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"Rise Above!": Students of Kosovo fearless in defence of higher education reforms

30 October 2015, by Eurisa Rukovci

The Student's Political Club is one amongst a number of groups of students and individuals who are supporting the protest. One of their activists, Eurisa Rukovci presents here an account of the challenges in higher education which the wider student movement is fighting to overcome.

Eurisa Rukovci joined the Students' Political Club in 2014 and has been its member ever since, actively engaging in radical protests and actions that have a social, leftist character. She studies psychology with a focus on social psychology.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paraphrasing the Marxist educator, Paulo Freire in his masterpiece, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", an authentic vision for education is that which aims to transform the social structure that surrounds academia. Neo-liberal apparatchiks who manage our education system want to push teachers in a narrow minded focus of "audit trails" and "managing systems", as a way towards achieving efficiency in classrooms. The same problem is present within the education system in Kosovo. The post-war period gave way to neoliberal reforms and neoliberal management which has ruined the education system all the way from primary levels to higher education. This is especially the case with the University of Pristina, which has historically been a hot-spot for political activity that paved way to social changes and solidarity amongst students. Worth mentioning are the leftist protests of the "National Liberation Front of Kosovo" in 1968, 1981 and 1997. This paved the way for the Liberation Army to use the university as a political hub from which to recruit a large number of soldiers. The University of Pristina can be seen as a live embodiment of dialectics, where bad and good, just and unjust battle each other. With these constant battles that have revolutionary character we can see that in the past years good has always triumphed over evil. However, since the war of 1998-1999, the recent unlawful policies have tipped the scales in favour of the defiling and corrupted government and its puppets (the majority of professors, deans and student organisations).

Seeing the troublesome circumstances a group of students who have left ideals decided to gather and start the student organisation- Students' Political Club (KPS) in 2010 to combat all the corrupt and undermined structures in the University. A common goal united us, founded on the model for universal equality and social equity. When the organisation was set in motion, its main goals were not nationalistic and it didn't intend to bring forth nationalistic propaganda fuelling the easy emotions that are present in the population. It had left tendencies from the start. In the beginning we started as a debate club where we read, listened and watched everything left. After establishing ourselves as a group, we moved on to other things. First off, we started going out on the terrain at protests and political actions which started off by opposing the increased rates of tuition, demanding better conditions in lecture halls and dormitories etc. After 2012 people started paying more attention and we caught the mainstream media's eye with the

blockade of the faculty of philosophy.

The culmination of our activities has been marked by the protests of January and February of 2014 together with the "SKV Movement". We started off with 50 students and after two weeks we gained the support of over 5000 protesters. The police expressed violence using force, tear gas and even kidnappings. With this we managed, as Zizek wrote, to transform the daily objective violence of the system to subjective violence. From that moment until now, the positive side to tall this is that we have a larger number of activists. We are continuing with political activism that targets the Electricity Company, government corruption, women's rights etc.

Exploitative system-exploitative education

We continue to oppose the political societal formations where we live. Although we have a critique against the general political situation in Kosovo, we are concentrated in the critique for higher education. We oppose the neoliberal reforms and the Bologna process that is being implemented in our university. Considering the fact that in our country the political formation and its development are capitalist, the relations of production are exploitative. This implies that higher education as part of the superstructure operates in an exploitative manner also. Wilkinson and Pickett in their book "The spirit level: why equality is better for everyone", have shown that countries that have more inclusive policies and a lower rate of inequality have an education system that is higher in quality. Countries with low inequality, mainly the Scandinavian countries have a more qualitative education in comparison with Greece, Italy, USA and other countries that use free market logic.

Unfortunately this "Chicago Boys" logic has devalued and commercialised our education system. After the 2014's protests, there were changes in the administration. The past rector surrendered in the midst of the student protests after it was uncovered that his academic work was published in a questionable pay-to-publish journal in India. After the fall of the corrupted rector in 2014, there was a temporary man in charge for about six months.

Following those events, a new rector was appointed, Ramadan Zejnullahu. The University of Pristina has been broadly condemned for its relationship with corruption, political parties, and absence of literature. The new rector vowed to stop all of this and was immediately challenged by the corrupt 'leaders' of the University including professors and student organisations that are tied to parties and corruption that is overwhelming in our country. The Students' Political club has announced to the media the incrimination of the Senate and the Board of Directors and the ways in which they are still trying to keep corruption alive, and for each one of them we have exposed their academic shortcomings, plagiarism, and their ties to the corrupt political parties. They organised protests to overthrow the rector clinging to the lie that the reforms are going to harm students.

This paved the way for the student march on October 9th, which gathered student activists and members from civil society in support of the new rector. In support of the new reforms and in support of fighting crime in our university.

Even though the call for mobilisation was made in a short time, 24 hours to be exact, we had more than 200 people that joined us. What followed was a blockade at the rector's office from the Student Parliament that lasted two days. We decided that we had to radicalise our attitude and decided to graffiti slogans all over the university's campus. The symbolic action of October 18th, was challenged by the police resulting in the arrest of five of our activists. Even though they were released overnight, our activists were attacked and threatened with guns and rubber truncheons in the University of Education, dean of which is a man with political power. This just proves our argument and we see clearly that even the security guards that are employed to guard the university are in service to the oppressive reign and they are used as militants to push political agendas with violence.

We are against and in favour of a notion and a concept

We stated that we are not defending anyone and we are not against anyone in particular. We are against and in favour of a notion and a concept. We are against the notion of a corrupt University, corruption that has been described and recorded that absolutely demonstrates that personal gain eclipses and overpowers the trust that has been put in the hands of those in charge of the education of students. We are in favour of the new reforms that are taking place that will make the University a better academic institution that has higher standards and is not pulled by the levers of power to advantage the people in function at the expense of the rest of us.

For more details about the activity in question and the general activities of KPS we have a statement from the activist Eroll Gashi who says that, recently KPS has co-organised a march which expresses support for many progressive processes that the university is going through. "Also, we have sought autonomy for the University and as a last demand, we stated that the budget that is being given to the education needs to become the country's priority", said Gashi adding that the university definitely needs to be politicised because knowledge in itself is political and that students must have an ideological-political formation. "Our critique against the student organisations that are the levers of the government and other corrupted parties lies in the fact that these parties aim to depoliticise the student and the university, and this is what they serve to. While in contrast from them we have a political critique and

articulation on the university and we have ideological clarity, thus aiming to make radical transformations of all society," said Gashi, and added that KPS will continue to make the university a political factor of society and to make society a political concern of the university.

I often go back to the early years of my teenage life when performing was my hobby and I think back of the song "Rise Above" from "Black Flag". With it I always get reminded of the struggle that we have to fight for a better society, especially the verse "We're gonna rise above, we're tired of your abuse, try to stop us, it's no use." I began this article and I'm concluding it with these verses that reflect the grave situation in our university in hopes of radically transforming it.

LeftEast

Turkey's Tiananmen in Context

29 October 2015, by Justus Links

There is no question whom such a rally benefits: Turkish society, but especially the citizens of the war-torn southeast, whether Kurdish, Arab, or Turkmen; the families of soldiers in Turkey's conscript army, whether or not they agree with the state's war aims; the working class of Turkey, which needs to unite against those who would splinter it along identitarian lines. There can be no question whom it challenges: those holding onto power in the saddle of sectarian strife, manipulating ethnic and religious hatreds to cover up their on-going massacre of workers, women, and minorities. There can be little doubt that these words apply as well to the AKP as to the fundamentalist gangs it has been accused of harboring and arming for battle in Syria.

We should not spend too much time agonizing over which arm of the reactionary alliance is formally responsible for the twin explosions that ripped through the crowd at 10:04 AM, as the convoy had reached Gençlik (Youth) Park across from the station. Whether the culprits are an international jihadi group or someone closer to home makes little difference when these groups have effectively formed a united front against the Kurds, and against progressive possibilities generally from Istanbul to Damascus.

The state's first reaction to the explosions was to punish the victims. Police cordoned off the area,blocking ambulances and shooting tear-gas at those trying to help the wounded. Eighty-six demonstrators are now dead, according to the Minister of Health; ninety-seven, according to the Medical Association. Dr. Hande Arpat wrote that the police response prevented her and other doctors from reaching the wounded in time. Eyewitnesses have said that some of the disputed number died, not of the explosion, but of tear-gas.

If the first order of business was to ensure as many deaths as possible, censorship soon followed. The television regulatory board (RTÜK) temporarily outlawed coverage of the event, and access to Twitter and Facebook were blocked.

Exposed to the criticism of oppositional politicians, government spokesmen soon resorted to one of the classics of Turkish polemic: blaming the victims . Forestry and Fisheries Minister Veysel Ero?lu breezily reminded his audience, "You know, before the elections, so that they would pass the [10%] barrier [for entry to Parliament], just to make themselves look like victims, such acts of provocation were done." Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) co-chairman Selahattin Demirta? duly noted, "there are AKP administrators who openly claim that we bombed ourselves."

Those versed in Turkish politics will immediately recognize the trope of the agent provocateur. Kurdish leaders have not been its only target. The Alevi and leftist intellectuals massacred at the Mad?mak Hotel in Sivas in 1994 could tell a tale of such revisionist history, as could the staff of the old-line secularist newspaper Cumhuriyet ("Republic"), whose prominent columnist ?lhan Selçuk, then eighty-three years old, was arrested in 2008 on suspicion of planning on attack on his own paper for the sake of instigating a military coup. In general the Balyoz and Ergenekon conspiracy trials concluded in 2013 (and voided soon afterward when the AKP and its Gülenist allies in the police and judiciary turned against each other) deepened Turks' appreciation of the plausibility of self-inflicted wounds.

But this genre of accusation has really come into its prime in the long series of attacks on HDP gatherings, headquarters and sympathizers over the course of this year, after which the AKP unfailingly waxes high-minded about "terrorism," by which its target audience is expected to hear "Kurds." So it was yesterday evening in Prime Minister Ahmet Davuto?lu's speech to the press, in which every fifth word or so was "terror" or "terrorism," climaxing in a threat aimed at Demirta?. "If he turns the pain of our citizens who lost their lives to terror today into a call for civil war, if he says, 'this is a crime of the state against the people' and invites the people to revolt against the state, then this stance…will be investigated, prosecuted, and sentenced." Davuto?lu promised that, "if anyone should demand vengeance I am here, I am in Diyarbak?r, in Konya, I am everywhere in Turkey." It is not hard to guess from whom vengeance will be taken.

Ethicists can debate the place in justice of vengeance, but Justice and Development Party (AKP) justice is a special case, in which vengeance is exacted from the victims. That is why Ahmet ?ahbaz, the policeman who killed demonstrator Ethem Sar?sülük on the streets of Ankara during the Gezi protests, has recently been

released, though initially convicted of murder, while Sar?sülük's family members have faced criminal charges of insulting ?ahbaz during the trial, and visits from armed men in their neighborhood. It is why a young woman convicted of killing her serial rapist was sentenced to life in prison while countless femicidal men get short terms for demonstrating "good conduct" during the procedings.

Where criminals are protected and their accusers criminalized, all but the fearless tread with caution. Republican People's Party (CHP) chairman Kemal K?l?çdaro?lu refrained from making "personal accusations" but asked nonetheless whether "this is how Turkey should be governed." His lieutenant, CHP parliamentarian Umut Oran, was more blunt, demanding the resignation of the head of the intelligence service (MIT) and the Interior Minister, for failing to prevent mass murder within sight of the train station, the main football stadium, the main amusement park, and the museums and other main cultural institutions of the capital city. In the absence of such a resignation, Oran maintained, the interim government tasked with shepherding new elections on November 1 would reveal its true aim to be simply to keep the AKP in power. At a press conference later in the day, the question of whether his fellow ministers should resign made Justice Minister Kenan ?pek laugh .

With much yet unsaid, it was left to Selahattin Demirta? to connect the dots. "If their fingerprints are not [on this crime], will even one of the leaders, who failed to prevent it, resign? Not one. That means that they're pleased. They're very pleased with the picture that has emerged. This is not an attack on the unity of our state and our people, this is an attack on our people by our state."

Doubtless the government will think little about things having been laid so far out in the open. Turkey's "neighbors" in the Syriza Party may declare that "the Erdo?an government (sic?) must answer for its attacks against democracy and peace in Turkey and the surrounding region," but pro-government figures like the organized crime boss Sedat Peker will go on making statements like "when our self-defense is at stake, we will let their blood flow by the ditch-full," delivered to applause at a rally in Erdo?an's ancestral home of Rize the day before the attack. They're just words, after all. Just as pro-government journalist Cem Küçük could write to rival Ahmet Hakan, in print, "we will crush you like an insect," and then act surprised when three thugs with AKP party membership assaulted Hakan in the street.

Yet if the government now no longer feels the need to hide its intentions, then neither does its opposition. Last night thousands gathered in Taksim demanding that the government resign. Some people are truly fearless.

11 October 2015

LeftEast

South African Student Protesters Win First Big Victory

28 October 2015, by Patrick Bond

The #FeesMustFall movement's first victory comes at a time that the African National Congress (ANC) ruling party confronts unprecedented economic pressure and social unrest. GDP growth will be only 1.5% this year and probably the same next year, lower than population growth. This is the most unequal of any major country, and the official poverty rate (at $2/day) has recently risen to 53%.

The World Economic Forum last month judged the South African working class as the most militant on earth – the position amongst 140 countries held since 2012, when 34 mineworkers were massacred at Marikana – and the police reported recently that last year, nearly 2300 protests turned "violent" (in police terminology). The deregulated corporate elite enjoys the world's third highest profits, yet remains intent on looting the economy at a rate as fast as any. All these measures have amplified since the ANC took power in 1994.

The desperation flash point this month was the announcement of double-digit increases in university tuition fees. Students demonstrated not only against local managers at more than a dozen campuses. Their organizations united across the ideological spectrum, from socialist to nationalist to even the center-right student wing of the main opposition party, and hit national targets.

They began by storming the parliamentary precinct in Cape Town on October 21, then marched to the Johannesburg and Durban headquarters of the ANC on October 22 and 23, and finally demonstrated – more than ten thousand strong – at President Jacob Zuma's office in Pretoria on October 23.

There, restraining fences were torn down by some of the activists and tyres and latrines were burned, with police once again responding by using stun grenades, rubber bullets and water cannons. Refusing to come out to address the crowd, instead Zuma held a press conference where he conceded to the students' main demand: no fee increase for next year (in spite of general price inflation expected to be 6%).

The trajectory through race to class

The current insurgency began late last month with sporadic acts of fury. At

the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, small groups of students burnt an administration building and nearby cars, and students were then caught bringing human excrement on campus presumably for throwing, a tactic used successfully six months earlier to catalyse the dismantling of a hated statue at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

That was the #RhodesMustFall movement. Within a few weeks of a "poo protest" in which excrement was hurled at the prominent likeness of 19th century colonial mining lord Cecil Rhodes, thousands cheered when the statue was removed from the scenic campus. But their other demands for university transformation and "decolonization" – racial equity, a different campus culture, curriculum reform to promote Africanization, labor rights for low-paid workers, more indigenous African professors (there are only five out of more than 250 senior faculty at Cape Town) – were unsuccessful.

After a breather, at UCT and Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand ("Wits"), the country's two traditional sites of ruling class reproduction, student protests revived this month. Of the 19 tertiary institutions that erupted in protest this month, these two were the best organised, most sustained and non-violent, mainly using the tactic of entrance blockades, then moving to the nearby arterial roads. Disciplined student leaders emphasized non-violent civil disobedience, with white students often taking place on the front line of struggle as buffers, given their skin privilege. Worsening police brutality and occasional clashes with higher-income drivers who tried driving through the blockades did not deter the activists.

On October 21, inside Cape Town's Parliament House, the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters' (EFF) support for their cause came before Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene delivered his medium-term budget speech, which EFF leaders ardently tried to postpone, before being forcefully evicted. Outside, thousands of courageous students broke through a fence and nearly made their way into the main hall where Nene was holding forth.

But although there is still plenty of scope for fiscal expansiveness, Nene's budget was heartless: no new money for universities (just condemnation of "unconstructive" student protests), and a tokenistic $0.75/month rise in grant payments to the poorest pensioners and disabled people (who currently receive $105/month). Nene dishonestly claimed that this plus a prior tiny raise offered in February are "in line with long-term inflation." Since the inflation rate for poor people is much higher than the norm due to the far higher share of faster-inflating food, housing and electricity costs in their budgets, in reality he imposed a 2% real cut.

Nene did find funds for a three-year $63 billion infrastructure program whose major projects promote, first, exceptionally destructive coal exports mainly by multinational corporations; second, the Durban port-petrochemical complex's expansion; and third, iron-ore exports. Yet there is vast world over-capacity in coal, shipping and steel, with South Africa's second major steel producer barely avoiding bankruptcy last month. But these White Elephant mega-projects continue to get the lion's share of state, parastatal and private infrastructure funding.

The influence of big business on Nene's budget team is blatant: for example, the world's largest mining house, BHP Billiton, still gets electricity at 1/10th the price of ordinary consumers. Corporate tax evasion and illicit financial flows are now notorious. Nene made a downpayment on nuclear reactors worth $100 billion, as well as the first funding tranche for another pro-corporate investment, the BRICS New Development Bank, whose target capitalisation (spread among five countries) is $100 billion.

Credit rating agencies and a "communist" minister

Whether seen through the eyes of students, workers, the poor, women and environmentalists, Nene's budget begs for intensified social struggle. October 21 was, however, the first time that a major spontaneous protest targeted the finance minister at such a sensitive moment. For Nene, the only objective appeared to be appeasing the banks' credit ratings agencies.

As Reuters reported, Nene "downplayed the effect of university students storming parliament as he delivered his medium term budget on the credit rating of Africa's most advanced economy. 'What matters for the ratings agencies is our response as government in addressing these challenges,' he said about the students' demands to keep tuition fees unchanged."

Government's response was a combination of widely-condemned police brutality and ineffectual seduction by the ruling alliance's left flank, especially the SA Communist Party whose leader Blade Nzimande is also Minister of Higher Education. He was shouted down by protesters outside parliament when he tried to explain why their demand was unrealistic and they would face a 6% increase.

Nzimande's 2013 Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities found "the amount of government funding is not sufficient to meet the needs of the public university system… Government should increase the funding for higher education, to be more in line with international levels of expenditure." But Nzimande had refused to release a 2012 commissioned study on how to finance free tertiary education.

A boost to anti-austerity activism

Students simply refused to accept Nzimande's 6% tuition rise. So the march on Pretoria two days later – and threat of a full storming of Zuma's office – must have been the decisive factor in the state's reversal. Although the cost of a deferring a tuition increase is estimated at between $150 and $300 million, by making this concession Zuma has given encouragement to many more protests and Pretoria marches in future.

For those in the society watching and rooting for the students, this was a critical moment, perhaps ultimately as important as the breakthrough

Treatment Action Campaign fight for free AIDS medicines fifteen years ago. For as Nene signalled, a more damaging period of austerity looms. Thanks to Nene's tight-fistedness, there will be a relatively small budget deficit (3.3% of GDP), but financial commentators are full of threats about South Africa following Brazil's recent downgrading to a junk-bond rating by Fitch, Standard&Poors and Moodys, the creditors' cruel rating agencies.

The class war rages on. Other student demands remain outstanding: free tertiary education for poor and working people as the overall goal, and an end to labor casualization and outsourcing for low-paid university workers. Many such workers barely receive $100/month, and with a poverty line of $60/person/month, raising a family on starvation wages is impossible.

The task of retaining this visionary student-worker alliance in coming weeks and maintaining a national presence will be as difficult as is the multi-class 'United Front' organizing now underway. Difficult yes, but now, nothing seems impossible in this exceptional site of class struggle.

Counterpunch

Germany scraps tuition fees after mass student protests cause shift in public opinion

27 October 2015, by David Smith

The world's fourth largest economy, Germany, has abolished all higher education tuition fees after flirting with the system for a few years. The contrast could not be greater with both the United States and the United Kingdom, which has largely aped the US model with potentially disastrous results.

In the US, tuition costs have risen 500% since 1985 and those who borrowed for a bachelor's degree granted in 2012 owe an average of US$29,400. Some 40 million Americans are paying back US$1.2 trillion in outstanding student debt. US senator Elizabeth Warren, who is campaigning to lower fees, says the burden is stopping young Americans from buying homes and cars, or starting small businesses. Meanwhile, existing federal financial aid to students is poorly targeted, with half of federal tuition tax credits going to the wealthiest 20%.

In the UK, the problem of student debt could become even worse than in the US. The Tory Government introduced tuition fees of £9,000 (US$14,500) a year in 2012 and average debt levels per student are now expected to be £44,000 (US$71,000). Yet, the system is self-defeating as most of the debt may never even be paid off. The UK's Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests that nearly three quarters (73%) of today's students will fail to clear their debts, and may only have them written off 30 years after graduating, by which time they could be in their mid 50s.

Sara Goldrick-Rab, a University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist and educational policy expert, argues that both the US and the UK could follow the German example if the political will were there. But both countries have veered so far to the political right that it is hard to see the policies being overturned. Goldrick-Rab co-authored the Lumina report, which suggested giving US students from families with an annual income of up to US$160,000 two free years of higher education – including books and supplies – just as they now get free primary and secondary schooling.

"What Germany has done is fabulous and it's not surprising that people in the US don't understand it. What I really liked was the reversal of their decision to impose them," she said. "It's a great shame that the UK has gone to a system like ours because it's a disaster to be avoided at all costs. British students coming out with that much debt will be very unhappy in a generation or two, just as we are in the US. I'd love to see a 180 degree turnaround in the UK as well, but I can't see it happening. The same neoliberal economic assumptions are driving policies in the UK as in the US, even though they are not justified by data."

The German political decision to introduce tuition fees was defeated by popular opposition which carried echoes of the mass student protests in Quebec that halted proposed tuition fee rises. The German Free Education Movement was born when 200 organizations, including student unions, trade unions and political parties, formed the Alliance against Tuition Fees. Students took to the streets all over Germany in response to the seven West German states that introduced fees in 2006 and 2007.

In Hessen, students occupied their universities and in Hamburg there was a fee strike. Meanwhile, in Bavaria, a movement that began with hundreds of students protesting in 2008 grew rapidly. By 2013 there were several thousand protesters and public opinion had shifted. The group delivered a petition for a state referendum on higher education policy. It was signed by 1.35 million voters and caused the state's conservative premier to scrap tuition fees just a few days later. Only Lower Saxony still has fees and they will be scrapped this year. Again there is a major contrast with the UK, where much weaker protests had no effect. Only 15,000 students marched in London in 2010 and the movement subsided quickly.

"In the US, people have been laughing at Germany saying they are throwing money away and subsidizing the rich,"

said Goldrick-Rab. “But this is a misunderstanding. Having a universal policy makes it more transparent and welcoming to the lower classes. The critics are missing the powerful signal of the word ‘free’ and how divisive the means-tested system is.”

“Going through the process to prove you deserve aid is demeaning and alienating and creates multiple classes of people who hate each other. The near poor are almost poor enough to get aid, but they can’t get it, so they are angry at the poor. The middle class are also moving into the poor category so they are saying ‘how dare you poor people get this aid when we deserve it too?’ And they’re right, they do deserve it too. Universal systems, such as the German one, are much more stable and less divisive.”

Goldrick-Rab’s Lumina Report explains how the US Government could afford to pay for the first two years of higher education. The arguments are quite complex, but the essence of her proposition is that ending Government subsidies to elitist private colleges, such as Harvard and Stanford, would fund the system overnight. “It’s a global question about the degree to which higher education is part of the structure which gives people more chances, or part of the structure for sorting people into boxes. The current system in both the UK and the US is highly elitist,” she said.

There is little political appetite in the US or UK to change the policies, however. Even on the left - the US Democratic Party and the UK Labour Party, support tuition fees. [1] But other European countries have taken a different view. The Scandinavian countries maintain high-quality, efficient mass university systems, like Germany, without charging students, and the Dutch, the Swiss and the French charge tuition fees at a fraction of the English level.

Jason Houle, an assistant professor of sociology at Dartmouth College, says rising college debt is one of the major reasons for the overall increase in debt levels among young Americans aged 24 to 28. More than a third in that age group has more debt than assets, double the proportion of their peers in the 1980s. Houle’s research shows how this age group has shifted credit use away from home mortgage debt and towards student loan and consumer debt.

“The trend towards greater student debt is part of the neo-liberalization of the economy. It’s about privatizing risk and saying, ‘okay, guys, you take your own risks now’. It’s no longer the responsibility of the Government, or the institutions. The political scientist Jacob Hacker called it the Great Risk Shift. We treat corporations in exactly the opposite fashion,” he said.

Houle says that if Wall Street companies were not making profit from the system, it would be configured differently. The evidence backs up his assertion. The growth in student loan defaults has given rise to collection agencies, a new type of business. One such company, Performant Recovery, earned US$36 million last year and its shares have rocketed. Wall Street has its fingerprints all over the money. Several of the collection agencies are subsidiaries of larger companies, including JPMorgan Chase and Sallie Mae. To date, US$121 billion of the more than US$1.1 trillion in loans are 90-plus days delinquent, or in default, and those numbers are expected to grow, making collection companies even richer.

Activists are fighting back against the debt problem. For example, the Strike Debt group in the US came up with a plan to purchase and abolished a portfolio of private student loans issued to more than 2,700 Everest College students. The debt was worth US$3,856,866.11, but US rules allowed the group to buy it for US$106,709.48 in cash, about 3 cents for dollar.

“Taking advantage of some of the crazy rules in the US to buy debt from creditors is great, but it’s also short-sighted and misses the root causes of debt,” said Houle. “Such movements in the US pull people out of the river who are drowning rather than going upstream and seeing why they are falling into the river in the first place. If we don’t change the structure of the system and reduce costs it will just be a problem again for the next generation coming through.”

The success of the German protests suggests a way forward. In the UK, students will mobilize in their thousands in London on November 19 to demand free education. [2] It could be the beginning of a more powerful movement against student debt.

October 8, 2014

Source Economy Watch.

Footnotes

[1] The newly-elected Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is in fact in favour of abolishing all tuition fees. — **IV**

[2] There is a call on November 4 — **IV**.

Textile workers’ strike

27 October 2015, by Mada Masr

Sisi decreed last month that the 10 percent bonuses would be paid retroactively from July to all employees in the public works sector.

Thousands of workers at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, located in the Nile Delta Governorate of Gharbiya, have been on strike for the past six Thousands of other workers joined them on Sunday, launching an open-ended strike at the Kafr al-Dawwar Textile Company.

In response to the strike in Mahalla, administrators suspended three workers without pay, accusing them of "instigating strike action" and "obstructing production."

Administrators have accused striking workers of incurring millions of pounds worth of losses for the company, which is already in debt to the tune of nearly LE2 billion.

Kamal al-Fayoumy, a worker leader at the company — who was sacked several months ago on charges of instigating strikes — told Mada Masr: "On Thursday, three workers were suspended after administrators accused them of leading work stoppages. However, they have not been officially dismissed from work." He added that there has been talk of reinstating them.

Despite such punitive measures, an estimated 14,000 workers (from a total of over 17,000) at the company are continuing with their strike, with an escalation on Saturday, when they moved from a partial strike to a comprehensive strike.

According to Fayoumy, all the factories and production lines at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company have come to a standstill, with the exception of the administration, security personnel, and local utilities employees.

Mahalla's striking workers have also been demanding their monthly allocations of LE90 for food, which company administrators have pledged since May.

Fayoumy reported that the administrators of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company are claiming that the Holding Company for Textile Industries, which manages 32 state-owned textile mills, are the ones responsible for providing the 10 percent bonus. But the Holding Company is claiming it is the Finance Ministry that is responsible.

"All these state officials and administrators are washing their hands of responsibility for the payment of the bonus decreed by President Sisi," Fayoumy said.

Thousands of workers at the Kafr al-Dawwar Textile Company (located in the Nile Delta Governorate of Beheira) launched a strike, along with factory-occupations and a sit-in on Sunday, demanding the payment of their overdue 10 percent bonuses.

Citing workers at the company, the state-owned Middle East News Agency reported that the strike would continue indefinitely until administrators pay up.

Quoting local union committee president, Shaaban al-Baghdady, MENA reported that the non-payment of this officially-decreed bonus is likely to contribute to widening income disparities and "inequality amongst the ranks of public sector workers."

The state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) has reportedly been negotiating with 20 local union committees to encourage them to end the strike.

On Thursday, the privately-owned Youm7 news portal reported that ETUF chiefs had reached an agreement with the unions to halt the strikes.

The ETUF executive council's leadership expired in 2011, and since then the Ministry of Manpower has been handpicking and appointing the ETUF's board. In May this year, Sisi issued a decree which further extends the terms of these unelected officials by another year.

The ETUF website made no mention of the strikes over the non-payment of the 10 percent bonuses, instead it dedicated several of its pages to congratulating ETUF President Gebali al-Maraghi, and two other leaders of the federation, for winning seats in this year's parliamentary elections. Maraghy and the two other ETUF leaders were running under the pro-Sisi For the Love of Egypt list.

Mada Masr

The Portuguese election: quicksand in the center, an emboldened left and a desperate president

24 October 2015, by João Camargo

The PS, which has for the last forty years been running the country with the Social-Democrats (PSD) and the conservatives (CDS) suffered a massive shock, although the polls in previous weeks clearly predicted this outcome. Not seen as an alternative to the rightwing's austerity, it had a disastrous campaign after its best-known leader, previous prime-minister José Sócrates, was arrested for corruption. It now faces its greatest dilemma: turning right and approving a right-wing government or turning left and opening a whole new scenario, never seen in Portuguese politics: a PS government supported in Parliament by left-wing parties (BE and PCP, which now amount to 18.5%, one million votes).

The President of the Republic, former prime-minister (1985-95), Cavaco Silva, had previously stated, far exceeding his mandate, that he would not empower a relative majority and an unstable government. After a long career once more he has lied. Two days after the election, after meeting with only his own party (PSD), Silva told the country he had asked Passos

Coelho (former prime-minister and head of the winning coalition) to form a stable government, in which there couldn't be parties that didn't assume "international and historical treaties and agreements", as well as "the grand strategical options" adopted for the last 40 years: that is, NATO, European Union, the Euro, the EU's Budgetary Treaty and the future TTIP. This option clearly meant to exclude BE and PCP from any governmental solution. Nonetheless, it was to the left that António Costa, leader of PS, turned.

The PS-PCP meeting, the day after the President of the Republic laid out his "rules" as to who could be in government, came as a shock: the communists said that they would support a PS government and could even eventually be a part of that government. The communists felt the pressure from being overtaken once again by the Left Bloc and gave a historic sign of the political possibilities of participating in a broader coalition. During the campaign, in the debate with PS leader, BE's spokeswoman Catarina Martins laid down conditions for talks on a left agreement, telling the PS to retreat on three points of its program: no freezing on current pensions, no welfare reform with cuts on future pensions and no flexibilization of labour laws. On the election evening speech, Martins was also clear: "The Left Bloc will do everything to prevent the right wing coalition forming a government. We now await for the response of the other parties". PCP spoke afterwards and supported this idea. The final decision would be in the hands of the PS.

After the support of PCP, the Socialists started talking about good chances of forming a left-wing government. This put the right-wing coalition and all pundits in a terrified frenzy. From calling it a coup to anti-democratic, everything has been said. Waving the banner of the red scare, and of the Portuguese revolutionary period, news and opinion columns have shown how the simple prospect of a discontinuty to extreme austerity opens the gate of generalized hostility from the mainstream media. From the EU, through Wolfgang Schauble, came the cheer for the right-wing coalition's meager victory as a sign of support of the Portuguese for more austerity measures, came Durão Barroso's claim that a government supported by far-left parties would face a major backlash from the markets.

After a frustrating meeting of the coalition (PSD-CDS) with PS, Costa went to meet Catarina Martins in BE's headquarters. The Left Bloc spokeswoman declared afterwards that "the Passos (PSD) and Portas (CDS) government is over". The fall in the stock markets, the day after, was presented as as a consequence of this meeting and declarations. Since the "markets" rose, which meant "they" didn't really care.

A second meeting of PS with the coalition turned out to be another frustrating assembly, put an end to negotiations in the "central bloc". PSD-CDS accepted 20 of the PS's election program measures, and PS had demanded at least another 20 (to which the right-wing said they were willing to negotiate everything). PS fully turned to a left-wing solution, although there is turmoil inside the PS's ranks, with senior leaders both supporting and opposing a left-wing solution. António Costa has now promised to take the left-wing solution to a party referendum. The right-wing parties accepted they were losing ground and victimised themselves, relying heavily on a Presidential veto.

The possibility of a Socialist Party government supported in Parliament by the Left Bloc and the Communist Party is now a credible one. The devil, of course, is in the details. It is clear that the PS will not assume any anti-capitalist stance, it will not accept defiance of the EU's austerity regime and will have important difficulties in implementing some of the agreements it is making with BE and PCP. The left-wing parties are fighting to ensure a stop to austerity in the short term and some recoverage in labour income — and stopping the "further than the troika" coalition from returning to power. They are also exploiting all the possibilities of forcing the PS to choose a path between PASOK and Labour, pulling it to the left and exposing a lot of PS members and leaders as de facto right-wing representatives.

Two weeks after the election, the President of the Republic insisted on on naming Passos Coelho as Prime Minister, against the majority of Parliament (PS+BE+PCP+Greens = 53% of Parliament). In his speech to the country on the 22nd of October he directly addressed PS MPs calling on their rebellion to vote against their own party and give their support to the right-wing government. Further, he again attacked the Left, pointing out is unavailabity to support a solution with "anti-european" parties, which is the current term used by the right to undermine any deal between the PS, the Left Bloc and the Communists. He finished with a very clear threat that he would not accept a majority government of the left. Now, PS, BE and PCP (or any of the three) will have to present a no confidence vote, which will lead to a fall of government. The question is: in January, there will be presidential elections and this president cannot dissolve the parliament and call another election. Also, any incumbent president will not be able to dissolve parliament and call for another election in the first 6 months of mandate. This means the current parliament will stay for at least 9 months. If Cavaco Silva insists on the ilegal action of not naming the left for government, the previous government will stay in power without most of its powers, managing without a budget, that is, without being able to implement any new measures. On the day after Cavaco Silva named the right to run the country, PS's candidate for the second figure in the Republic, the President of the Assembly of the Republic, Ferro Rodrigues (one of the most leftist MPs of the socialists), was elected with 120 votes, uniting PS, BE, PCP and the Greens and defeating the right-wing candidate. It's the first defeat for the right, and next week there will be the final test, the vote to fail the right-wing government and put all responsibility on the President of the Republic for either naming a left-wing government or leaving the country in a 9 month coma (that's stability and responsibility for you, right?).

The contradictions in this whole process seem to be solidifying the PS's turn to the left. The rebellion of its most right-wing leaders seems to be

put down by the reactionary actions of the President of the Republic. If the PS had chosen not to make a turn to the left (that is, not accepting a minimum program to halt austerity and restore parts of all that has been taken from the people in the last years) it faced a melting into PSD. This apparent move to the left opens a whole new set of possibilities. In Portugal as in other countries, with Spanish and Irish elections just around the corner. All signs from the Portuguese bourgeoisie were that there should have been a government between PS and PSD. That possibility is over. Now that the political center is shattered, the left needs to push and make sure that the middle ground is just quicksand from now on. The class struggle settling in the Portuguese Parliament has amassed all reactionary forces to speak out. The desperate actions of the President of the Republic, to safeguard the status quo of misery, austerity, precarity and the massive theft of wealth from the workers to capital, represent how off guard they were caught by an emboldened left. The time will soon come to once again push all these contradictions back in the streets and destroy once and for all the "arc of power" and the end of history.

Greek despair

20 October 2015, by Josep María Antentas

The Tsipras of today is a sinister shadow of the winner on January 25, 2015. A caricature of himself. In less than a year the hopes of change have been buried, bowing to the dictates of the financial world. As on many occasions in history, the gravediggers of the future have come from the ranks of the popular camp. When this happens, the consequences are devastating. Disorientation and confusion spread without restraint. It takes time to overcome.

Popular Unity (2.8% of the vote) failed in its defensive and desperate attempt to articulate politically the "Oxi" expressed in the referendum, which shows that discouragement, confusion and fear have prevailed above the hopes and wishes for change. But we must continue, preparing for what is to come, for the new round of social devastation.

The limits of the Tsipras government show that those who confront the dictatorship of finance must be willing to go all the way. If not, it is not worth trying. Why start roads to nowhere? This is a fundamental strategic lesson that it must be borne in mind in the case of the Spanish state. There are times at which there is no alternative. The circle cannot always be squared.

Podemos's support for Tsipras is bread for today and hunger for tomorrow. Although it allows the pretence of being with the "winners" in Greece, it has actually linked its fate to that of a party that has capitulated before the Troika and which, before the next general elections in the Spanish state, will be forced to implement a package of savage cuts. There will be no good news from Greece in the immediate future. Each measure implemented by the new Syriza government will be a veritable torpedo to the credibility of Podemos and to the credibility of change. A nightmare. Tsipras may become a veritable Freddy Krueger of social change, not only in Greece, also in distant Iberia. And remember, "Nightmare on Elm Street" was followed by six sequels. Each of them worse. The spiral of defeat is infernal.

The year 2015 was very sensitive for the Troika and the international financial regime, with the victory of Tspiras on January 25 and the possibility of a triumph for Podemos at the end of the year in the Spanish state. But with Tsipras domesticated and Podemos losing momentum, the financial regime and its political servants can finish the year more comfortably. Which portends a tough 2016 where austerity policies will be intensified. One conclusion imposes itself: make a move and change the game plan to generate a shock and ensure that the bipartisan system of the PP-PSOE does not, in spite of its weakness, stabilize its decline or soften it with its preferred replacement, Ciudadanos.

What does Russia want in its war in Syria?

19 October 2015, by Gilbert Achcar , Ilya Budraitskis

Ilya Budraitskis: It has been several days since the start of the Russian military operation in Syria and the goals and strategy of this operation are still unclear. The explanation coming from Russian officials is unclear. On one hand they put an anti-ISIS agenda as the main reason of the operation, and on the other they present it, like Putin did at the UN, as an aid to the legitimate government of Assad. What do you think is the real goal of this operation?

Gilbert Achcar: The initial official reason for the intervention was designed in order for Russia to get a Western, and especially American, green light. Since Western countries are bombing ISIS in Syria they were certainly not in a position to object to Russia doing the same. It is under this pretext that Putin sold his intervention

to Washington before implementing it, and Washington bought it. At the very beginning, before Russian planes started bombing, the statements from Washington were welcoming Russia's contribution to the fight against ISIS. This was completely illusionary, of course – a pure deception. But I would really be surprised if, in Washington, they really believed that Russia was deploying forces to Syria in order to fight ISIS.

They couldn't have possibly ignored that the real goal of Russia's intervention is to shore up Bashar al-Assad's regime. The fact is, however, that Washington agrees even on this true goal of Moscow's intervention – preventing the collapse of the Assad regime. Since the early phase of the uprising in Syria, the US administration, even when it started saying that Assad should step down, always emphasized that the regime should remain in place. Contrarily to what simplistic critics of the US believe, the Obama administration is not at all in the business of "regime change" in Syria – it is rather the contrary. They just wanted the Assad regime without Assad himself. This is the "lesson" they drew from the catastrophic US failure in Iraq: in retrospect, they believe that they should have opted for the "Saddamism without Saddam" scenario there, instead of dismantling the regime's apparatuses.

This is why Putin`s intervention was seen rather favorably in Washington. And there's a lot of hypocrisy in the present complaint by the Obama administration about the fact that most Russian strikes are directed against the non-ISIS Syrian opposition. They are blaming Russia for not striking enough at ISIS: had the proportion of Russian strikes against ISIS been higher, it would have made them more comfortable in their collusion. They would have objected much less to the strikes consolidating the Assad regime. And yet, Washington's hope is that Putin will not only prevent the regime's collapse and consolidate it, but also help in reaching some kind of political settlement of the conflict. For the time being this is more wishful thinking than anything else.

The key goal of Russia's military intervention in Syria was to shore up the regime at a time when the latter had suffered very heavy losses since last summer. Assad himself acknowledged in July the regime's inability to keep holding parts of the territory it had been holding until then. Moscow's intervention aims at preventing the collapse of the regime and enable it to reconquer the territory it lost last summer. This is the basic and primary goal of the Russian intervention.

There is a second goal, however, which goes far beyond Syria, and translates in the fact that Russia sent to Syria a sampling of its air force and launched cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea. This looks like the "Gulf moment" of Russian imperialism. I mean that Putin is doing at a reduced scale what the United States did in 1991 when it showcased its advanced weaponry against Iraq in the first Gulf war. That was a way of saying to the world: "See how powerful we are! See how efficient is our weaponry!" And it was a major argument for the reassertion of US hegemony at a crucial historic moment. The Cold war was finishing – the year 1991 turned out to be the Soviet Union's last year, as you know well. US imperialism needed to reassert the function of its hegemony in the global system.

What Putin is doing now with this show of force is saying to the world: "We Russians also have an advanced weaponry, we can also deliver, and actually we are a more reliable ally than the US". Putin's macho bullying contrasts a lot with the Obama administration's timid attitude in the Middle East over recent years. Putin is winning friends in the region. He developed relations with Egypt's counter-revolutionary autocrat Sisi, and with the Iraqi government. Iraq and Egypt are two states which were regarded as being part of the US sphere of influence, and yet both of them are supporting the Russian intervention, both of them are now buying weapons from Russia and developing military and strategic relations with Moscow.

This is, of course, a major breakthrough for Russian imperialism in its competition with US imperialism. From this angle, Russia's ongoing intervention should be seen as part of an inter-imperialist competition. More than 15 years ago, I analyzed the Kosovo war as part of a New Cold War. This characterization was criticized at the time; we are fully in it now, it's obvious.

Many say that what we have now in Syria, with the Russian intervention, is a total failure of US policy. A few others believe that there is a hidden US plan to involve Russia in this conflict. And there is apparently a real split in the American elite around the Syrian question. What do you think is the US position in this situation?

There has definitely been an ongoing disagreement at the top level in the US with regard to Syria. It is no secret that there was a dispute on the issue of providing support to the Syrian mainstream opposition between Obama and Hillary Clinton, when she was secretary of state, with others in the military and the CIA sharing her view. In 2012, when this debate started, the mainstream opposition, the Free Syrian army, was still the dominant force in the opposition. It is actually this mainstream Syrian opposition's weakness, due to the lack of support from Washington and especially the US veto on its supply with anti-aircraft defensive means, which enabled Islamic "jihadist" forces to develop in parallel and later become more important in the armed opposition to the Syrian regime. Those who advocated support to the mainstream opposition, like Clinton and then-CIA director David Petraeus, now believe that the events proved them right, that the catastrophic development of the situation in Syria is, to a large extent, a result of Obama's wrong policy.

Obama is confronted indeed with a terribly negative balance-sheet of his policy on Syria. It's a total disaster from whichever point of view you look at it, humanitarian or strategic. European Union countries are quite worried about the huge wave of refugees, the outcome of a massive humanitarian disaster. The Obama administration is trying to console itself by saying that Russia is falling in a trap, that it will be its second

Afghanistan. It is no coincidence that, in his recent criticism of the Russian intervention, Obama used the term "quagmire" – a term applied to the US in Vietnam, and to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Russia is now said to be getting into a quagmire in Syria. This is wishful thinking again, aiming at sweetening the pill of a major failure.

For the moment in fact major US allies like Germany and France don't seem to have a definitely negative position on the Russian intervention. Do you think that the Russian intervention provoked some split between the US and Europe and could give Russia an opportunity to deal with the European Union apart from the US?

I don't think so. First of all there is no major difference between the French and US positions. They are actually quite similar. Germany's position is slightly different because it is not directly involved in the military action against ISIS. France criticized Russia for targeting the non-ISIS opposition. And the French position is very strict on the issue of Assad. Like Washington and even more categorically, Paris says that he should go and that there can't be a political transition in Syria with his participation. And this is quite obvious in fact, because if a political transition is to be based on an agreement, a compromise between the regime and the opposition, there is no way at all that the latter could accept some kind of joint government under the presidency of Bashar al-Assad. The position of Washington and Paris is predicated on this. It contrasts with Moscow's, which regards Assad as the legitimate president and insists that any agreement should be approved by him. There is a significant gap between the two positions for the time being.

As I told you, Washington and its European allies are indulging in wishful thinking. They hope that, once he consolidates the Syrian regime, Putin will exert pressure on it to open the way for a compromise whereby Assad would accept to hand power over after a transitional period culminating in elections. Angela Merkel, although she rectified her position the day after, said at some point that the international community should deal with Assad. And we heard the same from quite a few quarters in Europe and the US: "After all, Assad is better than ISIS. We can do business with him. So let's agree on some kind of transition with him." This is self-defeating actually. It only resulted in uniting the non-ISIS opposition against that perspective. The armed opposition includes all the shades of "jihadism", all outbidding each other in their opposition to Assad. There is no way that any credible section of the opposition could agree on a deal involving the continued presence of Assad. His departure is an indispensable condition for any political settlement aiming at stopping the war in Syria. Otherwise it simply won't stop.

Washington issued many hypocritical statements condemning the Russian action, even though they green-lighted it in the first place. The main reason for that is that they don't want to appear openly as supporting the rescue of the Assad regime, and thus alienate the region's Sunnis as they see it. There are actually making use of the Russian intervention to drive a wedge between Moscow and the Sunni-majority countries. The Saudis had begun talks with Russia and were reported to have offered an agreement on increasing oil prices as a reward for a change in Russia's attitude toward Syria. And they are now very disappointed by Moscow's intervention, although they may still be hoping that Putin can ultimately impose Assad's departure.

In the meantime, however, sources like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Muslim clerics of the Saudi kingdom have called for Holy War against Russia's second Afghanistan, in a striking symmetry with the Russian Orthodox Church's description of Putin's military adventure as a Holy War. Note the difference between previous imperialist wars of recent times: war was represented as religious on the Muslim side only. Now, for the first time in a long history, we have a clash of "Holy Warriors"! In this sense, Putin is a "godsend" to the jihadists: the perfect enemy.

You probably know that there was a secret visit of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani to Moscow this summer. The final decision for Russia's intervention was taken after that meeting. Iran played a major role in this decision. So what do you think is Iran's interest in the Russian intervention?

Iran shares with Russia a common interest in preserving the Assad regime, a strategic ally of both countries. For Iran, Syria is a key link in an axis that goes from Tehran to Hezbollah in Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. Syria is crucial for Iran's supplies to Hezbollah. It provides Iran with strategic access to the Mediterranean. And for Russia, Syria is the only country on the Mediterranean which hosts Russian naval and air bases. That is why we are witnessing today in Syria a counter-offensive that combines Assad regime forces, Iran's own and proxy troops, and Russian air and fire support. To all intents and purposes the Assad regime has been completely dependent on Iran for quite some time. Iran is running the show in Syria. And, of course, Russia has a major influence on Damascus as well, due to being its main purveyor of weapons. The ongoing direct Russian intervention has definitely greatly increased the role of Russia. There are some in the West who welcome this increase as happening at the expense of Iran: wishful thinking again!

The Russian media now pretend to portray the situation in Syria like one with legitimate government and "normal" order on one side, and different forces trying to destroy the state and bring disorder on the other side. But the other point of view is that there has been a deep transformation of the Assad regime during the civil war and one can't say that it is a "normal" state confronting anti-state forces. There was a degeneration of the state and the present Assad regime is a product of this. So what is the real nature of the Assad regime now and how did it change during the years of war?

Let me start with the constant description by Putin and Lavrov of the

Assad regime as the "legitimate" government. Well, that's rooted in a very limited conception of legitimacy. You could say, of course, that Assad represents the legitimate government from the point of view of international law, but certainly not from the point of view of democratic legitimacy. It may be the "legal" government by UN standard but it is definitely not "legitimate" as it was never elected democratically. This is a regime that is the product of a coup d'état that took place 45 years ago. It is still in power after a transmission of the presidency by inheritance within the quasi-royal dynasty that rules the country by means of security services and military dictatorship. Syria is a country where there have been no fair elections and no political freedoms for half a century. And this regime has alienated the population even more over the last two decades with its acceleration of neo-liberal reforms leading to the impoverishment of broad sections of the population, especially in the countryside, and a sharp rise in unemployment and the cost of living.

The situation had become intolerable, and that's why the popular uprising happened in 2011. Naturally, this most brutal dictatorial regime would not cope with the mass demonstrations, which were very peaceful at the beginning, in any democratic way like organizing truly free elections: this was out of the question. So the regime's only response was brutal force, which they escalated gradually, killing more people every day and building up a situation that led to the uprising turning into civil war. In addition to that, it is well known that the regime, in the summer/autumn of 2011, released the jihadists it held in its prisons. That was because it wanted them to create armed jihadist groups – the inevitable outcome of their release in a situation of uprising – in order to confirm the lie that the regime spread from the beginning: that it was facing a jihadist rebellion. This proved indeed to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the militants whom the regime released from jails are now leading some of the key jihadist groups in Syria. It is important to be aware of the fact that whatever one can say about the reactionary character of a big section of those who are fighting the regime, it is the regime that has produced them in the first place. More generally, by its cruelty, the regime has created the resentment that bred the development of jihadism, up to ISIS. ISIS indeed is a barbaric response to the regime's barbarism, in what I call a "clash of barbarisms".

There is another aspect to that. The Assad regime is now quite worse than it was before the uprising. It is now not only a dictatorial state but a country in which murderous unrestrained gangsters, the shabbiha as they are called in Arabic, are running the show. And they are terrorizing the population, which is why a major part of the recent wave of Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe came from regime-controlled areas. Those are the very many who can't suffer any longer to remain subjected to those criminal gangsters that the Assad regime has nurtured. The Syrian population has no faith at all in the future of the regime. And therefore all those who could afford it, decided to flee to Europe. Many of the refugees fleeing to Europe, as you could see from television reportages, are not from the poorest parts of the population. There is a significant proportion of middle-class persons among the refugees. They often sold everything they possessed in Syria because they have no hope in coming back! This will have a huge cost for the country's future. Those who remain in Syria are either people who can't do otherwise, or war profiteers.

The situation is very gloomy. No one can blame Syrians for deciding to leave their country for good as it takes a lot of optimism indeed to maintain any hope in Syria's future. Nevertheless, we have seen dramatic situations even worse than that in history followed by recovery, even though it may take many years. The first condition for the cessation of the war and the beginning of any recovery process in Syria is, however, Assad's departure. As long as he is there, it won't be possible to end this terrible tragedy.

Western media are still talking about a moderate opposition in Syria. And Putin's main counter-argument is that there is no clear border between jihadists and moderates in the armed opposition. Lavrov even said recently that he could talk to the Free Syrian Army but the problem is that it is not clear who its leaders are and whether it really exists or not. Can you give an assessment of the non-ISIS opposition groups?

There is a whole range of these groups. From the initial armed groups of the Free Syrian Army, which were relatively secular and nonsectarian, to all shades of jihadists up to Al Qaeda's Syrian branch, Al-Nusra. All the jihadists share the program of imposing sharia law and impose it in the regions under their control. However, none of these groups, including Al-Nusra, comes close to the unbelievable barbarism of ISIS, which is a most ugly caricature of fundamentalist state that could have been described as implausible had it been a work of fiction. The non-ISIS Islamic opposition groups represent a continuum of Islamic fundamentalist forces from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al-Qaeda, all of them opposed to ISIS. Nothing of this, of course, inspires optimism for the future of Syria. True, the regime's barbarism has killed much more people than anyone else's, including ISIS. But most opposition forces represent alternatives that are not inspiring at all. However, the precondition to reversing this trend, which is produced by the regime itself as I explained, is to get rid of Assad. It won't be reversed short of that.

There are also the Kurdish forces in Syria, which are the most progressive armed group taking part in this whole battle, if not the only one. Their main fight has been against ISIS until now, while they adopted a somewhat neutral stance between the regime and the rest of opposition. Since last year, they have been, and are still backed by the US through air strikes and weapon delivery. They are essentially engaged in controlling and defending the Kurdish populated areas. In order to play a role in combat beyond their regions, and thus in determining the fate of Syria as a whole, they need to ally with Arabs and other minorities. This is what Washington has been pushing for with

some success, first by bringing them to work together with FSA groups, and now with Syrian Arab tribes along the pattern that the US followed in Iraq against Al-Qaeda, and is presently reviving there against ISIS.

Do you think that some kind of coalition can come to the fore in Syria, which could represent a progressive perspective for the future of the country?

To be frank, I am not optimistic at all with regard to the existing forces – all of them. For now the best one can hope is ending the war. Stopping this terrible bloodshed and the destruction of the country is the priority. A progressive alternative will need to be rebuilt from the potential that still exists. Although there aren't any significant organized forces representing a progressive alternative, there still is an important potential composed of many of the young people who initiated the uprising in 2011. Thousands of them are in exile now; others are in jail. And many others are still in Syria, but can't play a determining role in the civil war. We need the war to stop first. Whatever the end of the war can bring, it will be positive from that point of view. But it will take the emergence of a new progressive alternative on the basis of the existing potential in order for the situation to inspire any optimism.

But can one say that stopping this conflict may happen only with some help or some intervention from abroad? Or do you think that foreign interventions, whether Russian or Western, actually prolong the war?

Western intervention has targeted ISIS exclusively until now. The strikes of the US-led coalition are all on ISIS areas, and have completely avoided regime-controlled areas. While very few Russian strikes are against ISIS, the overwhelming majority have been against the non-ISIS opposition in areas disputed between the regime and the opposition. So there is a major difference in this respect. The Russian intervention is indeed prolonging the Syrian civil war. Whatever wishful thinking there may be in the West about Russia's possible role, the fact remains that before the Russian intervention, the regime was exhausted, it was losing ground and looked to be on its way to collapse. This is actually the reason why Putin intervened, as I already mentioned. It would have been a terrible defeat for him if the Assad regime had collapsed.

ISIS's spectacular expansion took place more than one year ago, and neither Russia nor the Assad regime did anything serious to fight it. Putin's main concern, like Assad's for that matter, is the regime's survival. By shoring it up, Putin is prolonging the war. And that is criminal. Eventually, of course, one can only wish that the West's wishful thinking prove true and Putin force Assad to step down. It is difficult to tell what Putin's perspective on this is. It is true, however, that Russia runs a high risk of getting stuck into a "quagmire", to use Obama's term, if the war doesn't end in the short term. So we shall watch how things will develop. The rosiest dream of Syria's ordinary people for now is the end of the war with a deployment of UN forces to maintain order and rebuild the state and the country.

LeftEast

Storm in a tea garden

15 October 2015, by R. Krishnakumar

An agitation demanding higher wages by a spontaneous collective of women labourers of the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations (KDHP) company in Munnar has generated a lot of interest in Kerala for its novelty, the political strength it seemed to muster in quick time and the jolt it has given to the jaded trade union movement in the State.

Even as political parties were bracing for the upcoming elections to the local bodies on November 2 and 5, women workers from the tea gardens of Kerala claimed prime-time spots on television screens, catching everyone by surprise.

Their agitation has thrown Kerala's plantation sector into disarray, caught its male-dominated trade unions off guard and, refreshingly, focussed public attention on the growing inequalities and gender-related disparities in the sector.

Within a week, the struggle spread, with trade unions that were found wanting initially and held at bay by the women too embracing their cause. Nearly three lakh plantation workers across the State, the majority of them women, then struck work demanding a revision in their daily wages to Rs.500 and a 20 per cent bonus. Even by October 7, despite several meetings of the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC) convened by the government, the managements refused to budge, claiming that such a hike would kill the already unviable plantation companies.

The women, under the banner "Pengal Otrumai" (Women's Unity), soon gained the empathy of the entire State as they launched an indefinite satyagraha at Munnar and chose not to be part of the joint agitation of trade unions which commenced at the same time literally across the street, on the Kochi-Dhanushkodi National Highway 49.

The last wage-revision agreement in the plantation sector in Kerala had come into effect in May 2011. According to its provisions, a labourer who gathered the minimum quantity of 21 kilogram of leaves a day would get Rs.232 as her wage. The validity of that agreement came to an end on December 31, 2014. The workers have been demanding a wage revision ever since. In the 10 months that followed, eight PLC meetings were held, but the plantation managements were unwilling to raise the wages without a

concurrent increase in the “output” of the workers. The government remained complacent; unrest grew among the workers.

Danish RGA changes perspective

14 October 2015, by Michael Voss

For the socialist left in Denmark the relationship to Social Democracy has always been the crux of political tactics. This focus has taken different forms. Some parts of the left worked for an alliance with the social democratic leadership. Other parts of the left expected some improvements from a social democratic government, compared to governments of the traditional right wing parties. Then again others made it a priority to reveal the class treason of the social democrats.

The Fourth International organisation in Denmark tried to implement a united front approach, based on the understanding and definition of Social Democracy as a reformist workers party or a bourgeois workers party.

All these variants of a socialist left approach to the historic big party of the labour movement have been present in Enhedslisten/Red Green Alliance.

Young illusions

In addition to the traditional currents of the socialist left, also known in the rest of Europe, a special current developed in the Red Green Alliance during the 10 years of right-wing government from 2001 to 2011. A layer of young activists came out of the autonomous movement, the different student organisations, the anti-racism movement, the pro-refugee movement, the anti-cuts protests and other anti-government manifestations.

They experienced alliances with social democratic youth leaders, social democratic union leaders and on a few occasions support from social democratic MPs in opposing the right-wing government of that period. They were of a generation that did not study the history of the labour movement and experiences, strategies and tactics of the revolutionary movement very much. Out of this came a romantic view of previous Social Democratic governments and some illusions in what a new Social Democratic government would do or could be convinced to do.

This generation of RGA-members had an important position in the party in the period preceding the 2011 elections: in the National Leadership, in the – at that time – small parliamentary group, among the party staff in Parliament and in the group of candidates for the 2011 elections.

Hope for change

The focus on Social Democracy and on the importance of a change of government was not without foundation. Though based on an overall neoliberal approach to economic analysis, financial politics, social welfare politics and labour market politics, Social Democracy did actually propose some pro-worker and pro-welfare reforms in their election campaign of 2011.

Illusions in the outcome of a change of government were shared by an important part of the Social Democratic electorate. For the first time in many years union activists campaigned actively for a new government.

This situation inside and outside our party defined the RGA election campaign. The RGA challenged Social Democracy to carry out the best of their own election promises and to use a governmental change to make a real political change. In my view that was a necessary tactic, but already during the election campaign it was obvious that the young generation of the leadership did not only see it as a tactic, but really expected a government that would cooperate with the Red Green Alliance in implementing some progressive reforms – or at least put a halt to neoliberal austerity.

Disappointment

To the voters of Social Democracy, of Socialist People’s Party and a to a big extent of the Red Green Alliance the hard core neoliberal political practice of the new government came as a huge disappointment (See previous articles, most recently “A defeat for austerity policies but no left wing victory”, June 2015).

This was equally true for the generation of young RGA MPs and party employees. For example, when the government broke off negotiations with the RGA on a tax reform and instead made a parliamentary deal with the traditional right wing parties, the very popular public spokesperson of the RGA, Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, went on national TV in a fit of anger and said that the government “is pissing on their voters” and that from now on no deals on financial politics would be made with the RGA without an exact financial compensation for the negative effects of the tax reform and of other deals with the right wing.

Nevertheless the MP-group - with the support of the majority of the National Leadership - continued the rhetorical narrative of calling “our friends in Social Democracy” to order. They fixed most of their political proposals within the confines of “restoring the welfare society that we have built for decades”. And they agreed to support the national budget of the government once more.

Cracks in this approach did appear, though, from the MP-group itself and coming out of the debates in the party. When elections were called in June

2015, it was obvious that running a campaign on the idea of positive change if the Social Democratic prime minister were re-elected would not be possible. Consequently, the RGA election campaign focused very much on RGA-politics, less on the issue of government. Still, very reasonably, the aim of avoiding the right-wing candidate for prime minister was an important part of the RGA campaign, but this was said in the framework of "things getting even worse" and "minimising the chances of RGA-influence".

No common project

When the RGA met in September for its first annual convention after the elections, a much stronger underlying change in attitude towards Social Democracy surfaced. The outgoing National Leadership – almost unanimously – proposed a brief text called "The Left of the Future – tasks for the RGA".

The text said:

"The story about the Helle Thorning-Schmidt government, the election campaign of Social Democracy plus the post-election statements of the new leader of Social Democracy (HTS resigned just after the elections, and Mette Frederiksen took over - MV) have made it clear that the RGA has no project in common with Social Democracy. On the contrary the economic policy and the migrant/refugee policy of Social Democracy are much closer to the right wing than to us."

The text then stated the need to rebuilt the Left and said:

"In this task we cannot rely on Social Democracy as a co-player. The Left must strengthen itself and develop by itself in opposition to both the right wing and to Social Democracy. Our main task cannot be attempts to make small correction to the defeated and mistaken political perspective of Social Democracy. We are the Left in our own right with our own perspective and our own course."
The text took notice of the fact that the RGA now is the biggest party to the left of Social Democracy and concluded that it is the duty of the RGA to lead the work of rebuilding the Left.

This overall perspective was divided into seven roughly sketched tasks. Among these was the need for the RGA to take responsibility for building protests, mobilisation and organisations – not just supporting initiatives of others or demanding that other "leaderships" take action.

The text concluded in a call to other groups and individuals to join in the debate about a new Left in Denmark.

No blueprint – no guarantees

With only one vote against and a small number of abstentions the text was accepted by the convention.

Of course this does not change the RGA overnight – for many reasons. The text itself is not a blueprint for a new party project, but it indicates a new direction and some of the steps necessary to move that way.

RGA members and groups of members have made this overall conclusion on the basis of different analyses and experiences. Some have tried to move the party in that direction before. Some base the new approach on an analysis of the long-term development of Social Democracy. Others support the new perspective as an immediate reaction to their disappointment with the SD-led government.

A sober evaluation must include the fact that it is not relevant right now to appeal to Social Democracy or even make alliances with the party – whatever your political perspective is. A traditional right wing majority in Parliament supports the present government, and Social Democracy is only one of several opposition parties with no power at all. When we get closer to the next elections, and the issue of a new government is posed once more, old habits can easily surface again.

Membership democracy defended

Among other issues at the convention was a new plan for building the party. Part of this were several proposals that diminished membership influence, for example National Leadership election every two years instead of every year and choosing parliamentary candidates every two years instead every year. Another proposal weakened minority rights when choosing National Leadership.

These proposals were backed by the majority of the outgoing National Leadership, but they were all clearly defeated at the convention.

What if the Greek government had heeded the Truth Committee's recommendations?

14 October 2015, by Éric Toussaint

See video

Éric Toussaint: Thank you for this question which brings up the main objection raised by those who claim that there was no other solution. The question is saying: if the government had taken the findings in the report into account, it would have had to suspend debt repayment and this would have resulted in disaster and chaos that would have been highly

detrimental to the country as a whole.

Up to the referendum, Greece did not receive any help whatsoever.

In order to provide an answer we have to review what actually occurred. Between the elections on 25 January and the referendum on 5 July 2015 Greece reimbursed close to â‚¬7 billion while it did not receive any help whatsoever, although at least â‚¬7.2 billion was due from the programme that had been extended until the end of June. [1]

Other amounts should also have been available from the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and from the ECB that collects high interest on Greek securities. But the creditors, who wanted to strangle the Tsipras government, refused to release the least penny.

Let us then ask ourselves the following question: if, on 20 February, instead of committing itself to repaying the debt the Greek government had said "We apply Paragraph 9 of Article 7 in Regulation n° 472/2013 adopted by the European Parliament on 21 May 2013 that says 'A Member State subject to a macroeconomic adjustment programme shall carry out a comprehensive audit of its public finances in order, inter alia, to assess the reasons that led to the building up of excessive levels of debt as well as to track any possible irregularity,'" [2] if the negotiators had said "We enforce the regulation and since we are auditing the debt to track possible irregularities, we provisionally suspend repayment without anticipating on further developments", and if concomitantly the Greek government had taken the necessary measures to solve the banking crisis while protecting savers' deposits, would not the situation have been much better than what did happen between February and June 2015?

Let's go further. If the government had used our Committee's findings, what would have happened? Remember that our Committee was set up some time after the 20th of February, on the 4th of April and in view of Regulation n° 472. If, on the basis of the preliminary findings that were made public on 17 and 18 June and of the result of the 5 July referendum, the Greek government had said, "We have continued repaying for these last six months. This has cost us â‚¬7 billion. The state coffers are now empty. We have made huge concessions to our creditors and have received none in return; they have even increased their demands." So if, on the basis of the referendum results and of our findings, the government had stopped paying the debt from 5 July, it would have kept the â‚¬7 billion that was eventually paid to the ECB between July and September 2015.

Strong measures had to be taken

It was thus perfectly possible for the Greek government to use both the results of the referendum (namely the rejection of the creditors' proposals) and our findings to suspend debt repayment and take strong and urgent measures in the banking sector, since the banks had been closed by the ECB and the Central Bank of Greece. Strong measures had to be taken to protect savers' deposits while socializing the banks and setting up a parallel currency; strong measures also had to be taken in terms of tax collection. [3] If this plan B had been implemented, I am convinced that it would not have resulted in disaster. I am convinced that creditors would have been compelled to start negotiating in earnest.

Under pressure of creditors the Tsipras government chose another road. When it signed the third memorandum without any possibility of there being a genuine debate or amendments in parliament and without the least respect for the result of the referendum, it committed itself to a third 'bailout' programme involving additional loans for an amount of â‚¬86 billion to be used to repay former debts that we had identified as illegitimate, illegal and unsustainable, and included â‚¬25 billion to recapitalize Greek banks that have already received â‚¬48 billion since 2010.

And we know full well that â‚¬25 billion is not enough to turn the situation of the Greek banks around. It will not be enough because what are called 'non performing loans', i.e. bank loans that will probably never be repaid, exceed Greek banks' equities. Greek banks are insolvent. This is the real situation. The truth must be told. Within six or nine months, deposits above â‚¬100,000 may be encroached upon to save the Greek banks.

And as my colleague Michel Husson explains, austerity measures will prevent Greece from meeting the objectives set by the EU for the coming years. European creditors will continue to demand more efforts from those who have already been squeezed dry.

It is wrong to claim that if Greece had suspended payment and heeded the committee's preliminary findings the situation would have been disastrous.

I will end by saying that it is wrong to claim that if Greece had suspended payment and heeded the committee's preliminary findings the situation would have been disastrous. In short, we consider firstly, that it is not right to continue borrowing under illegitimate and illegal conditions – indeed the third memorandum is just as illegal and illegitimate; and secondly, that, as explained by Michel Husson, the country's economic situation is not going to recover.

We shall shortly be publishing a text the Committee has adopted and that is being finalized on the situation of Greek banks. It should show to what extent this situation is still deeply worrying for Greece. We draw attention to the fact that the â‚¬25 billion of additional debt contracted to recapitalize the banks has fallen into the hands of private shareholders. While the Hellenic Financial Stability Fund and the Greek government are the banks' principal shareholders, they do not act upon their responsibility as shareholders because they accepted so-called preferential shares that do not hold voting rights; thus the fate of Greek banks is left in the hands of private shareholders.

This Financial Stability fund is run by Pierre Mariani, [4] who is responsible for the failure of the bank Dexia ,a

bank I know a lot about since it is a Belgian-French institution that has had to be bailed out three times by the Belgian, French and Luxembourg governments.

Is it really conceivable that the direction of a body whose mission is to manage the recapitalisation of Greek banks be entrusted to someone who played a major role in a financial disaster with major consequences on public finances in Belgium, France and Luxembourg ?

Is it really conceivable that the direction of a body whose mission is to manage the recapitalisation of Greek banks be entrusted to someone who played a major role in a financial disaster with major consequences on public finances in Belgium, France and Luxembourg, and who sold toxic loans to local communities? How can Mariani be trusted at all? When Dexia was bailed out by the Belgian government, Pierre Mariani was dismissed because of his disastrous management, though not without a golden handshake of one million euros. For 2012, Dexia paid him â‚¬1,700,000. [5] Then he came over here to manage Greek banks. Is it right that the interests of Greek citizens and of the country as a whole be in the hands of such people? Isn't this in fact a major scandal and contradiction, if we consider the interests of the nation?

If the Committee's recommendations had been heeded, a solution to the Greek issue could have been found. Our findings were not taken into account. The road taken is that of austerity with a third memorandum. The problems of Greece are far from being solved and debt will still be an unbearable burden on the back of a population that has already had to face five years of austerity enforced by creditors.

Creditors might then, in exchange for capitulation, consider some debt relief in the guise of longer maturities. But you know as well as I do that in the agreement signed by Greece there is no commitment to any debt relief, merely the possibility of doing something about the debt, provided the Greek government complies with creditors' demands, but no more than that.

You know as well as I do that the IMF anticipates that Greek debt will rocket to 200% of GDP, while also stating that it will not reduce its own claims. The IMF calls for a reduction of the debt but will not itself participate. Can you imagine that the IMF will convince the Europeans to reduce the Greek debt by saying, "the debt is unsustainable but we won't give up any of the money owed to us. You Europeans should make the sacrifices."?

Do you really believe that accepting the logic of a third memorandum can save the country? We do not think so; we think that the issue of Greek debt will remain central in the coming years. Auditing the Greek debt started in 2011, when a citizen's audit committee for Greek debt was set up including a number of people who would later become members of the current committee created in April 2015. The first committee was resurrected thanks to the President of the Greek Parliament, who received at the time the support of the Prime Minister and of the President of the Republic. Remember: they were present on 4 April.

Our determination to help Greece is unruffled.

Unfortunately, the government did not heed our recommendations. We don't know what our status will be once the parliament has a new President, [6] but no matter, we shall continue working. As we were not paid, nothing will change. Our determination to help Greece is unruffled. If we have to pay for our flights ourselves and find accommodation with Greek families, we will.

And I hope that one day there will be a Greek government that will take our findings into account in the interests of the Greek people. I swear to you that our sole objective has been to stand up for the Greek people, and for all peoples in Europe and in the World, to find a just solution to the issue of illegitimate debt.
Transcript by Mariella Caponetto and Éric Toussaint.

Translation: Christine Pagnoulle, Mike Krolikowski & Vicki Briault.

Footnotes

[1] The programme of the second memorandum was to terminate on 28 February 2015 but was extended for four more months with the agreement reached on 20 February between the Tsipras government and the Eurogroup.

[2] REGULATION (EU) No 472/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 21 May 2013 on the strengthening of economic and budgetary surveillance of Member States in the euro area experiencing or threatened with serious difficulties with respect to their financial stability http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-cont...

[3] Here in French.

[4] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierr... (in French)

[5] http://www.rtbf.be/info/economie/de...

[6] On 4 October 2015, Nikos Voutsis, former minister of home affairs in the Tsipras government, was elected president of the parliament. Zoe Konstantopoulou, handed over the Committee's report on the third memorandum and asserted that she would continue in her support of the committee's mission

Illegitimacy, Illegality, Odiousness and Unsustainability of the August 2015 Memorandum of Understanding and Loan Agreements

13 October 2015, by Truth Committee on the Greek Public Debt

Introduction

In its June 2015 the preliminary report of the Debt Truth Committee demonstrated that the largest part of Greece's post-2009 debt was in fact private debt converted into sovereign debt. The same countries and institutions that converted private into public debt later entered into a series of loan agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) from 2010 onwards, the bulk of which was used to repay the aforementioned debt and the ensuing interest, while at the same time imposing upon the Greek population conditions of extreme austerity. The Debt Truth Committee found that the debt is odious, illegal and illegitimate and wholly unsustainable. Such characterisations were consistent with pertinent definitions adopted by specialized UN bodies. Moreover, in line with other international human rights bodies, the Debt Truth Committee held that the conditions imposed upon Greece violated not only its Constitution but also its international treaty and customary obligations.

In August 2015, the Tsipras (SYRIZA/ANEL) government agreed to a new MoU and a Financial Assistance Facility Agreement [loan agreement]. The terms of the August 2015 MoU [Third MoU) and loan agreement entered into by the Tsipras government brings into question two particular aspects of odious debt doctrine; namely: a) the proper place of economic self-determination (as expressed by popular vote) in debt restructuring and; b) the actual outcomes of these agreements on the Greek people, the fiscal and financial impositions on the State and the sustainability of the debt overall. These aspects of the agreements will determine the odious, illegal or illegitimate nature of the aforementioned outcomes.

The Binding Nature of the Referendum

The referendum of 5 July 2015 requested the Greek people to decide whether or not to accept two sets of proposals put forward by the EU Commission, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB). The proposals were set out in two distinct documents. The first was titled "Reforms for the Completion of the Current Program and Beyond", while the second was titled "Preliminary Debt Sustainability Analysis". The effect of both documents (would-be-agreements) was the provision of liquidity, chiefly for debt-repayment in exchange for severe fiscal and social conditionalities. It was because of these severe conditionalities and their detrimental impact on society and the country's fiscal independence that the Prime Minister called for a referendum. The outcome of the referendum was an overwhelming NO vote (61.3%) against the contents of the two documents. The Prime Minister and the ruling SYRIZA parties had championed the NO vote, this being consistent with SYRIZA's pre-election manifestos. However, in the aftermath of the referendum and despite its outcome, the Prime Minister adopted the Third MoU and loan agreements, the contents of which are of equal or great social and fiscal impact as compared to the preceding ones. See the Annex titled "Significant Differences between the Text Rejected by the July 2015 Referendum and the July 9th Accepted by the Greek Government.

Domestic and international press has remained silent, or in any event made no serious attempt, to explain the legality of rejecting the clear outcome of the referendum. Article 44(2) of the Greek Constitution stipulates the conditions under which a referendum may be held. It envisages two types of referenda; the first concerns crucial national issues whereas the second relates to adopted bills regulating important social matters, save if they concern fiscal issues. This provision is, however, silent as to whether the results of referenda possess a binding as opposed to a consultative character. The better view, which is accepted by the majority, is that both types of referenda are binding as to their outcome.

As regards the second type of referendum concerning bills dealing with important social issues, these are deemed accepted but not yet officially adopted if they have not been implemented into a presidential decree and not yet published in the Official Gazzette. In between these two (i.e. adoption by Parliament and issuance of a presidential decree) lies the referendum, which allows the people to either approve or reject the bill in question. The Constitution stipulates that if the referendum approves the bill, then the outcome of the referendum becomes effective from the date of the referendum and not the date on which the presidential decree containing it was published.

But even beyond this procedural legal analysis, it is accepted by the vast majority of constitutional commentators that both types of referenda are binding as to their substantive outcome. However, each

type of referendum is addressed to, and accordingly constrains, only a particular state institution. Hence, referenda on crucial national issues affect the ability of the executive to take contrary action on the substantive matter decided by the referendum. Equally, a referendum concerning important social matters (by means of a bill) imposes limitations on parliament to legislate on the matter decided. Nonetheless, although referenda are binding in the sense described, they do not prevent the executive and parliament respectively to deal with issues that are peripheral to the substantive content of the referendum. Moreover, the executive and parliament may re-engage with the substantive issue already determined by a referendum, but this can only be justified if it is 'in the benefit of the people" (Article 1(3) of the Constitution) and as long as it respects the Constitution and the rule of law.

It is beyond doubt, therefore, that referenda under Greek law are binding as to their substantive content. In the case at hand, because the question contained in the 5 July referendum concerned the adoption of international agreements and Greece's fiscal sovereignty – and by extension the economic self-determination of the Greek people – it is best described as a referendum on crucial national matters. As a result, the overwhelming rejection of the two proposals (would-be-agreements) constrains the power of any post-referendum Greek government from entering into agreements with a similar content. Given that the debt for which such agreements are destined has been found to be odious, illegal and illegitimate – and moreover its social impact has been well documented – it is inconceivable that any circumvention of the referendum outcome can ever be "in the interests of the Greek people".

The referendum was intended as a clear exercise of economic self-determination, both internal and international, which constitutes a rule of customary international law and jus cogens. The clear expression of almost 62 per cent of the Greek electorate body demonstrated its opposition to the contents of the aforementioned documents and by extension any future agreement containing their terms. The circumvention of the referendum's outcome violates Article 44 of the Constitution and the rule of law and as a result does not bind successor governments because of its illegal nature. Moreover, because it also violates the collective right of self-determination it constitutes a violation of Greece's treaty and customary obligations. The principle that agreements must be honoured (pacta sunt servanda) finds no application in the present instance because the underlying cause of action is illegal (i.e. constitutional violation).

In any event, one should also consider the moral dimension of an electorate outcome with a clear majority of 62 per cent. It is inconceivable that a government can lightly reject the outcome of such a popular vote and that subsequently other states and intergovernmental organizations can enter into agreements that are wholly antithetical to such a popular vote. Such agreements are no doubt illegitimate and lack any moral foundation.

The Post-Referendum MoU and Loan Agreement

On 19 August 2015 the Greek government signed the aforementioned MoU with the EU Commission and the ESM, followed by a Financial Assistance Facility Agreement [loan agreement] a little later. The agreements envisaged the disbursement of 86 billion Euros to Greece, of which more than 25 billion was earmarked for the re-capitalisation of Greek private banks.

On paper only, the MoU addresses several social issues, such as social welfare nets, justice, labour incentives, access to healthcare and others, but the actions by which these are to be implemented are vague or non-existent. It is only tax, privatisation and revenue-collecting measures that are discussed in detail. Without a concrete proposal that tackles debt sustainability while at the same time truly promoting foreign and domestic direct investment (which will lead to meaningful job creation) all the aforementioned safety nets are merely hortatory and hollow promises. Below it is shown that, in fact, several user fees are imposed on all or most social services (including healthcare), as well as new taxes on trade and commerce, all of which will inhibit inward investment, while at the same time making services more expensive. Hence, the impact on socio-economic rights will be detrimental for the middle class (at the very least), the youth and unemployed. The same detrimental effect on fundamental human rights will continue unabated as debt repayment is the only focal point and objective in the MoU and the loan agreement.

The MoU, which is more concerned with policies as compared to the loan agreement, gives no real substance to even its hortatory promises on social issues. None of these is envisaged as justiciable rights, but rather as contractually agreed terms between two sovereigns, namely a debtor and several creditors. This observation is significant even though it may seem that the two outcomes are identical. For example, the MoU stipulates that a user fee of 5 euros for admission to public hospitals may be re-introduced. Although such a fee may ultimately be waived for the ultra-poor, this may not be the case for those with some (meager) income but who are unable to otherwise afford the fee, thus denying them the right to healthcare. Such persons cannot challenge the hospital fee as their right to healthcare under the MoU and subsequent agreements will have been eliminated. Hence, the rights that the Greek people enjoyed under the Constitution and international law are rendered non-justiciable and subject to the terms of loan agreements. A person will be entitled to the contents of a fundamental right (not the right itself) only if the terms of the MoU or loan agreement permit. This state of affairs constitutes an unprecedented violation of fundamental rights.

The MoU makes a number of other hollow promises with a view to communicating its content to the

Greek people. It promises 50,000 new jobs while at the same time making investment and trade unprofitable and without specifying even in the slightest where and how these jobs are to materialize and without elaborating how Greece is to boost employment. There is absolutely no provision for enhancing the Greek economy in such a way that it can create jobs. By way of illustration, there is no plan for boosting particular industries through R&D, developing the tourist industry, or for attracting employment-boosting investment. In fact, the MoU imposes measures that are not conducive to serious, long-term, investment. Hence, there is nothing in the agreements promising to enhance Greece's investment or business environment or otherwise boost consumerism, which in turn would spur confidence in the internal market and lead to some job creation.

Furthermore, the third MoU is based on the same hypotheses and postulates as the first two previous MoU. Therefore it is destined to fail, leaving the debt unsustainable. See the annex "The third memorandum is unsustainable just like the previous two".

The MoU is also silent on the odious, illegal and illegitimate nature of the Greek debt as a whole (particularly the conversion of private into public debt), as well as the odious, illegal and illegitimate nature of the loans disbursed to Greece since 2010, which were used almost entirely (almost 92 per cent) in order to repay capital and interest to creditors. In fact, the 2015 MoU and loan agreement are an extension of these previous odious loan agreements (advanced by the same creditors) and hence it is not surprising that no reference to the nature of the Greek debt is made. Given that the debt and all of the 2010-2014 loan agreements have been found to be odious, illegal and illegitimate, any subsequent loan agreement that is predicated on these (while ignoring their illegal character) is itself also odious, illegal and illegitimate.

Coercion, Unlawful Coercive Measures and Direct Interference in the Domestic Affairs of Greece

In its June 2015 preliminary report the Debt Truth Committee pointed out that the majority of debt instruments entered into by Greece between 2010-2014 had encompassed a large degree of coercion. Indeed, it was demonstrated that where a state is coerced into violating its constitutional, treaty and customary obligations in order to secure credit and liquidity, especially where it is forced to forego a significant part of its legislative and socio-economic sovereignty, such a state is deemed as having consented under a high degree of coercion. It was explained in the preliminary report (at page 59-60) that the term "coercion" under Article 52 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT) may be construed as including also forms of economic coercion and should not necessarily be limited to armed force. The report provides ample references to several instruments whereby economic pressure is viewed as a form of aggression. Moreover, it was explained in the preliminary report that the aforementioned type of economic coercion also qualifies as unlawful intervention in the domestic affairs of a state, which, although does not invalidate consent, may nonetheless offer a basis for denouncing a treaty under Article 56(1) VCLT.

Principle 4 of the 2015 UN General Assembly resolution outlining several customary principles on sovereign debt restructuring, which is discussed below, requires that all actors involved refrain from exercising any undue influence in the process. It is clear that no part of the negotiations were concluded in good faith and that undue influence was exercised from the outset against the Greek government and the Greek economy as a whole. Undue influence was also imposed against the Greek people in the run up to the January 2015 elections and up until the referendum. [1] It should be stated that the rejection by the Greek government and its creditors of the overwhelming referendum result constitutes undue influence in the people's constitutional prerogative to choose their financial future and is itself illegitimate and contrary to the rule of law (principle 7).

Since February 2015, following the ascent to power of SYRIZA, the forms of coercion and intervention were mostly direct and threats were not limited to the government but also to the Greek people. This manifested itself in numerous ways and we shall limit our reference here to only a few.

On 27th June, the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, announces a referendum concerning the creditors' 'unbearable' austerity demands. In a speech on national television after a late night cabinet meeting on Friday, Alexis Tsipras said that the Greek people would vote on 5 July whether to accept conditions imposed by Greece's three main creditors, the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary fund, known collectively as the Troika. On 29th June Benoît CÅ"uré, Member of the Executive Board of ECB, told the French financial daily Les Echos that "an exit from the euro zone, so far a theoretical issue, can unfortunately not be excluded any more", adding that this was the consequence of Athens' decision to end the talks. Benoît CÅ"uré said that if Greeks vote "Yes" in the referendum for the aid package, he had "no doubt" euro zone authorities will find ways to meet commitments towards Greece. Alternatively, he pointed out, if the "No" vote wins, "it would be very difficult to resume political dialogue", he said. [2] During this time the ECB refused any liquidity assistance to Greece for an entire week.

On 3 July 2015, ECB Vice President Vitor Constancio said he could not say whether the ECB would provide emergency liquidity assistance (ELA) to Greek banks if Greeks vote 'No' in a referendum on Sunday. Asked if the ECB would grant the assistance that

Greek banks need to stay afloat, Constancio said: “I cannot in advance answer that question.””It will be a decision by the (ECB) Governing Council. We will have to wait and see how the Governing Council as a whole will analyse the situation", he told a news conference following a speech to a financial conference. [3] On 11 July, a few days after the overwhelming No vote, the German finance ministry paper said: “These proposals cannot build the basis for a completely new, three-year [bailout] programme, as requested by Greece.” This was a reference to the new fiscal austerity proposals suggested by the Greek Prime Minister. It called for Greece to be expelled from the Eurozone for a minimum of five years and demanded that the Greek government transfer â‚¬50bn of state assets to an external agency for sell-off. [4]

The stance of the ECB and its financial coercion of Greece and its people was not only direct but wholly unveiled and extremely hostile. During this time EU officials and government officials, such as Wolfgang Schauble, made the point that Greece will be led to a humanitarian crisis with tanks being rolled on the streets should the electorate choose to vote No in the referendum, thus intimating that Greece was destined to a complete breakdown. [5] The decision of the ECB to limit the provision of additional liquidity to the Greek banking system, which effectively brought about the imposition of capital controls, contravened its mandate and core responsibilities. Given that the ECB had deemed Greek banks solvent in the stress tests conducted in 2014 it was under an obligation to provide Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA) in order to stem the bank run as long as these banks could post collateral in line with its regulations. At the moment the ECB capped the ELA it is estimated that Greek banks could have accessed up to an additional 28 billion euros in emergency funding. [6] The ECB clearly breached its obligations under the EU treaties. Firstly, the disruption imposed upon the payments system of Greece is in clear violation of its obligation to ensure the smooth operation of said system as prescribed in Article 127 of the EU Treaty. Secondly, the ECB has the mandate to “support the general economic policies in the Union with a view to contributing to the achievement of the objectives of the Union”. One of those economic policies is the “imperative to break the vicious circle between banks and sovereigns”. [7] By forcing the closure of the banks and pushing the country close to a de facto and illegal exit from the Euro, the ECB created a situation in which the Greek state and its banks became even more intertwined.

On 13 July Alexis Tsipras accepts the creditors’ austerity deal and agrees on the terms of a third MoU. On 19th August Alexis Tsipras signs the Third MoU. On 14th September in an interview to Reuters, Vitor Constancio replied to the question: “What doubts were raised about the euro?”

“It raised doubts for the markets that countries like Greece could cope with the challenges of monetary union. There was never any doubt among the majority of member countries. We maintain that the euro is irreversible. Legally, no country can be expelled. The actual prospect of that happening was never for real.” [8]

It is also telling that following the referendum, in the crucial discussion before the UN General Assembly concerning a resolution on sovereign debt restructuring, which is discussed below, Greece abstained from voting. Such a political stance is inconceivable given that the substance of the resolution was of the utmost national importance for an indebted country such as Greece (and the terms of the resolution were favorable). Despite the EU common position on this matter, [9], there is a clear conflict of interest between Greece and other EU states, given that Greece is a debtor and its other partners are creditors. The EU common position effectively demanded that member states vote against the resolution, or that at the very least cast a vote of abstention, which has the same legal effect. Hence, Greece’s position on this matter can only be the result of pressure from its creditors as its abstention is wholly against national interests.

Direct statements against the NO vote and the calamities that would befall the Greek people were moreover made by powerful officials of the EU, in clear defiance of democracy and democratic principles. Illustrative examples are those of the President of the EU Parliament, Martin Schultz. No doubt, the coercion described in this section was aided by a large part of the Greek press, which went as far as distort predictions as to the outcome of the referendum. Several polls predicted that the YES vote prevailed. Such a result could not have possibly been retrieved from the available data at the time.

All of the above were designed and meant to instill fear in the Greek people and hence to sway their vote in favor of the YES option and additionally to coerce the Greek government into accepting the terms of its creditors.

Indicative Outcomes from Acceptance of Third MoU

The Third MoU is in line with its predecessors. It continues to violate fundamental human rights, while at the same time crippling the Greek economy and providing no incentives or platform for growth, investment and enhancement of trade. Its aim is to collect even more taxes and raise revenues in order to continue repaying Greece’s “debt” without any reference to debt reduction with a view to serious debt sustainability. The MoU calls for greater privatization which is contrary to economic self-determination and without a serious plan risks dissipating and under-selling profitable businesses and creating more joblessness.

Greece has effectively lost its sovereignty in the same manner as the previous agreements. Any bill that comes through parliament must receive the approval of the creditors before being adopted. Such restrictions on legislative sovereignty can only culminate in an absence of democracy and the imposition of subservience and colonialism. It is instructive that upon reaching

agreement with its creditors, the SYRIZA government adopted a series of laws which the creditors had long demanded. One illustrative example is the adoption of a new Code of Civil Procedure. Many of the provisions of this new Code had been rejected by 93 per cent of the legal profession (lawyers and judges) and had been resisted by previous parliaments. Astonishingly, the new Code envisages that where an entity is insolvent or otherwise unable or unwilling to satisfy its creditors, private banks will always carry the status of preferential creditors, above and beyond the State! This outcome is alien to Greek constitutional, administrative and civil law and is no doubt the result of intense pressure by Greece's creditors.

Social implications of 3rd Memorandum

The third MoU that accompanies the August 2015 loan agreement, just like the previous ones in 2010 and 2012, transfers the weight of structural adjustment to Greek society. As a result, the third MoU will increase poverty, class polarization and social exclusion. It is telling that while creditor demands envisage to broaden the tax base, tackle tax avoidance, etc, at the same time they seek to eliminate a 26% withholding tax on cross border transactions. This was set to come into operation on 1 September 2015 with the aim of halting a very common source of tax avoidance, under the guise that this would enhance the free movement of capital.

In addition, the economic terms of the third MoU and the August 2015 loan agreement will further undermine the sovereign rights of Greece.

Source: Assessment of the Social Impact of the new Stability Support Programme for Greece, Commission Staff Working Document, Brussels 19.8.2015, SWD(2015) 162 final

It is beyond doubt that the new austerity measures, among many other consequences:

- Reduces pensions in line with the measures implemented through the anti-pension reforms of 2010 and 2012 under the promise to save around 0.25% of GDP in 2015 and 1% of GDP by 2016. The package, inter alia, creates strong disincentives for increasing early retirement penalties; raises health-related contributions of pensioners to 6%; integrates all supplementary pensions funds which henceforth will be financed exclusively by personal contributions by 1 January 2015; freezes monthly guaranteed contribution pension limits in nominal terms until 2021; establishes a closer link between contributions and benefits; phases out the solidarity grant (EKAS) for all pensioners by end-December 2019, starting with the top 20% of beneficiaries in March 2016.
- Increases taxation on farmers. The squeeze on farmers' income will be derived in the following forms: Firstly, with the gradual abolition of excise tax refund on diesel oil in two equal steps in October 2015 and October 2016. Secondly, through the increase of direct taxation and, thirdly, by means of increasing social security contributions.
- Phases out progressively, by 31 December 2016, VAT discounts currently available to businesses on the Aegean islands. The first round of abolition will be announced by a joint ministerial decision by 1.10.2015. The aim of the exemption was to decrease consumer prices in distant and not easily reachable islands and hence to achieve regional coherence.
- Eases attachment and garnishment processes in favor of tax authorities and banks. This is to be achieved through the elimination of the existing 25% ceiling for the attachment/seizure of wages and pensions and by lowering all thresholds of 1.500 euros. This measure will trigger a new wave of seizures on wages, pensions and deposits.
- Increases the advance corporate income tax not only for large enterprises, but even for the self-employed up to 75% for incomes in 2015 and 100% for 2016 incomes, thus further reducing available income.
- Imposes a new round of market liberalization under the instructions of the OECD's so-called toolkit. The only beneficiaries from the

> opening of the (now) restricted professions of notaries, actuaries and bailiffs will be banks, law firms and big employers. There will be negative impacts upon working class rights, including the revision of the framework of collective bargaining and wage setting, industrial action and collective dismissals. The further flexibility of labor relations (as the experience of the previous years has shown) will culminate in even lower wages and increase in unemployment, precariousness, undeclared work and non-taxable profits.

Furthermore, quasi-automatic correction mechanisms that will impose new spending cuts in cases of failure to achieve their stated fiscal aims, will undoubtedly bring about a new wave of austerity measures. These measures despite being unknown until now have the pre-approval of the Greek parliament. This was adopted by parliament through a monster-size law that was demanded by Greece's creditors and ultimately accepted by the government. One may easily predict that under such favorable conditions, creditors need not worry about the failure of their fiscal targets. As a result, it is more likely than not that they will announce a new round of spending cuts on the ground that such measures have already been approved by parliament.

By way of conclusion, the period of draconian austerity measures introduced in 2010, and which is depicted in the following statistics, continues ...

Source: ibid

Conclusion

In the recent UN General Assembly resolution on sovereign debt restructuring, [10] several principles were laid down. These are important for several reasons. Despite the fact that UN General Assembly resolutions are not binding per se, they evince, where there is sufficient support, the official position of states on a particular matter. Where support is overwhelming, sustained and over a significant time (or where the practice supported in the resolution satisfies these criteria) the principle(s) in the resolution may in time reflect customary international law. In the case at hand, the resolution received 136 votes in favour, only 6 against and 41 abstentions. The Assembly made it clear that the principles enunciated in the resolution were guided by customary international law and in any event, the overwhelming support of these principles by 136 states demonstrates a clear customary consensus. It should be pointed out that the principles are rather conservative and not at all in favour of sovereign borrowers. Their emphasis is on debt repayment and honouring of loan agreements. The first principle, which is central to this discussion, states that:

"A Sovereign State has the right, in the exercise of its discretion, to design its macroeconomic policy, including restructuring its sovereign debt, which should not be frustrated or impeded by any abusive measures".

This is also consistent with the UN Guiding Principles on Foreign Debt and Human Rights, adopted by the UN Independent Expert on debt and human rights and endorsed by the Human Rights Council. [11] In equal measure, principle 2 requires good faith by the parties with a view to achieving durable debt servicing and sustainability. [12] Sustainability in principle 8 is defined as follows:

"Sustainability implies that sovereign debt restructuring workouts are completed in a timely and efficient manner and lead to a stable debt situation in the debtor State, preserving at the outset creditors' rights while promoting sustained and inclusive economic growth and sustainable development, minimizing economic and social costs, warranting the stability of the international financial system and respecting human rights." [13]

Based on the aforementioned discussion and the pertinent law applicable to the facts of the case, the following conclusions are beyond any doubt evident:

- the Third MoU and August 2015 loan agreement is illegal, illegitimate and odious because it fails to recognize the illegal, illegitimate and odious character of Greece's existing debt, as well as the odious, illegal and illegitimate nature of the instruments by which this debt was financed from 2009 until early 2015.

- the Third MoU and August 2015 loan agreement violates the fundamental human rights of the Greek people (both civil and political as well as socio-economic rights) as these are set out in the Greek Constitution and international law (treaty-based and customary).

- Since the ascent to power of the SYRIZA government until its political agreement with Greece's creditors, there was an unprecedented level of coercion and direct interference in Greece's domestic affairs (including threats against the Greek people) with a view to scaring the Greek government and its people in order to accept the terms of the creditors. Such interference and coercion render any agreements invalid and open to unilateral denunciation by future governments. Moreover, such actions evince an absence of moral fibre and solidarity from the leaders of EU states and EU institutions and demonstrate that the wellbeing of the private banking system is the greatest imperative in EU policy

The Committee would like to express its deep regret that the Tsipras government took no consideration whatsoever of the outcomes of the Committee's preliminary report in its negotiations with the creditors. In fact, Prime Minister Tsipras agreed that no haircut to the debt would take place despite being fully aware of the odious, illegal and illegitimate

character of the country's debt. [14]

[15]

Athens – 25 September 2015

Footnotes

[1] http://www.theguardian.com/business...

[2] http://www.lesechos.fr/monde/europe...

[3] | 3 | http://www.reuters.com/article/...

[4] http://www.theguardian.com/business...

[5] http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2015-...

[6] Barclays Research (2015). Greece's Achilles' Heel.

[7] Council of the EU (2012), Euro Area Summit Statement of 29 June 2012.

[8] https://www.ecb.europa.eu/press/key...

[9] EU Common Position on the UN Draft Resolution A/69/L.84, Doc 11705/15 (7 September 2015).

[10] UN Doc A/69/L.84 (29 July 2015).

[11] UN Guiding Principles on Foreign Debt and Human Rights, UN Doc A/HRC/20/23 (10 April 2011), paras 73-75.

[12] UN Guiding Principles, para 54

[13] Equally endorsed in the UN Guiding Principles, paras 48 and 65.

[14] Euro Summit Statement, 12 July 2015, at 6.

[15] A fuller version of this report can be found in PDF version with two extra annexes here

27S: an earthquake that doesn't stop here

13 October 2015, by Josep María Antentas

Junts pel si, refoundation of Convergencia and unitary aspirations

Junts pel Sí achieved a good result, 1,616,962 votes (39.6%) and 62 deputies (although less than the sum of CiU and ERC in 2012: 1,614,383, 44. 4% and 72 deputies), enough to constitute the clearly dominant force on the Catalan political landscape. In percentage terms its result is slightly higher than that obtained by Mas in 2010 (38.47%) and lower than that obtained by Convergence i Unió in 1984 (46.8%), 1988 (45.7%), 1992 (46.1%), 1995 (40.95%), although in terms of votes it is the highest ever obtained by a winning force (1,346,729 in 1984, 1,232,514 in 1988, 1,221,233 in 1992, or 1,198,010 in 2010).

Junts is an unequal alliance between Convergencia and ERC, under the leadership of the first, supported by the social organizations driving the independence process, ANC and Omnium. Its creation marked the culmination of Mas's efforts to force a "unitary" list with ERC, and ensure his continuity in the presidency of the Generalitat. It is the direct result of the unrest of the pro-independence movement through the tribulations subsequent to 9N and, above all, the phantasm of a possible victory of a Catalunya en Común in the wake of Barcelona en comú, whose triumph shook the official account of Catalan politics.

Within Junts two projects coexist under tension. On the one hand, the claim of the Catalanist right to refound their political space riding on the independence process, once the instrument of Convergencia is historically exhausted, building a new transversal "national" party to become the central pivot of Catalan politics. On the other hand, the desire of ERC, ANC and Omnium to articulate a unitary list that will ensure a pro-independence majority to continue the process of a break with the central state. The two strategic objectives are different, but not competing, the first feeding off the second.

Although Junts pel si is the tool that ensures the continuity of Mas as head of the Generalitat and the independence process (without controlling it entirely, rather like a surfer who does not control the waves that drive him), it also expresses the sincere unitary aspirations of many people seeking a unitary politico-electoral reflection of the clamour expressed in the four large mobilizations of September 11 from 2012 onwards. It builds on the momentum of the citizens' movement for independence and provides a roadmap that appears plausible for the bulk of the majority social base of the pro-independence movement. There is, however, a searing contradiction between the hopes of its popular base and the subordination of its strategic project to a strict neoliberal agenda.

The dances of the PSC

27S confirmed the loss of centrality of the PSC, whose historic decline is a deep seated trend flowing from its lack of credibility both in the domestic and social arenas, after the two Tripartite governments in Catalonia

(2003-2010) and the two Zapatero governments (2004-2011). It did however stabilize its decline after being on the brink of an irreversible "Pasokification" under the impact of 15M and the independence process, and the inconsistent "leadership" of Pere Navarro (November 2011-June 2014). But its 520,000 votes (12.7%) and 16 seats, while the worst in its history and lower than that of 2012 (523,333 votes, 14.6 %, and 20 deputies), show that it appears to have bottomed out. Its result is a success in relation to the initial predictions and gives the PSOE some hope faced with the imminent general elections. The most important thing for Iceta: to beat Catalunya si qui es Pot. A crucial element to ensure a visible role in the next legislature. Once again, as in all the autonomous communities last May 24, Podemos was behind the PSOE. A direct torpedo to its hypothesis of rapid electoral victory out of the ashes of the parties of the regime.

Without doubt, the PSC has been known how to take advantage of Podemos's loss of momentum at the state level since January of this year and the inability of Podem in the Catalan context to capitalize on the victory of Barcelona en Comú on May 24, as well as Iceta's skill in combining (populist?) dances with oratorical abilities to attract a portion of the electorate not polarized by the independence debate.

The fiasco of Catalunya sí que es Pot

No room for discussion, Catalunya si qui es Pot (CSQP) was the major victim of these elections. The contrast is sharp between the initial expectations of a success similar to that of Barcelona en Comú and the results obtained, 364,823 votes (8 .9%) and 11 deputies. And, symbolically, their debacle before a PSC which appeared sunk a few months ago is crucial. There are many reasons for this debacle and they intersect in a way that is not always consistent:

First, CSQP was a victim of its own phantasm and the threat that it would eventually constitute a candidacy in the wake of Barcelona en Comú precipitated the formation of Junts pel si. This completely changed the political landscape, generating a demobilizing dynamic and a centrifugal leakage of potential votes toward Ciutadans and the PSC on the one hand, and the CUP and Junts pel si on the other.

Second, CSQP was configured as an agreement from above between parties (one new but in decline and without a consolidated structure, Podem; another old, ICV, with a strong structure and apparatus, but not much electoral weight), with the lethal photograph of Pablo Iglesias with Joan Herrera as its founding event, without generating any type of popular dynamic. Just the inverse of what Barcelona en Comú had been (that doesn't mean that its campaign did not mobilize an important sector of society, as reflected in the numerical success of many of its actions). The unhooking of the Procés Constituent and the non-involvement of Barcelona en Comú stifled the project in its infancy. Of course, the limitations of both actors (little internal cohesion in the case of the Proces, and tiredness after the municipal elections and the assumption of municipal government in the case of Barcelona en Comú) may partially explain its absence in the attempt to set up a "yes we can" nomination for 27S. But the primary responsibility lies with the bureaucratic style of the project headed by Podemos and ICV, which pushed away the two actors that would have been able to make a qualitative change to the project. Both parties overestimated their own strength and refused to renew the process to facilitate the incorporation of Procés and Barcelona en Comú. Definitely, what emerged at the end of July under the name of Catalunya si que es Pot already had very little to do with the prospect of a Catalunya en comú that haunted Catalan political life after May 24. Can you attempt to continue the changing dynamics of the municipal elections without the support of Barcelona en comú? Can you claim to have credibility in the pro-sovereignty movement without the backing of the Proces constituent?

Third, the polarization around the debate on independence has been lethal to CSQP. It favours Junts pel si, the CUP and Ciutadans. CSQP appeared in no man's land in this debate, with a position not always distinguishable from the PSC (despite being very different). The initial claims of Podemos to transcend the framework of the independence debate were not met. And Podemos was overwhelmed by the framework it intended to transcend. The negative spiral for CSQP has been hellish. Not having a serious discourse on the independence process prevents discussion with the left social base of CUP and ERC. In the absence of a clear Spanish centralist discourse it cannot compete with Ciutadans. And being unable to generate a winning dynamic, a part of its vote went back to the PSC. This could have been resolved only with the ability to put on the table another focus of discussion in which CSQP would from an attractive field, and at the same time offer a solid proposal on the national axis, like a strong defence of a Catalan constituent process not subordinated to central state dynamics, which would meet the aspirations of the pro-independence movement's social base. Although in its founding manifesto CSQP demanded such a constituent process and the horizon of a Catalan republic whose final links with the Spanish state would remain open, its campaign discourse completely avoided such an approach, focusing on the struggle for a binding referendum.

It should be noted, however, that the insufficiencies of Catalunya si qui es pot in its discourse on sovereignty, while the fruit in the first instance of programmatic decisions taken by the forces that make up the candidacy, expresses what much of its social and electoral base thinks. And this, in turn, is the Achilles heel of the pro-independence movement and the Catalan left as a whole. It is a problem for the first, because without the support of the "yes we can" social base, its majority will always be adjusted, and also for the second, because it remains fractured between a minority position within separatism and a minority position outside of the same, unable to articulate a space that can be seen in a credible manner as an alternative majoritarian project.

Forgetting the social base of "yes we can" is an almost symmetrical error, weakening the national profile to reduce it to an abstract defence of a right to decide without substantive content.

The combination between dependence on Pablo Iglesias to mobilize the electorate and the absence of strong Catalan references prevented CSQP from making the necessary synthesis to articulate its heterogeneous social base so far as the independence process is concerned. Iglesias, while able to mobilize a broad audience, seemed "lost in translation" in this campaign, with silly mistakes like the call for votes of "Catalans who are not ashamed to have Andalusian parents or grandparents from Extremadura". From the unnecessary criticism of David Fernandez in December 2014 until now, Iglesias has already tripped too often on the same stone, the independence process, with the clear outcome the visible and growing erosion of his image. The paradox of Catalan politics is that it lacks clear voices rejecting Mas from the left like that of Iglesias. But precisely what the leader of Podemos doesn't seem to understand is that the credibility of his virulent and correct anti-Mas discourse is mortally wounded, precisely because of his lack of credibility in the defence of Catalan national rights.

After this political breakthrough, Iglesias became a bête noire of the Catalan establishment. And not because he is not pro-independence, since Rajoy and Sanchez aren't either, but awaken contempt and derision rather than fear. He generates concern because he proposes a project of political and social change that does not pass through independence, and this raises uncomfortable questions that the bulk of the independence movement has been unwilling or unable to answer. Therefore, the repeated samples of Iglesias's ignorance of Catalan reality and its complexities constitute an error which is difficult to understand.

Electoral successes and strategic ceilings of the CUP

In electoral terms, the CUP was one of the main winners of the night, with 335,520 votes (8.21 %) and 10 seats (126,435, 3.48% and 3 members in 2012), growing on the basis of the ERC electorate who did not want to vote for a list with Mas, new voters and those who felt dissatisfied with the weaknesses of discourse, radicalism and style of CSQP.

Its entry into the *Parlament* in 2012 was one of the first signs that a new political cycle was opening, after 15M and the independence process, in which there space for parties that were playing outside the rules.. In strategic terms, the CUP has however three limits: first, the policy of outstretched hand in the national sphere and closed fist in the social sphere separated both areas too much, renouncing the real struggle to inject into the strategy of the bulk of the independence movement the idea that a process of independence required articulating as big a majority as possible, to introduce an emergency anti-crisis and anti-corruption plan. Second, it was too caught up in the discursive framework of the independence process and in its political scenario (agreement for the question of 9N, signature of its appeal, holding of 9N and so on). Third, it maintained a linear conception and construction of "popular unity", being very wary of any policy of alliances in which did not have a clear hegemonic role and of developing a strategy of confluence, on the basis of rupture, with the other left-wing forces essential to articulating majorities for change.

The politics of the CSQP and the CUP are comparable as are their respective strategic limits because, while the first comes out 27S weakened and the second strengthened, the shortcomings of the approaches of both in relation to the great earthquake that has shaken Catalonia in recent years has not allowed the crystallization of a pole of rupture with decisive effect in Catalan political life. Ground has doubtless been gained from 2012 onwards, but not to the extent of what was possible and necessary.

The apocalyptic No of the PP and the Spanish centralist neoliberalism of Ciutadans

The No vote, whether articulated by the PP, Ciudadanos, Felipe Gonzalez, or financial power, only sold fear, reification of the institutional order and acceptance of the imperial dictates of global geopolitics. The combination of an improvised apocalyptic discourse and the contradictions of its spokespersons served to mobilize a portion of the electorate and keep it in tension. But it is not able to offer any credible alternative horizon.

Garcia Albiol, despite being convincing in his role of authoritarian horseman of the apocalypse, did little to contain the weakening of his party, associated with corruption and cuts as much as with the defence of the unity of Spain. The PP cannot compete with Ciutadans, which is capable of dressing up its Spanish centralist neoliberalism as a project of renovation and defending the "unity of the homeland" without appearing openly reactionary. The PP's poor result, 347,758 votes (8.5%) and 11 deputies (compared to 471,681, 12.98% and 19 seats in 2012) should be highlighted. Rajoy has once more been weakened at the ballot box and by the Catalan onslaught.

Often, Ciutadans is perceived in Catalonia only in relation to its Spanish centralism. But we must not forget the neoliberal nature of the party, pro-business and a faithful friend of the Ibex 35. Its ascent among a sector of the working class involves a reversal of political consciousness in a double sense, in the field of national identity and in the field of the social model. With its outstanding second place, 732,147 votes (17. 9%) and 25 deputies (275,007, 7.57% and 9 seats

in 2012), Ciutadans emerges from 27S with momentum for the general election, in which it may be presented as the main adversary of separatism in Catalonia, and it has obtained an important symbolic victory over Podemos.

Heterogeneous challenges

An unstable scenario has opened. The pro-independence forces have won a relative majority of seats (62 +10 = 72), if not of votes (47.8%). Its absolute number, 1,952,482 is slightly higher than that of the yes-yes in the Consultation of 9N, 1,897,274 (although there anybody over 16 could vote). This shows the massive nature of pro-independence sentiment, but also a relative stagnation of its social base, and the limits of the policy of "first independence and then everything else" which has been a major strategic focus of the ANC. But the differences between Junts pel sí and the CUP-Crida Constituent betoken a parliamentary majority which is unstable and full of contradictions.

On the immediate horizon, we can glimpse an unprecedented scenario of confrontation between the Catalan institutions and those of the state. And, in the confrontation between a democratic movement (putting asides its shortcomings) and a state and a regime whose deficits are apparent, there is no doubt about which side you need to be on at the decisive moments. Catalunya sí que es Pot should bear that in mind. The No campaign is based only on fear. The "Yes" bloc opens up possibilities and carries the seeds of hope, even though it carries a manufacturing defect, the hegemony of the neo-liberal right wing inside it, which threatens permanently to drown all the dreams Catalans have invested in independence and direct them toward a neoliberal project that empties sovereignty of all content. The CUP -Crida Consituent should not forget that.

The left-wing forces of rupture will have a significant number of seats, but overall far below what would have been possible in the event of having taken other paths. There were other possibilities. Other detours on the way. Perhaps more risky. Perhaps more complex. A triple challenge tops the agenda: defeating the state in its authoritarian confrontation with the independence movement, and transcending the agenda of the latter by introducing the proposal of a popular constituent and participatory process and an emergency plan to deal with the social crisis that helps rethink the terms of the debate, and articulate a new project, attracting a broad social spectrum and articulating a majority bloc, and embodying another model of Catalonia distinct from that of Junts pel Sí.

Confronted by the ecological emergency: project of society, programme, strategy

12 October 2015, by Daniel Tanuro

Although scientists are reluctant to say that their projections are 100 per cent certain, these ones were categorical: "We have gone beyond the point of no return," they said at a joint press conference. According to them, nothing can prevent a rise in sea level of 1.2 metres in the coming 300-400 years. It is their opinion that the phenomenon will lead to accelerated destabilization of the adjacent area, which could subsequently lead to a further rise in sea level of more than three metres. [1]

The silent catastrophe is underway

The social consequences of rising sea levels on this scale cannot escape anyone. It is enough to mention that 10 million Egyptians live less than one metre above sea level, as do 15 million Bengalis, about 30 million Chinese and Indians, some 20 million Vietnamese... Not to mention all the major cities situated in coastal areas: London, New York, San Francisco...

You can certainly build dykes to a height of one metre - provided you have the financial and technological means to do so. But you cannot build dykes that are ten metres high. And even if you could, not many people would accept living behind them.

But to take the full measure of the threat, we must know that the dislocation of the Antarctic ice cap is only one of the four causes of rising sea levels. The other three are: the thermal dilation of masses of water, the melting of mountain glaciers and the dislocation of the Greenland ice cap. If the quantity of ice accumulated on submerged land melted completely, it would lead to a rise in sea level of more than 90 metres.

Anders Levermann has attempted to make global projections of the rising sea levels that the models ascribe to these four causes. His conclusion is alarming: to any one degree Celsius of increase in average surface temperature relative to the late eighteenth century, there would correspond an increase in sea level of 1.3 metres, at equilibrium [2]. The temperature differential with respect to the reference period is now + 0.8°C. If Levermann is right, a rise of 1.84 metres at equilibrium is already inevitable.

Fatih Birol, "chief economist" in the International Energy Agency is not a Bolshevik or an ecosocialist. He admitted recently that the current

trend in emissions of greenhouse gases is perfectly consistent with global warming of 6°C by the end of the century, and that it could go up to 11°C or more [3].

Assuming that Levermann's findings are accurate, we would therefore be creating the conditions for a rise in sea level of 13.8 metres or more, at equilibrium. This is one of the reasons why no adjustment to global warming of this magnitude is possible in a world of 9 billion people [4].

In these projections, the term "at equilibrium" means: at the moment when a new equilibrium point is reached between the average surface temperature and the quantity of ice present on the globe. Concretely, this return to the energy equilibrium of the Earth system should take roughly between one and two thousand years.

One to two thousand years is a long time. But the important point is that the process, once engaged, cannot be stopped: to an atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases X there will inevitably correspond Y increase in temperature, which will inevitably lead to Z dilation of masses of water and the melting of a quantity Z' of ice which, transformed into water, will lead to an increase in sea level.

The only way to stop this chain of causes and effects would be to put the planet in the freezer. A kind of natural freezer exists: it is the glaciations. But glaciations are obviously not set in motion to order. Astrophysicists believe that the next one will take place in 30,000 years at the earliest.

So far, I have only discussed the impact of global warming on rising sea levels. It gives a vivid picture of the terrible danger - irreversible on a human time scale - that is building up silently over our heads. But this is, as you know, only one of the consequences of climate change. I will just quickly mention a few others which are more threatening in the short term than the rise in se levels; some of them are already noticeable:

â€¢ The decline in agricultural productivity. Up to the point of 3°C global warming compared to the eighteenth century, it is estimated that overall productivity will increase. But as of now, it is decreasing in some tropical regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa;

â€¢ Extreme weather events. If you had come here two weeks ago, you would have landed right in the middle of a heat wave, with temperatures above 35°C for more than a week, which was once very exceptional in these areas but is tending to occur more and more often;

â€¢ The consequences on health: if the good weather starts again and you're lying in the undergrowth, beware of ticks. These Lyme disease-carrying mites are much more numerous than before, because the winters are becoming milder. In the subtropics, the extension of the zone conducive to the development of malaria is already a serious health problem.

Accelerated deterioration of all ecological parameters

At the same time, climate change is only one manifestation among others of accelerated deterioration of the environment. We speak in this regard of "ecological crisis". I will explain later why this expression is, in my opinion, inappropriate. Suffice it for now to say that the "ecological crisis" has many facets. The main ones are:

â€¢ The acidification of the oceans - it constitutes a serious threat to many marine organisms whose outer skeleton of calcium carbonate would not withstand excessive acidity;

â€¢ The decline in biodiversity – at present we are experiencing what biologists call the "sixth wave of extinction" of living species, and it is faster than the preceding one, which corresponds to the disappearance of the dinosaurs, sixty million years ago;

â€¢ The perturbation of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles - it may cause a relatively unfamiliar phenomenon of the sudden death of oceans, which seems already to have occurred naturally in the history of the planet;

â€¢ The destruction of the stratospheric ozone layer that protects us from ultraviolet rays - it is the only major environmental issue on which positive points have been scored, I will come back to that later;

â€¢ The deterioration and overexploitation of water reserves – at present, 25 per cent of rivers no longer reach the sea because of excessive siphoning off of water, particularly for irrigated agriculture;

â€¢ The chemical poisoning of the biosphere - in one century, the chemical industry has created one hundred thousand molecules that do not exist in nature, some of which - particularly toxic compounds - cannot be decomposed by natural agents;

â€¢ The destruction of soil and the loss of arable land.

All these phenomena are interconnected and climate change occupies a central position. The acidification of oceans, for example, results from increasing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, which is at the same time the principal greenhouse gas. The decline in biodiversity is also partly due to global warming: it is so rapid that some species are unable to save themselves by migration.

Especially, all these phenomena have in common that their graphic representation reveals similar curves, of an exponential kind - with, in any case, a marked acceleration from the three decades following the Second World War.

â€¢ The curve of atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, in terms of time, is exponential;

â€¢ The curve of the number of species that are disappearing, in terms of time, is exponential;
â€¢ The increasing acidity of the oceans in terms of time is exponential;

â€¢ The quantity of soils destroyed is exponential;

â€¢ The quantity of phosphates and nitrates released into the seas is also

exponential.

The common profile of all these curves obviously indicates a common origin. The question arises: what is it?

Yes to a demographic transition, no to diversion

To this question, a reactionary and misanthropic current, which is very present in the mass media, responds by pointing to human nature or population, or both. Earth is supposedly "sick of humanity," as James Lovelock concludes his essay on Gaia [5]. And from a typical patriarchal attitude, women are particularly in the sights of these gentlemen.

We must be very firm on this issue. It goes without saying that the number of people on Earth is a factor in the environmental equation. It would be foolish to deny it. We are moreover in favour of a stabilization of the population - a so-called demographic transition. But we warn against the authoritarian, neoliberal and barbaric solutions that the demographic obsession has caused to germinate in some brains - for example, the proposal to establish "rights to procreate" that are exchangeable, on the model of "rights to pollute".

The demographic transition depends fundamentally on two elements: the right of women to control their own fertility (in particular the right to free abortion in good conditions) and a social security worthy of the name (in particular a pension system that enables older people to live decently without the help of numerous children).

If we exclude the barbaric solutions - and we must obviously exclude them! - the demographic transition is a slow process, which cannot respond to the environmental emergency. That is why we must be vigilant: in most cases, those who seek a solution to the ecological crisis that starts from the question of the population want to create a diversion from the real causes.
However, it is not because there are too many of us that:

â€¢ 50 per cent of the food produced on a world scale never ends up on our plates or in our fridges;

â€¢ The part that ends up on our plates or our fridges gets there after travelling thousands of kilometres, often unnecessarily;

â€¢ This part includes more and more meat, beef in particular, whereas a diet containing too much meat is bad for our health;

â€¢ Firms spend fortunes on advertising to produce in us artificially alienated consumption needs, a miserable compensation for the poverty of human relationships in this society;

â€¢ Companies compete to work out ingenious ways for the goods they sell us to wear out and break down more quickly, and for them not to be repairable;

â€¢ Governments spend fortunes and squander huge resources on armaments and security and surveillance equipment;

â€¢ Economic and political decision-makers, although they are fully aware of the dangers, have refused over the last half-century to organize seriously the transition to an energy system based exclusively on renewables, which are more than sufficient to meet all the energy needs of humanity.

A double impasse of capitalism

In truth, as you will have understood, the cause of all these phenomena is neither the population nor human nature but capitalism and the "nature" of this mode of production which runs counter to nature. In truth, the exponential curves of the deterioration of the environment are nothing other than the manifestation of the basic law of capitalism: "Always more".

A capitalism without growth is a contradiction in terms. The explanation is simple: in this system based on competition for profit, each private owner of the means of production is forced to continuously seek to reduce their costs, in particular by replacing workers with machines that increase labour productivity. This constraint is absolutely imperative: whoever would seek to evade it would immediately be condemned to economic death.

Capitalism is therefore by its essence productivist. It produces ever more commodities, which means appropriating and pillaging ever more natural resources, increasingly exploiting the labour force (either directly in production or indirectly in services and in the reproduction of the labour force), and increasingly destroying knowledge and logical alternatives to its own bulimic "logic".

In this insane capitalist logic, the "ecological crisis" itself is perceived only as "a formidable opportunity for new markets." Thus the business press highlights the opportunities in the market for renewables, the market for pollution rights, the (pseudo-) organic agriculture market, etc. The global nature of the problem disappears and the global solution also disappears, swallowed up by the appetite for profit of individual capitalists.

It is obvious that the pseudo-solutions of this "green capitalism" will solve nothing. I will not waste my time explaining it. As Albert Einstein said, you do not solve a problem with the means that caused the problem. We will not solve the ecological crisis by the market mechanisms and the productivism that are the cause of the ecological crisis.

On this subject, take note of this: as I mentioned, the only aspect of the ecological crisis where the exponential dynamics of destruction have been broken is the disappearance of the ozone layer. The emissions of gases responsible for the phenomenon have indeed fallen dramatically since the Montreal Protocol (1987). Yet it is precisely the only area in which governments (for a series of very specific reasons that I cannot go into here) have used regulatory measures rather than market mechanisms [6].

The conclusion is glaringly obvious: it

is not nature that is in crisis, it is capitalist society. We have arrived at a stage where the absurdity of this mode of production is seriously perturbing the relationship between humanity and the nature to which it belongs, to the point of posing a mortal threat to much of the human race. That is why I do not like the expression "ecological crisis".

The term "crisis" is moreover incorrect. A crisis is a moment of transition between two states of a system. In my view, we cannot talk of "crisis" to describe the totality of exponential phenomena of environmental deterioration that I have talked about, which have amplified over the past two centuries.

It is not a "crisis" that we are dealing with but a double impasse of capitalism, on both the environmental and social levels (to put it briefly: the tendency for the rate of profit to fall and how capital is trying to counter it).

It is striking that, on the two levels - social and environmental - the system is coming up against limits that it is not even capable of identifying itself. This validates completely the analysis of Marx, who said that "the only limit to capital is capital itself" and concluded that this Moloch, if we do not eliminate it in time, would exhaust "the only two sources of all wealth: the Earth and the worker ".

Ecological struggle, class struggle

This approach enables us to give a framework to the struggle that we must wage. This is not an "ecological struggle" - in the sense of a kind of luxury struggle for those who do not have too many social problems. It is a social struggle to preserve the conditions of existence on this planet, especially for the working class, women, youth, peasants, indigenous peoples - in short the exploited and oppressed that capitalism threatens to sacrifice en masse.

The struggle that we must wage for the environment is a class struggle, an anticapitalist struggle that encompasses virtually all other struggles and that has the potential to bring them all together. A struggle whose outcome will decide the choice between a humanity worthy of the name - that takes loving care of itself and of the nature to which it belongs - or the barbaric chaos of social and environmental destruction.

This struggle is both poetic - it is full of emotions and passion because it is about saving the enchantment of the world that makes us human in the full sense of the word - and eminently rational. But we are under no illusions: it will be won neither by poetry nor by reason, whatever the beauty of the first and the rigour of the second.

Given the news in recent weeks, I will illustrate this assertion by a Greek parable: what is there in common between Yanis Varoufakis and the major environmental associations? The illusion of believing that human tragedies and reasonable arguments, supported by Nobel prizewinners, could persuade the adversary that their policy is absurd, even from the point of view of their own capitalist interests.

This belief is actually illusory. It is not a question primarily of stupidity or lack of information on the part of "decision-makers" but one of material interests. To save the climate: 1) the oil, gas and coal companies should renounce exploiting four-fifths of the fossil fuel reserves that they own and which determine their listing on the stock market; and 2) the major part of the global energy system – which is worth almost a fifth of global GDP - should be scrapped before amortization. In both cases this destruction of capital would cause a huge financial crisis.

So we can make another Greek comparison: what do Schäuble and Lagarde have in common with climate sceptics? An iron determination to protect their system, that of the capitalist class to which they belong and which has built most of its power over two centuries on the exploitation of fossil fuels.

The Schäubles and Lagardes of all countries are prepared to maintain this system at the price of immense destruction, of the sacrifice of hundreds of millions of human beings, and even of precipitating the world into a chaos that would be unmanageable except by means which will have nothing to do, even remotely, with so-called "civilization".

When the damage is done, the Schäubles and Lagardes will shed crocodile tears over the victims, talking about "natural disaster". For those people, you see, think that the laws of the market are natural laws, as intangible - if not more so - than the laws of physics.

The bourgeois economist Schumpeter said that capitalism emerges from its periodic crises by "creative destruction". What Ernest Mandel called "late capitalism" cannot get out of its dual social and ecological impasse by "creative destruction."

So it really is a question of a struggle, not of an academic debate, and the example of Greece shows us on a small scale how merciless this struggle will be.

Explain, block, "commonise"?

"What is to be done?“, as the man said... What must be done to minimize the climate catastrophe?

The first thing to do is to explain tirelessly, everywhere, the seriousness of the situation and its cause, especially in popular organizations, the trade unions, women’s organizations and youth movements. An enormous and permanent work of education is necessary, in which we must participate. To speak is already to act, to sow the seeds of the great anger that is indispensable.

The second thing to do is to fight against all the major investment projects in the service of the fossil industry: the new airports, new pipelines, new motorways, new drilling, new mines, the new madness of shale gas, the new fads of geo-engineers who dream of providing

Earth with a thermostat … of which they would have control.

Naomi Klein is absolutely right to call for strengthening everywhere this movement of contestation that she calls "Blokadia". She is right because this blocking is indeed of strategic importance: the present level of development of infrastructures does not allow capital to continue to burn the masses of fossil fuels that are putting us on the path to global warming of 6°C by 2100 [7].

Mobilizations like those of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, or the Keystone XL pipeline, or the Yasuni park, are like locks that block its path. Let us defend them and let us coordinate in order to defend them.

The third thing to do is to support all the collective, social and democratic alternative initiatives that take forward the concept of what is common, of common goods and common management of Earth "as good fathers and mothers." Let us not look down on groups that buy local produce from organic agriculture and other initiatives aimed at food sovereignty, for example. We obviously do not believe that capitalism can be overthrown in this way, by contagion. Nonetheless, these initiatives can be levers for developing consciousness, in particular when they organize dialogue and consequently break the separation - generalized by capital - between producers and consumers, or when they involve the trade-union movement.

However, it goes without saying that permanent education, blockages and initiatives for the conquest of common goods are not enough. The struggle requires a project of an alternative society, a programme and a strategy. I will quickly run through these three aspects.

Project of society: the ecosocialist aggiornamento

Let us call a spade a spade: the proposed alternative society can only be of a socialist kind. What is involved is suppressing the production of exchange values – for the benefit of the capitalist minority and replacing it with the production of use values – for the satisfaction of real human needs, democratically determined. There is no other possible choice, no other possible alternative to this mode of production. However, this alternative basically corresponds to the definition of socialism.

The autonomous women's movement challenges our organizations, to make us take the full measure of the fact that socialism involves not only the abolition of the exploitation of wage labour but also the struggle against the oppression of women. Unpaid domestic work in the service of the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force is a pillar of the system, carefully hidden by patriarchal power, which also oppresses gays and lesbians. Our movement is trying to draw all the conclusions from that in terms of the kind of socialism that we want.

In the same way, we need to explore what the seriousness of the ecological crisis means for our socialist project. Here too, an aggiornamento is necessary. I will briefly mention three points:
â€¢ Technology. Lenin said that "socialism is soviets plus electricity." It is clear today that this definition is inadequate. How will the electricity be produced? From coal, oil, natural gas, nuclear energy? A socialism worthy of the name demands an electricity that is generated solely from renewable energy sources and used with maximum efficiency. In other words, the "ecological crisis" leads us to conclude that technologies are not neutral;

â€¢ Limits. Engels exalted "the unlimited development of the productive forces" that would be possible, he said, once humanity had got rid of "capitalist fetters." We can discuss the exact interpretation of this phrase of Engels, the importance he accorded to non-material productive forces such as knowledge, etc. But one thing is clear: the socialist project is cluttered up with what Daniel Bensaïd called "productivist dross." Let us eliminate it. We are fighting for a socialism that respects the limits of resources, the rhythms and the modes of functioning of ecosystems and the great natural cycles. A socialism which applies the precautionary principle and abandons the "domination of nature";

â€¢ Decentralization. Marx said of the Paris Commune that it was "the political form, at last discovered, of the emancipation of labour." On the basis of this revolutionary experience, he abandoned more centralist conceptions, announced that he was in favour of a federation of communes as an alternative to the state and began to study the communal forms of pre-capitalist societies. A real democracy of the associated producers is not in fact possible without the destruction of the state and its replacement by a decentralized federation of structures of self-organization, which coordinate among themselves. The energy transition that is necessary encourages us to opt for this conception in a much bolder way, because renewables involve decentralization, which facilitates management by communities or under their control. We can therefore complete Marx's formula: "the commune is the political form, at last discovered, of the emancipation of labour and environmental sustainability" (in the true sense of the term).

These three points are sufficient, I think, to show that ecosocialism is something other than a new label on an old bottle: it is an emancipatory project that integrates the new challenges with which humanity is confronted because of the capitalist destruction of the environment and the disastrous experience of "real socialism".

Programme: an inescapably radical character

Concerning the programme, I would say that those who think that the ecological question risks diverting us from anticapitalist responses with which to counter austerity are seriously mistaken. The opposite is true: in reality, the urgency and the

gravity of the environmental crisis give strong legitimacy to an extremely radical, revolutionary programme, whose keystone is the double expropriation/socialization of energy and of the financial sector, without compensation or buyback and under workers' control.

These two sectors are very profoundly intertwined, particularly because the gigantic investments of the fossil sector (exploration, drilling, mining, refineries, power plants, power lines, etc.) are long-term investments, financed by credit. Given what has been said above on the scrapping of the energy system before amortization and on the fossil reserves that must be left underground, nationalization is the prerequisite for the collectivity to dispose of the levers and the means that make it possible to organize the energy transition independently of the imperatives of profit, in a decentralized framework.
Under this keystone, we can organize many more immediate demands, which I will not detail here. I will only say that two issues seem of great importance, in a double perspective of response to austerity and of spreading the idea of common property:

â€¢ The first is that of free access: for example, free basic services which correspond to socially necessary needs for access to water, lighting, mobility and heat (combined with a rapidly progressive pricing system beyond these needs);

â€¢ The second is that of the reduction of the sphere of the market in favour of a democratic public sector, with mechanisms of control by and participation of the population: public companies for the insulation and renovation of housing, public transport companies, etc.

Strategy: convergence of peasant, indigenous, workers' and feminist struggles

I will conclude with strategy. It is clear that humanity can only break out of the impasse into which capitalism has dragged it by revolutionary means. It is also clear that the anticapitalist struggle that must be conducted implies necessarily a central role of the working class (that is to say all those whose existence depends on the direct or indirect exploitation of their labour power by capitalism - in production, in services or in the reproduction of labour power).

But the revolution is not two well defined armies - the working class and the bourgeoisie - who line up face to face on the battlefield. Every revolutionary situation is the product of a crisis of the whole society, of a confused ferment of initiatives by classes, but also by fractions of classes, social layers, etc. Within this ferment, the working class must conquer hegemony by demonstrating in practice that its programme provides answers to the problems and the aspirations of all the exploited and oppressed.

Making this clear is particularly relevant here because the "ecological crisis" is like the threat of atomic war: it challenges and sets in motion millions of men and women from all strata of society, because they are worried about the future of the planet and that of their children.

This is why the great ecological mobilizations, like the great pacifist demonstrations, often have an inter-classist dimension. Admittedly, workers are in the majority there (at least in the "developed" countries, where the working class forms the majority of the population), but they do not participate as workers, with a consciousness of their specific role.

In my opinion, the task of revolutionaries in this context is not to stay on the side of the road distributing leaflets calling for a socialist response. These leaflets are certainly useful, but our task is also to build the mass movement and orient it towards anticapitalist solutions.

This discussion on strategy is all the more important in that the working class is now in the rearguard of the struggle over the climate, while peasants and indigenous peoples are in the front line with anticapitalist demands – with women playing a key role in both cases.
We must build the mass movement with the strategic preoccupation of drawing into it the working class, whose role will be decisive. But to do this we need to understand the specific reasons that explain the relative under-participation of the workers' movement in the ecological struggle in general, especially over the climate.

The explanation is not complicated. Today, when small farmers are fighting for their livelihoods against agribusiness, the immediate demands that they put forward largely coincide with the agrarian programme that needs to be applied in order to save the climate. Moreover, they know that they need support in the general population in order to confront a very powerful enemy who wants to destroy them; therefore they lean more towards the "worker-peasant" alliance than towards a petty-bourgeois programme. The same applies, mutatis mutandis, with the indigenous peoples in defence of their way of life, based on symbiosis with the forest, for example.

In these two categories, it is not surprising that women play a key role. Not because of an ecological "feminine essence", but because on the one hand women are responsible for 80 per cent of food production in the world, and on the other hand the role of "nurturing" that patriarchy assigns to them in the division of labour confronts them directly with some of the most brutal impacts of climate change, such as the increasing scarcity of water resources.

Things present themselves differently for workers. Indeed, there is no coincidence, but tension or even apparent opposition - at first - between the immediate demands that they pose spontaneously to defend their livelihood, on the one hand, and the programme that should be applied from an ecological point of view, on the other.

It goes without saying that this opposition is only apparent, but it represents nonetheless an obstacle, especially in struggles that are conducted enterprise by enterprise. Often moreover, workers in polluting enterprises say that they are torn between the consciousness of the ecologically harmful nature of their work and the fact that they need to keep their jobs.

This tension can only be overcome by anticapitalist responses, which alone make it possible to respond to both social needs and environmental constraints. Such is the overall strategic approach of ecosocialism.

I am not going to draw up a catalogue of these demands - they need to be largely invented in concrete struggles, starting in particular from battles over health in the workplace - but there is one that seems to me to be crucial: a radical reduction of working hours without loss of pay, with compensatory hiring and a sharp reduction in the intensity of work, under workers' control.

This is a decisive demand because a radical reduction of working time with a lower intensity of work is the best way to fight against unemployment while also combating productivism. In order to understand the strategic importance of this demand from an ecological point of view, it is necessary to know in particular that the reduction of industrial production and transport is a prerequisite for a transition to renewable energy, taking into account the climate constraint.
There are many obstacles to the dissemination of these ecosocialist demands in the workers' movement. One of them is obviously the existence of a trade-union bureaucracy that practice class collaboration and hopes that in this way – one more illusion! - it can accompany a "just transition" towards a social and ecological capitalism.

Committing ourselves to the building of a mass movement in defence of the environment in general, and of the climate in particular, enables us to become capable of indicting the logic of capitalism by starting from this movement, in action, on a mass scale. This can only encourage workers to join in the fight with their weapons and to play the decisive role that will be theirs in the end.

Revolutionary strategy is not the workerism or economism that was denounced by Lenin. There is no question of tail-ending the Greens. What is necessary is to provide a comprehensive response to the global impasse of capitalism, on every terrain and in every milieu. It means renewing with the best revolutionary traditions of the workers' movement, as expressed in this beautiful song of the Viennese workers, an ecosocialist song that was ahead of its time:

It is we who are the builders of the new world

We are the fields, the sower and the seed

We are the reapers of the next harvests

It is we who are the future, who are life.

This is a transcript (in a form that has been somewhat abbreviated by the author) of the exposé given on July 28, 2015 as part of the 32nd International Meeting of Youth of the Fourth International, which was organized in Belgium. The author would like to thank all those whose contributions led him to modify and clarify the text on some points.

Footnotes

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/13/science/earth/collapse-of-parts-of-west-antarctica-ice-sheet-has-begun-scientists-say.html?_r

[2] http://www.realclimate.org/index.php/archives/2013/08/the-inevitability-of-sea-level-rise/

[3] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/world-on-track-for-nearly-11-degree-temperature-rise-energy-expert-says/2011/11/28/gIQAi0lM6N_story.html

[4] Corinne Le Quere, Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, University of East Anglia "The scientific case for radical emission reductions." http://tyndall.ac.uk/communication/news-archive/2013/radical-emissions-reduction-conference-videos-now-online

[5] James Lovelock, *La Terre est un être vivant, l'hypothèse Gaia*, Flammarion, coll. Champs, Paris 1999.

[6] http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/csd/assessments/ozone/2010/executivesummary/#fig1

[7] Corinne Le Quere, op. cit.

Millions Are "Feeling the Bern," but What's Next?

10 October 2015, by Solidarity

All this is not because Bernie Sanders is a Democrat. He has spent only five months of his 43-year political career as a nominal member of that party. In the Democratic Party today he remains an isolated outsider, with none of its major leaders offering him any encouragement, let alone political support. Although Sanders caucuses

with the Democrats and almost always votes with them, against the Republicans, before his presidential run he was most famous for being the longest-serving independent in Congress.

He's introduced legislation for a $15 federal minimum wage, for free college tuition, and for tight financial regulation and reform that the corporate-tied Democratic leadership won't touch. We disagree with Sanders' relative silence on war and the military budget, but whatever his weaknesses, they don't make him acceptable to the Democratic leadership. Sanders has the best voting record in Congress as judged by the AFL-CIO, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, and the NAACP. But that's not the reason people are "feeling the Bern"—many of his supporters have never been involved in mainstream political organizations. Some are Democrats, some are independents, some are non-voters.

Sanders has been drawing crowds in the tens of thousands

What Bernie enthusiasts have in common is that they are excited and relieved to find, for once, a candidate they don't have to hold their nose to vote for. They've pulled the lever for "lesser evil" corporate Democrats like Hillary Clinton before, against right-wing Republicans, but they're fed up with the idea that those are the only two choices. Many Sanders supporters despise Clinton's cynical politics. They support Sanders because they see him speaking up for society's economic underdogs. While Hillary Clinton sat on the board of Walmart, Bernie Sanders was marching on union picket lines. Today he stands with those workers fighting for $15 an hour and to get out from under student debt and to form new unions. He demands that we drive corporate money out of politics; he argues for universal health care and free college. And he was moved by the intervention of the Black Lives Matter movement to make a strong statement on institutional racism and police violence.

It's anger over our mounting insecurity—and the knowledge that it doesn't have to be this way—that is fueling the Sanders campaign. We can view the excitement as a continuation, through electoral politics, of the Occupy Wall Street movement that erupted in 2011, the movement that made inequality the issue of the day. The Occupy message changed the national conversation. Today it's Sanders speaking for the 99%, and the spirit of Occupy infuses the Sanders for President movement. He has incorporated Occupy's grievances into a platform centered on economic justice and against "the billionaire class."

Sanders' Labor Support Grows

Bernie Sanders' supporters in the unions are challenging the labor officialdom's longstanding, unquestioned, and virtually unconditional support for the Democratic Party leadership and organization. When President Randi Weingarten and the executive council of the Teachers union endorsed Clinton without any discussion among the members, thousands of AFT members protested. In the other teachers union, the NEA, an early endorsement of Clinton has ignited a similar rank-and-file firestorm. In the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, member activism has gotten leaders to say they won't endorse anytime soon.

Labor for Bernie, the group that organized the 26,000-person phone call with Sanders, brings together members who have seen their unions disrespected for decades, and who want to challenge both the economic and political state of affairs. They want to challenge their bosses and force the government to recognize their rights, and many are finding that they have to oppose their own union leaders to do so.

A Socialist Inspiration

Sanders has always called himself a "democratic socialist," but that did not feature so much in the first couple months of his campaign. With every new interview it has become more prominent. The Tea Party's attack on the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) as "socialism" was false, but ironically, for the first time in decades, it opened the door to a positive discussion of socialism. In 2014 Kshama Sawant won a seat on the Seattle City Council, showing that once again (as was true 100 years ago) a socialist could win political office in America.

Sanders has made it clear that his model is "social democracy" in the Scandinavian tradition: free health care and education for all; good jobs and wages with excellent unemployment insurance, public housing programs, and a generous conception of the public good and social well-being. "In Denmark," he says, "it is very hard to become very, very rich, but it's pretty hard to be very, very poor. And that makes a lot of sense to me." Health care and social protections are under attack in Europe, too, but since they started at a higher level, these societies remain far ahead of the United States in the quality of their citizens' lives. However, these social programs exist within the context of a capitalist system that still creates inequality, exploits labor, and still goes from boom to bust. In fact, capitalism makes impossible many of the ideals that social democrats themselves aspire to. Militarism, too, can't coexist with Sanders' ideals—for one thing, defunding the war apparatus would be a great place to get the money for health care and education.

A Political Revolution

Sanders stresses that the movement is not about him, that a president alone cannot make the change we need. He calls for a "political revolution," which, he says, means more than "tinkering around the edges of American society." It will take, he says, millions and millions of people getting involved. Today we see movements that are getting people involved: Black Lives Matter, the Fight for $15, the victorious marriage equality campaign, the fight against fracking. All contain new activists who are looking for an understanding of our society and a fresh politics. It is seekers like these who could start an ongoing and independent political movement.

Back in 1988 Jesse Jackson appealed to the movements in his Democratic primary campaign for the presidency—but then dismantled the Rainbow Coalition that had supported him, incorporating his supporters into the Democratic Party. Sanders' campaign has the potential for going beyond a futile pressure group within the Democrats. Together with other movements, it could help lay the groundwork for an independent populist political movement. The lesson that Sanders' supporters should take from the Jesse Jackson and Dennis Kucinich experiences is that realizing this potential will require an exit route from the Democratic Party.

More long-term, the choice is between giving up and going home once election season is over, and staying active in all sorts of movements that challenge politics as usual. The Democratic Party is not an empty vessel which a movement for "political revolution" can fill with its own ideas and own supporters. If it were possible to take over that party and use it to fight the power, it would have happened earlier—maybe in the 1930s, or in 1972 when antiwar candidate George McGovern was nominated and then deserted by the party establishment.

No, this party is a longstanding institution, a convenient vehicle for perpetuating the dominance of the capitalist class—the banking, hedge fund, and corporate executives who mostly, but not exclusively, favor the Republican option. Both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are the darlings of a big section of Wall Street as well as of other capitalists who don't follow the extreme right wing on social issues. Just follow the money to find the biggest contributors to their campaigns.

The leaders who control the Democratic Party have no intention of allowing Bernie Sanders to get anywhere near the presidential nomination. In the end, they need the votes of his supporters and the energy his campaign generates, but they'll do whatever is needed to stop his momentum. That could mean rallying around Clinton, finding a substitute corporate candidate in the event that she slips badly, or relying on the super-delegates (elected officials who get to vote at the convention without regard to the outcome of their state's primary). And if they need to pour on some dirty tricks to extinguish "the Bern," they won't hesitate.

What Next?

Young people's anger over low wages and McJobs, Black people's anger at police brutality and murder, the awakening working class anger against corporations and corporate government, the labor activism around the Sanders campaign, the opening to socialist ideas, the enthusiasm for a bold economic program, the call for "political revolution"—all indicate the potential for an insurgent movement. But the paradox is that such a movement would need a new political party. How could the Democratic Party, where the levers of power are controlled by banks and corporations, professional politicians and their fundraisers and advertising agencies, ever tolerate a candidate and a campaign that would break their hold?

Sanders' proposals can never be realized within that party—and Sanders knows it. Why else would he have remained an independent his whole life, until 2015? Why else would he urge a "political revolution"? Sanders himself has pledged to support the party nominee, but that doesn't mean his supporters have to go peacefully and become loyal Clinton workers. The new mass political party we need doesn't exist now, and the Sanders campaign is time-limited. After Bernie's uprising has been buried by the Democratic Party leadership, the Green Party and its likely presidential candidate Jill Stein will be on the November 2016 ballot running on many of the very same principles that energize the Sanders campaign. Check out her program for economic, social and environmental justice. (We would have been delighted to see Sanders run as an independent, but he has ruled that out.)

For Bernie Sanders' supporters, Jill Stein's campaign represents what you're fighting for right now. The voices of protest and indignation can continue making themselves heard at the ballot box. Around the country, there will be referenda on social justice issues and local independent candidates running as pro-people renegades against the Democratic Party machine. Our support should uncompromisingly follow our political convictions if our "revolution" is going to take off.

The political revolution is all of us—we are the power. More important than any candidate's electoral campaign is what we do to build movements and organize people to challenge neoliberal policies—and eventually, to challenge capitalism. Join the movement to combat climate change. Fight for $15 an hour. Support Black Lives Matter. Work for universal health care. Make your union into a force that matters, or help organize your workplace. Join those who are fighting to reduce student debt. Oppose the demonization and deportation of immigrants. Join in international solidarity with the victims of imperialism around the globe. To win the aspirations that Bernie represents will take all the movements, in the streets—before, during, and after the elections.

About the elections of September 20

8 October 2015, by OKDE-Spartakos

The working class regions voted massively for SYRIZA one more time. It was not the small promises or the ridiculous excuses SYRIZA pointed out that made them do that, as much as their hatred for the right-wing, PASOK, and in general the old memorandum governments. This totally justified hatred, though, is not

enough to make the result look positive. The typical proportion of the percentages of the left and right are in favor of the former, but this is of little importance in front of the fact that a left party which is in the government takes the jurisdiction to implement, in collaboration with the nationalist right-wing ANEL, a program of austerity and reforms in favor of the profits of the national and international capital.

In front of the result of the election, though, there is no point neither in sadness and pessimism, nor in made-up optimism. The problem for the revolutionary left is to conceive the new conditions, not to cry, neither to smile, but to put the current duties in order. Instability will continue and nothing is over yet.

The big percentage of abstention expresses more disorientation and disappointment than a specific ''political message''. At the same time, though, it shows that acceptance of the memorandum as an inevitable evil is to a certain degree iconic. Reduced expectation from the electoral result is not necessarily a bad sign, even if abstention as a conscious stance depoliticizes the problem.

The increase of the Golden Dawn in terms of percentage (not in votes, despite the absence of the far-right LAOS from the election) shows that the Nazis came in order to stay. It is true that in the pre-electoral campaign the GD didn't make but a few public appearances and that the racist hatred against refugees, which the Nazis normally tried to capitalize, was only limited and remained in a regional level. It is also true, however, that the GD has a stable audience and is waiting for its chance. After four years of so important experiences of the antifascist movement, by saying that the GD's percentage is worrying is the same as saying nothing. We must go back in the streets and eliminate the Nazis once and for all.

The basic problem emerging from the election is that a whole social current, that for years struggled hard and had achieved to overthrow governments and political relations, has taken shelter under Tsipras' leadership. This leadership makes that part of the society more passive and conservative. The hypothesis that the SYRIZA's betrayal would automatically lead to its destruction was proven to be naïve. Leaderships have a strong effect on the consciousness of their base. The out-of-SYRIZA left bears part of the responsibility for SYRIZA's dominance, because of its inadequacy and mistakes, but the biggest responsibility lies on the opposition inside SYRIZA and on all currents who supported it critically and tactically, as it is with their aid that all this social current was given away to Tsipras.

ANTARSYA was one of the few forces in the electoral map that was reinforced in absolute numbers. Its percentage is decent, though substantially lower than its presence in the class struggle, and than the necessities in a time of crisis. The pre-electoral campaign and the alliance with EEK has to be valued positively. Despite some contradictions, it has been a clear move towards a more explicitely anticapitalist orientation than the one in last January.

The choice of ANTARSYA not to join Popular Unity was right, something proven by PU's campaign. To return to an already outdated discussion for this kind of programmatic and electoral collaborations has nothing to offer today, other than pressures for a conservative adjustment of ANTARSYA.

On the contrary, broad united action of the movement, upon certain practical targets against the new measures, with committees and coordination between all militant forces in the struggle, with the anticapitalist left in its vanguard and its center of gravity out of the parliament, in the streets and in work-places, is what can change social and political relation of forces. Despite the current image given by the election, this relation can change quickly, because there are odjective reasons for the instability of the system. We must not let Tsipras represent the social current born in the crisis. We must not let New Democracy and PASOK come back and Golden Dawn profit more. The time comes for actual insurgency (translator's note: the actual translation of ''insurgency'' in Greek stands for "antarsia", a word that sounds the same as the name of our political front).

The struggle against private electricity suppliers and illegitimate tariff hikes

7 October 2015, by Radical Socialist

It is therefore necessary to examine the issue from a clearly socialist point of view. The campaign was initiated due to an action that has been taking place almost every year. The Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation announces, with the consent of the Electricity Regulatory Commission, revisions of rates. Not only does it do so almost every year, but it announces rate hikes with retrospective effect. In other word, after people have consumed power and have even paid the bill, as they thought, they are informed later that they must pay more because the rate is being increased from an earlier date. The success of neoliberalism has meant that all major parties, from right to left, have accepted that certain market linked principles cannot be questioned by elected governments. Indeed, they feel that it is the duty of elected governments to support certain particular forces.

The CESC is one of several power

suppliers in India owned by private companies. And the logic of private companies is that they must make a profit, not only some profit, but profit at the highest possible rate. So, while the Electricity Act gives governments to override the State Regulatory Commissions in the public interest, the reality is that it does not happen. For many years in West Bengal, for example, the Goenka owned CESC has been imposing and collecting arrears in this way, regardless of whether the CPI(M) led Left Front or the TMC had been in power.

While the people who came together might be a small number, what they have done after a long time, is to challenge the consensus that says, profits first, do not challenge the rights of monopoly capital. In this, their action is similar to other small or medium scale actions. For example we can mention the case of the Asongothito Kshetra Sangrami Sramik Mancha organising a campaign for minimum wages for a whole series of sectors in West Bengal back in 2011, shortly after the TMC government was formed and the bourgeois media were heralding the end of the left. Equally as another example, we can talk of a small Union, the Progressive Plantation Workers Union early this year, opposing the rotten agreement in the tea gardens. None of these show a dramatic shift away from the mainstream left. But they all are straws in the wind, that new forces are beginning to come out and question the neo-liberal consensus.

This is of course not specific to West Bengal, or even to India. There are various developments, all of which show working people seeking alternatives. In some cases they have emerged. In other cases there might have been expectations belied. Such for example was the broad party building exercise in Greece. In other cases, apparently dead organisations have seen revival, as with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party. It would be argued that we are comparing totally different issues. We say, we are pointing to a trend, where some people, everywhere, are beginning to challenge the neoliberal consensus that Margaret Thatcher made famous as TINA (there is no alternative). As of now, the challenges in India are small — much smaller than some of the European examples we have cited. The mainstream left still dominates the working class, and unlike the trade unions, which have sometimes taken up serious fights, the left parties have a totally spineless attitude. Yet, the fact that in the first half of September, the Left Front also decided to get into the act, shows that while the small forces may not be strong enough to launch and sustain movements where hundreds of thousands of people really join the fight, they are already in a position where they can make masses of people aware, and compel the mainstream left to take periodic actions.

This immediately brings up tactical questions which we from outside a particular campaign cannot address in full, yet which do need discussions. The mainstream left cannot be totally ignored, as long as they exist. The sectarian stance is to simply abuse them and turn one's back on them. This is good for purity, but this means imposing a limit on how large a movement will eventually be built.
On the other hand, to merge banners is to ensure that the mainstream left will step in, steal the issue, and then make a rotten compromise. There is a need to retain one's organisational independence, which in turn calls for a political clarification and the raising of one's banner; while at the same time agreeing to specific, limited, united front actions.
If the demands are such that the action emboldens the masses and lead to further militancy, such united fronts serve toiling people and should be promoted. But there cannot be a unity that leads to the surrender of the banner of revolutionaries and of militant fighters, since given the relation of forces even now, despite its continuous bloodletting, shows a far greater numerical strength of the reformist left. Our goal must be, not just a token show of force or even a token concession. In the field of power, the issues and demands must involve the following:
· Questioning the logic of periodic hikes altogether
· Scrapping the retrospective effects of power hike
· Questioning why private companies must be given such crucial public utilities, especially when they do not even produce but mostly buy and supply the power
· Demanding the expansion of solar, wind power

Kolkata 19 September, 2015

Slowing economy – Chinese Strikes in Manufacturing: from Offensive to Defensive?

6 October 2015, by Kevin Lin

This development is contributing to a long-term trend of manufacturing capital relocation both within industrial regions and from the southern coast to the interior—if not to Southeast Asia. As a result of rising wages and labor unrest, especially over the last decade, some factories simply closed down. The immediate result is an upsurge of strikes and militant protests in the last couple of years where companies try to avoid any compensation for closure or relocation. Workers ask for severance payment and compensation for years, sometimes decades, of unpaid social insurance and housing fund contributions to which they're legally entitled.

For most of the last three decades,

social insurance and housing fund contributions hadn't been among the main concerns of Chinese workers. But a combination of workers getting older and demanding a fair share of their contribution has placed these demands at the center of recent strikes. I focused on one such strike in a previous article [1]: hundreds of migrant workers at the Lide Footwear Company went on strike in late 2014 after hearing rumors about relocation. Many were unwilling to relocate with the company, and were instead hoping to receive severance payment and other compensations. China's labor laws stipulate a range of such compensations, but the lack of enforcement means that management gets to dictate what workers receive—or not. In this case, the management's refusal to negotiate fairly led to a number of strikes and negotiations between workers and management over many months.

The Lide strike stands out. While most strikes end in a matter of days and rarely last for more than a couple of weeks, it was not until mid-2015 that the Lide workers were finally able to win most of their demands from management. Over the same period, another strike similar to Lide in many ways drew media coverage following a solidarity campaign highlighting the company's role as a contractor for the Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo, a popular brand with over 400 stores in China. The Shenzhen Artigas Clothing and Leather Company, known locally as Qingsheng, was established in 1992 with Hong Kong investment shortly after Deng Xiaoping accelerated China's opening to foreign direct investment, and has been oriented primarily to export. In 2014, it made plans to relocate to another industrial park without any prior consultation or negotiation with workers, sparking initially a nine-day strike in December which was forcibly suppressed by the police.

On June 9 this year, as the company tried to shut down the factory and remove equipment, over 900 workers began a protest, occupying the shopfloor to prevent management from closing down the factory. They demanded negotiation on severance payment and compensation. Unpaid social insurance, in particular, has become a significant issue in such strikes, as many workers have worked at the same factory for more than a decade. Some workers then went on hunger strike to try to put more pressure on management. Heavy-handed tactics were used against workers, including harassment and detention of strikers by the local police.

Only after three weeks of persistent factory occupation did management finally agree to start negotiation. However, it refused to hold collective negotiation and only wanted to deal with workers on an individual basis. Workers rejected the management's attempt to divide workers, and continued the strike. As the strike entered into deadlock, some 200 workers travelled to Guangzhou and staged a regular protest at the Guangdong Provincial Government. After days of protesting and sleeping in a nearby park, they were forcefully removed and briefly detained by police. Management also stepped up pressure on the remaining workers occupying the factory by cutting off utilities. Workers were locked out of the factory, and the lockout was enforced with the assistance of local police.

In contrast to the Lide Footwear factory strike which won most of workers' demands, the Qingsheng strike ended without any success to force management into negotiation. These two cases, and other similar strikes in recent months, reflect the deleterious impact of slowing export sector on manufacturing workers. Companies operating on thin profit margins have opted to relocate, scale down production, cut the number of their workers, and ask workers to re-sign their contracts.

Mobilization and Organization

In the face of such assaults on their jobs and livelihood, workers' protests have taken the more radical form of repeated work stoppages, factory occupation and collective negotiations with management over several months. Not all strikes end in success. In fact, there is evidence that police have stepped up crackdowns on high-profile strikes.

The key feature of these strikes is the development of sustained mobilization and disciplined organization over a long period of time. Workers have to build ad-hoc and informal organization with elected representatives from scratch, and sustain it over months while maintaining the confidence of fellow workers. And as workers are unprotected in their industrial actions by law, the longer the strike lasts the riskier it will become for the strike leaders. The assistance of Chinese labor NGOs no doubt lends experience and legal knowledge to the organizers. But the striking workers themselves, rather than any outside influence, remain the driving force of these strikes. As management and local police force work together to coerce workers back to work, their mobilization and solidarity have proven crucial in resistance.

Key to the mobilization is a strong sense of entitlement for having worked so many years at the same company, which gives workers a firm moral and legal reason and determination to take actions. During these strikes, it is common for workers to highlight the fact that the company has taken the fruits of their labor, and thereby frame their action as one of both legal and moral entitlement. In addition, the fact that many workers are either facing contract termination, or willing to quit, might have contributed to their determination to take the risks. And as industrial employment remains plentiful, workers will not have too much problem finding jobs elsewhere.

Strikes related to factory relocation and closure are likely to dominate the manufacturing sector in the next few months. This development poses a broader question about the development of China's working class movement. Studies of Chinese workers' collective actions argue that in the last decade or so, as workers become more aware of their rights and collective strength, the migrant working class movement has transitioned from a primarily defensive movement against wage arrears to an offensive movement, demanding rising wages and in some

cases democratization of workplace unions usually dominated by management. While this formulation is necessarily a generalisation—in fact, demanding unpaid wages still constitutes the main reason behind the largest number of labor protests today—it is useful in capturing an important trend in the movement.

So does the recent upsurge of strikes related to severance payment and compensation suggest a shift away from offensive back to defensive struggles? Or is this rather a brief interruption to the long-term trend as described? Will the confidence of workers to fight for higher wages be rolled back as they are forced to face the reality of manufacturing decline and settle for severance payment as the best they can achieve? Will the working class militancy that has been building up in the last two decade be lost as the slowing economy closes off space for offensive struggles, and as the state heightens suppression?

There is cause for pessimism, but also for optimism. That workers make demands on unpaid social insurance and housing contribution legally due to them is in fact as important as their struggles for higher wages. Given that employer social insurance and housing contributions have long been enshrined in the labor laws, actually demanding them is an important step forward. It is true that migrant workers have been reluctant to demand social insurance because they also have to make a contribution out of their meager wages, and do not know for certain whether they will benefit in old age. But as many are near retirement age, this is becoming a more urgent issue for them.

Moreover, workers have raised paid maternity leave and high-temperature allowance among others as part of their demands. While these tend to be ignored by management in negotiations, it reflects workers' greater awareness of labor rights and entitlements. These legal entitlements enable workers to skilfully and tactically deploy the law in their negotiation with management.

There is another reason that it would not do justice to these strikes to characterize them as defensive. It is no easier to fight for these demands than for higher wages, and it is offensive in expanding the basket of demands that could be negotiated with management. It may well be much harder in most cases, because a lump sum payment of severance payment and social insurance and housing contribution can easily reach millions and sometimes tens of millions of Yuan. In addition, these strikes also train workers in mobilization and democratic representation and deliberation, as well as negotiation and bargaining—the same experience developed during offensive strikes.

This is not to ignore that tougher economic conditions may pose more challenges to the workers' movement. It will be naïve to think that any labor movement would follow a linear progression. The fact that China's working class movement has seen intensifying collective actions over the last two decades, in particular since the Honda auto workers' strike in 2010 which is widely seen as pointing to the maturing of the labor movement, may have contributed to such a perhaps overly optimistic, linear view. In practice, workers' organizing capacity and consciousness have always been geographically and sectorally uneven. Manufacturing strikes have been concentrated in two regions: the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta. The present situation facing manufacturing workers similarly should not be generalized to the working class movement as a whole where non-manufacturing and service sectors have also been more active.

The slowing of the export sector is likely to continue, and the government sees the shift away from export-dependency as essential to rebalancing China's economy. The resulting capital relocation and restructuring in the manufacturing industry will likely erode some of workers' hard-fought gains, at least temporarily. This will displace workers, and may also disorganize and fragment the nascent labor movement to some extent. New struggles and networks both in the old and new places will take time to develop. But this is an unavoidable and necessary learning experience for a still young labor movement. Workers' current organising and mobilizing experience in these strikes may well be invaluable for their future struggles.

Saturday 3 October 2015

Footnotes

[1] http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spi...

The loss of the rightwing majority and the rise of the Left Bloc

5 October 2015, by Luis Branco

The loss of the rightwing majority in Parliament was the main decision of the 5.37 million voters in the Portuguese legislative elections. The two parties of the ruling coalition lost around 727 thousand votes since the last election in 2011, a few weeks after signing the troika memorandum, and obtained 38.55% of the votes (including the results in Madeira and Açores, where they stood in separate lists).

The harsh austerity imposed on the Portuguese people has sent almost half a million voters into emigration

did not have the opportunity chance to vote this Sunday. The Socialist Party was not able to gather the remaining protest vote and increased its score (32.38%) only by 200 thousand votes. The fact that the former prime-minister José Sócrates has been in custody since last year on suspicions of corruption (he was sent home under police surveillance at the beginning of the electoral campaign and there are still no charges against him) and last year's takeover of the leadership by António Costa, forcing party elections just after the short victory of the SP in the European elections, during which it was led by an opponent of Sócrates, helped to divide and demobilize its electorate.

In the anti-austerity forces, the Communist Party did not manage to capitalize on the revolt expressed in the streets during the "troika years" and kept its electorate of the last elections, increasing its score by only around 3400 votes and one MP (8.27% of the votes, 17MPs).

The only political force that succeeded in attracting the discontented voters was clearly the Left Bloc. With 549 thousand votes (261 thousand more than in 2011) and 10.22% of the votes and 19 MPs, the Left Bloc managed to win seats from the rightwing coalition in several districts and is now a national force, electing MPs in ten different districts. One of them is an historic mark in 40 years of democracy: for the first time, the Madeira archipelago has elected a radical left MP. Three of the newly elected MPs are independents, including one long time disabled rights activist, this will now force the Parliament to build access for his wheelchair to the benches and the speaker's tribune.

This result was built mostly on the performance of the new Left Bloc leadership after the November 2014 national convention of the party. The spokeswoman Catarina Martins had a widely-applauded victory in every face-to-face tv debate with the prime-minister, the vice-prime-minister and the SP leader and gathered the biggest popular support on street campaign in all Left Bloc's history. The electoral result confirmed this warm reception on the streets in every corner of the country for the last two months. And the two parties that were formed by dissidents of the Bloc with widespread media coverage (Livre and Agir) were now doomed to political irrelevance, obtaining 0.72% and 0.38% respectively. The only small party to enter the Parliament is PAN, which has an animal rights agenda and it is ready to support any government.

With a left-wing majority in parliament, the moment has come for the SP to assume its responsibility and try to negotiate a governmental alternative that could be supported (or not objected) by the Left Bloc and the Communist Party. But the first reaction of Antonio Costa on the electoral night, saying the SP will not put obstacles to the parliamentary approval of the rightwing governmental programme (LB and PCP already said they will reject it) opens the space for a big coalition of the 3 parties that signed the troika agreement and support the European Budget Treaty.

In practical terms, any additional austerity measure that the PSD/CDS government will try to impose (namely the 600 million euro cut in pensions that already promised to Brussels) must have the agreement of the SP to pass in parliament. The hypothesis of the fall of this government and new elections soon is not viable according to Portuguese law: there is a presidential election in January and the current president cannot dissolve the parliament in the last six months of his mandate, and neither can parliament be dissolved in the first six months of its mandate.

Looking for Lost Momentum

5 October 2015, by Josep María Antentas

A few months before the general elections, and on the eve of the Catalan election set for September 27, Podemos faces strategic challenges as well as all the forces of political and social change. After a year of irrational exuberance over some polling results, it seems that bipartisanship has held up better than expected, drawing energy from unexpected sources.

For weeks now, all electoral polls show a downward trend for Podemos. The vicious circle of electoral logic grinds on relentlessly. If the idea that the conservative Popular Party (PP) may win gains traction, it could catalyze a demobilizing chain reaction; and if a vote for the Socialist Party (PSOE) is seen as a defense against the PP, this may portend lethal consequences for Podemos.

The party, led by Pablo Iglesias, has arrived at a delicate moment. It stands at the threshold of achieving results which could decisively condition Spanish politics. If not, its election results may condemn it to being (merely) a significant opposition force, one lacking destabilizing potential.

Because of the electoral system's structure, a small change in the percentage of votes received makes a huge difference in terms of the number of parliamentary seats allocated. This difference could spell the collapse of the two-party system, or allow it to stagger on despite everything. Once again, we are so close and yet so far.

We are at a turning point, facing two choices: resign ourselves to the fact that the general elections will end up being anticlimactic, a disappointing outcome to the process which began after the European elections of May 25, 2014.

Or, we can make a decisive turn and find a way to shake things up. Two

debates intermingle in this anxiety-filled moment. How can we build "popular unity?" And how can we confront domestic and international financial power in light of what has happened in Greece?

The Choices

What does this much-touted "popular unity" mean? A catch-all idea, it runs the risk of becoming fetishized. In fact, both terms of the expression lend themselves to every imaginable mystification and every conceivable doctrinaire prescription. In the current discussions in the Spanish left and popular movements "popular unity" is conjugated in three different ways.

The first is as a rhetorical expression to denote self-referential party building, but one which includes opening its electoral lists to independents, as with the Popular Unity Candidates (Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, CUP) in Catalonia (CUP is an anti-capitalist and independentist party that in 2012 got 3 percent of votes and for the first time three MPs in the Catalan Parliament, after important local electoral successes during the 2000s).

The second is as an alliance of political apparatuses from above, as United Left (Izquierda Unida, IU – a coalition dominated by the Spanish Communist Party that since 1978 has been the main force at the left of social democracy, with results ranging from 4 percent to 10 percent) proclaims, and as the Catalonia Yes We Can (Catalunya Sí que es Pot) campaign was constructed (Catalunya sí que es Pot is the recent coalition created in Catalonia between Podemos and the green party of eurocommunist origins, Iniciativa per Cataaunya Verds, and Esquerra Unida I Alternativa, de Catalan branch of IU). Both of these options have been embraced by Podemos, which leans toward one or the other depending on the context and place.

The third involves the desire to create a participatory and pluralistic popular movement, in which the tension between the logic of the apparatus and that of unity from below favor the latter, and in which the political machines are put at the service of creating an open movement.

In some cases, the preparation of lists for primary elections has mobilized participation from below, despite remaining within a competitive logic. This was the case with Madrid Now (Ahora Madrid), the activist slate that won the mayorship of Madrid on May 24 with Manuela Carmena, a progressive judge, at the top of the ticket.

In others, the process of drawing up the lists is not at the center of the project, which instead revolves around the strong movement-based orientations and practices of those initiating the campaign, determined as they are to build a genuine mass people's movement.

This was the case with Barcelona en Comú, the slate headed by Ada Colau — the former spokesperson of the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas-PAH) — which has governed Barcelona since last May. There is no finished model of how to proceed or generalizable way to replicate these examples. But there are experiences, out of this diversity, that point in this direction.

This is the spirit of Barcelona en Comú, of the Mareas Atlánticas (a set of local slates which achieved important successes in several cities in Galicia), of the proposals of Procés Constituent (a Catalan sociopolitical movement that has not directly stood in elections but supported some local lists, led by the Benedictine nun Teresa Forcades, who is recognized for her activism against the pharmaceutical multinationals, and Arcadi Oliveres, an economist associated with social movements in Catalonia).

But the debate over "popular unity" goes beyond discussions over how to build it, taking up questions of strategic objectives, definitions of "winning," and the process of social change itself. Neither superficial electoralism, nor aimless resistance is sufficient; what is key is the dialectical link between self-organization and mobilization on the one hand, and electoral and institutional work on the other.

So, "popular unity" to what ends? It must be to break up the current order of things by opening self-sustaining, national constituent processes (we talk of "constituent processes" in plural, as a process of popular change in a state comprising different nations, as Spain cannot be conceived from a centralist point of view) and the implementation of anti-austerity plans.

"Constituent processes" and "anti-austerity plans" are elastic concepts that can be interpreted in various ways; yet, in their totality, they point to a rupture built on the willingness to construct political majorities that address real needs and not abstract proclamations.

However, in order to prepare for future challenges, it is increasingly necessary to deepen our strategic clarifications and articulate more precisely the tasks and programmatic objectives of "popular" governments. These goals must not be understood as mere suggestions, which may or may not be complied with, as Carmena, the mayor of Madrid, unfortunately stated recently.

The Greek Example

The chances of a break with austerity in the Spanish state are today reflected in a Greek mirror, although the images there are not as neat or pristine as we would have liked. The Greek situation is undoing any illusion of easy and easygoing social transformation, deconstructing the simplistic and linear schema so popular in the early days of Podemos: vote for us = quick electoral victory = political change. The path, it turns out, is rather rockier. And that is what lays ahead.

There are two possible readings of Tsipras's surrender to the troika. The first is that you cannot change things. The second is that half measures don't work. One leads to paralysis and discouragement, the other forces one to draw unavoidable strategic conclusions.

The Syriza crisis marked the first major internal differentiation within the anti-austerity movement since the outbreak of the crisis. The Tsipras fiasco lays out the inconsistencies of neo-reformist approaches which hope

to square an impossible circle. You cannot beat the hooligans of austerity without causing a stir. There are times when it is necessary to choose.

But the fact is, the troika and the financial powers that be have already chosen for you. It is impossible to bring the austerity bulldozer to a halt without pulling out all the stops. Naively seeking to cut a deal with the very forces who seek to impose their will on you will not work!

Tsipras's logic, and that of his supporters in the ranks of the European left, appeals to the lesser evil and to so-called responsibility. No rupture is possible. That can only lead to the abyss. No structural change is possible. So we must only consider the endgame.

Actually, this is the most irresponsible of all strategies. Nothing is more reckless than to raise expectations and then not meet them out of cowardice and timidity. Nothing is more foolish than to hope for concessions from the troika, especially when those powers know they do not face the threat of a real break.

In order to win reforms, it is necessary to put the question of a rupture into play. This has always been the case throughout history, and it is even more true in the times we live in today. Not having a Plan B effectively means not having a Plan A.

The situation does not allow for half-measures or superficial solutions. The radical solution, in the sense of going to the root of the problem, now seems inescapable. The challenge of "trying to be as radical as reality itself," to use Lenin's well-known expression, now presents itself with unusual force.

However, we are in a complex and contradictory context. Today's repoliticization comes after decades of depoliticization. The resumption of self-organization cannot easily overcome the historical breakdown of traditional political and workplace forms. Great social unrest is paired with a low level of political consciousness, while social radicalization is still confined to a capitalist-consumerist horizon.

Expectations for real change are undermined by decades of setbacks and the absence of concrete alternatives, and the effervescence of social struggle runs parallel to low levels of stable organization and a general weakness of the Left.

All this favors the crystallization of alternative political projects proposing inconsistent and desultory change, and of strategic inconsistencies that appear once when the moment of truth arrives. Hence the current impasse.

Therefore, the Podemos leadership's support of Tsipras must be understood as a strategic mistake, revealing a short-term tactical focus which offers no solutions. Tsipras's victory on September 20 may provide the fictitious impression that Podemos is "with" the winners. But make no mistake. His victory this fall has little to do with Syriza's January 25 victory. Instead, Tsipras will have no option other than to implement the policy of the troika, backed by the Greek financial and economic elites.

In fact, supporting Syriza now risks associating Podemos with a failed and defeated project, one which only deepens the Iberian strategic impasses. Any single measure adopted by the new Tsipras government will be a true torpedo to Podemos's credibility and to the credibility of the idea of political and social change itself. Not only in Greece, but also in the Spanish state.

It is difficult to sell hope in Spain by endorsing those who have buried it in Greece. And it is impossible to criticize the cuts carried out by Spanish President Mariano Rajoy or Catalan President Artur Mas at the same time as justifying those made by Tsipras.

Given this scenario, it is not a question of adapting to the capitulationists who permanently adopt the slogan "No, we can't" (no se puede) as their strategic horizon, nor can we be content with sterile, auto-proclamatory calls for resistance. Now is the time to fight for the majority, to offer an alternative path to the no future of grungy austerity.

This means articulating a radical project and a spirit of convergence, a willingness to lead a rupture, and a willingness to get our hands dirty in order to deal with difficult contradictions.

Only sectarians confuse radicalism with isolation, cynicism, and permanent programmatic differentiation. Only those who are afraid to seriously tackle the adventure of changing society will confuse the will of the majority, unity, and political confluence , with the danger of political adaptation to the narrow margins of the possible.

Towards Rupture

Reality's reflection has turned out to be more complex, tortuous, and stubbornly material than expected. It is less schematic, linear, media-oriented, and discursive than the leadership of Podemos theorized. The political struggle is more convoluted than the populist hypothesis they suggested, both in its strict Laclau-ian variant and in its more general meanings.

Building a popular majority is not as linear as Podemos believed it to be and the political struggle is broader than its communicative dimension. The electoral strategy alone may stall if it is not merged into the construction of a real and rooted popular movement, and party politics without movement politics may quickly run out of gas.

Podemos leaders witnessed the limits of their formula last May 24, when simultaneous municipal and regional elections took place. In that round, Podemos stood independently in regional elections and joined with grassroots and popular coalitions at the municipal level. In the regional elections, Podemos's results came below those of PSOE and they scored lower than those obtained by the grassroots and popular coalition municipal candidates, which won in several major cities.

Faced with this situation, the party leaders' orientation has been to try to expand Podemos's electoral lists to include other groups and independent candidates, proposing that they run for election under the Podemos brand,

supplemented by some sort of additional name or designation.

The specific formula proposed by Iglesias is "Podemos" followed by a hyphen and then a name to be determined (i.e. Podemos-People's list . . .) that show that the Podemos list includes people and groups going beyond Podemos but under its' hegemony.

Alongside this proposal, there is an effort to expand Podemos's electoral reach, while avoiding entering into electoral coalitions at the national level with other leftist forces such as the United Left and grassroots and popular candidates like those adopted in local elections.

In parallel, Podemos has attempted to build electoral coalitions in those nations or regions of the Spanish state where there are progressive forces working at the nationalist or regional level, and where Podemos generally has weaker roots.

Thus, Podemos tried to establish agreements with Initiativa-Verds in Catalunya (an environmental- political force with roots in the eEuro-communist tradition which won thirteen deputies and 10 percent of votes in 2012 in Catalonia, but which experienced a severe decline in its electoral expectations because of the emergence of Podemos), Compromís in the Valencia Nation (an environmental and pro-Catalan regional force which won 18 percent of the vote and nineteen deputies in the May 24 elections, and which currently governs the autonomous region of Valencia in coalition with the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE), Més in the Balearic Islands (an environmental and pro-Catalan regional force which won 13.8 percent of the vote and six seats on May 24, and which currently governs the autonomous community of the Balearic Islands in coalition with PSOE) and Mareas of Galicia (a group of grassroots municipal candidates, primarily organized by left currents of the Galician independence movement and who received uneven support from Podemos in the elections of May 24).

This approach is, however, too fragmented to solve the tougher dilemma, and it is focused strictly on the logic of the apparatus. In fact, this timid solution cannot resolve the deeper problem: the impossibility of Podemos winning the general election.

A bigger jolt is needed. A change of pace to stop the downward slide. Now is not the time to fly on autopilot or cruise along behind a sluggish diesel engine. What we need is a souped-up race car. We need quick reflexes. All organizations age, and in today's world of fast food, of the instantaneous and the spurious, they grow old even faster.

The processes of birth, consolidation, and restructuring do not pass in orderly fashion from one phase to the next, but are in a state of constant turmoil. This means we must know how to navigate turbulent waters and crosscurrents, even more so during a moment of crisis when, as we remember from Hamlet, "time is out of joint."

Thinking that things are going along fine "a la Kautsky" (even if along an accelerated and hurried version of his perspective) is the dullest of strategic mistakes. It is worse than adventurism. Hence, it is time to wake up, to act like a real "gearbox," to use Daniel Bensaid's expression, and change rhythm. To draw new players onto the field and change the pattern and pace of the game.

And this means invoking a sense of "popular unity" based on building convergences from below, using the May 24 municipal electoral successes as our starting point. It means rejecting agreements between party apparatuses as well as self-proclaimed certainties.

Thinking strategically today requires an open mind in order to understand such varied and apparently contradictory situations as the hope represented by Jeremy Corbyn in Britain (so unexpectedly reborn in the heart of the ancient Labour Party), or the necessity of breaking from Syriza and the need to support Popular Unity in Greece, or the struggle for participatory confluences and popular unities from below within the Spanish state.
Through all these various processes, which take shape in disparate (and even crazy!) forms, we must, however, be ready to provoke a rupture with this unbearable economic and political order. And to accomplish this, strategic innovation is just as important as firmness of principle and incorruptibility of will.

*Translated for **Jacobin** by Todd Chretien in partnership with **Socialist Worker**.*

The Agony of Mexican Labor Today

5 October 2015, by Dan La Botz

The dissident teachers also joined parents and students in militant protests in Guerrero, in Mexico City, and throughout the country over the massacre and kidnapping that took place on September 26, 2014, when police and other assailants killed six, wounded twenty-five, and forcibly disappeared 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. Beginning in late September, protestors—striking out at symbols of government and politics—burned the Iguala, Guerrero, city hall, as well as the office of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the state's capital of Chilpancingo. Teachers also joined a large protest on November 8, where protestors set fire to the door of the National Palace in Mexico City. Protests reached a peak on the November 20 anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, when tens—some say hundreds—of thousands marched and rallied in the zócalo, the national plaza. By early December, students, labor unionists,

and community groups had taken over the Sonora state legislature, while teachers blocked the Highway of the Sun that links Mexico City to the resort city of Acapulco, with the Christmas holiday season just about to begin.

The central issue has been testing and evaluation of teachers. Led by the National Coordinating Committee (known as "la CNTE"), a dissident left-wing caucus of the Mexican Teachers Union ("el SNTE"), the teachers have prevented teacher exams from taking place in their stronghold states, closing test sites, burning testing materials, and cutting the hair of teachers who attempted to take the test. When the national elections for congress, state governors, and mayors took place this past June, teachers called for a boycott, arguing that all the parties were corrupt. In Oaxaca, the union blockaded polling places and burned ballots in the street, coming into conflict with the police and army and sometimes with grassroots community groups that wanted to vote. The Oaxaca SNTE Local 22 is planning on striking on August 24, at the beginning of the school year, unless they can work out a rollback of the evaluations with the federal government.

Yet, despite the show of power, Mexican labor unions and workers are, overall, in the worst situation in decades. President Peña Nieto and the PRI, along with their allies in the equally conservative National Action Party (PAN), have succeeded in passing a series of so-called reforms—education, labor, energy, and communications—that will have devastating effects on an already weakened labor movement. And so far there seems to be no labor or broader social movement capable of resisting, stopping, and overturning these reforms. All of this is taking place in a country where the war between the government and the drug cartels has taken 110,000 lives and seen 25,000 people forcibly disappeared. The army and the police have engaged in beatings, robbery, torture, rape, and extrajudicial murder, acts committed with impunity. While this has been fundamentally a war between the federal government and the drug cartels, it has sometimes spilled over onto the social movements, providing a context for incidental repression. The result is greater insecurity throughout the society, including the labor movement. With the possibility of violence from the cartels on the one hand and the army and the police on the other, many choose to keep their heads down.

The Mexican workers' situation, then, is incredibly difficult, the result of a long history of state oppression, employer exploitation, and—as a Mexican woman labor organizer recently said to me—what can only be described as "social decomposition." How did Mexico's working class get into this situation? And how might it ever get out?

Mexico's System of State Labor Control

The Mexican government has controlled the unions since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, but it was in the 1930s that the system of one-party state control over the unions was fully developed. President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) fulfilled the Revolution's goals by nationalizing the U.S.- and British-owned oil industry, distributing millions of acres of land to Indians and peasants, and recognizing the labor unions. During the Great Depression, Mexican workers, often under leftist leadership, organized new industrial unions and federations. Cárdenas brought the unions of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and the National Confederation of Peasants (CNC) into the ruling party, creating the state-party that later became the PRI. It was the dream of Cárdenas that the state, rising above labor and capital, could create a socialist society in his agrarian nation while also developing industry through the substitution of domestically manufactured goods for imports.

After Cárdenas, however, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, more conservative presidents—while improving relations with private and foreign capital—drove the Communists and other leftists out of the unions, using the police and gangsters to install new union leaders, known as los charros. (The nickname comes from a railroad union leader who dressed up in fancy charro, or cowboy, outfits.) More than simply labor bureaucrats, these men were a caste of corrupt, violent political loyalists—often simultaneously union leaders and PRI representatives, senators, or governors. The PRI's "official unions" existed to prevent independent unionism, to stop strikes, and to keep wages down. It was this low-wage system, combined with the high tariffs of the import-substitution model, that made possible the "Mexican miracle" of the post-war period.

The Example of the Teachers Union

The Mexican Teachers Union's history illustrates what happened to unions under the system of state control. In the early 1940s, a young man named Carlos Jongitud Barrios attended a rural teachers college in Ozuluama, Veracruz. After graduation, he joined the teachers union and then the PRI. By the 1950s, he had become part of the union's national executive committee; by the 1970s, he was the union's top leader. His caucus, called the Revolutionary Vanguard, worked closely with the PRI and the Secretary of Public Education, controlling the union through a political machine that imposed leaders on the state and local unions. Loyal officials and members could be rewarded with union, political, and government posts, including no-show jobs, jobs for family and friends, and so on. When rank-and-file teachers protested, they might be fired, beaten, or even killed, as some were.

During the 1970s, leftist teachers in the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, many of them indigenous bilingual teachers, began to protest against Jongitud Barrios' union dictatorship, creating the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE). By the 1980s, through many strikes and protests, the teachers in those states succeeded in winning control of their state

organizations and formed an alliance with teachers' union locals in Mexico City. When, in the late 1980s, the teacher rank-and-file seemed poised to take control of the national union, Mexico President Carlos Salinas (PRI) intervened and assured the ascension of Elba Esther Gordillo, a supposed reformer, to leadership of the union. Gordillo, who had been part of the Jongitud Barrios administration, re-created the same sort of dictatorial party machine, running the union through fear and favors, the latter including, one year, the gift of a Hummer to every single union delegate to the national convention. Against Gordillo, unions in Oaxaca and Chiapas, joined by some in Guerrero and Michoacán, have continued the fight for union democracy and teacher power to the present day.

Calderón Crushes Dissent

The Mexican state continues to use both the law and brute force to deal with union problems. When, in February 2006, there was a disaster at the Pasta de Conchos mine in the state of Coahuila, killing 65 miners, Miners Union leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia called it "industrial homicide," blaming the companies and the government. In retaliation, the administration of President Felipe Calderón (PAN) falsely accused Gómez Urrutia of embezzling $50 million from his union. To avoid being imprisoned, Gómez Urrutia fled, with the help of the United Steel Workers of Canada and the United States, to Vancouver. At the same time, with the miners on the defensive, Grupo México, one of the country's largest mining corporations, waged a war against the Miners Union and eventually dislodged it from the Cananea mine. While the courts have thrown out all charges against Gómez Urrutia, he has continued to lead the union from Canada, fearing to return to Mexico.

A few years later, in October of 2009, Calderón crushed the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME), a union that led a coalition against neoliberalism and privatization, seizing the Mexican Light and Power Company, liquidating the company, and firing 40,000 union workers. A remnant of 16,000 SME workers has continued to fight for their jobs. In February 2013, President Peña Nieto's administration also arrested and imprisoned Elba Esther Gordillo, head of the Mexican Teachers Union on well-founded charges of embezzlement. Jailed because she had made the mistake of challenging PRI leaders, Gordillo remains in prison. The union is now headed by Juan Díaz de la Torre, long an associate of Gordillo and head of the union's political machine and its New Alliance Party, which is allied with the PRI.

Repression and Rebellion in the Unions

Workers in the industrial unions, the Mexican Petroleum Workers, the Railroad Workers, and electrical workers (in one of the two national unions, SUTERM), experienced the same sort of state-party imposed authoritarian unions as the teachers did. There were rebellions, of course—fights for union democracy and greater union power by the railroad workers in 1959, by the electrical workers in 1974-75, by telephone workers in the 1970s and '80s—but the police, army, and the "official union" thugs put them down. During the workers' insurgency of the late 1960s and early 1970s, some industrial unions and public university unions did succeed in winning independence. Some of the leaders of the 1970s struggles went on to create the independent National Union of Workers (UNT) in the 1990s.

At the peak of the imposition of neoliberalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, President Carlos Salinas used the army and the police to attack the offices of the Petroleum Workers Union (STPRM) and arrested and indicted union head Joaquín "La Quina" Hernández Galicia and other union officials on charges of corruption. Salinas also sent the army to preemptively occupy the Cananea mine—the birthplace of the Mexican union movement—to prevent strikes and protests over its privatization. During this period, Salinas privatized 1,000 state-owned companies, the largest being the Mexican Telephone Company (TELMEX), bought by Carlos Slim and a consortium of Mexican and American companies. Slim is now the richest man in Mexico and one of the richest in the world.

Most recently, farmworkers in San Quintín, Baja California, organized a strike for higher wages in March against both their employers and the state- controlled union that represents them. The mostly indigenous fieldworkers shut down the Transpeninsular Highway that carries produce from the fields to warehouses and stores in the United States, effectively paralyzing the agricultural assembly line. President Peña Nieto's government promised investigations, but authorities meanwhile sent the army and police to break the strike. The coalition of indigenous groups that had organized the strike was defeated and the companies continued to pay the same low wages. How is it possible that the state can run roughshod over the working class in this way?

The Power of Mexico's Capitalists

Mexico's capitalist class is wealthy, well organized, and politically powerful. Mexican businesspeople have for many decades been organized in the Employers Confederation of the Mexican Republic (COPARMEX) which boasts that its "more than 36,000 member companies across the country are responsible for 30% of GDP and 4.8 million formal jobs." COPARMEX and other business organizations, such as the National Chamber of the Manufacturing Industry (CANACINTRA), have worked for years, principally through the PAN but also with the PRI, to develop policies, write legislation, and to lobby for their political agenda.

The Mexican capitalists brought neoliberal government to power in two stages: First, the victory within the PRI of the so-called "Technocrats" over the "Dinosaurs" (that is, the

neoliberals over the economic nationalists) in the 1980s and 1990s. Second, the electoral victory of the PAN. The two PAN administrations—under Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012)—demonstrated that the party was incapable of governing Mexico. Fox's administration failed to deliver on its promises to the business class, while Calderón initiated the disastrous war on drugs with the tens of thousands of dead and forcibly disappeared as well as widespread police and army human-rights violations.

Enrique Peña Nieto, the governor of the State of Mexico (the country's most populous state, which wraps around the Mexico City Federal District and includes much of the Mexico City metropolitan area) won back the presidency for the PRI in 2012. He has been the champion of Mexican capitalists and foreign investors, pushing forward the neoliberal agenda that the PRI had initiated back in the 1980s. Immediately after his election, "EPN" (as he is widely known) succeeded in drawing the PAN and also the ostensibly left-of-center PRD into his Pact for Mexico. The pact bound these parties to the neoliberal program advocated by COPARMEX and by foreign investors. Over the next three years, Mexico passed the so-called reforms—education, labor, energy, and telecommunications—representing a clear victory for big business.

Nevertheless, Mexico's capitalist class faces a serious problem: economic stagnation. After 2008, virtually the entire world economy went into crisis, followed in many cases by prolonged stagnation. Because of its high degree of integration into the North American regional economy, Mexico's economic growth depends upon the United States, its largest trading partner. The world economy and the U.S. economy have not been strong enough to pull Mexico out of its economic doldroms. Mexico's GDP is not growing at even 1% per year. For the working class, this has meant a continual decline in its standard of living. This situation might drive workers to fight back, but workers' independent organization is as of yet virtually non-existent.

The State of the Mexican Working Class

The Mexican government's policy for many decades has been to maintain low wages. One way to do that is to establish a low minimum wage, one at or even below subsistence level. Minimum wages have been kept at subsistence except during the period of large-scale labor and social movements in Mexico that lasted from the mid-1960s to the 1970s. Since labor became more quiescent after 1976, the minimum wage has lost 73% of its purchasing power. Today, the minimum wage is actually lower in real (inflation-adusted) terms than it was in 1930, 1940, or 1960.

A second way to keep wages low is through the "wage ceiling," an officially unacknowledged but well-known government policy that works to keep wages in both public and private sectors from rising. The Secretary of Labor and the Labor Boards typically use their authority to keep wage increases slightly below the rate of inflation. The result, of course, is that over time wages tend to fall below the cost of living.

Since 2013, wages in Mexico have fallen lower than Chinese wages, about one-fifth lower. Some six million Mexicans earn the minimum wage of 70.10 pesos, or $4.50, per day, while another 12 million earn 140 pesos, or $9.00, per day. Manufacturing workers, 16% of the labor force, average about $2.70 an hour. Jornaleros, agricultural day laborers, generally earn between 65 and 110 pesos, that is, between $4.25 and $7.15 per day. Even when parents and their children work in the fields, as they frequently do, they earn barely subsistence wages.

Low wages, of course, mean poverty. Various organizations report that 40-50% of all Mexicans live in poverty. The Mexican Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) actually suggests that only 18.3% of all Mexicans are not poor; 81.7%, or more than four-fifths, are poor. Nor are things improving. The World Bank recently reported, "Poverty has not diminished in the last twenty years." It is the lack of good jobs and decent wages, of course, which has led 10% of all Mexicans to migrate to the United States.

Why are Mexican workers paid so little? The principal reason is that they do not control their own unions or have their own political party, so they have no vehicle with which to struggle to improve their situation. Even the "official" unions affiliated with the PRI have declined in size. One study suggests that unions declined from representing just over 30% to just below 20% of workers between 1984 and 2000, while today unionization is about 10%. One expert calculates that only 8.6% of the economically active population is unionized.

The tripartite system of the Labor Boards, made up of government, business, and labor representatives, represents the institutional collusion of the state, capital, and a corrupt and violent labor bureaucracy, all three of which oppose workers' self-organization. Studies suggest that 80-90% of all contracts in Mexico are so-called "protection contracts" that offer only the basic minimum wages and conditions, contracts that are frequently negotiated by "ghost unions" unknown to the workers. Very few Mexican workers have genuine labor unions committed to improving the situation of their members.

So it is not surprising that Mexico has few official strikes. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), strikes have fallen from 577 in 1995, to 84 in 2010, and only 62 in 2011. Of course there are many unofficial work stoppages and strikes, especially in the more unionized public sector, and particularly among the militant teachers. In the private sector, however, workers who engage in unofficial strikes are often simply fired and replaced.

Recent Election

Despite widespread disillusionment with the political system, as well as continuing economic doldrums,

President Enrique Peña Nieto and the PRI were the big winners in the Mexican elections of June 2015, followed by the conservative PAN. Both parties are committed to deepening of the country's neoliberal, "free market" economic reforms.

The PRI won 29% of the vote; the PAN, 20%. Several competing leftist parties had smaller tallies: the PRD received 10.8%; the Movement of National Regeneration (MORENA), 8.3%; the Citizens Movement, 5.9%. The Labor Party (PT), received only 2.87%, too little to keep its registration and ballot status. The teachers' boycott of the election had little impact. The PRI and its allied parties, such as the Green Ecological Party and the New Alliance Party, will have large pluralities in both houses of the Mexican Congress.

Why has the Mexican left done so poorly, when in many past elections it has received a third of the vote? Three things are at work. First, the PRD lost members and voters to its former leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his new MORENA party. Second, some became cynical about the PRD with its history of opportunism and corruption, but did not follow López Obrador into MORENA. Third, splits in a movement always lead to some disillusionment and apathy. Does the current teachers' union movement, with its tens of thousands of militant demonstrators, represent the death agony of the old labor movement or the birth of a new one? The low wages and high levels of poverty, the weakness of the unions and of the left political parties, the government's use of repression to crush labor movements and jail union leaders all suggest that the labor movement is at best on the defensive and at worst in serious decline. The widespread skepticism and cynicism about the political system tends to undermine confidence and inhibit political change.

In Mexico, as in many other nations around the world today, the main parts of the political system—the government, the electoral authorities, and the parties—do not enjoy the confidence of the people. According to a recent poll, some 72% of the Mexican public has no confidence in the government; 82% has no confidence in the political parties. This is, no doubt, one reason that only about half of all registered voters actually vote. The Mexican political system, controlled by the elites of la clase política and representing the interests of the oligarchy and foreign investors, uses its power to block change at every level.

Attempts to break out of the system over the last twenty-five years have failed in one way or another. The PRD, controlled by cliques, became corrupt. The Zapatistas, the group that led the Chiapas Rebellion in 1994, never found a way to play a role in national politics and behaved in a sectarian way that isolated them from other movements. Only small left groups argue for the building of a militant labor movement fighting to improve the wages and living standards of workers and to create a mass working-class party. The activist remnant of the Electrical Workers Union (SME), la CNTE, and left groups such as the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) attempted to do this with the creation of the Organization of the Working People (OPT)—but then dropped that project to support the teachers' boycott of the election.

Mexican leftism has tended for decades to vacillate between a Cardenist reformism that seeks to penetrate the corrupt Mexican state and a radicalism that dreams—with images of Villa, Zapata, and Che—of creating a new Cuban revolution through violent rebellion. In Egypt, Spain, the United States, Greece, Brazil, and other countries, movements have emerged in recent years that might suggest a break from past models. Mexico, in contrast, has had no major social explosion—no Tahrir Square, no indignados, and no Occupy Wall Street. Since 1989, there have been no new major political parties—such as have appeared in Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, Greece, and Spain—to shake up the corrupt party system. Mexican working people will have to find a way to make a break with the government-controlled unions and with the existing parties—but given the high level of repression and the pervasive cynicism, it will surely not be easy.

Source: ***Dollars&Sense*** *September/October 2015.*

Glossary of Mexican Politics

Political Parties:

â€¢ Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) – Institutional Revolutionary Party

â€¢ Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) – National Action Party

â€¢ Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) – Party of the Democratic Revolution

â€¢ Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (MORENA) – Movement of National Regeneration

â€¢ Partido del Trabajo (PT) – Labor Party

â€¢ Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT) – Revolutionary Workers Party

â€¢ Organización Política del Pueblo y los Trabajadores (OPT) – Political Organization of the People and the Workers

Unions and Labor Federations:

â€¢ Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) – Confederation of Mexican Workers

â€¢ Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC) – National Confederation of Peasants

â€¢ Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (la CNTE) – National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers

â€¢ Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (el SNTE) – National Union of Education Workers

â€¢ Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana (SNTRM) – Union of Petroleum

Workers of the Mexican Republic

â€¢ Sindicato único de Trabajadores Electricistas de la República Mexicana (SUTERM) – Sole Union of Electrical Workers of the Mexican Republic Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) – National Union of Workers

Employers' Organizations

â€¢ Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Transformación (CANACINTRA) – National Chamber of the Manufacturing Industry

â€¢ Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (COPARMEX) – Employers' Confederation of the Mexican Republic
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"People are the actors of their own emancipation"

2 October 2015, by Joseph Daher

How do you identify yourself?

Politically speaking, I'm an internationalist Marxist believing that people are the actors of their own emancipation. My connection to Syria is my father, my family, friends and my numerous travels to the region. The bond with Syria has become more than "blood." It's a bond that is political, sentimental, familial, with the society, etc., everything together. I've lived in Lebanon, worked in Palestine, traveled to Egypt and Tunis. I've been in the region meeting activists and working with them. I also participated in solidarity campaigns with the revolutions of the Middle East and North Africa throughout Europe. I'm active as well in Switzerland and Europe working with people from different backgrounds, especially in Geneva where I live now. Being brought up mostly in Geneva, we're used to having people with mixed backgrounds similar to other big cities like New York. It's helped me to think on an international basis. I used to go back to Syria very often. My father lived over there before he passed away one year ago. He came to live with me when the military conflict began in Aleppo in the summer of 2012. I always had a very strong bond with the Middle East, its people and its societies. I just finished my PHD in London on Hezbollah. I'm a teaching assistant at University of Lausanne, while being an activist locally and internationally. I'm married. I have a little daughter that I completely love and a second child on the way.

How have you experienced oppression personally?

I'm mixed background, but I don't look like the image of an Arab as presented in the media, which is seen as someone with a big beard and dark skin. I pass quite easily in Switzerland, especially since my name is Joseph and not Mohammad. I didn't have to suffer any kind of oppression related to my mixed background. Regarding European society, I didn't have to suffer from oppression compared to other populations, especially people from Muslim backgrounds and Black/ African backgrounds. I think a lot of things are oppressive in the Swiss society. Generally speaking, the capitalistic society in Switzerland is a very conservative and racist state, very oppressive in terms of social rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, etc. It's maybe one of the worst countries in Europe along with Great Britain regarding labor rights. It's even worse in terms of laws than the European Union. Switzerland is not known as an imperialist state, but it is.

Regarding Syria, when I used to go back, it was an oppressive society because it was firstly a dictatorship, repressing all individuals and groups that criticize or oppose it, or just thought differently. Numerous oppressions also exist regarding women's rights, LGBTQ rights, racism, etc. The Syrian regime also gave increasing weight through the last decades to the conservative layers of society against any attempt to promote a secular society as it claimed to do. Religion played a very important role in all sectors of society and was strengthened by the regime as a tool of control. I don't have any problem with believers, to be clear, or religion or as a belief. Everyone should be allowed to freely practice their religion. I have a problem with religion as a basis of power in society—oppressive laws, oppression against women, minorities (whether ethnic, religious, sexual oriented, etc.), artists and the strengthening of the patriarchal authority. The security services went to my father's place in Aleppo as soon as they knew I was active in foreign countries at the beginning of the revolution process in Syria. Syria as a dictatorship was well known to be very violent. In Syria, you also have the big ethnic discrimination against the Kurdish population—politically, socially, economically, etc. The most impoverished region in Syria was mainly inhabited by Kurds, and politically and culturally they were discriminated against.

Kurds have a lot of problems elsewhere in countries they live such as Iraq, Iran and Turkey.

The only time Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey agreed on something, it was oppressing the Kurds. Any people who are willing to have their own state and put an end to the borders inherited from the Sykes-Picot Agreement after the First World War is seen as a threat to the different states and the imperialist status quo. This is why we have to be supportive of the self determination of people, whether they be the Kurds, the Palestinians, or any other group being oppressed.

How do you feel about the oppression that you've witnessed and experienced?

Wherever I've lived, the answer to the various oppressions has been to be part of a radical and anti-capitalist organization in order to organize resistance, to be part of resistance, whether it be against patriarchy, against sexism, against a sectarian and bourgeois system like in Lebanon. In Switzerland, it's been struggling for social issues, struggling against racist policies, Islamaphobia, being in solidarity with people in struggle throughout the world—Palestine, revolutions in MENA, Kurds, etc. To be in organizations is important in order to build the resistance with people for their own interests and of the society as a whole. Basically, I've been politically organized. Wherever I've lived, I've done this—England, Lebanon, Syria, Switzerland, etc.

Can you talk about the history of what started the Syrian Revolution?

The Syrian uprising has its roots mainly in the absence of democracy and social justice. It is a total dictatorship. It's a killing machine dictatorship. We've witnessed this since 2011, but we witnessed this as well in the 1970's and 80's with the Massacre of Hama at the time of Hafez Al-Assad—the father of Bashar Al-Assad. So the roots are the absence of democracy, total totalitarianism, the absence of social justice. You had increasing social inequalities in Syria and impoverishment of the society, while high corruption was the rule through neoliberal and privatization policies. At the eve of the beginning of the uprising in 2011, you had 30% of the people in Syria living under the poverty line and 30% just above. Neoliberal policies were implemented, especially with the arrival of Bashar Al-Assad in 2000. More than 70% of the economy was in the hands of the private sector with a particular type of crony-capitalism that benefited the family and the people around Assad in a mafia style. The richest man of Syria was Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar Al-Assad. There were increasing social inequalities. Labor rights were attacked. Rural areas were very hard hit by these neoliberal policies. You had huge slums that were built around the big cities of Damascus and Aleppo lacking services, lacking everything. These were the roots of the revolution. Obviously, the fire started in Egypt and Tunis, and other uprisings in the region followed, including Syria. Neoliberal policies actually reinforced the authoritarian nature of the Assad regime, while the Assad family ruled more and more through the years as if the state was serving its own interests.

Can you talk about how the uprising shifted to war?

I'll start to explain how the uprisings became militarized. It's important to remind everyone that the uprisings in Syria for the first nearly six months were completely peaceful. People were shouting in the streets, "Salmiyah! Salmiyah! Salmiyah!" which means peaceful. People were opening their shirts and showing that they were not armed, as the regimes propaganda was promoting that they were armed infiltrators and terrorists. Others were coming with roses to demonstrations and giving them to the police and security services. They had slogans in various areas of Syria saying, "We're not Salafists. We're not Muslim Brotherhood. We're just Syrians who want freedom." This was because the regime was accusing all of the demonstrators of being Salafists, Muslim Brotherhood or Islamic extremists. Actually, most of the slogans were, "We want democracy." "We want the fall of the regime." "The Syrian people won't kneel." "The Syrian people are one! Christians and Muslims are one! Sunni and Alawis are one!" At the very beginning, Syrians wanted reforms, but after the massive and very rapid repressions from the first days, people started to demand the fall of the regime. As I said, for the first six months, the revolution was totally peaceful, and until today—although on a less massive scale because of the war—you still have peaceful demonstrations and activities wherever it's possible in various areas.

Hilary Clinton in the first few months said that Bashar Al-Assad was a reformist and was not backing the revolution, while Saudi Arabia—which was the first foreign investor in Syria before the revolution—did not move in the first few months of the revolution as well. Just as Qatar or Turkey didn't have any kind of radical position of support of the Syrian Revolution. All these countries were quite close to the Syrian regime before the revolution, especially Qatar and Turkey. After six months, you had defectors of the Syrian Regime Army and people taking arms. This was the establishment of the Free Syrian Army, which was not organized, neither was it supported by any country. It was mostly people from different regions taking up arms, trying to defend the demonstrations, to let the demonstration be able to go out to the roads and neighborhoods, to oppose the army that would not let the demonstrations go out. It was first of all based on a defensive perspective with a continuation of the massive repression.

You had also various countries that promoted Islamic fundamentalist groups from different tendencies—salafists to jihadists. They funded these groups. After a while, these groups became more well funded, more well equipped. At the same time, a lot of Islamic fundamentalist activists were liberated in the first three months of the revolution by the Assad regime. That let the fundamentalists develop, while democratic, progressive activists were killed on a daily basis. They were tortured and killed because the regime—just as in the 70's and 80's—wanted to reach a dichotomy, which was the regime or Islamic fundamentalism. Today, most of the heads of the Islamic fundamentalist brigades fighting in Syria were in Syrian prison together, and they were liberated, while democratic activists were oppressed, imprisoned, killed or pushed to asylum.

Can you talk about the rise of ISIS in the region?

ISIS was formally established in Syria in autumn 2013 when Al Qaeda and ISIS broke their ties. The roots of ISIS (the Islamic State) are various. First of all, its roots began with the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. Even before this, we have to look at the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and its consequences on the Iraqi society because today part of the commanders of ISIS are ex-Ba'athists from

Saddam's army. You had the role of the Saddam Hussein dictatorship, the US invasion of Iraq, the destruction of the Iraqi society in 2003 and definitely the establishment of a sectarian state after that. The role of the Iraqi government's sectarian policies particularly under the Prime Minister's rule of Nouri Al-Maliki between 2006 and 2014—especially towards the Sunni population—played a big role along with the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Lebanese Shi'a Islamic movement, Hezbollah, also trained Iraqi sectarian Shi'a militias that committed massacres against the Sunni population.

At the same time, you had private networks of Saudi Arabia supporting various Islamic Sunni fundamentalist forces in Iraq. Most probably in the beginning, they funded Al Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS) in Iraq. Even though ISIS was supported by private networks of the Gulf monarchies, in 2011, it became very fast independent and reversed. It was the same trajectory as Al Qaeda thirty years ago in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia supported it in the beginning, but after it became an independent actor with its own financial independence, it was against Saudi Arabia. Today, ISIS doesn't have political or financial support from monarchies of the Gulf. Maybe small networks in the Gulf, but not directly from the Gulf monarchies. ISIS funds themselves by selling oil, taxing people, selling archaeological pieces and various other stuff. ISIS is a mafia style company today in terms of business and self-funding.

What is their role in Syria, and are they connected at all with the Islamists that were freed by the Syrian government?

Some of them, yes. Mostly Daesh (ISIS). Daesh was an Iraqi fundamental group and then it used Syria as a field to gain political and military experiences in the beginning of 2011. Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria) was not active in Syria before the beginning of January 2012. Jabhat al Nusra was established in Syria as a branch of ISIS in the beginning. They accumulated experience. They accumulated in the beginning some support, but very small in Syria because their fundamentalist ideas were opposite of those of the revolution. But they had money. They had experience from the war in Iraq and their fight against US occupation and the Iraqi army and Shi'a sectarian militias, so people joined them, but after also left them. For the first two years, they had some kind of popular support because the people were seeking anything to support against the Assad regime. There was nevertheless no massive support because they were not present in civilian revolutionary activities in the beginning, mostly concentrating on military conflict. There are differences between different Islamic fundamentalist forces. You have Daesh (ISIS), which is the most extremist. You have Al Qaeda, which is also extremist. Ahrar Sham is a Salafist organization. I call them all Islamic fundamentalists because they do have in common the goal to establish an Islamic State, even though I agree and acknowledge the differences among them. The various levels of extremism don't make them moderates as people put it.

To give you an example, Ayman Al-Zawahiri—who is the head of Al Qaeda today—said in September of this year, "Despite the problems and the mistakes of the Islamic State (ISIS), we would rather collaborate with them against the crusaders, the Shi'as and the seculars here in Iraq and Syria. The difference between The Islamic State (ISIS) and Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria) is that with ISIS, every kind of territory that is conquered by the group must be declared Islamic State. The Jabhat al Nusra say, "No, we should wait until the regime in Syria is overthrown to declare an Islamic State. In both cases, it's fundamentalism. It's in opposition to the demands of the Syrian Revolutionary process. In addition to this, Jabhat al Nusra have been opposed in a lot of areas in Syria by revolutionaries because of the authoritarian fundamentalist practices. At one point, Jabhat al Nusra did declare in some regions an Islamic State because there's an opposition between them and Daesh (ISIS). Regarding Ahrar Sham (Salafist organization in Syria), just a few months ago, they wrote a statement for the death of the Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which is a fundamentalist and reactionary organization. So even though I acknowledge the differences, they are still counter revolutionary forces when it comes to Syria or the region.

Do the people fighting for democracy in Syria feel like their voices have been muffled because these other groups have been coming in and speaking on their behalf?

Actually, these groups have attacked the revolutionaries since the beginning. They killed Free Syria Army commanders. They attacked civilian revolutionary activists. Definitely, they feel that these forces are not supporting the demands of the revolutionaries. This does not mean that on the military battlefield sometimes you don't have collaboration against the Assad regime and against the Islamic State (ISIS). So there's contradictions as well because on the military field, it's practical needs sometimes, so you need to collaborate, but most of the activists consider these groups as counter revolutionaries and opposing the demands of the revolution. This is why you had a lot of demonstrations and protests against Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria) and against Ahrar Sham (Salafist organization in Syria) as well because of the authoritarian practices. I document a lot on my blog various demonstrations against these kinds of groups.

Before the revolution, was Syria considered an Islamic State?

No, it was not considered an Islamic State. It's a dictatorship. In the same time, Syria has been wrongly considered a secular state. It's not a secular state. In the constitution, the president had to be Muslim. In the new constitution that was agreed democratically—this is completely bullshit—the main source of law is Islamic law—Sharia. When it comes to inheritance, family laws, it's Sharia according to Sunni interpretation for all the Muslims, even for Islamic minorities . For Christians, it's particular Christian laws. It's not a secular state. The Assad regime has supported various conservative layers

of the society and encouraged the spread of conservative and reactionary organizations allied to it in order to control society, whether it be Sunni or Christian. Especially for neoliberal policies, you had the development of Islamic and Christian charity organizations, while state services were being weakened considerably in terms of quantity and quality. Just as today, the regime has used Shi'a sectarian militias as actors of repression against revolutionaries.

How do the Syrian people feel about the role America has played?

I will speak on my behalf. I don't want to speak on the behalf of the Syrian population. There are various opinions on the subject. The US since the beginning has had a very clear position. It wants a kind of a Yemini solution. In other words, it would prefer that Bashar Al-Assad leave power but that it maintains the same regime in place. This was one of the lessons of the Iraqi defeat following the military invasion in 2003. This has been the position mostly of the US since the beginning. They want limited change. This has been the position of the US in all of the revolutionary processes—limiting any kind of radical change, maintaining regimes as it is, maybe cutting off the head of the regime, but bringing the Muslim Brotherhood. This is what you had for a moment in time in Egypt—the military with the Muslim Brotherhood, before the coup of Sissi in July 2013 following massive protests. In Tunis, this is what you have currently. This is what they've done in Yemen in 2011/2012, and this is what they wanted to do in Syria. They wanted to bring the Syrian National Council—the coalition that is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood—to deal with the Assad regime. Today even US officials have said that maybe they see Bashar Al-Assad playing a role in a transition, but it's clear that the US doesn't want any kind of radical change in the region, including Syria.

Why do you think they don't want radical change?

The US wants the imperial status quo to remain the same in the region. This means not threatening Israel. This means not threatening monarchies of the gulf. This is also the deal that has been made with Iran. In the opinion of the US, Iran can play a role to stabilize the region, and we can see today there's kind of a deal between the US and Iran when it comes to the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq. Iran helps Iraqi sectarian militias to fight the Islamic State (ISIS) on the ground, while the US takes care of the air. The USA and Iran also spoke previously when it came to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. All these regional and international players want an end to the revolutionary processes. Obviously, there can be contradictions between these different regional actors, but at the end of the day, the US wants to maintain an imperialist status quo in the Middle East, maintaining its interest in the region. This is why we should oppose all imperialist (USA, Russia and others), and sub-imperialist powers (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Turkey) because they all oppose the interests of the popular classes, and not choose one or the other because we consider it the lesser evil.

The US, relatively speaking, has witnessed a weakening of its imperialist powers since 2003 with the defeat in Iraq, and after with the economic crisis in 2008 and labor strikes as well. The revolutionary popular uprisings that began in 2010 changed the imperialist status quo. The US has not at all, or very slightly, supported Syrian revolutionaries, nor have they provided them with needed weapons, such as the anti-aircraft missiles demanded by the revolutionaries in Syria. All of this propaganda that they've provided them weapons is not true. Less than one hundred Syrians have been trained by the USA. The military assistance of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah is a whole other level in terms of boots on the ground, providing weapons, economic, political and military assistance, etc. Only Hezbollah has between four thousand and five thousand soldiers in Syria. Even in the documents of the US officials saying that they would provide arms to the Syrian revolutionaries, it was not in order to fight the Assad regime. It was in order to fight ISIS because the Islamic State is an actor that cannot be stabilized or cannot be dealt with in the stabilization of the region. This is why there is a will of the different states of the region to put an end to ISIS, whereas the Assad regime can still be an actor that is rational to speak to for the US. The last Russian initiatives towards the international imperialist actors goes in this direction.

We shouldn't forget that Assad's regime collaborated with the second gulf war in 1991. They collaborated in the bombardments of Iraq, especially with the US to so-called liberate Kuwait. Syria was part of the coalition. Syria participated in 2001 in the war on terror working with US security officials. In 1976, Syria intervened in Lebanon to crush the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese National Movements, a Coalition of nationalist and leftist forces. This was done with the approval of the US and even at the time with Israel as well. Israel said they don't want to see the fall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime. They want it to be weakened, but they don't want to see the fall because since 1974, not a single bullet has been shot from the Syrian occupied Golan Heights. Syria had prevented any kind of resistance from Syria against Israel to allow the liberation of the Golan Heights. No one has an interest—especially not the US—to see the overthrow of the Assad regime, a weakening definitely, but not the overthrow of the regime. The US has played its general role to maintain its interests—the imperial status quo.

Can you talk about Israel, the role it plays in the Middle East and the occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights?

The Golan Heights have been occupied since 1967, while in addition, colonial settlements have been established. The population of settlers is around, I think, 170,000 today in the Golan Heights. The Israeli society is a settler colonial state, which is different than being just a colonial state. For example, Algeria was a settler colonial state. You had one million people that were French that were brought to Algeria. They were benefiting from the oppression of the indigenous people just like Australia and the US were settler colonial states. The difference in the settler colonial state is that they don't

necessarily have as a final objective to exploit the indigenous people like the colonial state, but a settler colonial state also is to put an end to the indigenous people. This is what happened in the US and Australia, and in many perspectives, although not totally, in Palestine with the forced displacement of the population in 1948 of 800,000 Palestinians.

Israel has been playing the role of a tool of US imperialism since 1956 in the region. This means it intervenes in various countries in the region to attack progressive actors. Israel is a colonial, apartheid, racist state that has oppressed Palestinians for more than sixty years. Any kind of solution to the Middle East must find a solution in the liberation of the Palestinians, definitely. The way to liberate the Palestinian people is to support the uprisings in the region because the road to the liberation of Palestine is the road to the liberation of Damascus, Saudi Arabia, etc. All of these regimes have no interests of the Palestinians and had an interest in crushing the Palestinian people because they were revolutionary energy. This you see in Black September in Jordan (where Palestinian organizations and leftist organizations tried to overthrow the regime), in Lebanon in 1976, in the embargo on the Gaza strip (assisted by the Egyptian regime for years) or in Syria and elsewhere as well. So Israel is part of this imperialist status quo in serving US and Western interests and is directly or indirectly allied to the old regimes of the region to maintain the status quo. This is why I say the liberation of the Palestinian people goes through the overthrow of all the regimes in the region, including Iran and Turkey.

Regarding a solution to the Palestinian issue, I'm in favor of a democratic secular socialist bi-national state for Palestine where everyone would be considered a citizen regardless of their religion, ethnicity, whatever. Of course, there should be a social distribution in favor of the Palestinian people that have been deprived of their lands, houses, etc. The right of return must be granted to all Palestinian refugees. There also needs to be a complete dismantlement of the current Israeli apartheid, colonial and racist state. In the new state, Israeli Jews should be recognized as a people, and they should have the right to stay in Palestine. Currently, Israel is still a counter revolutionary actor, and as we can see, it's really willing to support any kind of dictatorship and has been opposed to these uprisings. Avigdor Lieberman, who was the Israeli foreign minister at the time, said something really true at the beginning of the revolutionary processes in the region. He said the biggest threat to Israel was these uprisings in Egypt and Tunis and the various countries. They are a far bigger threat than the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is 100% true because what we saw was new demonstrations of the Palestinian people going to the borders towards Palestine in the various Arab countries following the uprising. You had this is Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan etc. The first demonstration against the Israeli embassy in Egypt followed the overthrow of Mubarak. It is true that these uprisings are the way to liberate Palestine.

Getting back to talking about the Golan Heights, what is the motive for Israel to continue to hold onto the Golan Heights, especially since there has been no conflict between Syria and Israel? Why do you think they are continuing to hold onto that piece of land?

It doesn't play anymore of an important role. Militarily speaking, it's an advantage for them. Today, this is less important. You have a lot of water that is being used by the Israelis for their own benefits. More importantly, I think it's a way to make a deal of peace against land with Syria in the future. Even though we're seeing less and less of a possibility to see the Golan going back to Syria. There's a new law that any kind of deal to give back the Golan to Syria must go through a popular referendum. It's going to be very difficult to see the Golan returned to Syria, especially with the situation in Syria. Actually, the Syrian regime said quite often, "If you give us back the Golan, we're ready to make peace on the Palestinian issue. You deal with it."

How do you feel about how the world has responded to the refugee crisis?

I think the problem with refugees has been an issue for years, but especially for the last four years. More than 95% of the refugees from Syria are living in horrible conditions in neighboring countries—Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, etc. It's very difficult coming to the European Union. The European Union has made policies to build itself like a fortress where only the vast majority of people that can come are people with money, or because they serve a particular economic purpose. The European Union is responsible for the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea and on the roads of Europe. It's a clear responsibility of the European Union whereby they also use a company called Frontex. It's a private company that is used by the European Union to prevent the arrival of refugees. They use security measures that are horrible—attacking the refugees, etc.

When the small amount of refugees can reach Europe, they are faced with police violence and repression. They are faced with establishments where they have to wait a year, two years to work, to have a dignified life. So the European Union is anti-democratic and anti-social when it comes to refugees and also on other issues when it comes to local population. With the propaganda, Europe is terrible. When it comes to the refugees coming from the Middle East, they are characterized by the extreme right wing conservatives as terrorists, or they are accused of threatening the "Christian inheritage and cultural roots" of Europe. So from all sides, it's been catastrophic. The rule of the European Union has been criminal regarding the issues of refugees, especially those coming from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. It has built itself as a fortress using security to prevent the arrival of refugees in addition to racist propaganda. We shouldn't forget that the imperialist policies of the European Union is also the reason why people are leaving their own countries, whether by supporting dictatorship, by intervening militarily, by neoliberal economic agreements, etc.

These people have suffered a lot, suffered from dictatorship, suffered from fundamentalism, suffered from socioeconomic problems and from various forms of oppression. In coming to the European Union, they are resisting and organizing themselves against police violence, against the security measures of the states. We have to take example of these people in our own struggle, to collaborate and participate with them in their struggle against the security measures in order to be able to freely circulate all around Europe and freely establish themselves in Europe. This is very important. On the issue of refugees, what is worrying—especially with Syria—is that most of the corporate media is saying that the main problem regarding refugees is that they left because of the Islamist State (ISIS), which is not true. Some of them left because of that. The Islamic State is a reactionary barbarian organization. That's true, but the biggest creator of refugees from Syria is the Bashar Al-Assad regime. By 2013, you had two million refugees in neighboring countries and 4.5 million refugees within Syria. This was the Bashar Al-Assad regime. Who has the planes in Syria? It's the Bashar Al-Assad regime. They are the ones bombing. The way to prevent the creation of new refugees is not by allying with the dictatorship of the Bashar Al-Assad regime, or any kind of dictatorship.

It's important to note the story of Aylan, whose picture was published all over the world when he drowned in the Mediterranean. The story of this boy and his family is an illustration of the tragedy of millions of families in Syria. First of all, his father is a Kurdish Syrian who was living in Damascus. He was imprisoned first by the Bashar Al-Assad regime, tortured by the regime. He had to sell his shop. He was a hairdresser. He sold his shop to bribe the security officers that were keeping him. He left Damascus when he was able to with his family to Aleppo. He had to leave Aleppo because of the daily bombardments of the Bashar Al-Assad regime. He went back to the city he was originally from—Kobani. Then, he had to leave Kobani because of the attacks of the Islamic State (ISIS) on the city. When he reached Turkey, he didn't receive any help from the Turkish government, so he decided he wanted to leave Turkey. What happened? He asked with his brother for a visa to establish himself in Canada where his sister lives. Canada refused the visa asylum for the father of Aylan. Therefore, he decided with his family to go through illegal ways to reach Europe. This is how Aylan, his brother and mother died. The tragedy is this.

Do you think we are able to overcome these cycles of oppression?

I hope so. This is why I'm organizing. I'm trying to build popular resistance wherever I live because otherwise I would just sit at home. I hope that we can, and everyday there are small victories. Even though they're small, I hope we have many more victories because I hope to be able to live in a better society, to be able to help with the emancipation of the popular classes wherever I am or wherever I live on an international basis. This is why I continue to be part of resistance, actions or programs wherever I live, helping others wherever they are. There's no other solution as Rosa Luxemburg said, "socialism or Barbarism." We need to continue the resistance. I would like to cite the French Marxist, Daniel Bensaid: "Les lendemains, chantants ou non, ne sont pas prévisibles avec exactitude, mais les tendances du présent déchiré, lacéré de contradictions et blessé de sourdes menaces, ne sont pas pour autant inintelligibles et indéchiffrables. Renoncer aux prédictions hasardeuses n'annule pas l'impératif de changer l'ordre existant. Là où persiste le conflit, demeure aussi le choix, la décision, le risque raisonné entre plusieurs issues, et l'obligation inéluctable d'agir." It's hard to translate, but he's talking about the obligation to act. We have the unavoidable obligation to act despite the non-guarantee of victory.

Once we are able to overcome that, what would you like the world to look like?

I would like to live in a socialist world, but even though we reach a socialist world, there will be struggle because it's not because you put an end of the capitalist system that all the forms of oppression just disappear. This was unfortunately one of the biggest mistakes of the various sections of the Stalinist left in the world by advocating that various forms of oppression will disappear automatically with the end of the capitalist system. It was a way to prevent any kinds of discussions and struggles around oppressions regarding racism, feminism, homophobia, etc. The end of the capitalist system will be a fantastic victory for all the people of the world and give new opportunities to build a socialist society, which will able us to tackle other forms of oppression. So with the establishment of a socialist society there would be new struggles. The challenge is that we have everything to build from scratch. We need to put an end to these various forms of oppression. We shouldn't forget that oppression of women, oppression of Black people or other oppression are mixed together with social oppression as well. We shouldn't differentiate them. We should understand them as mixing with each other. People will radicalize themselves through different means. Some radicalize themselves because they feel the oppression because of the color of their skin. Others feel it because of their gender. You have to reach all of these people. This is why as revolutionaries we shouldn't undermine them by saying, "Oh, we'll just deal with them later." No, it's very important to deal with them directly. So even in a socialist world, we'll have to deal with these kinds of things—with sexism, with homophobia, with racism, etc. These things don't just disappear in a click. Our duty is to build a whole other society, not only on an economic understanding, but on all levels.

Do you want to talk any further about what you want the world to look like?

Peace, peace, but not in a hippie way. I want to put an end to social injustice, various forms of oppression (racism, gender, religious, etc.), ecological catastrophes, etc. I think we can imagine it, but without forgetting that everything has to be built from scratch because never in the history of human life have we experienced—on a large-scale basis—a socialist world. Even

though we can take experiences from the past, everything has to be done from scratch. And this does not mean that no mistakes will be done. It just means that we have to live different experiences and see what works. In the perspective in the emancipation of the people, what I would like is that people won't die at their workplaces, that the maximum you work is what you need to work according to the interest of the society, according to your own interest, according to how you are, etc. And you spend a lot of time also doing whatever you want—culture, learning, reading, art, sports, etc. It's a whole completely different way of how to deal with the organization of life. For example, fathers taking care of their children as much as their wife or two persons of the same sex, etc.

Imagine we're able to get to that place. That world is going to be so incredibly different than the one we're in now, and the way that we react to that world is going to be different. A lot of weight will be lifted from our shoulders. We will be more free to do art and other things. In a world like that, where we aren't constantly battling each other and battling ourselves in a lot of ways, what then do you think we are capable of?

Great things! More seriously, I think we'll always have to be careful if we reach this level to not fall back in old mistakes. We always have to be careful to challenge oppressions. This is something that even though we end capitalist system, I think we still have to deal with this for a long period, and we always have to remind ourselves to re-challenge new forms of power. We'll be capable of hopefully saving our planet. We're not doing it very well. Quite the opposite, now we're destroying it. This is something to do. Cure sickness, hopefully put science at the interest of the people and not for profits, equalize so that rural areas are not dominated by urban areas. So much things to do. I hope that we'll see new victories of people wherever in the world but especially for the Middle East. I'm happy we're seeing new popular uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq lately. This is very positive, with democratic, social justice and equality demands, secular state demands, supporting the pockets in Syria opposing all the different forms of counter revolution, whether old regimes or Islamic fundamentalist forces. So hopefully we can build a new society on democracy, social justice and equality.