



## IV491 - December 2015

# Bigotry vs. Black Lives, Muslims, Immigrants

31 December 2015, by **Malik Miah**

Today's rightwing bigotry and quasi-populist appeals are based on an extension of the same ideology, targeting minorities who are seen by the white working and middle class as the source of their socio-economic decline and insecurities for their lives and futures.

Donald Trump and other Republican presidential candidates use hate and fear of these "others." Could this strategy win the 2016 presidency? Possibly yes, because the Republican Party tactic is to limit the voting rights of minorities, given that if 65% of whites who vote go their way it doesn't matter if 90% of Blacks, Latinos and Asians vote for the Democratic nominee.

So far this approach "with district gerrymandering and thinly disguised voter suppression laws" has helped Republicans win control of more than half the states.

### Rooted in History

When the U.S. Declaration of Independence was written by slaveholder Thomas Jefferson, Blacks were excluded. After independence and in the new Constitution, Black "Americans" did not exist. Black slaves were considered part of the new country only as property, while those lucky enough to be "free" suffered legal discrimination and

possible enslavement.

From British rule to U.S. independence Blacks fought to be recognized first as humans, second as citizens and lastly as equals (which is still to come). African Americans operate under the reality that "the struggles continue," since they never end so long as institutional racism and structural inequality persists.

For every step forward in history (end of slavery, Radical Reconstruction, end to Jim Crow segregation) there has always been a vicious backlash. Since the 1970s, for example, school desegregation has been reversed in practice for the most part; affirmative action programs mostly ended; and wealth inequalities between Blacks and whites have widened.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement stands on these 400 years of struggle in response to white power. It faces the same rightwing backlash, and even pushback from liberals and some leftists. The BLM leaders are often asked a question others are not. "Don't other lives matter too?"

But if whites faced the same police violence and society's assumption of guilt, there would not be a need for a BLM movement. Whites are rarely subject to random attacks and murders by cops (or by Blacks) or face discrimination for jobs or decent

housing. What is called "white privilege" underpins white supremacy. Even when whites deny the reality, few if any would change places with Black people.

Many liberals and some leftists don't accept the term "white privilege" because it makes it more difficult to convince white workers to stand up for Black equality. But privilege is not simply subjective; it is rooted in a reality established by written laws, white vigilante violence and oppression.

Any objective study of the history of the country proves this. The only way to educate whites and everyone else is to speak the truth and demand radical institutional changes by the power of the state. Both the Civil War in the 1860s, and the use of federal troops in the South in the 1960s to enforce court-ordered desegregation, illustrates this point.

### Criminalizing Muslims

A similar rightwing ideologically-driven attack is directed at Muslims (the most feared "other" today). Muslims are supposed to prove that they are loyal to "American values." Trump says what many believe: keep all Muslims out of the United States.

The shooting death of 14 people in San Bernardino, California illustrates the problem. At first, before the shooters were known, a discussion about guns and mental illness occurred in the media since many thought the shooters might be white. But once it became clear that the two shooters were husband and wife with Muslim names, the focus immediately turned.

The New York Post displayed the hypocrisy with brutal clarity, changing its front page headline from "Murder Mission" to "Muslim Killers" within hours of learning the identity of the shooters.

All Muslims (Shia, Sunni, nonbeliever, secularist or atheist) are challenged by the mainstream media to speak out. When a white Christian male murdered three people, targeting a Colorado Planned Parenthood clinic, the New York Post did not put "Christian killer" on its front page.

Muslims had already been targeted around the issue of admitting a small number of Syrian refugees. Now conservative and anti-Muslim demagogues are whipping up a "war on radical Islam" to justify targeting U.S-born Muslim citizens too. Any person with an Islamic name now faces possible physical attack.

The fact that millions of Muslims are culturally Muslim but secular and even atheist (like me) is irrelevant. It's like being Black: Cops or racists don't ask your ideology, wealth or education. They assume "reasonable suspicion" of possible criminality.

Even liberal Democrats like talk show host Bill Maher, who likes to ridicule religion in general, has been on a rant that only Islam teaches hatred and violence. The fact that a majority Christian country (Germany) carried out the Nazi genocide in the 20th century means little.

Fear-mongering and demonization has occurred many times in U.S. history, and not just by rightwing demagogues. The New Deal president Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to integrate the military and take on Jim Crow segregation.

Blacks had to organize a March on Washington Movement in 1941 for a share of jobs in the war industries. It was FDR who issued the Executive Order for the swift internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry (prison camps) with no due process or justification except that Japanese Americans looked like the people of Japan.

## **Immigrants Also "The Other"**

The mainstream right also continues its racist and horrific scapegoating of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. In Trump's view all 11 million undocumented immigrants and their legal American children must be deported.

The demand for a border wall, and especially internment of immigrants before deportation, has won popular support from a significant minority. It is a reminder of the anti-Jewish propaganda in early 1930s Germany, the most "enlightened" country in Europe at the time. Yet the demagogue Hitler and his Brown Shirts turned the tide, even against the ruling elites.

Can it happen here? White supremacists have served as the "fascist"-like thugs against Black people, especially in the Old South where laws and force were used by states to oppress African Americans.

Today's new laws suppressing the right to vote in southern states like North Carolina shows how history can repeat itself. White power is getting stronger in the state as African Americans are politically isolated.

The immigration issue, combined with the anti-BLM backlash and scapegoating of Muslims, represent the potential breeding ground for a fascist movement to be spawned.

Trump is not a classical fascist "he doesn't have an organization like the Brown Shirts to go after his opponents and enemies. But those attending many of his rallies have shown how demonizing the "other" can lead to violence, as happened to a BLM

supporter at one of his events.

Trump is distinctive in that he is not religious. Declaring that he's a man of the people, this billionaire's appeal uses economic anxieties, much more than social issues like abortion or marriage.

He plays to working-class whites' victimhood. He even denounces his own class including Big Business and Wall Street (not that he means it).

## **The Fightback**

While the right appears strong "it controls the Republican Party and Congress and a majority of state houses" the broad population is divided.

The Black Lives Matter movement of the past two years, along with the immigrant Dreamers movement, has set the example of what to do. It starts with self-mobilization and without reliance on the two major parties or its politicians.

Its extension to college campuses, where Black students are leading the way against racism and discriminatory practices, is a big advance. The victory at the University of Missouri, including the unprecedented stance of the football team, inspired students around the country.

The protests exposed the lie about "political correctness." The term itself is derogatory, since the issue is racism and discrimination "are you for rooting it out or pretending it is okay because it happened in the past? (A similar debate occurred about removing the Confederate flag and monuments.)

At Princeton in New Jersey, Black students have pushed an issue that has hung over the school for decades "honoring a former president who was an arch-segregationist. Woodrow Wilson served as Princeton's president from 1902-1910, New Jersey governor from 1911-13 and president of the United States from 1914-21.

Wilson used his cabinet to re-segregate federal government departments and forced civil servant applicants to include photographs,

which were understood by African Americans at the time as a move to weed them out.

The Muslim community for the most part has not used social media or street mobilizations as the BLM, Black students and Dreamers have done. It is out of genuine fear. At some point, however, this must change to push back the anti-Muslim bigots.

Islam, like most religions, almost by definition, is hierarchical and about holy texts. It is not the texts, but the political ideology of religion that teaches its followers of their

superiority and domination over other religions, that cause the problem.

ISIS wins followers precisely because it combines doctrines of religious superiority with a political ideology claiming to oppose Western and neo-colonial dominion.

Youths radicalized by Islamist appeals in the United States, as in Canada, France and other European countries, see the violence of Western militaries in the wars of occupation in the Arab countries and north Africa.

The ruling elites' "solution" is a bigger police state where Muslims are targeted and lose their rights as France is doing. This will worsen the problems and reinforce the reactionary Islamists' narrative.

The challenge is to build a social movement to fight Islamophobia and bigotry, and at the same time to oppose the reactionary ISIS ideology and terrorist methods without aligning with the same Western imperial countries that are carrying out the "war on Islam."

[Against the Current](#)

# Recipes for curbing the conference

## 31 December 2015

### Ideological barrier

Pavlo Kutuev, the Head of the Department of Sociology of KPI who hosted the event, addressed a welcoming speech on behalf of professors of the institute.

Referring to the title of the conference, he said that the current global crisis should not be perceived as a "natural phenomenon" but rather as a sequence of implementing a specific ideology, namely that of neoliberal policy (privatization, market deregulation, reducing state intervention in the economy and cuts of social benefits). He also drew attention to the countries whose governments allegedly do not agree with this system but at the same time tend to be authoritarian. Usually, they justify their authoritarianism with some social or economic efficiency which seems to be at least controversial. It is important how government is accountable to the masses, the speaker highlighted. The task of the academic community is to find viable alternatives.

Left-wing anti-Putin politician Ilya Ponomarev, the only Russian MP who voted against the annexation of

Crimea, now a political emigrant, started his speech by congratulations on the occasion of the 1917 Revolution anniversary. Then, he underlined the general problems faced by Ukraine. He shared his experience in communicating with the international donors that complain about the lack of reforms in Ukraine. "I tell these donors: you are not helping but just giving the money - it's not the same". The funds received by the Ukrainian government are mainly financial loans that need to be returned, rather than the needed investments in real production.

Criticizing Arseniy Yatsenyuk's current cabinet for its underestimating of industry, Ilya Ponomarev stressed that Ukraine has the capacity to produce goods that would find their buyers from across the globe. He believes that it's quite erroneous when Ukrainian government replicates Thatcherite policies of closing the mines considered unprofitable: the number of unemployment would increase while the amount of funds saved would be negligible. In total, the policies of de-industrialization and increasing tariffs which are implemented in Ukraine leads not to modernization but rather to something

quite opposite. The guest also explained the relevance of writing off the foreign debt (not just debt restructuring), because the value of the default risk is included in the interest rate of the loan and is already being paid.

Referring back to the controversial issue of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, Ilya Ponomarev noted that the taglines of Kremlin propaganda are changing. A year ago, Putin's advocates used to justify the Russian intervention in Ukraine by the need "to save the Russian-speaking brothers from the bloody junta"; now it comes to "preventing from the return of 1990s".

In both countries, unholy alliances of nationalists and neoliberals retain power, and in Ukraine, the latter seem to dominate. He urged Ukrainians to make away with popular delusions about the forthcoming collapse of their northern neighbor, the Russian Federation; no matter what the price of oil is, Russia is able to maintain stability due to the low cost of its extraction.

Ukraine is in a difficult situation: the industrial capabilities of the Soviet era are lost, and Western investors are

reluctant to invest. But Ilya Ponomaryov still retains hope for the changes in economic policy and the probable progress of Ukraine in order to become an example of a democratic and socially oriented alternative for the other post-Soviet countries.

The recent adoption, on first reading, of the Labor Code of Ukraine curtailing workers rights is a manifestation of global trends, said French author Catherine Samary. She is a lecturer at Dauphine University (Paris), a veteran left militant and an important figure of the reunified Fourth International and member of the radical left in France. At present, the process of destruction of the welfare state is observable both in poor countries of the periphery and in capitalist core countries such as France and Germany (at the beginning of 21st century they had also reduced the salaries and the protection of the employees).

The Pinochet/Reagan/Thatcher-style offensive of the market fundamentalist forces exerted in the last quarter of the twentieth century under the mottos of "trade not aid" and "workfare not welfare" ultimately led to the current crisis of capitalism that has been simmering since 2008. The capitalist "anti-crisis" policy has class priorities; particularly, budget funds have been allocated to bailout indebted private institutions: the state had been saving "the banks, not the people".

According to the researcher, in 2009 the ruling classes used the crisis as an excuse to start a "new international anti-social war" that continues today. The speaker expressed her doubts in the idea that the aggravation of inter-imperialist contradictions in terms of the crisis means a "new Cold War". In her opinion, rather it could be called "Yalta-2": the great powers bargain on the division of spheres of influence, and events in Ukraine and Syria serve as corroboration. Neoliberalism must be stopped to give the Ukrainian people an opportunity to defend their social and ecological rights, as well as the sovereign right to rule their own destiny rather than obey the dictate of the imperialist forces.

Specific causes of the local crisis lie in

the war, debts, and dynamics of the Ukrainian capitalism, noted Marko Bojcun, a British researcher of Ukrainian origin from the London Metropolitan University. Transformation to a market economy after gaining independence led Ukraine to depletion of productive forces. Wage arrears reached record levels. The situation requires a significant strengthening of the working class, which is now effectively deprived of political voice and representation. Therefore, development of "large-scale party of labor" is necessary. Mutual support of the oppressed social groups and horizontal solidarity between them are the priorities on the way of bringing together the working classes. Marko Bojcun concluded by stressing the need to combine social movements around the struggles of miners against the closure of coal mines.

## Specter of the Greek scenario

We are constantly frightened with the "Greek scenario", even though Greece represents an extremely important experience of victories and defeats in the struggle against austerity and the "vicious circle of debt", stressed Denis Pilash, opening the session on the issue of external debt. Several highly competent experts, including a guest from Greece and the founder of the global movement for debt relief, provided their analysis of the debt issue, Syriza-led government accomplishments, and the possible option of Ukrainian default.

The analysts believe that developing countries are not able to pay their debts off to the IMF and other financial institutions. Under these conditions, the peripheral countries are doomed to lag behind in development, paying debts on the cost of their sovereignty and social standards.

As Judith Dellheim from the School of Solidarity Economy of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation noted, external debt becomes a tool for pushing privatization, lower wages, and commercialization of the public sector. These processes can be

confronted by fighting for the preservation and expansion of social and environmental standards, as well as for radical democratization of public control over the financial sector. Speaking about the domestic economic policy, she stressed the need to allocate fund to secure common public interests, in particular through the implementation of socio-economic projects in the infrastructure sector at a local level. Like in the case of workers' self-managed factory in Greece, the introduction of such initiatives, corresponding with the interests of communities and the environment, will be the key to the sustainable development.

Moisis Litsis, a journalist from Greece renowned for his trade union and anti-fascist activities who's also a member of the local anti-debt committee, cited facts that confirm the extent of the crisis hitting the people of Greece: over the last years, GDP fell by 25%, youth unemployment has risen to 60%, and external debt reached 175% of GDP. The so-called "international financial aid" is actually addressed not for Greece, but for the banks, while the terms of the bailout package memorandums led to further deterioration of workers' welfare and elimination of the system of labor contracts. The collapse of the public sector on the local level often made solidarity networks and civic initiatives such as "social clinics" the only hope for thousands of people.

For the first time in contemporary history, Greeks voted for a party to the left of the traditional social democracy, Syriza, to form a new government and combat the Troika. However, they were not fully aware of the complexity of confrontation with the dictate of creditors, bankers, and European bureaucrats. At the critical moment, the new government did not have an alternative - a "plan B" - in case the negotiations drop to a standstill and the creditors neglect the expression of the will of the Greek people (62% of them voted against the anti-social conditions of the new loan agreement in the national referendum).

In addition, the cabinet of Alexis Tsipras failed to conduct a decisive attack on the Greek oligarchy and had

the illusion that they could gain real support from Russia and China or individual governments within the EU. So, it is extremely important now to create an international movement against the debts, appealed the speaker.

Probably the best choice to tell more about such a movement was Éric Toussaint, a Belgian political scientist and reunified Fourth International militant, author of numerous books, and the speaker for the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt. He coordinated the audits of public debt in several countries; the most recent of these cases was the Greek Truth Committee on Public Debt. Continuing the narrative of his Kyiv lecture delivered a day before, he described how the debt bondage leads different countries to underdevelopment. He cited examples of the opposite policies as well: success stories of states that defied recommendations imposed by the IMF and the World Bank.

After a long-lasting audit of the odious debt, the leftist government of Ecuador defaulted and implemented an interesting e-currency experiment, thus freeing direct funds for economic development, education, and poverty reduction. Éric Toussaint urged the Ukrainians to “disobey the creditors” and to demand debt relief. If the “plan A” (reaching a consensus through negotiations) does not work, we should implement a “plan B” - revolutionary break with the international financial institutions. However, it is clear for the citizens of Ukraine that their government is hardly capable even for the first scenario.

Discussing the case of Greece, where the government was forced to capitulate without having used the report of the anti-debt committee, established by former President of the Hellenic Parliament Zoe Konstantopoulou, Éric Toussaint noted that even this defeat should be a lesson for the European Left: during this period, they have to figure out how a “plan B” could look like.

## Back to Ukraine

So, what should be the alternative for Ukraine? To paraphrase one of the speakers of the third session, the question is only what we need to do first - either to relieve the debt or to introduce progressive taxation. There is little doubt from the view of economic analysis that both steps should be done as soon as possible. It seems that Ukraine can use its advantages only due to balanced social and economic policies for the benefit of the working classes instead of observance of the “free market” dogmas.

Aleksandr Odosii stated that agriculture can be a source of future development only in case of adequate governmental regulation. To overcome the lack of balance between agricultural and energetic sectors, alternative energy should be promoted. The potential of existing transport infrastructure should be also used to full extent. Today, the agricultural sector is beneficial for a bunch of businessmen (profit of sunflower farming can reach 300% in some cases), and the owners channel significant funds to consumption rather than production development.

Enjoying superprofits, agricultural companies pay negligible share of taxes (0.6%) to the state budget, using the offshore optimization, as noted by Zakhar Popovych, an expert of Center for Social and Labor Research and a member of organizational committee of Social'nyi Rukh (“Social Movement”), a Ukrainian left-wing political party currently under formation. Using comparative studies, Zakhar Popovych concluded: “In terms of taxation of big business, we seem to be on the last place in Europe” (like as by the level of salaries). 45% of the economy is in shade. The planned reform by the Ministry of Finance will become the “punishment” for the poor, in accordance with monetarist orthodoxy: the budget will continue to be pumped up by the employees through the personal income tax, while corporations pay less tax from their profits.

The problem of public debt has become rampant, underlined

Oleksandr Kravchuk, economy expert of the Center for Social and Labor Research, and one of organizers of the conference. This year, the total public debt is set to exceed the GDP level, and loan repayment began to constitute the most substantial share (16.4%) of the state budget. These funds could potentially go to the industrial production or to the development of scientific and technical sphere. Controversial loans strangling the country became an unbearable yoke for the people and must be denied. According to the economist, the latest debt restructuring agreement secures disadvantageous provisions for Ukraine but is beneficial for the creditors - as the repayment of debts is tied to the economic growth of the country, it will limit the possibilities of future development.

Admittedly, Ukraine is too keen on liberal trends which have been challenged at the West long time ago. Oleksandr Antoniuk, energy economist based in Luxemburg, reported about malignancy of energy sector privatization. He instantiated this point by the facts that the majority of “developed countries” (France, Sweden, USA etc.) either have never conducted course for liberalization of the energy sector or have already curtailed this process. The introduction of “market prices” led to an abrupt increase of tariffs without improving service quality: in California, electricity prices skyrocketed by 13 times after the liberalization.

The issue should be put bluntly: what social forces will embody the demands, obvious and rational in terms of common good? One of the organizers of the conference, sociologist Oksana Dutchak stressed that the vast majority of recent socio-economic protests have been taking place without participation of political parties, because people trust none of them. So the question remains open. Demand for the existence of such political subject is indisputable: it should reflect the interests of the diverse grassroots protest groups.



## The path of justice

The conference concluded with the speeches of those who themselves create wealth and require its equitable distribution: working class activists. Experience of independent trade unions is particularly valuable to restore the confidence to the workers' organizations in general.

Spectacular examples of trade union activities aimed to protect the workers were presented by Valeriy Petrovskiy from the Free Trade Union of Railway Workers of Ukraine. The union attained a collective agreement providing extensive social guarantees, including the 13th salary and even the payment of jubilee awards. However, there is a danger that in the wake of attempts to corporatize "Ukrzaliznytsya" [Ukrainian Railways], its management tends to sack at least a part of its 300,000 employees. However, Valeriy Petrovskiy assured that no member of his trade union could be fired "without a fight".

Yuriy Samoilov, miner and lifelong union activist, made an excursion into the workers' history of Kryvyi Rih, an important ore mining and refining city in the centre of Ukraine, and spoke about the need to restore the class identity among employees. In addition, he pointed out that workers' organizations should not only respond to the arbitrary actions of the employers and government, but must move to the offensive, pushing their

own agenda of social change in the interests of the working majority.

Yevhen Derkach, the young leader of the independent trade union "Zakhyst pratsi" at the "Pivdenmash" ["Yuzhmash"], a legendary factory that once constructed the most sophisticated Soviet space rockets but today is nothing than struggling for its bare surviving, depicted the importance of trade unions for the society. Describing eloquent examples of over-exploitation of employees, he stated: in order to change an individual consciousness ("from slaves to free people") and the social mood, you should always be prepared for class conflict with the employers. Yevhen Derkach and his fellow comrades experience this firsthand, facing pressure and even violent attacks in their fight to preserve the workspaces at their factory.

One of the reports concerned the workers' struggle in extreme conditions at the front-line areas. Pavlo Lysyanskyi described the experience of his Eastern Human Rights Group that works in the war-torn regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. He listed the EHRG assistance for the protesting workers at Svitlodarsk hospital and a supermarket chain. The group is complimentary to trade unions, it assists in establishing new ones and provides a form of external pressure on the company. Human rights lawyers and journalists are in contact with workers, labor rights of

whom are violated, and turn to law enforcement. Trade unions are launched at the enterprises upon successful campaigns "from outside" by EHRG members.

Coordinator of "Solidarity Center" programs in Ukraine Tristan Masat, regrettably noted the lack of constituency for progressive political subjects in Ukraine that could consolidate social movements for grassroots pressure on the government. So he advised the representatives of unions and NGOs present at the conference to develop membership-based organizations as for mass mobilization (particularly the campaign against the new Labor Code) and apply to international organizations for the protection of labor rights.

Judging by the heated discussions and lots of questions, the conference helped bring together workers and students, academics and activists from Ukraine and abroad in sharing their experience, developing the agenda of a democratic socialist alternative, and finding a way for deeper cooperation. Let's hope that such events bring us closer to the very moment when the conference theme, the neoliberal capitalism itself, becomes a mere subject for studies by historians.

*Translated by Lesia Bidochko and Anton Pechenkin*

<http://commons.com.ua/en/chi-ye-zam>.  
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**30 December 2015, by robm**

IV491 December 2015 PDF magazine available to

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## Final warning! The situation in France after

# the regional elections

**29 December 2015, by François Sabado, Pierre Rousset**

Nothing would be more mistaken than to believe that the FN is only a party of the first round and that in the second, almost ritually, it will be blocked by a "republican backlash". That is what happened this time, but it is not sure that it will be the case the next time. Especially if the governmental left continues its neoliberal policies (which it has said it will) and if the right becomes even more radical, as Nicolas Sarkozy wants.

So the priority task is to do everything to block the austerity policies of the Valls Hollande government - and to that end to put a stop to the state of emergency, to defeat the constitutional reform that seeks to trivialize the use of repressive emergency measures.

## The National Front, a real danger

The regional elections mark a new upsurge of the National Front: nearly 7 million votes, more than the number of votes obtained by Marine Le Pen in the last presidential election. In election after election, since 2012, the FN vote has increased. It has become, in electoral terms, the biggest party in the country. Without alliances, it falls short of an absolute majority, but with the deepening of the regime crisis in France, that can change. We cannot rule out the possibility of the victory of Marine Le Pen in the next presidential election in 2017.

We know the reasons for this upsurge of the National Front: the global degradation of the relationship of forces to the detriment of the workers' movement, the neoliberal policies endorsed by governments of right and

left, the persistent repercussions of post-colonial domination, the new (marginalized) place of the country in capitalist globalization. The combination of the effects of a long economic depression in Europe, the political crisis related to the choices made by the government, the consequences of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State and a new wave of racism in the popular classes provide a breeding ground for the FN.

The National Front is now present in all layers of society. It is becoming a majority electoral force among blue- and white-collar workers (at least among those who vote). The globalized bourgeoisie has certainly not made a choice in favour of the National Front - particularly its policy on leaving the euro; but the employers are now divided. The FN today does not correspond to the rational interests of the ruling classes. However, the political crisis is such, the political apparatuses are so weakened, that an "electoral accident", even though it is not "the most probable variant", can no longer be rejected out of hand.

At the risk of disarming ourselves, we should not underestimate the danger of the National Front or the destructive effects that a possible frontist victory would have. The political struggle against the far right must be conducted - an FN government would not be just one more right-wing government. Some people think the opposite, such as Jacques Rancière, who affirms: "As soon as I analyze the National Front as the fruit of the imbalance that is proper to our institutional logic, my hypothesis is rather one of an integration into the system. There are already many similarities between the National Front and the forces present within the system."

To a question - if the FN came to power, would it have concrete effects for the weakest in French society, that is to say, the immigrants ... - Jacques Rancière replies, unwisely:

"Yes, probably. But I have difficulty in seeing the FN organizing massive departures, an exodus of hundreds of thousands or millions of people, to send them "back home". The National Front is not the poor Whites against the immigrants. Its electorate is extending into all sectors of society, including among immigrants. So, of course, there could be symbolic actions, but I do not believe that a UMP-FN government would be very different from a UMP government..." [1].

Some ultraleft currents go further, putting the PS, the right and the National Front on the same level.

We do not agree with these analyses.

The National Front is not a fascist party in the manner of the 1930s because we are not in the 1930s. The origin of its leadership is fascist, its national-socialist themes repeat the classic themes of the far right, national preference and anti-immigrant racism, anti-Muslim in particular, remain central to its politics. This is not a classic fascist party, but nor is it a bourgeois party like the others.

A FN government is not a UMP government, much less a PS government. The vote for the PS and the vote for the National Front vote is not the same thing. Although voting for the right after the withdrawal of PS lists in the North and in the PACA region has added to the confusion and to the disappearance of the left in the fight against the National Front, there should be no hesitation about voting Socialist against the FN.

Admittedly, Valls and Hollande are conducting neoliberal policies that are destroying the living conditions of millions of workers; they want to entrench the state of emergency in the Constitution. We are sliding into ever more authoritarian political systems. Parliamentary democracy is being emptied of what remains of the "democratic".

Hollande and Valls are conducting a policy of destruction of the left, as other "socialists" already did in the past. But at this moment of the 21st century, 'social democratic' leaders are undoing what made historical social democracy

However, as severe and repressive as it is, the state of exception of Valls is not yet that of Marine Le Pen. At the centre of her programme, there is admittedly no mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie through fascist militias to liquidate the workers' movement; but there is the "national preference", as opposed to several million foreigners and French citizens of foreign origin – as well as all those who protect them.

There are many similarities between the National Front and other forces of the system, but the FN is nonetheless not integrated into the system. The orientation of Marine Le Pen is not a project like that of Gianfranco Fini in Italy. Coming from the Italian Social Movement, then founder of the National Alliance in 1995, Fini joined in 2009 Berlusconi's formation, the People of Freedom, before separating from him in 2010. He was a minister in Berlusconi's second and third governments. He is really built into the system.

The majority of the National Front does not want to make alliances in which their party would find itself in a subordinate position. Its leaders want to break the right and replace it. They cannot today go beyond a certain electoral threshold. However, they are betting on the deepening of the crisis, and on the division and the explosion of the right. Is this a hypothesis that we can rule out?

Given the current international situation, the political disarray, the lack of a credible alternative to the system based on solidarity, the

internal racist pressure, the National Front can count on certain sections of society to justify discrimination, repression, or indeed the expulsion of foreigners, particularly Muslim foreigners. It is a ferment of civil war that implies a radical liquidation of democratic freedoms. There will be a noticeable difference between all the authoritarian, Bonapartist, political formulas initiated by social democracy or the centre-right and a regime dominated by the far right.

The struggle against the National Front should take on a new dimension and must therefore be reconsidered – because, to date, we have failed to conduct it. Minority central mobilizations against the FN are no longer operative. Everything must be "taken up at the grass roots", in workplaces, in schools, in neighbourhoods, in towns, with unity of action of all democratic forces – we must organize mobilizations against the measures taken at local level by the party, especially in the towns it governs, in terms of education, culture, defence of freedoms.

To emphasize the specific danger that the National Front represents is not to give any kind of seal of approval to the government and to Hollande as president! The Valls state of emergency already aims to get society accustomed to living in a state of exception, to delegitimize the control of the judiciary over the repressive apparatus and over the executive, to put citizens under general surveillance, to in fact restrict civil liberties, to squeeze the life out of social movements.

The Hollande-Valls state of emergency creates the political conditions and mental conditioning that could tomorrow favour the imposition of a "navy blue" state of emergency [2]. The attack against democratic freedoms that we are experiencing today is extremely serious, unprecedented in France since the war in Algeria. So what is urgent, the first task, is to confront our leaders with the broadest possible democratic front. It is by blocking today the implementation of "austerity and security" policies, by giving back confidence to combative sectors in the trade unions, associations,

workplaces, neighbourhoods, by rebuilding an anti-capitalist political alternative that we will begin to push back the National Front.

The priority struggle against the austerity and security policies of the Valls Hollande government should not lead us to minimize or relativize the fight against the National Front – and vice versa.

## The right divided

The traditional right won the regional elections, without however this relative success calling into question the central place that the National Front has conquered in political life. The right remains under pressure.

This situation is pushing towards a recomposition of political life – something that is easier said than done. "Well-informed" commentators are exhorting the political machines of right and left to move towards a "national union", particularly against the FN, evoking governmental formulas of union or alliance of the right, the centre and social democracy that are now dominant in Germany and in the European Union. However, in France, this approach is quite difficult to implement.

The pressure exerted by the National Front has made a considerable part of the voters of the right swing over to voting FN. More generally, this encourages a radicalization of the traditional right.

During the recent elections, the PS withdrew its candidates in two regions, the North and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, calling for a vote in the second round for the right in order to block the National Front – a call that was largely followed by left voters. However, the same right refused any withdrawal in favour of the lists of the left – Nicolas Sarkozy even declaring "To vote for the PS or the FN is the same thing"...

So, in the case of PS and FN candidates facing each other in an election, it is not at all clear that the electorate of the right would block against the far right. It is this uncertainty that makes possible the



major "electoral accident": a defeat of Hollande by Marine Le Pen in the second round of the next presidential election.

Nicolas Sarkozy wants to embody this electorate, by taking up its programme. The result is that many voters prefer the original to the copy and Sarkozy becomes weaker in his own camp. The divisions, indeed the fractures, within the traditional right open up space for his competitors, Alain Juppé, Bruno Lemaire and François Fillon. The aftermath of the regional elections is shaping up to be a period of turbulence, whose outcome remains undecided.

For a good many years now there has been a virtual space in France for a recomposed "centre", which however does not manage to take shape due to the weight of inertia of political machines and electoral clienteles - and the constraints of the presidential election, the biggest challenge in the electoral arena. These constraints are even stronger because there is no vice president, no ticket that could embody an alliance and satisfy at least two egos, two "stables".

To bring about first of all the union of the right and centre in order to eventually forge in the future alliances with part of the left seems to be a rational project (represented by Alain Juppé?), But it runs up against the dynamics of radicalization on the right and the structural weakness of the centre.

The risk for the right, if Nicolas Sarkozy is the presidential candidate, is the opposite: a centrist candidate (François Bayrou?) might prevent him from reaching the second round, leaving a face-off between Holland and Marine Le Pen...

So there is a double impasse, which will probably be resolved only on the occasion of an open crisis on the right, and which blocks for the moment the realization of a kind of national unity with the PS, or part of it.

## Where is the

## Socialist Party going?

It has limited the damage, but the decline is obvious.

The PS got better results than in the recent European and departmental elections, but in the first round of the regional elections, it nevertheless came in behind the National Front and the right, with less than 25 per cent of the vote. The total of what can be called the left came to only about 35 per cent. The decision not to present lists in the second round in some areas has serious consequences: it means deserting, even on the parliamentary terrain, the fight against the right and the National Front.

This operation may seem like a smart tactical move, allowing Hollande to present himself as a unifying candidate in 2017, during the presidential election, counting on a division of the right-wing forces. In the meantime, however, the PS has withdrawn from the political struggle in two key regions.

This choice reflects a continued deterioration of the Socialist Party since 2012. It went from 280,000 members (official figure) in 2006 to 130,000 in December 2014. Only 70,000 "activists" voted for the last congress. However, the party is not experiencing a process of "Pasokisation". It has more than 20 per cent of the vote, it is not suddenly collapsing. The crisis is far from reaching the Greek level in France. The weakening of social democracy is nevertheless considerable.

Even more important, the PS is undergoing a profound change in its nature. There is what could be called an acceleration of the bourgeois transformation of social democracy. It is a process that has been unfolding for a long time and which is resulting in an unprecedented degree of integration of social-democratic cadres at the highest levels of the state, in global institutions (IMF, WTO...) and in the globalized economy. The socialist parties have become "less and less working-class

and more and more bourgeois." The brutality of neoliberal policies is undermining their social and political bases.

In different ways, the socialist parties are being transformed into bourgeois parties. Are they therefore become just like other bourgeois parties? Not quite; the functioning of alternation in government requires the socialist parties to mark out their difference with other bourgeois parties. They remain linked, by their historical origin, to the workers' movement, but of that there are no longer any more than traces that are fading in the memory of activists. This nevertheless creates contradictions and oppositions within these parties. They can maintain a certain relationship with the "people of the left", although it is increasingly distended. This qualitative change, if it was completed, would transform these parties into US-style democratic parties.

We are, perhaps, on the eve of events that would crystallize a qualitative leap in the process (for one of the authors of this article, this transformation has already, in its essentials, been accomplished in the French case).

The result of the regional elections is sufficient for Hollande and Valls to persist on their chosen path: to pursue neoliberal policies, then move to the construction of a new party that would resemble US-style democrats. Manuel Valls in particular, but also more and more sectors of the PS, are posing the question of a renovation-refounding of the PS or of a new political formation that would it possible to break the remaining links with the history of social democracy.

The new international situation, the duration of the neoliberal economic depression, the integration into the policies of the European Union, the march towards an authoritarian regime: all of this is pushing towards an internal evolution of the Socialist Party, towards changes that are progressively draining the life from it... It nevertheless remains the case that for Valls, Macron and others, the PS is still not sufficiently on the right: it is necessary to accelerate the pace.

Will there be resistance? On what scale? In what forms?... The British surprise indicates that even where we were not expecting it, there are unpredictable reactions. This does not call into question the domination of "Blairism" in the Labour Party, particularly in its parliamentary representation, but it indicates that changes in the political landscape are also having repercussions in formations like Labour.

Much will depend on the next presidential election, but in any case the question of a refounding-new formation will be posed in relation to the choice of the option of a policy of national unity.

## Radical left: the failure. How to rebuild

For the radical left, these elections were a profound failure: the NPA was unable to present candidates. Lutte Ouvrière got a little over 1 per cent. The Left Front got under 5 per cent, less than half the result of Mélenchon in the 2012 presidential election. This is the end of a political cycle.

Since 1995, there have been three important politico electoral experiences - and we insist on the electoral form of these experiences. In 1995 with Laguiller and Lutte Ouvrière; in 2002 and 2007 with the LCR - then the NPA - and Olivier Besancenot; and in 2010-2012, with the Left Front and Jean Luc Mélenchon, who received in 2012 more than 4.5 million votes. These three experiences have shown the potential for political reorganization on the left of the left, but also its limitations and its failure. This also explains the space left for the National Front. In any case, there has not been, beyond the political and historical differences between each experience, the emergence of political parties like Syriza, Podemos or the Portuguese Left Bloc.

The deterioration of the relationship of forces to the detriment of struggles and social movements over recent years has affected all the organizations of the radical left. The Left Front, which with its specific features has dominated in recent years the political space to the left of the left, has been paralyzed by its internal contradictions. The hesitations between the affirmation of the need for political opposition, often made by Mélenchon, and the alliances of the PCF with the PS or those of Mélenchon's Left Party with the Greens have blurred its message and its policies. The recent decision to make lists for the second round of the regional elections with the Socialist Party certainly does not contribute to independence from a ruling party that embodies neoliberal austerity and the state of emergency!

Independence with regard to the PS and the government remains a key issue. Many people on the left recognize this. We must rebuild. We need something new. It cannot come only from the existing organizations. We must go beyond them. This new force should not however become a satellite of the PS! It cannot emerge if the radical left appears to be linked to the governmental left.

In a situation of retreat, like the one we are living through, there are nevertheless struggles of resistance - economic, anti-racist, ecological, feminist, local and sectoral struggles - and those against the state of emergency.

These movements are not enough to relaunch a broad recomposition on the left of the left. To reach this objective, there will have to be new social and political founding events of historic dimensions, but concrete integration into these "real movements" is the condition *sine qua non* for being able to move forward today.

The political recomposition to which we aspire is prepared by participating in daily struggles, class struggles and struggles for emancipation in all their forms.

Thus, the considerable mobilization on the occasion of the COP 21, which was maintained despite the state of emergency, shows that a young generation is posing the problems of changing the system through climate issues and their implications (energy, transport, trade, justice, people's rights...). It will continue. We have to be more closely linked to it, on a more daily basis, we have to engage in dialogue with its main organizers. Similarly we must take part in local experiences, in activist networks and in the building of social or political fronts that bring together activists from different origins, activists who have emerged from these struggles, who are able to begin formulating an alternative to austerity policies, to capitalist productivism. Without forgetting international solidarity, welcoming refugees and migrants, support for victims of humanitarian disasters and for all our comrades who face particularly dangerous situations.

The fight for rights provides a foundation that enables to resist today while preparing the future: workers' rights and demands, women's rights, rights of the oppressed, ecological and social rights, citizens' rights. The struggle against the state of emergency and the constitutional reform represents a key axis. In fact, on its success depends to a great extent the defence of a democratic space, a space of freedom, helping us better to continue all of our actions of resistance. The stakes are high. It is possible to win on this terrain: it is not certain that François Hollande will obtain the necessary 60 per cent majority for the adoption of constitutional amendments in Congress (Parliament and the Senate meeting together) or through a referendum.

To defeat the government on this issue would give a boost to the struggles against austerity, against the FN, for solidarity-based alternatives, feminist and ecosocialist.

*This article was originally written for **Viento Sur**.*

# Crises, Craziness and "Security"

29 December 2015, by **Against the Current**

Harassment and sometimes physical attacks on Muslims in the United States can't be understood separately from the hatred that produced the murderous attack at the Colorado Planned Parenthood office, or the racist attempted murder of activists in Minneapolis occupying a police precinct station in response to yet another cop shooting of a young Black "suspect."

Jamar Clark was one of 1209 people killed so far by police in the United States in 2015, according to statistics compiled by the British paper *The Guardian* as of early December. (We won't detail here how this reflects a continuation of racist and nativist themes in U.S. history – for further discussion, see Malik Miah's overview [here](#))

Donald Trump and what he represents must be seen as a symbol and symptom of a sick society and political system. Practically all the Republican candidates wanted to play with the fire of anti-Muslim bigotry, but without getting burned. It was Jeb Bush who first suggested admitting only those Syrian refugees who could prove they're Christian.

Other presidential candidates and governors already called for slamming the borders shut to refugees, or closing "suspicious mosques" – Ben Carson, Ted Cruz, Chris Christie, Texas governor Greg Abbott and Indiana's Mike Pence among other sleazy characters. Some 31 governors sued to block refugees from entering their states.

When Trump previously called for "registering" Muslims in the United States, the Republican leadership could have denounced him as unfit to be president. They didn't. Now, by calling for excluding Muslims from U.S. shores, Trump has focused the world's attention on the actual meaning of the Republicans' message

to their voting base, and thereby blown it up in the GOP's face – performing a kind of public service, in his own perverse and sick fashion.

Globally, Trump's ravings can be damaging for Washington's imperial projects – given perceptions around the world that he might be the next U.S. president, although the real-life chance of that happening is essentially zero.

Even attempting Trump's proposed ban, of course, would shatter U.S. international relations, not only with Middle Eastern "strategic partners" but even more widely. (Imagine the United States telling Nigeria that its Christian citizens can visit, study or work here but not its Muslims, or informing India that Hindus and Sikhs may be welcome but Indian Muslims need not apply...) That's one reason why the "responsible" Republican establishment now has to find a way to sideline him.

## Distorted Debate and Denial

Before the Paris and San Bernardino massacres; before the video of the Chicago police murder of Laquan McDonald and the city's year-long coverup; before "the Godzilla El Niño" and before the Paris Climate Summit looked more like the "Bomb Syria Summit;" before all this, the new year might have seemed the moment to ponder a surreal and somewhat comical electoral spectacle. But events have intervened to confront the other-worldly craziness of the U.S. election with the real-world thing.

The most critical issues facing the country and human life on the planet have generally not been discussed – and when they are, the "solutions" proposed are the wrong ones. Will the carbon-reduction goals of the Paris

"COP21" summit – as modest as they are in relation to the scale of the crisis – crash on the political reefs of U.S. Congressional rejection and Big Oil money? Only in the United States, after all, are climate change science and warnings of unfolding disaster widely regarded as a fraud and a plot to destroy "our way of life."

Unfortunately climate change, while inexorable under the regime of capitalist production and carbon-dependent energy, doesn't conform to the political cycle. Taking the Florida example, with rising sea levels Miami will end up underwater but not during the political careers of Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush...

On war and "security," Republicans (and some Democrats) accuse the Obama administration of "weakness" in the face of the "Islamic State" threat. In reality, Western powers' bombing of Syria and Libya, and rightwing rhetoric of "war with radical Islam," both drive more embittered Muslim young people, especially in Europe, toward the ISIS recruiters.

In particular cases such as the San Bernardino murderers Syed Farooq and Tashfeen Malik, we don't know what underlying pathology might have caused them to plot a killing spree and leave behind their six-month old baby – just as we often can't say why some particular white youth turns to neo-nazi ideology. What we can say is that, as a social phenomenon, the brutal narratives of ISIS and imperialism clearly reinforce and "confirm" each other.

While the San Bernardino murders are distinctive in their apparent pseudo-"Islamic" motivation, they're also the latest of more than 350 "mass shootings" (defined by four or more victims) in the United States this year! Only in America – and this statistic doesn't even count killings or violent assaults from domestic abuse, for

example.

The individual American's risk of death or mayhem from that kind of violence is vastly greater than the danger of being a victim of a terrorist attack. But the anti-Muslim backlash that Trump and other rightwingers whip up draws from the deep reservoir of fear among (mostly) white people for their own and their families' future.

The electoral debate has mostly been around a false and distorted set of arguments about "security" that millions of people feel slipping away. For example, how many tens of thousands of U.S. troops should go back into Iraq and Syria to keep us "safe" or should the United States rely on massive air power and some unnamed regional "partners" to put the "boots on the ground?" Posed that way, of course it's a question with no answer, just a road to endless wars.

The escalating U.S., European and Russian bombing campaigns over Syria are working at cross-purposes, and all creating large-scale civilian carnage are likely to make the desperate refugee flight from Syria even worse. As the statement of the French New Anticapitalist Party put it immediately after the Paris massacre by the "Islamic State," **The cruelty of imperialist wars results in the cruelty of terrorism**".

Yes, the Paris massacre is a spillover from the set of catastrophes that imperialism brought about in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya both through direct military invasion and through the rise of religious-totalitarian fanaticism that imperial powers and regional client regimes enabled, cultivated, encouraged and ultimately found they could not control.

Yassamine Mather puts it well: "What we are seeing is the inevitable consequence of decades of supporting Islamists in the Middle East to defeat secular and leftwing forces decades of the 'special relationship' with those who finance and support jihadism." She cites in particular "those countries that openly finance and arm IS" notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Persian

Gulf." ([Weekly Worker, November 19, 2015](#))

The Obama administration can't seem to pressure its NATO partner Turkey to seal the border against ISIS's recruits and oil shipments, or Saudi Arabia to block money transfers that fund ISIS operations. Meanwhile, Washington actively supports the operation by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf States that is destroying the entire country of Yemen, whose population has essentially no escape route. Try to find a Republican or Democratic candidate of any stripe calling attention to this catastrophe!

## Real and False Security

Can the United States build a "big beautiful wall" (as Trump calls it) to keep out Mexicans, Central Americans and mythical Middle Easterners trying to infiltrate by way of the southern border? Will the country be safer by resuming waterboarding (Trump: "you bet your ass I would") or keeping the Guantanamo prison camp open forever, as the Republican congressional majority demands?

To turn the argument rightside up requires looking at the real threats, and their causes, that face people's lives. There's no threat that Syrian refugees fleeing the destruction of their homeland will bring terrorist fighters into the United States. There's a real danger that the bigoted rhetoric of opportunistic politicians will lead to escalating attacks on Muslim communities and mosques.

Underlying the hysteria of the U.S. election are the insecurities that people live with every day, and the reality that these are not experienced at all evenly. It may produce some feelings of unity when governments and politicians proclaim that "terrorism threatens us all," but it's an illusion that somehow "we're all in this together."

The terror that African-American families face includes kids getting shot by police, persistent massive structural unemployment, home foreclosures and evictions, the

destruction of public education, and the resulting endemic violence that kills young people by the thousands, swells for-profit prisons and cripples whole communities.

Latino communities fear the terror of immigration raids that rip families apart. Muslims, and sometimes others mistaken for them, are subjected to street attacks and harassment that many analysts describe as worse than immediately following 9/11 in 2001. Those are not fears that afflict most white Americans.

Yet what about the insecurities that do face tens of millions of working-class people both white and people of color? Yes, they exist and are very real indeed. Millions still go without health care, and if Republicans in state houses and Congress get their way, many millions more would lose what they've gained under Obamacare and expanded Medicare programs.

Job insecurity is rampant with the near-collapse of unions and the global corporate takeover that's only accelerated under the terms of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Stress and overwork are killers in themselves as people struggle to make ends meet in a low-wage economy with a growing "precarious" job sector.

The electorate is bombarded with drivel about "simplifying the tax code" Ben Carson's flat-tax "tithe" and Ted Cruz's idea to abolish the IRS standing out for their silliness all based on the rich and super-rich paying less, while massively increasing military spending and balancing the budget through fantasy accounting. None of them deal with the real state of the economy, crumbling infrastructure or ballooning education costs, let alone with the desperate urgency of converting from fossil fuel dependence.

## Where's the Alternative?

The most serious issues facing our society and the world aren't being raised in this two-year presidential campaign of the capitalist parties, except when Bernie Sanders speaks



out on issues like the Fight for \$15, the TPP and the disaster facing the African-American community. For the most part, however, the issues that matter most are being posed in the streets, by insurgent movements.

These are the mostly African American and mostly young folks who clogged Chicago's Michigan Avenue shopping district on Black Friday, proclaiming that there's no business as usual after

the city stonewalled the murder of Laquan McDonald and the police destruction of evidence during mayor Rahm Emanuel's reelection campaign "and now spearheading the movement demanding his resignation.

They are the activists at COP21 who said that neither terrorism nor a "state of emergency" would keep the climate catastrophe protests off the Paris streets. The Black students and anti-racist allies confronting recalcitrant

administrations at the University of Missouri, Princeton, Yale and Ithaca College. Fast-food and Walmart workers saying loud and clear that they will win \$15 an hour.

Those are the movements that will transform society "and yes, in the course of doing so, change the electoral equation too.

[Against the Current](#)

## Big Three Contracts: Who Won?

27 December 2015, by **Dianne Feeley**

After confidently strutting during last summer's bargaining convention, the UAW leadership never attempted to organize workers for a contract campaign. Having suspended their right to strike at the time of the 2008-09 financial crisis, GM and Chrysler/Fiat (FCA) workers were able to rejoin Ford workers this time around in being able to utilize their strike weapon. But if the convention was drowned in "It's Our Turn" and "Bridge the Gap" slogans, membership preparation didn't go beyond taking formal strike votes. My local printed a "No two tier" T-shirt for us to wear at the Detroit Labor Day Parade but elsewhere union activists designed, distributed, and wore "No two tiers" shirts all on their own.

While labor costs differ for the Big Three, the Center for Automotive Research pegs them in the range of 4-8%. Costs went down with the introduction of second-tier workers, who were hired at half rate, with less comprehensive health care coverage and a measly 401(k) instead of a defined pension. It was somewhat surprising, then, that despite Chrysler being the smallest of the Big Three, and where fully 45% of the work force is second tier, UAW President Dennis Williams chose it as the negotiating target. Traditionally the first corporation chosen is the strongest, with the contract setting the pattern

for the others. This time around Williams chose the weakest.

### Rejecting the Marchionne "Solution"

CEO Sergio Marchionne, whose salary and benefits totaled \$72 million last year, had been vocal in seeing two-tier wages as a problem—"almost offensive." His solution: Eliminate the top tier! Unveiling a five-year product plan in the spring of 2014, he commented:

"I always have been of the view that the two-tier wage structures are unsustainable in the long term....The real problem here is we need to freeze the tier ones and make them a dying class. I don't mean this literally.

"We have to replace the tier two-wage structure with something that reflects the sharing of the economics of running this enterprise. I do see in some particular cases the tier twos should be able to make more than a tier one, but only in the event that the company is successful. I object violently to the notion of entitlement in the wage structure. That is something that is incredibly unwise."

Sergio Marchionne (left) and UAW

President Dennis Williams, during a ceremony that opened contract negotiations.

When the tentative agreement was approved by a majority of the UAW bargaining committee, Chrysler workers were outraged to learn that the proposal was to follow Marchionne's lead, gradually increasing the second-tier wage, currently between \$15.78-19.28 an hour, to a high of \$25. This still left a wage gap between the second-tier and those hired before 2007. As the veteran workers retired, so would their wage scale. The contract was "a bridge to nowhere."

An additional slap in the face was the disappearance of the 25% maximum on the number of lower-tier workers that was to take effect at the expiration of the 2011 agreement. Many senior second-tier workers had held onto their jobs in anticipation of moving to the higher wage with the new contract. When UAW Chrysler Vice President Norwood Jewell said that commitment was never guaranteed, workers pointed to wording in the union's own contract summary. The lie was infuriating.

Over the last couple of decades the strategy employed to get UAW contracts passed has been to offer particularly large signing bonuses. The Chrysler agreement offered a



\$3,000 bonus to veteran workers and \$2,000 to the second tier. With that carrot, autoworkers were supposed to overlook the continued stress of the work schedule. Workers are told that it's unrealistic to expect to win back in one contract what was lost in the economic crisis. The Cost-of-Living-Adjustment that autoworkers first won in the aftermath of World War II is no longer possible. One just has to get used to "the new normal."

First-tier workers, stuck at \$28 an hour for the last decade, were slated to receive two 3% wage increases and two 4% lump-sum bonuses. Having already lost \$4 an hour since COLA was suspended in 2009, these workers would find real wages further deteriorated four years down the road.

Chrysler has adopted an onerous Alternative Work Schedule at most of its plants. This condemns the work force to odd schedules and cheats them out of overtime pay first won at Chrysler in 1937!

A draconian absentee policy and continued skilled trades consolidation remained in place. The agreement also proposed shifting health care to an unexplained health care co-op.

Chrysler promised a \$5.3 million investment, but this would result in few additional jobs. The corporation also announced it would like to move all small car production to Mexico; only SUVs and trucks would be manufactured in the United States.

Leaflets and petitions circulated in the plants, autoworkers proudly wore "No 2 tier" T-shirts on the shop floor, conference calls were organized, comments flooded Facebook and Twitter. After a UAW informational meeting at the Jefferson North plant, some members boldly marched on nearby Solidarity House, the UAW's headquarters.

With FCA earning a 7.7% profit in the second quarter of 2016, workers overwhelmingly rejected the deal, with all but three locals voting it down. It was clear that the overwhelming "no" vote could be summed up in the demand "Equal Pay for Equal Work."

## The Second Deal

UAW officials were forced to reopen negotiations and let Marchionne know his plan was not acceptable. The second tentative agreement bumped up the signing bonus by \$1,000 and dropped the change in health care. But the substantive difference was opening a path from second tier (now termed "in progression" workers) to the wages veteran workers make. Although the agreement required eight years to reach the top, many would get there by the end of the four-year contract. The majority now felt that the principle of equal pay for equal work had been re-established, despite worrying exceptions.

Buried deep in the contract are provisions that set separate wage scales for FCA's parts workers at Mopar and axle plants. Current Mopar workers can reach parity with other FCA workers, but new hires will be put in a separate scale, their top wage dependent on their division (assembly, powertrain, stamping, etc.) Current and future axle workers who reach the highest wage of \$19.86 are eligible for an annual raise of 3% during the contract's last three years.

Temporary work is no longer limited to covering absences at the end of the week. Already hired "permanent" temporary workers can earn \$17-22 while newly hired temps will earn from \$15.78-19.28. Thirty-five years ago when I worked at Ford, temporaries were used over the summer to cover the vacation period. With the introduction of the lean production system, the Big Three and the union agreed to have temps fill in on weekends. But where it used to be that surviving on the job for 90 days meant permanent employment, now the Big Three have "permanent" temporary workers, who lack job security.

The revised agreement didn't address issues such as COLA or the hated Alternative Work Schedule. Nonetheless workers felt they had defeated Marchionne's plan to lower the wage scale.

Given that the company was the smallest of the Big Three, FCA

workers concluded they had gone about as far as they were going to be able to go this time around and voted for the contract.

## On to General Motors

Next up was GM. Going into the negotiations the corporation stated it intended to maintain its 10% profitability rate; no UAW official challenged the remark. The tentative agreement offered a moratorium on outsourcing and \$1.9 billion in new investments in addition to the \$6.4 billion already announced, promising 3,300 jobs at 12 different sites. Of course, there's always a loophole for management to renege on such promises.

The agreement mirrored the eight-year pattern for moving second-tier workers, representing 20% of GM's 52,700 unionized work force, to the highest wage. Additionally their health care coverage was raised to match first-tier benefits. At GM even temps are entitled to health care coverage after 90 days—and earn a whopping 24 hours of unpaid (yes, the contract specifies unpaid!) annual vacation time.

While COLA was off the table, veteran workers were to receive annual wage increases similar to the Chrysler agreement. The signing bonus of \$8,000 was available to both—and even temps working more than 90 days would receive \$2,000. As at Chrysler, additional sweeteners were various bonuses and profit-sharing payouts. Throwing money at workers is cheaper than reinstating COLA, where the increase is imbedded in the wage and compounds over time.

Along with these temporary tiers, the agreement outlines an "exception" to the UAW-GM agreement in four GM parts plants because of "unique operations and competitive environments."

If second-tier wages are being phased out, at the same time more tiers have been created. Workers in different GM plants will have different rates of pay, and temp pay rates depend on one's

hiring date.

By the end of the voting process 58.3% of production workers voted “yes,” but 59.5% of skilled trades workers voted it down. Tradespeople, who vote separately because they have unique issues, opposed GM’s continued drive to reclassify and reduce the trades, forcing them to perform multiple jobs without proper training, outsourcing the work or sometimes forcing them to take production jobs. Many felt GM was skimping on the apprenticeship program.

In 2013, when Chrysler skilled trades voted the contract down, the UAW leadership, after a hasty consultation with local officials, declared the contract ratified. This time the leadership held up ratifying the agreement and had local meetings to identify their objections. Two weeks later Dennis Williams announced the contract ratified, stating it had been modified to protect certain core job classifications and seniority rights. However, the modified agreement was not sent back to the trades for a final vote.

## Ford Workers Vote

While the UAW consulted with GM skilled trades workers, the UAW/Ford tentative agreement had been released to Ford’s 53,000 union members. Unlike GM and Chrysler, the corporation did not go through bankruptcy. Early in 2009 it asked its workers to make sacrifices to get through a difficult period. Ford workers agreed to suspend COLA, several bonuses and a minute of break for every hour of work. But when Ford later asked for a second modification, including suspension of the right to strike, workers voted “no.”

Since 2009 Ford posted \$48.36 billion in profits, \$6.8 billion in 2014. Ford’s profit margin, at 11.1%, is the highest of the Big Three. Nonetheless, the UAW/Ford agreement differed little from the GM one—just slightly more bonus money and the promise of a \$9 billion investment.

Under the previous contract, whenever the second-tier workforce

exceeded a 28% cap, the most senior of them immediately graduated to first-tier wages. Earlier in the year 808 second-tier workers had been reclassified and another 338 will move as well, but given that the new contract adopts the eight-year pattern, 15,137 will be placed in that lengthy process.

Parts plants were marked off as “exceptions” with lower wage scales, as were the temps. As Scott Houldieson, Vice President of UAW Local 551, wrote, “This is part of the plan to keep us segregated. A segregated workforce doesn’t stand together in the face of intimidation. A segregated workforce won’t work together to fight wage suppression.”

The “no” votes at Ford ran at 53% until the very last day. Throughout the process Jimmy Settles, UAW Ford Vice President made it clear that if the agreement was turned down, he could not negotiate a better deal. (In 2011 he announced that if the agreement was turned down, the UAW would call a strike and Ford would call in scabs.) A former first vice president of Local 600 and then director of the region, Settles also predicted that the outcome of the election would be determined by the votes at the Ford Rouge complex. Having been dogged all week by various UAW officials roaming through the plants, telling them how great the agreement was, workers at Dearborn Truck, Dearborn Engine, and Dearborn Diversified voted in large enough numbers to meet Settles’ predictions. The national agreement was approved by 51%-49%.

## What’s Next?

Over the course of the long ratification process, workers experienced a sense of power as they forced the UAW to go back to the table at both Chrysler and GM—and got a better deal for it. Standing together and insisting that second-tier workers have a path to the traditional wage produced a victory, particularly in the face of Sergio Marchionne’s alternative. But this round of bargaining saw the smallest and least profitable corporation setting the basic pattern for the Big Three contracts. It also established a multi-tier wage system and kept COLA

and working conditions off the table.

The media presented the passage of these agreements as a big victory for the country’s 145,000 unionized autoworkers. Their conclusion seemed based on the size of the big bonuses. “Contracts show split between vets, newbies,” a peculiar roundup article by Alisa Priddle and Brent Snaveley in the November 29th Detroit Free Press, attributes the rocky road to ratification to higher expectations by the newer workers—but by themselves they clearly didn’t have the numbers to vote the agreement down. In quoting Jimmy Settles at a press conference just two days before balloting ended, the reporters seem to agree with his analysis: “We hired a lot of people in a very short period of time. And for many of them, this is their first job. And they don’t understand the process.”

The arrogance of this statement by a UAW official is breathtaking! First of all, the UAW does not “hire” at Ford, management does. The truth is that both first- and second-tier workers sought an end to the terrible inequity they experienced on the job every day, and felt that the industry could well afford it. Unity was key. The reporters did note the difference between what UAW officials wanted in this contract—to bridge the gap—and what autoworkers were demanding, to eliminate the gap.

While pointing out that according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics wages in the auto sector have declined 21% in the 2003-2013 period, the reporters latched on to an analysis that workers win progressively more contract after contract. They quoted labor professor Arthur Wheaton, who saw in autoworker demands “a symptom of a misinformed and untrusting membership...I think it was that they didn’t understand the history of the bargaining—that it is a building block, you do it step by step.”

Send that labor prof to work in an auto plant! The history of wages, benefits, and working conditions is not a continuous step forward, but the result of class forces in what is today a globalized industry. In a crisis, workers are blackmailed into making concessions to keep their jobs. Then

the corporation uses them to claw back to recovery, rewarding shareholders and top management and stiffing the workers. As Gary Walkowicz, bargaining committeeperson at Dearborn Truck Plant, wrote in a leaflet he distributed, "It does not repay us for all the concessions we have given up. It does not even bring us back to the standard of living we were at before the concessions started."

The post-World War II period of building upon one contract after another is long gone. Autoworkers never recovered from the concessions agreed to in the 1979-81 period. Today contracts veer from a round of concessions in one fell swoop to a partial recovery. In this neoliberal world, companies want workers to keep wages low and reward them with bonuses when the company is particularly flush. They do not want workers to feel "entitled" to wages and benefits. As a result, workers feel less confident. If they win, as the Chrysler workers did, a way out of two-tier, then they feel that's all they can manage to do this time around. They are not supposed to notice that there is something wrong when a four-year contract outlines an eight-year

process.

The strategy of pressing their advantage seems reckless. And the fact that UAW officials at both the national and local level counsel caution makes it difficult to have any confidence that the bargaining team is capable of striking a better bargain, even in the most opportune moment. It's hard to imagine how a fight against these corporations can be waged by a leadership that feels workers should be happy to have a job. But rebuilding a militant culture isn't easy, even after the kinds of discussions that took place this time. Will militants run in the next round of elections and begin to offer an alternative as they take office? A space has opened up, but will it be enough?

Interestingly, one legacy from the struggles of the oppositional New Directions caucus led by Jerry Tucker against concessions in the 1980s and early '90s was the right to read the actual contract language, not just the summary the bargaining committee drew up. In both 2011 and 2015 these were available on the UAW website.

While both the union and corporation tried to present the multi-tier wages

for temps and parts workers as "exceptions," this looks like a cancer that will spread, as does the use of temps.

How can the lower-wage scale in the Big Three parts plants be an inspiration to the unorganized workers who make up 85% of the auto supplier work force? Or to the unorganized workers at Toyota, Honda, Volkswagen? Or to autoworkers in states like Michigan and Indiana, where right-to-work laws can misdirect workers' frustration over conditions on the job?

There are still deeper problems: Given what we know about the role fossil fuel plays in causing climate change, the annual production of 16-18 million U.S-made vehicles is not sustainable. These lines need to be rapidly phased out and replaced with an industry manufacturing buses, light rail, and some electric vehicles. Clearly that's not going to happen as long as capital drives the industry and without worker and community control guiding the conversion.

There's a lot for autoworkers to be thinking about and organizing around!

*December 16, 2015*

## Referendum and constituent process

**27 December 2015, by Josep María Antentas**

Forgotten by the pro-independence process which considers it a past stage and ignored by those who reject the elementary democratic exercise of the right to decide, the referendum however crept with almost the same force into the pre-election debate in Catalonia through the candidacy of En ComÃ Podem, the undoubted lever of a campaign that could culminate in the final breakdown of the Catalan party system as we have known it until now and with a shock similar to that already experienced in the city of Barcelona on May 24.

The referendum fell by the wayside

after the decision of the Mas government, with the support of the pro-independence organizations, not to openly confront the state following the challenge of November 9, looking for a way out in the form of the alternative consultation eventually organized, and pushing toward the conversion of the parliamentary elections into a plebiscite.

The result of September 27, with a clear victory of the pro-independence forces in terms of a pro-independence parliamentary majority, opened a scenario in which there is a parliamentary bloc implementing a

roadmap to independence but devoid of the uncontested legitimacy that a referendum majority would have had.

The denial of the referendum has become the quintessence of the undemocratic approach of the PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos towards the independence process in Catalonia. The demand is inappropriate. There is nothing to talk about. Discussion finished. End of story. The political No, accompanied by judicial coercion, has only one basic strategic perspective: to win time, wait until the Catalan pro-independence movement deflates after a war of attrition in the

demoralization that festers and, as a last resort, try to disable the more conservative part of the pro-independence social base with some kind of limited and controlled reform of Catalan self-government.

However, despite its absence, the referendum, or rather the non-referendum, largely determines the stakes of the present confrontation. The denial of the referendum prevented the state from trying to defeat the independence process democratically, thus undermining its own legitimacy and institutional machinery.

And the absence of a binding consultation prevents the pro-independence movement from preparing for the final battle, as it is still immersed in an increasingly complex process, with each new step intensifying the clash with the state but without precipitating a final outcome. The referendum today seems as implausible, due to the correlation of forces in the Congress of Deputies, as it is necessary. Hence the need to place it, as En Comença Podem does, at the center of state politics both before and after the nationwide elections, also recalling that the democratic solution to the demands arising from Catalonia is a fundamental part of an overall democratic solution to the crisis of regime and a firewall against any operation of self-reform from above.

A scenario that must be kept in mind to be situated correctly in the discussions following the general election which will mark the end of the first part of a political crisis that will remain open after December 20.

The need to hold a binding consultation, however, operates in

dialectical tension with the opening of a Catalan constituent process not subordinate to state logics, as a form of real and effective practical exercise of the sovereignty of the people and whose legitimacy derives from both the popular mobilization that started on September 11 of 2012 and the result of September 27 as well as March 15, 2011 which raised the constituent need from another perspective from that of independence, although with the democratic impulse as the common element.

We should not counterpose the referendum to the Catalan constitutional process. There will be no mandatory consultation in Catalonia without the existence of a movement that advances with its own agenda of rupture, taking its sovereign path, but without strategically disconnecting from state policy. And, on the other hand, the independence process will not result in a democratically legitimized outcome accepted by all (within and outside of Catalonia) without a binding consultation. Referendum and constituent process supplement and need each other. The one has little credibility without the other. The first appears on the agenda for December 20. The second was the decisive question on September 27.

A referendum proposal disconnected from a Catalan constituent process not subordinated to state dynamics appears as a mere form of shifting the goalposts and postponing the exercise of sovereignty by the Catalan people until a parliamentary majority is obtained in the Congress of Deputies. This moves the axis of the decision exclusively to the state level and would have crippling effects in Catalonia.

In reality it is necessary to advance on two fronts at the same time, initiating a constituent dynamic in Catalonia and fighting for a change in the balance of forces at state level in which December 20 should be a major first step and for which the Catalan mobilization and the state alliances woven from Catalonia for December 20 are decisive.

Conversely, a proposal for a Catalan constitutional process that does not contemplate the need for a referendum, which is not tied to the construction of a new majority in the state, misses a central piece in the democratic legitimacy of the process and in the formation of a broad Catalan political majority.

This has been the double weak point of the route followed by the declaration of initiation of the independence process adopted last November 9 in the Catalan parliament, lacking a strategy also addressed to the advocates of the right to decide and culminating in a legitimate consultation.

The management of the dialectic between referendum and Catalan constituent process holds the key to a strategy of rupture whose rhythms and scales do not overlap mechanically in a harmonious way, but which can be positively framed. How? By opening with a triple confluent step: advancing in a sovereign manner from Catalonia, articulating between the peripheries to acquire a decisive centrality as they already do in En comença Podem and the Galician En Marea, and contributing to a new plural majority of rupture in the state assembly, either this December 20... or in the second round of a game that the dominant classes are far from having won in advance.

## Greece: an alternative

25 December 2015, by **Éric Toussaint**

Taking feedback into account I have slightly amended my proposal. I had presented this proposal on 29 March

2014 in Athens during a working meeting with DEA activists [3] and participants from other countries (France, USA, Switzerland, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, Germany ...). I also presented a summary of this proposal at a public conference on 30 March 2014 where Panagiotis Lafazanis, presently the leader of the new Popular Unity party launched in Greece on 21 August 2015, also spoke.

This proposal has not been published so far. In fact, I thought that the responses to my repeated requests for comments and improvements were insufficient to make it public. I was also aware of my limited knowledge of the Greek reality and of the need for a collective proposal essentially developed by the Greeks involved in their national reality. Despite these reservations, following the capitulation of July 2015, I have decided to make public the proposal written two years ago.

The present paper includes large chunks of the proposals I drafted in July 2015. [see ]

In this draft, I proposed an exit from the Eurozone at an appropriate time, which I could not specify. In fact, as a witness to the Greek people's level of consciousness I am convinced that a number of priority measures could and should have been taken without having to leave the Eurozone. To talk the majority of the population into accepting the exit, they need to be told why this option has become a necessity (evidently this is what has been happening since July 2015). Finally, an exit from the Eurozone entails other measures, so that the exit eventually favours the interests of the majority of the population. Otherwise the exit becomes a right-wing measure, which has to be avoided.

In a country such as Greece, a popular government should:

1. Repeal the anti-popular measures imposed in the memoranda signed with the Troika after May 2010. This particularly refers to the reinstatement of dismissed workers following the imposition of these memoranda.

2. Suspend debt payment, organize an audit and radically reduce the debt and its repayment by an act of repudiation (which will necessarily be unilateral), adopt discriminatory measures to protect the people's savings invested in debt.

Adopt a specific measure on the bilateral debt owed to Germany. It amounts to €15 billion contracted in the May 2010 memorandum: the repudiation of this debt should partially compensate Germany's historic debt to Greece (World War II).

3. Socialize the banking and insurance sectors. Their own choices have now led most banks to a situation of insolvency and not just a temporary liquidity crisis. The decision of the European Central Bank and the Bank of Greece to protect the interests of large private shareholders only makes the situation worse.

We must return to basics. The banks should be regarded as a public service, precisely because they are significant entities and their poor management can have a disastrous impact on the economy. The banking business is too serious to be entrusted to private bankers. Since it handles public money, enjoys the State's guarantees and provides a basic service to society, the bank must be treated as a public service.

The government needs to retrieve its ability to control and manage economic and financial activities. It must also have the means to make investments and finance public expenditure by drastically curtailing the loans from private institutions. For this, it must regain authority over the banks to socialize them, by transferring them to the public sector under citizens' control, without compensating the major private shareholders. In some cases, despite the lack of compensation, the expropriation of private banks can be quite expensive for the State, due to their accumulated debts and the reserve of toxic assets. The cost in question must be recovered as much as possible from the global assets of large shareholders. In fact, private companies that are shareholders of the banks are the ones that caused this dismal state of the banking sector.

All along they have been making substantial profits while holding a portion of their assets in other sectors of the economy. Now it's time to seize some of their global assets.

Public banks with public service status (under citizens' control) can coexist with cooperative banks of moderate size (the cooperative nature of these banks should be strictly controlled with the provision to penalize by withdrawing the business permit).

The present paper includes large chunks of the proposals I drafted in July 2015 [4]

The Greek State is by far the main shareholder of the four major Greek banks (representing more than 80% of the Greek banking sector) and it should therefore take full control of the banks in order to protect citizens' savings and boost domestic loans to support consumption. First, the State should assume its majority stake in the banks and turn them into public-sector companies. Then, the State should organize the orderly liquidation of these banks whilst ensuring the protection of small shareholders and savers. The State should recover the cost of cleansing the banks from major private shareholders who have caused the crisis and then abused public support. A 'bad bank' should be created to isolate and hold toxic assets with a view to their liquidation. Those responsible for the banking crisis should be sued and made to pay once and for all. The financial sector must be thoroughly cleaned up and made to serve the people and the real economy.

Private insurance companies should also be socialized. Although the situation of the insurance sector is less publicized, it is also bearing the full brunt of the current crisis. Large insurance groups conducted risky operations just as private banks did, since they move in the same circles. The major chunk of their assets consists of sovereign debt securities and derivatives. In search of maximum immediate profit, they speculated dangerously on premiums paid by policyholders, on their savings invested in life insurance or voluntary contributions for a supplementary pension. Expropriating the insurance sector will prevent a disaster and



protect depositors and policyholders. This expropriation should function in tandem with the consolidation of capitalized retirement schemes.

4. Regain control over the Central Bank. Yannis Stournaras, the current CEO (appointed by Antonis Samaras' government) invests all his energy in preventing the changes that the people are calling for. He is a Trojan Horse, serving the interests of large private banks and the neoliberal European authorities. The Central Bank of Greece should be made to serve the interests of the Greek population.

5. Create an electronic currency (denominated in euros) for internal use in the country. The public authorities could raise pensions and salaries in the public services and grant humanitarian aid to people by opening credit accounts for them in electronic currency that could be used for several kinds of payment: electricity and water bills, payment for transport and taxes, purchases of food and basic goods, etc. Contrary to a baseless prejudice, even private businesses would do well to voluntarily accept the electronic method of payment as it would allow them both to sell their goods and settle payments to the government (payment of taxes and for the various public services they use). The creation of this additional electronic currency would reduce the country's needs in hard euros. Transactions in this complementary electronic currency could be made by mobile phone, as is the case today in Ecuador.

6. Dissolve the privatization agency and replace it with a national **asset** management agency (with an immediate halt to privatizations) which will be responsible for protecting public assets while generating revenue.

7. Impose a strict control on capital movements and retail prices.

8. Adopt a tax reform with:

a) Higher taxation rates on the highest income bracket.

b) An increase of the tax on immovable property (with exemption

for the principal residence below a threshold to be defined according to the number of people living in that residence).

c) Abolition of the tax privileges enjoyed by ship-owners, the Orthodox Church and other capitalist sectors.

d) Radical reduction or abolition of VAT on essential goods and services; imposition of hefty taxes on the wealth of the richest.

e) Strict control of the massive tax evasion which deprives the community of considerable means and employment. Substantial public resources should be allocated to the financial services to effectively fight against the fraudulent activities of major corporations and the wealthiest households. The results should be made public and the perpetrators severely punished.

9. Adopt a policy for internal public borrowing from the Central Bank through the monetization of debt. Additional public domestic borrowing measures may be adopted by issuing public debt securities within national borders.

In fact, the State must be able to borrow to improve the living conditions of the population, for example by carrying out public utility works. Some of this work can be financed by the current budget through assertive policy choices, but government borrowing could also enable other more ambitious projects – for example the massive development of public transport to replace private cars; developing the use of renewable energy; creating or reopening local railway services throughout the urban and semi-urban sectors of the country; renovating, rehabilitating or constructing public buildings and social housing while reducing energy consumption and providing quality amenities.

A transparent policy of public borrowing must be defined urgently. Public borrowing should aim at guaranteeing an improvement in living conditions, discarding the logic of environmental destruction. It must contribute to a redistribution of wealth and to reducing inequalities.

That is why we propose that financial institutions, large private corporations and wealthy households be legally bound to purchase – commensurate with their wealth and income – non-indexed government bonds at 0%**interest**. The rest of the population can voluntarily acquire government bonds at an interest rate above**inflation** that will ensure a genuine and positive return (e.g. 3%). So if annual inflation is 3%, the interest rate actually paid by the State for the corresponding year will be 6%. Such a policy of positive discrimination (similar to those adopted against racial oppression in the US, the caste system in India, or gender inequality) will result in tax justice and less inequality in wealth distribution.

10. Contract a public loan from alternative sources (that is to say, excluding the Troika and the foreign financial markets) without accepting any conditionalities.

11. Apply the following golden rule: the amount allocated to the repayment of public debt cannot exceed 5% of government revenues. Rule out the socialization of private debt. Make it obligatory to organize a permanent audit of public debt with citizen participation. Withdraw statutory limitations to crimes related to illegitimate debt; treat illegitimate debt as invalid; adopt a second golden rule which stipulates that public expenditure guaranteeing fundamental human rights is irreducible and takes precedence over debt repayment.

12. It is also important for Greece to launch a process of structural democratic changes with active citizen participation. To achieve this constituent process, Greece must convene the election of a Constituent Assembly through popular vote to draft a new democratically chosen Constitution. Once the Constituent Assembly – which should operate on the basis of grievances and proposals received from the people – has adopted the draft, it will be submitted to popular vote.

13. Establish a register of assets.

14. Reduce working hours and restore

pre-2010 salaries. Then increase wages and low pensions to a level yet to be fixed.

15. Increase the legal minimum wage; establish an index for wages and social benefits commensurate with the cost of living.

16. Withdraw the parliamentary immunity enjoyed by elected officials involved in the crisis and bring them to justice.

17. Ban organizations which promote racism and / or racial hatred.

18. Implement a comprehensive programme to stimulate the economy:

Support local agricultural production: create a public service for training farmers in peasant agriculture and agro-ecology, prioritize the access of local products to the market, reschedule CAP subsidies so that they go to small farms, improve the supply line for local seeds, support new agricultural cooperatives, relocate agriculture and support facilities for food sovereignty;

- Support small and medium enterprises;
- Support small businesses;
- Support traditional fishery;
- Create jobs in the public services sector giving priority to health, public education and the environment;
- Restore companies that had been privatized to public status and support workers' takeover of companies;
- Develop renewable energies to meet local needs, support heating insulation projects for buildings, develop public transport, reject large and unnecessary projects and turn away from extractivism;
- Start ambitious projects

for environmental conservation and consolidate the corresponding national laws: natural parks, biodiversity of terrestrial and marine wildlife;

- Support small scale tourism (against the big tourist resorts);
- Organize public, local and ecological administration of water and waste.

19. Exit the Eurozone by applying a redistributive monetary reform, by reducing the liquid assets of the wealthiest households.

Here's an example (of course, the rates indicated may be modified after a thorough examination of how liquid household savings are distributed and the adoption of stringent criteria):

â,¬1 would be exchanged against one new drachma (n.D) up to â,¬ 200,000  
â,¬1 = 0.7 n. D. between â,¬ 200,000 and 250,000  
â,¬1 = 0.6 n. D. between â,¬ 250,000 and 350,000  
â,¬1 = 0.5 n. D. between â,¬ 350,000 and 500,000  
â,¬1 = 0.4 n. D. between â,¬ 500,000 and 600,000  
â,¬1 = 0.2 n. D. above â,¬ 600,000  
â,¬1 = 0.1 n. D. over â,¬ 1 million

If a household owns â,¬ 200,000 in cash, it gets 200,000 n.D in exchange  
For â,¬ 250,000, it gets 200,000 + 35,000 = 235,000 n.D

For â,¬ 350,000, it gets 200,000 + 35,000 + 60,000 = 295,000 n.D

For â,¬ 500,000, it gets 200,000 + 35,000 + 60,000 + 75,000 = 370,000 n.D

For â,¬ 600,000, it gets 200,000 + 35,000 + 60,000 + 75,000 + 40,000 = 410,000 n.D

For â,¬ 1 million, it gets 410,000 + 80,000 = 490,000 n.D

For â,¬ 2 million, it gets 410,000 + 80,000 + 100,000 = 590,000 n.D

20. Withdraw Greece from [NATO](#) , discontinue the foreign bases on Greek territory and reduce military expenditure. Start negotiations with neighbouring countries so that a

concerted process of demilitarization can be launched. It is essential to cancel the military cooperation agreement with Israel.

## Conclusion

The change after the capitulation of July 2015 has been radical and there will be numerous disastrous consequences. If we look at the causes of the current turn of events, there is of course the stubbornness of the creditors, but there is also the strategy chosen by the Syriza leadership and the government of Alexis Tsipras [5]: the refusal to clearly and explicitly question the legitimacy and legality of the debt, the continued repayment of debt, the failure to recognize the importance of a citizens' audit (even though Tsipras officially supported the audit), the refusal to ruffle the feathers of the big shareholders in the Greek banks that are responsible for the banking crisis, the refusal to defend the country against the creditors' aggressive inflexibility, the refusal to have an alternative plan ready, which could have included the exit from the euro, and to provide public explanations of the reasons why that might be necessary, the illusion that negotiations could prevail on the creditors to make enough concessions to allow SYRIZA and Greece to escape from austerity, the refusal to start a constituent process in order to democratically change the Greek constitution, the failure to understand the pivotal role of popular demonstrations that should have received encouragement, and so on.

The most urgent choice was not whether or not to remain in the Eurozone, but rather whether to negotiate while in a weak position or to give priority to the following five steps based on the strength of popular mobilization:

1. Suspend debt repayments while continuing to audit the debt, which means getting into direct conflict with the Troika;

2. Resolve the banking crisis, which means confronting the major private shareholders who caused the crisis;

3. Create a complementary parallel currency;

4. Increase measures to address the humanitarian crisis, in addition to the significant ones already taken by the government since February 2015;

5. Stop privatizations and create new resources for the public treasuries by adopting strong measures at the expense of the privileged sectors, starting with the richest 1%, the large

corporations and the major tax evaders.

*Translated by Suchandra De Sarkar in collaboration with Christine Pagnouille*

# New colonialisms and the crisis of left values

25 December 2015, by **Raul Zibechi**

Times of confusion in which ethics are shipwrecked, basic points of reference disappear and something is installed like “anything goes,” which permits supporting any cause that goes against the bigger enemy, beyond all consideration of principles and values. Shortcuts lead to dead ends, like equating Putin with Lenin, to use a somewhat fashionable example.

The Russian intervention in Syria is a neocolonial act, which places Russia on the same side of history as the United States, France and England. Good, emancipating colonialisms don’t exist. As much as Russian intervention is justified with the argument of stopping the Islamic State and the imperial offensive in the region, it is nothing more than an action symmetric to one using identical methods and similar arguments that is condemned.

The question that I consider central is: Why are voices from the Latin American left raised in support of Putin? It’s evident that many have hung their hopes for a better world, on the intervention of the big powers like China and Russia, with the hope of stopping or overthrowing the still hegemonic powers. It’s understandable in view of the exploits that Washington commits in our region. But it’s a strategic error and an ethical deviation.

I would like to illuminate this especially critical juncture, appealing to a historic document: the letter to Maurice Thorez (secretary general of the French Communist Party), written in October 1956 by Aimé Césaire. The text was born in one of the corners of history, a little after the XX Congress

of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where the crimes of Stalinism were denounced; the same month as the uprising of the Hungarian people against the pro-Russian bureaucratic regime (which resulted in thousands of deaths) and of the colonial attack Egypt for the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

Césaire renounced the party after a shameful congress in which the leadership was incapable of the least self-criticism before the revelation of crimes that, in fact, it was supporting. He was born in Martinique, like Frantz Fanon, where he was a secondary school teacher. He was a poet and the founder of the blackness movement in the 1930s. In 1950 he wrote *Discourse on colonialism*, with a big impact in black communities. His letter to Thorez was, in the words of Immanuel Wallerstein, “the document that best explained and expressed the distancing between the global communist movement and the different national liberation movements” (in *Discurso sobre el colonialismo*, Akal, p. 8).

I find three questions in his letter that illuminate the crisis of left values through which we travel.

The first is the lack of will to break with Stalinism. Césaire turns against the ethical relativism that seeks to exorcise the crimes of Stalinism with “some mechanical phrase.” It’s like that cracking of the whip that is repeated over and over, saying that Stalin “committed errors.” Murdering millions is not an error, even though it supposedly kills in the name of a just cause.

The largest part of the lefts do not make a serious and self-critical balance of the Stalinism that, as has been written in these pages, goes way beyond the figure of Stalin. What gave life to Stalinism is a model of society centered on the State and on the power of a bureaucracy that comes from a State bourgeoisie, which controls the means of production. It continues betting on a socialism that repeats that old and expired model of centralization of the means of production.

The second is that the struggles of the oppressed cannot be treated, Césaire says, “as part of a more important whole,” because a “singularity of our problems exists that cannot be reduced to any other problem.” The struggle against racism, he says, is “of a very different nature than the struggle of the French worker against French capitalism,” and cannot be considered “a fragment of this struggle.”

On this point, the anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal struggles touch the same fibers. “These forces would be faded into organizations that are not their own, made for them, made by them and adapted to objectives that only they can determine.” Even today there are those who don’t comprehend that women need their own spaces, like all oppressed peoples.

It’s about, affirms Césaire, “not confusing alliance and subordination,” something very frequent when parties of the left seek to “assimilate” the demands of the different groups below to a single cause, through the sacrosanct unity that does nothing more than homogenize differences,

thereby installing new oppressions.

The third question that Césaire's letter illuminates, highly topical, is related with universalism; in other words, with the construction of non-Eurocentric universals, in which the totality is not imposed on the diversities. "There are two ways of getting lost: by walled segregation in the particular or by dissolution into the "universal."

We are still far from constructing "a universal depository of all the particulars," which supposes the "deepening and coexistence of all the particulars," as Césaire wrote six decades ago.

Those who bet on powers symmetric with the existing, excluding and hegemonic ones, but of the left; those

who oppose the bad bombs of the Yankees with the good bombs of the Russians, follow the path traced by Stalinism of making a clean sweep with the past and with differences, instead of working for something different, for "a world where many worlds fit."

16 October 2015

[Clay's beach](#)

## A Brief History of ISIS

23 December 2015, by **Adam Hanieh**

War and imperialism, on one side, and the growing reach of jihadist terrorism, on the other, are said to be locked together in a mutually reinforcing embrace of violence and destruction. "Imperialist cruelty and Islamist cruelty feed each other," the French Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) [argued](#) shortly after the Paris attacks. In order to break this nihilistic death grip, we need to oppose foreign intervention, put an end to imperialist violence, and halt the ongoing plunder of wealth from countries in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere.

The basic logic of this argument is undoubtedly sound. But in terms of explanatory value, this kind of analysis does not go far enough. It suffers from too much generality and abstractness "telling us little about the specificity of this particular moment, or the nature of ISIS as a movement. By attributing a kind of automaticity or natural mirror between ISIS and imperialism, we can miss the all-important context and history that has shaped the remarkably rapid rise of the organization.

Why does the response to Western aggression and the calamitous situations in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere across the region take this particular ideological and political form? What explains the support that ISIS finds on the ground in both the Arab world and Europe? In short: why

now? And why like this?

The real genesis of the Islamic State's rise needs to be seen in the trajectory of the Arab uprisings that erupted throughout 2011 and 2012. These uprisings represented enormous hope, a hope that must continue to be defended. They were met with repression and reversal, unable to move forward in any fundamental sense. It was into this breach that Islamist groups stepped, their rise closely calibrated to the pushback against the revolts and the popular democratic aspirations that they embodied.

There was no inevitability to this. Rather, the difficulties the uprisings faced created a vacuum that was necessarily filled by something else.

ISIS's worldview is an ideological expression of this new reality. To be clear, ISIS's rise cannot be explained as simply an outcome of ideology or religion, as many Western commentators appear to believe. There are very real social and political roots that explain the organization's growth.

But taking the ideological expression seriously helps us understand how various intersecting factors "the destructive spread of sectarianism, the devastating repression in Syria and Iraq, and the interests of different regional and international powers in

the Middle East " have acted to incubate the rise of ISIS.

It is a dialectic of retreat: the growth of ISIS has reinforced, and has simultaneously fed off, an inability to achieve the aspirations of 2011 as the region has become mired in multiple, deepening crises. While ISIS's ideological framing of these crises is obviously false, it is nonetheless one that appears for some to resonate with lived experience, a comprehension of the world that makes sense of the apparent chaos and destruction. The mutually reinforcing aspects of this process are what make the current situation so dangerous.

## The Ghosts of 2011

The upheavals that began with the protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011, and subsequently reverberated through the entire region, were the most significant revolts the Middle East had seen in over five decades. It is important to remember the initial promise embodied in these movements at a time when too many are quick to dismiss them as doomed from the outset "or worse, some kind of plot stirred by external conspirators.

These protests drew millions into mass political action for the first time in



generations, seriously shaking established state structures and the grip of repressive, Western-allied regimes. Most significantly, that these movements were regional in scope pointed to the commonalities and shared experiences of people throughout the Middle East. Their impact on political consciousness and forms of organization continue to be felt across the world.

From the beginning of these uprisings it was clear that the issues at stake went far beyond the simplistic caricature of “democracy versus dictatorship” that many commentators assumed. The underlying reasons drawing people into the streets were [deeply connected](#) to forms of capitalism in the region: decades of neoliberal economic restructuring, the impact of global crises, and the ways in which Arab states were governed by autocratic police and military regimes long backed by Western powers.

These factors need to be seen in their totality, not as separate or divisible causes. Protesters did not necessarily explicitly articulate this totality as the reason for their anger, but this underlying reality meant that the profound issues facing the Arab world would never be solved through the simple removal of individual autocrats.

It was to prevent any such challenge to political and economic structures that elites, supported by Western powers and their regional allies, quickly stepped in and attempted to quash the possibility of change. This took place through a variety of means, with a range of political actors coming to shape the counterrevolutionary processes differently in each country.

At the level of economic policy, there was little alteration, with Western donors and international financial institutions [insisting](#) on the continuity of neoliberal reform packages in places such as Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. Coupled with this economic continuity, indeed a prerequisite for it, was the rolling out of new laws and emergency orders that banned protests, strikes, and political movements.

Simultaneously, political and military intervention in the region rapidly

expanded. The fracturing of Libya following direct Western military [intervention](#), and the Saudi-led crushing of the Bahrain uprising were two key moments of this process. Egypt's military coup in July 2013 also marked a critical point in the reconstitution of old state structures, and confirmed the pernicious role of the [Gulf States](#) in pushing back Egypt's revolutionary process.

Perhaps most significantly, the social and physical devastation wrought by the Assad regime in Syria, including hundreds of thousands of deaths and the millions of people displaced across and within borders, further reinforced a region-wide sense of despair that came to replace the initial optimism of 2011.

ISIS and its earlier incarnations were basically irrelevant to the first phases of these uprisings, the massive demonstrations, strikes, and creative protest movements that rocked all Arab countries during 2011. Indeed, the only comment ISIS (at that time known as the Islamic State of Iraq) could muster following the overthrow of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak was a statement warning against secularism, democracy, and nationalism, urging Egyptians not to “replace that which is better with that which is worse.”

Yet as the initial aspirations for real change appeared to be increasingly thwarted, ISIS and other jihadist groups emerged as a symptom of this reversal, an expression of the apparent retreat in the revolutionary process and the growing sense of chaos. In order to better understand why this was the case, it is necessary to take a brief detour through ISIS's ideology and worldview.

## Authenticity, Brutality, Utopia

Islamic fundamentalism is often defined as the desire to bring back the ways of a magnificent past, supposedly modeled (in the Sunni account) on the first few generations of Islamic rulers that came after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. The Islamic State professes this goal, and

in terms of social practice and religious law this is how it purports to rule.

But to reduce ISIS to a simple seventh-century irredentism would be a serious mistake. The organization takes seriously the project of state building, devoting much effort toward the establishment of various financial, legal, and administrative structures across the territories it now controls. Although the borders of these areas are in constant flux and there are differing [assessments](#) of what is meant by “control,” ISIS has an extensive territorial reach, by some [estimates](#) ruling over 10 million people.

As part of this very modernist project, the organization has placed a high priority on developing a sophisticated media and propaganda network, setting it qualitatively apart from other examples of Islamic rule such as Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where television-adorned trees and the “execution” of computers [remain](#) lasting images of the 1990s and early 2000s.

One researcher has [estimated](#) that the ISIS media unit generates just under forty unique pieces of media each day, including videos, photo essays, articles, and audio programs in many different languages. This level of programming rivals any TV network, and stands in contrast to the older al-Qaeda model that relied on grainy VHS tapes smuggled from the mountains of Afghanistan to Al Jazeera, where they were held hostage to the vagaries of hostile news producers and intelligence agencies.

The decentralized network through which ISIS propaganda is disseminated is also unique, using an army of Twitter accounts and anonymous websites such as justpaste.it and archive.org to host their media. Abdel Bari Atwan, an Arab journalist whose [account of the rise of ISIS](#) draws upon well-placed insiders, claims that the organization controls over one hundred thousand Twitter accounts and sends a daily barrage of fifty thousand tweets. This and other forms of social media are the conduits through which ISIS both recruits and disseminates its messages.



ISIS's tech-savvy side has been widely acknowledged, most recently in Obama's [facile description](#) of them as "a bunch of killers with good social media." But the Islamic State's effective use of technical skills, or simply a response to conditions of secrecy and constant surveillance. Rather, the high priority ISIS places on social media and technology points to the organization's obsessive concern with performativity and self-representation.

Indeed, it is difficult to think of any other political or religious entity in the region that takes so seriously the question of "branding" and projecting a certain self-image to the outside world.

Within this ideological messaging, three key tropes stand out. The first of these is a self-evident feature of any fundamentalist movement: religious authenticity, or the need to continually claim and demonstrate fidelity to religious text. In this context, what constitutes "authenticity" is something that must continually be asserted, performed, and defended in front of rival perspectives.

There are many examples of ISIS's preoccupation with this question. Several commentators, for example, have noted the group's apparently strange emphasis on the small and rather insignificant town of Dabiq, located in northern Syria. Dabiq possesses no military utility or natural resources. Nonetheless, ISIS's online magazine is named after the spot, and the group reported a large influx of recruits when it announced the battle to take the town.

The reason? Dabiq holds a particular position in Islamic eschatology, as the site of a future battle with infidel armies that will herald the beginning of the apocalypse. By taking hold of this small Syrian town, ISIS could project itself as faithfully following a path that had been foretold centuries ago. In a similar vein, the group's announcement of the town of Raqqa as its Western headquarters resonated strongly among Arab Muslims. The town had been the home of Harun al-Rashid, the fifth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, which many view as a golden age of Islam.

The second core feature of ISIS propaganda is the well-known "brutality" meme: the live decapitations, executions, and other shocking content that have splashed the group across television and computer screens throughout the world. The deliberately horrifying material has guaranteed wall-to-wall media coverage and instant fame.

Compare this with al-Qaeda, which took decades and the September 11 attacks to become a household name. Brutality, however, is much more than just a headline-grabber. It is also intentionally used to generate fear.

This strategy has been incredibly successful "as ISIS approached the town of Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi army simply stripped, dropped their weapons, and ran, allowing the jihadists to capture untold arms and military transport vehicles, as well as a reported \$400 million from the Iraqi Central Bank (although this latter story [has been disputed](#)).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the application of excessive violence is a conscious element of what ISIS describes as its strategy of "polarization" "one aimed at exploding the bloody sectarian wars that underpin the expansion of ISIS across the region.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the stereotype propagated by Western media, the main content of ISIS propaganda is actually much more mundane than the violence for which the group is best known. This is the third of the group's ideological tropes: utopic themes aimed at showing the supposed pleasures of civilian life in the "caliphate," among them bountiful economic activity, beautiful scenery, and stability of life.

One exhaustive study that documented all media produced by the organization from mid-July to mid-August 2015 found that more than half of the material was focused on these themes of utopia. Similarly, the aforementioned magazine, *Dabiq*, is heavily infused with these subjects. This is the most misunderstood element of how the group projects itself in the Arab world, and arguably the most important. It is an orientation

that seems particularly directed toward Arab audiences.

A glance through ISIS-related Twitter accounts in Arabic shows constant chatter aimed at emphasizing the seemingly inane, boring, everydayness of life in the Islamic State: water pipes getting fixed, markets bustling with colorful fruit and vegetables, fresh bread, and new dental clinics.

This observation points to the undeniable fact that ISIS consciously choreographs itself as an island of stability and peace amid a region of chaos, war, and upheaval. This is important to understanding the pull that ISIS presents to some layers of the population. In a moment of deep crisis, the promise of some level of security is part of what makes ISIS attractive (or, at the very least, a less-worse option).

Recognizing this utopic promise is an important clue to understanding how the organization has managed to expand over the past year. This is not to suggest that ISIS rule is not brutal or repressive, particularly for those at the receiving end of its sectarian violence, but rather that it is precisely in the hollowness of its utopic promise that some measure of hope can be found.

## Managing "Savage Chaos"

This triptych of ISIS propaganda "religious authenticity, brutality, and utopia" is itself a reflection of a wider eschatology: a periodization of history and future based on the imminence of end times. It is a major difference between ISIS and other jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda.

Unlike al-Qaeda, the Islamic State tends to emphasize much more the sequential unfolding of historical phases associated with prophetic moments (the example of Dabiq is one illustration of this). This is why the question of authenticity figures so heavily in the group's propaganda. Less obviously, however, this eschatology also provides an explanation for both the brutality and utopia tropes discussed above.

The clearest reflection of this can be found in a popular reference point for jihadist strategy: the book *Administration of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Islamic Nation Will Pass (AoS)*, first published on the Internet in Arabic in 2004, under the nom de guerre Abu Bakr Naji. The book should not be thought of (as it has been in some journalistic accounts) as a step-by-step playbook or strategy manual for jihadist groups; it is rather a text whose very popularity in these circles reveals something about the worldview that informs jihadist thinking.

Succinctly, the key goal of AoS is to explain the steps that they need to take in order to end the domination of “great powers” (principally the United States) over the region and establish a state in accordance with Islamic principles. AoS delineates two distinct historical phases that must be passed through before an Islamic state can be established.

The first, the phase of “vexation and exhaustion,” is the stage that the author believed the Arab world was passing through at the time of writing (early 2000s). During this stage, the task was to harass and destabilize the enemy through “vexation operations,” including actions such as bombing tourist resorts and economically significant areas (particularly those associated with petroleum).

These actions would force Arab governments to disperse their security forces across wide areas, an expensive undertaking that would inevitably leave new targets exposed. Moreover, the apparent ability of groups to undertake these actions with impunity would act as a kind of propaganda by deed and help attract new recruits.

The ultimate goal of these operations is to generate a situation of tumult and breakdown of state structures, which the author described as the phase of “savage chaos.” This period corresponds to a profound increase in individual and social insecurity, a lack of basic social provisions, and a rise in all forms of social violence. It is conceived as a natural outcome of the withdrawal and collapse of state structures; moreover, its arrival is

viewed as positive for the jihadist group. By stepping into the subsequent chaos, the responsibility of the situation and “manage or administer savagery.”

Concretely, this means the supply of services such as “food and medical treatment, preservation of security and justice among the people who live in the regions of savagery, securing the borders by means of groups that deter anyone who tries to assault the regions of savagery, as well as setting up defensive fortifications.”

This side to the “management of savagery” clearly mirrors how ISIS views its current role in the Arab world (particularly in Iraq and Syria), and helps us understand why the utopic theme is so prominent in its propaganda.

Moreover, within the AoS schema, the role of violence is also elemental. Echoing the ways in which ISIS employs brutality, AoS recommends that violence be deliberately excessive and highly performative. “Massacring the enemy and making him frightened” would serve “to make [enemies] think one thousand times before attacking.” This would include so-called “paying the price” actions, aimed at deterring enemies from attacking due to the fear of subsequent reprisals.

Likewise, all actions should aim to create societal “polarization” through the use of disproportionate violence. As the author of AoS notes:

*“Dragging the masses into the battle requires more actions which will inflame opposition and which will make the people enter into the battle, willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side which he supports. We must make this battle very violent, such that death is a heartbeat away so that the two groups will realize that entering this battle will frequently lead to death.”*

There is an irresistible dénouement to this formula: the worse the situation gets the better it is. The author recognizes (and applauds) this self-fulfilling logic, noting that even if the jihadist group was to fail in the

immediate administration of savagery, then the results would actually still be positive: failure, it is said, “does not mean end of the matter; rather, this failure will lead to an increase in savagery.”

There is established, in short, an inevitable teleology that thrives in profoundly negative situations, where the very existence of mutually reinforcing and ever-worsening cycles of violence become themselves the evidence for the correctness of the schema.

## Sectarianism and Post-Invasion Iraq

The link between ISIS’s worldview and the disastrous rise in sectarianism throughout the region is clear. Although the author of AoS and the leaders of earlier jihadist groups were careful to avoid religious sanction for intra-Muslim violence, and condemned any deliberate targeting of other Muslims, this was to change with the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) during the mid-2000s.

Led by the Jordanian Abu Musab Zarqawi, AQI came to understand the bombing of religious ceremonies and institutions as one of the most stunningly effective tools of polarization. In Iraq, Zarqawi consciously sought to ignite a civil war between Shi’a and Sunni through a methodical series of devastating attacks on Shi’a communities.

Such activities, coupled with the gruesome beheading videos that earned him the appellation “Sheikh of the Slaughterers,” provoked increasing anger among the older al-Qaeda leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Indeed, the latter penned a famous letter to Zarqawi in 2005 [6] upbraiding the Jordanian, in which he described the “the scenes of slaughtering the hostages” and Zarqawi’s attacks on Shi’a in Iraq as tactics that would alienate al-Qaeda from their necessary support base.

Nonetheless, despite Zawahiri’s protestations, a range of factors that had little to do with Zarqawi provided

a fertile environment for sectarianism. First, the notorious de-Ba'athification policy implemented by US occupation forces following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a profound marginalization of the country's Sunni population. Under this policy, any person who had been a member of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party was summarily dismissed from their job, denied public-sector employment, and barred from accessing their pensions.

As many analysts pointed out at the time, this was a recipe for disaster. Ba'ath party membership had been an expectation for virtually any state job, so the policy led to the mass dismissal of thousands of teachers, doctors, police, and low-ranking civil servants. By eviscerating the state in this way, the United States virtually guaranteed a collapse of basic social services – a catastrophic prospect for a society emerging from over two decades of sanctions and war.

Sunni marginalization was not simply felt in the economic sphere. American forces frequently led attacks against Sunni-populated towns and villages, and tens of thousands of prisoners were locked away in US-run prisons where isolation, torture, and the "Taylorized bureaucracy of detention" [7] were routinely used to bolster the occupation.

The most notorious of these prisons was the Abu Ghraib detention facility, which exploded into Western consciousness in 2003 following the release of photographs showing US military personnel torturing prisoners. In the wake of this scandal, many detainees were transferred out of Abu Ghraib to another prison, Camp Bucca. It was here that one detainee, later known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, came to establish a strong relationship with a coterie of former Ba'athist military officers who had spent time in Abu Ghraib.

Today, of course, al-Baghdadi is the leader of ISIS, and those same Ba'athist officers now serve as his closest deputies and advisors. In this manner, the experience of Sunni detainees at the hands of the US military not only further entrenched the country's emerging sectarian divisions, but also, in a concrete

sense, actually forged the Islamic State itself.

Sectarian rifts continued to deepen from 2006 onwards, as the US, in tacit agreement with Iran, came to institutionalize a Shi'a-dominated state backed by a range of Shi'a militias. This situation only worsened following the formal departure of US troops from Iraq in 2011. Coupled with unparalleled levels of socioeconomic insecurity, Sunni marginalization produced a real social base whose attraction to ISIS goes beyond religious or ideological factors.

A large proportion of the mid-ranking cadres of ISIS are former Ba'athist functionaries drawn to the organization partly through economic incentives. Financial rewards are also appealing at the rank-and-file level. Pay for an ISIS fighter, for example, is estimated to be around \$300 to 400 per month, more than double that provided by the Iraqi army. The truck drivers and smugglers who today ship ISIS-produced oil from Syria to Iraq [8] are motivated primarily by the chance to make a living. For all its religious pretensions, the ISIS state-building project has a very material grounding.

Many commentators writing about Iraq often chalk this outcome up to the stupidity and hubris of the Bush administration, and the succession of obvious policy errors made following the occupation. Such an approach assumes that the United States actually sought a stable and united Iraq.

Yet a non-sectarian, unified Iraq led by a government with strong popular support would have been a disaster for US interests in the Middle East. Without this possibility ever seriously in the cards, it is not hard to see that from the outset, the fragmentation of Iraq along sectarian lines was the most likely outcome of US occupation (particularly since this also coincided with Iranian interests). Divide and rule has long been a preferred method of colonial domination.

These are the actual material and political roots of the region's current sectarian turn. Despite what ISIS, Saudi Arabia, or Iran might claim,

sectarianism is not the result of ever-present doctrinal or ethnic schisms, existing since time immemorial and persisting unchanged into the contemporary era.

It has always been, as the Lebanese communist [Mahdi Amel](#) argued decades ago, a modern technique of political power, a means through which ruling classes attempt to establish their legitimacy and social base, while fragmenting the potential for any kind of popular opposition. Post-invasion Iraq and the subsequent rise of ISIS provide a tragic confirmation of this thesis.

## Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the Islamic State

The utility of religion in shoring up earthly powers has, of course, a lengthy pedigree in the region. It is now widely acknowledged that the organizational roots of Islamic fundamentalist movements (including the progenitors of ISIS) have their origins in an alliance between the US and the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, through the 1960s and 1970s [9].

Faced with growing left-wing and nationalist political movements in the region, the sponsorship of Islamism was seen as an effective and disarming counterweight. By the 1980s, this policy was applied most systematically through US and Saudi support for Arab Islamist fighters in Afghanistan. It was here that preparations for armed jihad received their first practical boost.

This longstanding instrumentalization of Islamic fundamentalism has led some observers to argue that ISIS is a tool of the Gulf States. At first glance these claims would appear to make sense. Ideologically, there are close commonalities between the Saudi regime and the Islamic State. Both share a particularly restrictive interpretation of Islamic punishments (*hudud*). Indeed, the signature beheadings and amputations seen in ISIS-controlled areas are found nowhere else in the region except for



Saudi Arabia. When ISIS was looking for textbooks to use in the schools they govern, the only appropriate versions were felt to be those taken from Saudi Arabia.

There is also undoubtedly sympathy for ISIS among large portions of the Saudi population, including those who contribute financially, or volunteer to fight. Yet “while weapons supplied by Saudi Arabia (and Qatar) to Syrian groups have likely ended up in the hands of ISIS through defections or capture” there is little convincing evidence that ISIS is directly funded, or armed, by Saudi Arabia or any other Gulf state.

At a rhetorical level, the relationship between the two is one of profound antipathy and hatred. ISIS considers the Saudi monarchy to be one of its most despised enemies, and the overthrow of the al-Saud ruling family is one of the group’s principal aims. The Saudi monarchy will countenance no other claimant to global Islamic leadership, and fears the threat ISIS presents to its own rule.

On the other hand, the growing strength of ISIS does have a clear link to the repression directed by the Assad government against the Syrian uprising. A few months into the uprising, Assad released hundreds of prisoners (among them well-trained jihadists), many of whom became leaders and fighters in Islamic fundamentalist groups. Former high-ranking Syrian intelligence agents have claimed that this was a deliberate attempt by the regime to stoke sectarian discord and paint the uprising in an Islamist light [10].

The Assad government has a long record of attempting to manipulate such groups [11], including a prisoner release in the early 2000s and the facilitation of thousands of jihadist volunteers across the border to join up with Zargawi network in Iraq. Indeed, by February 2010, Syrian intelligence officials were attempting to market their infiltration and manipulation of jihadist groups as a basis for deepening security cooperation with the US in the region [12].

It is hardly surprising that when Syrian protesters were faced with the

barrel bombs, tanks, and indiscriminate aerial attacks of Assad’s military, it was to the well-trained, battle-hardened jihadist groups that some began to turn. These groups included Jabhat al Nusra (JaN), an organization established after the Islamic State in Iraq dispatched fighters to Syria in late 2011 and which made its public debut in January 2012.

During 2013, as the violence and displacement worsened, JaN suffered a bitter split with its parent group over strategic direction: whether to focus on confronting the Syrian military and deemphasizing sectarian divisions, or to prioritize territorial control, based on Islamic law and the pursuit of a strategy of polarization against all other groups. Islamic State in Iraq chose the latter path, announcing the expulsion of recalcitrant JaN cadres on April 9, 2013 and the formation of the newly configured ISIS.

Reflecting these strategic priorities “and contrary to popular belief” ISIS has largely avoided direct confrontation with the Assad government [13]. Instead, taking advantage of its control over smuggling routes and the border crossings that straddle Iraq and Syria (allowing it strategic depth and the safety of retreat denied to any other armed organization), ISIS has primarily sought territorial expansion.

In this endeavor, the military counsel of former Ba’athist generals from the days of Camp Bucca has been key to its success “the emphasis being on dominating access and supply routes that connect strategic nodes rather than an obsession with fixed points per se, securing oil fields, and controlling core infrastructure (particularly water and electricity generation).

This strategy has not only made the organization fabulously rich (holding at least nine lucrative oil fields in Syria and Iraq estimated to be worth over \$1.5 million per day in oil sales). It has also made the rest of Syrian territory (whether government- or opposition-controlled) heavily dependent on ISIS for their energy and power needs.

Coupled with vast amounts of money amassed from kidnapping, extortion, the sale of antiquities, smuggling, and taxes, ISIS is unlike almost all actual states in the Middle East “independently wealthy, financially self-sufficient, and operating within borders that deliberately transgress the boundaries established by colonial powers in the early twentieth century.

## More Intervention?

In these circumstances, calls to ratchet up Western military intervention in the region will only provide further sustenance for the organization. Precisely because war and occupation have laid such a fertile ground for Islamic State to grow, it is patently obvious that this kind of response will only worsen the situation. Indeed, in line with its strategy of polarization, the recent ISIS attacks have been explicitly aimed toward this outcome, and to drawing more Western intervention into the region as a means to deepen the sense of crisis and chaos.

Opposition to foreign intervention is not simply a demand that needs to be directed against the US or European states. Despite official claims of targeting ISIS, the Russian aerial bombardment of Syria that began on September 30 has largely avoided ISIS-controlled areas, focusing instead on areas where non-ISIS opposition groups are located.

These Russian attacks “supported on the ground by Hezbollah, Iranian troops, Iraqi Shi’a militias, and the Syrian army” have primarily sought to bolster the position of Assad in the lead up to what appears to be an emerging deal between the major regional and international players in Syria. In this context, the presence of ISIS actually serves to reinforce Assad’s claim to be “resisting terrorism,” a function that is clearly illustrated by the numerous [Western states](#) that have now swung over to supporting his government as a supposed necessary evil.

Of course, the Russian military orientation may change in the wake of

the Sinai, Beirut, and Paris attacks, but the fact is that the longstanding unspoken détente [14] between Islamic State and the Assad government has until now served the interests of both sides.

In these circumstances there are few easy answers for the Left. Yes, we need alternative, radical visions grounded in democratic demands, social and economic justice, and a rejection of sectarianism. But this also requires a sober assessment of the balance of forces and some kind of accounting of what went wrong over the last few years.

We need to be wary of analyses that attribute some kind of automatic reflexivity to the rise of ISIS and the machinations of war and imperialism. There was nothing inevitable about this outcome. It was in the reversals of the 2011 uprisings – and their failure to fundamentally challenge autocratic rulers – that ISIS found an ecosystem in which it could prosper and grow.

Politics abhors a vacuum, and with the

setbacks for popular and democratic mobilizations over the last three years, the Islamic State was one of those forces that came to reap the fruits of retreat. In parasitic fashion, the organization has latched onto the explosion of sectarian violence deliberately cultivated by rulers across all countries in the region, finding a host first in Iraq and later in Syria. In both these states, the group encountered (and helped bring into being) a reality that macabrely fit its “administration of savagery” schema.

Yet despite the apparent bleakness of the situation, there are grounds for hope. Local forces are confronting the Islamic State in extraordinarily difficult circumstances – most importantly, Kurdish movements (simultaneously facing the Turkish government’s repression [15]), as well as the non-ISIS opposition forces in Syria.

At the same time, courageous social and political movements in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere continue to defy the logic of sectarianism and demonstrate that the

struggle for a progressive alternative remains alive.

ISIS may project a utopic promise of stability and prosperity, but this is far from the reality on the ground. We can be absolutely certain that it will experience its own internal revolts, as similarly declarative examples of Islamic “states” have faced in the past.

Moreover, if we understand the rise of ISIS through the prism of retreat, we can take some confidence in knowing that the organization does not offer any effective answer to the region’s current predicament. It does not represent any kind of anti-imperialist response, or plausible route to a Middle East free of domination or repression, whether foreign or local.

Despite all the setbacks of the last few years, the potential growth of a genuinely left alternative has not been extinguished and, most importantly, has never been more necessary.

*Thanks to Laleh Khalili and Rafeef Ziadah for their comments.*

[Jacobin](#)

# Celebrate the electoral breakthrough but prepare to continue fighting for a rupture

22 December 2015, by **Anticapitalistas**

The PP came first in terms of votes but suffered a sharp decrease of seats. It is clear that there is a social majority that wants them out, that does not want the party of Barcenas and the Gürtel scandal to continue to govern. They have paid for corruption and rule in favour of the rich and against the working classes. This is good news: behind the political change, the new distribution of parliamentary power,

there is a strong social opposition.

The PSOE is not sinking and this is not good news. Although lower in votes and seats, its resilience also marks the limits of the process of change: without mobilization, is difficult to further erode the PSOE. The challenge ahead is that the need to oust the PP does not lead to legitimizing the PSOE, a “left” that applies neoliberal

policies, which has always ruled in favour of the elites.

The Ciudadanos phenomenon has proved less than expected. Its fourth position is a reminder that people prefer the original to the copy and that the centre, in a context of political polarization, has serious difficulties in developing itself. Its programme, a product of the FAES [