could be characterized as right-wing liberal, and his foreign policy orientation, pro-U.S. It is also no secret, though, that even today, such views do not preclude one from elite positions in the Russian leadership or at the tops of corporations. However, the most important unwritten rule is the total ban on public criticism of the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine - an open protest against Russian troops on

another country's territory. It was precisely this rule that Nemtsov so consistently violated, a violation that put him high on the list of "internal enemies," and his place on that list that was the proximate cause of his murder.

Of course, Nemtsov's killing came as an unpleasant surprise for the federal government, which is already occupied with a last-ditch effort to maintain the illusion of stability and control of the country. There are a few possibilities in terms of who may have ordered the execution. Among them are certain circles of Russia's extensive security class who have an interest in ramping up tensions here. Others include the members of amateur groups broadly falling under the "anti-Maidan," as well as veterans of the military operation in the so-called Novorossiia, or even militants on the payroll of Ramzan Kadyrov. In any case, what happens next depends

on how society reacts to this killing. Liberal leaders' decision to move their march from Maryno to central Moscow, at the location of Nemtsov's death, is absolutely proper. After what happened last night, the agenda in this country has changed. What started as a murder is now the most important political question of the moment.

As we take to the streets tomorrow, we demand:

- An independent and transparent investigation into the murder of Boris Nemtsov
- An immediate end to the incitement to hatred by way of aggressive propaganda on state television
- Real and unconditional freedom of speech and assembly

- Termination of the Russian military operation in Ukraine
- The development of a crisis relief program aimed at helping the Russian people, not financial and energy corporations.

Translated from the original Russian by Thomas Callahan.

[LeftEast](#)

Solidarity with the Greek people!

2 March 2015, by **Fourth International**

The electoral victory of Syriza and the rout of the parties committed to respecting the demands of the Troika was also a frontal challenge to the European ruling classes and institutions.

For the first time, the regressive social plans imposed for 4 years on the European working classes have been repudiated electorally, bringing to government a party that, despite contradictory statement, waged its campaign mainly around the rejection of these plans. This was in the country in Europe, that has suffered the most violent social attacks imposed by the memorandum of the European Union, the ECB and the IMF,

Consequently, the arrival of this government was a sign of hope for all those, in Europe in particular, who are suffering from these same policies and for the social and political forces who seek to point the way to a fightback against austerity policies.

Just after its election, the Tsipras government announced that it was going to implement a series of measurements that broke with the commitments of former prime minister Samaras.

These declarations immediately ran up against the demands of the European Union and the Troika. On February 4th, the European Central Bank announced that the refinancing of the Greek banks was stopped, because it

no longer accepted the bonds of the Greek debt. At the same time there was a massive movement of withdrawals of liquidities in Greece. The pressure on the Tsipras government has been increasing in these recent days, in the meetings of the Eurogroup, that Greece should accept and maintain the framework of the memorandum, pressure supported by all the European governments, of both the right and social democracy. The unanimous and visible desire is to strangle the Greek government by controlling its banking system.

The demands put forward by the Eurogroup demonstrate that the idea of a break with the austerity policies without a confrontation with the European Union is impossible in practice.

Over and above the words, in the first agreements made between the Eurogroup and the government of Tsipras, the government undertakes to reimburse fully and in respect of the deadlines its creditors. This is a retreat on the undertakings given to the Greek people.

A long-term battle is underway. The European institutions are once again displaying their desire to impose extremely harsh neo-liberal policies which lead to the economic and social marginalisation of whole countries. For any force which wants to stand against the dominant choices in economic policy, rupture is an

essential condition. The rejection of the memorandums, of the budgetary diktats of the EU, the non-repayment of most of the debt are the key questions of confrontation. It is up to the Greek social and political forces themselves in the framework of a very broad and democratic discussion to choose the methods that seem the most appropriate to carry out such an anti-Troika policy building the best relationship of forces possible within the population in Greece, and addressing the European populations, who are also victims of austerity.

This policy cannot be consolidated without a policy that breaks with all the antisocial attacks imposed on the Greek people in the last four years in wages, health, the right to work and housing. Such an orientation require the taking of anticapitalist measures, of inroads into capitalist property, nationalization of the banks, and certain key sectors of the economy, reorganization of the economy to satisfy elementary social needs. To impose these solutions, social mobilization and workers' control of their own affairs are essential.

A decisive battle has begun in Greece, but all the peoples of Europe are concerned. The Greek people should not remain isolated. The leaders of the European Union claim to speak in the name of their people in their desire to strangle the Greek people.

We must immediately build a massive

movement of solidarity with the Greek people, their political and social labour movement, to build a Europe-wide relationship of forces in the struggle for who imposes their will in Greece, through the mobilisation of the great forces of the workers' movement throughout Europe. The fight to put an end to austerity will be

able to develop only through mobilizations of the major forces of the labour movement throughout Europe. We must stop the European Union governments from continuing to impose their diktats, reject any interference, any blackmail. It is for the people to decide their own

business. We - with campaign groups, the trade union movement and political organizations throughout Europe - must build a wall of solidarity with the Greek people, against the policies of the troika. This is the task that the militants of our International will take up in the days and the weeks to come.

Declaration of Fourth International on Palestine

2 March 2015, by **Fourth International**

Situation

1) The year 2014 was characterized in Israel and the Palestinian territories by a deepening of the dynamics that had been at work during the two preceding decades. Israel strengthened its hold on Gaza and the West Bank. Jewish settlement continued and sped up. Repression of the Palestinians was uninterrupted, and accompanied by intermittent, targeted, extremely violent military attacks, with a new level reached in the last bloody attack on Gaza in summer 2014. The political and economic strangulation of Palestinian society continued, as did the rightward radicalization of Israeli society and politics.

2) These dynamics had already been manifest before the Oslo accords of 1993-94. The long-term process of expropriation of Palestinian land and ethnic cleansing had been proceeding all along, on a shifting scale and at varying tempos in different conjunctures. But the situation today can only be understood by taking account of the changes made with the introduction of 'Palestinian autonomy'. This period has seen an end of the direct Israeli military occupation of the main Palestinian population centres. Direct occupation has been replaced by the Palestinian Authority (PA), a Palestinian politico-administrative and repressive

apparatus. In the process, the Palestinian refugees outside historic Palestine have been marginalized.

3) The 'peace process', and thus the tasks assigned to the PA, were rife with intrinsic contradictions. They were meant to contain Palestinian demands through the distribution of international aid, backed up by repression. But given the lack of any real political advances, the contradictions exploded in September 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada. This revolt manifested the refusal of broad layers of Palestinian society to keep silent in the face of the so-called 'peace process' and faced with an unprecedented acceleration of the colonization: in reality a thinly veiled restructuring of the Israeli occupation. The uprising further increased the visibility of the divisions at the PA's summit between, on the one hand, those who advocated trying to maintain an implausible balance between struggling against the occupation and collaborating with the occupation authorities, and, on the other hand, those who supported unqualified integration into the colonial system.

4) Israel repressed the Intifada by liquidating or arresting thousands of resistance fighters, the majority of whom came from Fatah. This violent repression strengthened the most capitulationist currents of the Palestinian leadership. Yasser Arafat's

death and his replacement by Mahmoud Abbas were the visible expression of the new balance of forces. Since 2005, under the direction of Abbas and his old and new associates, the PA has fully played the role of an auxiliary of the Israeli occupation forces. This has been apparent, notably, in the reorganization of the Palestinian security services under US tutelage. In addition, pushed forward by former high IMF official Salam Fayyad as PA prime minister, the PA sped up and completed the Palestinian economy's integration into and subjection to the world capitalist system and its chief local representative: Israel. While there are still, within the Palestinian Authority's apparatus nationalist sectors coming from Fatah hostile to co-management with the occupying power they are more and more marginalized.

5) The victory of Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) in the 2006 legislative elections was a new, albeit deformed, expression of the refusal of the majority of Palestinian society to submit to Western and Israeli orders or to give any political support to the PA's capitulationist and corrupt leadership. Most Palestinians did not identify the PA leadership with Fatah, however: while the PA's rulers were defeated in individual constituencies, Fatah as an organization obtained a percentage of the national party list vote that was only slightly lower than

Hamas'.

6) Hamas' victory was followed by its complete seizure of power in the Gaza Strip in reaction to Fatah leader Mohammed Dahlan's attempted putsch, which had the direct or indirect support of the US, Egypt and Israel. But this exposed Hamas to the contradictions of Oslo. There are increasingly visible divisions within Hamas between advocates of resistance to Israel, including armed resistance - and thus of confrontation with the Abbas leadership - and those who support rapprochement with the Abbas leadership (and thus a 'cold peace' with Israel).

7) Hamas faces the same problem that Fatah confronted in the first years of Palestinian autonomy: the tension between co-managing structures integrated into the system of occupation and at the same time continuing the struggle against occupation. So far, Hamas has managed to maintain its unity by combining the clientelist management of its mini-state apparatus in Gaza with the direction of the armed struggle (alongside other Palestinian organizations but with far more visibility and on a greater scale than the others), particularly in response to Israeli aggression. This has enabled Hamas to maintain its legitimacy, both among those who have benefited directly from the movement's institutionalization (by appropriating some of the revenues of the mini-state apparatus) - who support more peaceful relations with Israel - and among those in the most marginalized layers of the population (especially in the refugee camps) who oppose any form of peaceful relations with Israel.

8) This precarious equilibrium also rests on a discourse - the reactionary utopia of an Islamic state in Palestine, whose extent in space and time remains deliberately unspecified - that makes it possible to unite social categories with divergent, even contradictory material interests. Hamas has no monopoly on religious ideology, and this is not the main line of cleavage in Palestinian politics. But religion is central for Hamas, and is manifested in the movement's projects and practices: the marginalization of women, the substitution of religion for

politics, the confusion between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, etc. Looking beyond the clear need for inclusive frameworks that allow unity in struggle among different currents of the Palestinian resistance, this underlines the necessity of a political leadership that can provide an alternative to Hamas.

9) The Palestinian left (the PFLP, DFLP and PPP and Mustafa Barghouti's current) is not capable today of forming the necessary alternative. It is divided between advocates of total (in the case of the PPP) or partial (in the case of the DFLP) integration into the PA and the devotees (in the case of the PFLP) of national unity between Hamas and the Abbas leadership. The left is thus paying the price for its ambiguous attitude towards the 'peace process'. Unlike the PPP, the DFLP and PFLP formally opposed the Oslo accords. But their leaderships' insistence on the legitimacy of the PLO led them to mute some of their criticisms. Their failure to undertake the construction of a 'third force' left Hamas with the mantle of the only credible opposition, first to Arafat, then to Abbas. In view of this lack of perspectives, many of the left's cadres and activists gradually reoriented to NGO work. While their work has often been essential, it contributes, as long as it is not linked to the construction of a political alternative, to the depoliticization and NGO-ization of Palestinian society.

10) Meanwhile, the rightward radicalization of Israeli society and politics is continuing. Recent Israeli governments, dominated by racist, anti-democratic, far right forces, have continued and sped up the policies of settlement, repression and ethnic cleansing, directed against the Palestinians not only in the West Bank and (minus the settlements) in the Gaza Strip but also within pre-1967 Israel. The Israeli centre and centre-left have shared responsibility for these developments, either by participating in coalition governments or through their silent complicity in these policies. The 'peace movement' is paying the price for its orientation towards the Labour Party. Only small anti-colonialist groups are now really taking on the task of

struggling against all the dimensions of Israeli colonialism and of full-fledged solidarity with the Palestinians. Unfortunately, they are a small minority in Israeli society today. They face growing repression and harassment from the Israeli state and from far right groups.

11) These developments, taken as a whole, and the shift in the relationship of forces to the Palestinians' disadvantage, can only be fully understood and analyzed by situating them in their regional and international context. The Israeli state is in fact an integral part, politically and economically, of the world imperialist order. It benefits from open backing or indirect support from virtually all the Western countries. The tensions which exist between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government do not lead to any pressure on Israel; the USA, weakened in the region, cannot enter into open confrontation with their Israeli ally. Even some states that are more critical of Israeli policies, like Brazil, Turkey or even China, are continuing to step up their military and commercial ties with Israel. The recent votes in several European countries recommending recognition of a Palestinian state may express irritation at Israeli violence, arrogance and stubbornness and more and more marked isolation of the state of Israel, but they have not led to any real change in the diplomatic balance of forces. The Arab revolutionary process, which had raised the possibility of a break in the Palestinians' regional isolation, is going through a period of retreat with the rise of counter-revolution in its different forms, both repressive regimes and Islamic fundamentalism. The process has not been defeated and the region is far from being stabilized and new developments are to be expected, particularly in Syria and Egypt which could have an impact on the Palestinian situation. The revolutionary ebb is currently benefiting the Israeli state, due both to extreme forms of rivalry among the Arab countries and to growing collaboration with Israel by several Arab states: Egypt, Jordan, the Gulf states, etc. The Palestinians' isolation, contrasted with the widespread, strong support enjoyed by Israel,

underscores all the more the vital necessity of international solidarity, as the key to changing the relationship of forces.

Tasks

12) For almost three years now, we have been witnessing a tactical shift by the Palestinian leadership led by Abbas: it has decided to appeal directly to the international institutions, thus partially freeing itself from the constraints of the Oslo framework. The PA has thus asked to join the UN and various bodies linked to it, acceded to the International Criminal Court (ICC), tried to make the UN adopt a resolution imposing a calendar for Israeli military withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, etc. The failure of this last attempt shows the limits of the tactical shift. So does the threat of financial sanctions hanging over the PA, mainly by the US and Israel, especially if the PA pursues its appeal to the ICC. This would paralyze the functioning of the Palestinian institutions.

13) The conclusion is nonetheless unavoidable that these initiatives reveal an increased awareness by part of the Palestinian leadership that the 'peace process' and bilateral negotiations under US tutelage have led to a dead end. Even so, Abbas and his associates do not for the time being explicitly envisage a formal break with the Oslo accords. Rather, they aim to improve the relationship of forces with Israel. These initiatives also reflect, though in a distorted way, the aspiration of a steadily growing proportion of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories to escape from the cage of a 'peace process' that is making the prospect of satisfying the Palestinians' national rights more remote every day.

14) It is this realization in particular that guided the Palestinians who in July 2005 launched the civil society appeal for boycott, divestment and sanctions. Without taking a position on a long-term solution, they noted the failure of the strategy of negotiations and the unbalanced relationship of forces, and set the goal of isolating the state of Israel politically, economically

and diplomatically until such time as the Palestinians' national rights are achieved. BDS is thus meant to escape from the logic of bilateral negotiations and of an 'acceptable compromise'. Its aim is to develop mechanisms that will force Israel, which until now has stubbornly refused to speak any other language than the language of force, to change course. It is also a question of breaking with the logic of military confrontation with Israel, a dead end for the Palestinians, and to combine external pressure and the new development of a popular movement within the country.

15) BDS gives the international solidarity movement a key tool to denounce and pressurize not only the state of Israel, but also other states that are complicit in the occupation, as well as the big capitalist multinationals that profit from it by participating directly or indirectly in the economic exploitation of the Palestinian territories. In the last decade, especially in the wake of the massacres in Gaza in the winter of 2008-2009, BDS has made steady progress on an international scale. It has become a central activity of the solidarity movement and has won some significant victories, mainly in the areas of boycotts and divestment.

16) The Palestinian initiators of the BDS campaign rely on the creativity and tactical sense of the international solidarity movements, so that they take account in each country of the different possible aspects and levels of BDS suitable to specific national and regional realities. In different countries and regions, therefore, different demands can be highlighted, favouring demands which could have a real impact on Israel: suspension of the EU-Israel agreement, an immediate end to Egyptian participation in the blockade of Gaza and the opening of the Rafah crossing, an arms embargo, an end to military and economic cooperation with Israel (for example on the extraction of gas in the Mediterranean), the freeing of prisoners - particularly child prisoners etc. The key thing, apart from tactical adaptations, is to reject any concession on the fundamental demands, and to insist that BDS will only stop with the full and entire achievement of Palestinian national

rights as a whole, including the rights of Palestinians in the 1967 territories, of the Palestinians in pre-1967 Israel and the Palestinian refugees in exile outside historic Palestine.

17) Through and over and above the BDS campaign we should especially emphasize the reinforcement of contacts, links and partnerships between different social and labour movements - trade unions, peasant movements, the feminist movement, the LGBTI movement, human rights movements, the progressive Christian movements, etc. - with their Palestinian counterparts. These partnerships directly benefit the Palestinians by breaking their isolation, and by enabling solidarity movements to root themselves more deeply in national and regional social and political dynamics, widening their social base and audience. The chaos created by the counter-revolution in the region in the region has strengthened the logic of exodus of Palestinian refugees towards, in particular, Europe: taking into account this new fact should be a preoccupation of the solidarity movement linked with the movements of defence of migrants' and refugees' rights. The criminalization of the BDS movement and more largely the solidarity movement among other, and particularly in France, it also a new fact that we should take up in building as broad and unitive mobilizations as possible.

18) We should of course combat any form of racism, including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, within the movement in solidarity with the Palestinians, and reject any form of collaboration with extreme right forces. The recent events in Paris and Copenhagen during which Jewish people were deliberately assassinated, underline the need to struggle against all forms of stigmatization on religious or ethnic bases, and the importance of the presence of anti-occupations Jewish movements and networks within the solidarity movement. This implies developing a solidarity movement that is firmly wedded to principles. In imperialist countries, this does not however rule out an inclusive and proactive approach towards people of Arab and/or Muslim

culture, who often provide some of the main bases of support for solidarity. On the contrary, solidarity movements should work towards or deepen their collaboration with forces representing these groups, including Muslim movements and grassroots organizations, insofar as unity is possible without abandoning such fundamental principles as the reject of any confessional approach to the Palestinian question and any instrumentalization of solidarity in the service of religion.

19) Finally, it is important to establish and cultivate ties with the forces of the Palestinian left, in all their diversity, without posing any preconditions. This dialogue should focus, on the one hand, on forms of joint work that are possible within the international solidarity movement and, on the other hand, on perspectives for the recomposition of the anti-imperialist left on a regional and international scale and on the contribution that we can make to this process, in particular in defending our revolutionary Marxist point of view. In

this connection, the joint meetings and declarations of the revolutionary left organizations of the Arab region provide precious support, even if we may sometimes consider them imperfect and/or insufficiently representative. It is our task to build them, strengthen them and broaden them, while respecting pluralism and allowing for tactical divergences. In the solidarity movement with Palestinians, we should fight against any attempt to counterpose the regional revolutionary process and the Palestinian struggle, in particular in recalling the historical hostility of the regimes in the region to the Palestinians' demands, and underlining the complementarity between the struggle against the Israel and the struggle against the regimes. The combination between the Palestinian struggle and the other struggles for emancipation should also be particularly highlighted in our educational system, including and particularly in the IIRE schools.

20) In all these struggles and discussions, we will uphold the demands included in the resolution of

the FI's 2010 World Congress: unconditional, immediate and total retreat by the Israeli army from the territories occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem; the dismantling of all colonies built since 1967; destruction of the separation wall; liberation of the political prisoners held by Israel; immediate and unconditional lifting of the blockade of Gaza - as initial steps towards a political solution based on equal rights. We support the struggle of the Palestinian people in all its forms for the attainment of their rights: the right to self-determination without any external interference; the right of return for the refugees or compensation for those who demand it; equal rights for the Palestinians of 1948. Furthermore, we reaffirm the necessity of the emancipation of the Arab peoples, of the dismantling of the Zionist state, which represents a racist and colonialist project at the service of imperialism, in favour of a political solution in which all the peoples of Palestine (Palestinian and Israeli Jewish) can live together in full equality of rights.

The Syrian bourgeoisie and the people's revolution

2 March 2015, by Ghayath Naisse

It is notable that this gloomy picture concerns the areas which are revolutionary - and therefore destroyed - which are the areas where the popular classes, including the working class, live and work. This geographic map corresponds to a large extent with the nature of the social forces which are driving the revolution

The political understanding of the traditional, nationalist and Stalinist left, both before the wave of revolutions which has swept across the region and during it, can be characterised as a mixture of statements saying that the coming - or

current - revolution is a national-democratic revolution, and another set of statements speaking of revolutions by stages, meaning that the first stage is a national-democratic revolution, but with a 'socialist horizon' which will arrive one day, in the far future. This is a repetition of debates which used to be current among the leftist forces during the experiences of the revolutions of the twentieth century - as if no lessons whatsoever had been derived from them

These two concepts, which are in fact a single concept, Stalinist in essence and origin, are based on the idea that we possess a national bourgeoisie, or

a national capitalism. This demands, according to this Stalinist proposition, that we ally with it in order to reach the sought-after national-democratic stage, so as to build a strong economy, industry, growth, etc. From this intellectual proposition, originally Stalinist, are derived a number of Third-Worldist schools, which accuse a mafioso, comprador or rentier bourgeoisie, in order to distinguish it from a national industrial bourgeoisie which will have a progressive role. Some of them see it as necessary that the 'revolutionary party' should lead a class alliance (popular-national bourgeoisie) during this national-democratic stage. This is in fact a

repetition of the demagoguery of which we have seen the miserable effects under the slogan of national liberation, and what were called people's democracies, which were revealed to be in reality pure capitalist dictatorships, or state capitalisms

Our object is not an intellectual contest with the above-mentioned myths, which we oppose, with the adoption of the concept of permanent revolution, and the idea that all mass revolutions carry within them, in the age of capitalism which dominates the whole world, the dynamism of social revolution, that is, the actuality of socialist revolution in our era. Rather, let us see where in reality this Syrian bourgeoisie is today, this bourgeoisie which is supposed, according to the positions set out above, to be concerned with the 'democratic' revolutions, and what its political and class position actually is.

A strong bourgeoisie in possession and in power

The regime of the Assads, father and son, has succeeded, over four decades, in re-forming a large and strong bourgeois class. But what the dictator Assad the elder did over three decades in this respect is distinguished by its caution and by a slow return of spirit to the large bourgeoisie, via carefully-considered measures and by its organic connection with the ruling power. To do this it used two implements: the Law of Profit no. 10 of 1991, and the establishment of a general regime of corruption and generalised robbery, through which the high state bureaucrats, and especially the ruling clique and its partners, became, by the plunder of property, a large bourgeoisie in real estate, commerce and industry. But Assad the elder conserved to some degree the social role of the state, retaining free health and education systems and subsidies for basic subsistence products for the great majority of the toiling classes; and absorbed part of the unemployment by pumping it into a

large state bureaucracy with no rational productive function, especially the army, the security apparatus, and the administrative departments

This caution on the side of preserving some of the social achievements which Assad the elder retained, was cast aside by Bashar al-Assad when he succeeded his father in July 2000. He instituted swift and violent neoliberal changes to the economy, with a shameful disregard for any expected social reactions, in the belief that the repressive apparatuses of power had destroyed, over the decades, any attempt at protest. This was a grave mistake, for social protests did not stop but increased from 2006 onwards

The regime had given its antisocial neoliberal policy, undertaken in the interests of the Syrian large bourgeoisie, the name of the 'social market economy'. The regime of the clique, after Assad the younger inherited the leadership, brought the number of those living below the poverty line from 11 to 33 per cent; if we add to that the number of those living on less than two dollars a day, the number of people living in poverty in Syria in 2009 was almost half of the population, according to UN statistics

This rising bourgeoisie gained possession of 70 per cent of the GDP according to the statistics for 2009, at the time when there was a kind of unwritten agreement between it and the power of the ruling clique, by which the latter said to the rising bourgeois class: 'Get as rich as you like, but leave us in power'. This is what happened over the last four decades. Thus the regime symbolically brought a number of businessmen into the People's Council, which has no practical role. And it increased the powers of the industrial and commercial associations, and even formed businessmen's councils with 69 states in 2009, allowing Syrian businessmen to do business and associate directly with companies and institutions in trade, banking and industry in these countries (it is these same councils which were dissolved in June 2013 as a result of the siege and economic boycott imposed on Syria and the disappearance of their role)

In addition to this, the despotic form of the regime may be regarded as the form corresponding to the rising Syrian bourgeoisie, in that there is no space for protest against its exploitation and plunder, and no legal or trade-unionist obstacles in the path of its greed.

What national bourgeoisie

When the people's revolution broke out in March 2011, it was noteworthy that a section of this Syrian large bourgeoisie expressed its support for the ruling regime by propaganda and proclamations, in that stage in the first months of the revolution when demonstrations of support for the clique were still a pressing need of the regime. Another section continued to finance and arm militias loyal to the regime, especially that part of the bourgeoisie which is a partner to the ruling family clique.

But it is well-known that capital has no homeland and no religion other than its profits: from the end of the first year of the revolution there began a growing movement to smuggle the property of this bourgeoisie to Lebanon and other Arab and foreign states. This began, in the second year, with the closing of its factories and the arbitrary sacking of tens of thousands of workers, or the moving or sale of these factories.

The bourgeoisie did not long hesitate in grasping the danger that the popular revolution posed to it. It immediately began arbitrarily sacking large numbers of workers, in order to prevent them from taking part in strikes in their factories, and to protect their capital in the best conditions for the guarantee of their interests. The semi-official newspaper 'al-Watan' published a report noting the dismissal of over 85,000 workers in the first year of the revolution; half of those dismissed were from Damascus and its surrounding areas. The official figures indicated that 187 firms in the private sector were closed completely in the period from 1/1/2011 to 27/2/2012. The report indicates that these figures were not confirmed: the number of workshops

and factories closed was estimated at 500. [47]

The British Financial Times stated that ‘Syrian businessmen have quietly moved their property abroad since the start of the crisis in the country. Economists have said that the operation sped up when the violence destroyed the commercial centres in Damascus and Aleppo...’ [48]

The researcher Samir ‘Abbud estimated the value of what has been withdrawn from deposits in Syrian banks by the depositors (especially the large bourgeois), by the end of 2012, at nearly 100 million Syrian pounds. [49]

But no-one has an exact estimate of the size of the capital smuggled out by the bourgeoisie, including that section which is closely linked to the ruling family clique, and there is no correct estimate of the number of factories which have been moved abroad to be worked or sold, or those damaged or stopped from working

According to statements of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, ‘capital flight from Syria is estimated at 20 million dollars’, [50] a figure we believe is much lower than the real one, especially as it was produced at the start of 2013

In reality, the number of private factories which have stopped working in Aleppo alone, a city whose industry forms 36 per cent of Syria’s total industry, is more than a thousand, meaning the arbitrary dismissal of more than 500,000 workers. [51]

Nor did the industrial bourgeoisie smuggle most of its factories abroad in the dead of night: many of the factories were transferred outside the country with the agreement of the Syrian authorities themselves, as is demonstrated by the statement of the Egyptian Minister of Industry and Foreign Trade Hatim Salih, at the end of March 2013, that ‘70 Syrian factories have moved to Egypt’, indicating that ‘there are 300 more factories waiting to find sites’. [52] Another indication is the decision of the Syrian government to prohibit the export of factories, issued in March 2013, [53] and the statement of the

Syrian economic expert Muhammad Sa’id, that ‘around 90 per cent of the industrial establishments were moved abroad with the permission of the state and with the agreement of their owners...’ [54]

The Syrian bourgeoisie did not just sell or move the majority of its establishments and factories; it also smuggled out the larger part of its capital. And of even greater importance is that a large part of the bourgeois fled the country themselves to place themselves and their property in security, looking on at the ongoing death and destruction, the price of which was being paid by the poor and the toiling classes, whether they were civilians or fighters with the ‘popular resistance’, or soldiers in the regime’s army. And this at a time when the part of the bourgeois class that remains in the country is flourishing and getting drunk on the war economy, by selling land, building, smuggling, speculation, monopolies, or other profitable activities that wars provide. Some of them can now live exclusively off these activities: those who have been given the name of warlords

We are looking at something like the emigration of a ‘class’, or of a large part of it, outside the country, while it waits for other classes to wear each other out (among them is that section of the class which holds the reins of political power), in their violent struggle, until things are stabilised in such a way as to allow it to return and dominate once more, in conditions more than suitable for it politically and economically. This is the class which has preserved itself physically and retained all its economic and financial energies

Various sources are in agreement on the estimate that at the start of 2013 the number of ‘Syrian businessmen who have gone to Egypt is around 30 per cent of the businessmen who have fled Syria: in number 50,000 investors’. [55]

This is also what is announced, despite some discrepancy in the estimates, by numerous Syrian official statements. Mazen Humur, member of the administrative council of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce,

announced that ‘60 per cent of businessmen left the country at the height of the crisis, causing the economy losses estimated at 20 billion dollars’. [56] At the same time, Muruwwa al-Aytuni, member of the administrative council of the Damascus and Environs Chamber of Industry, announced that ‘70 per cent of Syrian businessmen have left the country, which is alarming.’ [57]

The working class and the common people

The Syrian working class has been exposed to an official deformation of its struggle and trade-union activity since the Ba’th took power, but the regime succeeded in attaching the labour unions to itself – we mean here the top union leadership – in 1974 under the slogan of ‘political unionism’. This is the case for the other union and professional organisations like the Peasants’ Union or the Students’ Union and others

In the first months of the 2011 revolution, the ruling bourgeois power used these ‘yellow’ trade union structures, in addition to a long tradition of terror and repression, to mobilise large numbers of workers, public employees and teachers in demonstrations in support of Bashar al-Asad. But the regime, out of fear that such demonstrations might turn against it on the one hand, and because it had called out the army to suppress the oppositional popular demonstrations, on the other, stopped using them in demonstrations in its own support – which, we repeat, benefited from the support and financing of many of the Syrian large bourgeoisie

It is well known that the Syrian regime openly hates and fears two basic segments of society, the workers and the students. It inserted into the founding document of the ruling National Progressive Front – which includes, along with the Ba’th Party, some small nationalist parties and the Stalinist Communists – a paragraph emphasising the obligation these parties are under to refrain from

activity in those sectors, in addition to the army

But the deterioration of the living standards of wide sectors of the population led, from 2006 onwards, to a marked increase in workers' and popular protests and demonstrations. Complaints spread even in the ranks of the official trade unions themselves. It was notable, from the beginning of the revolution, that the violence and destruction of the regime affected essentially the areas in which the labouring masses live and work, in the environs of Damascus, Dera'a, Homs, Aleppo and Deir el-Zor. Similarly, the bourgeoisie continually dismissed workers arbitrarily, even in factories not at risk from violence and in areas loyal to the regime

For its part, the regime is laying siege to the surviving workers' establishments with its militias and official apparatus, and trying to get sectors of the workers to endorse its battles, preventing its members from existing or acting as a class with its own distinct interests. Especially with the increasing collapse of the economy and subsistence in the country, which pushes those who still have a job to hold onto it, and those who have lost their jobs to seek work, which is not available in the current economic and political conditions. Some of those who have been made unemployed have been forced either to join the opposition fighting groups, which pay a subsistence allowance to their fighters, or have joined the so-called 'Syrian National Army', a kind of regime militia, not necessarily out of conviction, but as a means of subsistence and an attempt to survive

The general picture of the socio-economic condition of Syria has become more than tragic. The number of unemployed, at the end of the first quarter of 2013, has reached around 2.96 million, which brings the percentage of unemployment to 47.8 [58], while the actual labour force has dwindled to around 3.1 million workers today (2013), whereas it was around 6 million in 2010. This has led to an increase in the number of those working in the unofficial sector of the economy, such as travelling sellers of all kinds of goods, including oil, and smugglers

The living conditions of wide sectors of the workers and popular classes have deteriorated to the point that the Damascus Workers' Union was driven to criticise the current conditions in its annual report for this year (2013), presenting very high figures emphasising the decline taking place in living standards. It indicates, for instance, that the state has coined a huge quantity of money, which has pushed the rate of inflation up to 75 percent, and led to an alarming rise in prices, especially of foodstuffs and oil-derived products. This report states that 'Capital flight has caused the closure of thousands of establishments and factories in Syria, and hence the rise of the unemployment rate to record figures and the appearance of social problems,' emphasising the collapse of the living standard of around 6.1 million people, and a rise of around 100 percent in rents. The 'official' Workers' Union demanded the improvement of the living conditions of the poorest class of the society, the workers, by the increase of their pay by between 30 and 300 percent. [59]

It goes without saying that, from the facts we have given, in addition to the shift of a large part of the revolutionaries into armed combat, the violence of the regime and the savagery of the ongoing battles - all this has made the action of the working class, as a class, in its workplaces, extremely weak - although in 2013 we saw the first strike in medical supplies factories in Damascus on 29 July. But this by no means implies that the workers and toilers form the essential bloc of the revolutionaries of the popular armed movement

Therefore, in these extremely violent conditions of the current class struggle, we see on the one hand the flight abroad of an essential part of the bourgeoisie with all its structures, in order to preserve itself and its property. This surviving part is growing in wealth as a result of the war economy, and even the encouragement of the ruling power to move its factories and establishments into the so-called 'safe areas' on generous terms. On the other hand, we see the emergence of a new segment of war profiteers and

warlords, especially in the 'liberated areas'. This is a new bourgeois segment, no less corrupt than its peers

What is the political position of the Syrian bourgeoisie

The new war bourgeoisie has an interest in prolonging the struggle for an additional period, provided that this gave them the possibility to put the wealth they have plundered back into circulation. We find some of their representatives in a number of the political organisations of the opposition, especially the Syrian National Council and the Coalition of the Forces of the Revolution and the Opposition. But it is not opposed either to working with the regime itself: some of them are among those who have taken possession of oil wells and are selling their products to the regime which they claim to be fighting, as well as smuggling part of these products to Turkey. In fact, the Syrian bourgeoisie, in its essential part, continues to see the regime as 'its regime', and does not welcome any political step that expresses a position resisting it, or distinguishing itself (the bourgeoisie) from it (the regime). We may say that the initiatives of Mu'adh al-Khatib, former president of the National Coalition, expressed the position of the Damascus bourgeoisie only, and was based on the opening of dialogue and negotiations with the regime, without conditions. But the sole political initiative of the 'Syrian bourgeoisie' came two years after the revolution following a meeting of some Syrian businessmen in Amman, Jordan, in late March 2013. They launched what they called the 'Syrian Conscience Initiative', which guaranteed that al-Asad would stay (in power) until 2014 and that the current government would be retained, with the exception of the Ministers of Defence and the Interior only. It was clear that none of the revolutionaries were interested in this sole bourgeois initiative; rather, it was a miserable attempt to save the dictatorial bourgeois regime. [60]

Meanwhile, the middle strata scarcely have an existence any more - it was they who suffered most in the last ten years from a state of continual dwindling. The condition of impoverishment has reduced these middle strata to the condition of the popular classes, poor or miserably poor

Whatever happens to the political conditions in Syria in the coming period and their fluctuations, and whatever is the fate of the revolution, socio-economic demands will impose themselves at the core of any future political project. Specifically, it will become clearer that they have a place - alongside the desire to sweep away despotism and claim democratic freedoms - among the basic motives of the ongoing struggles and revolutionary dynamisms of all the labourers to achieve their demands

This gives an in-depth picture of the socio-economic changes under way in Syria, which are increasing in gravity and disintegration. The regime has used this fact, in addition to the policies of destruction and of inducing people to emigrate, in order to push wide sectors of the broad revolutionary masses to a state of despair and gasping for survival, fleeing from killing, destruction, hunger and deprivation. The regime hopes thereby to expel or paralyse the

masses from revolutionary action and protest, and has in fact been relatively successful, because the "liberated areas" suffer from the same problems as they did under dictatorial rule. Add to that the growth of the jihadist and takfiri forces, reactionary and opposed to the revolution, which are attempting, in addition to what is mentioned above, to impose a model of backward social relations, offer a reactionary vision which reveals an understanding of the Islamic religion submerged in its backwardness, narrow-mindedness, and narrow horizons, and announce their desire to impose a Caliphate, which is in clear contradiction with the reasons and aims of the great Syrian people's revolution. This makes these reactionary, fascist forces a dangerous obstacle in the way of the continuance of the popular movement and the victory of the revolution. These reactionary forces have come at present to constitute a black danger for the future of the revolution and of the country. At this point of the revolution, for the sake of its victory, there can be no escape for the popular movement and the armed popular revolutionary resistance, from accepting their responsibilities and confronting these reactionary forces with determination, with arms if necessary, and without hesitation, while continuing the popular revolution against the regime of the

ruling clique at the same time. This may permit the popular revolution to return to its original course, for the sake of freedom, democracy, equality, and social justice

This requires, of necessity, the collaboration of the responsible forces to lay down a strategy for the victory of the Syrian popular revolution, the revolution of freedom, dignity, and social justice. This requires, in our opinion, urgent efforts to establish a mass revolutionary leadership, making use of forms of popular self-organisation, in various parts of the Syrian land outside the domination of the regime, as opposed to the existing emaciated forms, besides bringing to maturity the emergence of a unified political and military leadership for the armed popular resistance, putting an end to its fragmentation, laying siege to the fascist takfiri groups and their isolation from the mass movement, as a step towards ending the dangerous, destructive and murderous role they have been playing. As for the revolutionary left, the building of the mass revolutionary socialist workers' party remains an urgent task, and a matter of life and death, in the current stage of the violent class struggle, and in the days to come

Translated by Peter Hill, June 2014

[Syria Freedom forever](#)