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30 November 2016, by robm

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Fidel Castro (1926-2016): A page turns

30 November 2016, by François Sabado

Resurgence of an internationalist revolutionary dynamic

How could a "guerilla" force of first a few dozen and then a few hundred militants, involve a whole people in the overthrow of the bloody dictatorship of Batista? How can we explain that a population of 10 million succeeded in standing up to American imperialism and thus polarizing the world situation?

It is here that we must recognize the leadership qualities of Fidel Castro. This is in keeping with the tradition of José Martí, a Cuban revolutionary, champion of the struggle for national liberation against North American imperialism. But we must note a double specificity of the Cuban revolution: while strategies of allying with the national bourgeoisie dominated the workers' movement of the time, Fidel and his comrades developed a strategy of armed struggle, combining guerrilla actions, movement of the masses, demonstrations and insurrectionary strikes. The second specificity is that by opposing "Yankee imperialism", the Cuban leadership ensured the sovereignty of the country. To do so, it nationalized the major capitalist holdings, especially North American ones, and began to bring the country out of underdevelopment, particularly in education and health.

Even though Cuba is a small country, Fidel propelled a revolutionary process within the Western Hemisphere itself. The alchemy between Fidel and Che Guevara revived the best internationalist traditions of the workers' movement. From the outset, calls for support from the struggling peoples multiplied, beginning with support for the Vietnamese people. In January 1966, the Cubans organized the international conference called "Tricontinental", which brought together the anti-imperialist forces of Africa, Asia and Latin America. This was a first since the major international conferences of the 1920s. This policy was embodied in the armed struggles undertaken by Che in Latin America (Bolivia) and Africa (Congo). It also manifested itself in the 1970s by sending thousands of Cuban soldiers to help the Angolan people to repel the assaults of South African troops.

We can - and must - discuss certain militaristic deviations within the Cuban strategies, but what is essential for this period was the resurgence of an internationalist revolutionary dynamic.

Soviet pressures and bureaucratic deformations

At the end of the 1960s, the Cuban Revolution was confronted with the reality of power relations and the global market. It paid in its flesh and blood the warning given to the revolutionary movement since the Russian revolution: "Socialism is not built in one country" ...

Isolated, strangled by the blockade and the North American embargo, the Cuban leadership was less and less in a position to implement its own policies. The tactical agreements with the USSR, necessary against US imperialism, were transformed into political subordination. In August 1968, Fidel Castro supported the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia. In economic terms, the choice of strengthening the sugar monoculture weakened the country considerably and led to the failure of the "zafra" - sugar harvest - of 1970. It increased Cuba's dependence on the USSR, particularly as the North American blockade was becoming harsher.

In this context, the Soviet model served more and more as a reference. Vertical conceptions of Cuban militarism's imprint on Cuban politics added to the Soviet model accentuated the bureaucratic deformations of the Cuban state: the restriction of democratic freedoms, the absence of political pluralism, the repression of opponents, the consolidation of the one-party regime, lack of social or political structures of the Cuban people ...

And now?

Under these conditions, many predicted a collapse of the Cuban revolution, like the USSR and the countries of the Eastern bloc. But despite the terrible years of the "special period" marked by the end of Soviet aid, combined with the North American embargo, Cuba has held on! For, despite its errors, its revolution was never a Russian import. It is a historical movement peculiar to the Cuban people. Its "anti-Yankee" impetus, the achievements - even tenuous - of its revolution and its fierce will to sovereignty have been stronger.

Until when? The balance of power is terribly unfavourable. What will the North American administration do: overwhelm Cuba with goods or continue the embargo? After Fidel's death, how will the forces within the Communist Party and the Cuban people reorganize? Will the supporters of a Chinese or Vietnamese road prevail? Once again, will the Cuban people find ways and means to continue the revolution? We hope so, and support them in this fight.

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Testing Trumponomics

30 November 2016, by Michael Roberts

Much of this optimism will turn out to be wishful thinking. But wishful thinking can work the markets for a while. The thinking is based on the policies that Trump is proposing: in particular, tax cuts for the corporate sector and personal income tax cuts that will benefit the top 1% of income earners the most. Also, he claims that he will spend up to $1trn on new infrastructure and investment projects around the country and deregulate the banks and reduce labour rights (what's left of them).

The stimulus measures are music to the ears of Keynesian economics, despite the general distaste that the top Keynesian gurus have had for the attitudes and rants of 'the Donald'. Indeed, if these policies are implemented over the next year or so, Trumponomics will be the next test of the Keynesian solution for the world economy to get out of this Long Depression. Abenomics in Japan, following similar policies of public spending, tax cuts and quantitative easing, has miserably failed. Japan's GDP growth has hardly moved, while wage incomes and prices remain transfixed.

But now some Keynesians are applauding Trump's approach as 'a break from neoliberalism'. The great historian and biographer of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky tells us that "Trump has also promised an $800bn-$1tn programme of infrastructure investment, to be financed by bonds, as well as a massive corporation tax cut, both aimed at creating 25m new jobs and boosting growth. This, together with a pledge to maintain welfare entitlements, amounts to a modern form of Keynesian fiscal policy". So Skidelsky goes on: "As Trump moves from populism to policy, liberals should not turn away in disgust and despair, but rather engage with Trumpism's positive potential. His proposals need to be interrogated and refined, not dismissed as ignorant ravings." Well, liberals of the Keynesian persuasion may want to 'engage' with Trump and adopt Trumponomics, but those who want to improve the lot of Labour, the majority not the top 1%, will take a different view.

Indeed, let's look at Trumponomics. Apparently, Skidelksy thinks that cutting corporation tax will create new jobs and raise growth. Well, there is no evidence that previous cuts in corporation tax have done so anywhere in the major economies. Corporate tax rates were slashed during the neoliberal period and yet economic growth has floundered. What has happened is a rise in the share going to the profits of capital at labour's expense and a rise in unproductive financial speculation. Officially, the US has a 35% marginal tax rate on corporations but after various exemptions, it is effectively only 23%, among the lowest in the world.

Trump's infrastructure plan is badly needed. In my blog, I have often shown the terrible state of the public services and communications in the

US. The average age of America's fixed assets is 22.8 years — the oldest in data back to 1925. Infrastructure spending is at 30-year lows and bridges, roads and railways are crumbling before our eyes. According to the 2013 report card by the American Society of Civil Engineers, the US has serious infrastructure needs of more than $3.4 trillion through 2020, including $1.7 trillion for roads, bridges and transit; $736 billion for electricity and power grids; $391 billion for schools; $134 billion for airports; and $131 billion for waterways and related projects. But federal investment in infrastructure has dropped by half during the past three decades, from 1% to 0.5% of GDP.

Undoubtedly, public investment in infrastructure would help the US economy and raise growth a little – Goldman Sachs reckons by 0.2% pts a year. But Trump's proposal of $1trn spending over four years is a fake. Most of this would not be public investment at all. The funds would come from private sources which would get incentives to provide money: the big construction companies and developers (like Trump Inc itself) will be offered tax breaks and also the right to own the bridges, roads, etc built with toll charges to the users of these. Direct public spending and construction will be limited.

Moreover, as I have argued in many posts, there is little evidence that Keynesian stimulus programmes work to deliver jobs and growth. Skidelsky talks about the Roosevelt era of the 1930s. Actually, very few permanent or new jobs were created under Roosevelt. The unemployment rate stayed right up to the start of the war. As Paul Krugman, the American Keynesian guru, pointed out in his book, End Depression now, it took the war to deliver full employment and economic recovery.

During the period of 'austerity', from 2009, when governments tried to run budget surpluses and wants to cut public debt after the Great Recession – a period we are still in – we were told by Keynesians that the 'multiplier' of austerity was huge (i.e. growth was being reduced drastically by more than one-to-one by cutting budget deficits or government spending). Well, again in previous posts, I have shown that this 'strong multiplier' is seriously open to question. Indeed, there is little correlation between reducing or raising government deficits or spending and growth since 2009. The best correlation with growth is with profits, not government spending.

Recently, Nora Traum of North Carolina State University presented a paper titled Clearing Up the Fiscal Multiplier Morass. She found that "different assumptions create different multipliers". She asked nine modelers, using three different kinds of models, to predict the effect on growth of three different tax reform proposals. For one reform, predictions on growth varied from –4.2 percent to 16.4 percent in the short run, and from 1.7 percent to 7.5 percent in the long run.

Recent research has shown that the best news for capital is cutting government spending rather than raising taxes to apply austerity. Reducing government spending gives more room for private capital than raising taxes like corporate taxes, which is much more damaging to capital and thus to growth. If we are now to expect fiscal expansion not austerity from Trump (we shall see), then capital will like the tax cut but will not want government spending (except for those developers which get the contracts) especially if it directly interferes or replaces private investment. Such was the point against Keynesian stimulus made by post-Keynesian Michal Kalecki himself.

Marxist economics explains why. What really drives investment and in modern capitalist economies, where private capital investment dominates, is the profitability of projects. Private investment has failed to deliver because the profitability is too low, but even so the public sector must not interfere.

That's the difference between Trump's plan and that of the Chinese government in its massive infrastructure and urbanisation investment since 2009. China has spent about $11 trillion on infrastructure in the last decade — more than 10 times what Trump is proposing. This public investment, bankrolled by state banks and carried out by state companies, has weakened the private sector's growth in China. But as the Chinese state controls the economy, not domestic or foreign big business (much to the chagrin of the World Bank), such investment can go ahead and deliver 6-7% annual real growth during this Long Depression.

So the likelihood that Trumponomics will work and take economic growth up to 4% a year, as Trump claims, is very low. It is ironic that when Bernie Sanders' advisers suggested that a program similar to Trump's be adopted and would achieve 4% or more real GDP growth, mainstream economists (romer-and-romer-evaluation-of-friedman1), jumped all over them, saying it was a pipe dream – correctly, in my view. But now Trump advocates it, financial markets and Keynesians find it attractive and even possible.

Like Abenomics, Trumponomics is really a combination of Keynesianism and neoliberalism. The new spending and tax cuts are to be paid for, apparently, by more deregulation of markets and labour conditions to boost profits. This is supposed to boost the growth rate in a 'dynamic model', or what used to be called 'trickle-down economics', where the rich get tax cuts and spend it on the goods and services so that the rest of us get some more income and jobs. The main incentive according to Trump's own economic expert is not from reductions in the personal or corporate tax rate, but from allowing businesses to write off their investments immediately instead of over time.

What Skidelsky ignores in his paeon of praise for Trump's policies is the hallmark of Trumponomics: trade protectionism and restrictions on immigration. These policies are much more likely to be imposed than his Keynesian-style stimulus. Trump plans to drop TTP (the regional trade deal

with Japan and Asia) and TTIP (with Europe) and 'renegotiate' NAFTA, the regional trade pact with Mexico and Canada. The aim is to 'protect' American jobs and end cheap Mexican labour.

As the Donald said last March: "I'm going to get Apple to start making their computers and their iPhones on our land, not in China." And he wants to impose a 45% tariff on Chinese imports. It's been estimated this could drag down China's GDP by 4.8% and Chinese exports to the US by 87% in three years, according to Daiwa Capital Markets. Even if Apple finds enough workers to assemble in the US, the cost of making an Apple iPhone 7 could increase $30-40, estimates Jason Dedrick, a professor at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. Since labour accounts for only a small part of an electronic device's overall costs, most of these higher expenses would come from shipping parts to the US. If the iPhone components were also made in the US, the device's costs could climb up to $90. That means that, if Apple chose to pass along all these costs to consumers, the device's retail price could climb about 14%. So Trump's trade policies would mean a sharp rise in prices of goods in the US for a start, even assuming there is no retaliation by China.

As John Smith has shown in his powerful book, Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis :"about 80 percent of global trade (in terms of gross exports) is linked to the international production networks of TNCs." UNCTAD estimates that "about 60 percent of global trade . . . consists of trade in intermediate goods and services that are incorporated at various stages in the production process of goods and services for final consumption.". A striking feature of contemporary globalization is that a very large and growing proportion of the workforce in many global value chains is now located in developing economies. In a phrase, the centre of gravity of much of the world's industrial production has shifted from the North to the South of the global economy.", as Smith quotes Gary Gereffi.

Reversing this key feature of what has been called 'globalisation' can only be damaging to American corporations, while at the same time shifting the burden of any cost and prices rises onto average American households.

Globalisation – the cross-border expansion of world trade and capital flows and the development of value-added chains internationally – has been an important counteracting factor to the falling rate of profit experienced after the mid-1960s up to the early 1980s in the major advanced economies. Deregulating labour rights, crushing trade union power, privatising public sector assets domestically went with global expansion by multinationals. Trump now talks about reversing this counteracting factor to benefit his supposed electoral support in the 'rust-belt' of mid-West America that has suffered the most from the movement of American multinationals to exploit cheaper labour in Mexico, Asia and Latin America.

The irony (and the worry for capital) is that the Great Recession and the ensuing Long Depression seems to be ending globalisation anyway. Globalisation was already in trouble before Trump and Brexit. The global financial crash, the Great Recession and ensuing Long Depression (similar to that of the 1930s) since 2009 had brought the expansion of world trade to a grinding halt.

On a standard measure of participation in global value chains produced by the IMF, the rise in profitability for the major multi-nationals is now stalling.

Sure, information flows (internet traffic and telephone calls, mainly) have exploded, but trade and capital flows are still below their pre-recession peaks. Global foreign direct investment as share of GDP is now falling.

And capital flows to the so-called emerging economies have plummeted.

The G20 leaders met recently before the Trump victory and they could already see the writing on the wall for globalisation. They said they were opposed to trade protectionism "in all its forms". As Deutsche Bank economists put it: "It feels like we're coming towards the end of an economic era... and time is running out to prevent economic and political regime change given the existing stresses in the system."

The strategists of capital are worried that Trumponomics will only makes things worse for profitability globally. Bin Smaghi, ex member of the ECB and leading strategist of finance capital, commented: "Trying to reverse globalisation can be damaging, particularly for the country that takes the first step. It is the advanced economies that are facing the greatest challenges in its most recent wave, which is why anti-globalisation movements are gaining support and governments are tempted to become inward looking. However, because their economies are so large, and so bound by the web of globalisation, they cannot reverse its course, unless emerging markets also retreat."

And the risk is that the emerging economies could be driven into a slump as trade falls further and capital inflows dry up. Emerging economies have been building up large amounts of debt (credit) raised from US and European banks to invest, not always in productive sectors. This has not caused any problem up to now because interest rates globally have been very low and the US dollar has been weak so that borrowing in dollars has not been a problem.

But this is beginning to change, partly due to Trumponomics. Moody's Investors Service has issued 35 credit

downgrades this year in countries including Austria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while only issuing five upgrades. And 35 of the 134 countries assessed by the ratings firm currently have a negative outlook hanging over them. That puts at least $7 trillion of government debt at risk of a downgrade, according to data from the Bank of International Settlements for the end of last year. This proportion of countries with a negative outlook from Moody's is the largest it has been since 2012, and it couldn't come at a worse time. Interest rates on bonds, especially ones with longer maturities, are now rising sharply. If this is the end of a 35-year bull run in the bond market, governments, after years of low interest rates, might have to prepare for significantly higher borrowing costs.

At the same time, the US dollar has spiralled upwards in strength compared to other major trading currencies.

Global debt relative to productive investment has been sharply increasing.

And emerging economies' corporate sector debt to capital ratio has also risen sharply.

Low and slowing economic growth globally along with a rising cost of borrowing and stagnant trade, now threatened by Trumponomics, will increase the risk of a global slump, not avoid it.

Fidel Castro dies

27 November 2016, by Dave Kellaway

Now he is gone but he has outlived all those US presidents who ordered the CIA to organise hundreds of assassination attempts, internal armed rebellions and a full scale invasion force. His demise and the impending collapse of the Cuban state has been prematurely announced a number of times since 1989. Unlike Russia and Eastern Europe it has not collapsed into gangster capitalism or experienced their catastrophic effects on living standards and life expectancy. The comparison between the response of Haiti and Cuba to the recent hurricane graphically shows that the gains made by the 1959 revolution still survive. In Cuba nobody died and whole towns were evacuated smoothly. Raul his brother in arms from the first battles still leads the government and is committed to a transition in leadership in 2018. Obama's turn to more positive relations with Cuba is a gain for the Cuban people, it has relaxed certain restrictions and could help economic growth. Visiting Cuba this September I saw the cruise ship passengers swarming through Old Havana. Direct flights from the US to Cuba started in the summer to Santa Clara and increased just this week to Havana.

Whatever our subsequent judgements, Fidel's life is a remarkable one. Born into the middle class he initially became radicalised as a democratic nationalist and was inspired by the great nineteenth century anti-colonialist fighter, Jose Marti. The first attempt at an armed uprising at the Moncada barracks in Santiago in 1953 ended with many fallen comrades and he was lucky not to be executed. As sometimes happens with defeats it had a radicalising effect, his famous speech at the trial played a role in that. Exiled to Mexico he wasted no time assembling a second armed group. In 1958 they left in the small boat Granma to try again. Again most of the fighters were killed in the first days but about a dozen survived and managed to make it to the Sierra Maestra – a friendly peasant played a crucial role. Once there they established a headquarters camp that was never found by Batista's army and gradually Che, Cienfuegos, his brother Raul and himself built up a number of small fronts which could successfully take on the army. More importantly the political support was developed and links made with the underground in the big towns. Certainly Fidel and the other leaders were probably already aware that the direction of struggle would lead them into conflict with US but for a whole period they presented themselves as democratic nationalists fighting a brutal dictatorship. This helped disarm the US who took little or no action to bolster the Batista regime. If we study the period between the entry into Havana and the speech a year or so later where Fidel defined the revolution as socialist we can see a textbook example of how to take a democratic anti-imperialist revolution down the road to one that overthrew capitalism. Each move forward could be understood as a response to sabotage or to the urgent basic needs of the population.

During the first years of the revolution Havana was the home for all radicals and revolutionaries. This was a revolution made by a group who were outside the Stalinist 'official' communist movement. The Cuban CP came to support the revolution but were subordinate to the Castroist leadership. The impact worldwide was particularly strong in Latin America. Armed groups launched uprisings mostly in rural areas and got the active but discreet support of the Cuban government. Unfortunately these brave revolutionaries failed to understand the specific conditions of the Cuban victory – it was never just a rural insurgency there anyway – and all ended in defeat. Che even left Cuba to set up a central guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia which also ended in defeat. Fidel supported Che politically and materially in this

operation. Indeed in a second way of armed insurgencies in the late seventies in Central America Cuba helped with resources and fighters. However the failure of these struggles elsewhere in Latin America and the consequent isolation of the Cuban revolution meant that Fidel was obliged to seek shelter in the Soviet camp. This had negative consequences on the way the economy and democratic organisation developed. Farming for instance was over-collectivised and productivity is still to recover since Cuba still imports today around 70% of its food. Also everything was nationalised, down to every restaurant and hairdresser. Today regulated small businesses and self-employment is increasingly allowed. One thing is clear, Fidel led a real anti-capitalist revolution that destroyed the bourgeois state. He was no Nasser, he did not just set up some sort of state capitalist regime.

Although Fidel never presided over a Stalinist Gulag there was some repression of dissidents and opponents. At the beginning of the revolution torturers and Batista leaders were tried and executed – indeed Che was partly in charge of this. Occasionally afterwards there were executions – notoriously of Ochoa and some other military leaders accused of drug running and of a ferry captain who had taken over a ship. Gays were also repressed and sent to special labour camps. Nearly all dissidents were released in recently although political opponents and artists for example are still hassled regularly. A degree of local democracy and involvement through the committees in defence of the revolution has always existed in a way that we did not see in the Stalinist countries. Debate goes on today in a number or restricted forums, particularly over the 'modernisation' of the economy. Of course the limits are that you cannot form a political current or party outside of the Cuban Communist Party, you cannot start up a really independent publication opposing the government and your internet use is tightly controlled.

Another distinction between Fidel and other 'communist' leaders is that he has not set up a dynasty as we have seen in China. His children had not been propelled into high government posts. Although he has enjoyed some of the privileges of government leadership he has not built sumptuous palaces or wallowed in the trappings of wealth. The US and the CIA have always tried to expose such crimes but have failed dismally. Despite any political failings we might discuss Fidel retains a certain moral probity and dignity in these areas. Although his image is prominently displayed usually with some revolutionary proclamation it is not overwhelming nor are there any statues.

Lately some of Fidel's style of leadership and political positions on some questions have been altered by the current leader, Raul Castro. Several of Fidel's appointees were shifted to one side by his brother who prefers a more institutionalised, conventional political procedure. Raul has also been more open to economic reforms and welcoming investment by foreign corporations. Part of the problem of understanding what is going on in Cuba is the fact that the real debates are not very transparent. Rather infrequently there is a Party congress where a big document is presented to the people which is then subject to thousands of amendments but no counter documents are permitted or organised currents. A lively debate does exist around the continued influence of the old military guard, over whether the Chinese road is the correct one and over regulation of foreign investment. Some cadres are clearly positioning themselves for the fruits of any larger scale capitalist opening, others are concerned about defending and improving the living standards of the people.

One of the lasting legacies of Fidel is surely the fact that unlike in other equivalent countries literacy and health levels are high. Although people could definitely eat better, no-one goes hungry or dies of malnutrition. Cuban doctors go worldwide on solidarity missions. The economy has not collapsed and some sectors like tourism and biotech are going pretty well. The devastation of the narco economy that we see in Mexico or Columbia does not exist in Cuba. Cuba's prestige in the world is remarkable for a poorish country of 10 million.

Given it is a small non-capitalist country in a sea of rampant capitalism and its closest neighbour and dominant imperialist power has imposed a blockade on its economy since the 1960s, it is not surprising that Fidel's legacy is a mixed one. The blockade certainly contributes to the low productivity and poor wages most Cubans earn. Financing the necessary military apparatus to withstand US aggression also drains resources that could improve conditions. Opening up the economy and having a dollar based currency alongside another peso one that is worth twenty five times less means that inequality is inevitably increasing. Cubans who work in the tourist industry and can earn dollars or the 20% who get remittances from relatives in the US can live reasonably well. The 75% who still work for the state earn each month roughly what you can make from renting a room to tourist for a couple of nights. People, particularly young people, yearn for more freedoms too such as an open internet.

Fidel and his generation are leaving the scene. It will be up to those Cubans who are today considering these new problems to try and resolve them in the interests of working people. Fidel overall was on our side and never wavered in his resistance to US imperialism. His example inspired resistance in many places.

Venceremos, adios companero.

November 27, 2016

Source Socialist Resistance.

Modern slaves rebel in rural South Africa and win!

25 November 2016, by Marc Ducassé and François Favre

Workers from the Robertson Winery stayed on strike for fourteen weeks. While South Africa is troubled by important social unrest against the ANC and President Zuma whose popularity never ceases to tumble down, the strike that took place at RW is emblematic of working class conditions in rural areas.

In order to try and understand the situation, we have interviewed by telephone two militants we met in 2015 and who had shown to us the harsh conditions for workers on farms and in the food industry. Mercia Andrews is a member of DLF (Democratic Left Front) [1] and has put a lot of energy at defending farm workers conditions, women's rights and access to land for them, whereas Deneco Dube is a shop steward for CSAAWU (Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union) and works at RW.

Since their recent unionisation, workers at RW have discussed about their conditions of work, wage levels, discrimination and inequalities, low pay which triggered off the strike. From the moment they are engaged, black workers (Mercia explains, "by black I mean those who have historically been oppressed") are discriminated and treated in a way that is reminiscent of slavery. So this fight is not limited to a fight for a salary rise, it also a protest against the fact that workers are no better treated than during apartheid.

Deneco explains that at hiring, 19 to 20 years old youngsters are selected with the help of a lie detector. Many South African companies use this nasty system that originates from the US, but only blacks have to go through it, which suggests that blacks are liars but whites wouldn't know how to lie… As a consequence, only black workers are confined to a bargaining unit and represented by their union. Middle management, all whites, cannot be in the same union and negotiate their conditions directly with their bosses, which is illegal. But it ensures that CSAAWU is not the representative of white workers during negotiations.

Basic salaries at RW average 3,200 rands, approximately 200 euros per months, with a few workers with extra qualifications to drive engines and mechanics earning a little more. But not all workers are treated the same: a black mechanic with 15 years' experience may lay claim to R8,500 R (about â‚¬ 550) when a white mechanic without experience will get 18 to R19,000R (about â‚¬1,200) and a lesser working load.

Working hours, 8.30 am to 17.30 pm do not give an accurate picture of the real working time as workers have to clock in three times before getting to their work station: once outside, whatever the weather might be like, once before the cloak-room, and a third one before the workplace. With more than 200 workers, queues are long and it is necessary to lengthen the day by one hour morning and evening. These hours are not paid and workers only have a 20 min break during the day (to include going to the toilet, eating and have a smoke), even a second extra time will lead to a written warning and a deduction on salary. But above all, only blacks clock in, and Deneco's anger when we questioned him about the legality of such a fact is perceptible: "no, it is not legal, and I don't understand why the Labour office tolerates these discriminations, these facts should be recorded in its reports; even audits on inequalities that companies annually transmit to the ministry show that black workers are a lot less paid than white workers, not even taking into account discriminations against women."

Companies have had to give up the system by which they paid part of the salaries in kind with wine. But as Mercia explains to us: " though this system is no longer legal, its noxious effect has not stopped. In many of the areas we intervene, alcohol consumption is very high and a number of workers are completely dependent on it. Bosses no longer pay with wine, but they sell bad quality alcohol to their workers. For us, fighting against alcohol dependency is a major issue because the more people are dependent, the more difficult it is for them to fight oppression and exploitation.

Facing the strikers' determination we asked how the wine industry reacted. Mercia: "the sector is very well organised, bosses have coalesced within VinPro, and its within this organisation that all policies on salaries are decided for all the various companies. This year, they have decided not to go over an 8% rise, and for them it is out of the question that RW gives in to strikers demands who wish to see their basic salaries rise to R8,500, as all the workers in the industry would then go for similar increases."

For CSAAWU, it was of the outmost importance not to limit the fight to the 227 workers of RW but on the contrary to extend it all along the value chain, from the vineyards that supply the distillery with raw wine to the distributors and even across other distilleries. Though CSAAWU represents 80% of the workforce, the fight is rough and risks are high. Mercia: "the management tried to outlaw the strike, then it tried to dictate to the union how they could fight for their cause, then threatened leaders with prison and a R500,000 fine if they be in the way of lorries or scabs management had recruited."

Facing a very unfavorable balance of power, strikers have attempted to broaden their supports towards the civil society in South Africa and abroad. From the beginning, DLF members got strongly involved and their role is central in this fight. The Red Brigades [2] have also brought

their support and have invited workers to come to the Cape Town Parliament and read a declaration condemning their employers. As for the ANC's attitude, Mercia's response is scathing and sharp "nothing", which confirms how the ANC leader's pre-occupations are remote from those of South African people. Food and money collections have been organised by other unions or some groups like students from the university of Cape Town. Some northern European unions are also involved particularly in Sweden and Denmark where wines from RW are commercialised. This is how strikers have decided to reactivate the boycott form of fight for Robertson, used in the past to get rid of apartheid. A Facebook page was opened to that effect.

For Deneco, for whom this is the second strike he has been involved with after the uprising of farm workers in 2012, international help and support was essential as strikers would not be able to stay without pay indefinitely, and boycott is the best way to put pressure on bosses. "For us, wine from Robertson equals drinking blood wine, as it is our blood that produces this wine, and we don't take any advantage from it, we're paid slave salaries when bosses get richer and richer. Today drinking this wine means drinking our blood."

On week 12th of the strike, whereas strikers had accepted proposals for a rise of R400 R for lowest wages, approximately 12.5%, the management refused to include a "peace" clause where it would promise not to proceed with dismissals, so negotiations stalled again. There was no doubt that the company was out to break workers morale and destroy their union. CSAAWU, therefore renewed its call for international solidarity, continuation and intensification of the boycott of all products from Robertson, and send protests directly to the company and by all means possible.

Workers refused to comply, give in to threats and fear and held out. On week 14, they decided to stop the strike and signed an agreement with management.
The agreement includes a rise in salary of 8% or a flat rate of R400 whichever is the most advantageous. This increase is backdated to August 8th. In addition, a annual bonus equivalent to one month's salary will be payed on November 15th. And above all and just as important all threats of legal action against 16 leaders of the strike and union members have been definitely lifted.

Though strikers are far from gaining the salary increases they were fighting for, they have nevertheless, it is a victory on many points. One can even say that the wine industry will never be the same again. The government has had to accept looking into the slavery conditions of work that exist in farms and the wine industry. Women and men working in the wineries of this country will take heart and get inspiration after the success of the strike at Robertson and in turn fight for their own rights.

CSAAWU, the union, comes out much stronger of this victorious strike and it will give some hope to all rural workers in South Africa who suffer as much if not more as those in urban zones due to their isolation. It is also a lesson for all of us, when Europe and the world at large engage in nationalist and reactionary policies. It seems clear that fights must continue with international solidarity in mind.

Footnotes

[1] The Democratic Left Front is a movement formed in 2008, which regroups militants who used to be members of Communist Party's leadership or that came from different political currents and South African left independent popular movements. DLF is engaged in the current left attempts at regrouping forces for a new socialist movement. It is also involved in similar attempts at building up a union movement independent from ANC.

[2] The Red Brigades is the name given to activists and militants from the left Economic Freedom Fighters, founded in 2013 by former members of ANC with Julius Malema as leader.

We Fight for Socialism over Barbarism

25 November 2016, by Democratic Socialists of America National Political Committee

How Trump Won: Seizing the Anti-Establishment Ground through Racial and Economic Nationalism

Governing elites have long used racism to divide working people. The Left must understand the centrality of racism to capitalism and speak directly to how racism has hurt the interests of the white working class. The far Right in Europe and the United States has succeeded in speaking to the anger of people long abandoned by the bipartisan conservative and center-left consensus in favor of unbridled corporate globalization. Trump's victory should show once and for all the dire consequences of leaving the Left's response to economic insecurity in the hands of corporate-aligned centrists like the Clintons.

If Sanders had been the Democratic nominee, he certainly could have

mobilized stronger working-class support against Trump, and his coattails could have put both houses of Congress in play. Clinton failed to gain the support of many working- and middle-class whites by running a campaign overly focused on Trump's character flaws rather than hammering home the Sanders-inspired platform proposals that would improve the lives of working people of all races. She failed to highlight raising the minimum wage, opposing "free trade" agreements and creating good jobs through public investment in infrastructure and alternative energy. The Democratic Party chose the wrong candidate and the wrong strategy, and now the United States is left with the most dangerous government in recent history.

The Pressing Urgency of Now: Defend the Targets of Nativist Racism

Given Trump's and Pence's vilification of communities of color, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, women and LGBTQ people, Democratic Socialists of America's and the broader Left's first priority must be to defend the civil and political rights — and very physical security — of those groups targeted by Trumpism. The appointment of the open bigot and anti-Semite Stephen Bannon of Breitbart News as senior White House counselor demonstrates that Trump's hateful rhetoric is not just talk. DSA and YDS chapters should be militant supporters of these groups in their immediate struggles to establish sanctuary cities for the undocumented, to defend Muslims and their mosques and to protect women seeking reproductive services. We must also proactively train ourselves to intervene effectively when we witness harassment of and violence against those targeted by the white nativist politics legitimated by the Trump victory. Finally, we should reach out to these communities immediately to express our solidarity and ask what work they would wish us to do.

Much of this work will involve DSA deepening our engagement with the Movement for Black Lives, the immigrant rights movement, Fight for 15, the reproductive justice movement and other movements on the frontlines against Trumpism. Under Reagan, similar acts of resistance eventually created a powerful rainbow coalition that advanced a multiracial politics of economic and racial justice. If we fully commit ourselves to these struggles over the next four years there is no reason why a new, even more powerful multiracial coalition for social and economic justice cannot emerge.

The Left will be faced with tremendous struggles on a variety of fronts starting on January 20.

Upon assuming office, Trump may use executive orders to reverse Obama's environmental regulations (particularly those concerning coal-fueled power plants). The Left should connect Trump's hostility to climate justice policies with mass action in support of the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline and for indigenous sovereignty. The climate justice movement, particularly if it puts environmental racism issues front and center, could be a major focus of resistance to Republican rule.

Trump is also likely to immediately end DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which currently protects from deportation over 4 million undocumented individuals who came to the US as minors. This could be the first step in the mass deportation of undocumented immigrants from the United States. The Left should build strong relationships with movements on the forefront of opposing these policies, and fight to build a majoritarian coalition in support of citizenship for the millions of Americans who contribute to our economy and society through their work and taxes, but do not even enjoy the most basic civil and political rights.

Republicans may press to repeal all of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), but they can be stopped. By organizing mass demonstrations, the Left could well save the eight million working-class family members who have gained Medicaid coverage and could also force the remaining 19 states that have refused to expand coverage to accept the federally funded program. We must organize the other 12 million people who currently receive health insurance through the ACA to demand that their coverage be continued, but at more affordable rates. Whether all or part of the ACA is abolished, the Left must campaign for state single-payer systems as the best alternative for expanding equitable and affordable health care coverage.

The Trans Pacific Partnership may well be a dead letter under Trump's presidency, but we must not see Trump's alleged opposition to it as a sign that he is in any way committed to a global trade policy that serves the interests of workers at home or abroad — far from it! In response to Trump's savagely anti-worker policy prescriptions the Left must advance an alternative vision of global economic policy that raises global living, labor and environmental standards as an alternative to a nativist protectionism that blames foreign workers and immigrants for declining working-class living standards at home.

Further, Trump will move quickly to destroy organized labor in the United States, particularly in the public sector. We must resist, though our efforts will be complicated by the AFL-CIO's self-defeating conciliatory stance toward the President-elect. Unions are the most powerful tool we have for building inter-racial solidarity among working class people around a shared economic interest. The questionable strategic and tactical choices made by much of their leadership both to support Clinton in the Democratic primaries and to commit themselves to working with Trump show the absolute necessity of a bottom-up left insurgency within the house of labor.

The Left must also press Democrats in the Senate to use the power of the filibuster to prevent the passage of disastrous legislation and extreme conservative appointments to the Supreme Court, and urge Democratic state and local governments to resist disastrous changes in Federal policy in whatever ways they can.

A Longer-Run Strategy for Progressive Power: Building a Multiracial Post-Sanders Movement

These are our immediate tasks. But we must also assess the Trump victory and what it means for future left and DSA strategy and seek opportunities to move from defense to offense. Though Clinton won the popular vote, she underperformed among white voters in the rust-belt states in part because many older voters suffered from the Clinton dynasty's support of neoliberal policies that failed to address the economic suffering caused by deindustrialization, mechanization and corporate outsourcing. Clinton even narrowly lost the vote of white women, in part because Trump set himself up as the anti-establishment candidate who would "drain the swamp" of Washington "special interests" (despite the Koch brothers funding much of the Republican ground campaign). Combined with racist and sexist diatribes blaming the end of America's supposedly golden era on women, immigrants and people of color, this rhetoric resonated deeply with over-45 white voters (both men and women) facing stagnant living standards, downward mobility and a soon-to-be majority-minority status in the United States.

While Trump offers no viable plan to actually address these voters' economic anxieties either by increasing employment, transforming U.S. trade policy or any other means, his call to "make America great again" by rebuilding infrastructure and creating "jobs, jobs, jobs" was powerful among many white voters who associate the memory of better economic conditions with a past of white privilege and a politics of "law and order."

The Republicans will not address the needs of working-class people in the United States. Instead we can expect them to propose massive tax cuts for the rich and corporations, running up huge budget deficits and exacerbating our already staggering level of income and wealth inequality. They will only maintain or expand those parts of the federal budget that really should be shrunk — for example, the military and prison systems. Many Trump voters will resent tax giveaways to the rich, and most Americans today are wary of military interventions overseas, so the Left has a real opportunity to mobilize against such national priorities and advance an alternative vision.

As the 2016 election has shown, however, changing demographics alone will not automatically threaten the success of white nativist politics. In this election (as in 2000), the undemocratic nature of the Electoral College prevented the winner of the popular vote from taking office. Further, voter suppression drove down the turnout of working-class citizens of all races as well as the elderly and students, a problem particularly severe in North Carolina, Wisconsin and Ohio. Beyond this, the progressive, black and Latino electorates are heavily concentrated in strongly Democratic states (and mostly in urban and inner suburban areas), which means that millions of their votes are effectively not counted in the outcome of the presidential election. (For instance, 100,000 additional votes beyond those needed to reach 50 percent in California do nothing to change the number of votes California receives in the electoral college).

To address this problem, the Left must build a stronger base among white working-class voters in small towns throughout the rural United States and in states in the former industrial heartland, the South and the plains states. There can be no progressive majoritarian politics in the United States without a politics that appeals to working-class voters of all races. Reapportionment in 2020 will heavily affect prospects for progressive electoral victories for the next decade. Thus, the Left has to sink deep roots in a wide range of communities across the nation, and DSA's rapid growth in the South should be nurtured and sustained.

Strong political headwinds blow against us over the coming years. If we hope to move U.S. politics in a progressive direction, we must continue down the trail blazed by Bernie Sanders. The many successful insurgent "Sanderistas" elected at the local and state level, as well as the emerging anti-corporate wing of the Democratic Party's congressional delegation and above all Sanders' own presidential primary run, demonstrated that multiracial working-class constituencies will support a social democratic program of progressive tax reform, universal access to high-quality health and childcare and public investment in infrastructure and alternative energy.

We must continue to press this agenda even more assertively, both by electing more insurgents at all levels of government and by also building working-class and socialist power in our trade union, social-movement and electoral work.

None of these programs can be won without a radical shift in power relations. In the absence of mass pressure from democratic social movements — movements willing to disrupt the everyday workings of undemocratic institutions — and the development of independent electoral capacity of activists of color, feminists, LGBTQ activists and trade unionists, corporate interests will continue to dominate the policy agenda.The campaigns of DSA-endorsed candidates at the local and state level, such as victorious State Representative Mike Sylvester (D-Maine) and the impressive second-place finish of Baltimore City Council Green candidate Ian Schlakman, demonstrate that building a multiracial base for explicitly socialist candidates (who, depending on local circumstances, may run as Democrats, independents, Greens or in nonpartisan races) is both possible and necessary.

The more than 9,000 members of DSA (nearly 2,000 of whom joined this week) believe that the surest way to resist and defeat Trumpism is if we build a strong, organized democratic socialist movement in U.S. politics, a movement that must become as diverse as the working class itself. The Sanders revolution moved us one step

closer toward a stronger and more assertive Left that can push for the many long-overdue reforms working people in this country desperately need, such as raising the minimum wage to $15 an hour and making publicly-funded university education a basic human right. Clinton's neoliberal centrism proved incapable of warding off the nativist far Right. The way forward lies in the movement for democratic socialism.

Thus, we invite veterans of the Sanders campaign and others to join the organization that works to bring his democratic socialist politics into the mainstream of U.S. political life.

November 13, 2016

DSA

The Enormous Profit of Thirst

23 November 2016, by Josiah Rector

The criminal negligence of LAN and Veolia should have come as no surprise. The Flint water crisis also fits into a larger pattern, documented by environmental justice activists and scholars for decades, of people of color and low-income whites being disproportionately exposed to toxic health hazards.

Beginning in 2011, a succession of three Emergency Managers (EMs) appointed by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder hired LAN as an outside consultant to conduct feasibility studies on switching from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Flint River. Over the next five years, EMs outsourced professional engineering services at the Flint Water Treatment Plant to LAN and (beginning in 2015) Veolia. [1]

LAN failed to design a system of corrosion control for Flint River water, leading to the poisoning of a majority-Black, working-class city's water supply for over two years. In early 2015, after the lead contamination was already well-known, the city hired Veolia as a water quality consultant.

Veolia's 2015 Interim Report, released on February 18, declared that Flint's water supply was "safe" and "in compliance with drinking water standards." It dismissed widespread reports of health problems among residents, cynically stating that "[s]ome people may be sensitive to any water."

However, Michigan's water crisis (including the poisoning of Flint and an ongoing epidemic of shutoffs in Detroit) is also directly related to water privatization and outsourcing. Any observer of water priatization, in fact, could have predicted the disastrous consequences of outsourcing municipal engineering and water treatment work to firms like LAN and Veolia.

Two French multinationals (Suez and Veolia) control about 70% of the world's private water market, and they operate in dozens of countries. Complaints of rising prices and falling water quality have accompanied their takeovers of municipal water systems across the globe.

For example, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 the Bush administration gave private contractors Bechtel, Fluor and Suez billions in taxpayer dollars to construct 158 water treatment facilities. In 2009, the City of Baghdad gave Suez and Veolia $5 billion to run the city's water system. As Karen Piper notes in her book The Price of Thirst, in 2013 the UN found an "alarming increase" in waterborne pollution and waterborne illness in Iraq, and Baghdad's water and sewer infrastructure remains unreliable and poorly maintained. [2]

Back to the 1800s

Many of the scandals surrounding private water companies, in fact, are a replay of the 19th century. As late as 1870, over half of all municipal water systems in the United States were privately owned. Public water ownership only became the norm during the Progressive Era, between 1890 and 1910.

Nineteenth-century water companies were notorious for overcharging ratepayers, and for failing to provide safe drinking water. Improvements in the scientific understanding of infectious diseases, such as cholera and typhoid, helped turn public opinion against private water systems.

The Detroit water system, which supplied Flint from 1967 until 2013, is a case in point. The system dates back over 200 years. Traditionally, the Huron people called what is now the Detroit River Karantouan. Indigenous people, and later French fur traders, drew water directly from the Detroit River, or relied on private wells.

Following the disastrous Fire of 1805, the Detroit Common Council ordered the digging of the first public wells around Fort Detroit. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Detroit began to transform from a colonial trading outpost to a small industrial-capitalist city (and, for African-American refugees from slavery, an important stop on the Underground Railroad).

The growth of industry beyond the shores of the Detroit River, however, required building a municipal waterworks. [3] In 1829 the Detroit Common Council decided to assign this task to the private Detroit Hydraulic Company (DHC), formed by the investors Bethuel Farrand and Rufus Wells. The Common Council gave the DHC exclusive rights to supply water to the City of Detroit.

By 1831 DHC had constructed two reservoirs, with a capacity of over 20,870 gallons, and laid wooden water pipes from the river to Jefferson

Avenue. However, like private water companies in other cities, the DHC did not adequately maintain its water works. Residents complained about intermittent supplies of foul-tasting water.

These criticisms came to a head during a series of devastating cholera epidemics. In 1832, cholera reached Detroit aboard the U.S.S. Henry Clay, which was en route to Chicago with 370 soldiers, sent to wage war against the Sauk leader Black Hawk. By the end of the summer, 219 soldiers had died of typhoid, along with between 50 and 100 people in Detroit.

In the summer of 1834, a far more devastating cholera epidemic struck, killing 320 Detroit residents, or 7-10% of Detroit's population. In the aftermath, critics accused the DHC of contributing to the epidemic.

In 1836, an investigative report commissioned by the Detroit Common Council concluded that the DHC had violated the terms of its charter. It found that "the irregular supply furnished has been far from being pure and wholesome; that it has endangered the health of our citizens; and that, from the present condition of the works, their location and circumstances, it is utterly impracticable for the Company to furnish pure and wholesome water."

Building a Public System

This failed privatization experiment led directly to the creation of Detroit's public water system. In May 1836 the city bought out the DHC for $25,000, and began to gradually expand out a system of wooden water and sewer pipes from the original two reservoirs. In 1853 the Michigan legislature passed a bill that created a Board of Water Commissioners, which could issue municipal bonds and collect rates from water users.

In the late 19th century, politicians (inÂcluding labor leaders like Samuel Goldwater of the Socialist Labor Party) criticized the Water Board for overcharging residents and exploiting immigrant workers building infrastructure projects. In his mayoral campaign in 1895, Detroit Mayor Hazen S. Pingree used this issue to electoral advantage, accusing the Water Board of paying themselves inflated salaries and subsidizing property speculation in the suburbs.

In an 1897 referendum, over 60% of Detroit voters approved a plan to abolish the Water Board, and to replace water rates with a "general tax." But when a "free water bill" with these provisions passed the Michigan legislature in 1899, the state Supreme Court struck it down, ruling that the Michigan constitution prohibited "piecemeal" amendments to city charters.

These events set the stage for the massive expansion of Detroit's public water system in the 20th century as its land area more than tripled in the 1910s and 1920s.

During the Great Depression, with hungry and unemployed residents unable to pay water bills, the Detroit Department of Water Supply adopted a policy, as Water Consumers Account Superintendent Hal F. Smith wrote in 1933, that "water service should not be discontinued to a residence where the only result would be to deprive a family of water service."

Beginning in 1940, New Deal public works investment finally eliminated typhoid in Detroit by funding primary sewage treatment. However, the city still lacked secondary sewage treatment, meaning that (while drinking water was finally safe) the city continued to discharge raw sewage into the Detroit River. The Detroit Water Board was primarily concerned with expansion during this period, not pollution and public health.

Results of Suburban Expansion

By the early 1960s, the Detroit water system had expanded to cover more than 50 municipalities beyond the city itself. The Water Board, with the support of real estate developers and corporate leaders (and billions of dollars in federal infrastructure spending) subsidized the growth of Detroit's segregated postwar suburbs. The Water Board functioned essentially as a state capitalist enterprise, focused on minimizing labor costs and maximizing market share.

In 1963, during negotiations about bringing Flint into the Detroit system, Gerald J. Remus, the General Manager of Detroit's sewage plant, wrote a memo to Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh that reveals much about the Water Board's thinking. "This not only captures the Flint market," Remus wrote, but it "will eliminate Flint as a potential competitive water merchant and Flint is the only remaining threat to DWB as a supplier of water to the central state cities (Lansing, East Lansing, Jackson, Battle Creek and Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti on the "loop")."

When the Flint Commission voted 6-3 to reject Remus' proposal to join the Detroit system, Remus threatened to make separate water deals with Flint's suburbs, which would wreck Flint's plans to build its own pipeline to Lake Huron. Faced with these high-pressure tactics, Flint officials agreed to join the Detroit system, and remained on it from 1967 until 2013.

The Water Board's expansion plans in the 1950s and 1960s rested on the assumption that Detroit's population would remain stable, while the city's suburbs would continue to expand. As we know today, the first half of this prediction was very wrong. As Detroit's tax base and population continuously declined in the 1970s and 1980s, the system's fixed capital costs increased.

While Clean Water Act regulations required improvements in sewage treatment, suburban public officials pushed bills through the Michigan legislature that restricted the rate increases that Detroit could pass on to suburban customers. (However, they did not prevent suburban municipalities from adding heavy mark-ups of their own.) The result: Detroit's primarily Black, working-class residents would bear the brunt of rate increases.

In 1977, the EPA sued Detroit for violating the Clean Water Act, and Federal District Court Judge John Feikens placed Detroit under a consent decree. Detroit successfully installed its secondary treatment by 1982, which was good for public health and for the survival of Lake Erie. But partly due to technical problems with the city's sewage treatment plants, the city remained under a consent decree overseen by Judge Feikens from 1977 until 2010.

During this period Judge Feikens, a conservative Republican, became notorious for combining support for suburban control of DWSD (Detroit Water and Sewerage Department) with racist statements about African Americans. In 1984, he told the Detroit Free Press that "[o]ne of the things we have to give black people the time to learn to do is to learn how to run city governments." Feikens went a long way to associate regionalization with white racism in the minds of Detroiters.

Price Increases, Shutoffs, Debt Swaps

Feikens also accelerated the internal privatization of DWSD. In 2002, Feikens recommended the appointment of Victor Mercado as its new CEO. Mercado had previously served as an executive at United Water (a subsidiary of Suez) and Thames Water (a U.K. water company privatized by Margaret Thatcher in 1989).

Mercado hired the Infrastructure Management Group, a pro-privatization consulting firm, which recommended laying off unionized workers (represented by AFSCME Local 207) and replacing them with private contractors. Mercado also ramped up DWSD's already harsh policy of shutoffs for households behind on their water bills. According to the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), DWSD shut off water for 40,752 households in Detroit in 2001-2002 alone.

Beginning in 2006 unpaid water bills were added to residential property taxes. We the People estimates that between 12-27% of tax foreclosures during the economic crisis included these debts.

Under Mercado, Detroit water rates more than doubled. One cause of rising rates was DWSD's municipal bond debt. As in the case of subprime mortgages, financial deregulation in the late 1990s and 2000s made new forms of predatory lending possible in the realm of municipal finance. In particular, the Commodity Futures Modernization Act of 2000 deregulated the swaps market, removing restrictions on the marketing of high-risk interest rate swaps.

In 2005, UBS, Bank of America and Merrill Lynch made a $1.44 billion deal with Detroit, including variable-rate debt to fund city worker pensions and an interest-rate swap to fund DWSD. The deal constituted a bet that interest rates would rise rather than fall — something the banks were in a better position to predict than the city.

When interest rates plummeted, due to the Fed's "quantitative easing" policy in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, DWSD was forced to pay $537 million in "swap termination fees" to the banks. To pay off the fees, DWSD took on further debt. By 2014, the majority of the department's annual budget ($420 million) went to pay debt service to Wall Street banks while only $380.1 million was for operating expenses.

Emergency Managers and Selloffs

A final factor setting the stage for the water crises in Detroit and Flint was Emergency Manager legislation. In 2011 Governor Rick Snyder signed Public Act 4 into law, which expanded the power of Emergency Managers to sell off public assets, void public union contracts, and suspend collective bargaining for up to five years.

This law had important implications for privatization. In 2003-2004, Highland Park Emergency Manager Ramona Pearson had tried unsuccessfully to privatize the Highland Park Water Plant. The Highland Park Human Rights Coalition and MWRO led a grassroots campaign against this proposal, and won.

Public Act 4 gave EMs much more power. In 2011, Pontiac Emergency Manager Louis Schimmel sold Pontiac's water treatment plant to United Water, which proceeded to lay off unionized workers and raise water rates. In Flint, Emergency Managers Michael Brown, Ed Kurtz and Darnell Early also increased water rates, while outsourcing water treatment to private contractors like LAN and Veolia.

In 2012, after a majority of Michigan voters struck down Public Act 4 in a popular referendum, Snyder signed a replacement and referendum-proof Emergency Manager law during the lame-duck session. Under the new law, Public Act 436, Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as Emergency Manager for Detroit shortly afterward. Orr soon began negotiations with suburban officials about replacing DWSD with a regional Great Lakes Water Authority.

During the 2014 negotiations Orr began placing bids for private companies to take over DWSD, including Veolia and United Water. When the Great Lakes Water Authority began operations in 2015, its Memorandum of Understanding listed Veolia as a contractor hired to "undertake an assessment of the systems and make recommendations to assist the parties in operating models, capital requirements and saving opportunities."

These "recommendations" will undoubtedly include increased outsourcing and layoffs for AFSCME workers. (In 2012, DWSD approved a four-year, $48 million restructuring contract with the consulting firm EMA, Inc., which called for laying off 81% of DWSD's workforce. In response, AFSCME Local 207 went on strike.)

The creation of the GLWA under Kevyn Orr only accelerated this process. In November 2015, DWSD

(now controlled by the GLWA) laid off 137 workers. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) found that because of the layoffs, staffing levels at Detroit's waste water treatment plants fell to 85% of a state-approved staffing plan. As a result of understaffing, GLWA received an environmental safety violation notice from the state in March 2016.

While the DWSD takeover occurred, a humanitarian crisis was developing in both Detroit and Flint. In Detroit, water shutoffs skyrocketed to over 6,000 a month under Kevyn Orr, leading to a campaign of civil disobedience led by the People's Water Board and MWRO in the summer of 2014 (and provoking condemnations from the UN Human Rights Council).

According to official statistics, DWSD ordered 71,436 shutoffs between 2012 and 2015, of which about 97% were residential. Although DWSD statistics do not differentiate between vacant and occupied homes, a conservative estimate for the number of Detroiters deprived of running water in this period is 100,000. Given that there are, according to DWSD, 175,000 residential customers, by the fall of 2016 approximately 33,000 households were missing. It is unclear how many residents remain off the grid but the Detroit News located 11,800 accounts that were never reconnected. We the People estimates the number as somewhere between 17,000 and 24,000.

Flint's Fatal Switch

Meanwhile, as DWSD's debt service to banks increased, Flint's EMs used rising water rates as an excuse to switch Flint to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). This would be a regional entity (similar to the GLWA) and needed Flint's bond-raising pipeline to clinch financing.

The first CEO of the KWA, Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright, was a former FBI informant who'd been accused of money laundering in 2005. One of the motives for the KWA was the prospect of selling Lake Huron water to multinational corporate interests.

In 2012, Genesee County Board of Commissioners Chair Jamie Curtis said that the KWA Lake Huron pipeline "opens this whole region up to the blue economy." It would sell "raw" water to towns that would process it in their treatment plants.

In May 2014, The New York Times reported that KWA backers not only "want to dodge Detroit's future rate increases, but in an age of climate change, they also hope to harness Lake Huron for investments and jobs in agribusiness, food processing and other industries that use lots of water."

A case in point is Nestlé. Rick Snyder's chief of staff Dennis Muchmore is married to Nestlé spokesperson Deb Muchmore. It may be no coincidence, then, that Snyder's staff at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) approved Nestlé's extraction of 200 gallons of fresh water per minute from Lake Huron for free.

The decision of Flint's Emergency Manager to switch to the Flint River, backed by State Treasurer Andy Dillon and MDEQ, occurred in this context. The stated purpose was to save money while Flint prepared for a long-term transition from the Detroit system. Although warned by Michael Glasgow, Flint water plant supervisor, that there was inadequate preparation to monitor the Flint water, which was known to be highly corrosive, the switch occurred just a week later, on April 25, 2014.

Outsourcing water quality control to LAN, officials boasted about the quality of the Flint River. Yet almost immediately residents began complaining about the dirty, smelly and foul-tasting water. As early as that August Flint issued a boil-water advisory after fecal coliform bacteria was found. LAN added chlorine but in early September issued a second boil-water advisory.

By October, management returned the GM plant back to the Detroit system — the Flint water corroded its engine parts! That same month, Susan Bohm of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services hypothesized in an email to Genesee County officials that Flint's water might be linked to an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease. Forty-seven cases were diagnosed in 2014, almost four times the number the previous year. Yet throughout the year MDEA regulators insisted that the river water met standards.

Early in 2015 Lee-Anne Walters, a resident with two children under three, asked Michael Glasgow to test her water, which had black sediment. The test revealed high iron levels (104 parts per billion). Yet when Veolia submitted its recommendations to improve the chemical treatment of the Flint River, it said nothing about lead.

By the end of March the City Council, inundated by the complaints of residents, voted 7-1 to reconnect with Detroit's water system but Emergency Manager Jerry Ambrose called that "incomprehensible."

As a result, Flint's Emergency Managers' decisions exposed an estimated 99,763 people (the population of Flint in 2013) to lead-contaminated water for over two years. By the time Governor Rick Snyder acknowledged the Legionnaires' outbreak, nine people had died. Meanwhile, Detroit's Emergency Manager ramped up shutoffs, resulting in over 100,000 residents losing running water in 2013-2015.

We thus have the surreal spectacle of roughly 200,000 people losing access to clean water in a state that borders the Great Lakes. The ideological commitment of a neoliberal state leads to austerity, privatization, outsourcing and Emergency Managers. In the case of Flint, that commitment saw LAN and Veolia as the experts, and they ignored elementary corrosion control standards under the EPA's Lead and Copper Rule.

Advocating a Solution

How can we address this crisis? A decade ago MWRO championed Roger

Colton's water affordability plan for income-eligible Detroit customers. The proposal passed city council but was never implemented by the Water Department, which claimed it would be considered illegal under the state constitution. A similar plan has been adopted by Philadelphia.

The Environmental Protection Agency standard is that water rates should be pegged at 2-3% of household income. Yet in Flint and Detroit, where more than 40% of the residents are poor, they pay the highest rates in the state.

In response to grassroots demonstrations, the DWSD rolled out a one-year water assistance program (renewable for a second year) for those who are 150% below the federal poverty level and put 44,000 households on a payment plan (half are already in arrears). Gary Brown, DWSD's director, feels the plan improves record keeping and "changes the culture of delinquency." But it doesn't address the problem that rates are too high and people too poor.

The People's Water Board, a coalition of three dozen Southeast Michigan organizations, calls for a moratorium on Detroit shutoffs, restoration of service and implementation of the water affordability plan. For the past two years they have organized meetings, actions and water stations for those without water.

In the case of Flint there are also a variety of grassroots organizations keeping up the pressure for justice, transparency and long-term reparations, particularly for the affected children.

As for Emergency Manager laws in MichÂigan (and similar ruling-class tools, from Detroit's Financial Advisory Board to Puerto Rico's Fiscal Control Board), they stand in the way of people having control over their lives and must be repealed.

The Michigan water struggle illustrates how the fight for environmental justice, collective bargaining rights, public ownership of the commons, and democracy itself are all fundamentally interconnected.

The reality is that we need to reclaim the commons from corporate interests, which have a nearly 200-year record of failing to protect public health.

Against the Current

Footnotes

[1] see http://bit.ly/2d1XvZo.

[2] Karen Piper, The Price of Thirst: Global Water Inequality and the Coming Chaos (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 176. See ATC review: http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/n...

[3] For more details and documentation of this history, see Josiah Rector, "Accumulating Risk: Environmental Justice and the History of Capitalism in Detroit" (Ph.D Dissertation: Wayne State University, forthcoming 2017).

"Don't mourn, organize"

21 November 2016, by Joanna Misnik

What are your first thoughts on the election outcome?

The U.S. just elected a new "leader of the free world." Both he and his opponent Clinton ran their entire campaigns with persistently high rates on disapproval from the public. Fully 12 million people who voted for Trump stated they had an unfavorable attitude toward him. But the South Carolina Klu Klux Klan held a gala celebration and Marine Le Pen, leader of the right-wing National Front in France, jumped for joy. The Republican Party that Trump overwhelmed when he got the nomination despite his egomania and racist, anti-immigrant, misogynistic utterances will now realign to become much more of an undiluted white nationalist, xenophobic, fundamentalist Christian bastion. The Democratic Party appears to have collapsed, at least temporarily. A new breed of carpetbaggers are consolidating their grip on the government – racists of all stripes, right to life zealots, climate deniers, Muslim haters, anti-LGBTQ crusaders, trade union busters, anti-immigrant wall builders, creationists, and defenders of the European white race. Unexpected though it was, from the morning of November 9 we live in a vastly different and dangerous political world.

How do you explain the result?

By now hundreds of analytical articles are available about why Hillary Clinton lost the election when all the pollsters and the mainstream U.S. media had already pronounced her the winner. The discussion turns in part around to what degree and why the U.S. white working class (called white no-college by the media) was the culprit in bringing her down. The discussion is correctly littered with comparisons to Brexit. A strange piece of the answer can be found in the battle between artificial intelligence and industrial workers thrown on the neoliberal scrap heap. The Clinton campaign relied heavily on an algorithm named Ada, after Ada, Countess of Lovelace, a pioneering 19th Century female mathematician. Ada spat out some 400,000 simulations per day that determined where the Clinton campaign would spend time and deploy resources. But Ada cannot calculate feelings and emotions, so she never calculated anything that would question the safety of the Blue Maginot Line, the assumption that the Rust Belt states of Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin were secure for Democrats. Besides,

Democrats needed to go after new, middle class constituencies that traditionally voted Republican; who cared if a few white workers slipped away through the cracks. Clinton's loss in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin gave Trump the electoral vote, though not the popular vote. Many of these white workers had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012, challenging the notion that racism was the sole or main impetus.

Yes, backward and nativist attitudes toward race, gender, sexuality, immigrants and Muslims played a role in capturing votes for Trump despite the negative attitudes toward him and his personal character. But in the main this white working class vote, particularly where Trump triumphed in the Rust Belt, was a clear rejection of the Democrats and the damage that neoliberal policies had brought to these industrial communities. It was a rejection of a party and a candidate that did not offer any relief, but supported NAFTA and trade agreements that steal "our" jobs and didn't care about them. Since the election, a number of reporters have gone back to hard-hit Ohio and Michigan cities. Time after time, the workers interviewed do not voice great respect for Trump. But they expect him to make America great again as he promised by bringing the lost jobs back to their communities. Most interviewed said they expected these changes in six months to a year at the most. Those expectations, combined with Trump's tax breaks for the rich, abolishing Obamacare potentially without a replacement, and the attacks on Social Security and Medicare that many Republicans are itching for will likely cause real tensions between the new President and the working class victims of neoliberalism who gave him their grudging support.

Can you explain the Electoral College?

This is a peculiar institution. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by more than 1.5 million, yet Trump is the winner via the Electoral College system, scoring 290 electoral votes to Clinton's 232. The U.S. president is not directly elected by whomever gets more individual votes, as Hillary Clinton has just done. Many explain it by saying the Founding Fathers were fearful that, in the period before the establishment of political parties, the unwashed and poorly educated voters would make unwise decisions. However, the Electoral College is an undemocratic vestige of slavery and the influence of the Southern slaveholders on national government in the foundational period of the U.S. Direct election of the President by white property-owning men eligible to vote in that era would have greatly advantaged the North with its larger population of eligible voters and reduced influence of the Southern ruling class. So the Electoral College was written into the Constitution. Each state is allocated a number of electors based on the number of representatives it has in Congress. Congressional representation is based on the total population of a given state. And in 1787 Southern planters had already won the right to count each slave as three-fifths of a person in order to attain greater representation in the Congress.

This is the archaic system, birthed by slavery and institutional racism, that remains in place today. African-Americans' right to be fully counted came as a result of the civil rights movement, which won the 1965 Voting Rights Act aimed at protecting their right to vote. In this recent election, with many of the protections of that Act removed by the Supreme Court, the right of Black people to vote came under threat through identification requirements', removal from the voting rolls, and the shutting down of 800 polling places in order to make voting inaccessible to poor voters with little to no transportation. Out on the streets in the anti-Trump protests, signs demanding an end to the Electoral College system in favor of direct election are cropping up.

It's new to see demonstrations throughout the country the day after a presidential election. How did they come about, who called them, are they mainly youth or also workers, can they help bring together different protest movements?

The spontaneous anti-Trump outpouring of tens of thousands just after the elections was inspiring, and protests are still being organized. Young people once again, through social media, were the main organizers of these actions. Thousands of high school and college students in city after city walked out of their classrooms to march against Trump's agenda. The very young people who were so numerous on the streets were in part a post-Bernie generation, coming into political action for the first time. Demonstrators included the whole gamut of social movement activists, particularly Black Lives Matter, Latin@s demanding immigration justice against Trump's plan for an initial 3 million deportations, and women taking the first steps to defend abortion rights against renewed Republican assault.

The demonstrations make the immediate statement that Trump and his right-wing cronies will face resistance, that the left is not hiding or cowed, let alone defeated. As has been the case since Occupy, these actions were not led by any particular organization or coalition. Despite efforts by some revolutionary groups to claim them, they are again the product of social media outreach by all kinds of individuals and groups. Already Facebook is being loaded with different actions for January 20, the day Trump is sworn in as President.

The Brooklyn, NY Chapter of the National Women's Liberation movement has monthly meetings usually attended by a couple dozen women. Just after Trump's victory, so many people said they were going on Facebook that they booked into a nearby stadium. Thousands of women flooded this meeting, overflowing even the stadium. The January 21st Million Women March in Washington also typifies how things move along. Facebook pages are being launched state by state by "organizers." The March will be a success, but no actual named and ongoing organization or coalition is bringing it about.

What's the attitude of the trade-union movement?

Most of organized labor is missing in action from the early efforts to build resistance. For decades the labor movement has seen itself as a loyal

junior partner of the Democratic Party, even as the Party's neoliberalism has landed severe blows on working people. With only 11% of workers organized into unions, the labor movement is increasingly vulnerable to the inevitable attacks from a right-wing Trump regime. And the movement is not at all prepared to meet this very serious challenge.

Republican administrations in 26 states have managed to pass anti-union-"right to work" legislation. With a Republican majority in both houses of Congress and a Trump presidency, it is likely that a Republican bill to rid the private sector of effective unions – the National Right to Work Act – will pass through. New appointments to government bodies dealing with labor rights will yield similar steps backward. When a right-wing voting majority is secured on the Supreme Court, an avalanche of cases challenging the right to unionize may well appear. Escalating privatization of public services on the state and federal levels could gut the public sector union movement.

A far-reaching political transformation is needed if the union movement is to survive the coming storm. Only 51% of union households voted for Clinton, the lowest percentage for a Democrat since 1980, the year of the Reagan Democrat. Tens of thousands of union workers who voted for Obama in the past went over to Trump in this election. The popularity of Bernie Sanders' anti-corporate, social democratic program among working people, including the unions that formed Labor for Bernie, point the way forward to the political renewal labor needs to mobilize for the fights ahead. Another attempt to influence or renew a neoliberal Democratic Party that has already shoved unions to the side of the road will only make a dead strategy more deadly. Hope lies in contestation with the 1% by the 99% and solidarity in action with the social movements under attack – an injury to one is an injury to all.

How have the turnabouts of Sanders been seen? What is the evolution of those that were in his campaign? Can we imagine a convergence of youth movements like BLM, a sector on the labour movement posing the question of a new party, a labour party as was discussed in the 1930s?

The response demonstrations have modeled solidarity and defiance. But the fight against Trump and the right wing in government is a longer-term process that requires something beyond Facebook networking. That would be the role of a third, left political party or pre-party formation in the US, or even a reinvigorated trade union movement. The power of the social movements, which are not presently bastions of strength, would be enhanced by a unified left front.

Bernie Sanders' army of supporters, many young, was basically dispersed when he honored his pledge to work for Clinton's election. But the Bernie revolt was and remains the real "revolution"in U.S. politics. The blocked social mobility of youth, especially from working class and immigrant backgrounds, is a volatile socio-political reality that won't go away. Many are out in the streets right now. Far fewer milllenials voted for Clinton than voted for Obama. Millenial disaffection from the two capitalist parties helped boost the tally for Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein to over one million votes. In just a few days after the Trump victory, the Democratic Socialists of America, (that's what google brings up when asked to find democratic socialism in order to connect with Bernie Sanders' ideas) reportedly received nearly 2,000 applications for membership.

The prospects for a third national political party emerging in the US in the near or medium term are not great. Class for itself consciousness is really very low and millennial distrust of parties and other institutions is high. This idea has more traction after the dismal defeat of Clinton and the neoliberal Democratic Party, but the small and splintered revolutionary left cannot bring this party into being by patiently explaining it. Real social forces must converge in action to create such a party. Moreover, so-called progressives and liberals are putting a new twist on the argument for remaining in the Democratic Party. They agree that a brand new political party is needed, that the Democrats as they are now are finished so let's turn the Democratic Party into that new party. This is the same old cynical game. U.S. progressives know full well that the Democratic Party is not a party in any real sense, but a wholly owned subsidiary of U.S. capital interests. Unlike the British Labour Party, for example, it has no real chapters, no rank and file membership decision-making structures in which to stage a revolt.

On the municipal level, however, local independent political campaigns and candidates can be initiated by the small revolutionary left in combination with social movements, unions, Green Party activists and local leaders. Pioneering models for this type of local independent politics include the Richmond Progressive Alliance, which has wrested control of the city council of this California town from the domination of the Chevron Oil Company, 8th largest corporation in the world. A national network of scattered municipal efforts at new politics outside the two parties would help legitimate the building of a new political voice for working people. **LeftElect** is that network of the rebels against the duopoly. The second **LeftElect** national conference will be held in Chicago in March 2017. National collaboration to grow independent political efforts is more of a start than we've had in decades.

The Kurdish national movement in Syria: political goals, controversy and dynamic

19 November 2016, by Joseph Daher

What are the goals of PYD and what is the purpose of its alliances?

Joseph Daher : There is a consensus among all Kurdish political parties, including PYD, to establish in a future Syria without Assad a form of decentralization, while all emphasizing the full integrity of Syrian territory within a federal system. The way to reach it is however different for numerous reasons. PYD has for example pursued a policy of strengthening its political influence through its own armed forces to control Kurdish majority inhabited areas, even more, and to try to link the 3 "Rojava" cantons geographically, but without any cooperation with Syrian Arab opposition forces, and sometimes even against them. On the other side, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) has argued that a federalist system has to be established following discussions with and explanations to the actors of the Syrian Arab opposition, which for the majority views federalism as a step toward separatism and division.

Regarding alliances, PYD officials actually recognized they have made a strategic decision not to confront military regime forces when they could, yet refusing accusations of collusion, describing themselves as a "third current" between an "oppressive regime and hardline rebel militants". At the same time there is no doubt that the PYD has engaged the regime in a conciliatory rather than confrontational manner and has pursued a modus vivendi that served both actors, at least for the short term. The possibility of the PYD to organize freely in Syria and to bring few thousands of armed fighters to Syria from Qandil enclave in Iraq in the first year of the uprising in 2011 allowed it to reestablish a presence and operate openly in Syria. This was made according to few sources and in exchange for cooperation with regime security forces in order to crush anti regime protests in majority Kurdish populated areas, which did occur notably in Afrin and some Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo. This did not prevent at the same period confrontations between PYD members and regime forces, while PYD promoting an anti regime propaganda in its social medias.

The self-governance of majority-Kurdish areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – also known as 'Rojava – Northern Syria' – is a direct result of the mass movement by the people of Syria (Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians together) against the Assad regime. The popular uprising pushed the regime to conclude a deal with the PYD in July 2012, in which they withdrew from several majority-Kurdish regions in the North to redeploy its armed forces to repress the uprising elsewhere, while maintaining small presence in some areas such as Qamichli and Hassaka.

Rather than being an Assad proxy, we can consider that the PYD has played a mutual beneficial role for itself and the Assad regime, seeking to take advantage of the lack of security and to expand the land it currently controls

Therefore, there is no stricto senso alliance between the Assad regime and the PYD as some say, but a pragmatic agreement of non confrontation, with conflicts in some periods, but that can't last for ever. The best proof of this situation is that although a kind of non-aggression pact existed between PYD and the regime, Assad has repeatedly declared that it refuses any kind of autonomy for the Kurds in Syria. In August, the Syrian Regime air force bombed the Kurdish neighbourhoods of the city of Hassaka, while Assad tacitly accepts Turkish military intervention and support to FSA and Islamic fundamentalist movements against the PYD in Northern Syria.

This does not mean in the same time that in the future new tactical and temporary collaboration between the two actors in a particular political context can occur.

In relation to the dominant trend of the opposition in exile, relations are not good, notably because of chauvinism of many groups and personalities within the Syrian Arab opposition – particularly the Syrian National Coalition, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhoods and the rightwing, while being allied to Turkey's AKP government.

The majority of the Syrian Arab opposition believes that Kurds are normal Syrian citizens who have been deprived of some of their rights and that the problem is therefore limited to the single issue of the census in 1962, which resulted in around 120, 000 Kurds being denied nationality and declared as foreigners, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination. There were between 250,00 and 300.000 stateless Kurds in the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, roughly 15 percent of the estimated two million total Kurdish population in Syria. The far majority of the opposition political parties have not been ready in any way to recognize the Kurds as a separate "people" or "nation" and are not ready and willing to listen to demands for federalism and administrative decentralization. As mentioned before, the demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the quasi majority of Kurdish parties in the country despite their political differences and rivalries.

We have to understand that the demand for a federal system by the Syrian Kurdish political parties is rooted in decades of state oppression, and this since the independence of the

country in 1946, on a national basis (policies of quasi systematic discrimination against Kurds, policies of colonization in the framework of the "Arab Belt" and cultural repressions at all levels), but also has socio-economic consequences: the most impoverished areas of the country were the areas mostly populated by Kurds such as in the north-eastern Jazirah.

In this perspective, the majority of the Syrian Arab opposition did not address or even acknowledge this reality, mirroring the regime's position.

Lately, the great majority of the Syrian Kurdish political movements, including the PYD and Kurdish National Council, were angered by the recent transition plan, proposed by the opposition's High Negotiations Committee for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, as the plan did not envision any form of federalism in post-war Syria. The High Negotiations Committee for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces proposed the principle of administrative decentralization in managing the country's affairs. The Kurdish National Council, which is part of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Etilaf), but which has failed repetitively to recognize Kurdish rights with this latter or the previous Syrian National Council at the 2011 Tunis Conference and at subsequent conferences in Geneva and Riyadh, stated clearly that "this document is not part of a solution, but rather a danger to a democratic, pluralistic and unified Syria guaranteeing cultural, social and political rights to all its ethnic, religious and linguistic groups". They add "Whoever reads the document notes immediately that point 1 of the "General Principles" exclusively lists the Arab culture and Islam as sources "for intellectual production and social relations". This definition clearly excludes other cultures – be they ethnic, linguistic or religious – and sets the majority culture as the leading one. As Syrian Kurds we feel repulsed by this narrow perception of the Syrian people. The similarities between this definition and the chauvinist policies under the Assad regime are undeniable". Just as on October 25, 2016, The Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC) condemned the Turkish bombardment of populated districts in Aleppo Governorate. The council explicitly demanded that the Turkish Army stop killing civilians and demanded that it withdraws its forces from Aleppo countryside,

At the same time as we mentioned before, PYD policies have also been problematic such as its non-conflict orientation towards the Assad regime, support for Russian intervention in Syria and even benefiting in the beginning of 2016 of Russian bombing in the countryside of Aleppo to conquer new territories against FSA and Islamc opposition forces. According to latest news, new military fights are unfortunately occurring between these actors in the northern region of Aleppo. And there are also some accusations of human rights violations against Arab populations. In addition, it has practiced authoritarian and repressive measures against other Kurdish groups and activists.

In general, no solution for the Kurdish issue and an inclusive Syria can be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper "people" or "nation" in Syria and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere; this clearly does not mean being uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD or any other Kurdish political party.

We need to reaffirm that the defeat of the Syrian revolution and of the popular movement would probably mark the end of the Rojava experience and the return to an era of oppression for the Kurds of Syria. The Assad regime and the Islamic reactionary forces would not allow any possible development of a political experience that is out of their authoritarian program.

This is why we should not isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution.

This is important to understand because among all international and regional powers, there is a near consensus around certain points: to liquidate the revolutionary popular movement initiated in March 2011, stabilize the regime in Damascus and keep at its head the dictator Bashar Al-Assad for the short-to-medium term. Also their objective is to oppose Kurdish autonomy and try to militarily defeat jihadist groups such as Daesh.

What is the relationship of the PYD with the democratic forces of the Syrian opposition?

J.D: Unfortunately, increased separation and division has appeared at times between the Syrian Arab and Kurdish movements, and most particularly the PYD. The majority of the Syrian Arab forces opposed to the Assad regime see federalism as a step toward separatism and division. This is strengthened, as mentioned previously, by the non confrontational policies of the PYD towards the Assad regime, which included notably maintaining communication channels open since the uprising began in 2011, cohabiting with regime forces in the cities of Qamichli and Hassaka, (despite occasional and violent confrontations) and abuses and violations of Human Rights against Syrian Arab civilians in areas dominated by the military forces of PYD, raise suspicions and opposition of a part of the Arab population of Syria.

According to a survey conducted between November 2015 and January 2016 by the independent Syrian-led civil society organization The Day After Tomorrow (TDA), respondents in both regime (86.7%) and opposition-held areas (67,4%) agree on rejecting federalism, while proponents of federalism almost reach a consensus in Kurdish-led Self-Administration areas (79.6%). These results show that a Kurdish-Arab divide exists and that the first imperative regarding any future political system in Syria is dealing with the "Kurdish issue".

In addition to this, in Kurdish majority inhabited regions, Syrian Kurdish democratic forces have tensed relations with PYD, because of campaigns of repression of this latter and its authoritarian policies.

Are there other Kurdish political forces.? Which of them are left or

forces of the movement? What they seek? What is their relationship with the PYD?

J.D: It is firstly important to note that all Kurdish political parties, except may be the Future movement headed by Mishaal Tammo at the time before being assassinated in October 2011 and the Yekiti party that was important since the beginning of the 1990s in mobilising the Kurdish youth against the regime, were absent or not the main actors mobilising the Syrian Kurdish streets at the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, adopting a more cautious approach. The protest movement in these areas emerged around pre-existing youth groups or newly established "Local Coordination Committees", seeing themselves as part of the national movement against the regime and calling for its overthrow. Young activists organized themselves by using social medias, including facebook. Local coordinating committees in the Arab parts of the country were the model for the development of similar groups in the Kurdish regions. The collaboration between some of the Arab and Kurdish youth groups and LCCs continued in a significant way until around March 2012 and then it weakened to become more localised, especially after the main Syrian Arab opposition in exile rejected the demands of the Kurdish parties.

Meanwhile, Kurdish traditional political parties although may be rhetorically supporting the demands of the protesters, tried to divide or weaken, including repression in the case of the PYD, the Kurdish youth movement through various ways and organized their own demonstrations to boost their own credentials rather than the popular national movement against the regime.

This situation did not prevent however in October 2011 the organization of a conference gathering the majority of Kurdish political parties, putting aside internal differences, independents, Kurdish youth organisations, Kurdish women organisations, human rights activists and professionals. The objective was to unite the Kurdish opposition and establish a united and representative Kurdish voice in Syria, especially in the context of Kurdish concerns about the political program and agenda of several actors within the Syrian National Council, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its close relations with the AKP Turkish government. This is how was created the Kurdish National Council. Unfortunately, with time, the voice of the Kurdish youth and local coordination committees within the KNC, were taken over once more by the domination of the traditional Kurdish political parties which marginalized them by their control of the decision making process and political support from outside, notably Barzani.

The KNC was formed in Erbil, Iraq, under the sponsorship of Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. The stated mission of the KNC was to find a "democratic solution to the Kurdish issue" while emphasizing that it was part of the revolution. In June 2016, the KNC was composed of 12 parties, but most of them were acting outside of Syria now. Moreover, the KNC leadership left to Erbil, the regional capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), because it was unable to organise in Syria.

Despite several attempts of reconciliation between the PYD and KNC these past few years, relations are very bad with attacks on both sides. KNC members and representatives have been arrested on numerous occasions in areas controlled by the PYD, while the border with the Kurdish areas of Iraq controlled by Barzani were often closed by this latter to pressure the PYD resulting in lack of essential goods and medical supplies.

The domination of the PYD on these Kurdish inhabited majority areas did not however put an end to the activities of youth groups independent from the PYD and KNC. In cities like Qamichli, ?Amudah, ?Ayn al-?Arab (Kobani?), and ad-Darbasiyah, young people have joining forces in groups united by common interests and goals, not by party affiliation. Youth and community centers focusing on education, culture, politics, and human rights and built upon on the work of volunteers have developed considerably and enjoyed great popularity until nowadays.

What conditions prevail in the areas controlled by the PYD (civil liberties, human rights etc.)?

J.D: Institutions in PYD controlled areas are dominated by PYD-affiliated organisations, with an assortment of Kurdish, Syriac and Assyrian personalities who had little to lose from entering the project. For a far majority of Kurdish political parties and activists, Rojava is only a new form of authoritarianism rather than democratic confederalism in action. As evidence of this many of them pointed out to the exclusion of opposition parties and activists from youth groups within Rojava. Members and leaders of the people's councils, which were established by the authorities of Rojava, are theoretically responsible for local governance and including representatives of all Kurdish political parties as well as non-Kurdish population in mixed areas, are appointed by the PYD. Likewise, the movement maintains overall decision-making authority, consigning the councils other than for distribution of gas and humanitarian aid to a largely symbolic role. The commune's institution, one of the key element in the new Rojava system, whose role is to provide humanitarian assistance to the inhabitants in their neighbourhoods, has been criticized to enforcing the rule of PYD linked organisations.

At the same time, these new institutions lack legitimacy among large sections of the Syrian Arabs in these areas, although an Arab president had to be elected to the male/female joint presidency of the town's local council. For instance Shaykh Humaydi Daham al-Jarba, the head of a tribal Arab militia and an outspoken supporter of the Assad regime, was nominated as the governor of the Jazirah canton in Rojava in 2014. His son became the commander of the al-Sanadid Forces, one of the main Arab militias fighting alongside the PYD-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Prominence of tribal leaders in the Rojava institution was also preserved, rather than challenges.

The authoritarianism of the PYD was

demonstrated in its repression and imprisonment of activists, political opponents and the closure of critical organizations or institutions, such as the independent radio Arta in February 2014 and April 2016. Members of other rival Syrian Kurdish opposition parties like the Yekiti Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria and Azadi party have particularly suffered from the repression by the authorities in the autonomous regions of Rojava for their peaceful activism and criticism of the PYD. Just lately, the KNC's president, Ibrahim Berro, was arrested in August 2016 at an Asayish checkpoint in Qamichli, and then exiled to Iraki Kurdistan the day after. As a reaction, in mid September, the local councils of the Kurdish National Council in the northern province of Hassaka, Maabdeh, 'Amoudah, Qamishli, al-Jawadiyeh, and Malakiyeh organized a sit-in against the practices of the PYD and arbitrary arrests. The protesters demanded the release of political prisoners imprisoned by the party whose number has reached about 100. New protests occurred in October as well.

The PYD has faced growing opposition within the Kurdish population in Syria and active pro revolutionary Kurdish activists for their authoritarian policies. The increasing political and military hegemony of the PYD and the inability of the KNC to project influence inside Syria further weakened the coalition with internal divisions.

At the same time, in the areas controlled by the PYD, there are advances on some aspects that must be acknowledged such as promotion of women rights and gender equality, securalisation of laws and institutions, and to a certain extent some forms of coexistence between the various ethnicities and religious sects, despite some tensions. Some parties within the KNC also saw cooperation with the PYD as the unique way to maintain a power-base in Syria, while large sections of the population saw it as a necessary evil to defend itself against some FSA, Islamic and salafist djihadist forces attacking Kurdish regions since summer 2012. For example, the launch of the campaign "Western Kurdistan for his children" by the PYD in the summer 2012 against the attacks by Islamic fundamentalist groups against the cities mostly inhabited by Kurds also diminished criticisms against the party and gathered temporarily the Syrian Kurdish political scene with the support of other Kurdish groups to this campaign, while reiterating the need for the PYD to work and collaborate with them. The PYD and its military branch, YPG, role as the sole viable protector of Syria's Kurds were further strengthened therefore. These kind of feeling come back every time the Syrian Arab opposition gathered around the Etilaf reject Kurdish rights and make racist discourses and speeches against Kurds or when various opposition armed forces, from FSA to Islamic Fundamentalist region supported or not by Turkey, attack PYD and Kurdish regions.

Syria Freedom Forever

Mobilizations against the labour law: New forms and political problems of a long-lasting mobilization

17 November 2016, by Patrick Le Moal

On September 15, 2016, between 100,000 and 150,000 demonstrators participated in every major city in the fourteenth national day of action. This participation, even reduced, shows that the rejection of the labour law and its world remains intact, even after the adoption of the law on July 21, and can still mobilize in the streets teams of combative activists, against the government and the whole political system. Neither the terrorist attacks of the summer, nor the media coverage of the beginning of the presidential campaign have succeeded in preventing this resurgence after the holiday months. It appears today to be the end of the wave of mobilization that started in February by signing the online petition against the law, which registered a million signatures in two weeks. But let us not be in such a hurry to inter such a wave, which can reappear in other forms, given the magnitude of the social and political crisis. Because the radicalization is a response to the deepening of the neoliberal and authoritarian counter-reform, and to the inability of mainstream parties to offer perspectives to those below. [1]

The stakes of the labour law for the bourgeoisie

The mobilization against the labour law came up against a major project for the government and the bourgeoisie, who want to destroy most of the social advances that are still present in the labour code, acquired primarily during the half-century from 1936 to 1986. The objective is to align French labour law with that of the other European countries, something that the mobilizations of the last 30 years, although they did not lead to great victories, have prevented for the moment. They now want to impose a deregulation of the labour market similar to that which exists in the other major European countries.

So, much more than a bill, it is a central confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. To win, you need a massive and determined, one that can go all the way and establish a relationship of forces mobilization and fixed up to the end, be a balance of power such that they have no other solution than to yield, or lose much more.

Breaks with the PS

The mobilization marked a break of a part of the popular classes with the Socialist Party (PS) and its government, and the power of the movement shook the routine and the apparatuses of the trade unions.

While the leaderships of the unions (CGT, Solidaires, FSU) that were opposed to the law, which had been marginally reformulated to obtain the support of the CFDT, the CGC and UNSA, did not prepare any real response, the first reaction came from some critical oppositionists on the left of the PS [