



IV493 - February 2016

IV493 - February 2016 PDF

29 February 2016, by [robm](#)

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Russia in Crisis: the Agonies of the Oil Empire

28 February 2016, by [Ilya Budraitskis](#)

The windfall from oil sales both created the sense that Russia's foreign policy muscle was strengthening and guaranteed a constant rise in state spending. The army, the bureaucratic apparatus and the murky system of government procurements received the bulk of this beneficence. Nevertheless, the growth in spending in the social sphere was seen as more of a residual effect, and education and medicine have always been regarded as the first things to sacrifice when money is short.

The years of oil prosperity fostered the growth of an ugly social model in which the inflation of energy resource prices on speculation compensated for the decline of production, a phenomenal level of social inequality, corruption, and increasingly systemic authoritarian political power protecting the interests of the elite. Vladimir Putin's popularity rested (and, for now, still rests) on this uncertain foundation. Key to this popularity was the widespread notion that because of his ruthlessness, Putin is the one person who is capable of guaranteeing "stability," an enduring trajectory of national growth

protected from any risk of shake-ups.

The most valuable insight here for the majority of Russia's residents is that "Putinist stability" is now most definitely a thing of the past, and that the Russian elite has no backup plan for redeeming the situation. By last year it had already become clear that the government's anti-crisis politics boils down to a local variety of austerity outdoing even the current politics of EU governments in its ruthlessness. It consists of sharply reduced social spending, forced pension reform (a proposed increase in the retirement age to 65), the refusal on principle to index salaries to the rate of inflation (12.9% last year) and more taxes and fees collected from the population. The weakening of the ruble, restrained with the help of currency reserves introduced onto the market and increased interests rates at the Central Bank, made loans inaccessible to small- and medium-sized business and contributed further to the economy's collapse.

The state budget for 2016, in accordance with this crisis, is based

on calculation that set the median price of oil at \$50 a barrel, but it has already fallen below \$30. Although the government has not yet publicly considered revising it, the Minister of Finance has already recommended that all other departments reduce spending by 10%.

The situation is exacerbated by the current system of revenue distribution between Moscow and the regions, in which all revenue becomes part of the federal budget, only then to be recounted into local budgets. The result is a growing tension between the government and regional authorities, who must bear responsibility for these "austerity measures" before the people. At the same time, in an effort to maintain his popularity, the president publicly demands from them demonstrations of "social commitment," putting them in an impossible situation.

The sharp decline in government revenues exposes the vulnerability of Putin's "power verticals," that is, the complete political dependence of local powers on the center combined with their economic "autonomy" (that is,

responsibility for fulfilling budget responsibilities). The political losses incurred from austerity must be shouldered by the federal government headed by Dmitri Medvedev or local governors—anyone but the president, whose popularity should not under any circumstance suffer as a result of a reduction in the quality of life of the people who support him.

The figure of Putin as a “national leader” is the main basis of legitimacy for those in power in the eyes of the majority. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that people trust their president, but they don’t trust the state he represents. In these catastrophic conditions the Putin political machine is preparing for parliamentary elections, which are set to take place in September 2016. Like all previous elections, they will have to conform to the script written by the Kremlin. It currently appears to name “United Russia” as the majority in Parliament, while casting Medvedev as the victim of growing passive dissatisfaction. The “independent” candidates, as well as the kept opposition (including the communists and Zhirinovskiy’s party) will attack the government for its antisocial austerity measures, but the president will remain beyond the reach of critics.

This guiding script may get out of control and provoke a wave of public disturbances (as happened in

December 2011, after the previous parliamentary elections). The principal difference today may turn out to be the combination of political protests against an antidemocratic system and social protests against poverty and the government’s neoliberal policies. 2015 saw a serious uptick in local protests in connection with delays in the disbursement of salaries, job cuts and unnecessary new taxes. In December demonstrations by truck drivers indignant at new, extremely high road tolls took place in nearly half of all regions of the country. In some cities, there were protest actions against harsh limitations placed on state medical coverage. On the whole, experts estimate that there have been 409 protests in the past year linked to the violation of workers’ rights (168 of which took the form of work stoppages). That’s 76% more than the average for the period 2008-2013.

The economic crisis along with the regular political cycle (parliamentary elections in 2016 and presidential elections in 2018), will unavoidably provoke and strengthen divisions within the elite. The possible battle lines can already be faintly seen: between Moscow and regional powers; between government finance experts and army lobbyists, who will insist on an increase in the defense budget in the face of “external threat,” and among state corporations, demanding all new subsidies from the state budget to finance their huge debts.

In the attempt to maintain the existing balance of forces, the regime must revisit their foreign policy of the past two years, including the war that is still dragging on in Ukraine, conflict with the west and the developing military engagement in Syria. Moscow is already taking active steps toward the removal of US and EU sanctions. For the first time since the moment that Russia annexed Crimea, direct negotiations over the fate of Donbas began in Kiev in between Ukrainian president Poroshenko and Russian representative Boris Gryzlov (a member of Putin’s inner circle of “friends”). This meeting was followed by an hours-long consultation between the Kremlin’s main “facilitator” of Ukrainian affairs and Assistant US Secretary of State Victoria Nuland. The repeal of the sanctions is necessary for the Russian government, among other reasons to enable large-scale foreign loans to augment depleted national financial resources. Dependence on oil prices could soon be completely replaced by another dependency—this time on international creditors.

All of this means that Russia is on the threshold of serious changes, which in the short term indicate an end to “Putinism” as a system—at least as we have known it during these “fat” years.

[LeftEast](#)

EU founding myths and reality

27 February 2016, by [Miguel Urbán Crespo](#)

The myth tells us that the “founding fathers” (of course, there were no “founding mothers”; the European project wasn’t born from a rib) built the project on the sound principles of democracy, solidarity and human rights. We mostly hear about Monnet, Schuman, Churchill or Adenauer. However, some of us prefer to remember Altiero Spinelli, an antifascist activist imprisoned by Benito Mussolini during World War II, who promoted a European federalist movement that could serve as an antidote to the destruction and horror

generated by imperialist wars.

Today, we see walls that have been built with razor wire as well as with fear of others and fear of the unknown.

But today, with every passing minute, these founding myths seem more misleading. Just look at how Europe’s borders are bleeding, and how fences emerge every other day! The fact is that the EU is responding to the largest refugee crisis in its history—and, possibly, its greatest

challenge in decades—by building walls, installing mass detention centers, and compromising the rights and freedoms of both natives and migrants. Today, we see walls that have been built with razor wire as well as with fear of others and fear of the unknown. Walls that widen the gap between us and them. Walls that reinforce bolted identities and exclusionary nationalism. Walls that revive old ghosts, the same ones that haunted Europe decades ago, and the same ones that supposedly gave rise to that European dream.

Today, the EU welcomes tax havens, sponsors financial coups against its own member states, and negotiates free trade agreements, such as the TiSA or TTIP, behind closed doors, turning its back on the interests of its own citizens. Faced with the challenges of climate change, the increasing scarcity of resources, and the competition from other emerging powers, the EU reduces labor rights and social policies to compete in a global market. At the same time, it intensifies its aggressive foreign trade policy, and, for the sake of security and the battle against terror, it curbs the same rights and freedoms that terror seeks to destroy.

At a time when we need Europe the most, we are finding more internal and external borders. At a time when we most urgently need to translate the values of peace, prosperity and

democracy into concrete policies, we are finding more wars, more cuts and growing xenophobia across the continent. We can already predict the results of this combination of impoverishment, savage capitalism, intolerance, and nationalism.

A change of course is not only possible or desirable; it is urgent and necessary. We need a democratic overhaul. Europe cannot continue living off its myths. Europe needs a plan B.

The EU claims to be a project designed to prevent the emergence of the ghosts that had plagued its past. It claims to have started with a dream. But the truth is that this dream has turned into a nightmare.

When austerity becomes the only political and economic option, this EU becomes a problem for the social

majorities. Building a different Europe therefore emerges as the only solution to the precarious condition we are currently living in.

The EU's current plan strays far away from the state of affairs envisioned in its foundational dreams. It is a plan that produces monsters and revives old ghosts. We know how that story ended. That is why a change of course is not only possible or desirable; it is urgent and necessary. We need a democratic overhaul. Europe cannot continue living off its myths. Europe needs a plan B.

This weekend, in Madrid, we have taken the first steps to change the Europe of merchants and war into a Europe of democracy and human rights.

[Huffington Post](#)

Help nuclear reactors Tihange 2 and Doel 3 final closing

27 February 2016, by [SAP-LCR](#)

This government is anti-social and pro-nuclear. They only think of making the rich richer, as quickly as possible. In addition, they take no account of the security of the population or the long-term consequences. They hide behind the studies from the FANC, which should be the watchdog of citizens against the dangers of nuclear power, but behaves in reality as a poodle of the energy sector.

We call on everyone to support the actions against nuclear energy, including financially supporting the legal case filed by the Stop Nuclear power association. All donations are welcome.

The reactor number 3 (abbreviated D3) of the nuclear power station at Doel, started up in 1982, was first shut down in June 2012 after the discovery of thousands of microscopic cracks in the reactor vessel. In August 2012 similar defects were detected in the reactor vessel of reactor No. 2 of the nuclear plant at Tihange (abbreviated

T2) during checks causing the stoppage of the reactor, also in 1983. [1]

Almost a year later, in May 2013, the FANC [2] gave permission to Electrabel to restart the reactors, a license subject to completion of obligations in the field of testing and trials in the year after the restart.

In March 2014, Electrabel decided to bring forward the planned closure of the two reactors as an irradiation test shows excessive embrittlement in a control sample of steel similar to the steel of the reactor vessels. [3]

To try to explain this unexpected result, Electrabel subsequently conducted further research and analysis. Meanwhile, reactor vessels were re-examined with an improved procedure. This study revealed a much larger number of defects to light than the previous survey: more than 13,000 for Doel 3 and more than 3,000 for Tihange 2. Finally, after twenty

months of consultations and analysis, the FANC gave permission again in November 2015 to restart the two reactors.

Interpretation

What can we conclude from this? Let us first of all remember that the reactor vessel is the essential component of a nuclear reactor for which no shortcoming can be tolerated. A crack in the reactor vessel is an incident that makes the reactor uncontrollable which would inevitably lead to the melt down of the reactor core and an absolute disaster like the disaster of Chernobyl or Fukushima. This standard of zero tolerance for a reactor is what is imposed in all specifications for the construction of a nuclear reactor. [4]

The vessels T2 and D3 do not comply with these maximum quality standards. If a reactor vessel with these known defects would be

delivered on a new construction site, it would undoubtedly be refused, as would also be the case in any country in the world. [5]

This first observation is obvious to everyone, but not for the FANC. That raises questions about the legitimacy of this agency and its ability to ensure the safety of the operation of Belgian nuclear reactors.

The way in which Electrabel and the FANC have dealt with this issue shows many deficiencies that threaten the security of citizens either in Belgium or in neighbouring countries, as demonstrated relevant by the recent study by Mrs. Ilse Tweer, an internationally recognized consultant for her expertise in materials science. [6]

We particularly draw attention to a general approach which flouts the rules of good scientific practice. There is also the lack of certainty about the origin of the cracks that in itself should prevent a restart.

Last but not least, citizens can only ask themselves about the absence of political input in this decision. Jan Jambon, Minister of Security and Interior responsible for nuclear safety, Marie-Christine Marghem, Energy Minister Charles Michel, Prime Minister and all other ministers of his government are hiding themselves away behind the all-encompassing ability of the FANC, shifting their decision making responsibility onto it and so by doing closing the door to any consultation with the population.

Legal proceedings

Faced with this scientific and political failure and the incredible risks taken, private citizens from all regions of the country have decided to bring the case to court with a view to close the two reactors permanently and disconnect them from the national grid.

A first step therefore was taken on December 20, 2015 with the filing of a petition for an injunction by the Nucléaire Stop Nuclear association. In it, the court is requested to order the two reactors to be immediately stopped and to call on independent

experts to decide on a definitive closure. The oral arguments take place before the Brussels Court of First Instance in public session on February 8, from 9 to 12 hours. The verdict is expected about three weeks later.

A second petition on behalf of individual applicants is in preparation and will likely be submitted between February 25th and March 10th. It will only concern the merits of the case and will complement the first procedure. In fact a legal procedure for the benefit of individuals cannot be used by a non-profit organization.

The combined cost of these two procedures is difficult to estimate, because anticipating their development and their respective timeframes is not easy. In addition to the court costs and the fees of the lawyers, there are the costs of the experts who could reach already to tens of thousands of euros. This could run up to an expenditure of â,- 50,000, which the applicants are preparing themselves for.

How can you help?

? By making a donation to support our fund, however small, to the bank account we have opened specially for it (see below).

? By spreading this initiative in your networks.

? If you represent an organization, we would be grateful if your association could support us officially: the name of your organization will appear on the Associations page.

? To write to us or send us a support message [here](#)

Bank account
Account name: Stop Nuclear Nucléaire VZW
IBAN: BE98 5230 8078 3493
BIC: TRIOBEBB
Address: Blegny, Belgium

Communication: an email address (which will allow us to contact you easily).

Other actions and support fund

In parallel with our case against the D3 and T2 reactors BBL (Bond Better Environment) and IEW (Inter-Environnement Wallonie) are starting legal proceedings for two other reactors to close, namely Doel 1 and Doel 2. This procedure will also be accompanied by a call for donations. IEW and BBL have an action for annulment before the Constitutional Court filed against the Law of June 28, 2015, making it possible once again to extend by 10 years the period of operation D1 and D2. That would put their life at 50 years, while the life was envisaged as being 30 years during construction. See their websites for more information [here](#) and [here](#).

Footnotes

[1] These two reactors each have a capacity of 1,000 MWe (megawatts electric). A law voted in 2003 made it possible to extend the operation time of the two reactors to 10 years, such as those of the five other Belgian reactors, as if by magic from 30 to 40 years. According to this law, the reactor Tihange 1 had to close in 2015, but in 2012, again by magic, the government proposed the closure up to 2025. The reactors of Doel 1 and Doel 2 have the same fate assigned to them by a convention signed on November 30, 2015 by Engie / Electrabel and the Belgian State, represented by Prime Minister Charles Michel and Energy Minister Marie-Christine Marghem. A procedure for the annulment of this agreement is currently being pursued by BBL and IEW, see "Other actions and support fund".

[2] FANC: Federal Agency for Nuclear Control www.fanc.fgov.be

[3] The embrittlement of the control sample with radiation was more serious than predicted. The control sample in question was

delivered by Areva and was of a similar type as the steel of the reactor vessels with similar defects.

[4] Note that a reactor cannot be repaired or replaced.

[5] Jan Bens, director of the FANC, has recognized this during a meeting with Camille Gira, Secretary of State for Sustainable Development of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. See www.rtbf.be/info/ ... (On January 19, 2016).

[6] Flawed Reactor Pressure Vessels in the Belgian NPPs Doel 3 and Tihange2 (Lack of reactor pressure vessels in the Belgian nuclear power stations Doel 3 and Tihange 2), published in January 2016. This study will be available later in French and in other languages.

The struggle for the solution of the debt and the Euro

26 February 2016, by [Francisco Louçã](#)

1. A prolonged stalemate that feeds successive crises

1. The world economy is stagnant. The international system is in transformation and crisis. In transformation, because new centres of profitability of capital and therefore of political power arise, with the Chinese economy being the most powerful while that of Brazil is experiencing a sharp fall. In crisis, because this mediocre growth maintains a high rate of unemployment in the more developed countries and because the difficulty of recovery of the rate of accumulation precipitates austerity measures and modification of the distribution of income between capital and labour, with effects which are socially regressive and economically recessive. This results in the weakening or disturbance of political regimes, as shown in the instability in France, in the referendum in the United Kingdom, the governmental impasse in Spain and the emergence of xenophobic populism, in Hungary and Poland but also in Belgium or the Netherlands. Finally, the centre of the empire, Washington, is a decadent power, with a decomposing hegemony and as such is even more dangerous.

2. The USA represents one third of the global economy. In the political arena, more than that. In demography and

geography, much less. In currency, still almost everything. In military technology, the same. This monumental power, that dominated the last century and that now slowly degrades in the twenty-first century, is one of the greatest threats to global stability. For three reasons: its external action accentuates conflict, its policy is dangerous, and its economy is extractive and therefore decadent.

3. Foreign policy was the main factor in Obama's election. He promised decompression (the closure of Guantanamo) and multilateralism (a minimum form inclusion of allies). But neither one nor the other has transpired and in all these areas of intervention he has retreated. In Europe, he has drawn Germany into a conflict in the East, in Ukraine, trying to place the boundary of NATO at the edge of Russia. Meanwhile, the three pillars of the US's relationship in the Middle East have suffered serious disturbance or increasing risks: in Egypt, with a popular uprising and then with a military coup, while Israel and Saudi Arabia are both risking a suicide note through complacency or support for the Daesh. The foreign policy of the USA has failed because it allowed in the first case the resurgence of Russia as a military power and in the second Iran's assertion as a regional force.

4. The biggest problem, however, is that for the USA, from its privileged position, foreign policy is determined by internal politics (in Europe is the

opposite). This is imposed by the drift to the right of the US political system with the emergence of isolationist populism in the two major parties, moving from an imposing imperial leadership towards a hesitant government, with brutal and disjointed disciplinary actions that inflame the world. Also, the U.S. no longer has control as a territorial power. The defeat in Vietnam seems to have closed an epoch. Attack and withdrawal has become the US practice, so that internal politics becomes volatile in its external actions. This is a "drone militarism". The technology allows air wars, with the immediate effect of amplifying the conflict and facilitating conditions for the globalization of terror, from Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya Syria.

5. Since internal politics is closed in on itself, the US can no longer lead the world: Obama cannot accept a treaty on climate change because it would be rejected by the House of Representatives or by the Senate, starting with his own party - and he would be forced to seek legal solutions based on a weak compromise. That is to say, if foreign policy is determined by internal politics, the US also abdicates from offering an external leadership, even when needed. The world is dominated by a state that cannot lead international decisions.

6. The extractive economy is at the root of this contradiction in internal policy. The sovereign privilege of the dollar has been undermined by the existence of a basket of currencies of

reference for the creation of a reserve for trade, although none can yet compete in the supreme role that the US preserved to ensure accumulation. Only the *yuan* has the support of a state that can aspire to such a role, but China still does not have a sufficiently powerful financial market to absorb income from savings and direct the financial funds that are the nerve of capital accumulation. Thus, it is still what the US decides which conditions globalization.

7. The US benefits and will continue to benefit from globalization, standing in a privileged and comfortable position to be the first hegemonic leader that imports capital rather than exporting it, making this anomaly one of its forms of domination. This is something unprecedented in the history. This engineering of power requires the dollar to be the reference currency (without being the privileged international reserve currency) and requires control of the main productive forces (without the US being the productive motor of goods or possibly knowledge), of natural resources (although the powder keg of the Middle East threatens this guarantee), of innovative capacity (where space has been opened up for other powers with the change of energy pattern and new essential goods, as in medicine) and even the control of savings and investment (although China will soon have sufficient resources to overtake the USA). That is to say, the reason for its strength today is the cause of its fragility tomorrow, inasmuch as this advantage is transient.

8. Some US economists, alarmed by these vulnerabilities, launched a debate two years ago on "secular stagnation", retrieving a term used in 1939 by a president of the American Association of Economists, Alvin Hansen, ten years after the start of the crisis of 1929, to describe demographic stagnation, the deficit in demand and therefore to a perspective of degradation of investment with consequent reduction of potential growth. Following this analogy, we would now, having entered the twenty-first century, be in a new secular stagnation for reasons similar to those of the Great Depression.

9. The numbers seem to confirm this fear. The IMF revised their forecasts for 2020 at the end of last year, anticipating a GDP for China 14% lower than its previous forecast, with Europe and the US being 6% lower. A previous study by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a research institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had already registered this pessimism, subsequently worsened, stating that the production potential of the major economies of the world because of the crash of the sub-primes in the recessions in 2008-9 would be of the order of 9% or, as summarized in *The Economist* (June 14, 2014) would be "as if the entire German economy had evaporated".

10. Hence the extractive economy, in which financial income is parasitic on the system: a shadow banking that absorbs savings, a political system which imposes austerity on the workers, central banks that guarantee the socialization of losses to banking, a voracious capitalism that commodifies social services and that, above all, wishes to privatize social security. Ideologically, the academy, the institutions and the US leaders direct this process. Politically, it is multi-polar, highlighting the growing strength of Merkel in the European Union. Strategically, nobody knows what will happen really, because the finances of the most powerful economies, if they had a heart, would have reasons that reason does not know. Without knowing about them, we do not know anything. The future is not what it was.

11. Europe is at risk in this whirlwind. It is living through a relentless process: its leader, Merkel, now takes advantage of the signals of European disintegration, because it provides the best conditions for attracting capital, with issue of securities at negative interest, in advantageous conditions for her electoral hegemony; in return, the spiral of debt in the peripheral countries or austerity in the others leads, by the rules of the Euro, to unstoppable processes of internal devaluation, or, in other words, to an increase in the absolute exploitation and the transfer of surplus value of national economies to the international capitalist rentiers. Consequently, the political regimes of

Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy and France lose their capacity of cohesion, or the main parties are eroded or are wrenched apart, with possible sudden electoral changes, favouring in certain cases forces that represent the anti-systemic revolt of the workers or in other cases populist forces that seek to condition the population with xenophobic politics.

2. Europe and Portugal in the debt and the Euro

12. The Portuguese problem, as with some of the other countries in the EU, is in the first place a democratic issue because it is social. An immediate response to this problem is a democratic struggle against the blackmail of the debt and the austerity that results from it, with a social impact that is destroying Portugal. That is the problem of problems.

13. Without vanquishing the debt, Portugal and other countries in the same situation will experience a period of social disintegration, driven by the transfer of financial revenue guaranteed on present and future taxes, thus accentuating the neoliberal project of imposition of reducing incomes from labour to the benefit of those for capital, and drain the area of deliberation and the struggle for hegemony in this country. That is to say, either the left leads the opposition and mobilizes the popular classes, or populism will occupy its space.

14. In recent years, it was in response to the debt problem that big changes have taken place in terms of social mobilization and in the perception of Portuguese public opinion (the "Que se lixe a Troika" demonstrations, or the manifesto of 74 in relation to the debt), and this is one of the elements explaining the change that occurred in the elections of October 2015, with the Bloco Esquerda enjoying the biggest electoral increase of any party.

15. None of these changes would have been possible with another political platform that was not centred in the rejection of the blackmail of the debt.

Remember that the programme of the Bloco included not only a concrete proposal on the debt but also an explicit declaration stating that, if negotiations with creditors and the European institutions did not permit a solution, exit from the Euro would be the only remaining alternative.

16. To form a left majority against the debt, i.e., a government which rejects austerity and the debt in favour of wage-earners, public services and investment, requires alliance. A left government against the Troika will emerge from this alliance. To work towards such a government, it is necessary to defeat the right, mobilise the workers, win hegemony over the centre and submit to the people a viable solution that changes the political landscape. For such a transformation, it is necessary to concentrate our forces on understanding between the parties and on an engagement: the rejection of the debt.

17. As the strategy of Syriza in Greece showed, the struggle for a left-wing government has a flag, the rejection of the debt. As the Greek experience reflected, the right and the radical centre will use the fear of exit from the Euro as the main political argument because this fear can swing elections. As the experience of Syriza showed, a government can only advance if it acts with tactical rigor, with clarity to formulate proposals, with an alliance and concentrating on the decisive argument: the debt. As the third rescue plan showed, to have the strength to negotiate it is necessary to have a plan B which is concrete and viable. As has been exemplified in Greece, there is only one plan B to support the restructuring of the debt, and that is exit from the Euro.

18. There is a huge amount of work to be done to bring positions closer together and articulate proposals. The left, in the past, has barely addressed this task. It must be carried out at a European level as quickly and intensely as possible. This road can only be taken through a break with the debt and austerity. This path is viable and it is possible to build such an alliance.

19. The exuberant proposal of a plan A (federalist, resolving the difficulties of the peripheral states, accepting an increase in the power of Berlin) has disappeared from the Portuguese political debate. This proposal started from the principle that a better solution for Portugal and Europe consisted in a constitution for a European state, under federal form. That is to say that Portugal should be a province of that state, of course led by the German government. Such a solution is neither good nor acceptable: it would be a historical regression from which the only exit for Portugal, or any other country of the European periphery, would be a high-intensity conflict for its independence. At best.

20. The federalist proposal remains a farce because neither a doubling of the budget to 2%, for example, nor the same management of a single currency necessarily requires the European government of a European state. It certainly calls for common rules and reinforced cooperation, and therefore a *hegemonic* sovereign authority. In this sense, the federalist proposal intends to submit the left to the acceleration of the authoritarian project of the European bourgeoisie. The left that opposes federalism neither can nor should desist from struggle at the European level. Nor can it expect the forces of federalist centralism to see reason, which would go against their social interests. The left cannot oppose a cordial federalism to a fierce federalism. It has to overcome the forms of federalism, which destroy democracy.

21. The experience of blackmail and the violence of the European authorities in breaking down the Greek government shows that a decision that leads to conflict will always be political and the fruit of a relationship of forces, both local and European. But the Greek experience also shows that all the discourse on "another Europe" is fragile and in itself empty. To appeal to otherness when the dominant forces in Europe are applying austerity and the locking of the European institutions to strengthen the extractive economy and its austerity, is simply an exercise of distraction. It is a left which has been disoriented for too long with

promises of Europe. It is necessary to abandon the discourse of "another Europe" and to focus on concrete measures to overcome the actually existing institutions.

22. To achieve a new relationship of European forces it is necessary that governments of the left be elected in the polls, being faithful to the workers who mandate them. To achieve a government of the left is necessary to know where we are going and where we should concentrate pressure, because this path requires clarifying alternatives to change parties and policies. All the pressure should focus on the requirement for the parties to submit a plan to cancel the debt, via European negotiation or, if necessary, the unilateral imposition of a moratorium and cancellation, which can lead to an exit from the Euro. This is only possible with a left government and a radical change in the relationship of forces, so popular mobilization is determinant.

23. A left government will not be constituted by the centre or by a new formation of political forces of the centre. The meaning of left politics is based on this conviction: to overcome it is necessary to want to win and know how to win, it is necessary to reject the financial income that strangles wages, pensions and public services. A left-wing government requires that the left has a left policy. The democratic problem of Portugal is the blackmail of financial capital and it is this financial capital that the left government must confront.

24. There is no smart austerity. Nor means of austerity which is worth it. A new government which accepts financial blackmail will create more austerity and more destruction because every day the imposition of the rules of the Budgetary Treaty will be worse: as it is already clear, its solution for the fire of austerity is to blow on the embers of the fire. Or, to cite someone with authority and experience of negotiating with the Troika, when we are in a hole the European Commission and the ECB require that we continue digging.

25. The amiable hypothesis of alleviating the conditions of financial blackmail to strengthen Merkel, or a

recovery in Europe thanks to the Draghi Plan or the Juncker Plan, is no more than naivety. A political conformation like the German government, with Merkel's alliance with the Social Democratic Party, or SPD, demonstrates how the system of domination is protected. The President of the Euro-group, who is the Dutch Finance Minister, is living proof of how these neoliberal social democrats assume the role of Merkel's Prussian Cavalry. A new government in Portugal cannot count on the facilities of the European institutions; it has to count on its people and their allies on the popular left in Europe.

26. The left government must submit a categorical commitment to initiate negotiations to repudiate the debt from the first day. If a proposal for cancellation of the debt is not accepted by the European authorities, the best answer would be the unilateral imposition of a moratorium on the payment of the debt, and negotiation with the various creditors of an exchange of debt for securities of a lower value and linked to future growth, and the control of capital.

27. The left government needs to have enough strength to impose a fiscal revolution, creating the means for a reorganization of the productive system, including reindustrialization for employment, import substitution, energy and environmental reconversion and a focused investment on these lines. Once more, this economic policy attacks financial capital.

28. In this context, the left government should be prepared for all conflicts, including the pressure to force an exit from the Euro. In *Dividadura [The dictatorship of the debt; 2012]*, with Mariana Mortágua, we wrote that, politically, exit from the Euro would only be acceptable to the population "when there is rigorously no other alternative, when they have exhausted all the alternatives, when survival requires it. There is only one condition in which exit from the Euro may become necessary for the Portuguese people, and that situation cannot be ruled out: if, due to a collapse of the European institutions and rules, the independence of Portugal was

questioned and there was no other solution than to leave the European Union and, consequently, the Euro, to regain the power of decision-making. And yet it is necessary that the majority of the population commit itself in this respect, so that the strength of the popular movements and the defence of the interests of labour are reinforced". I maintain this point of view.

29. I do not think that exit from the Euro will be made easy for us. Nor should we expect kindness to support a departure of Portugal. We should not expect the German government to authorize an unconditional loan to promote the policies of a left-wing government that had to exit the Euro. Even if the German government was seeking to impose that exit as Schauble tried in relation to Greece, no funding is likely - rather it would seek to make such a choice a bad example. The hypothesis of a gentlemen's agreement seems politically unviable. Among the European leadership there is no place for chivalry, just extremely authoritarian social interests.

30. An exit from the Euro conducted under the orders of Merkel or of a right-wing government would mean a class struggle with no quarter given against the workers, to transform and accelerate the process of capital accumulation for the exclusive benefit of a part of the oligarchy. And would not give any guarantee for the cancellation of the debt; on the contrary, in such a case, this option could be a way of accentuating the transfer of income from labour towards capital through an austerity which accelerates a violent adjustment. The left that is confused over this hypothesis does not deserve to survive politically, because it would fall on the side of austerity and savagery. Whoever defends exit from the Euro without the cancellation of the debt will not succeed in resolving the democratic problem of Portugal.

31. In the battle against the debt, if the left government was forced to leave the Euro it should be alongside the people, mobilized to reject the threats of Merkel and of financial capital, and be willing to stand up for democracy. The effects of an exit from

the Euro are deep and can be justified only by a national emergency, administrated by a government to create a great social mobilization. This political question will always be essential, given the pressure and the difficulties involved in the management of this process. Only the democratic power of the people ensures the strength to take the necessary decisions in this context. Those who ignore this threat and high intensity risk are not prepared to fight for power.

32. Exit from the Euro, whose political difficulties we noted, is however the only alternative when there is no debt restructuring in the negotiations. In this case, it is the only way. For two reasons: first, because exit from the Euro restores a national currency, and therefore allows imposition of the conversion of all public debts in Euros to the new currency, subject to national legislation, devaluing this debt; secondly, it allows the control of capital and the management of a policy of devaluation, the two measures that favour the creation of investment and the revival of demand and employment.

33. So, whoever wants to prepare a left policy against these risks must submit a proposal taking into account all the scenarios and the best alternatives for each problem, including exit from the Euro for the devaluation of the new escudo.

A study of the way to control the negative effects in the short and medium term of a possible exit from the Euro has to consider necessarily the following:

a) Portugal runs the risk that the new currency, the escudo, would be for some months merely scriptural, so that internal transactions take place in foreign currency. Its circulation will tend to decrease and it will be dependent on a European Central Bank with which the country can enter into conflict, so a short term issue of provisional notes would be necessary;

b) Depositors will feel threatened and harmed and will react by withdrawing their bank deposits in Euros. Measures should be taken to generate confidence in the banking system, which will necessarily be under public

control;

c) The immediate impact of the increase in import prices following the devaluation of the escudo will only later be compensated in the trade balance by an increase in exports, which will depend on orders. Hence there must be an emergency plan for energy, transport and medicines;

d) Interest rates will tend to rise, with effects on the distribution of national income to the detriment of debtors, while inflation will rise, which also has redistributive effects to the detriment of wages and pensions, which is why it will be necessary to take compensatory tax measures for the popular sectors;

e) The legal redefinition of the value of the internal debt, in defence of debtors, and the effects of this redefinition on the balance sheets of the banks, will require a systemic resolution (which would be already be necessary with the restructuring of the public debt);

f) A study is needed of the forms of social redistribution of the benefits that devaluation would give the export sector;

g) There would need to be an institutional restructuring, including the new definition of the legal functioning of the Bank of Portugal and the public banks like the CGD, as well as the administration of the financial system, which means having as quickly as possible a new law for the resolution of the national bank and appropriate intervention processes.

34. This study would also include the European political conditions for the decision of a left government:

a) Verification that there is the majority required for taking the possible decision of exit from the Euro, taking account of the power of the President and the need for a parliamentary majority that in the long run will be able to overcome the

latter's right of veto;

b) Defining the new model of change in a context of conflict with the European authorities and their possible hostility to the inclusion of Portugal in the European system of countries outside the Euro area;

c) Considering that the state can legally claim the sovereign power to re-denominate its debt in local currency, but that companies indebted abroad do not have that legal power and, therefore, their balance sheets would be adversely affected;

d) The redefinition of relations with the European Union, in particular, to allow policies that protect industrialization, the creation of employment and the renationalisation of key strategic common goods for budget management.

35. There are answers, difficult as they are, to all these threats and problems. None of these responses is a slogan. A slogan is useless and does not replace the detailed preparation of responses to economic and social problems. The slogan is a flag. It is legitimate to play politics with a flag. But a flag is not a form of government. We cannot renounce the creation of a left government to search for answers to the problem of democratic Portugal, which is the debt. A winning strategy depends on a thorough job of preparing the responses taking account of the difficulties in carrying them out.

36. Realism is a condition of intelligence. All the realistic responses require an economic policy such as Portugal needs: control of credit, public intervention in the financial system, mobilization of fiscal resources, a strategy for employment. It is not realistic to accept the blackmail of the debt or to oppose it with solutions that do not stand up.

37. My conclusion is the following: the agenda that will create a left-wing majority is the fight against the debt. A left government can only win if forms an alliance and this alliance requires clarity with respect to the cancellation of the debt. This government must be prepared to reject all the pressures of financial capital and take all the necessary measures in this regard, including exit from the Euro if that is the only solution that remains. This preparation requires careful and detailed work, bringing together the best left economists. This work is to be done. And it is better to start now.

38. The current government in Portugal, which results from an electoral defeat of the right, is not a left government with the commitment to restructure the debt. It is a government of a centre party, PS, with the conditional support of the left, in the context of commitments to the recovery of wages and pensions, an end to the privatization process and no rise in direct and indirect taxes on employment. These commitments allow social relief, a recovery of demand, and therefore the living conditions of the majority of the population, and have received the support of broad sectors of the population. In the case of the decision to inject 3 billion Euros into the recovery of a small bank that was going to be sold (150 million Euros) to Santander, the left parties opposed this decision of the government and voted against its law, with a correction of the budget for 2015. The relationship between the different parties will thus always depend on specific decisions, it remains to be seen if these decisions are confronted with the position of the Commission, which is important in the definition of the state budgets for 2016 and subsequent years.

The Belgian unions in deadlock

15 February 2016, by [Thomas Weyts](#)

In the case of ACOD-Rail the Flemish Secretaries also blatantly ignored the decision of a National Committee to first go for a 48 hour strike and then

possibly a 72 hour strike if the action did not get results. (The National Committee is still formally the highest and certainly the most broadly

composed body, in which delegates and activists are allowed to have their say.) For them, it seems the "democracy" of a couple of secretaries

(looking suspiciously like a panic attack) takes precedence over democracy and participation (however limited it often is) of activists and delegates at their headquarters.

The betrayal of the rail strike in Flanders also meant a new setback for the many trade unionists who were hoping that this round in the fight for the preservation of social benefits and trade union achievements in the SNCB could be an attempt to restart the real work of social opposition to the government, and perhaps even lead to a new action plan.

The strike was finally quite successful in Wallonia and Brussels, where hardly any trains ran, and the strike turnout was around 80% according to the unions. In Flanders there were a respectable number of strikers, despite the downright cowardly position of trade union leaders on the rail, even if at Antwerp-Berchem there was only a limited token picket. Undoubtedly many Dutch speaking railway staff in Brussels participated in the strike.

Meanwhile, negotiations resumed at the SNCB. Railway management made it made clear that although the implementation of the measures already taken unilaterally by them in December can be negotiated (amongst other things around the organization of work, overtime and holidays), but the decision itself is not up for discussion. The reduction of public funding by the government remains in force. If the union leaders were to accept such a restrictive framework, the strike will finally have been for nothing, despite all the effort made. Meanwhile further negotiations will continue until the end of February, and there will be no new action on the rail.

However, what is at stake in the conflict at the SNCB is much more fundamental than just the struggle for social rights and working conditions of thousands of workers on the rail. Governments and rail management want to also neutralise a bastion of union power, which in past actions has played an important role, and want to make use of the conflict at the railways to put through measures related to "minimum service", which

later can be applied in other sectors. If this succeeds it means a serious defeat for the entire trade union movement. Moreover, it opens the way for the further privatization of the railways, to the detriment of staff and users.

The deep malaise in the trade union movement hasn't come out of thin air.

First there was the giving up, without any positive result, of the action plan that by the end of 2014 had given hundreds of thousands of members and activists renewed hope, and also outside and around the trade union movement had encouraged social resistance (as witnessed by among other things, the impact that the 'Heart over Hard' campaign had had in Flanders), in exchange for the reopening of collective bargaining, which in turn has achieved little that is positive for the working population.

Then the capitulation in Greece of the Tsipras government, which for months across Europe had restored hope in the possibility to at least start a break with dominant neoliberal austerity policies, came as a new blow to left-wing activists and the broader labour movement.

The attacks in Paris and the subsequent security policy, the ubiquitous racism, the resurgence of the far right in many countries, etc. meant in France and Belgium not only a huge damper on the social struggle, planned climate action, and much more, but also offered an undreamed of excuse for the leadership bodies of the ABVV and the ACV to completely shut down further planned actions in the context of an increasingly hollowed out "action plan".

The background to this is formed by an important strategic debate, or rather a series of connected strategic debates being held as much as possible by the leadership of ACV and ABVV behind closed doors, when in fact it concerns every union leadership body, every activist, indeed all members and broader layers of the population.

This involves questions such as:

- What is the remaining role of social

dialogue, if over many years it has become clear that in national and sectoral inter-professional agreements fewer and fewer gains have been obtained for workers, many negotiations just being allowed to discuss marginal changes to savings plans made by the Government and with a right-wing government that wants to give less and less consideration to the results of such consultations?

- Should the unions in the first place serve to organize resistance against the policies of social cuts, or do they need to cooperate with the demolition policy, in particular by advising that certain services should be targeted (e.g. help with finding jobs for the unemployed, career advice, more "individual" services, etc.)?

- If full support to social resistance is to be given, with what plan of action? And does this mean to go if necessary for the fall of the right-wing government? Or should we abandon this policy, in anticipation of the 2019 elections? Which alternatives should be put forward for this government for which policies? What about the measures already taken, including by the previous Di Rupo government (e.g. measures related to pensions, waiting benefit, the suspension of unemployed young people, etc.)?

- If a form of political alternative is proposed, what role should trade unions should take in it? As usual, and with fewer results, should there be reliance on the old political friends of the PS, SP.A and CD & V, or should there be the taking of or support for autonomous political initiatives?

These debates cross the entire trade union movement, in Flanders and Wallonia. Even though there is a tendency amongst a number of bureaucrats, substantially supported by the media and nearly all parties in Parliament (with the exception of the PVDA) to make this discussion a communal conflict by making an issue of "Flemish consultation trade unionism" versus "Walloon conflict trade unionism," it would be in our view a major weakening of the unions to go down this road.

Meanwhile, of course, governments,

employers and the right are not sitting still, on the contrary, their offensive is going further day after day. Moreover, the climate after the attacks in Paris and the inaction and division in the camp of the working population just makes them more self-assured and arrogant.

Thus Maggie De Block continues to be an outspoken advocate of a policy of sanctions against the long-term sick who refuse to go back to work, all agreements between unions and bosses at the Group of 10 notwithstanding. Thus Bart De Wever and the VBO advocate a new round of hefty cuts in social security (and not only on the operating costs of the trade unions in managing unemployment records). At the same time billions are being found for new spending on the military and police. The bosses are at the same time getting favourable measures one after the other as gifts at the expense of social security or taxes.

The measures taken in the context of counter-terrorism policy will additionally introduce a whole package of repressive legislation, which can be used partly and easily against activists and trade unionists. Also concerning the right to strike, the right to picket, etc., there are many threats hanging in the air, which could be easily carried out in the current climate.

The return of the communal issue in the political field, primarily because of the N-VA, also enhances the risk of splitting the unions or major parts of it along communal lines.

In the political arena the trade union movement can hardly count on old "political friends": a lot of SP.A leaders avoided supporting the recent railway strike, Mohammed Redouani, the heir of Tobback in Leuven even bluntly advocated the splitting of ACOD-Rail and the breaking away of the Flemish wing from the "union extremists". The Greens want to more and more explicitly profile themselves as a party for small SMEs and have never had much sympathy with the trade union movement and its demands.

Only the PTB / PVDA takes up the defence of the social demands in the

federal and regional parliaments, and actively initiates proposals in the area. But the PVDA has on the one hand no real understanding of what the trade union bureaucracy is, namely a social layer within the workers' movement which by its specific social position has different interests to the mass of the members. Not that this makes the trade union bureaucracy an homogeneous whole of course, also in here there is a "left" and a "right", there are more and less militant elements. On the other hand the PVDA tries to become the voice of "the whole trade union movement" instead of Social or Christian Democracy, but fundamentally still respects the same division of responsibilities with the union bureaucracy [as the other parties]: they are the "social area", the party "the political area", where both sides leave each other alone. Together, this makes sure that today it is generally in public passive and makes very little criticism of the union leaderships and does not succeed to push for a credible alternative to the current impasse.

It is no longer five minutes to midnight any more for the trade unions and the social resistance, but is now actually midnight. A rapid, profound change of course is therefore urgently needed, not only to safeguard what is left of social gains, but also in order to rescue the unions as organizations for the immediate (and less immediate) interests of the working people, and not simply as "service giving" extensions of government policy.

How to get out of the impasse?

- First, it should be clear that we only will make progress through a broad democratic debate throughout the trade union movement, from top to bottom. Here a balance must be drawn up of the Action Plan and the results achieved so far (or rather not) without there being any taboo subjects, and the role of the way that the unions have acted in this. The upcoming trade union congresses should certainly be seized as an opportunity to do so, but there is need for more. These conferences should at

least be prepared for by broad activist meetings everywhere.

- In our view, there is a need for a new action plan, which once more has a logical, understandable and clear structure, with clear milestones and objectives, around clear and broad-based demands. Again, it is important that wide discussion take place and positions are worked out collectively, starting with meetings in the workplace. We think that demanding the reversal of all anti-social measures already taken is necessary, only trying to prevent 'still worse' problems is not sufficient. Where this hits a brick wall with the government, we should not shy away from going for the fall of the right-wing governments.

- Both in ACV and ABVV, both in Flanders and Wallonia and Brussels, there are people at all levels of the trade union movement who defended such perspectives and continue to defend them. Today, the trade union left, however, is not at all organized. To carry weight in the debate and go for a majority in the trade union movement, the structuring into a network of this trade union left that can take joint initiatives is indispensable. In 2016 let's put forward joint steps in this direction.

- The presence of the PVDA / PTB in the federal, Walloon and Brussels parliaments, the support to the social demands and the trade unions that its MPs and activists give, have certainly an important added value for the social resistance. However, the PVDA alone cannot form the political alternative that the trade unions and social movements need. We remain convinced of the need for the left of the trade union movement to come forward with their own political initiatives, in order to achieve a broader, pluralistic anti-capitalist political force. The call of the ABVV in Charleroi in 2012 was a first step in that direction. The PVDA could deliver a significant and positive contribution to the shaping of such a force, if they so wish, and if they would be willing to self-critically examine a number of their current views.

What we outline above is certainly no easy approach, where success and victories are guaranteed. On the

contrary, there are enough pitfalls and obstacles. But in our view it is the only approach that can open a way out of

the current morass in which the labour movement and the left is in danger of sinking. Plenty of work in front of us then, let's go forward with

as many people as possible.

Translation by Seán Collins

After Iowa and New Hampshire: A Political Revolution Underway?

12 February 2016, by [Solidarity Steering Committee](#)

This is turning into an extraordinary election year in the midst of an extraordinary social crisis. The party establishments that control the Democratic and Republican parties on behalf of the corporate ruling class have lost control of the script—at least temporarily.

Commentators like to portray Sanders and Donald Trump as symmetrical “populist outsiders” responding to working class anger and frustration. But while Bernie Sanders appeals to traditions of social solidarity and shared responsibility for resolving the disasters facing our society, Trump taps into the worst instincts of scapegoating “Others”—Muslims, immigrants, and any other convenient targets. No wonder that open white-supremacists and “nationalists” see Trump’s campaign as an opening for their politics of racism and hatred.

By contrast, the youth and working class energy that fuels Sanders’ campaign illustrates the profound attraction of his program for single-payer health care, expanded social security, tuition-free public universities, a \$15 minimum wage, and “political revolution” against Wall Street and “too big to exist” banks. All of this suggests that America is not in the midst of a mass popular turn to the right.

The turnout of young first-time voters in Iowa stunned the pundits. On the Democratic side, by some estimates as many as 80% came out for Bernie. (On perhaps a smaller but still significant scale, young people especially on campuses showed up for the Republican caucuses too – maybe for similar reasons on both sides, seeing their futures stuck in the mud of job

insecurity and crushing debt.) By the night of the New Hampshire primary, everyone understood that young people were voting heavily for Sanders—including young women, in the face of tone-deaf demands from Gloria Steinem and Madeline Albright about their “duty” to support Clinton.

Among working class Americans, Labor for Bernie is also showing strength. While a number of unions plunged into early endorsements for Clinton, without taking the time or trouble to see how their members might feel, the AFL-CIO hasn’t yet done so, surely in part because of pro-Sanders sentiment within significant sectors of labor. The United Auto Workers says it’s surveying the union’s membership, which UAW president Dennis Williams describes as “conflicted.” Labor for Bernie’s April 1 national meeting at the beginning of the Labor Notes conference in Chicago promises to be an exciting event!

Despite all the excitement and early momentum, however, the Democratic party establishment is 99% convinced that the avowed democratic socialist is not electable—and one percent utterly terrified that he just might be, in view of what might emerge from the Republican rat pack.

In the coming Southern and big-state primaries, we anticipate that Sanders will do better than the conventional predictions, including among African American and Latino voters. To what lengths the Democratic leadership might go in the effort to head Sanders off will be tested in the coming few months. His candidacy presents itself as an asset to the party by bringing in young and working class folks who are

notably tepid in their enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton – all too understandably so! Those prospects for “unity” might be damaged if the party leadership goes deep into its bag of dirty tricks to sideline Sanders, for example by openly race-baiting, redbaiting, or relying on unelected super-delegates to seal the Clinton nomination. But those methods are certainly available if needed. And the final line of defense will be pure scaremongering – the pseudo-practical lie that “nominating Bernie will throw the White House to the rightwing Republicans.”

But whatever the outcome of the primary contests, a political revolution against “the billionaire class,” or what the Occupy movement called “the one percent”—the corporate capitalist ruling class—will not take place within the confines of a party ultimately owned and controlled by that class. Whatever the sound and fury emanating from the nomination process, corporate America, the banks, Wall Street, and the hedge funds can be sure that the Democratic Party remains in safe hands. They prospered under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, as they did under George W. Bush in between, and the heated rhetoric of a political campaign won’t change the reality that, as Sanders has pithily put it, “it’s Wall Street that regulates Congress.” The plain fact is that it regulates the Democratic Party too, which is precisely why Bernie Sanders himself has been running as a political independent for decades.

The Sanders “Bern” and the energy he’s captured is all too likely to dissipate in disillusionment and frustration, as Jesse Jackson’s 1988

Rainbow challenge tragically did...unless the movement finds a means of continuing and expressing itself independently from the Democratic Party. What form that might take isn't predictable, and can only emerge from among the engaged activists. Could this energy move toward independent politics like [Jill Stein's campaign](#) or even a new party? Might thousands of Sanders

supporters conclude that like Bernie, they really are socialists and begin to draw some appropriate conclusions? Could that be a component of what we in Solidarity have called the potential "Next Left?"

These are the open questions for discussion among hundreds of thousands of folks who are "feeling the Bern." Like others on the socialist left, Solidarity hopes to be part of that

exploration.

For a free copy of a pamphlet on *The Two-Party System in the United States: Its Origins and Evolution in the Service of Power, Privilege and Capital* send a note to our office staff at cfc@igc.org and we'll mail it to you!

*Steering Committee of Solidarity
February 11, 2016*

Open letter to the signatories of the declaration "Let us mobilise against dictatorships, imperialist aggression and Daesh. We reject the politics of 'national security', racism and austerity"

10 February 2016

Solidarity with Rojava, with the Kurdish revolution and with the liberation struggle of the PKK!

An international statement on the situation in Syria in Iraq "Let us mobilise against dictatorships, imperialist aggression and Daesh. We reject the politics of 'national security', racism and austerity" published by [International Viewpoint](#) on 11 December, has now (as of 4 January 2016) been signed by over 40 revolutionary socialist organizations spanning five continents. [1]

We very much welcome the emergence of such broad joint statements from the Left! As individuals who feel closely tied to the revolutionary Left and its fortunes, we hope to see more international initiatives of this type in the future, as they can contribute to an intensification of international

coordination between the forces of the revolutionary Left, thereby helping to make us a more visible social and political force. We'd like to thank the comrades for taking the initiative for this international statement, and we share the analysis and the demands of the statement.

We are deeply disappointed, however, to see that the statement says absolutely nothing about the Kurdish revolution or the specific democratic experiment in Rojava, nor does it proclaim solidarity with them. In our view, this is symptomatic of the difficulties that some parts of the revolutionary Left have concerning solidarity with Rojava, the Kurdish revolution and the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). Thus we have taken this opportunity to author an open letter to the organizations that have signed this statement in hopes of beginning (or intensifying) an international discussion on the questions raised here.

The Arab Spring has slipped into the long night of an Arab Winter. The only instance in which the democratic revolts of the Arab world have not been crushed by reactionary forces

but instead led to the establishment of a new democratic polity is Rojava, the Kurdish territory in northern Syria in which the dynamic of the Syrian revolution has connected with the Kurdish liberation movement encompassing the Kurdish populations in all of the countries of the region. Under the leadership of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the people of Rojava are experimenting with a democratic, secular and multi-ethnic social model that proclaims gender equality, social justice and respect for the environment. Certainly, the revolution in Rojava is not a socialist one, even if its leading forces describes themselves as such. But it is nevertheless a democratic revolution, a revolution against national oppression and a feminist revolution - and thereby the most hopeful and inspiring event in a region fraught with jihadist terror, civil war and imperialist intervention. Nowhere else have the democratic revolts of the last few years - from Tahrir to Occupy and the movements of the squares in southern Europe - condensed into an alternative social model as they did in Rojava. It could become an alternative role model for other parts of the region, it might inspire other

struggles, and the dynamics of democratic Revolutions always might have a potential to lead to a socialist Revolution. It is precisely because of this, however, that Rojava has become the target of Daesh terror and Turkish sub-imperialism - as well as the most important point of international solidarity with progressive and Left movements in the region.

The PYD is the Syrian sister party of the PKK. The PKK has undergone a considerable transformation over the past years, moving away from its Stalinist and nationalist roots towards a libertarian socialist-inspired model of 'democratic confederalism' beyond the confines of the nation-state, inscribing the liberation of women as a central objective. In the last several decades the PKK has built a transnational, mass revolutionary organization with millions of supporters. It is undoubtedly the most important Left force in the entire region. In Turkey, the PKK and its sister organizations fight Erdogan's neoliberal despotism; in Syria, they oppose the Assad regime and they've forced it to retreat from Rojava (after uprisings across Syria had already put the regime under considerable pressure) and have now become Daesh's greatest enemy; in Iran they oppose the dictatorship of the Mullahs; in northern Iraq they fight Daesh and they stand in Opposition to the corrupt and pro-imperialist Barzani regime. In Turkey the HDP, an alliance between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish radical left, the Gezi Park movement and women's and LGBT movements, has revitalized the Left and passed the 10% threshold - the first Left party to do so in the country's history. The struggle against Erdogan led by the PKK in the Kurdish areas of Turkey has meanwhile taken the form of open popular uprisings for 'democratic autonomy'.

In response to the growing strength of the PKK and its sister organizations, NATO member state Turkey launched a new war against the Kurdish movement last June and began brutally repressing the popular uprisings in northern (Turkish) Kurdistan, while PKK positions in northern Iraq are being bombed and

the danger of a military invasion of Rojava by the Turkish state persists. Although the PKK fights on the front line against Daesh (and opposes Erdogan, Assad, the Mullahs and Barzani), it is still regarded as a terrorist organization and banned by the US, the EU and many other states. Few examples demonstrate the hollowness of the West's 'war against ISIS' better than its ongoing persecution of ISIS's most militant adversary, the PKK. In this situation, the international Left is tasked with concrete anti-imperialist solidarity with the most important Left force in the Middle East by building a powerful campaign against the persecution of the PKK, particularly in the imperialist centres.

We expect this solidarity also from the signatories of the statement referred to above!

For revolutionary socialists, solidarity with liberation movements should never be uncritical. There is much to criticize with regard to the PKK and PYD in terms of its past, and also of its present, such as its rejection of the working class as the central actor of socialist transformation, its mainly ethical understanding of socialism, the historical foundations of Abdullah Å-calán's theories, the personality cult surrounding him, attacks on oppositional demonstrations in PYD-controlled areas, etc. The PKK's constant manoeuvring between the region's shifting constellations of imperialist interventions must also be viewed critically.

Nevertheless, we consider it unacceptable for revolutionary socialists to not even mention Rojava, the Kurdish revolution or the PKK's struggle in a statement on the situation in the Middle East. It demonstrates a political blindness with regard to the most important Left force in the Middle East. Solidarity with their fight should instead become a unifying strategic perspective for Left solidarity with the progressive forces in the region.

We demand (complementary to the demands contained in the above statement):

* A public debate about the significance of Rojava, the Kurdish revolution and the PKK's struggle among revolutionary socialist forces

* Active support for the revolution in Rojava and the uprisings in northern Kurdistan

* To start an international revolutionary socialist campaign against the illegalization of the PKK, or revolutionary socialist participation in existing campaigns

First Signatories:

Michael Prütz (NaO - Neue antikapitalistische Organisation [New anticapitalist Organization], Germany; has joined the GIM - Gruppe Internationaler Marxisten [Group of international Marxists] in 1970)

Angela Klein (isl - international sozialistische linke [international socialist left], Germany)

Dr. Florian Wilde (Die Linke; from 1993-2002 Member of IST-Groups, Germany)

Erkin Erdogan (DS?P - Devrimci Sosyalist ??çi Partisi [Revolutionary Socialist Workers' Party], Turkey / Marx21, Germany)

Tino Plancherel (ex-member of SAP - Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei [Socialist Workers Party], Switzerland)

Michael Schilwa (NaO, Germany; has joined the GIM in the 1970s)

Michael Eff (NaO, Germany; founding member of KJO Spartakus in 1969)

Mark Bergfeld (Cologne/London)

We'll collect and publish further signatories. If you'd like to sign, please write your name (and, if possible, the organization you're belonging to) to rojavasolidarity@gmx.de

Footnotes

[1] The declaration was initially published on the Lebanese website [Al Manshour](#).

A turning point for Latin America?

8 February 2016, by [Stuart Piper](#)

Confrontation inside and outside parliament

On the morning of Tuesday, 5 January, a few thousand supporters of Venezuela's right-wing opposition gathered around La Hoyada metro station in central Caracas. Most had travelled in from the better-off neighbourhoods to the east. The mood was euphoric, but tense. They would march the short distance west to the National Assembly, in the company of their newly elected representatives who were about to be sworn in.

The parliamentary elections on 6 December had given them a huge, and unexpected, majority. 109 members of parliament had been elected on the ticket of the opposition MUD coalition. All of the three seats reserved for indigenous representatives also went to candidates aligned with the opposition. That gave them 112 seats, exactly the two-thirds majority that could enable them to enact sweeping changes and roll back the Bolivarian revolution. The Venezuelan United Socialist Party (PSUV) and its allies had won just 55 seats, down from 98 in the previous parliament. In 17 years since Hugo Chavez was first elected, there had been 20 sets of elections and referendums. The Bolivarian forces had won all of them, except one referendum in 2007, when Chavez presented a radical but confused proposal to reform the Constitution, and lost. This latest parliamentary poll was the first real defeat for the process, and it was a big one.

That same Tuesday morning, a few blocks north of the Assembly building, around the Miraflores presidential palace, a somewhat larger crowd of chavistas was also beginning to gather. They had been marching in from the working-class bastion of 23 de Enero and other popular barrios to the west and south. The mood here was defiant. "We will not allow

them to destroy what we have gained', was the basic message of their chants and placards. They too would be heading towards the Assembly, with members of their much reduced socialist group.

As the two forces converged, literally on either side of the National Assembly, the scene was set for a showdown inside and outside of parliament. This confrontation is sure to be protracted, often bitter, often convoluted and often difficult to follow. But it is one that will partly determine the future of the left in Latin America, and to an extent beyond the region too.

The first battle within the Assembly would be over exactly how many members would be sworn in. At the end of December, the Supreme Court had temporarily suspended the election of all four representatives from the state of Amazonas, pending an investigation into alleged irregularities. Three of them were from the MUD, one from the PSUV.

The opposition claimed the Court had been stacked with government supporters and swore in its three barred members anyway. The Supreme Court ruled the Assembly was in breach of the law and said none of its decisions would be valid as long as the barred representatives remained. There was a tense stand off. In the end a temporary truce was reached, the three members stood down, and President Maduro was able to deliver his Annual Address before the Assembly on 15 January.

His speech was characteristic of the moment, mixing defiance with conciliatory words. He angrily rejected opposition aims to give the beneficiaries of the government's public housing programme the right to buy and sell their homes.

"... We will not let you apply any capitalist model to the Housing Mission. That's for sure. I will not allow it. ...Together with the people I

won't allow it. ...The fact is, [as mayors of Greater Caracas] you haven't built a single home. And now you want to privatize the homes we have built together with the people? No! Where have you built a single house, Guanipa? Where? Tell me where you have built any homes, Richard Blanco... You have built none, we have built a million. Do you think we are going to let you privatize those. No, no, no! You'll have to overthrow me to pass a privatization law."

But later in the address he also made a call for collaboration.

"The people want answers, solutions, and nobody thinks that those solutions will come from just one sector. It is down to all of us, in a continual process of convergence... I call for constructive dialogue and action to build a new economy, to reverse the mechanisms of speculation and hoarding. A transparent dialogue to prevent capitalism from destroying our people's lives."

For most of the speech, the opposition majority listened respectfully. The first battle was over. It turned out to be more of a skirmish. A symbolic flashing of swords followed by an uncomfortable handshake. But this is merely the opening round.

Reasons for defeat

The single most important reason for this defeat is clear. The economy. Particularly the acute shortages of basic goods and the dramatic erosion of purchasing power for the majority of Venezuelans. That is what Marisa meant when she said they had "hit us in the stomach".

The Venezuelan Central Bank has just released figures it had not published for over a year. Up to September 2015, inflation was at 109%, or 142% at an annualised rate. GDP fell 7.1% in the third quarter of last year, which means the country has now been in recession for two years. Venezuela's

reserves have also plummeted, and the country faces major foreign debt repayments in the coming months. But all this doesn't say much about what it feels like for most working-class Venezuelans.

It is important to clarify here that the dramatic situation that most people face in their daily lives does not mean that Venezuela is experiencing widespread hunger or extreme poverty. That could become an issue if things don't change, but it has not been the case so far. In fact one of the reasons for the shortages is that, along with important gains in social provisions - health, education and so on - the 17 years of Bolivarian revolution have seen big increases in consumption. Many more people are eating and buying much more. And Venezuela's already feeble and distorted agriculture and industry have been unable to keep up.

The plunge in the price of oil, which accounts for about 96% of Venezuela's foreign exchange earnings, has obviously taken an immense toll. But it has only aggravated a perverse mechanism which was already sapping the economy, and people's support for the revolution. A detailed explanation would take too long, but the short version is this. For over a decade, exchange controls and price controls boosted the living standards of most Venezuelans, especially the poor, by ensuring affordable access to food and other basic necessities. But they began to create a situation that is now out of control and utterly unsustainable.

For the majority of Venezuelans, their wages are set in line with two official, fixed, exchange rates: 6.30 Bolivars to the dollar for medicines and other priority imports; 13.50 Bolivars to the dollar for most other goods. So a graduate, a few years into their professional life, might be earning 18 thousand Bolivars a month, or approximately 1300 dollars a month. With that, in theory, they can buy a more than adequate supply of basic goods whose prices are set by the government, also in line with those two fixed exchange rates. The problem is that the majority of wholesalers and retailers remain in the private sector, and most of them, and even some

state ones too, refuse to sell their products at those prices. They can make much more money by selling them to informal street vendors, smuggling them across the border to Colombia, or simply hoarding them until the price goes up. That leaves our graduate with two choices. Either she can wait in queues for five hours or more to pay the "correct" price for basic goods that may or may not turn up - one day for milk, the next day for coffee or sanitary towels. Or she can buy them on the "open" market, often a street corner, and pay maybe fifty or a hundred times more.

For the reality is that most prices in Venezuela are now calculated at somewhere between the third, official, floating exchange rate, currently at around 200 Bolivars to the dollar, and the illegal but dominant, parallel market rate, which is now over 800 Bolivars to the dollar. By that calculation, our young professional's monthly income is not 1300 dollars, but somewhere between 22 and 90 dollars.

The government has for the last two years or more been blaming these huge price disparities, and the shortages that accompany them, on an "economic war" waged by the Venezuelan right and their backers abroad. No doubt there is a deliberate political attempt to use these economic difficulties to undermine the Bolivarian government. But one thing that seems to emerge from the election results and from discussions that broke out among chavista communities in their aftermath, is that this explanation is no longer convincing most people. And on its own, the "economic war" argument diverts attention from the policy choices the government needs to face. These choices are difficult, but, as Maduro said, people want solutions.

The second main reason for disaffection among Chavez supporters is corruption. It comes up in almost every debate, declaration or interview with both activists and ordinary citizens since 6 December. And of course it overlaps with the economic problems people face. For the corollary of the extreme distortion in the exchange rates is systematic and massive fraud in the use of foreign

currency. Private importers get dollars for essential imports at the 6.30 rate from the government. They then sell the goods at a price closer to the 800 parallel rate, making a profit of many thousands percent. Or they import a much smaller quantity of the goods, or none at all, and use the unspent dollars to make a killing on the parallel exchange market. And of course private importers can only do this, if someone in the public administration gives them a hand, or looks the other way. Similarly, you can only smuggle endless tanker loads of fuel or truck loads of medicine into Colombia, if someone in the state oil company or health ministry lets you take them, and if someone in the National Guard waves you through the checkpoint.

Everyone knows this corruption exists. It is not new, it goes back many decades, but the Bolivarian revolution has been unable to stop it. And that some of its leaders, or their families, have joined in. But very few want to talk about it openly or specifically. The case of President Maduro's two step nephews was emblematic. They were arrested in Haiti a few weeks before the election in a sting operation by the DEA, and swiftly flown to New York to face drug charges. It seems there was a large measure of deliberate theatre in this affair, staged to undermine Maduro ahead of the poll. The two could be completely innocent. And the fact that Maduro made virtually no comment about it at all, could just be down to a decent sense of respect for family and their sensibilities. There has never been any indication that Maduro himself is other than scrupulously honest. In the end, the affair probably had very little impact on the elections. It merely added to an impression of generalised opacity and impunity.

But this issue, too, is more complicated than it seems. It is not just about impunity for a handful of high-ranking officials who may have filled their pockets on the back of the revolution. Those surely exist, and nowhere more than in sections of the Armed Forces and the judiciary. However, similar if less spectacular mechanisms of graft exist in almost every other area of public administration and employment, as

well as in the private sector. To a large extent, these are traceable to 100 years of dependence on oil rent, which corroded almost every nook and cranny of the Venezuelan state and economy.

All this is evidence of a larger question: the extent to which the Venezuelan revolutionary process has been held hostage to an old, and particularly corrupt, state apparatus; and the extent to which it could, or should, have confronted this.

The failure to address these structural issues, and the lack of transparency surrounding them, overlaps, in part, with another failure that community activists and critical chavista commentators have mentioned since 6 December. That of the public media (still a relative minority compared with the private media) to foster a political culture of debate and critique, and provide a space for the constructive confrontation of alternative ideas and proposals. And this in turn reveals another problem, the danger that appeals to “unity” act as cover for a culture of intolerance.

What exactly happened?

Many chavistas and their supporters, including this writer, thought that the biggest danger in December’s elections would be abstention. The assumption was that the basic divide in Venezuelan society, between the approximately 55-60% who have sympathised with the Bolivarian revolution, rooted mainly in the poorer sections of the population, and the 40-45% who opposed it, rooted largely among better-off layers, would not change. The danger, according to this view, was that many of the first group, the chavista “social majority”, demoralised and angry at the difficulty in finding basic goods and the erosion of their incomes, would just not vote. That might allow the opposition’s “social minority” to squeak past with a narrow electoral majority.

However, this is not quite what happened. The turnout was very high, 74.17% overall, compared with 66.45% in the previous parliamentary

elections in 2010. And in several of the traditional chavista strongholds in Caracas, it was even higher: 77.22% in 23 de Enero, 75.87% in La Vega, 75.63% in Antimano. While in some of the main opposition bastions in the east of Caracas, the turnout was lower than the national average: 63.28% in Chacao, 66.93% in Baruta, and so on. There was also an increase in spoiled or blank votes, from 2.5% in 2010 to 4.77% this time, although in the Venezuelan voting system it is impossible to tell how many of these were deliberate.

The overall share of the vote on 6 December 2015 was 56.22% for the opposition MUD coalition and 40.91% for the PSUV and its allies. More statistical analysis is required. But even taking into account the uneven spread of abstention and spoiled ballots, and the big increase in the electoral roll, by almost 1.8 million, as new voters registered, this indicates that a significant number of former chavista votes did indeed shift to the opposition. One of the most shocking consequences was that the PSUV actually lost in several of its traditional Caracas strongholds. In 23 de Enero, of all places, the opposition won the first-past-the-post seat and took first place in the list vote, albeit by a whisper. In La Vega, the opposition won by a larger margin. While in Antimano, the PSUV held onto a clear advantage, although its vote dropped considerably. These were very serious defeats indeed.

It is less clear whether this means that a significant part of the old social base of the Bolivarian revolution has transferred its allegiance to the opposition. This can only be tested by developments in the coming months. But a number of analysts and critics from within the chavista movement argue that most of the PSUV’s losses were the result of a “punishment” vote. And there is some anecdotal evidence to back this view that former chavistas did not so much vote for the opposition, as against what they perceived as the shortcomings of the government.

What the opposition could do

It is now unclear when or whether the opposition will secure its two-thirds majority in parliament, following the temporary withdrawal of those three suspended members. But if it does, and that seems the most likely outcome, the opposition can do a great deal of damage to the Bolivarian government. It can, of course, introduce its own legislation, which the president can send back but cannot in the end veto.

A few days after the elections the MUD posted a list of legislative priorities on its web site. It was short on detail, but indicated a return to classic neoliberal dogma. Apart from a promised amnesty for the hard-line, opposition leader, Leopoldo Lopez, and other alleged “political prisoners”, at the top of the list was repealing the price controls in the Fair Prices and Food Security laws, which aim to ensure access to cheap basic necessities to all Venezuelans.

Two other laws would open the way to privatizations, reversing the nationalization of strategic enterprises and “decentralizing” public services, handing them over to local authorities who would then be able to subcontract them to private service providers. A third law in this area would open large infrastructure projects to foreign tender and seek finance from multilateral funding institutions. The very real problem of crime would be tackled by giving more power to municipal and state police forces, which are often controlled by opposition local governments. It is worth recalling that in 2002, it was the municipal police in Caracas that played a key role in the failed coup attempt against President Hugo Chavez. And on the media, the opposition majority in parliament proposes a law to, quote, “end hegemony” in the public media and ensure, quote, “the independence”, of those in charge of those media outlets.

With this majority the opposition can also overturn or rewrite so-called

“organic” laws, including the 2016 budget that the old National Assembly approved in November. And it can delay or block requests from ministries and the public sector for additional, discretionary funds, which is in practice how government departments in Venezuela run their business. (One of the main aims of Maduro’s “state of economic emergency”, declared on 15 January, is to limit this possibility.)

With a super-majority, the opposition can also demand the replacement of Supreme Court and other judges, government ministers and the Vice-President. It can pass amendments to the Constitution, or even call a Constituent Assembly to draw up a new one. And once the president has completed half his term - that should be in April for Nicolas Maduro - this opposition “super-majority” in parliament can call a Presidential Recall Referendum without having to collect 4 million or so signatures, as it would have to do if it didn’t have the two-thirds majority. The indications are that this is the path the opposition will seek to take. That could mean a recall referendum as early as June or July, more probably in August. And if President Maduro were to lose, there would have to be fresh presidential elections three months later. During those three months, the Speaker of the National Assembly - that is the opposition - would assume the presidency.

However, the opposition majority may find all this more difficult in practice than in principle. It needs every one of its 112 votes to pass the more far-reaching measures. And the MUD is a fractious coalition of parties which has so far been able to agree on little except its desire to get rid of Maduro and the Bolivarian revolutionary process. The biggest single component, with 33 members of the National Assembly, is now Primero Justicia (PJ), which has its own internal contradictions but which overall has a different, and apparently more moderate approach to that of the others. PJ emerged over a decade ago as a “modern”, neoliberal party, sometimes with gestures towards social liberalism, sometimes leaning more overtly to the right. Shortly after the election, one of its leaders and the

opposition’s former presidential candidate, Henrique Capriles, began insisting that the opposition’s priority should be to tackle the economic crisis, obviously with neoliberal policies, not to get rid of Maduro as soon as possible. And Primero Justicia has been promoting its own list of four legislative priorities, somewhat different to those put forward by the MUD itself. While it agrees on the need for an amnesty, its economic proposals suggest a more subtle version of neoliberalism, emphasising a safety net for pensioners and that right - lambasted by Maduro in his annual address - for those who benefit from the Bolivarian government’s huge public housing programme, to become owners of their own homes.

Nonetheless, it is the second largest component of the MUD in parliament, Acción Democrática (AD), with 25 seats, which for now seems to have seized leadership of the coalition. Supported by most of the smaller opposition parties, including the most hard right groups like Leopoldo Lopez’ Voluntad Popular, Acción Democrática managed to get its veteran general secretary, Henry Ramos Allup, elected as the opposition’s first Speaker of the National Assembly, over Primero Justicia’s leader, Julio Borges. But it was a fairly evenly split vote in a secret internal ballot.

Allup immediately made clear that his priority is indeed to find a “constitutional” means to get rid of President Maduro within 6 months. AD is the oldest party in congress. It was once one of the biggest social democratic parties in Latin America, although some would have preferred to characterize it as populist. From 1958, along with the now almost defunct Christian Democratic party, Copei, it became one of the pillars of the two-party Punto Fijo pact and the Fourth Republic. In the process it degenerated into a kleptocratic, electoral machine, ever more identified with corruption and manipulation, ever more distant from its social-democratic roots. With a large measure of ignorance or deliberate disinformation, much of the international media continues to refer, absurdly, to Acción Democrática, and indeed most of the Venezuelan opposition, as “centre left”. In fact it is

difficult to characterize AD’s politics or ideology today, except to say that is clearly of the right and represents most of what Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution sought to overthrow 17 years ago. And its leader, the 72 year-old Ramos Allup, is the epitome of that tradition. In his opening speech to the Assembly, Hector Rodriguez, the new, 32 year-old leader of the socialist bloc, looked at Allup and said, “You were a member of the National Assembly before I was born, when I was at junior school, when I was at high school, and when I was at university”. And that, he warned, was what the new majority wanted to take Venezuela back to.

Apart from the opposition’s own limitations and internal divisions, there is enough ambiguity in the way the Constitution specifies the powers of a two-thirds majority to give ample space for extended procedural and constitutional disputes between parliament, the president and the supreme court.

First responses

In the first hours and days after the results came in, there was shock, but also mobilization, among the organized communities that make up the social base of the Bolivarian revolution. Countless meetings and debates occurred more or less spontaneously in the shanty towns perched above Caracas and other working-class and poor neighbourhoods, towns and villages across the country. Almost all were intensely critical. Something had gone badly wrong. Marisa’s comments about being hit in the stomach came at one of these, in La Vega. But there was also a spirit of defiance: things have got to change, because we are not just going to roll over, we have to resist.

The first responses from the government were also largely positive. After immediately recognizing the results, President Maduro called for a process of reflection: to identify the mistakes, learn the lessons and take the opportunity to relaunch the revolutionary process. This theme of a “rebirth” of the Bolivarian movement

has been a constant since then.

In its final sessions in December, the chavista majority in the outgoing National Assembly pushed through several pieces of progressive legislation that it had been discussing for some time. The Seed Law was one of these. It had been put forward initially by Venezuela's growing environmental movement. Its aim is to prevent the use of GM seeds and block the development of large-scale agribusiness in the Venezuelan countryside. Instead it seeks to recover the ancestral diversity of seed types and make family farming and agroecology the basis of agricultural development – something that has to be a priority in a country that has excellent arable land but has long imported well over 70 percent of its food. Another was the Popular Communication Law, intended to promote and protect the community media that have been encouraged over the last decade and a half.

President Maduro himself used the special powers granted him by parliament earlier last year to introduce several other progressive measures. All Venezuelan workers would enjoy job security until 2018. They can only be sacked for specific, justifiable reasons. This was intended to block the opposition's efforts to begin mass layoffs, as are already happening in Argentina since Mauricio Macri assumed the presidency in December. Maduro also removed tax loopholes to ensure large companies could no longer avoid the corporation tax they owed, and introduced a new tax on large financial transactions.

More fundamentally, the government proposed a strengthening of popular power, calling a National Communal Parliament, bringing together representatives of communes from across the country to discuss projects coming from the organized communities. Activists in pro-chavista demonstrations could be heard chanting, "parliament in the streets, parliament in the barrios, parliament in the workplaces, parliament in the schools and colleges". The opposition immediately denounced it as a move to undermine and bypass the elected representatives of the National Assembly. President Maduro said this

was a step towards the "communal state" that Hugo Chavez had advocated. But ministers also sought to refute the opposition by insisting that this was a body of local democracy that did not challenge the National Assembly and was completely in line with the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999.

The government has also been emphasising the role communes should play in boosting the economy. "I call on all popular power bodies to join in and turn this into productive popular power. We can't have communes that don't produce", said Aristobulo Isturiz, a veteran chavista leader who had just been named Vice President in Maduro's reshuffle, the day after the "economic emergency" was declared. He was visiting one of over a thousand "communal markets" being held that Saturday across Venezuela, selling basic goods at controlled prices to the local community. According to Isturiz, the commune here in Macarao, on the outskirts of Caracas, had been organized by 68 community councils, and had allowed for the creation of a community textile works, a community bakery and these regular food-distribution days.

This has always been seen as one of the aims of the communes. And it has been part of the three-pronged, economic "strategy" developed explicitly by Chavez from 2004, after he won the recall referendum against him that year: firstly, the development of a non-state, non-private, "social economy" or "social sector"; secondly a strengthened state sector, with the nationalization of more strategic enterprises; and thirdly a more heavily regulated private sector.

But the results have so far been meagre. From 2004, tens of thousands of new cooperatives were set up, alongside poles of "endogenous development" and a variety of other community enterprises. Within a few years, almost all had failed, as sharply rising oil prices made it much easier and cheaper to import everything. In recent years, attempts to develop a "communal economy" – production projects centred on the communes – have fared little better.

President Maduro also talked of the communes in his Annual Address before the National Assembly. In this time of rebirth of the chavista project, these forms of popular organization must be given "a most decided and solid relaunch".

But there still does not seem to be a clear strategic vision behind this talk of a "communal economy". Indeed, there are probably two or three competing strategies here. Some see it as an instrument of transition to a post-capitalist economy, as an alternative to state-led "socialism", though they are probably a minority. For others it is merely one more piece in a decidedly mixed economy. Or it maybe it is just part of a pragmatic search for anything that could add to domestic production and cut the import bill.

Is there a way forward?

All that said, there remains a hugely positive legacy which is far from over. Even more important than the impressive social gains, which most people on the left are aware of, there are political gains in Venezuela that are unlike any others on the planet. With all the inadequacies and frustrations of popular power as it exists, seventeen years of Bolivarian revolution have fostered a population that is mobilized and self organized to degree that is probably unique in the world today. The idea of socialism, and the belief that a transition to something called socialism was underway – strongly identified with the character of Hugo Chavez – is not dead. Nowhere else in recent history have millions of people actually believed that. And the belief in solidarity across the region, and a break with imperialism, is also uniquely strong in Latin America. Venezuela has been the crucible of that too.

There are crucial, and difficult, economic choices to be made. Some on the "pragmatic" left are advising the government to make a "tactical" retreat; to lift or relax price and exchange controls in order to rebalance the economy, and then use

the state to “direct” investment and finally make a transition to a more productive, less oil-dependent economy. Many others on the radical left, including trusted Bolivarian intellectuals like Luis Britto, are pushing for more fundamental curbs on capital, including taking state control of imports and exports, the banking system, and possibly the entire food supply chain. For the time being, the government seems intent on continuing down its middle course. But in the wake of December’s defeat, more of the same looks less and less convincing to the chavista grassroots.

Whichever route is taken, the ability, or failure, to regenerate mobilization, participation and hope will be decisive. And the key to that is regenerating popular power.

The concept and practice of popular

power applied by the Bolivarian revolution has always been contradictory. On the one hand, it was the kernel of Hugo Chavez’ revolutionary strategy, when he talked of the need to replace the still existing bourgeois state with a new, communal state. It wasn’t something he always defended or promoted, but he returned to it time and again. On the other hand, many Bolivarian leaders have treated the structures of popular power that have emerged, like the community councils and communes, as mere adjuncts to the existing institutions of state.

So Isis Ochoa, shortly after being reappointed as Minister of Communes in Maduro’s new year reshuffle, said that the National Communal Parliament that had just been called, was “an organizational expression of the Venezuelan state”. Of course she was responding to the opposition’s

attacks on this Communal Parliament as illegitimate and an attempt to undermine democracy and the elected National Assembly. But the right has always used such arguments to attack any form of participatory democracy that looked like it might acquire real power. To defend it in this way is to meet the bourgeoisie on its own terrain. It suggests that Isis Ochoa hadn’t quite grasped what Hugo Chavez meant in one of his last televised cabinet meetings before his final trip for cancer treatment Cuba. The speech he made there, dubbed “A change of course” (El Golpe de Timón) became his political testament. In one of the most poignant moments, he turned to Maduro, his chosen successor, and demanded, “Where are the communes, Nicolas? Where are the communes?”

[Socialist Resistance](#)

It’s possible, but we’re not there yet!

6 February 2016, by [Denis Godard](#)

It’s possible, but we’re not there yet. That’s the conclusion one should draw protests against state of emergency Saturday, January 30 throughout France.

In Paris, one hour exactly before the demonstration, the rain turned into a downpour. Just at the time when the hesitating were making up their minds. Almost everywhere in France, the weather was in tune with the law and order climate propagated by all dominant institutions: do not demonstrate, stay home! Despite this, between 10,000 and 20,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Paris.

From Bayonne to Boulogne-sur-Mer to Metz in Lannion, from Perpignan to Dole, and including Arles, Besançon, Tulle or Le Puy-en-Velay, there were at least 45,000 protesters. Outside Paris, each protest gathered around between one hundred and two thousand participants.

This was the first general response to the emergency, the first public break

with the prevailing consensus that says that the name of security, everyone would be in favour [of the state of emergency].

It obviously needs much more than that. Outside Paris and a few cities like Grenoble, Bordeaux, Chambéry or Poitiers, the mobilization has not exceeded a militant nucleus. Even in these cities, the working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods were very poorly represented.

But deadlines are close, between a bill to cabinet on Wednesday 3 February and the debates in the Assembly and the Senate between 5 and 16 February.

And beyond these deadlines, the whole logic of the state of exception is going forward, giving confidence to the police and racist. So it is vital to convince and mobilize deeply throughout society.

Bring together all currents, all forms of struggle

It is obvious that the existence of several united-front committees, including one led by LDH “We will not yield” [[“[Nous ne céderons pas](#)”, initiated by the League for Human Rights (Ligue des Droits de l’Homme LDH. This appeal was not open to signatures from political parties.] and another more connected to the activist movements “Stop state of emergency”[[“[Stop Etat d’urgence.](#)], does not make things easier. Thus, in some cities like Marseille, there was not even able to be a united demonstration or rally.

In Paris, the two committees have managed to agree on a common Demonstration. In the first part of the march, the undocumented, the homeless, the BDS activists, trade unions or the Zadistes (radical ecology activists). To reach the entire society,

all the different sensibilities and forms of struggle will be essential. All. No one can deny the role of racism and Islamophobia in the logic implemented in the state of emergency, Muslims thus are the main target of police searches. And if the anti-racist and Islamophobic element of the mobilization, and the fight against police violence, are not taken into account, the movement will have great difficulty in mobilizing in the localities.

From local to global

The mobilization must now develop in every neighborhood, in every workplace and on different fronts endangered by the government's offensive. In Montreuil ([a major city in the Paris region], a local assembly is held on Thursday 4 February. in Grenoble, "Six hours for our

freedoms" will take place this Sunday, 7 February in collaboration with Mediapart, bringing together local and national activists, trade unionists and representatives of neighborhood struggles. Such initiatives are multiplying.

This must be combined with the defence of the victims of repression. An appeal has been launched to mobilize support for a participant in the migrants solidarity demonstration of solidarity of 22 November, on Wednesday 3 February. And the next day, Thursday 4 February is the day of action in support Goodyear trade unionists.

Keep up street protests

The struggle against the state of

emergency and deprivation of nationality status be present in all events, as was the case in Calais on 23 January where many demonstrators wore the sticker "Stop Etat d'urgence". This should be the case in the antifascist mobilizations of 6 February 6, the 8 March initiatives for women's rights and against racism on 19 March. It should be the case of all trade union struggles. Because the logic of the state of emergency is to atomize us and ban collective protest in public space.

On Friday 5 February there will be a new rally in front of the National Assembly. In the next few days the two committees should decide on a new national date as a goal to stimulate the work of local mobilization that has to go forward. Urgently.

From 'Anticapitaliste' N° 322 4 February 2016.

Corbyn consolidates his position

5 February 2016, by [Veronica Fagan](#)

Since day one he has been under relentless attacks from Blairites and others on the right wing of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) who wanted to destroy him before he had been able to establish his position.

The media have denounced him for everything he has done - or not done - from day one; not singing the national anthem, not being prepared to press the nuclear button, not bending his head low enough at the Cenotaph, [1] being a "supporter of terrorism" and having dinner with the Stop the War Coalition.

The Labour right followed in their wake, trumpeting the same causes. This is the same right wing that shaped the Tory-light and cuts-light policies that lost Labour the last election, whose reaction to that defeat was to declare that campaign had been too far to the left and to win in 2020 the party had to move further to the right - even more Tory-light. The acting leader at the time, Harriet Harman, proposed accepting the Tory

budget and cuts agenda.

The right has problems, however.

Corbyn has consolidated his position and is stronger now than when he was first elected. He has broken the cross party consensus on some of the key issues in British politics, raised the level of the political discourse in the process. This has pushed the political situation in the Labour Party to the left and repopularised radical ideas.

He has openly welcomed migrants and asylum seekers to this country - speaking at the welcome refugees' demonstration on the very same day (12 September 2015) as his election triumph.

He has given full support to the junior doctors [2] and he has taken up the issue of low wages; saying that he would ban the big corporations from paying dividends to their shareholders unless they could show that they are paying a proper living wage to their

workforce - both their direct workers and their contracted workers.

On the Andrew Marr television talk show on Sunday January 17, as well as backing the junior doctors in their defence of the NHS, he called for the repeal of the anti-union laws, and said that he would reverse the law against secondary picketing. He also said, at the international level, that he would negotiate with Argentina over the Falklands (Malvinas) islands.

He has set his face against the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system - the holy grail of the British establishment. He also held the line against war - and taken two thirds of Labour MPs and a slender majority of his then shadow cabinet in the vote against military intervention in Syria despite the huge attacks on him for doing so

The membership of the Labour Party has grown dramatically from around 201,293 before the last election to 388,407 on 10 January 2016, not far

behind the existing, very short lived peak of membership of 407,000 after Blair was elected as Prime Minister in 1997. [3]

Given that those numbers also conceal some resignations from a section of the right who couldn't stomach him at all, it's also a party which is significantly further to the left than it was. Corbyn is reshaping the Labour Party towards his own political positionsâ€”though there remains a fair way to go.

Even if the right wing was able to force a fresh leadership election, (and it is not clear that any significant number of them now see this as being in their immediate sights) Corbyn would only increase his majority. If they tried to exclude him from the ballot paper they would split the party.

Perhaps this, as well as their own internal divisions, is why there is no obvious candidate around whom the right can rally - instead desperate cries that it must be that person every time yet another malcontent grumbles at Corbyn.

Oldham West success

The right has another problem.

They were desperate for Labour to lose the Oldham West and Royton by-election (on 3 December 2015, just three months after Corbyn's election) but it did not happen. Contrary to their expectations, Corbyn has had a positive response from the electorate as well

Labour won the seat with a majority of 10,722 and a 62% share of the voteâ€”higher than at the general election. Predictions of a dramatic UKIP victory were dashed as its vote declined from the general election rather than increasing.

When Jeremy Corbyn said Labour's win in Oldham demonstrated the strength and appeal of its anti-austerity message he was absolutely right. Oldham reflected the changes Corbyn has made since he became leader. Labour is now an anti-austerity party, despite the squeals of pain and

anger from many of its MPs.

Corbynism was also behind the defeats the Tories have suffered in Parliament in recent months - the U-turn over tax credits and the cuts to police numbers. The Â£5.7 m contract to train the staff to work in Saudi Arabia's brutal justice system was scrapped after Corbyn intervened.

This is in sharp contrast to Labour's performance under Miliband - not to mention Brown and Blair - where it was often hard to tell the difference between them and the Tories. It is precisely by showing that austerity is not inevitable - and neither is war - that Labour can win at the polls, convincing people that there is a point in turning out.

The May elections [4] are big challenge for Corbyn but the signs are that Labour will do well, including in London despite the fact that the mayoral candidate Sadiq Khan is not a Corbynite. In any case even a poor result in May would not necessarily be terminal to the project since he appears to be looking to build support over the next two to three years,

Scotland remains a major problem for Corbyn, and that is not going to change whilst he sticks to a unionist position. Corbyn is well to the left of the SNP but whilst he sticks to a unionist agenda he will make no progress north of the border.

Of course the place where things are most difficult for Corbyn is in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

His shadow cabinet reshuffle, despite its mauling by the media for taking too long, as if there was a limit for such reshuffles, has strengthened his position by removing some of those who were openly defying his leadership. [5] It included the removal of Trident supporter Maria Eagle from the defence brief and her replacement with Emily Thornbury who opposes it - and who was very sharp in her backing for Corbyn in the media during the debate on Syria.

Trident critical

The fight over Trident is absolutely

critical. Although there are some dissenters, for the majority of the Tories and the Labour right, defending Trident is a central issue. It's about revelling in Britain's imperial past and her status in the future.

So preventing Trident replacement would be a massive blow for the British ruling class, as well as a huge victory for Corbyn who has championed this cause all his life.

The majority of the population is opposed to Trident renewal - for example on Question Time on Friday Jan 15 for example the studio audience was strongly with Livingstone on the issue. Meetings up and down the country building for the demonstration to build for the February 27 demonstration have been well attended.

Scrapping it will be overwhelmingly popular amongst individual Labour Party members but voices from the top of some unionsâ€”Unite's Len McCluskey and GMB's Paul Kenny for exampleâ€”have been raised in opposition.

In Unite's case, McCluskey's comments - unless he is being misquoted - would seem an extremely skewed interpretation the union's policy - which while it rightly talks about the need to maintain jobs and skills, is absolutely against Trident renewal . [6] Unite's Scottish Secretary Pat Rafferty for example spoke in favour of the resolution against Trident which was adopted by Labour Scotland's conference last year.

Corbyn is rightly countering their arguments by saying that Trident jobs should be switched to renewable energy production. This is a much stronger argument than the idea of submarines without nuclear weapons - an idea which doesn't draw on the strength of the work that has been done over defence diversification over decades.

In this the fortieth anniversary year of the Lucas Aerospace plan, when shop stewards in the plant which was largely making products for the defence industry, came together with radical scientists and produced

detailed blue prints for 150 alternative products that the plant and its workers could be converted to produce, the time to build on and popularise such ideas has never been more urgent.

But what horrifies the right even more is the way Corbyn is proposing taking the decision on Trident. He has said that it will be the membership, either at conference or a membership vote, that will decide the issue – sidelining the Parliamentary LP and the policy forums.

In taking such a position, Corbyn is not only seeking to reach out to those more likely to support his convictions on this vital issue but to strengthen both the level of democracy and of political debate in the party in a more fundamental way. This is obviously a threat to the PLP and to the right not only on one vital issue of opposition to weapons of mass destruction, but on a broader and more long term basis.

Momentum - a challenging project

Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell were right to launch Momentum as a social movement both inside and outside of the LP. It is an ambitious project for which there are no blueprints.

Corbyn's election campaign went way beyond the existing Labour left when Momentum was launched there was a leadership waiting in the wings that would be seen as legitimate by the movement as a whole. So it seemed fair enough at the beginning that there was a Launch Reference Group composed of four of the new Corbyn supporters in the PLP and two others. [7]

Membership remains a loose concept. Everyone who signed up for Corbyn's campaign was asked to get involved and huge numbers did - somewhere between thirty and forty thousand. There are around fifty local groups (there is no list) which vary in how they organise - some meet regularly, others don't. Some are open to all

Corbyn supporters, others are LP members only.

Momentum has been active on a range of issues from voter registration - where government changes could see over 2 million losing the right to vote, to opposition to Osborne's planned tax credits cuts. They mobilised for the Oldham by election and were visible on the climate change and student protests.

In the run up to the Syria vote, Momentum made a huge effort to support Corbyn by both by on line and in person lobbying. East London Momentum organiser Imad Ahmed spoke at the December 12 demonstration. Since the beginning of 2016, Momentum mobilised against the Rail Fare Rip-Off and to support the junior doctor's action.

This is very positive - organising people to defend the key aspects of Corbyn's policies both by public campaigning and putting pressure on the PLP with the weight of so many new activists.

What future for Momentum?

There are questions some questions about campaigning - the fact that Momentum nationally has not been involved in the campaign against Trident for example is definitely a weakness.

But it's on the questions of structures and democracy that the greatest problems lie. The future of Momentum as an organisation is more problematic than the Corbyn project itself. The presence of non-members of the LP - which has been endorsed by both Corbyn and McDonnell - is opposed not only by the Labour right but also by some on the Labour left.

Some seem to have the mistaken view that the best way to deal with the idea that Momentum is dominated by the 'hard left' is to concede ground - as if when you give someone an inch they will go away quietly. Momentum is under attack for its political principles - who is involved is a secondary question for the media and the right.

One question is whether Momentum should affiliate to the Labour Party as a socialist society. Many arguing this position suggest that this means that only members of the Labour Party can be members of Momentum. This is not true. Currently Labour has almost twenty affiliated socialist societies, each with their own rules. The Socialist Health Association for example has long been an affiliated socialist society but its members and office holders don't have to be members and of the Labour Party - and indeed neither do its office holders [8] It set out a structure in which regional representatives and others would initially not be elected, though elections were promised - within six months:

Attempts to hold a National Committee meeting in January had to be abandoned following a protest letter from more than a dozen Momentum organisers from London [9]

A further letter from 'Team Momentum' responded [10] that there would be regional (and national) meetings to elect delegates to the national committee which would meet on February 6. That is not far away and I have yet to hear of any regional gatherings yet though some local groups have elected their delegations.

Momentum will only succeed in its political aims if it sticks to a democratic road. This means all the structures should be open to everyone who supports the project. It's important that this is argued within Momentum groups - nothing is yet a done deal.

The need for an alliance to defend Corbyn's policies remains necessary - which means that other ways of bringing together his supporters will develop, if Momentum fails to meet the challenge.

Corbyn's popularity is based on his policies and principals. People are fed up with empty spin and they want some policy substance and he is providing that. It is crucial, therefore, that he sticks to the left-wing agenda on which he was elected - and at the moment he is doing just that.

The best way of defending the Corbyn project, which is stronger today than when he was elected, is to mobilise in defence of those ideas and to debate as widely as possible how to take forward the dynamism and enthusiasm which led to his election in the first place.

Footnotes

[1] At the official commemoration of the dead of the two world and other wars in November 2015.

[2] See "[Junior doctors - fighting to defend our NHS](#)", "[Junior doctors' strike: What the dispute is about](#)", the movement is continuing with all-out strike action called for 10 February.

[3] The number of actual resignations since Corbyn's election is less than 4000 - as distinct from the numbers who stopped paying which has brought the total leavers to 8500. For the period between the general election and Corbyn's election the figures were 1300 resignations and a total of 5500 leavers. So there is a clear increase in right wingers leaving but way below the 30,000 claimed by Mandelson.

[4] Local elections renewing sections of local authorities will be held on 5 May 2016, and will include the crucial election of London's directly-elected mayor, a post currently held by leading Tory Boris Johnson.

[5] The reshuffle of the shadow cabinet named in September 2015 took place over 2 days in early January, see }The Guardian} "[Corbyn's more unified shadow cabinet ... after a 34 hour-long reshuffle](#) " and "[Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet reshuffle: who's in and who's out](#)".

[6] See [Unite Trident policy: peace and disarmament](#).

[7] Clive Lewis MP, Rebecca Long-Bailey MP, Richard Burgon MP,

Kate Osamor MP together with Councillor Sam Tarry and Jon Lansman (prominent member of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy and author of the Left Futures blog).

[8] See [SOCIALIST HEALTH ASSOCIATION](#)

The current position with Momentum structures is confused and problematic. The obvious place to decide how the organisation should be structured is a meeting of all Momentum supporters rather than structures created and imposed from the top.

Just before Christmas, members received an email summing up the organisations work together with information about the formation of a national committee. [{"In order to reflect the diversity of the movement and its grassroots nature, the National Committee will be made up of two representatives from Scotland, Wales and each of the nine English regions, two from each national trade union and representatives of established Labour left organisations. The committee will be gender balanced and will include BAME and disability representation. Initial representation from regions and nations and equalities groups will be based on consultation as prescribed by the reference group, but will be elected within six months."}]

[9] Key parts of the letter include: "we believe that the decision making processes for Momentum at a national level must be made absolutely transparent. If decisions are made about who can attend Momentum meetings, whether Momentum will become a membership organisation, or how the national organisation will be structured, it has to be clear who is making these decisions" and: "Principally, we hope that local groups will be able to have real input in deciding what national structure Momentum should adopt, and that any eventual structure will include significant representation from

local groups, allowing local activists real democratic influence over the organisation's national direction".and "In the context of the above concerns we have no confidence in the national committee meeting being organised for the 16th January."}] . Even the protest letter accepted that only LP members can be involved in decision making. [{"We agree that Momentum decision making meetings should exclude members of other parties. We would like to note that this isn't because we have anything against members of other parties, but rather that if members of other parties are allowed to have influence over the decision making processes in local groups it may inhibit our ability to build positive links with Constituency Labour Parties, and ultimately to fight for Labour election victories.

[10] ...Over the next month, we will build towards the first meeting of our National Committee on Saturday 6 February with gatherings of delegates from verified local Momentum groups in all nine English regions, Scotland and Wales.

Momentum staff members will be in touch in the coming week, to organise the regional meetings with group organisers, trade unions and other relevant stakeholders. These regional (national in the case of Wales and Scotland) meetings will elect delegates to the National Committee. In the instances of Scotland and Wales, staff members will be a point of contact as you organise your meetings and selection process independently. Each region or nation will elect two delegates, at least one of whom must be a woman. The North West and the South East will have three delegates due to their size, at least two of whom must be women. London will have four delegates, at least two of whom must be women. All delegates will be Labour Party members.

As well as elect their delegates, these regional gatherings may

debate all issues on the forthcoming agenda and present

their own comments, proposals or amendments. These papers will be

presented to all members of the Committee....

New Year's Eve in Cologne - some reflections

4 February 2016, by [Angela Klein](#)

I First of all some facts that can be reconstructed from the police reports.

Up to 1000 men were assaulting women on the square in front of the Cologne central station between 8.30 p.m. and 6.30 a.m. The women were surrounded by groups of men, insulted, sexually harassed and robbed. Even a rape is reported to have taken place. The mood in front of the station was aggressive. This might have partly been due to the fact that during the evening people, for fun, were throwing around fireworks, in some cases with the aim of hitting other people. The local police were present with 143 officers, the federal police inside the railway station with 70 officers. Neither group was able to cope with the situation.

It was not an isolated event. According to a report of the federal police office (Bundeskriminalamt - BKA) sexual and property offences on New Year's Eve similar to Cologne were reported from twelve federal states (Länder). The only exceptions were Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia. In some other European countries such events are alleged to have been reported but there is no reliable information.

By far the most offences were reported from North Rhine-Westphalia (1076) and Hamburg (195). For North Rhine-Westphalia the BKA reported 692 cases of physical injury and theft as well as 384 cases of sexual assaults, 116 of the latter "in combination with property offences" (according to news reports from 23 January).

Up to 23 January the police investigated nationwide 72 suspects, among them 12 Germans and 60 persons of other nationalities. Beyond that the BKA report was rather vague: Hamburg talked about small groups of "male persons having a Mediterranean appearance". Hesse reported men of "North African/Arabic /Southern European/Eastern European appearance". North Rhine-Westphalia talked about "an apparent migration background" and a "foreign appearance" without explaining what that could mean.

In relation to the Cologne events 30 suspects aged 16 to 32 have been identified according to the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior. Among them were 13 Moroccans and 12 Algerians. Weeks ago a report of the Cologne city police talked about "10 Algerian, 10 Moroccan, 4 Syrian, 5 Iranian, 1 Iraqi, 1 Serbian, 2 German citizens and 1 US citizen." Half of the suspects were asylum seekers, 2 had a residence permit, 2 were unaccompanied minors, and 11 were supposed to be illegally in Germany; 7 persons are in custody, among them several Algerians (as of 21 January).

The media soon had a real go at "offenders from North Africa". In fact the police for years (even before the outset of the current migration wave) has been hard on the heels of gangs of North African youth in German cities. Above all in Berlin the police have been dealing for years with around thousand male offenders from the Turkish and Arab communities. These people are a minority of the adolescents of the third generation of migrants. They have already experienced violent behaviour during their first years at school.

But we must see that a great number of the refugees that have come to Germany in 2015 and are still coming

are single youth or young men without a family life. There is not a specific problem of young men from Arab countries, but a specific problem which is due to the circumstances: they have nothing to do and are living in scandalous conditions. It is understandable (though not to be tolerated) that they go berserk [1] and it points to those in the background who are responsible: the political and administrative leaderships and their policy of deterrence instead of integration. The circumstances of housing and living are very important and they make it evident that the federal government has zero intention of really integrating these people. People responsible for the work with migrants say: no more than 50 in one place, with enough privacy and so on. Especially important is that the families can come together again, and it is extremely cynical that the federal government forbids exactly that for those asylum seekers who are not yet fully recognized. The offences of these young people show that sexist and racist violence are linked to each other.

The BKA and the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior unanimously declared not to have any evidence that the offenders had had an arrangement with each other, and they likewise denied any link to organized crime. The Ministry considers it "very likely that group-dynamic processes influenced the individual offences on New Year's Eve". A Moroccan who for three years has been "working" as a pickpocket in Cologne put it thus: "We were around 70 persons and met in Kalk [a Cologne suburb]. Then we went to the central station and talked loudly in Arabic. Thus more and more Arabic-speaking people joined us. Many took the opportunity to steal, some grabbed at girls and the whole thing completely went off course." Only one suspect is recorded in the extensive police

database on the Northern African scene.

All this suggests the picture of petty-crime youth gangs rather than the variously expressed speculation about the apparently “coordinated procedure” having a political background with the IS possibly being involved.

The North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of the Interior claims to have “clear evidence that the offences had been committed by various offenders or groups of offenders”. They lived in various cities and came from various countries. None of the thirty hitherto identified offenders were residents of Cologne. Around half of them were residents of other North Rhine-Westphalian cities, the other half having no fixed abode at all. According to the report the assaults came about rather spontaneously: “That such offences had been committed nationwide - as well as in other European countries - still suggests the conclusion that the offences had not been planned in advance.” There is still no explanation for the wide-ranging appearance of the presumed youth gangs.

II Police did not take the massive assaults seriously

Initially the police did not take the massive assaults seriously and even tried to cover them up. Until conservative media like the magazines *Spiegel* and *Focus* used the assaults on women to stir up public sentiments against “Northern African asylum seekers” the event had not attracted public attention. But then the Cologne chief constable had to resign. Among the people who stirred up the anti-refugee sentiments was the president of the right-wing police “trade union” DPG, Rainer Wendt. He claimed that politicians had instructed the police not to publish criminal offences of refugees. At the same time the public media chiefly gave accounts of criminal offences committed by refugees and less of those committed by German citizens. Wendt’s allegations and the media coverage

suggest that leading politicians are eager to protect foreigners more than Germans and that the police are no longer able or willing to protect the citizens. The critical TV magazine *Panorama* questioned Wendt and other police officers. The former could not give any evidence that supported his allegations. Various police stations unanimously declared that refugee delinquency had not grown in 2015 and makes up only a fraction of the total amount of crime (e.g. in Karlsruhe around 50 cases from a total of 50,000).

The North Rhine-Westphalian part of the extreme right-wing PEGIDA movement and various fascist organizations mobilized only 500 people to a demonstration in Cologne on 9 January (against a counter demonstration of 3,000). On 6 January some hundred women held a manifestation against sexism and racism in front of the cathedral; later they joined a left-wing manifestation against the instrumentalization of the events for a hardening of the refugee legislation.

The events gave fresh impetus to the hardliners within the federal government and within the CDU/CSU and they annihilated the initial “welcome culture” the public opinion was so proud of. The general elections in the federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt on 13 March will probably carry the right-wing AfD (“Alternative for Germany”) into the parliaments of both *Länder*.

There were over 220 attacks on refugee camps in 2015 that is such incidents took place almost daily. Scarcely any perpetrators were arrested; only four sentences were passed. Some pogrom-like assaults on dark-skinned foreigners took place. Militant right-wing groups set up armed vigilante groups patrolling with dogs at night because the police are supposed to be no longer able “to protect the citizens”. There are mayors who tolerate the vigilantes and there are police stations that merely “observe” them.

The federal government is preparing a hardening of the refugee legislation; countries like Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia would thus be classified as

“safe countries of origin”. Asylum seekers from those countries would have no chance of being acknowledged as refugees. SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel is threatening countries with stopping foreign aid if they are not ready to receive asylum seekers that have been sent back by the German authorities. Asylum seekers who are merely “tolerated” are not allowed to send for their families. This is especially cynical and stimulates situations as in Cologne on New Year’s Eve.

The main purpose of the agitation against asylum seekers is to prevent the entrance of more refugees into the country. The federal government is using the label “safe country of origin” to restrict gradually the areas people are allowed to come from in order to be acknowledged as asylum seekers in Germany. Migrants are divided into “good” and “bad” ones by the media in order to counter the accusation of being racist.

III On some problems regarding the reactions of the left.

Generally the left - like the police - did not take the events on New Year’s Eve seriously. As the media began to agitate against “North Africans” the left objected to the racist instrumentalization of the attacks. Partly they went so far as to refuse to take into account the participation of the North African community because this seemed to be a racist attribution. Only the women’s manifestations and the reactions of numerous women groups demanding a better protection of women against sexual violence led to a partial re-thinking by the left. The unspoken fear of the left is that the women’s demands - by making no difference between German and non-German offenders - inadvertently join the racist chorus.

Yet the women were aware of the danger and from the very beginning they made clear that the issue is not

violence by foreigners but violence by males. However, the fact remains that only with the growing agitation against asylum seekers could they get a broader hearing for their main demand to sharpen the penal code relating to sex crimes - a rather uncomfortable experience. But it is good that they have done it and that they are not caught in a trap like "The main enemy is the anti-refugee agitation". Thus it turned out that they have been able to build a bridge between the rights for women and those for migrants.

In mid-January Syrian refugees took up the issue and held a manifestation during which they distributed roses to women and apologized for the assaults. Under these circumstances it was an important and nice gesture but a double-edged one as well. They apologized for something they had not done and that may inadvertently enforce the mainstream propaganda of "good" and "bad" refugees. Some Syrian demonstrators demanded as resolutely as the official German attitude the "severe punishment" and "deportation" of the offenders. Their wish to be accepted by the German society as equals is leading to their over-adaptation (which is not a new phenomenon). Moreover, migrants who are established in Germany fear that such events may challenge their own position, which they have achieved with difficulty.

Finally we should admit: Even the women realized only gradually that the events on New Year's Eve demanded a political response by them and that they could not go on with things as normal. In an interview with *SoZ - Sozialistische Zeitung* Behshid Najafi, a leader of the migrant women's organization Agisra, complained that even women do not take such assaults seriously enough and are ready to put up with too much.

IV The autonomous women's

movement is a valuable ally

In this struggle the autonomous women's movement is a valuable ally that relentlessly refers to gender and the German patriarchal society's deficits rather than to different nationalities.

It should be recalled that the patriarchal condition is a social phenomenon related to the emergence of class rule and not a peculiar trait of a specific "nation" or "religion" though all major monotheistic religions are patriarchal. Only in a patriarchal society women can be treated as second-class human beings. Overcoming patriarchal conditions lies as the heart of the matter behind the women's demand: "A woman's NO must be enough!" Sexual violence is not only existing in the case of physical aggression but even when women are driven into situations where they are submitted to something against their will. The degradation of a woman is the first step to physical violence. Therefore the women's organizations unanimously demand that Germany should ratify the Istanbul convention and change the German legislation in accordance. But there is a strong opposition by a male lobby to that demand.

Patriarchal conditions manifest themselves in various societies in various ways - and even in one and the same society the position of women is different depending upon the strength of the women's movement and the influence of religion in everyday life. This is true for Europe as well as for Islamic countries. Even in European countries not long ago women were regarded as fair game when they showed more skin than usual. Recalling these conditions, insisting upon the universal validity of women's rights and fighting against violence the women's movement is a valuable force in the struggle against racism - especially since racism and sexism are based on a similar pattern.

V Finally there is another dimension

The women's demand to strengthen the legislation regarding sex crime is a problem for many left-wing people who are against the rearmament of the state apparatus. Yet we should make a difference between the repressive function of the state and its protective function. The neo-liberal state has massively dismantled the last and strengthened the former. In Germany there is not a lack of the means for staff and money to support women's institutions for self-help, violence prevention and police protection - the national budget has a surplus of 18 million Euros. But there is a lack of political will. This can be seen even more blatantly in the dereliction of schools, the dismantling of public services and above all in the way refugees are accommodated in this country: in mass quarters offering no private space and lacking adequate food supply or hygienic standards; the refugees often wait for months to be acknowledged as asylum seekers - not to speak about language or training courses. Thus it is not surprising that young people get a camp psychosis and form criminal gangs.

The left cannot compensate the state's failures by its own structures. Therefore women have no choice but to demand sharper laws, which force the police to act.

30 January 2016

*No one article can cover all the aspects of this discussion. **International Viewpoint** welcomes other contributions.*

Footnotes

[1] Our mothers told us that in the refugee camps at the end of the war women/children and men were separated for exactly the same reasons. The same measures are applied today in several refugee camps in Germany which have reported such problems. Of course such incidents do not happen in every camp, but one must say also

that the conditions in the camps are quite different and the more

social contacts and social control

they allow the less incidents might be reported.

Assessing the Paris COP and building on the outcome

3 February 2016, by [Alan Thornett](#)

It is the first comprehensive agreement after 21 years of meetings and conferences conducted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol applied to just a few countries and was sabotaged by the USA and others. Copenhagen in 2009 broke up in acrimony and emissions were allowed to let rip without any international restriction, legal or political.

Much of the media was euphoric about the deal. The Guardian headline for example announced: "Paris climate deal: nearly 200 nations sign an end of fossil fuel era." The governments that signed it hailed it as a great victory: as an historic breakthrough that has delivered a framework for the avoidance of catastrophic climate change.

This is clearly not the case. The deal as it stands is totally (catastrophically) inadequate when set against the scale of the task. There is no doubt about that. It would be wrong, however, in my view, to dismiss it as simply a failure "as if nothing positive was achieved. The issue post-Paris is not just whether the deal reached can resolve the issue of climate change (clearly not), but whether there were gains made that can strengthen the struggle against it. Whether gains were made that can improve the terrain on which the struggle takes place. The deal, from this point of view, is deeply contradictory.

An international agreement, of course, is far from the only level that the struggle against global warming and climate change has to be waged. Such an agreement is important, however, in order to set the framework of the struggle at a national level and against the governments of the individual countries. Global warming and the

ecological crisis are the ultimate international issues since there is only one atmosphere and only one biosphere.

Gains for the movement

In my view "and this might be controversial on the left [1]" there were indeed significant gains made in Paris, despite huge problems in terms of implementation. If we get this wrong we can disarm the movement.

For the first time, for example, neither the scientific basis of global warming and climate change, or its anthropogenic character, was disputed. The climate skeptics were a non-factor. This is a big change from Copenhagen.

There was also, for the first time, unambiguous recognition, by a COP, of what climate scientists, and climate campaigners, have been saying for many years: that there is a real and urgent threat, from anthropogenic global warming and climate change, that will have catastrophic consequences for hundreds of millions of people if the burning of fossil fuels is not brought to an end.

It is a signal "though one that will be roundly ignored by the fossil fuel industry today" that the end of the era of fossil fuel is historically in sight.

This is an important point. Kevin Anderson (climate scientist and Professor of energy and climate change at the University of Manchester), who is heavily critical of the deal when it comes to implementation, describes it as a: "testament to how assiduous and painstaking science can defeat the

unremitting programme of misinformation that is perpetuated by powerful vested interests'. He is right about that. He might have added that it is also a testament to dedicated and determined campaigners, over the years, who have also refused to be silenced on this issue.

Another factor, no doubt, that led to a greater recognition of the realities of global warming in Paris is the increasingly unavoidable consequences of it. The ice caps are shrinking, the sea level is rising, the deserts are expanding, fresh water is become ever more scarce, agriculture is under threat, and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent. A further dimension to this has recently been added with signs of the destabilisation of the vast Western Antarctic ice sheet, the melting of which could raise the sea level by 7m.

Even the most reluctant have had to wake up and face reality "at least to some extent.

As the conference was taking place, towns in the North of England and Scotland were being hit by unprecedented rainfall and devastating floods. Since the deal was signed there have been record-breaking hurricanes in Texas, unprecedented floods in Argentina, and severe droughts in Africa, California and Southern Spain, often with huge bush fires breaking out. Australia has had all three "floods droughts and bush fires.

A long and hard struggle remains (to say the least) but gains were made in Paris that can be built on.

What the climate campaigns say

Mass mobilisations of anti-climate change campaigners took place around the world in the run up to the Paris COP. The demonstration of 70,000 in London on November 29 was the biggest Britain has seen on climate change. Mobilisations and activities took place in Paris during COP itself, and despite the state of emergency imposed under anti-terrorism laws, there was an impressive impromptu march to the Eiffel Tower.

Opinion amongst the campaigning organisations on the outcome of Paris varies. Avaaz called it ‘a landmark goal that can save everything we love!’ though warning of a long struggle ahead. Greenpeace (via spokesperson Yann Arthus-Bertrand) said that: ‘The wheel of climate action turns slowly, but in Paris it has turned. There’s much in this deal that frustrates and disappoints me, but it still puts the fossil fuel industry squarely on the wrong side of history’.

Fossil Free (a campus based campaign for disinvestment) put it this way: “Should we be glad with the agreement reached in Le Bourget? The goals that were set are definitely not enough to keep us within the 1.5 degree global warming, but it is a huge improvement compared to what we had.” Friends of the Earth, on the other hand, said the deal is a sham designed to fleece the poor countries.

George Monbiot, who I don’t always agree with on such assessments, put it very well: “By comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it’s a disaster”. Kevin Anderson made a similar point. He said: “It is the twenty-first century’s equivalent to the victory of heliocentrism over the inquisition. Yet it risks being total fantasy”.

The anti-climate change movement as whole, however, has emerged far more positive from Paris than from Copenhagen after which it virtually collapsed. This reflects not just the more positive outcome but a better

thought-through approach by the campaigns in the build up to Paris, which was to prepare for the worst, build the movement, and make plans to continue the struggle at a higher level in 2016 and beyond.

The movement upped its demands

The most important (and surprising) position taken by the COP, in my view, was the decision to set a target for a 1.5°C limit on the global temperature increase. The objective was set of “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.” [Article 2 point a]

This is far more ambitious (more stringent) than expected. Most climate campaigners, particularly outside the countries at the greatest risk, have tended to argue up till now for a 2°C limit. The inadequacy of 2°C was clear but calling for a 1.5°C limit was felt (by many) as difficult to promote given the prevailing level of consciousness on the issue. The world would have to stop burning fossil fuels altogether by 2030 in order to hold to a 1.5°C temperature increase. Now 1.5°C has been adopted by the Paris COP it will be a lot easier to advocate.

It sets a new benchmark against which the struggle to reduce carbon emissions will be measured. The movement has just upped its demands.

Not that 1.5°C was won without a struggle in Paris. In fact it was the direct result of a very determined struggle, throughout the conference, by those countries that will disappear under the waves as a result of a temperature rise in excess of 1.5°C.

A coalition of one hundred countries led by the Marshall Islands, and with the support of Avaaz and others, organised what was termed a High Ambition Coalition in order to coordinate their intervention. Many of these countries have long campaigned

around the slogan ‘1.5 to stay alive’ but no one listened.

Non-binding pledges

The big problem (the down side) of the deal is the yawning gap between words and deeds – between aspiration and implementation. This has been widely (and rightly) noted in the movement.

The biggest single problem is that carbon reduction targets are to be ‘achieved’ via non-binding pledges submitted by each country (signaturee) in advance of the COP called ‘Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INCDs)’. The INCDs are to be audited every five years after an initial review in 2018. (The rationale behind the non-binding status of these pledges (for what it is worth) is that since Copenhagen this is the only way to get 195 countries to sign up to a comprehensive agreement.)

The criteria for constructing the INCDs are set out in the preamble to the agreement. They are surprisingly good – as far as they go. They are based – the preamble insists – on ‘the principles of democracy and climate justice’. The INCDs should be constructed, the criteria states, by:

“Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.”

Also by: “Noting the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth, and noting the importance for some of the concept of “climate justice”, when taking action to address climate change.”

It is good that the criteria recognise the integrity of the ecosystems. The problem, however, is not what they say but what they omit—and what they leave dangerously ambiguous.

They have nothing to say, for example, about the methods and technologies that can be used by the signatories to construct their INCDs and achieve their carbon reduction targets. This is left up to the signatories themselves. Many have therefore (unsurprisingly) opted for methods of ‘achieving’ carbon reduction that are the least disruptive to their current wasteful (disastrous) practices rather than the most effective and sustainable.

Rather than opting for energy conservation programmes, cutting out wasteful production, and converting to renewables, many have turned dangerous technologies such as biomass and technical fixes like carbon capture and storage, that don’t even exist in a useable form. No doubt to nuclear will also be high on their lists. There is no mention of carbon trading in the agreement but that does not mean that this will not be used to construct some figures around.

There are other serious problems as well. The target date by which the 1.5°C limit should be met is not made clear other than ‘as soon as possible’ or alternatively ‘in the second half of this century’. Article 4 point 1 puts it this way:

“In order to achieve the long-term temperature goal set out in Article 2, Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties, and to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with best available science, so as to achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century, on the basis of equity, and in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty.”

There is no clear yardstick against which the carbon reductions pledges should be based. Some signatories have pledged to cut emissions

‘compared to business as usual’ whilst others have pledged to cut emissions in terms of carbon intensity—which is the amount of carbon needed to produce the same amount of economic activity. Both of these methods can be used to record carbon reductions that don’t exist.

The agreement explicitly allows countries to count emission reductions made in other countries as a part of their own domestic targets—that are referred to as ‘Internationally Transferred Mitigation Targets’.

It is also far from clear where international transport—air and shipping that are major polluters—comes into all this. How or whether they are included in the national INCDs or whether they will remain un-monitored.

Nor does it, of course, take any account of the logic of the capitalist system with its productivism, its drive for growth, and its insatiable need for profit.

A 2.7°C temperature increase

The consequences of all this becomes very clear when the effects of the carbon reduction proposals in the INCDs from the 195 participating countries are aggregated—a calculation made by the COP itself. Far from holding the global temperature to a 1.5°C limit, or even a 2°C limit, the aggregate effect of the INCDs submitted adds up to a rise in the global temperature of 2.7°C.

Such a rise would be catastrophic. It would not only lead to the disappearance of many low lying countries and low lying regions under the waves with the displacement of millions of people to join the ranks of the climate refugees but it would trigger dangerous feedback events which would spin global warming out of control.

The answer, in the agreement, to this problem is to call for a progressive tightening of the INCDs as the audits take place. It puts it this way: “much

greater emission efforts will be required than those associated with the INCDs in order to hold the increase in the global average temperature to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels by reducing emissions to 40 gigatonnes [of carbon into the atmosphere] or to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels...”

The problem with this, of course, is the signatories themselves. Many of them signed the deal not because they are committed to tackling global warming but because it is becoming increasingly difficult, in terms of world opinion, to avoid signing such a deal. They have little intention of doing anything about the problem if they can possibly avoid it.

This is the case from Putin’s Russia to Cameron’s Britain, where the Tories were busy cutting subsidies to renewables and vigorously promoting fossil fuels including, shale gas, even as the agreement was being signed.

The global South

Another much disputed issue in Paris was the situation of the impoverished countries of the global South. Countries who pollute the least but are most deprived of climate justice—the principal victims of climate chaos.

As a result of a struggle by such countries the agreement recognises this reality, at least to some extent. It accepts that such countries will need material help if they are to be able to adopt sustainable (non-carbon) models of development and eradicate poverty at the same time. The wealthy countries are consequently ‘strongly urged’ by the agreement to provide \$100bn a year (from 2020) to help them in this. This figure is to be progressively raised in future years.

The agreement consequently: “Resolves to enhance the provision of urgent and adequate finances, technology and capacity building support by developed country Parties in order to enhance the level of ambition of pre-2020 action by Parties, and in this regard strongly urges developed country Parties to

scale up their level of financial support, with a concrete roadmap to achieve the goal of jointly providing USD 100bn annually by 2020 for mitigation and adaptation while significantly increasing adaptation finance from current levels and to further provide appropriate technology and capacity building support.”

100bn dollars a year is woefully inadequate, of course, Friends of the Earth are right about that, but it is an important principle to establish.

A transitional approach

For ecosocialists, and indeed for climate campaigners more generally, the Paris COP was a part of a long hard struggle against climate change and to defend the environment.

The agreement, however, is framed entirely within the parameters of the capitalist system, with its productivism, growth, and drive for profit. It could not be otherwise. The COP was comprised of 195 capitalist governments (194 if we discount Cuba) led by the UN. It was never going to produce the anti-capitalist solution to the climate crisis – based on a social justice and climate justice basis – that is needed. If we judge it (and dismiss it) on that basis we will miss the point.

It is important, in this regard, that we avoid the kind of maximalism that suggests that little or nothing can be done short of overthrowing capitalism and establishing a socialist society. That socialism (or indeed ecosocialism) is the answer.

The issue at stake was not just whether a deal, if reached, would resolve the issue of climate change – would be the ultimate solution. Few, I suspect, expected that it would. The objective for most was to fight for the best deal possible. Hopefully one that would break the deadlock of Copenhagen and include some breakthroughs that would advance the struggle; a deal that would create a new dynamic from which a new round (or stage) of the

struggle could be launched. This much, at least, was achieved.

The problem (or contradiction) for the COP and its signatories is that despite the deal being firmly within a capitalist framework, the 1.5°C limit is unachievable under capitalism – short of a dictatorial solution. From this point of view it is a transitional demand. The task for ecosocialists, and indeed for the wider movement, therefore is to demand it’s implemented to the full, along with other breakthroughs in the agreement.

Winning the kind of change needed to defend the environment under capitalism is very difficult. It is the most environmentally destructive form of society the world has ever seen, with the possible exception of Stalinism. That does not mean, however, that it cannot be done, or that we can wait for the demise of the system before big changes are made to defend the environment. Time is too short anyway. We have to fight for major changes to defend the environment as a part of the struggle to end capitalism and in preparation for a fully sustainable ecosocialist society.

Building the movement after Paris

The mobilisation for Paris was always about building the movement as well as getting an agreement. It was not just about mobilising for Paris but through Paris and into 2016. This was the stance of the mobilising committee in Paris and also of the organising committee in London that organised the demonstration on November 29.

And it is already happening in Britain. Fossil Free, a campus based divestment campaign, has initiated, along with Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Christian Aid and many more, an international week of action on May 7-15, around the slogan Break Free from Fossil Fuels. It will raise the issue of a just transition to renewables and the need to keep coal, oil and gas in the ground. It will seek to build on

the campaigns and battles that have been taking place around oil pipelines, coal extraction, and fracking sites. The aim will be to demonstrate to the fossil fuel industry that it no longer has the consent of the people.

The struggle in Britain

In Britain the task is to respond to such initiatives, and also to expose and take on the total hypocrisy of the current Tory government in terms of its highly damaging environmental record. Behind Cameron’s Paris rhetoric, and that of Amber Rudd – the Tory Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change – the Tories turned their back on even the minimal climate measures previously taken on climate change. They have been aided and abetted in this by having a climate denier as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Tories were paralysed by the devastating floods in the North of England having recently cut the funding both for flood defences and for the Environment Agency. There was plenty of spin but no commitment to significant additional resources.

They have already removed the subsidies from onshore wind and cut solar funding, putting an estimated 30,000 solar industry jobs at risk. They have made renewables liable to the climate change levy, so that clean generation will have to pay more in tax. They are fast-tracking fracking applications and the government is threatening to overrule Lancashire council’s decision to refuse Cuadrilla’s fracking planning application.

They have scrapped the Green Deal for home insulation, and are cutting the funding for home insulation. They are scrapping the Zero Carbon Homes target – that was supported by house builders as well as environmentalists. They are removing tax incentives to buy less-polluting cars.

At the same time they have massive plans for road building – their £15 billion road-building spree is still going ahead despite austerity. They also have in-principle agreement,

under the Davies report, for a new runway in the South East of England. Britain is already unable to meet its carbon emission targets. Building a new runway and propping up an industry that is highly damaging to the environment, that gets huge tax subsidies, and pays no VAT, will make it impossible.

The task for campaigners in Britain post-Paris is to tackle these issues by building the campaigns against climate change at both the domestic and international level as well as the direct actions campaigns around fracking and other issues on the basis of the gains made in Paris.

13.1.16

[Socialist Resistance](#)

Footnotes

[1] For example see Daniel Tanuro's article [COP21: in spite of the show, the glass is 80% empty](#).

The World's Eyes are on Turkey

1 February 2016, by [Sarah Parker](#)

The background

But between 25 and 28 June more than 200 civilians were killed in Kobani by ISIS in a surprise attack, as the Turkish army continued to ignore or assist ISIS attacks on the Syrian Kurds, and on 11 July the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) issued a statement explaining that the numerous Turkish military violations of the 2 year old ceasefire in Turkey would no longer be tolerated, and that for example, every effort would be made by the Kurdish people, including the guerrillas, to stop the construction of dams for military purposes. [1] On 16 July the People's defence forces announced that guerrillas were conducting warning actions in response to sharply increased Turkish military activity including bombardments in guerrilla defence areas. [2] On 17 July Erdogan repudiated the "Dolmabahçe Accords" of February 28 as a basis for peace between Turkey and the Kurdish side, a clear signal that the peace process was over and the war beginning again. On 23 July the US and Turkey reached agreement that Turkey would enter the so-called anti-ISIS coalition and that the US could use the Incirlik airbase near Diyarbakir. [3] This was spun by a sceptical media as a sign that Turkey might start to deal with ISIS, as opposed to ignoring it or assisting it. Within 48 hours of the agreement, Turkey had made a few bombing runs over ISIS territory in Syria, (after which little more was heard about this aspect of the campaign [4]) and began a systematic air campaign against guerrilla camps

in Northern Iraq which has continued unbroken up to now. After a period of half-hearted attempts to form a coalition government, on 24 August Erdogan called a fresh election for November 1. This was run in an atmosphere of blatant intimidation after more than 100 attacks on HDP party offices and the bombing of a peace rally called by labour movement organisations and the HDP on 10 October in which 102 people were killed and more than 400 injured. No group claimed the bombing but it is widely thought to have been carried out by people with connections to ISIS. The HDP's vote still got them over the threshold, but the AKP's vote rose just enough for the party to get an overall majority.

Self-rule and resistance

From early August 2015 local assemblies in Kurdistan Turkey began declaring self-rule, and this was confirmed by the meeting of the Democratic People's Congress on 28 December 2015 [5] after Erdogan's AKP stole the re-run election of November 1, the idea is to build the strongest possible local self-defence and as a step on the road to freedom from the persecution of the Turkish state. Youths initially dug ditches and put up barricades to deny entrance to these areas to the police and army. Even though in many of these areas neighbourhoods have now been literally under siege by 10,000 troops on and off for months the

Turkish army, police and special forces have not been able to retake them though they have driven out some residents. The worst sieges are of the cities of Cizre and Silopi, in ?irnak province, and of Sur, the historic old city centre of Diyarbakir, currently under heavy mortar bombardment by the Turkish army which has been trying for more than 40 days to recapture neighbourhoods under control of the new PKK-linked youth self-defence forces and the local population. A People's Council representative in Cizre has today (18 Jan) called for an uprising throughout Kurdistan to support the Kurdish resistance. The resistance is in its 33rd day in Silopi, where neighbourhoods are frequently under tank fire and 26 civilians have been killed, but the state has conceded lifting of the curfew during daylight hours from 19 Jan. HDP MP Ferhat Encü says things are far worse than after the military coup in 1980. The latest figures are that 283 civilians have been killed in the sieges since 12 July [6] while 300,000 people are estimated to have been driven out of their homes in the depths of winter. The left needs to wake up to the fact that the Kurdish war has come down from the mountains into the cities and that thousands of people are putting up a heroic resistance to a major NATO ally that has said repeatedly that it will crush the resistance street by street, and do some serious solidarity work.

The umbrella group KCK Koma CivakÄn Kurdistan (Group of Communities in Kurdistan) has called on people to stay and support the

resistance if they are able to, though many people have retreated to other districts, as the situation is very dangerous with people being at sight by army snipers or killed by the shelling, while the state has cut off water and electricity. It should be noted that the centres of resistance are Kurdish cities in the south east which have suffered repression for seventy years, plus discrimination and high unemployment, and where HDP received very high votes in the elections both in June and November 2015, and are near to Rojava and Kurdistan Iraq.

As People's Defence Forces commander Murat Karayilan said in his New Year message: "The AKP has unleashed a furious attack on us. The guerrillas and also the youth in the cities, all parts of Kurdish society, are playing their part in the resistance". Self-defence units have been announced in more and more places, the latest being a women's unit in Nusaybin. The participation of women in the struggle grows all the time, and clearly the resilience of the women and their determination to fight for freedom is a huge strength of the movement. Overall the resistance against the might of the Turkish state is a remarkable achievement and perhaps goes some way to explain the silence of other NATO members.

Relating to the rest of society

Looking at the Turkish state as a whole, Tariq Ali conducted an interesting interview on Telesur called "Turkey is a boiling society" in which Sungur Savran singles out landmark events of the last three years: June - September 2013 the Gezi uprising, 6-12 October 2014 the serhildan (uprising) in Kurdish areas of Turkey with millions on the street, and when it became clear that PKK had armed units in even the smallest towns', and metal workers' strike 2015 when in May tens of thousands rose up first against yellow unions and then against the bosses, in a wave spreading from Bursa to Izmir, Ankara, Istanbul, a promising development because the workers movement had been largely dormant

for many years. Savran argued that secular forces in big cities of Turkey, petit bourgeoisie and upper layers of the working class who used to vote CHP (Ataturk's old party, nationalist but social democratic) now understand what has been done to the Kurds and are becoming sympathetic and starting to vote HDP; it is vital for socialists to continue to work to draw this bloc into the HDP orbit. He also notes that Erdogan has begun to actively mobilise right-wing death-squads (partly because he cannot rely entirely on the still-secular army linked to NATO) to use against the working class in Turkey, and against leftists, Alevis and Kurds. This was one of the reasons that people decided to put up the barricades - they knew they would have to defend themselves sooner or later.

The most recent developments which have linked the west of Turkey to the war on the Kurds in the south-east are the bomb which killed 10 mainly German tourists in Istanbul, and the issue of the Academics for Peace statement, which was signed by over 1000 academics in Turkey and many outside. The academics who signed the statement calling for peace and for an end to the repression have been accused of treachery, and threatened both by Erdogan, and by well-known crime boss Sedat Peker. All signatories are under criminal investigation, many have been arrested, some have already been sacked from their jobs, with reports of pressure being applied such as prominent marks being put on signatories' office doors, and a movement is rapidly gathering in their defence, which fortunately has become rapidly internationalised, and has received considerable media coverage, as Erdogan has perhaps unwisely extended his criticism to Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali, well known supporters of liberation struggles who signed the statement. At the last count 299 academics in Britain had rushed to sign a statement of support. Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali have said they will only go to Turkey if invited by the Kurdish people and the HDP, in response to invitations to them by president Erdogan. Both HDP and the People's Republican Party CHP have condemned the threats by Erdogan

and expressed concern at the path which he is pushing the society along. HDP MP Faysal Sariyildiz has invited Chomsky to visit the Kurdistan region and has invited Erdogan and Davutoglu to visit with him to see the situation for himself, accompanying the invitations with very graphic statement describing conditions under the siege, which can be read here: <http://anfenglish.com/features/hdp-invites-chomsky-to-kurdistan>

Turkey in Syria and Iraq

It is misleading to look at the activities of the Turkish state in Turkey in isolation: their policy in their near abroad should also be understood. It must be noted that the Turkish state is deeply involved in military and other interference in northern Syria and northern Iraq, bidding to reclaim its former regional power, via self-serving attempts to exploit the legitimate grievances of the opposition to the regime in Syria, along with a last-ditch attempt to block the struggle of the Kurdish people and their allies both in Syria and northern Iraq.

Just to give a broad outline on the Kurdish struggle in Syria, the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its military wing the YPG (People's Defence Forces) in Syria said consistently that they would defend their own areas if attacked and they have done that. They are currently still defending the three majority Kurdish and mixed self-declared autonomous cantons of Afrin, Kobani and Jazira (Qamishli and Hasakah), and the mainly Kurdish area of Shaikh Maqsud in Aleppo. Battles to break the isolation of the western canton of Afrin and to defend Sheikh Maqsud, recently bombed by the regime and currently under heavy attack again by Al Nusra and Ahrar Al Sham forces, and to cut the supply lines from Turkey and ISIS's supply lines east via Raqqa and Shengal to Mosul, are taking place at the moment. Erdogan notoriously said that if the Kurds crossed west of the Euphrates this would be a red line for Turkey; this happened recently when the Syrian Democratic Forces, (the new name for the Kurdish defence forces and their

allies which include Arab and some Assyrian units) crossed the Euphrates and took the Tishrin Dam and its surrounding area from ISIS. Presumably the attitude of the US is that the Syrian Kurdish forces are currently useful for keeping ISIS within bounds, as are the PUK peshmerga in Iraq; and that in due course Turkey will be free to deal with both. Obviously most of the Kurdish people have a different ambition - survival, self-determination, and democratisation of the whole of the Middle East, and it is the job of socialists to stand with them.

The Turkish state wants both to crush all resistance and to take back the lands lost by the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. The Turkish army established bases in Northern Iraq in 1991 under the cloak of the no-fly zone, ostensibly set up to protect the Kurds of Iraq from Saddam Hussein. The bases were used in 1996 in co-operation with the KDP to attack PKK guerrillas. The Turkish army made an unsuccessful attack on PKK bases on 26 December 2007 and after fierce fighting in which the areas under attack were also defended by PUK peshmergas who rushed north from Sulaimaniyah and the surrounding area, the Turkish army had to retreat hastily with heavy losses; the army made various further forays over that winter. The new Kurdistan Parliament voted in 2008 that the bases should be removed, and the Prime Minister of the KRG Nechivan Barzani confirmed that the Turkish bases would be shut, but nothing happened. At the end of 2011 US and NATO "troop trainers" left Iraq over failure to agree immunity from prosecution for US troops' actions; the withdrawal of the main bulk of the American forces took place between December 2007 and 2011. In 2012 the Iraqi government said that the Turkish bases had to be closed. So by this time US and other NATO forces that had been in Iraq since 2003 had largely withdrawn; but the number of Turkish forces only increased. The presence of the Turkish troops was not popular; petitions with 470,000 signatures were collected in South Kurdistan and delivered to the Kurdistan Parliament and to the Regional Presidency in 2012, and with almost 1,000,000 to the Parliament

and to the Regional Government in 2015, but were ignored.

The current situation in Kurdistan Iraq is potentially explosive. Turkey and other NATO members are well aware that the people in South Kurdistan are furious at the corruption and inefficiency of their government, even if the situation is less calamitous than in the rest of Iraq. NATO policy is to deliberately support Barzani's KDP party as a counterweight to the more radical base of the PUK in Sulaimani and Kirkuk, and to the increasing presence of guerrillas allied to or belonging to the PKK, who have been at large in South Kurdistan, not just in the mountain refuge of Qandil, since the rise of ISIS and the fall of Shengal and Mosul in 2014. At this moment PUK peshmergas and PKK and YJA Star guerrillas are jointly holding off a heavy ISIS assault in the south of Kirkuk, and it has also not escaped the attention of the Kurdish fighters that Turkish army forces in Northern Iraq are well-placed to engage in a race for Mosul should ISIS come under too much pressure there, or even to move against the PUK "Green Zone" if there is an upsurge of the mass movement against corruption and poverty - perhaps NATO and Turkey even see an increasing presence of the Turkish army in Northern Iraq as a substitute for the US army.

Break the silence

Despite periodic speculation that the US and EU member states dislike some of Turkey's policies, ever since the AKP disowned the Dolmabahçe Accords between the state side and the Kurdish side and restarted the war in July, there have few comments from other NATO members other than terse statements of support for Turkey's right to defend its national security. As winter deepens and the Turkish army bombards Kurdish cities because it has not been able to retake them, there is a deafening silence from other governments.

On 18 January Prime Minister Davutoglu visited to David Cameron and five people were arrested in Whitehall as police tried to prevent protesters outside 10 Downing Street from making their views known, the

whole incident clearly showing which side the British government is on, if there were any doubt.

On the evening of 19 January there are reports that the Turkish army has crossed the border into Syria at Jarablus, the last ISIS-held crossing point on the Turkish border, with no reaction from ISIS forces in the area. [7] This comes amid an outburst of media speculation that the UN Syria talks will be postponed because Turkey refuses to accept that there should be Kurdish representation on the opposition side at the talks.

Actions, contacts and resources in Britain

- Sign or publicise the Academics for Peace statement and the supporting statement from academics in Britain [here](#).

- Look out for details, to be announced soon, of national solidarity demonstration on Sunday 6 March - Break the Silence! Stop Turkey's war on the Kurds! Unban the PKK!

- For announcements of emergency protests, see [Free Youth Facebook page](#), [Solidarity with People of Turkey Facebook page](#) or [Kurdish Revolution Information Page](#).

- To get weekly briefings from Peace in Kurdistan campaign on events arranged by and in solidarity with the Kurdish movement, contact estella24@tiscali.co.uk.

- Write to your MP.

- To give medical aid you can donate money to [Kurdish Red Moon - Heyva Sor a Kurdistan](#) at Fairfax Hall 11 Portland Gardens London N4 1HU
Registered Charity No: 10 93 741
Company No: 42 85 714
Bank Sort code: 20 46 60
Bank Account No: 40 91 23 87

Source [Left Unity](#).

Footnotes

[1] ANF News KCK: We will not accept the violation of the ceasefire anymore.

[2] ANF News Warning action by guerrillas in response to Turkish military activity.

[3] *Washington Post* Turkey agrees to allow U.S. military to use its base to attack Islamic State.

[4] *Washington Post* Turkey agrees to allow U.S. military to use its base to attack Islamic State.

[5] DP Turkey's Kurds call for self-rule.

[6] Kurdish Info List of civil casualties during the Turkish State's Operations.

[7] ANF News ANHA: Turkish army has entered Jarablus.