



IV517 - February 2018

Solidarity with the Anacé indigenous people of Brazil

2 March 2018

From the 1990s, the Anacé indigenous people began to suffer from a new series of attacks with the installation of the Industrial Complex and Port of Pecém. This is 50 km from Fortaleza and is the closest Brazilian port to both Europe and USA, with transit times as short as six days to New York and seven days to Portugal and Spain. Just ten years old, it is already the main Brazilian port for the transportation of fruit, cement and shoes. It is also one of the main ports for the movement of steel, iron and cotton.

This complex has two thermoelectric plants in operation (one coal, with two units, respectively controlled by EDP and Eneva, a subsidiary of the British multinational EOn and a gas plant belonging to Enel - an Italian multinational.) and a steel mill. Together, they are authorized to use 2529 litres of water per second, enough to supply more than one million people. Their consumption worsened the situation of the water reservoirs of Ceará, already harmed by 5 years of unprecedented drought and high rates of evaporation, probably as a result of climate change.

In 2015, before the start of the steelworks, the thermoelectric plants alone emitted 7.25 Megatons of CO₂ (22.7% of the total emissions of the state in CO₂-equivalent) as well as

toxic gases and particulate material. This also severely impacts on the health of local communities (indigenous and non-indigenous). As if that were not enough, part of the Anacé people was forcibly removed from its territory, which remains unmarked, to a "reserve", to pave the way for the installation of an oil refinery, which is planned to happen in the coming years through Chinese investment.

Due to the delay in demarcating their lands, the Anacé communities started actions in which they mark out their own lands, which they call "retomadas". One of them (Japuara) is consolidated but covers only a small part of the territory. The new retomada attempts have met a violent response from squatters and by the state police apparatus.

In addition, due to the falling level of the reservoirs, the state government has begun to use groundwater in the region, which, according to environmental impact studies, will have a serious impact on the quantity and quality of the local water, drying up small shallow wells that serve families and small communities, and allowing saline intrusion. The Anacés are once again at the forefront of resistance against this project, having started court action and set up camp to protect their water. The camp was

violently repressed and the lawsuits are still in dispute, although the government is still carrying out the work. We ask for solidarity with this brave group of fighters.

Appeal

We, social-environmental movements, indigenous organizations, environmentalists, human rights defenders and supporters of the indigenous cause, give our full and unconditional support to the Anacé Indigenous People of the communities of Japuara and Cauãpe and their traditional leaders. We condemn the acts of violence and the violations committed by squatters, authorities and public agents.

A month after the police twice repossessed their land by force, Anacé leaders, especially from Japoara and Cauãpe, in the municipality of Caucaia, in the state of Ceará, still face frequent intimidation. There are reports of people passing on motorcycles, wearing helmets to hide their faces, with a message that the Anacés interpret as a threat. They fear for their lives.

The Anacé people have lived in this region from at least the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Expelled from their traditional territory, they have

little basis to maintain their practices and customs. The areas in which they have been forced to live have not yet been given official status, as the federal constitution sets out, leading to a systematic advance of squatters on the small patch of land for which this people fights, at all costs, to guarantee current and future generations.

Without effective action by public authorities, especially the institutions responsible for guaranteeing the rights of indigenous peoples, such as the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF), besides the Federal Government, the Anacé People began and intensified in the last five years, a process known as "retomadas", in which they act to occupy their own land - actions carried out by indigenous peoples in several states of Brazil, mainly in the Northeast and Center-West regions.

One such retomadas in January resulted in police aggression and the repossession of the land by the state of Ceará, without any of the legal procedures that should be used in cases that directly affect indigenous peoples, such as the presence of

FUNAI, the Brazilian Government Agency for Law Enforcement and the Federal Police.

In addition to the struggle for land rights, the Anacé also fight for their right to water. At the end of 2017, leaders of the Anacé indigenous people filed a popular action, in the State Court of Caucaia, against illegal water withdrawal from Lagamar do Cauãpe, an Environmental Protection Area. In the first moment, they obtained a court decision favorable to indigenous and traditional communities. However, the state government were later granted permission to use the waters of Cauãpe .

History of violent repossessions

On January 19, 2018, the first repossession took place, in a "retomada" area known as Lagoa do Barro, in the municipality of Caucaia, which is in the hands of squatters. The Anacé reported aggression suffered during the violent eviction, with some leaders threatened with arrest.

A few days later, on January 24, 2018, due to the fight against the withdrawal of water from Lagamar do Cauãpe to supply the companies of the Industrial Complex and Port of Pecém, affecting the lives of 27 communities, the police carried out a further attack to repossess land. Rubber bullets and pepper spray were used, the tents where the leadership had sheltered for more than one month, to resist the irresponsible use of water to favor large capital, were overturned.

After the repossession, the Anacés, especially the community of Japoara, suffered threats, intimidation and criminalization because of their struggle for land, water and the full right to live.

We reiterate our support; we demand the investigation of the threats; we demand that the violence against Anacé People of the communities of Japoara and Cauãpe ceases.

**For the immediate Demarcation of the Anacé Indigenous Land!
Land demarcated, life guaranteed!**

Please send your support to direitosindigenasce@gmail.com

We want the Right to say NO! Alternatives to mining and extractivism

1 March 2018, by Amandla!

When corporations start to explore regions regarding their mining interests, the narrative of the rising tide is frequently used during negotiations with local communities. Equally profitable results from the exploitation of natural resources, beneficial development activities, positive transformation of economic structures, shared prosperity - those are the promises. However in cases where communities try to oppose mining plans of corporations and the state, they are quickly labelled as "anti-development". But for what

reasons do communities not get to see the tangible results of these so-called "win-win" agreements?

Extractivism and its vast consequences

Firstly one has to understand that in reality, the extremely unequal power relations between communities and corporations prevent that utopia of "a

tide which lifts all boats" from happening. Even during the negotiations of so-called "benefit-sharing agreements", the community usually finds itself in a tremendously disadvantaged position. Normally, the aim of those agreements is to ensure the community's equal benefit in extractivist activities, but in fact - and despite the presence of various actors such as governments, NGOs, research institutes and councils -, the negotiations are often transformed into a process used by mining companies to acquire not only relative

acceptance by the communities, but also legal protection against eventual latter lawsuits. It is easy to take advantage of the negotiation process because obviously, communities often don't have the capacities to deal with complex mining projects, contracts and laws, but also because government oversight is extremely weak, both during the negotiations and the follow-up phases.

The consequences are usually the same: If finally implemented by mining companies, community projects are often far from really addressing communities' needs.

The second main problem are the negative impacts of extractivist activities itself and their constant underestimation. Mining can threaten the community's safety, causing severe health damage due to increased air and water pollution from acid mining drainage. The countless damaging consequences of environmental degradation include decrease of water access and fertile land, often leading to the loss of traditional jobs and livelihoods. Financial insecurity can result in collapsed family structures, precarious work or other risky alternative means of employment. On top of that, since gender-specific socially defined norms and traditions mostly dictate women's roles in economic and social structures, women bear the brunt of extractivist activities. Most of these negative consequences have differentiated and more extreme effects upon women and therefore lead to an intensification of already existing oppressive structures, affecting the vulnerable ones of society even more.

What are possible alternatives?

So how can communities, facing such a multitude of different problems, be supported in their struggle against extractivism that denies them their self-determined development? There are already existing instruments, like the principle of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), which theoretically functions as a protection of communities' substantive rights. It

does not only guarantee the right to be consulted about planned mining activities prior to any realization thereof, but also the right to take a decision, based on provided access to objective information, which is free from any obligation, duty, force or coercion. However, there are a growing number of instances in which local leaders disregard communal interests in alliance with mining corporations. That is why FPIC works in practice often not for, but against communities, as it gives space for co-optation of local chiefs and does not stress the need to consult grassroots interests.

The "Right to say No" and law from below

There have been communities which effectively opposed the mining interests of corporations - for instance the case of the Amadiba Crisis Committee in Pondoland, an area in South Africa's Eastern Cape, provides a powerful example of how a community did not only reject extractivism and mining, but instead also came up with their own development alternatives like ecotourism and renewable energy projects. Nevertheless, there are many more communities which lack resources and support to effectively resist the increasing powershift towards companies' interests. In order to support their struggle, the existing practice of the FPIC is not enough - instead, we need a "Right to say No".

The concept of the "Right to say No", based on the concept of FPIC, an important step towards the right to self-determined development. It stresses the communities' fundamental right to not only be involved in- and informed about the plans, but also, in cases of unsatisfying outcomes of negotiating processes, to finally say "No" to the proposals. This essential notion does not only amplify communities' voices and put them in a more equitable position, but also puts pressure on corporations to respect indigenous knowledge and customary law. The right to say "No" to mining is

therefore also the right to say "Yes" to a self-determined living and gives communities a concrete instrument to come up with their own development model through grassroots processes and law from below.

The need to rethink mining policy at a national level

The growing mobilizations around the Right to say "No" and the numerous protests and complaints of communities affected by mining should also encourage us to pose questions at a larger scale. The frequently used argument that "mining creates jobs" and therefore helps our economy to grow fails to consider some key elements. Firstly, the damages to the traditional economy are often underestimated as it is more informal - for instance, the impact of pollution is very hard to assess. In addition, the fact that mining companies are mostly multinational companies leads to massive outflows of money from the vast majority of South Africans to the pockets of international businesses and national elites. One can sometimes wonder if tax evasion and corruption has become the new national sport for the "one percent". In fact, our collective natural resources do not benefit South African citizens but instead offshore tax havens and a handful of politicians and business people. And last but not least, we cannot forget that extractivism, by its nature, is short-sighted: What happens to an economy which is not diversified enough to be independent from mining - once our mineral resources run out?

And the dimension of extractivist devastation becomes even more obvious when looked at it from a global perspective: Throughout entire regions of Africa, South America and Asia, we can identify communities which are struggling with the consequences of extractivism. But equally, movements, organizations and civil society can be found that are opposing these developments. To

connect these different struggles, being aware of potential differences in diverse contexts and yet identifying similarities to learn from each other, is the key to forging solidarity and combining the strength of global movements against extractivism. It is

the only way to work towards a future where we don't have to hope for an environmentally and socially devastating lifestyle to "lift our boats", but where sustainable development models and social justice are achieved - even without any "tide" that is

"rising" at all.

This is what resistance to mining looks like - check out pictures of various events around the Alternative Mining Indaba 2018 [here](#)

[Amandla](#)

After the Grenfell Tower Fire

28 February 2018, by **Shelia Cohen**

As for the Inquiry into the fire, when its Chair remarked that he hoped it would provide "a small measure of solace" for the victims' families, one journalist justly commented: "It's an error of gargantuan, class-ridden insensitivity to talk in such terms to people some of whom have survived an inferno and have lost everything." [1]

One particularly outrageous example of such insensitivity was the revelation in mid-September 2017 that the chief executive of the organization "managing" the block was still being paid his full six-figure salary, despite being forced to resign in the wake of the carnage. [2]

But overshadowing even this iniquity is the decision by the judge in charge of the Grenfell Inquiry "the far from plebeian Sir Martin Moore-Bick" to ban Grenfell tenants themselves from giving evidence to the inquiry. What would they know about it, after all?

Just before the initial hearing held by the Inquiry, which began on December 4, 2017, the campaigning organization Inquest called for the bereaved and survivors to be placed at its heart, rather than having their voices effectively "silenced."

GT survivor Adel Chaoui, who had lost family members in the inferno, argued, "We fear the prime minister's current position does not go far enough to assure us that we'll have access to a balanced and unbiased inquiry... We urge her to reconsider."

In fact, many of the families have warned Prime Minister Teresa May that they might not participate in the public inquiry unless the judge makes it more inclusive.

Unlike Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who did what almost any other human being would have done "talked to and sympathised with survivors" May restricted her interactions to the firefighters on the scene.

Writing in January 2018, six months after the disaster, it's hard to know where to start regarding the fate of those who survived. The ill-fated tower block (Britspeak for high-rise apartment building) stood in the middle of one of the richest areas in London and indeed of the whole country.

The relationship between the ultra-rich of south Kensington and people like the Grenfell Tower tenants is summed up by an elderly tenant who, asked whether the two groups ever mixed, replied "Oh no. We worked for them." Significantly, differences in life expectancy between different parts of the borough can be as much as 20 years.

Such upper-class domination was evident in the composition of the local council and, until recently, parliamentary constituency. While the area was unexpectedly won by a Labour candidate in the June 2017 parliamentary election, the council remains stubbornly Conservative, with the polished accents of its representatives undermining their

claims of solidarity and empathy with Grenfell tenants.

Yet the lack of social privilege has not prevented GT tenants from organizing effectively. Even pre-disaster, a Grenfell Tower Action group existed and had argued among other things for sprinkler systems to be installed in their tower block and others.

The difference these might have made hardly needs emphasising "but the same is true of only too many other aspects of this tragedy. Members of the first firefighting crews to reach the Tower later expressed marked frustration over the time it had taken to send backup fire engines to the scene, hampering their efforts to evacuate more people from the burning ruins.

Fire Brigade Union (FBU) leader Matt Wrack commented that this may have been caused by closures of local fire stations, adding that cuts to firefighter numbers and "a decades-long process of fire safety deregulation" should be a key part of any inquiry into the disaster. [3]

"Lucky but Vulnerable..."

Apart from its immediate horrific consequences, the Grenfell Tower fire also raises more fundamental and long-term questions over "social housing," as council housing is now euphemistically known.

While the Chief Executive of the Tenant Participatory Advisory Service insisted that “We’re seeing a shift – the voices of tenants are finally being listened to, particularly in matters of safety and regulation,” a council tenant commented that “To be a social housing tenant today is to feel lucky but vulnerable. Fewer and fewer people now have a secure tenancy and the Grenfell tragedy has made us question the safety of those homes we do have...[and] has highlighted how few properties are available.” [4]

Yet above the chorus of condemnation, class relations in Britain remain inviolate. With a “Tory” (Conservative) government still nominally in charge, there is a reluctance to address the issues raised by the Grenfell disaster through any further use of supposedly “limited” public funds, with the refusal of additional resources to councils aiming at measures to prevent a Grenfell in their own back yards.

For example, housing minister Alok Sharma turned down a request by Nottingham city council for £6m (roughly \$14 million) to install sprinkler systems in all its tower blocks, arguing that the work was “additional, not essential.” In this environment it seems likely that funds for such “additional” concerns will be drawn from the people rather than their representatives.

Wandsworth council in south London, for example, has stated that the £24m needed for fire safety work will come from leaseholders’ service charges, at a cost of up to £4,000 each – very possibly to the very “ordinary” residents themselves!

Along the same lines, it was revealed in early 2018 that Robert Black, chief executive of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, is still receiving his full six-figure salary while he “helps” the TMO respond to the many simultaneous investigations into the disaster.

Cruel Hope

More lamentable, of course, than any of these post-disaster catastrophes is the tale of the fire itself – how it

came about, and its (avoidable) toll in terms of victims of all ages and circumstances.

While the fire raged, for example, police helicopters hovering above the tower offered the “cruel hope” of rescue, with tenants rushing up to the top floors in a desperate search for safety. As one desperate survivor asked later: “Why were they going to the top when they should have been going down? They [my family] were let down...”

An Evening Standard reporter reported on the date of the fire itself (14th June), “I got a call at around 1:30 a.m. that there was a fire in west London...The radio was reporting that there was a terrible fire at Grenfell Tower...When I arrived it was a horrible, nightmare scene. About a third of the tower was alight...”

“Rubbish was falling and I could hear screams from the building – I felt helpless, there was nothing I could do. I can’t emphasise how brave the fire brigade were – I’ve never seen anything like it...[A]t that stage, we didn’t know if the tower would collapse...I’ve covered loads of tragedies, but that ranks as one of the worst.” [5]

Yet according to FBU leader Matt Wrack, the first fire crews to reach the tower were “frustrated at the time it took to send back-up engines” This was a result of cuts, of fire stations closed and fire engines axed. Ten fire stations had closed in London and more than 550 firefighters had lost their jobs.

The fire and its terrible consequences have of course raised much wider social issues than fire safety per se. David Lammy, Member of Parliament for the working-class London district of Tottenham, wrote some months afterwards: “This atrocity [has] forced us to consider things that for far too long we have been happy to ignore – the state of social housing, the human cost of the creeping privatisation of services... the atrophy of local government in the face of budget cuts, together with rampant commercialisation and gentrification.”

Any such reconsideration didn’t last

long, as Lammy noted: “Within a couple of days the dog whistle sounded in social media...and in parts of the broadcast and print media. Grenfell Tower residents were illegal immigrants, unwelcome, the underclass.”

Even worse, if anything, is his conclusion that “What strikes me when I speak to Grenfell survivors is the lack of dignity and humanity in the way they have been treated...It is not right that parents are sharing rooms with their teenage children and that the bereaved have no...place to call their own and no place to grieve.” [6]

Along similar lines, months after the disaster in January 2018 Socialist Worker could report that “Grenfell fire survivors [are] angry at delays and obstructions,” [7] while at about the same time the auditing company KPMG – clearly more used to dealing with the affairs of multi-million-dollar businesses – was dismissed from the Inquiry when concerns were raised over potential “conflict of interests.”

The company is also auditor for (a) the owners of Celotex, which produced the insulation used in the Tower, and (b) both the Royal Borough (so-called) of Kensington and Chelsea, not to mention (c) Rydon Group, the contractor which had last “refurbished” Grenfell Tower. According to the newly elected local Labour MP Emma Dent Coad, [8] this was – yet another example of the government’s deafness to local needs.” [9]

“Not Very Important” People?

Indeed, Rydon itself has tarnished its reputation through association with the various blunders involved in maintenance of the Tower.

As one writer to my own local paper pointed out, people fighting for the maintenance of a neighborhood hospital, the Whittington, were “shocked” by the decision of its board to employ Ryhurst, a subsidiary of

Rydon. Speaking for herself and fellow activists, she writes, "We are really shocked at the irresponsible, insensitive and immoral decision of the board to employ...a company that may possibly be facing charges of corporate manslaughter." [10]

Equally outrageous was a leaflet recently sent to K&C residents by the Conservative council leadership which asked people to "rate how important to you and your family" the Grenfell Tower disaster and other "local issues" are, from 0 "not very important" to 10 -- "very important."

For many of the impossibly wealthy residents of the borough, it appears there are "very important issues" that have nothing to do with the unnecessary deaths of more than 80 working-class people.

The refusal of the current "lame duck" Tory government to produce the funds necessary to avoid future disasters is another indication of such class carelessness. Four months after Grenfell, "[t]he government is failing to release funds to improve the fire safety of dozens of tower blocks following the Grenfell Tower disaster, despite promising that a lack of financial resources should not hinder essential works."(11)

This mirrors the fate of Grenfell Tower ex-residents themselves. Only a tiny proportion of survivors have been able to obtain anything remotely comparable to their previous, hardly luxurious accommodations.

Despite a surplus of almost £300m in council funds, only 26 of the families made homeless by the disaster have been permanently housed. Meanwhile 203 households, including 226 children, remain in hotels or bed-and-breakfast accommodations.

The main form of "housing" has been in hotel rooms, of which the following is only one highly graphic example:

"Most nights Ibtisam and her five children go to sleep squeezed into two double beds, next to each other in their small hotel room in central

London. She shares one bed with her 12-year-old and 13-year-old daughters, her two younger sons, four and six, share the other, and the 11-year-old boy sleeps on a mattress on the floor. While Ibtisam's response is stoical: 'I don't want to complain,' it is clear that the situation is causing major difficulties; there's nowhere for the children to do their homework, nowhere to wash clothes, nowhere to cook. Added to this is a perception that public sympathy is on the decline: "People think we are spoilt, living in hotels, that we are being picky..." which of course is the opposite of the truth: "We just want to get out and get on with our lives."(12)

Even more seriously, and very recently, comes news that some Grenfell Tower residents may be faced with the threat of deportation on the grounds of "illegal" immigration, as reported in early February 2018 by the UK Guardian.

Lasting Damage

A psychologist leading the response to the tragedy notes that the emotional impact of Grenfell has spread far beyond those immediately involved, with at least 11,000 people possibly affected. More than 1300 have been treated by the Central and North West London NHS Trust (CNWL) since the tragedy, mainly for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the CNWL Director has commented that it could be years before the full mental health toll of the tragedy would be revealed.

But any return to "normality" seems blocked by countless examples of insensitivity to local people's situation. Late in 2017, the location of Wornington College, the branch of Kensington and Chelsea College closest to the Grenfell site, has posed concerns to ex-tenants, many of whom (or whose children) were students there.

Threats to close K & C through merging it with another west London college have mobilized Grenfell tenants, who have now managed to "stall" the merger. Although the future

is still uncertain on this issue, the effective resistance of these newly-formed activists marks a positive turn in local politics for the area. [11]

As can be seen from the dates of the various articles cited, concern over and interest in the Grenfell Tower tragedy has continued here for many months. But the underlying factors "the sustained neglect of and failure to renew council housing, notably under the Tory government" have remained firmly in place.

The era of the tower-block is long past, and perhaps that's something to be thankful for, but with its passing has also come the demise of council housing in general. It has been replaced by what is now known as "social housing." This is a euphemism that includes housing association accommodation, which is considerably less affordable.

Such policies in no way guarantee a return to the low-rent, secure housing opportunities available in the 1950s and early '60s. That relatively benevolent Keynesian era was replaced with Margaret Thatcher's siren call to council tenants giving them the "right to buy" their council flats and houses. Unfortunately too many responded, fatally undermining the availability of genuinely "affordable" housing.

For all its faults, and recognizing only too clearly the unspeakable tragedy of its "literal" fall, Grenfell Tower embodied that comparatively generous era. Let's hope that today's Corbynistas, helped along by the ineptitude of the current Tory government, can bring back at least some of the comparatively generous social benefits offered during the postwar period.

Better still, of course, would be an upsurge that swept away all the double-talking politicians whose "reforms" have been so wounding to Grenfell tenants and their counterparts all over this less-than-United Kingdom.

[Against the Current](#)

IV517 - February 2018 PDF

28 February 2018, by **robm**

IVP517 PDF magazine available to [download here](#)

Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Middle East: a highly explosive region

27 February 2018, by **Gilbert Achcar**

If by cold war we understand an acute antagonism, where Saudi Arabia and Iran are in military-political competition and involved in proxy wars through interposed countries, without going to war directly against each other, then that is indeed the case. Since its inception, the Iranian regime originating in the "Islamic revolution" of 1979 has been in permanent hostility with the Saudi kingdom. These are politically antithetical regimes, though both are based on Islamic fundamentalism. The Saudi kingdom is linked to the United States, while the Islamic Republic of Iran was born from the overthrow of a monarchy and is fiercely anti-American. What has made this cold war warm for some time now is the way that the invasion of Iraq led by the US in 2003 opened a Pandora's Box: it gave Iran the opportunity to extend and then consolidate its influence in Iraq, and thus set foot directly in an Arab country bordering the Saudi kingdom. Until then, Iran's main auxiliary in the region was the Lebanese Hezbollah, but this remained a relatively limited concern for the Saudis. On the other hand, the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq became for them a source of great concern, which has since been reinforced, especially with the new surge of Iranian influence on the occasion of what has been called the "Arab Spring". Iran is profiting from the destabilization of the Arab Middle

East: first, the destabilization brought by the US invasion of Iraq, then that caused by the "Arab Spring" a few years later. After Iraq, Iran intervened in Syria from 2013, with regional auxiliaries but also with Iranians on the ground. Then it was the turn of Yemen, where the Houthis are supported by Tehran, although the Iranian military role remains limited in this country compared to Iraq and Syria.

There is no shortage of commentators in the West to explain that what we have here is a new episode of the secular antagonism of Shiites and Sunnis. What do you think of this "analysis"?

It is a typically "orientalist" explanation in the pejorative sense of the term, which refers to a logic that always brings everything back to cultures that are supposed to be permanent. This does not make sense: the so-called Sunni-Shiite conflict was not a major aspect of regional politics until the invasion of Iraq and the ensuing civil war in 2006, which took a religious character, opposing Sunnis to Shiites in that country. It is a fact, however, that since the "Islamic revolution" in Iran, the Saudis - whose official ideology is fiercely anti-Shiite - have played the religious card to isolate the Iranian revolution, explaining that Khomeinism was an

avatar of Shiism and contradictory with Sunnism. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, for their part, have of course used their Shiite religious leadership to expand their influence in the Arab world. They intervened in Lebanon in particular for the founding, arming, and financing of Hezbollah, but as a rule their declared official policy was more Pan-Islamic than Shiite. They have tried to appeal to Islam in general, and have forged rather strong links with the Muslim Brotherhood, who are Sunni, but fundamentalists like them. In particular, they boasted of supporting Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, in a sort of binomial with Hezbollah. So there was a Pan-Islamic politics of Iran that embarrassed the Saudis and gave rise to an Islamic outbidding between them... What has happened, however, since the invasion of Iraq and especially since the civil war in that country, is that we have seen an escalation in the sectarian aspect of Iranian policy, which has become increasingly decisive. Tehran extended its influence in Iraq by playing the sectarian card, which then became a major element of its approach. This greatly contributed to poisoning the situation with the Saudis who, of course, have not ceased to spread their violent sectarian ideology. To say that today there is a sectarian dynamic on the ground is undeniable, but to explain

this dynamic by the simple fact that there are Sunnis and Shiites explains nothing: it is a tautology. It is a political process that has given the conflict this sectarian aspect. Moreover, we can also say that of all historical survivals such as sectarianism or tribalism: they are not eternal cultural elements, but cultural elements that have been maintained or recovered, and used for political ends... Why are there no more wars between Catholics and Protestants in Europe, apart from the conflict in Northern Ireland, when Europe has experienced such conflicts, and more deadly ones, in the past? If this sectarian factor now plays such a role in the Middle East, it is for reasons of political history, and not for cultural or religious reasons. The source of the conflict does not lie in religious differences, but in very profane conflicts of interest.

As regards the Iranian expansionism as denounced by the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Western governments... what is the reality? There have been these opportunities given to Iran to increase its influence in Iraq and Syria, but what are the limits of this influence, and how is it really a pressing threat to Saudi, Israeli or American interests?

There is a threat to the three countries you mentioned, insofar as the Iranian state has a policy that is fiercely hostile to them. But I would also like to emphasize that the expansionism of the Iranian regime is at the same time a threat to the populations of the region. Its exploitation of the religious factor is making the societies of the region explode, which is extremely serious. This expansionist policy is led in particular by the Guardians of the Revolution, which is a state within the state in Iran: they control a major sector of the economy of the country and are the armed expression of the expansionism of the regime, by their nature as a military-political force. It is they who intervene in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, where they supervise troops selected on a sectarian basis. You cannot be a member of Hezbollah, for example, without being Shiite: it is an organization based on sectarian affiliation. All of this introduces

extremely dangerous cleavages in the societies concerned. The Saudis are no better, there is no doubt, but in this case Tehran's offensive policy of expansion contrasts with the conservatism of the Saudis. We do not see them building local armed tentacles as Iran does. Even in Syria, they financed and supported groups that they do not fully control. The Saudi kingdom is hyper-conservative and it fears this destabilization of the region, which does not scare Iran in the least!

Do you mean that instability benefits Iran, not Saudi Arabia, which prefers the status quo?

Take Lebanon as an example: the Saudis have not set up and are not trying to establish a Sunni version of Hezbollah, even though Hezbollah has the monopoly of force in Lebanon. The Saudi regime is certainly more reactionary than the Iranian regime, socially and culturally, but Iran is much more aggressive and expansionist. It plays an even more dangerous role in giving a sectarian character to the conflicts in the region. This was an essential antidote against the revolutionary wave of the "Arab Spring". If this wave was not able to spread in Iraq despite attempts at social mobilization, it was mainly because of the sectarian cleavage. It was the same in Lebanon. If in Syria the regime has been able to resist the revolutionary wave and counter-attack, it is also by using the sectarian factor, but it is also and above all thanks to the support of Iran by means of sectarian militias coming from Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran itself (including troops made up of Afghan refugees in the latter country, often forcibly conscripted). These militias play a crucial role in maintaining the regime.

But what about the Iraqi state at present? It seems exaggerated to describe it as a vassal of Iran, but it is deeply connected to Iran while still receiving American support.

It is paradoxical, indeed. There has for a long time been competition combined with collaboration between the US and Iran in Iraq. The American invasion was from the outset undertaken with the complicity of Iran, which means that Sunni Arab

nationalists, like the Baathists, regularly accuse Iran of being an accomplice of the United States, and present themselves as victims of an Iranian-American plot. It is an undeniable fact that, when US troops invaded Iraq, they brought with them the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, loyal to Iran, as well as the Dawa party, a Shiite party linked to Iran... The occupation even installed them in the government! We can discuss to what extent it was stupidity on the part of the Bush administration, but there was undeniably some stupidity involved... The Bush team even declared, one year after the invasion, that they had been fooled by an adventurer named Chalabi, who had been their main guide in their Iraqi adventure, and was later accused of being a double agent on behalf of Iran. The result, in any case, is that they installed Iran in power in Iraq, and they did so when American troops were still there. They installed Maliki as head of government, whereas he is the man who has significantly strengthened the links between the Iraqi state that was being rebuilt and Iran. When the United States evacuated Iraq in 2011, they left a country that was far more subject to Tehran than to Washington. And when, three years later, ISIS made its breakthrough in Iraq, the United States made conditional on their intervention the resignation of Maliki, the man they had themselves put in charge of the government. They got him replaced by Abadi, who plays the card of neutralism, but on the ground, whatever the current prime minister wants, the forces directly linked to Iran are as powerful as the official army, which is itself controlled by Iran. The leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards strolls through the region, visits the troops, gives instructions, as in conquered territory...

How do you analyse American policy, or perhaps American policies, in view of the chaos that seems to reign at the moment at the top of the American state? Is it more of a tailending/opportunist policy towards Saudi Arabia's intrigues, or are the Americans themselves engaged in a manoeuvre? Do they have a

coherent strategy today?

We have in fact never seen such cacophony in Washington. Even at the time of Watergate, there was no cacophony in foreign policy. Today, there is Trump, who would like to conduct a certain policy, and the establishment, the army, the Pentagon, who do not follow him on many things. To give just one example, Trump had promised Erdogan to stop supporting Kurdish forces in Syria, and the Pentagon said exactly the opposite a month later. Trump was betting on his rapprochement with Moscow, and wanted to develop a policy based on this rapprochement. He was counting on Russia to push Iran out of Syria, but it did not work. He saw many obstacles arising against his desire to come closer to Putin. On the other hand, there is the Pentagon which decided, from 2014-2015, to rely on the Syrian Kurds, on the People's Protection Units (YPG), and which is pleased to have made this choice: they are excellent fighters. Washington has pushed them to create a force including Arabs, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), so as to no longer appear as an exclusively Kurdish force. The SDF won the battle against ISIS on Syrian territory. We see all the complexity of this situation, where a certain campist "anti-imperialism" (which by the way is exclusively anti-American, and often even pro-Russian), as it has manifested itself on Syria or Libya, does not fit the situation. There are in fact cases, which are certainly exceptional, where the United States supports, as in Syria today, a progressive force in its fight against a reactionary enemy. The YPG are indisputably the most progressive force of the country in Syria, on the key issue of the condition of women in particular, in spite of all limits that they have and without sinking into the delirium of believing that the Paris Commune has been reinvented in the Syrian Kurdish regions. Now it turns out that these are the people the Pentagon has decided to support, which has caused turmoil in the minds of the campists, whom we have not seen demonstrating against the American intervention in Syria, since they could hardly condemn forces linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organization they had been

supporting for many years. It is obvious that the Kurdish forces cannot be blamed for having accepted the support of the United States, without which they would have been crushed by ISIS. The city of Kobane could not have been saved without American air support and the weapons parachuted by the United States to the Kurdish forces, to the annoyance of Ankara. But at the same time the Kurdish forces would be very wrong to rely too much on the United States, which sooner or later will let them down; that is inevitable. There is a kind of reciprocal way that they use each other at this point in time; only a fool would, in the name of "anti-imperialism", blame them for it, which would be tantamount to recommending suicide to them. But this is obviously not reliable support: Washington uses the YPG for the moment as a bulwark not only against ISIS, but also against Iran. The Pentagon knows that if it dropped the Kurds now, the Iranians would probably gain control of the area east of the Euphrates.

Do you think the "cold war" can get hot? The conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia are getting more heated, and what is perplexing is the complexity of the actors, the tensions, and therefore the risk of things getting out of hand.

The Saudis have had their fingers burnt: their expedition to Yemen has failed; all it has managed to produce is a gigantic humanitarian disaster. I do not really see the kingdom embarking on a military adventure against Iran, contrary to others, like Israel or the United States, especially with a Trump administration that is so fiercely anti-Iranian. From them, nothing can be excluded. Take, for example, the recent US bombing of Syrian troops that killed about a hundred people. This is a way of saying: do not approach the regions where we are present. The situation may escalate between Iranians and Americans. What blocks things is the presence of Russia, which would not wish to be dragged by Tehran and even less by the Syrian regime into a clash with the United States. But it is certainly an explosive situation.

Is there a connection between these warlike noises and the revolts of the 2011 Arab Spring? We can also add now the Iranian Spring, because although the demonstrations at the beginning of the year have quickly ended, they are still symptomatic. Is there a link between each other's foreign policy and the domestic problems they face?

Of course. There is already an objective link: these military adventures are costly, and Iran in particular, far more than the Saudis, faces serious economic problems, which are the product of sanctions and oil prices, on the one hand, but also of this policy of expansion that the government is now trying to finance on the backs of the population, by applying the recipes of the IMF. Indeed it is the IMF that has been called to the rescue to define a new economic policy in Iran. And it was its recipes that sparked the beginning of the popular uprising that we saw. One of the strong themes in this uprising was the rejection by part of the population of this regional expansion policy. People are well aware that the regime's adventures in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon cost them dearly and are being conducted at their expense. As for the Saudis, their economic problem is linked to the drop in oil prices, but it is a decline that they themselves deliberately triggered in 2014. The kingdom is, of course, much richer than Iran.

Mohamed Ben Salman, known as MBS, the new Saudi "strongman", is making the transition from the reign of an extended family, the size of a clan in the tribal sense, to the reign of a single restricted family, more in line with the monarchical tradition. In other words, and in a way, it is the passage from the participation in state property of a few thousand people, members of the offspring of the founder of the kingdom, to a dynasty founded on the offspring of King Salman, which is much smaller, and the passage from the transmission of the throne from brother to brother to a transmission from father to son. It is a palace revolution, in every sense of the formula. If MBS is shaking the coconut tree (he has arrested several members of the extended ruling family

in order to force them to return to the state some of the fortunes they have accumulated by exploiting their privileges), he is not at all doing so from moral rectitude, since he himself has done worse. What is allowed for some is no longer allowed to others, and it is also a convenient way to replenish the coffers of the state.

How could the situation degenerate? Even if both do not want a real frontal war... You also said something that may sound surprising: the Saudis are fearful and conservative. But seen from afar it is they who are sowing disorder today by abducting the Lebanese Prime Minister, blockading Qatar, intervening militarily in Yemen. However, you say "unlike Israel and Iran". Do you see Netanyahu's policy as adventurist?

Israeli policy has been adventurist for a long time, since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 in particular. The policy that Netanyahu conducts with his far-right cabinet is a policy teetering on the edge of the precipice, an extremist policy that only adds fuel to the fire. This policy has now found an ally in the person of Trump, as shown by his position on Jerusalem, which is a provocation. On the military side, including in view of the internal situation in Israel, it is unlikely that the country will embark on a major operation in the immediate future. But the frequency of articles in the Israeli press of articles on "the coming war", however, suggests something. There is in Israel a worry about Iran's progress in Syria. Iran is present on the Israeli-Lebanese border through Hezbollah, and it is now more and more so on the

border with Syria. This is indeed a problem for Israel and, sooner or later, the Israeli government will have to take the bull by the horns, unless the United States manages to get Iran out of Syria. For now, they rely on Russia: Netanyahu (a great friend of Putin) and Trump are in agreement about that. But whenever there are Iranian manoeuvres that they consider to be potentially dangerous for them, the Israeli military conducts air strikes. And this is necessarily with the agreement of the Russians, since they have installed a powerful anti-aircraft system in Syria, which spares the Israeli air force. For the moment, the Israeli generals are marking their territory, they are drawing red lines. But everything will depend on what will happen with the Iranian presence in Syria in the coming period. In any case all parties are on the alert in this highly explosive region.

Hindu authoritarianism and agrarian distress

26 February 2018, by Achin Vanaik

Far right political forces have burgeoned throughout the world, but only in India does a far right party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), hold governmental power on its own. Nor anywhere else is there a far-right force, with obvious fascist characteristics, that has existed now for over 90 years.

The BJP is the electoral wing of the group called the Sangh Parivar, with well over a hundred affiliates, including cultural, religious, student, women and federated trade union fronts, whose original parent body is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The Sangh is fully committed to the project of establishing a Hindu state/nation as the 'true' embodiment of nationalism. The scale and depth of its implantation in the pores of civil society is unmatched. Across India, the RSS has over 56,000 branches and an estimated

membership between five to six million.

The rise of globalized neoliberalism: national histories and specificities

How this came to pass certainly involves global developments, such as the rise and spread of a neoliberalism that has had devastating economic consequences, as well as creating new and more powerful forms of social disorientation and alienation.

In such circumstances, people seek psychological refuge in clinging to 'unchangeable' ascribed identities of ethnicity, religion, race, caste and nation, either separately or in combination. Exclusivist and authoritarian populist nationalisms take hold.

However, the effect of neoliberal globalization is always mediated by national histories and specificities. In India, this has resulted in the rise of the Sangh and its expanding ideology

of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism with its foundational hatred of Islam and Muslims, who constitute 14% of the country's population.

Today the BJP has replaced the Congress party (now in serious decline) as the only national party in electoral terms, while in the competitive struggle to establish hegemony, compared to all other forces, Hindutva is in the lead although still well short of its ultimate goal.

Given this reality, the struggle to defeat communalism must necessarily fight on all fronts - cultural, political, ideological and economic. And it is the economic front, especially in the agrarian sector, which is currently the Sangh's weak spot.

Agrarian crises and distress

Agriculture contributes only 14% of GDP and only 40% of all rural output with micro-, small, and medium

enterprises of all sorts (services, manufacturing, construction) counting for the rest. But even here output growth far outstrips employment growth.

Two-thirds of the total population is from rural India with one-quarter being landless. Here there is a strong overlap between lower classes and lower castes: for example, a near majority of Dalits are landless but a majority of landless are not Dalits. This situation calls out for cross-caste/class alliances. Yet the main Dalit organisations and parties focus on affirmative action and identity politics. Only very recently has a young lawyer and Dalit leader, Jignesh Mevani, emerged, who is insisting on going beyond identity politics, demanding not just land redistribution but jobs for all the poor. This pleases neither upper caste farmers nor urban dwellers, while disturbing existing Dalit leaders.

Around 80% of all the landholdings of Indian farmers are small or marginal. Even the 20% of rich and medium-sized farmers feel disempowered, although they dominate rural politics, providing leadership for many, though not all, rural struggles, such as low caste mobilizations against upper caste atrocities and discrimination.

Over two-and-a-half decades Indian agriculture has suffered a serious decline. The key trends are rising costs of inputs despite some subsidies, growing indebtedness (52% of all farmers are in debt), increasing subdivision of land, declining output prices from global competition and greater corporatization of value chains between farm and retail.

Agriculture growth is not only insufficient, it is also jobless, while land acquisition for defence, infrastructure projects, real estate and industrial corridors has created uprisings against the government's pro-urban bias.

Agrarian mobilizations

Agrarian mobilizations have been against land acquisition, for jobs/support prices/debt relief and amenities. In the last 25 years around 300,000 farmers committed suicide

with around 270,000 doing so in the last 15 years.

Apart from the struggles against caste oppression most others have been led by the rich peasantry whose distress has led many to look for exit in due course and certainly for their progeny. According to the 2017 Annual Status of Education Report only 1.2% of youth from whatever backgrounds are willing to work in agriculture. It is no surprise, then, that such upper caste farmers' movements are now demanding reserved places for themselves in secure government jobs.

A big contrast to the 1990s when reservation was extended to the middle castes (around 50% of the population and also called Other Backward Classes or OBCs) as well as to Dalits (15%) and Tribals (8%), provoking an angry upper caste reaction.

Does this mean that the hegemonic ambitions of Hindutva forces and their anti-democratic project are being seriously challenged by such agrarian discontent?

Things are not so straightforward. The agrarian bourgeoisie comes mainly from the upper non-Brahmin castes and from the upper echelons of the OBCs. Most are not opposed to Hindutva ideology; indeed the main social base for the Sangh is from these castes. Indeed, recently there has been a substantial Hindutva-isation of OBCs, as well as some in-roads into Dalits and Tribals.

The promise of cultural upward mobility as a result of joining the broader Hindu fold has served as a psychological balm of sorts. But this rural bourgeoisie feels it has lost out at the apex of society to its urban industrial, service sector and financial counterparts.

Challenges ahead

What lessons can be drawn? A major focus of the struggle against rising Hindu authoritarian populism must be opposition to neoliberal economic policies. Yet all but the Left parties are wedded to a neoliberal position.

A new programme must be worked out for environmentally sustainable

development to meet employment, health and welfare needs for the vast majority. The Left and other progressive forces must also link the struggles of lower castes, women, tribals in all their variety, to the class struggles of all the working poor, perhaps especially in rural areas.

To defeat populist-nationalist forms of communal authoritarianism we have to fight against more than just communalism!

To defeat populist-nationalist forms of communal authoritarianism in India, we have to fight against more than just communalism.

This is the second article in a series on 'confronting authoritarian populism and the rural world', linked to the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) here at the TNI.

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Given this reality, the struggle to defeat communalism must necessarily fight on all fronts - cultural, political, ideological and economic. And it is the economic front, especially in the agrarian sector, which is currently the Sangh's weak spot.

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A new programme must be worked out for environmentally sustainable development to meet employment, health and welfare needs for the vast majority. The Left and other progressive forces must also link the struggles of lower castes, women, tribals in all their variety, to the class struggles of all the working poor, perhaps especially in rural areas.

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The New Poor People's Campaign

24 February 2018, by **Malik Miah**

King would be assassinated April 4, 1968, while organizing support to striking African-American sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. (For an extensive discussion of Martin Luther King's trajectory on the road "to the promised land," see the interview with author Michael Honey elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*.)

He went to Memphis even as many civil rights leaders were dubious about King's decision to turn the movement to broader social issues — the Vietnam War, working-class battles for dignity and economic advancement, and human rights campaigns like the planned Poor people's camp in Washington, D.C.

King's push for a nonviolent "true revolution of values" centered under the banner of human rights at home and abroad. It reflected his evolution and radicalization. He recognized the validity of the call made years earlier by Malcolm X (assassinated in 1965) to internationalize the fight for Black Freedom.

King's view on human rights and the poor went beyond working-class Blacks who were his primary focus. He spoke of class issues that appealed to white workers. His famous April 4, 1967 speech at Riverside Church in New York City on the Vietnam War was not supported by most traditional civil rights leaders.

King showed his willingness to go outside the narrowly defined civil rights box. Many of his closest aides even in the SCLC saw this shift as a mistake; President Johnson had signed the civil rights legislation, many believed, so why rock that relationship?

King's March in the North

King had already pushed for taking the freedom fight from the South to the North as he did with his 1966 open housing march in southwest Chicago. When King arrived at Marquette Park he was met by a white racist mob as vicious as he'd seen in Selma and other southern cities.

King understood that real equality was not possible with important but limited legal rights. He frequently made the point that legal equality was like running a race 50 yards behind white runners. Positive steps, he argued, had to be taken by the government to level the playing field.

After King's murder most of the traditional leaders turned to opportunities in the Democratic Party. Many became elected officials. Yet the economic plight of working-class Blacks changed only modestly. Racism did not decline in most urban centers like Detroit, Chicago and New York.

White supremacist backlash escalated, and most liberals were in retreat. Many were more focused on gaining support from backward racist white voters than the inequality facing African Americans. (Even today, this is seen among Democratic Party pundits who seek to water down demands in order to appeal to white working class Trump voters.)

Affirmative action programs and school desegregation laws came under attack. Even unionized Black workers in basic manufacturing in the 1970s had to challenge their own union leaders and the employers to get jobs in the skilled trades and as airline mechanics and pilots. As a result, court actions (consent decrees) were imposed on many companies and unions.

King saw the human rights revolution as a continuation of the civil rights revolution. He believed that the strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience was key to winning. The left wing of the movement contended that a more radical strategy was necessary to take on the state. The road to revolutionary change, however, had to begin with fundamental reforms.

The 2018 Poor People's Campaign

Why now? Since the election of the first African-American president in 2008 and his immediate replacement by a white nationalist president there has been a rapid rise of white nationalist policies.

Donald Trump won because anti-immigrant, anti-Black Lives Matter ideology convinced a majority of the white population that they would benefit with him as president. Whether or not they personally support his anti-immigrant or anti-Black policies, they still stand behind Trump.

The right wing had already taken over many state legislatures and made it harder to vote. Voter suppression is a key civil rights issue. The new Poor People's Campaign is a nonpartisan challenge to this narrow-minded white thinking.

It was initiated by the Reverend William J. Barber of North Carolina, who has led a campaign since 2013 against the far right in his state. Barber resigned as head of the state's NAACP in 2017 to run "The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival."

The campaign's objective is to train a massive network of grassroots activists to spark a multi-front

movement challenging what Barber calls four systemic “evils” in American society: poverty, racism, ecological devastation and the war economy.

The first actions occurred in January in D.C. and states across the country. As reported by Waging Nonviolence newsletter:

“The movement aims to draw in labor unions, farm workers, civil rights groups and marginalized communities from around the country, focusing each week on a specific issue of injustice. Each week will include specific policy demands and voter education programs at the state and federal levels, as well as training in nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience. By organizing through local and state chapters, the campaign will maintain a relatively decentralized structure guided by a set of core principles and targets.”

“What we face is not new,” Barber told a cheering crowd at a Raleigh, North Carolina, rally. “But when you get scared, remember the folks in power are scared too. They’re having nightmares!”

King’s Visionary Final Sermon

#MeToo for All Women

24 February 2018, by [Against the Current](#) Editors

There have always been women who demanded that society recognize that their bodies had been violated and the perpetrators held accountable. Yet their accounts were minimized and dismissed; they were vilified or threatened. That was true for Recy Taylor, who was kidnapped and raped by seven armed white men in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944. Disregarding attempts to silence her, the 24-year-old mother testified before two grand juries.

Martin Luther King’s final Sunday sermon in 1968 highlighted his nonviolent revolutionary vision:

“There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. In a sense it is a triple revolution; that is a technological revolution, with the impact of automation and cybernation; then there is a revolution of weaponry, with the emergence of atomic and nuclear weapons of warfare. Then there is a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion that is taking place all over the world. Yes, we do live in a period where changes are taking place and there is still the voice crying the vista of time saying, ‘Behold, I make all things new, former things are passed away.’”

“... Now whenever anything new comes into history it brings with it new challenges ... and new opportunities ... We are coming to Washington in a poor people’s campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses ... We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic non-violent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible.”

The campaign withered after King’s death. Its failure had much to do with the leadership’s turn to electoral politics. The traditional civil rights leaders saw the legal victories as a time to move forward.

There are now thousands of Black Elected Officials across the country. Yet for millions of African-American workers household income and wealth remains much less than those of other, particularly white workers.

Reverend Barber and a new generation of activists say that King’s vision is still valid and must be fought for. They recognize that electoral action is important, but as a strategy cannot change the system or protect human rights except as a product of a mass movement.

The 1964, 1965 and 1968 civil rights laws were passed by a Congress of primarily white men. Fear of rising social movements is why it happened. That’s the lesson of the 50 years since King’s assassination.

To achieve fundamental change in government requires a sustained street-based mass political and social struggle. The new Poor People’s Campaign can be an important contribution to that goal.

[Against the Current](#)

The 1975 case of Joanne Little, raped in her jail cell, who killed the guard in self-defense, or the 1991 testimony of Anita Hill against Clarence Thomas received some support, but elites refused to believe them. Today the whole world appears to be listening to the voices of women demanding an end to sexual harassment in its varied forms.

The #MeToo movement broke through the pattern of silence and cover up with vivid accounts of movie mogul

Harvey Weinstein's bullying, intimidation and rape. Then women agricultural workers stepped forward with their stories of the daily danger they faced in the fields. The floodgates opened with women workers testifying about their harassment in restaurants, factories, offices, hotels.

Since the term sexual harassment was coined by the women's movement in the late '70s, women workers have told their stories in speak outs, demanding that their workplace be made safe. Dependent on the customer for tips, waitresses have pointed out that often management urged them to dress suggestively in order to earn good tips. Janitors and hotel cleaners frequently working alone recounted how defenseless they were against managers and hotel guests. Immigration status, limited English, perceived sexual orientation or gender identity were other factors that put working women in more vulnerable situations. Often they testified that coworkers didn't support them.

Over the years several unions passed resolutions opposing sexual harassment, but few have carried out active campaigns to make it clear to both management and union members that sexual intimidation is against the law and will not be tolerated. Surely in these days, where everyone carries a cell phone, companies should provide immediate backup for women working alone.

Although it's relatively easy to file a grievance against management when a woman comes forward, it has proven more difficult when a male coworker or a union official is the harasser. Restaurant Opportunities Center-United, SEIU United Service Workers West, UE and UNITE HERE are unions that have pioneered membership training, held speakouts and even partnered with women's organizations against sexual assault. A few have developed a system of peer educators and encouraged coworkers (particularly men) to speak out when harassment first rears its ugly head. Clearly male and female workers need to reclaim their union as a space where discussions about equality lead to a deeper understanding of what solidarity means "across genders,

across race, across generations. [12]

The Nassar/MSU Scandal

The testimony of 250+ women who were inappropriately touched or assaulted by the celebrated Michigan State University and U.S.A. Gymnastic sports physician Larry Nassar revealed that girls as young as six were his prey. But it is a mistake to see him simply as a monster. Nassar was a calculating predator protected within a system that discounted his abuse and threatened women who reported him over a 20-year period.

At least 14 coaches, trainers and colleagues had been warned of Nassar's abuse. None reported him until three years ago, when a complaint reached the head of MSU's sports medicine clinic. An investigator then consulted with three doctors and a certified athletic trainer, all of whom backed Dr. Nassar's explanation that his methods were "appropriate." The charge was dismissed and women gymnasts warned against going to the media with "unsubstantiated claims."

In fact, the university hired a prestigious legal team to carry out an investigation, yet it never interviewed any women gymnasts. Former MSU president Lou Anna Simon portrayed the review as a "tireless effort." While the law firm billed MSU more than four million dollars, its aim seems to have been to shield the university from liability.

Women's Bodies Up for Grabs

Sexual harassment and abuse occur within a larger system that denies women autonomy. We see it in the way women are categorized as either "responsible" or "welfare cheats." We see it in unending rightwing attempts to make it difficult for U.S. women to have access to birth control, abortion and child care.

Over the last year, the Trump regime "supposedly opposed to "burdensome regulations" has

sought to regulate the lives and bodies of women. Days after Trump was sworn in he signed a global gag rule that cut \$8.8 billion in funding for international health assistance programs if they referred women for abortions when requested, or dared to lobby for abortion law reform.

Trump chose Mike Pence, a religious-right anti-abortionist, as his vice president and appointed Neil Gorsuch, known for his opposition to abortion, to the U.S. Supreme Court. Trump has appointed anti-abortion and anti-birth control people as officials in his administration, particularly in the Department of Health and Human Services. With more than a trillion-dollar operating budget and a staff of 80,000, HHS oversees programs including Medicare, Medicaid, the Food and Drug Administration, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Trump appointed E. Scott Lloyd, an anti-abortion lawyer with limited experience on refugee issues, head of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Lloyd personally flew to Texas attempting to pressure a refugee in an ORR shelter against seeking an abortion. He demanded that shelters receiving ORR grants not support abortion services "pre or post-release." Valerie Huber, an advocate of abstinence-only sex education programs, is now overseeing Title X, the only federal program devoted to family planning.

Trump has since rolled back the requirement that employers provide birth control without co-payments as part of their health care package. Last April he signed a law that allows states to block funds to Planned Parenthood and other clinics that might offer abortions along with contraception, pregnancy care, fertility and cancer screenings for low-income women.

A Larger System

Under capitalism the patriarchal system has evolved to empower even those who possess little except the fact that they are male. This pattern of "powerful" men (bosses, priests,

physicians, union officials, coworkers, even relatives) believing they can arrange situations where women must defer to them — often posing as mentors or friends — works well because even when girls/women report the molestation, they are told they must have “misunderstood” what actually happened.

Women who have been silenced, or who silence themselves, often face continued abuse. Their self-esteem plummets. Frequently accosted as a child, one ATC editor believed “whore” must be written on her forehead. This is why it is essential to break the silence and let those who have been taught to live in shame that there is no shame.

The power of the #MeToo movement is that it demands an end to the disappearance and presumed murder of indigenous women and those murdered along the southern border. It stands in solidarity with women in workplaces, on streets and those targeted within their homes.

Systems seek to protect their high-status members. We see that clearly in the cases of Hollywood, Michigan State University and the U.S.A. Gymnastics organization and in workplaces. It is particularly prevalent in closed systems — prisons, the military, the police, Church institutions, residential schools for indigenous children, special needs children/adults, nursing homes. The system cannot believe that their charming guy is really an abuser. And the consequences are too high, sometimes financially, but always in terms of the system’s reputation. Better to interpret the bullying and harassment as “only a joke.”

The #MeToo movement has uncovered how the system protects its own. That’s true whether it’s the staffer who accompanies the young actress to Harry Weinstein’s lair only to depart, the physicians and coaches who vouch for pelvic floor techniques that led to penetration, or the coworker who fails to notice the daily harassment.

Most of these situations involve men who molest or rape women, but the culture of violating another person’s autonomy also leads to predatory behavior involving boys or young men. The case of Jerry Sandusky, assistant to legendary head football coach Joe Paterno at Penn State University, is a prime example of a man who was able to sexually abuse boys for years. In 2012 Sandusky was convicted of 45 cases of child sexual abuse and is serving 30-60 years in prison. There is a direct parallel between so-called “lack of institutional control” — indifference to horrible abuse — at Penn State and Michigan State.

Indeed, since the #MeToo movement young male actors and fashion models have also come forward with charges against directors and photographers. Socialist feminists see the culture of the patriarchy at work here too. Just as women are denied their autonomy, young men are supposed to submit to powerful men.

But sexual harassment usually begins in a public space. This means that others are called upon to be co-conspirators. Just as in the case of racial harassment, an immediate response from a coworker can turn the situation around. The powerful

must be confronted, and the intended victim reaffirmed.

How to Resist?

On the first anniversary of the historic 2017 Women’s March, over 200 marches and vigils took place across the country and beyond. Many featured women candidates, and certainly more women in political office would be a good thing, especially in view of U.S. backwardness. And given the U.S. electoral system with its monopoly two-party system, it is not surprising that there was an overwhelming sense that voting for Democrats would be a step forward.

Many women and their allies, as they campaign and work for a variety of Democrats, progressive and otherwise, will find themselves trapped. Next to people like Trump, Pence and Ryan, these “lesser evils” look good, of course — but that doesn’t accomplish what needs to be done.

For socialists whose vision is a society of social equality and full individual dignity and freedom, our obligation to the #MeToo movement is to welcome its insights, and join in the discussion about unequal power relations and what they produce. Bullying, harassment and rape are acts of violence — they should never be confused with flirtation as some have claimed. The reality is that they are part of a system that needs to be entirely uprooted. Challenging the assumption that women are men’s property is a major step toward envisioning an egalitarian society.

[Against the Current](#)

Moroccan Catastrophic Convergence

23 February 2018, by Jawad Moustakbal

On October 28, 2016, in Al Hoceima — a city in northeastern Morocco — Mohsin Fikri lost his life after a state official threw his wares into a garbage

truck. When the desperate vendor climbed into the truck to reclaim his fish, “a local police officer ordered the garbage truck driver to start the

compactor and “grind him” according to activists and witnesses. The vendor was ground to death by the truck’s machinery.

The large protests that followed were reminiscent of the wave of mobilizations that Morocco witnessed in 2011, with the onset of the so-called Arab Spring. Activists in the streets denounced the hogra (arrogance and contempt of those in power) and expressed their sense of injustice.

The king offered cosmetic constitutional reforms. With this "concession" elites hoped the nominal Spring would pass, claiming a so-called Moroccan exception to the rule. This claim to stability was contradicted by major mobilizations following Fikri's death in more than 40 cities.

As scholar Gilbert Achcar has noted: "We were only at the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process that will go on for years and decades. As in every such historical process, there will be ups and downs, revolutions and counter-revolutions, upsurges and backlashes." [13]

The Catastrophic Convergence

Any follower of the general scene in Morocco is dazzled by the stark contradictions in a tale of two Moroccos. There is a Morocco of mega projects: Tanger-MedPort, highways, high-speed trains (on the Train À Grande Vitesse), luxurious cars, villas, palaces and tourist resorts with large pools and vast golf courses.

But the contrasts to this apparent luxury are many. One finds a Morocco that ranks among the lowest on the human development index (HDI), vacillating between 126 and 130 out of 188 countries during the last years, 15th in the Arab world and 4th in the Maghreb region behind Libya, Algeria and Tunisia. One finds a Morocco in which one third of the people suffer from poverty and where the students spend only three or four years studying while the world average is around eight. Some women are forced to give birth shut out of hospitals while many others are deprived of basic health services.

With its adoption of the structural adjustment program in the early

1980s, Morocco relinquished its food sovereignty. Now vulnerable to price fluctuations in staple goods on global markets, it imports almost 50% of its wheat. People are also compelled to pay increasingly exorbitant electricity bills as Morocco has placed the fate of its energy in the hands of international and local private companies whose main interest is the insatiable accumulation of profits.

In his book *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, American author Christian Parenti elaborates on the concept of catastrophic convergence, which has devastated numerous regions worldwide. He means the catastrophic convergence of militarism, neoliberalism and climate change. The stark contradictions and injustice of today's Morocco, as with many countries in the region, reveal interwoven factors.

Morocco's three convergences constitute political despotism (the takeover by the elite around the king of almost all political and economic decisions), economic neoliberalism (neo-colonialism in tandem with privatization and export-oriented development), and the impacts of climate change (especially "extreme events" such as droughts and floods).

I. The Crushing Machine of Political Despotism

During the second half of the '90s, with the preparation of the transition of power to the new King Mohammed VI, Morocco witnessed a slight improvement in political freedoms. The main factor that contributed to achieving those gains is the perseverance and sacrifice of generations of tireless Moroccan citizens and activists. Since the 1960s, they fought tooth and nail against the machinery of repression and intimidation imposed by the dictatorship of Hassan II, Mohammed VI's father.

But the relative improvement could

not hide the persistent forms of political despotism, baptized "the new concept of authority." [14] Moreover, certain practices of the old era continued, such as kidnappings, investigations under torture and unjust charges, especially after the terrible suicide terrorist attacks in Casablanca on May 16, 2003.

In December 2010 in Tunisia, Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself, protesting the loss of his livelihood after police confiscated his produce because he had neither a permit nor the money to bribe them. His death sparked extraordinary uprisings in Tunisia, quickly spreading throughout North Africa.

This historic moment forced the authoritarian regime in Morocco to make tactical concessions in order to neutralize popular anger. The success of this approach manifested itself in the weakening and then the apparent demise of the February 20th Movement "à" as the Arab Spring was known in Morocco.

Many activists faced a state backlash including false accusations, groundless sentences, imprisonment, as well as being fired from their jobs. For instance Moad, a young rapper, also known as El-Haqed ("The Enraged"), considered the voice of the February 20th movement, has been arrested and jailed many times since 2012.

It is noteworthy that the backlash faced by the men and women protesting the regime is merely a small fraction of a wider backlash against the citizens following the demise of the February 20th Movement. The machinery of political despotism resumed suppressing all forms of protests organized by diverse segments of society to express their dismay and demand their rights. These included trainee teachers, medical students and Maghreb Steel's workers.

Renters' struggles to defend their right to decent housing against the greed of real estate developers (egregiously, Guich L'Oudaya and Ouled Sbita) were suppressed, and "illegal" houses, ignored by officials when they were constructed in poor

neighborhoods, were demolished.

The dramatic death of Mohsin Fikri at the hands of a corrupt and oppressive system is proof that the machinery of political despotism remains, along with the task of uprooting it. Yet ongoing protests in the Northern cities also show that the spirit of Abdelkrim Khattabi, a leader in the Rif region where Fikri was killed and an important anti-colonialist, still haunts Morocco's rulers as a symbol of struggle against all forms of colonialism and dependence.

II. The Crushing Machine of Economic Liberalism and Privatization

With the despotic and nepotist leadership imposed since the fake independence of 1956, the liberal economic choices have been further narrowed as the structural adjustment program was implemented in the early 1980s. Since the privatization law in 1989 and the establishment of the Ministry of Economy and Privatization, the main decisions are dictated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

These include abandonment of public services (especially education and health), privatization of public facilities and institutions, an export-oriented economy (particularly agriculture), the opening of the Moroccan market to foreign products, and the decrease (or cancellation) of all subsidies to basic products (such as petrol, wheat, sugar, oil). These economic trends were deepened by ostensibly "free" trade agreements signed in the mid '90s.

In the 35 years following the diligent implementation of these neoliberal recipes, one can assert that they failed miserably even in their nominal goals, chief among them the control of the macroeconomic indexes and achievement of high economic growth rates. On the contrary, these trends had a catastrophic social impact, exacerbated our economic

dependency and dealt a blow to what was left of our national sovereignty.

The fuels sector is a stark example. The closure and bankruptcy of the only refinery in Morocco, La Samir, and the displacement of its workers and their families was a devastating loss. Meanwhile, those who benefited from its privatization transferred their profits abroad, incurring a loss to the state of almost US\$5 billion.

Liberalization of oil prices, which was recently adopted in compliance with IMF dictates, allowed the fuels lobby to impose constant price increases despite a general decrease of oil prices in the global market.

It is noteworthy that the fuel prices' liberalization and the closure of La Samir Refinery allowed fuel companies, including Afrikaia, owned by Aziz Akhannouch, the "long-standing" minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, to amass profits.

Akhannouch is the CEO of Akwa Group, a Moroccan conglomerate particularly active in the oil and gas sector. As of November 2013 Forbes estimated his net worth at \$1.4 billion. By 2016, he was ranked in the 28th position on Forbes's annual list of the world's wealthiest Arabs.

Akhannouch played a central role in the five-month deadlock around forming a new government in late 2016 and early 2017. Ongoing demonstrations denounce him for his alleged responsibility for the death of Mohsin Fikri; protesters call for his dismissal.

Morocco's ruling classes directly benefit from adopting neoliberal policies via the economic liberalization of public sectors and the privatization of state-owned companies in agro-industry (Cosumar and Régie des Tabacs), telecommunication and steel production. Through these privatizations, they have continued or even amplified the process of accumulation by dispossession initiated by colonizers before the fictitious independence. The majority of influential rich families in Morocco have benefited from the giveaway of profitable state companies and cost-effective public sectors.

Diana Davis of the Department of Geography and the Environment at the University of Texas explains that

"...neoliberalism has been enthusiastically, if selectively, embraced by the Moroccan monarchy and much of the business elite in contrast to the opposition it has encountered elsewhere.

"This is due, in part, to the fact that the royal family and its patrons have benefited enormously from certain aspects of neoliberal restructuring such as privatization. It is also due to some of the effects of neoliberalism that reinforce the government's political goals. It has recently been argued, for example, that many neoliberal reforms have acted to depoliticize the public sphere in Morocco and thereby delayed the democratic reform of an authoritarian regime." [15]

The rulers in Morocco have consistently pursued easy and lazy solutions by borrowing to service the financial debt caused by their misguided choices. Today, the public debt has reached record-high levels of almost US\$100 billion.

The Moroccan debt policy remains catastrophic, not only for using over one-third of the state budget to pay for debt services, but also for maintaining dependency through the conditions attached to loans.

Additionally, the lenders impose their preferences and projects with the collusion of the ruling elites. The French high-speed train project, the TGV between Casablanca and Tangier is a "good" example. The initial studies of the project were carried out by a French consultancy firm and sponsored by the French Development Agency (AFD) along with French and Gulf banks. French companies (Alstom and Railway) are the biggest beneficiaries of the project.

The majority of the Moroccan people, particularly the impoverished "most of whom have never set foot in any train, much less a high-speed one" will find themselves obliged to pay related debt service (including interest) at the expense of services they need, such as health and

education.

III. The Crushing Machine of Climate Change

Morocco is an example of climate injustice that characterizes the world nowadays. Morocco is one of the least polluting countries worldwide (less than 1.75 tons of CO₂ per capita/year in 2013). Its responsibility for global climate change is insignificant.

Nevertheless, Morocco is simultaneously among the countries most affected by, and least prepared to cope with, the impact of climate change. The state's retreat from the public sector and the shrinking of its resources due to the devastations of economic liberalism and privatization make the state unable to intervene to reduce repercussions of those terrible changes, notably extreme events such as floods and drought.

Anthropogenic climate change and its dire impacts on Morocco's vital sectors especially agriculture are undeniable.

Increases in temperatures and lowering levels of rainfall as well as the recurring droughts (1980, 1985, 1991, 2006, 2015, 2016) and floods (Casablanca in 2010, Guelmim and Tiznit in 2014, Taroudant 2016, among others) are the main manifestations of climate disruptions in Morocco. The last World Bank report predicts future and more intense catastrophic impacts in our region if the highest-polluting countries do not drastically reduce their emissions. [16]

Although the elites acknowledge these changes, their economic choices and structural projects are in stark contradiction to the necessity of addressing and coping with climate change. On the contrary, they are exacerbating them by compounding the pressure on natural resources. Here are just two examples.

The Azur Plan for tourism, in which the choice of sites on coastlines is problematic given the rise of sea levels and rising sea levels, presents a

deep contrast between the lush swimming pools and golf courses on one hand and the dwindling water resources on the other (one-third decrease since the '60s). In fact the prediction is that Morocco will face absolute water scarcity by 2025 (less than 500 m³/year/capita).

The Green Morocco Plan argues the necessity to promote "high added-value" agricultural products in the global market. Yet the majority of these products (citrus, vegetables and fruits) are the most water consuming.

These three factors (political despotism, economic liberalism and climate change) overlap and converge, deepening and speeding up each other's negative effects.

The Elites' "Environmentalism"

With the United Nations Climate Change Conference, converging with the Conference of the Parties (COP22) in Morocco, the ruling elites held the green banner and green-washed their companies, luxurious cars and speeches in order to win their guests' respect. They imposed decisions that claim to be environmental, but in fact only reflected an elite environmentalism in total opposition to the interests of the poor majority.

These decisions have deepened the conviction of this crushed majority that the laws are enforced against them, only exacerbating their suffering and humiliation. The most pertinent example is the zero-plastic bag campaign, which in fact targets plastic bags used by the poor while all forms of "first-class" plastic linked to big corporations' business were not banned.

This environmentalism is top-down, one which deems that the non-educated majority is responsible for ecological issues because they throw garbage in the streets and fail to maintain the beauty of public spaces. They perceive the ecological crisis as new opportunities for enrichment and accumulation of additional profit.

For that reason, they focus mainly on energy production projects owing to their high profitability via public-private partnerships (PPPs). This is a euphemism for privatizing profits and nationalizing losses, with citizens shouldering the responsibility of directly financing projects of energy production through hikes in electricity bills, or indirectly, through draining the state's finances.

On the contrary, private companies, including theirs and the ones of their French, Spanish, Emirati, and Saudi "partners," benefit from advantages and preferential terms stated in tailor-made contracts.

The Elites' "Nationalism"

The ruling elites do not hesitate whenever the opportunity arises to flaunt their nationalism. They do not hesitate to use it as a pretext against anyone who exposes their oppression and exploitation by in turn accusing them of being traitors to the nation and serving a foreign agenda.

They vaunt their patriotism even if they deposit most of their money abroad in Swiss, French and U.S. banks and other tax havens as it has been revealed recently by the Panama Papers. [17] They vaunt their patriotism while owning property and secondary residences in Europe and USA.

Furthermore, some of them consider their house abroad as primary while the Moroccan residence is considered as secondary, to be kept so long as it allows them to accumulate profits. They do not hesitate to show their second Western passports in order to escape from the bureaucratic, racist and degrading rules imposed by "rich" countries on Moroccans to get a visa.

Their nationalism is superficial and sporadic, embodied, for example, in busing poor people to the capital for marches. Their nationalism is in alliance with colonizers, old and new, in their mission to "re-conquer" Africa by appropriating its resources and controlling vital sectors such banks and energy, exactly as they did with

our resources and vital sectors in the name of “Moroccanization.”

Path of Hope: This Changes Everything

In her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Naomi Klein argued that the current catastrophic environmental crisis due to the globalized capitalist model of production, distribution and consumption is an opportunity to change everything. In fact, thanks to its catastrophic characteristic that even threatens life on Earth as we know it, this ecological crisis is a historic opportunity for emancipation and disposal of all forms of injustice and social disparities.

I adopt this motivational and hopeful view for Morocco. I believe that the catastrophic socio-economic as well as

ecological situation, due to the three grinding machines of political despotism, economic liberalism and privatization, and climate change, could be a historic opportunity to change everything.

Radical change nowadays is not an option but a necessity owed to the majority of our people as well as to future generations. Any serious alternative societal project in Morocco cannot fail to consider those three crushing machines, nor their catastrophic and compound convergence.

Our alternative must start from our own culture and traditions and become reconciled with our identity. We must break with copy/paste solutions, conceived elsewhere and parachuted absurdly into our reality.

We have to break with the myth of modernity and the Orientalist view of development’s possibilities of our country. Our hopes and goals have to

go beyond the development model adopted in France or the USA, if for no other reason than it is impossible ecologically to globalize this model.

We have to overstep our old and new colonizers so that “those lagging behind will become those at the fore,” as expressed by Frantz Fanon. We have to establish at the core of our alternative the complete sovereignty of local communities over their resources, including land, water, sun and minerals, which they could democratically manage for the common good.

All in all, the catastrophic convergence has to push us to urgently build a Morocco in which people have sovereignty over their resources and institutions. The latter have to be managed by the people to respond to the essential needs of the majority for food, education and health, in a way that respects ecosystems and their restorative capabilities.

At the Interstices of Race, Class and Imperialism: A. Sivanandan (1923-2018)

22 February 2018, by B. Skanthakumar

What animated him, in contrast to liberal-left academics and media commentators of colour fixated by issues of representation and privilege, was the question: “... what is it in the black and Third World experience, in the experience of the oppressed and exploited, that gives one the imagination to see other oppressions and the will to fight for a better society for all, a more equal, just, free society, a socialist society?” [18] 1

Sivanandan – probably in the spirit of an exasperated Karl Marx [19] who against some of his followers once protested “[if they are Marxists], then I am not” – spurned that identification. He believed Marxism to be hidebound by its European origin and ossified by its adherents into a secular dogma or

faith: more hindrance than help, in seeing and acting upon, a constantly revolutionising capitalism. Still he recorded his debt to Marx, through whom he found “... a way of analysing my own society, a way of resolving my own social contradictions, a way of understanding how conflict itself was the motor of one’s personal life as well as the combusting force of the society in which one lived.” [20]

Initially he appeared attentive to the radicalism of the women’s liberation movement, noting in 1973 its potential for the clarification of issues of working class and black struggle in “The Colony of the Colonised: Notes on Race, Class and Sex.” [21] However, he was distanced from feminism, thinking it to be captured by

middle-class women for the extension of their own rights, rather than for social change for those women and men whose freedoms are most trammelled.

Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles

Perhaps his most widely-read work is *From resistance to rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean struggles in Britain*, [22] where he chronicled the self-activity and self-organisation of immigrants from the ex-colonies, against injustice and for dignity and equality, reconstructing their history.

Despite references to black women's organising, he was less successful in integrating their specific experiences in his narratives.

His investigations of the political-economy of racism - the racism that kills, more than the racism that discriminates - informed a generation of social workers, school-teachers, university students and lecturers, and campaigners for self-defence of black communities. Subsequently, he made connections between the new scapegoats of state, popular and 'Fortress Europe' racism - refugees and asylum-seekers, working-class Eastern Europeans and Muslims - and imperialism; as he had between their predecessors and colonialism. "[I]t is your economics that creates our politics that make us refugees in your economies," he retorted to the votaries of immigration control and purveyors of xenophobia [23] or 'xeno-racism' in his coinage.

His early writing on "Black Power: The Politics of Existence" (Politics and Society, 1971) and "The Liberation of the Black Intellectual" (Race & Class, 1974) [24] - the former, sympathetically interrogating an insurrectionary movement in the United States; and the latter, challenging its intellectuals to find through their consciousness of colour, the consciousness of class - was retrieved from the archives by African-American scholars in the 1990s. They were seeking to illuminate the limitations of a cultural nationalism of the oppressed ('Afro-centrism') indifferent to capitalism, in its production of oppression, and to the reproduction of relations of exploitation and inequality, principally gender and class, among the oppressed.

At the onset of what would become known as 'globalisation', Sivanandan intervened in debates on the latest stage in the development of capitalism. In "Imperialism and Disorganic Development in the Silicon Age," [25] he identified three features: a new international division of labour and production where capital (from rich industrialised countries) moved to labour (in poor industrialising ones); the movement of labour (internal and transnational migration) within the

periphery (to export processing zones at home and petrocarbon producers abroad); and a new industrial revolution based on micro-electronics. However, where its promoters predicted that parts (at least) of the Third World were on track to the terminus of western capitalism and liberal government; he saw them shunted to 'disorganic development': capitalism sans capitalist culture or capitalist democracy.

A decade later, globalisation's progress was tracked in "New Circuits of Imperialism." [26] In the advanced capitalist world, deindustrialisation and automation had ravaged working class communities and enervated trade unions. Capital, he controversially pronounced, had freed itself of labour. In the dependent capitalist world where manufacturing had relocated, and where some Latin American and Southeast Asian countries were newly-industrialising, economic growth had not removed the mass of people from poverty, hunger and hopelessness. Humanity possessed the technological means to increase productivity with less labour, to distribute work more equitably, to increase time for creative leisure, and to provide a basic income to all. However, this won't and can't happen under capitalism, he insisted.

Already Sivanandan was taking issue with others, including his Jamaican-born friend and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who shared his view that capitalism was in the throes of an epochal shift, but who drew political conclusions diametrically opposed to his. In "All that melts into air is solid: the hokum of New Times," [27] he pilloried erstwhile Communists and their fellow-travellers, who - in their disappointment in the labour movement; befuddlement at the rise of Thatcherism (that is, neoliberalism with British characteristics); and in the zeitgeist of postmodernism - had taken flight from class politics.

Many Marxists made common cause with his intransigent defence of the socialist project; but resisted as did Ellen Meiksins Wood, [28] the assumption that globalisation is the inevitable or natural consequence of technological change rather than a

political, and therefore reversible, strategy of capital.

British Ceylon

Born on 20 December 1923 in British Ceylon's capital on the verdant multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious south-west littoral, his father - who had escaped the privations of peasant farming, through the route of English education, to join the colonial government service as a postal clerk - was from the Tamil Hindu village of Sandilipay in the parched northern peninsula of Jaffna. From Sivanandan's own induction into the premier Catholic boys school of St. Joseph's in Colombo, he was to acquire two abiding traits: his adoration of English poetry and his disavowal of religious belief.

Though aligned with the Left from his youth - formative influences at the University of Ceylon, where he read economics and political science, were the academics and visiting leaders of the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party - ahead of him may well have been the unexceptional petit-bourgeois life of the banker he became or barrister he aspired to be; except he was a disputatious Tamil in post-colonial Ceylon (renamed Sri Lanka in 1972) where Sinhala Buddhist nationalism was waxing.

The anti-Tamil riots of May 1958 [29] brought the first part of his life to a close. Disgusted by the savagery in which he was caught up, amid the collusion of the state and its discriminatory treatment of the Tamil minority, Sivanandan - to be followed by his Sinhala Catholic wife (their inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriage was opposed by their families) and their three children - emigrated to England, initially living in West London.

As he vividly recalled, he had walked out of one riot, only to walk into another. In late August and early September of 1958, the Notting Hill riots [30] broke out, where racial clashes were preceded by fascist assaults on men of Caribbean-origin, to the disinterest of local police.

Black in Britain

Unprepared for, and battered by, the racism swirling around him, he said: "I knew then I was black." [31] To be black, he explained, was not to do with the colour of one's skin, but the colour of one's politics or the colour of one's fight. It was an affirmation of the consciousness of racism and colonialism that bound immigrants from across the British empire and forged them into a new working class in a declining imperialism. And in its articulation, it owed not a little to the black power movement on the other side of the Atlantic, and to revolutionary nationalism in the colonised world. While he never gave up on affirming his blackness, the communities of the oppressed unglued themselves, before fragmenting into ever-more sectarian and inward-looking identities.

There was no going back to the middle-class status and life he had experienced in Sri Lanka. The colour bar operated in Britain not to deny work to black people but "instead to deskill them, to keep their wages down and to segregate them in the dirty, ill-paid jobs that white workers did not want." [32] In his mid-thirties, the ex-banker was now serving tea at Kingsbury public library. He turned adversity into opportunity by using his location to read, think and self-educate. He enrolled for evening classes to study librarianship; eventually becoming one in his place of work. None of this came easy, nor without cost. His marriage frayed and finally wore out; and he was now the sole carer for Tamara, Natasha and Rohan.

Institute of Race Relations

By 1964, he joined the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) as librarian (via the Colonial Office!), and was politically active in the mobilisations, self-help groups and self-organising of black people including the Black Unity and Freedom Party. His public writing begins from this time, peaking between the 1970s and 1990s. An outpost of the Royal Institute of

International Affairs, the IRR was funded by multinationals and run by white pro-establishment figures. It studied race and its management as an academic field and did nothing to combat racism.

Sivanandan and some others chafed at its unwillingness to engage with what "black people were undergoing [in Britain] in terms of racism and in the Third World in terms of colonialism and imperialism." [33] In 1972, they took control of its board, with Sivanandan at the helm as the IRR's new director, but bereft of other resources but the library, two other staff including Jenny Bourne whom he later married, and loyal volunteers.

Deploying their networks and allies, they began turning the IRR into a "think-in-order-to-do-tank, for black and Third World peoples." [34] At the core of its philosophy was that "the function of knowledge is to liberate...to apprehend reality in order to change it." [35] Its mission he constantly reminded himself and others is "... to ensure that that the people we are writing for are the people we are fighting for." [36]

Race & Class

Connecting racism with imperialism, and imperialism with capitalism, and capitalism with racism - mindful of the relationship between oppression and exploitation, within black communities, and in the former colonies - the IRR's flagship publication was renamed *Race & Class*, [37] proclaiming its purpose in its masthead as "A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation."

As its founder-editor, Sivanandan published Iqbal Ahmad, John Berger, Malcolm Caldwell, Angela Davis, Basil Davidson, Orlando Letelier, Cedric Robinson, Walter Rodney and Edward Said among others; and later Aijaz Ahmad, Jenny Bourne, Victoria Brittain, Liz Fekete, Barbara Harlow and Manning Marable, in its pages.

Among highlights for readers were his piercing book reviews and pungent obituaries of heroes and villains: African-American auto-worker and revolutionary organiser James Boggs

among the former and Enoch Powell, the Urdu-speaking English and Unionist politician and racist tribune, of course the latter.

However, he is best known for excoriating but always stylish essays in *Race & Class*, exhibiting his sharp intellect, unflinching commitment and lyrical prose. He was, in his own words, a pamphleteer: "writing for that time, for the struggle, not for all of time." [38] His long-form work focussed on the politics of black liberation in Britain and the USA; imperialism and capitalism in the core and the periphery; and the mutations of racism in Britain and Europe.

These are collected in *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (Pluto, London 1982) and *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism* (Verso, London 1990). Selections from both books, as well as newer writing, have been published as *Catching History On the Wing: Race, Culture and Globalisation* (Pluto, London 2008). The subtitles of these three volumes are revealing in themselves as a sign of the changing times which shaped their content. [39]

When Memory Dies

In his country of birth, Sivanandan is recognised, if at all, by his fiction. *When Memory Dies* (Arcadia, London 1997) was published when he was 73 years of age. [40] It was followed three years later by a collection of short stories (some previously published in literary magazines in Sri Lanka) gathered together as *Where The Dance Is* (Arcadia, London 2000). A second novel was underway in his late eighties but held up by annoyances of age and health.

An epic work of historical literature sweeping across 20th century Sri Lanka, the novel was composed he said, because "... there was a hollow in me, where my country was, and I had to fill it with its story." [41] Its detail draws on Sivanandan's youthful recollections of Colombo and Jaffna, and of the Kandyan highlands where he briefly taught in rural schools.

Awarded a Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Sagittarius Prize, both in 1998, it was written over two decades. It has taken another two for a Sinhala-language translation to get underway, with none in sight in the Tamil language.

Interwoven in the tale of three generations of one family, is Sri Lanka's passage from the era of late colonialism with its plantation and mercantile capitalism through to the dependent capitalism of the post-colony. The book opens with the rise of the labour and left movement, tracks the unfulfilled promise of decolonisation; the wavering before, followed by capitulation to, ethnic chauvinism by the Left parties; the corrosion of inter-ethnic relations across classes, through casual and institutionalised racism and punctuated by pogroms; and the rise of Tamil armed opposition to 'state fascism', before closing with the self-destructive consequences of that militarism and the dream of liberation deferred.

Sri Lanka

Astonishingly, Sivanandan's non-fiction, though sporadically extracted in Tribune, Economic Review and Lanka Guardian, is undiscovered in Sri Lanka. This includes "Sri Lanka: racism and the politics of underdevelopment" [42]

: composed in the embers of the murder, arson and displacement of Tamils during the July 1983 riots; and as new fires were lit in a protracted internal war between the state and myriad Tamil militant groups: each succored by its respective nationality. A primer on the surfacing of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism through the alliance of colonialism and

underdevelopment and its maturation under market state authoritarianism, this commanding survey draws on the work of the historian Kumari Jayawardena and sociologist Newton Gunasinghe, while typically deepening and extending their insights.

Twenty-five years later, in a wide-ranging synopsis of the history and dynamics of the ethnic conflict, culminating in a devastating end to a devastating war, Sivanandan despairingly pronounced that "fifty years of ethnic cleansing have ... made cohabitation with the Sinhalese people virtually impossible." [43] He was reacting to the permissiveness, as he saw it, of international actors in the enormous loss of Tamil lives in the military endgame; the cruelty of the mass post-war internment of Tamil civilians, recently under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); and the frightful political and human rights environment for Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims alike, under accelerating militarisation, during the Rajapakse regime.

In 1984, when Tamil militant organisations still claimed some attachment to socialism, before the fratricidal killings within their movement, and when their repressive character was still not evident, Sivanandan idealised them in the tradition of the liberation movements in Portuguese Africa. They were "freedom-fighters" and the last line of defence for Tamils and Sinhalese alike, against the "mounting dictatorship" of J. R. Jayewardene's *dharmishta* ('righteous') rule. Even so he cautioned them: "Tamil liberation is the easier won through the weakening of the Sinhala state from within, socialism the surer achieved through struggles not narrowly nationalist." [44]

"Weaponry was in command, not politics. This was a critical weakness, and it created the conditions for the final defeat in 2009."

Subsequently he was more sober in his assessments, as evident from the conclusion to *When Memory Dies*. After the LTTE had been crushed in May 2009, he faulted it for its elimination of opponents and critics within Tamil political and civil society; ethnic cleansing of the ethno-religious Muslim minority from Tamil-majority areas; and alienation from the Tamil people. The "... political dimension of their struggle had been subordinated to an ad hoc militarism; the military tail had begun to wag the political dog ... Weaponry was in command, not politics. This was a critical weakness, and it created the conditions for the final defeat in 2009," he contended. [45]

Human Condition

Sivanandan once observed how "racism particularizes us, class and gender exploitation particularizes us - but in fighting those things we should not ourselves become particular and self-seeking ... To fight racism is not to become racist ourselves, to fight privilege is not to become privileged ourselves." [46] He was emphatic that "any struggles of the oppressed, be it blacks or women, which are only for themselves and then not for the least of them, the most deprived, the most exploited of them, are inevitably self-serving and narrow and unable to enlarge the human condition." [47] Anyone who aspires, as he did, to understand the world in order to change it, irrespective of origin, location and cause, must inevitably seize this standpoint.

February 8, 2018

Ursula K. Le Guin - Rest in Power

20 February 2018

Ursula K. Le Guin died at her home in Portland, OR on Monday, January 22. Many obituaries have appropriately celebrated and acknowledged Le Guin as a literary artist—fiction writer, poet, and essayist. She was also a committed and generous community activist, a fighter for feminism, peace, freedom of speech, access to knowledge for everyone, and radical democracy.

This biography of Le Guin was written in 2003 by a Portland State University Women's Studies student as part of the "Portland Women City-Builders" project.

Ursula K. Le Guin - Writer, Citizen

In March 2003, Ursula K. Le Guin, world-renowned writer and poet, stands on the streets of downtown Portland, quietly passing out peace literature with other members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. As war seems more and more inevitable, she is one person, standing with others; both the individual and the group helping to give voice by their presence to the possibility of peace.

Le Guin is a master in the exploration of possibilities both as a writer and as a citizen. As a writer, she has won international acclaim for her fiction and poems that challenge readers to think beyond the confines of their own lives and universes. In her essay, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1976/1987) she talks of her fiction as "thought-experiments" in which "The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind.....One of the essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-asking: reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination." (p. 9). She was the first writer to win both the Nebula and Hugo awards twice, once for *The Left Hand of Darkness* and the second time for *The Dispossessed*.

As a Portland resident and private citizen she articulates the possible through marching in rallies, both large

and small, attending public meetings and serving on local boards. In the process, she has given heart to fellow activists, created funding and forums for local writers, and has helped struggling bookstores stay afloat by donating her time for readings and book signings.

Le Guin was born in 1929 into an unusually intellectual and supportive household. Her mother, Theodora Kroeber was a writer. Her father, Alfred Louis Kroeber, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, was one of the founders of modern anthropology. She grew up in California, then attended Radcliffe College, graduating in 1951, and went on to get a masters degree at Columbia University. She met the historian Charles Le Guin while enroute to France on a Fulbright scholarship, and they married shortly afterward. The Le Guins have lived in Portland for more than four decades, raising their two daughters and a son.

Le Guin's literary legacy grew out of the many threads of her life, including her own developing consciousness of herself as a woman writer and of the need to develop new words and metaphor as a way of giving voice to women's experiences. She has a special interest in issues that affect women directly. She has, for instance, been an outspoken advocate for abortion rights. In 1982, during a keynote address at a conference of the Portland branch of the National Abortion Rights Action League, she told the story of her own abortion while she was a young undergraduate. That story, "The Princess," was later published in a book of essays, *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989) and in *Ms. Magazine* (July 1992)

Creating opportunities for women writers has been one of her key interests. She was the founding president of Soapstone, a retreat for women writers on the Oregon coast. Ruth Gundle, director of Soapstone, says that Le Guin was instrumental in the early years, helping to make crucial decisions and to shape the program. She continues to be a key financial supporter. All of the royalties from Le Guin's popular book for writers, *Steering the Craft, go to Soapstone*.

"She hasn't just lent her name to causes that are important to her," says Gundle. "She has actually joined in and done the work. She attends meetings and takes work home to do. At an all-day retreat, she would sit on the floor with everyone else and discuss whether to have flush toilets or composting toilets." Echoing Gundle, Johanna Brenner, co-founder of In Other Words, a non-profit feminist bookstore, says "There isn't anything that I've asked her to do [to help the bookstore] that she hasn't done."

Le Guin served on the Friends of the Library Board, editing their newsletter for some years, and was involved in Library affairs from the 1980's onward. She served on the Multnomah County Library Advisory Board from 1990 to 1999 and remained a member of the library's internet-access committee until it was dissolved.

During these years, the library was challenged first by organizational troubles with the private board that governed it, leading to its re-affiliation with the County, and then by funding problems so severe that it had to lay off staff and cut back on hours of operation. To raise money, the library might have been tempted to begin charging for library cards, to sell advertising space in the library or to use the reading choices of patrons as a basis for sales campaigns.

"She's been a really powerful voice for maintaining the integrity of the library system," says Penny Hummel, public relations manager for the library. "She has reminded people that a library should be free and open to all; that everyone should have a right to access information and that each individual's access to information should be private. She's world renowned, and when she stands up and says something people listen. We've been very, very lucky to have her participation."

Le Guin also was a member of the group that founded the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts, later renamed Oregon Literary Arts, and served on the board for many years. OLA presents the Oregon Book Awards and the Oregon Fellowship Awards. Carrie Hoops, former

executive director of Oregon Literary Arts, says that Le Guin was a pivotal person in the creation of both awards. "She was an outspoken and uncompromising advocate on the part of Oregon writers....She brought to light the struggles of the starting writer. She helped create an understanding that what writers need

is time. "Many states have awards for writers," says Hoops; "Oregon is one of the very few states that offer fellowships for writers."

Portland has a rich and varied literary life and has become known as a good place for writers to live and work. Le

Guin's thoughtful contributions have helped build the infrastructure of libraries, bookstores, funding, awards, comradeship and peace that give writers a firm perch for taking flight.

January 24, 2018

[Solidarity](#)

Declaration of OKDE - Spartakos on the Macedonian issue

19 February 2018, by OKDE-Spartakos

2. The Greek state "discovered" anew that there is a problem with the name of the Republic of Macedonia when it was established as an independent state, in the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The Mitsotakis government initially unleashed a "national crusade", creating an imaginary enemy, with a double goal: an upgrade of the role of Greece as a regional imperialist power and the building of national unity in the interior of the country. [48] Then he tried to find a compromise, in line with the will of the US and NATO but the situation was already beyond his control now. The nationalistic demonstrations for the name of Macedonia were unfortunately supported across the whole political spectrum, with a few honorable exceptions, while organizations and militants that were carrying out internationalist agitation ended up in court.

The willingness of the Greek government to play the role of the godfather to the newly founded state went hand in hand with the overwhelming invasion of the Greek capital which saw the opportunity for new markets and quickly gained the status of the protagonist in the economy of the Republic of Macedonia, like in other Balkan countries, even displacing competitors that were in theory larger. This intrusion came in a classic imperialist way (banks, telecommunications,

highways, energy etc.) and was a strategic choice by Greek capital in the following years, first with the plan of integrating them into the Greek economic sphere of influence and then with the help of "hard" Euro. Alongside the influence of Greek enterprises on Macedonia's economy, the boycott in the 90s brought an already weakened economy to its knees.

3. This propaganda about the danger from the north for "our Macedonia" is not a new one of course, but is constantly employed by the Greek state. Since the early 20th century and the "autonomists" trials, all Greek governments underline the supposed "irredentism which is created by the use of the name Macedonia alone. After the Second World War, anticommunism combined with anti-Slavism, as the new national narrative, that survives as the official position of the Greek ministry of Foreign Affairs, is that the People's, and later Socialist Republic of Macedonia, one of the 6 Federal Republics of Yugoslavia, was a creation of Tito, who wanted to annex Greek territory and above all else the port of Thessaloniki. What it is common for all Greek governments since the fall of dictatorship, even for the current government, is that they still use this racist and anticommunist line. However, the "Macedonian struggle" of the Greek state on the international level was only through propaganda and it only became

aggressive when the new state opened itself to the capitalist market.

4. On the inside front though, the Greek state applied concrete actions, initially with assimilation and Hellenization and later with open suppression of the Macedonian minority that lived and continues to live near the northern borders. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to abandon their native language, were denied their cultural and educational rights, while whole places and families were literally renamed en masse. This policy led to the shrinking of the minority, which is still invisible to the Greek state. All Greek governments are responsible for this crime committed against the Macedonians of Greece for over a century.

5. All Greek governments follow the very same policy on the name of Macedonia- as on all the so-called national matters - even flirting with military intervention (talks between Mitsotakis and "anti-imperialist" Milosevic about dividing the country between Greece and Yugoslavia in the early 90s). Today's government is no exception. It continues the same "national policy" based on the same "red lines" and mostly on the Karamanlis government's veto in Bucharest in 2008. Any differentiation comes exclusively from the right, via the far right, nationalistic voices of ANEL. The Syriza-Anel government

takes an anti-Macedonian stance and is trying to prove that a “left wing” government can lead the “national struggle”. It does this by adapting to far right and neo fascist voices, which cannot be tamed and even take to the streets as in Thessaloniki. On the other hand it is trying to convince the so called patriotic left that it can provide a solution to “national issues”, based on a popular narrative about “right-wing traitors” and “left-wing patriots”.

6. The most important alibi always called forth over the Macedonian issue, unfortunately even by the left are the nationalistic claims of the ethnic Macedonians that they descend from ancient Macedonians. Indeed the Gruevski government indeed used an extreme nationalistic rhetoric both internally and externally (project Skopje 2014, extreme suppression of the Albanian minority). But the new Zaev government does not provide this alibi anymore. In a framework of bourgeois modernization, the project Skopje 2014 was abandoned, the relations with the Albanian minority are being restored and even on the question of the name of the country they show signs of falling back as they eagerly seek entry to the EU and NATO. The most outstanding example is the election of an Albanian as president of the parliament for the first time since the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the recognition of the Albanian language as an official equal language of the state, which is of historic importance. Moreover, to focus exclusively on the geopolitics of the affair and to say that it is all due to

the conflict between the USA and EU against Russia hides the real problem. We must state again that both the fantasy of descent from Alexander the Great and the entrance to the EU and NATO are part of bourgeois policy, totally incompatible with the interests of the large majority of the peoples in the Republic of Macedonia.

However, the Macedonian issue is not an issue of two nationalisms that collide. The historical inaccuracies told by both sides are not the main aspect. The main aspect is the reactionary role of the Greek state, which is based on its relative overwhelming economic, political and military power. On that basis, to fear some Macedonian “expansionism”, because of their name, is not only nationalistic but ridiculous. The great imperialist powers will try to intervene, this is evident. But this does not take the right of self-determination away from anyone. There is a reactionary side in this issue and that is the Greek state, Greek capital and its political personnel.

7. The Syriza government is trying to build a new national unity based on the “left”. The government appears as the reasonable ones, willing to put an effort to “find a solution”. To accept a name that includes the term Macedonia, might be presented by the government as a concession and the far right is accusing them for giving in. For us it is clear that the government doesn’t make any concessions at all, since they speak from a stronger position. For us the

name issue is clear. To adopt the demand for a name with a composite term is to objectively align with the Greek government and ruling class. Our neighbouring country already has a name, it is called Republic of Macedonia and any other name is a direct violation of their right to self-determination. We will not be accomplices to this imposition.

8. Our task is great, as we are against this new aggressive nationalism which is being fed by government policy and nationalist demonstrations. Our foremost priority is to oppose nationalism, racism, the fascists that try again increase their visibility and to fight for internationalist voices to prevail inside the working class.

â€¢ Recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by its constitutional name

â€¢ No national unity with our oppressors. The Greek state has no right to the name of any other state

â€¢ Recognition of the ethnic Macedonian minority and all ethnic minorities that live in Greece. Full rights to minorities

â€¢ No to nationalist demonstrations. The streets belong to internationalist solidarity, not to nationalist hatred

â€¢ Internationalist class-war based struggle against the EU and NATO—common internationalist struggle in all Balkan countries against capitalism, nationalism and imperialism

â€¢ Socialist internationalist Balkans without war and bosses

#MeToo shows sexism is not men of colour’s prerogative

18 February 2018, by Sara R. Farris

Subsequent investigations revealed that dozens of men of North African background had mugged and sexually assaulted women that night, though not on the mass scale that had initially

been reported.

Yet journalists and politicians all over the world were quick to frame the Cologne events as the result of the

“inherent” sexism of the brown men who had committed them. In the German press, the nearly unanimous position was that these men came from societies and religious

backgrounds in which women are subjugated and mistreated. There were similar sentiments expressed in the rest of Europe and even the US.

"The relationship with a woman, so fundamental to Western modernity, will long remain incomprehensible to the average [refugee or migrant] man," declared Algerian author Kamel Daoud in an article published in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Similarly, a New York Times editorial warned that: "Europe must find a way to cope with a problem that has been largely ignored until now: sexual aggression by refugees from countries where women do not have the same freedoms as in Europe."

A year and a half later, another major sexual violence scandal took the media spotlight in the West. In October 2017, accusations of sexual assault against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein encouraged many women and men to come forward with their stories of sexual abuse in Hollywood and beyond. The perpetrators identified were overwhelmingly white. The mass scale and organised legal and illegal cover-up of these crimes shocked Western societies.

It is in the aftermath of these revelations and the dramatic growth of the #MeToo movement that we should look back at the events in Cologne and the notions of masculinity, violence and race.

The myth of the sexual predator of colour

The impact of the Cologne events on German and international politics is hard to ignore. All across Europe - as well as in the US - conservative and right-wing political forces invoked Cologne as proof of the incompatibility between Islam and gender equality and as a sign of the danger Muslim men present for women in Western societies. [49]

Two years later, not only does the most powerful country in the world have an Islamophobe as a president, but Germany, too, has seen the right-

wing AfD (Alternative for Germany) rise to be the third largest party in the Bundestag.

The Cologne attacks had a widespread international resonance because they played into the widely spread stereotype that non-white males (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) are sexual predators by default.

This idea dates back to colonial times, when French, British and Dutch settlers described male colonial subjects as savages who oppressed their women, as Frantz Fanon, Anne McClintock and Ann Stoler masterfully detail in their respective works. [50]

Throughout the 2000s, the idea that non-white masculinity is tied to sexual violence was reinvigorated and there was a literal explosion of articles in Western media about the gang rapes committed in the French cities' suburbs by predominantly young men of North African origin or about honour killings in mostly non-Western communities. [51]

In the US, African American men have been disproportionately visible when accusations of rape or sexual assault on university campuses have surfaced and have been subjected to tougher punishments than white men accused of similar crimes.

Of course, the hyper-sexualisation and criminalisation of black male bodies have a long and brutal history in the US, tied as it is to slavery and its aftermath, when African male slaves were described as beasts with incessant lust for white women's flesh and lynched if they were thought to have had contact with them. [52] This history has produced what American political activist and academic Angela Davis has called "the myth of the Black rapist".

In the West, when non-white men are implicated in cases of sexual harassment and violence, the debate inevitably is much less about the nature of gender-based violence and its systemic presence in our societies, and much more about the "evidence" these cases provide for claims that misogyny is "naturally ingrained" in the culture, religion or race of the men involved.

To paraphrase the words of French Muslim feminist Souad Betka, a man of colour "is always more than a man. He is the tree that represents the forest." His actions, that is, are not merely expressions of his own personality but of the "racialised" community to which he is taken to belong.

#MeToo and women of colour

With men of colour facing suspicion and a high level of criminalisation and violence in the West, women of colour have faced a genuine dilemma.

Many of them have wished to denounce sexism and gender violence within their communities, but without reinforcing racist stereotypes about their "cultures" as especially patriarchal or backward.

It is in light of these experiences that we should look at the #MeToo campaign as an extremely important movement, potentially enabling women of colour and Muslim women to fight against sexual harassment without feeling the burden of "disloyalty" towards their communities.

By exposing just how white men are frequent perpetrators of sexual violence, and especially by revealing the magnitude and pervasiveness of sexism, sexual harassment and rape in Western societies, the #MeToo movement has accomplished something extraordinary.

It has given the white mainstream very clear evidence that sexism and gender violence are in no shape or form committed only by men of colour. Furthermore, it has forced the wider society to take women's daily experience of harassment and assault more seriously and has created a climate in which women have begun to feel more confident about speaking up.

In short, #MeToo has been such a big catalyst for what looks every day more like the emergence of a new feminist movement, because it speaks to women across the class, race and

sexuality divides. The movement points to the fact that sexual harassment and violence in many ways functions as a "great equaliser" among women because the overwhelming majority of us have experienced it in some form, regardless of our backgrounds.

Yet, while sexual violence knows no race, colour, gender or class, the response to sexual violence certainly does.

Yes, powerful white men are losing their jobs over allegations of sexual harassment and assault, and this is historic. But their easy access to financial resources, good lawyers and a network of support, as well as the racial biases of the legal system, all make it more likely that these men will receive lighter punishment, even when found guilty, as the case of Stanford swimmer Brock Turner so painfully demonstrates. [53]

Not only are men of colour more likely to be convicted for sexual assault when compared with white men, but for many women of colour reporting rape or sexual assault may prove more challenging. [54] Studies show that young black women are less likely to report rape on university campuses, and women of colour are over-represented in work sectors in which

they are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, such as the care and domestic sector. [55] Additionally, undocumented female migrants find it particularly difficult to report sexual violence both for fear of being misbelieved but also for fear of being deported. [56] Above all, women of colour and working-class women often do not speak up because they lack collective power in their workplace, and are "denied social supports such as free healthcare, outside of it" as the promoters of the International Women's Strike on March 8 clearly state. [57]

It is not by chance, then, that in spite of the fact that the #MeToo campaign was founded 10 years earlier by black activist Tarana Burke, the movement arguably only gained such momentum when white women with access to financial and media resources began coming forward. [58] As Catherine Rottenberg rightly points out this fact in itself "raises the absolutely crucial question of when and where claims of sexual harassment and assault are heard and whose voices count". [59]

Cologne after #MeToo

If #MeToo has been tremendously

important in debunking the myth of the man of colour as sexual predator, the movement, however, must be careful not to adopt a "carceral feminist" approach. [60] That is, #MeToo must recognise that mass incarceration, deportation and over-policing to sort out gender violence have a disproportionate impact on people of colour, as the Cologne events clearly demonstrated.

This is not to suggest that women who experience sexual violence and harassment should not come forward and report these acts to law enforcement agencies. In the absence of alternative and effective structures to deal with gender violence, women can only turn to the resources with which the state provides them.

However, if we are really serious about combating gender violence in all of its various forms, the #MeToo movement must initiate a much needed conversation about the type of gender justice we envisage, about ways to discredit stereotypes of man of colour's aggressive masculinity as well as about the kinds of infrastructure we need to enable all women - but particularly women of colour - to speak out without fear of racist repercussions.

[Aljazeera](#)

The 2018 wage agreement in the metal industry: more freedom for capital

17 February 2018, by **Jakob Schaefer**

What is in the agreement?

For the months of January to March, €100 in a single payment, less than one per cent of the average wage in the industry. From April 1, wages will increase by 4.3 per cent. In July 2019 at the latest, the payment of a "27.5 per cent supplement of a monthly

salary" will take place. In addition there is a fixed sum of €400. This will be "integrated into the grid in 2020 and taken into account by the convention in the volume of the additional increase". This will result in a change in the salary scale, which will lead to a slightly larger increase for the lower categories. Just a little more.

But the first problem appears with the

fixed €400: in case of a "bad economic situation", the company can, with the agreement of IG Metall, postpone the payment, reduce it or even delete it completely. In the past, both in terms of increases and the reduction of working time, we have already seen countless such concessions from IGM. The so-called "Pforzheim" agreement of 2004 gave this right to the "social partners" (delegates to the works council and

management) to derogate from the regional agreement, which has done a lot to make collective agreements porous.

In metallurgy and electronics, if we take the best case scenario, this gives for this year an average increase of just 3.7 per cent (which today represents, for the average salary, €3,418) and, for 2019, just over 3 per cent (about 3.6 per cent if the €400 is paid in full). Compared to the 27 months of the duration of the agreement, it comes to, for an average salary, an increase of 3.5 per cent per year, a little more for the lowest categories (but always provided that the €400 are paid). With a forecast price increase of 2 per cent, the inflation rate is exceeded, but this does not include productivity gains.

Decrease of working time?

In many comments on the agreement, this is the question that comes to the fore. In fact, what we have seen is an odious bargain that gives more to capital than to workers. What has been negotiated is in fact only an individual reduction (up to 28 hours) of fixed duration, with the right to return to 35 hours. The price to be paid is the possibility given to employers to multiply the number of workers hired at 40 hours, something that they already practice at present: they currently represent 13 per cent of the workforce nationally (18 per cent in Baden-Württemberg, the Land that acts as a pilot region); it will be permissible to increase that to 30 per cent with a company agreement, in the event of a lack of qualified skilled labour, and up to 50 per cent ("structural quota") for companies that are the most technologically advanced, again after a company agreement, if at least 50 per cent of employees are at high coefficients (wage group 12 of the Baden-Württemberg Convention, previously EG14). The works council can make use of its veto right at the three quota levels, but for the first one (13-18 per cent) only when it is exceeded by 4 per cent.

To this must be added that companies

now have the possibility of moving from the quota system to that of the "overall volume of working time in the enterprise". This collective volume has been set at 35.9 hours per week on the basis of 18 per cent of the work force at 40 hours and 82 per cent at 35 hours. In this system, each part-time employee opens the possibility of establishing new contracts at 40 hours. Thus, one person at 20 hours (15 hours less) is potentially 3 people hired at 40 hours (3 x 5 hours more).

And to give the full picture, companies will in the future have the possibility, in agreement with the works council, to withdraw time-savings accounts for up to 50 hours and to pay them (which corresponds to an extension of working time of more than one hour per week). An additional instrument to legalize non-compliance with the 35-hour week.

What should be our opinion of the overall result?

Complexification

This negotiation has pushed to the extreme the complexity of wage agreements that has been under way for years. The result is that the workers, the union members, can no longer know what are the points that concern them directly and what aspects of the agreement they can rely on. Even union delegates in many small and medium-sized enterprises are quickly overwhelmed. And in the many factories where there are no delegates at all, it's even worse. There, even when the company recognizes the convention and is bound by it, the boss can take advantage of this imbroglio to do pretty much what he wants.

Differentiation

With the new regulations for timetables, the room for flexibility on differentiated quotas and the possible of going beyond them, the system of global volume, the protection of companies against "surcharges", the diversified effects of "individual weekly working time" (IRWAZ), etc., the bosses have an optimal range of registers to further accentuate the

differences between categories of employees. Not to mention the fact that for the delegates to the works council, the verification of the respect of the agreements has become even more complex: how do you definitively establish a "lack of qualified labour" which would justify exceeding the fixed quota for the number of employees at 40 hours, or even: what is a "high-tech enterprise"? Who determines the definition? On what objective criteria does one establish that an employee has a "key qualification", and that the management of a company can therefore refuse them a reduction in the length of their working time?

Even more than before, the need for regulation is shifted towards workplaces, which not only reduces the scope and content of the collective agreement each time, but inevitably puts the delegates in a more and more difficult position. Often, not only do they not have the level of expertise that would be required, but they do not have the means to establish a relationship of forces (they cannot, for example, call a strike).

Collective provisions that are less and less protective

Contrary to what is stated by the mainstream media, there is no reduction in working time in this agreement. Where isolated employees individually reduce their working time, the boss may make others work longer in the same measure. With the rule of 13 per cent (or 18 per cent), we had already seen how it could be massively used and often exceeded. However, the boss always finds victims who do not dare to oppose his wishes. And this makes worse the trend towards the ever greater widening of the range of working times.

Wage compensation exists only in a small number of cases, for those who reduce to 28 hours momentarily to take care of children or for domestic tasks, but only in homeopathic doses: only two of the eight days off that they

can take in the year are paid. By accepting this, IG Metall abandoned the demand for full wage compensation, which was implicit and predictable given the extremely limited nature of the original demand.

In the end, there is no reduction in working time for all the workforce. There are just changes in the distribution of time, illegal quota overruns are now legalized and the door is opened wide to allow further overruns. The chief negotiator of Südwest-Metall (the employers' organization of the industry in the southwest), Stefan Wolf, was not wrong in stating: "We got a lot, and precisely a lot of openings up for

increasing working time".

What is left?

The only ray of light in this campaign of wage negotiations is that with the full strike days called by the trade union leadership (and not just targeted and very limited actions as is customary), many workers have for the first time been able to experience something like a small experience of struggle (in Baden-Württemberg alone, 190,000 people were on strike). Given the weakness of the number of strike days in Germany, this good news, modest as it is, deserves to be

mentioned, even though the rank-and-file union members have once again not had any say in the decision to sign the agreement.

But the negative points weigh really heavily. In the first place, with an agreement extended to 27 months, the door is closed to a struggle for a real reduction in working time. The scattering of workers in the most diverse categories (with different working hours) is not really done to foster the feeling of belonging to a collective. For a turning point in the way the negotiations are conducted (and not only by IG Metall) we still have, as we say in German, "thick boards to pierce".

A long-simmering factor in Iran protests: climate change

16 February 2018

But years of diminishing rainfall have shriveled water sources. Conditions worsened, residents say, after Iranian authorities began funneling water 60 miles away to the lowland city of Esfahan, sparking protests as far back as 2014.

On Dec. 30 of last year, about 200 people gathered in front of the provincial governor's office to protest the water transfer project. Their slogans soon morphed into chants of "Death to the dictator," the main rallying cry of anti-government protesters who poured into streets nationwide in the biggest spasm of public anger Iran has seen in years.

The uprising "in which at least 21 people died and thousands were arrested before authorities reimposed order" had many sparks: rising prices, persistent unemployment, bank collapses, a wide wealth gap, corruption in the theocracy.

But an overlooked factor, analysts say, is the impact of climate change and the widespread perception that Iran's

leaders are mishandling a growing problem of water scarcity.

"People believe that this is yet another major crisis the country is facing, and the people at the top are too incompetent and too corrupt to care," said Meir Javedanfar, a professor of Iranian politics at Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, an Israeli university.

"It does not seem to be a priority of the regime to address the drought issue," he said. "As long as it's not a priority, nothing will happen until something breaks."

Many environmental activists believe Iran is quickly approaching its breaking point as diminishing rainfall and warmer temperatures have caused lakes to disappear, kicked up blinding dust storms and emptied out once fertile regions as farmers seek economic refuge in cities.

Drought is a concern across the Middle East, but Iran's 80 million people are especially at risk. This month, the director of Iran's Drought

and Crisis Management Center, Shahrokh Fateh, said that 96% of the country's land area was experiencing prolonged drought conditions, the semiofficial ISNA news agency reported.

In some of the hardest hit areas, including border provinces where ethnic and religious minorities complain of official neglect, concerns over natural resources were a key driver of the demonstrations that began in late December.

"People in my area do not want to politicize their environmental concerns, but water shortages and pollution of the air and rivers are seen as political crises," said Yusef Farhadi Babadi, an environmental activist in Chaharmahal-Bakhtiari. "People want to reclaim their rights to clean air and water and efficient water use."

In the province, which covers an area slightly larger than the state of Connecticut, there were once 3,800 natural springs, but about 1,100 have dried up, Babadi said, citing official

statistics. The Iran Meteorological Organization forecast recently that for the Iranian year ending March 20, rainfall in the province would be more than 80% below the long-term average.

Many in the predominantly agricultural region complain about a controversial series of canals the government has built to bring hundreds of millions of cubic feet of water from the Karun River, which runs through Chaharmahal-Bakhtiari, to growing populations in central provinces.

Some of the water has gone to state-run steel mills in Esfahan, which Babadi described as "bankrupt industries." Meanwhile, with the exception of Shahr-e Kord, the provincial capital of about 150,000 people, towns in the area rely on tanker water that is riddled with chemicals, he said.

Farmers and cattle breeders have occasionally clashed with security forces, including in 2016, when multiple days of protests in the town of Boldaji left one demonstrator dead and nearly 200 injured. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard, Iran's powerful paramilitary organization, [reportedly sent](#) troops from 16 units to put down the uprising.

In neighboring Khuzestan, an oil-rich province with a large population of ethnic Arabs on the border with Iraq, desertification and industrial waste have destroyed date orchards and

wetlands. The World Health Organization lists the provincial capital of Ahvaz as one of the world's most polluted cities, and for much of the year a yellow smog blankets the city, sending residents fleeing to the hospital for help with breathing difficulties.

Ahvaz saw large protests for more than a week beginning Dec. 30, but they were the latest in a years-long string of demonstrations over environmental conditions, said Abafazl Abidi, a correspondent for the reform-minded Shargh newspaper in Tehran.

"Many are suffering from chronic environmental problems or pollution-related diseases like asthma and skin ailments," Abidi said. "People suffer from acid rain, visibility is only a few meters, there are outages of drinking water and electricity. The recent protests seem to me no surprise at all."

The conditions have worsened because of the rampant construction of dams, more than a dozen of which have been built in the province in the last 40 years, many reportedly by businesses linked to the Revolutionary Guard.

Experts say the projects have aimed to benefit regions and industries with better political connections while worsening water access for marginalized people.

"They have built them in a way that the consequences are so bad for the environment," Javedanfar said. "And

there is so much lack of trust that even if the water projects were justified, people would oppose them. If the Iranian regime were to reinvent the wheel, some would complain that it's too round."

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has called on the government to "manage climate change and environmental threats," but the response from successive governments has been mixed.

Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promised populist schemes to help farmers, but allowed industries to build haphazardly, and he once blamed Iran's drought on Western countries. President Hassan Rouhani, elected in 2013, has pumped funds into restoring the depleted Lake Urmia, but when he visited Khuzestan last year he was greeted by a fierce protest.

"In every election we try to send defenders of our rights to parliament or elect presidents who can address environmental issues...but in vain," Babadi said.

Authorities cracked down swiftly on the recent protests in Shahr-e Kord, but Babadi predicted the respite would be temporary.

"The drought and water transfer projects are so dangerous and detrimental that environmental protests will resume soon," he said.

[LA Times](#)

The war is far from being over in Syria

15 February 2018, by [Gilbert Achcar](#)

Assad and Putin recently declared that they have "won the war." Is the Syrian war over? What will happen to Bashar al-Assad?

There is a lot of wishful thinking in such proclamations: battles are still raging in the Idlib region and in East

Ghouta. It is true, though, that the regime, backed by Iran and Russia, has now been consolidated and is no longer facing an existential threat. Twice before, it was on the verge of a massive defeat, rescued each time by foreign intervention, first by Iran, then by Russia. As a result, the regime has

now the upper hand militarily. But when I say 'regime,' I am actually referring to the Russia-Iran-Assad axis, as the Assad regime alone would not have been able to accomplish any of this. Far from it, it would have been defeated a long time ago.

Besides, there is still a very large area of Syria out of regime control in the North-East, dominated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) are the SDF's backbone. They control a huge part of Syria, comprising the whole area east of the Euphrates to the Turkish and Iraqi borders—and this is where US troops are actually involved on the ground. Two more areas are under control of the YPG and their allies: Manbij, west of the Euphrates, and Afrin where the present Turkish offensive is taking place.

Specifically addressing the issue of the YPG: Turkey has started an attack on the YPG-controlled area of Afrin. Does this represent a new escalation of the conflict?

Here lies a major contradiction. For many years, Western powers have been following their Turkish ally, a key member of NATO, in labelling the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist organisation. The Turkish army has engaged in several offensives against the Kurds in Turkey over the years with the support of NATO countries.

However, when the United States decided to combat ISIS in both Syria and Iraq in 2014, it did not want to involve US troops on the ground directly in the battle but provided instead air and material support to local forces. Thus, it found that the best possible ally in this battle in Syria from a military perspective would be the Kurdish forces. Washington encouraged the creation of the SDF, with the inclusion of Syrian Arabs mostly belonging to the region now under SDF control, so that the US does not appear as involved in an ethnic fight on the side of the Kurdish minority. Since everybody knows that the PYD/YPG are closely tied to the PKK, this alliance created a political paradox. In fighting ISIS, the US relied on a force that is tied to a political movement officially labelled as 'terrorist' by Turkey and its NATO allies, including Washington. Unsurprisingly, this has hugely irritated the Turkish state, outraged at seeing the US cooperating with its public enemy number one.

This was made even more acute by the fact that Erdogan had undergone a sharp nationalist shift in 2015 when his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) lost the parliamentary majority. This was due to an increase in the votes garnered by a left-wing coalition in which the Kurdish movement played a central role, but it was also due, most importantly, to losing votes to the far-right Turkish nationalists. Faced with this, Erdogan resumed the war on the Kurds after years of making peace with the Kurdish movement, resorting to whipping up Turkish nationalism. The Islamic conservative stance of his discourse did not change, but a new shift occurred in the direction of Turkish nationalism and renewed onslaught on the Kurds. Erdogan organised a second election five months later, in which his party regained a parliamentary majority. Currently the AKP is in alliance with the major far-right Turkish nationalist party.

Basically, this stance of Erdogan put him increasingly on a collision course with the US. Tensions with the Obama administration surged. Erdogan bet for a while on the Trump administration—Donald Trump promised to stop supporting the Kurdish forces in Syria. However, the Pentagon contradicted him, for the Kurdish forces have proven that they are excellent fighters and have been instrumental in defeating ISIS.

The Pentagon regards the SDF as the main card they hold today in Syria. They know that if they cut ties with the SDF, the Assad regime and Iran-led forces will inevitably try to recover the vast strategic area to the east of the Euphrates. Since the US is determined to contain Iran's expansion in the region, the Pentagon sees no other option than to provide the Syrian-Kurdish forces and the SDF continued support. This is where the friction lies.

Erdogan is currently attacking the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin in North-West Syria. This region did play no role in the fight against ISIS and was thus no concern for the US. No US troops are present there. But Erdogan threatened to turn against Manbij—where the SDF is backed

by direct US presence on the ground. Russia greenlighted the Turkish intervention in the Afrin region, withdrawing its own troops from there. Its aim is to thus exacerbate the Turkish-US rift.

This whole situation is getting even more complicated, and this is where we can reconnect to the original question: it is far from being over in Syria. Any "mission accomplished," as Bush announced very carelessly and unwisely soon after the occupation of Iraq and as Putin has proclaimed twice about Syria, is merely wishful thinking. Nothing is solved in Syria. The Assad regime, even with Russia's support, does not have the capacity to control the country. It needs Iran. Yet, Iran's presence in Syria is unacceptable for both the US and Israel.

Would Turkey, if it defeats the Kurdish forces, be willing to go as far as to occupy Manbij?

It is a very tough nut to crack indeed, and what is happening now is quite telling. It would be quite difficult for Turkish forces to remain in the Afrin region for a long time even if they manage to occupy it, as they would fall under permanent attacks. Moreover, they would be engaged in war on a foreign territory, without the excuse of being invited by the official government unlike Iran's and Russia's forces.

Erdogan is playing with fire. He has taken a great risk with this operation. Facing discontent even within his own party, he is using this nationalist drive to consolidate his power. But a military setback could cost him a lot.

Under what circumstances would Iran leave Syria?

Iran would need to be compelled to leave. This could happen if there is a Russian-American agreement, in the form of a United Nations Security Council resolution stipulating that, on the basis of a political agreement that would be reached in Geneva, all foreign troops that entered Syria after 2011 (excluding the Russians who were already in Syria long before that year) should leave the country.

It would be difficult for Iran to say "no," especially if the Syrian regime is part of this deal. Assad would not side with Iran over Moscow if he had to choose. Moscow relies on his regime's forces on the ground, while Iran is occupying the ground. Tehran would not allow the Syrian regime the same margin of autonomy as Moscow would. Add to that that the Iranian regime is ideologically quite different from the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime has been portrayed by many as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism even though it is propped on the ground by Iran-led Islamic fundamentalist forces. That's also part of the complexity of this situation.

There have been some important demonstrations in Iran since the 28th of December last year. What influence on Iran's intervention in Syria can they have?

Had the movement carried on and continued to expand, it may have created a situation compelling the regime to reconsider its intervention in Syria, which was condemned by the demonstrators. But the movement subsided and was quelled, and the regime is back in control. We see, however, a surge in the tension between the two wings of the regime. The reformist wing represented by Iranian President Rouhani is trying to curtail the hard-line wing of the Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran), arguing that the latter and its foreign interventions are a burden on the Iranian economy.

If the social turmoil resumes, things may change, but for now the regime is in full control. Moreover, Syria is an important card in Tehran's confrontation with the Trump administration, which threatens to cancel the nuclear agreement. Such a move would play into the hands of the hardliners and therefore encourage a continuation of Iran's expansion as a counter movement to US pressure.

Do you think the European Union (EU) should have a bigger role in criticising Turkey for the attack on the Kurds?

The EU has failed to act independently of the United States on the global

level with regard to political and military issues. It has mostly behaved until now as an auxiliary of the United States. This has become a problem for Europe with the Trump administration because it is the first time that there is a US president who is so much in contrast politically with Europe's mainstream and so close to Europe's far right. The Bush administration did have problems with some European governments, such as France's and Germany's that stood against the invasion of Iraq due to differing interests. But Tony Blair's UK government, for instance, was fully involved on the side of Bush.

On the Palestine issue, there has been a crystallisation of a different EU opinion, which is why the President of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Mahmoud Abbas, is now attempting to get the Europeans to recognize the Palestinian state. On Iran too, there are open divergences between the Europeans and the Trump administration. The European governments were quite happy with Obama's policy leading to the nuclear deal with Iran, which Trump considers to be the worst agreement ever concluded by the US. If he does rescind the nuclear agreement, this will create an open crisis in US-European relations. Thus, Palestine and Iran, for the time being, are two contentious issues on which there is a sharp contrast between the US and the EU. The Syrian issue though is not one on which Europe holds views opposed to that of the US. On Syria, the EU has displayed no independent stance to this day.

Considering that the conflict is not over, do you think there is any possibility of reconstruction, as Assad is calling for?

Again, that is wishful thinking. Russia itself has on several occasions called upon the EU to fund the reconstruction of Syria. They have a lot of nerve because Russia has secured a position whereby, if there were to be a reconstruction of Syria, it would play a key role in it. Moscow would like the Europeans to fund Syria's reconstruction with Russian companies pocketing the lion's share of contracts. But this will not happen because the Europeans will not

disburse any money without a US green light, which will not be given until Washington is convinced that Iran won't take advantage of the situation. Under the present conditions, Iran too would necessarily secure a major part of the market. So, reconstruction won't really be on the agenda until this whole political puzzle is solved.

Russia is trying to set a post-war political framework for Syria. They've started doing it at the end of 2016, shortly before Trump inaugurated his presidency. They were expecting him to deliver on his promise of new relations with Russia, but for the time being this is not happening as the establishment in Washington reacted with a strongly anti-Russian position. In any event, Trump won't reach any deal with the Russians unless they agree to stop cooperating with Iran in Syria and push its forces out of the country.

For Trump the ideal scenario would be to reach a deal with Putin, entrust the Russians to take care of Syria on the condition that they push Iran out. In exchange for that, the United States could remove sanctions on Russia and give it some concessions in Europe. But this is clearly not on the horizon for now.

Do you think any of the talks in Sochi and Geneva will change anything in Syria?

These talks are about the conditions of a political settlement. We know more or less what this will look like?â€"a transitional period, a new constitution, new elections, all this with Assad remaining in power and running in a new presidential election?â€"so there's not much new to be expected in that regard. Moscow and Assad proclaim that they are willing to have international observers monitoring new elections. They may be betting on Assad's victory in free presidential elections today in Syria, because the Assad regime is one bloc whereas the opposition is very much divided. The fact that the opposition is in shambles may give the Assad regime enough confidence to undergo such a scenario.

However, for such a settlement to

happen, an international agreement is necessary first. In the Moscow-sponsored Sochi talks, only Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Syrian regime, and a discredited part of the Syrian opposition did participate. In the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva, the United States and Europe are involved. I can't see the US accepting an agreement that does not stipulate the withdrawal of all foreign troops that entered Syria after 2011. In other words, the US would say, "We are willing to leave Syria provided that Iranian forces leave it as well." That's why the US is currently sticking to the region east of the Euphrates. Washington's message to the Russians is: "We will leave Syria to you if you get it rid of the Iranians, otherwise we won't."

Trump's view of the conflict is different from Obama's. He is trying to isolate Iran and has recognised Jerusalem as capital of the Israeli state. Why are their

policies different and what implication will Trump's policy have for the region?

There are different issues here. When it comes to Israel, Trump is catering to a specific audience: the Evangelicals and other Christian Zionists, who constituted a large part of the Republican's constituency under Bush and are still a major part of Trump's voter base. Mike Pence, the US Vice President, is representative of this segment. He is outbidding even his own boss in pro-Israeli discourse. Conversely, there is no consensus on this issue within the wider US establishment. Even some people in Trump's entourage were not happy with his stance on Jerusalem, which is very ideological. The only issue on which there is a consensus in the administration is a tough attitude towards Iran, but this does not even include scrapping the nuclear agreement.

Does the Saudi regime still play any decisive role in the Syrian conflict, especially with regard to Iran?

Trump very much encouraged the Saudi rulers to escalate hostilities against Iran. They have been very clumsy in the handling of episodes such as that of putting pressure on Qatar or that of the forced resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, which both ended up in fiasco. The Saudi rulers have no strategy of their own regarding Syria, they align behind the United States. The remnants of the Syrian opposition that are linked to them have been very much weakened. Thus Riyadh's overall leverage in Syria is much weakened. Its main concern is to contain Iran and roll it back, and for that they can only rely on Washington.

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Reactions to Lula's conviction

14 February 2018, by **João Machado**

A political condemnation

But in the case recently tried, the evidence is extremely doubtful. His conviction was certainly motivated by the political interests of the majority of the Brazilian right. General elections are scheduled for October and, with regard to the presidency of the Republic, all polls place Lula far ahead of the other candidates, both in the first and second rounds. For this reason, he rightly says (and not only to the left) that this conviction is a continuation of the parliamentary coup d'état that drove Dilma Rousseff out of power. After the judgment, the PT reaffirmed Lula's candidacy, although he is not eligible.

Appeals will be filed against the conviction. In addition, the law allows the registration of his candidacy (in August), and only afterwards can it be challenged. And as the PT can appeal the judgement, it is even possible that Lula could be elected, and his then taking office will be rejected. The recent polls conducted have shown that, so far, the confirmation of the conviction did not reduce voting intentions for Lula. In addition, they show that a candidate supported by him would have fewer votes than him but would go to the second round. It is possible for the PT to maintain Lula's candidacy and replace it only a few weeks before the election.

A divided left

In this confused scenario, the Brazilian left has divided in recent weeks into at least four positions. If

we consider the PT and its allies to be part of the left, it can be said that the latter has largely protested against Lula's conviction, defended his right to be a candidate, and asserted that it supported (or could support) his candidacy. These sectors do not necessarily believe in Lula's "innocence" but are just like that part of the population that, according to the investigations, believes him guilty but intends to vote for him.

A second part of the left, critical of the PT governments (class collaboration, defence of bourgeois interests and popular demobilization), however participated in mobilizations in defence of Lula trying as much as possible to stand out from "Lulism". This sector is formed by a minority part of the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL), by a very minority part of the trade union movement and by a minority part of the popular

movements and intends to present a candidate for the presidency.

Continuing debates

These two sectors of the left have tried to organize large-scale demonstrations against Lula's condemnation. They were significant (thousands, even tens of thousands of participants), but smaller than expected. Many people intend to vote for Lula, but do not mobilize for his

defence.

A third sector of the left, constituted by the majority of PSOL militants, did not participate in the demonstrations, understanding that they would be conceived as part of Lula's campaign. This sector, while denouncing the political nature of the judgments that have already condemned him and defending the right of Lula to run as a candidate, puts forward its criticisms of the PT governments.

Finally, a fourth sector of the left,

while having a critical position on the judgments that have condemned Lula, argues that he should be sentenced and imprisoned and, therefore, does not defend his right to be a candidate. This position is shared by a small minority of PSOL activists, by the PSTU (Partido Socialista dos Trabalhadores Unificado, a small "Morenist" party) and the majority of the most left-wing trade union centre in Brazil, the CSP-Conlutas (whose leadership is linked to the PSTU).

In the weeks and months to come, these debates will continue.

The Tet Offensive, international solidarity and radicalism

13 February 2018, by **Pierre Rousset**

Since 1965, Vietnam had become the epicentre of the world situation. The United States took over from the French and continued a multi-faceted military escalation that became, over the years, increasingly deadly, including the massive bombardment of liberated areas in the south, North Vietnam, Laos and finally Cambodia. Washington sent up to 500,000 troops to the campaign (during the 2003 Iraq intervention, there were never more than 180,000). Giant B52 bombers came into action. The Phoenix plan of targeted killings accounted for more victims than drones today. The economic and scientific resources of the world's largest power were mobilized. The conflict took place on all fronts - including social: a capitalist reform of agriculture was opposed to the revolutionary agrarian reform of the liberation forces. In many respects, the extreme brutality of the escalation was unprecedented - and remains so far unique. It embodies imperialist barbarism.

If Washington committed such means, it was because the outcome of this total war was not to be of local significance alone. It was a question of putting a stop to the revolutionary

dynamic initiated in the third world by the victory of the Chinese revolution (1949), then of "containment and rollback" - the objective was to restore the imperialist order in the world, under US hegemony.

The roots of the radicalization of youth in the 1960s are diverse. In France, the Gaullist regime, resulting from a coup d'état, became unbearable ("10 years is enough"), as well as the stifling Catholic-influenced moral atmosphere. New social tensions were emerging as students of working class origin began to gain access to the universities. The year 1968 has different facets in different countries. However, the mobilization against the imperialist escalation in Vietnam constituted a unifying element, a shared identity trait, an essential marker across many countries. Of course, this is less true, at least on a large scale, under dictatorial regimes or the countries of Eastern Europe.

The necessary

moment

In Vietnam, the decision to launch an offensive of the magnitude of Tet was not self-evident and provoked intense debate within the leadership of the Communist Party. The option finally chosen was an all-out, sustained offensive that could (maximum objective) pave the way for insurrectional uprisings or (minimum objective) change the course of the war thanks to its global impact. The city of Hue (capital of Central Vietnam) resisted 26 days before being reconquered by US forces - at the cost of its destruction. The siege of the giant Khe Sanh military base by divisions of the People's Army lasted 77 days (starting on January 21, it was a diversion to hide the preparation of the Tet offensive proper). The fighting hit the heart of Saigon (including the US embassy) and continued for a long time in the popular suburbs.

All the modalities of a people's war were combined during the Tet offensive: guerrilla operations, uprisings, intervention of the regular army (initially based in the North) and so on. Many problems appeared and

were not necessarily resolved: how to organize the unstructured refugee populations in the suburbs of Saigon in such a clash? How to protect them durably against a deadly counter-offensive indifferent to civilian casualties?

Although initially taken by surprise, Washington quickly mobilized its huge military resources, as well as the networks and forces of the Saigon regime, to counter the Tet offensive. The cost paid by the revolutionary movement in Vietnam was very heavy. In particular, the political and activist infrastructure of the National Liberation Front (FNL) was severely undermined as it emerged into the open - the extent of losses of cadres in the South had long-term consequences.

In 1968, the Vietnamese leadership faced a real dilemma. It was necessary to change the course of the war, otherwise the US military escalation could have continued without limits: up to the massive bombardment of the dikes in the delta of the Red River in the North, for example, which would have caused the flooding of a large, densely populated area.

To act without delay and in a decisive way was all the more imperative as the Sino-Soviet conflict was in full swing and China was plunged into the tumult of the so-called Cultural Revolution. Material and military aid to Vietnam provided by Moscow and Beijing was still coming, but for how long?

More than a "favourable moment", February 1968 was a "necessary moment". To carry out a spectacular but punctual offensive (the revolutionary units retreating rapidly after simultaneous attacks on the whole territory) would have been much cheaper but might not have changed the course of the war. It was a very risky gamble to engage so many forces for so long - and the cost was considerable - but the course of the war was indeed changed.

Electric shock

The Tet offensive provoked an electric shock in the United States and in the

world. It exposed many of Washington's lies. It showed that this war was neither "democratic" nor being won, but was terrible, barbaric, bogged down. It divided the US bourgeoisie, because its economic cost became prohibitive in the eyes of financial circles. Campuses were igniting. The protest of the US soldiers took a collective form. The slogan of "out now!" became popular among the troops. More than ever, African-Americans recognized themselves in the Vietnamese liberation struggle.

In Japan, the fight against US bases and the construction of the Narita airport radicalized, with the mobilization of the peasants, the pacifist movement, and the far left. In Europe, the international conference and demonstration in Berlin was held in February, while the offensive was in full swing, with the emblematic banner: "The duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution." The Vietnamese struggle was indeed perceived, rightly, as the intimate combination of a social revolution and a national struggle for independence, one energizing the other.

So in the eyes of the far left, Vietnam symbolized the actuality of the world revolution. The context of the time is profoundly different from what it became 50 years later. In Europe, dictatorships existed in Greece, Spain and Portugal; trans-Pyrenean contacts had to be clandestine. Many known activists (this was less the case with female activists) were banned from staying in numerous countries - to travel and to build links between movements, borders had to be crossed "discreetly". Helping soldiers who deserted from US bases in Germany required just as much discretion. The daily lives of members of far-left organizations were very different from those of Socialist Party members; clashes were constant with fascist groups, police stations were regularly "visited", injury or imprisonment was always a possibility.

The identification with the struggle of the Vietnamese people helped the far left to build and - in much wider circles - prefigured the radicalism of May 68.

In France

In France, thanks to the links established during the Algerian war in solidarity networks with the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the Vietnam National Committee (CVN) brought together from the outset many components: personalities who were "autonomous" of the French Communist Party (PCF) and fellow travellers, intellectuals or committed scientists, doctors and medical staff, social Christians, Americans who came to Paris in protest against the war, those "without cards" and the "anonymous", as well as the far left. [61] The main Maoist currents nevertheless kept to themselves and the UJCML launched the Vietnam Base Committees (CVB). The PCF led a broad coalition including many unions. The CVN advocated unity, but the Communist Party refused to rub shoulders with "leftists"; this was the time when PCF and CGT stewards would physically attack far leftists during demonstrations or around workplaces. For their part, the Vietnamese worked with everyone.

As well as the crisis of the Gaullist regime and the sharpness of latent social tensions, the still fresh experience of the fight against France's dirty war in Algeria was one of the peculiarities of the 1960s in France with, more distantly, the experience of resistance to the colonial reconquest of Vietnam initiated in 1946-1954 to recreate France's Empire. It constituted the basis on which anti-imperialist solidarity was redeveloped in the sixties. The Interunion University Committee played a pivotal role in this transmission.

In the aftermath of the Tet offensive, Washington was forced to accept the principle of peace talks. Conducted in Paris, they were quadripartite: the North Vietnamese government and the provisional revolutionary government in the South on one side, the United States and Saigon regime on the other.

The Vietnamese CP rejected the presence of the "great powers". It had learned the lessons from the 1954 Geneva negotiations. China and the

USSR then lobbied hard for it to accept a compromise (the supposedly temporary division of the country at the 17th parallel) that was well below the level. that the liberation forces were entitled to hope for given the reality of the balance of power on the ground. The exorbitant price of this compromise was the Second Indochina War, under the hegemony of Washington, which had been careful not to sign the Geneva Accords.

This question had an important resonance in the solidarity movement, especially in Europe. The French Communist Party traditionally had "peace" as a central slogan; but what peace? With the experience of Geneva, the radical left, the student movement, those personalities "autonomous" of the PCF mobilized for the "victory" of the liberation forces. No more rotten compromises imposed in Vietnam! The PCF finally made honourable amends and the coalition that it led then took on the name of the "National Action Committee for the Victory of the Vietnamese People".

Agreeing to coerced and forced talks did not indicate any desire to engage in real negotiations. In fact, Washington was still trying to win the war, or else to thoroughly destroy this country that was so resistant to it. The military escalation continued, but the international context and the internal situation in the United States made it impossible to resort to ultimate measures such as the massive bombardment of dikes in the Red River delta (some were struck and weakened, however) or indeed atomic weapons.

However, Washington could play for time. The normalization of relations between China and the United States began. The People's Republic replaced Taiwan at the UN Security Council in 1971 and Nixon went to Beijing the following year.

The liberation forces in Vietnam finally appealed to all components of international solidarity to mobilize and

force Washington to sign the Paris Accords - a compromise, but this time a winning compromise, reached in 1973. US troops were gradually withdrawing from Vietnam (but the bombings were concentrated on Cambodia). In 1975, the Saigon regime collapsed.

Internationalism

These years of fire were a real school of internationalism for our militant generation. The utility - and therefore the need - of solidarity was tested. It took a thousand forms, a thousand faces, a thousand expressions and its diversity strengthened its effectiveness.

Political positions in support of struggles around the world are obviously important, and sometimes, given the situation, they cannot be transcribed into active campaigns. Nevertheless, internationalism is not an abstract notion. It's not just a theory, a program, an ethics, an empathy, a state of mind, the sense of a fighting community, even if it's all of that. It only comes alive in action. When it remains unorganised while action is possible, it becomes helpless, reduced to empty proclamations of commitment. The commitment was obvious for hundreds of thousands, even millions, during this period.

The French case shows, however, how this solidarity in action can be fragile. After the general strike of May 1968, the CVN and CVB disappeared, while the far left concentrated on strengthening its implantation in the working class. However, we were still far from the Vietnamese victory we were hoping for. The French "political moment|" makes it possible to understand why this was so. For a wing of Maoism, there was no longer any question of supporting the Vietnamese, deemed too close to the Soviets: this would lead it to side with the Khmer Rouge. For the majority of our militant generation, this was not the result of a cynical decision, but of a sudden shift in "priorities" and enthusiasms.

The abrupt cessation of solidarity mobilizations was nonetheless irresponsible in the strong sense of the term, an irresponsibility painfully felt by some of the components of the CVN.

The best help we could bring to the Vietnamese of course would have been to make the revolution at home, but there was still a long way to go - and even more than we envisioned at the time. The May crisis weakened the imperialist camp, without reducing the importance of a specific movement of solidarity as evidenced by the harshness of the Indochinese years 1968-1975. We knew it, but the reconstitution of a solidarity movement was not spontaneous.

The Vietnamese representation in France did everything it could to help. To the chagrin of the PCF, by now passive, the PRG (South Vietnam), Laotians and Khmers even participated in a meeting of the Ligue communiste (ex-JCR) calling for a revival of solidarity with Indochina. The arc of forces that had animated the CVN was, to a large extent, reconstituted to found, in 1971, the Indochinese Solidarity Front (FSI) which multiplied initiatives until 1973 - but could not, after 1975, respond to the strangulation policy pursued by imperialism for years, to the consequences of the China-USSR inter-bureaucratic conflicts and the Sino-Indochinese crisis.

The very conception of the anti-imperialist movement has been the subject of divisions in France within the extreme left. Was it above all a matter of popularizing amongst ourselves the example of the revolutionary struggle in Vietnam ("Dare to struggle")? Was it really up to the Vietnamese people to help us build ourselves? The compass that guides solidarity, if this word makes sense, concerns the needs of those who struggle "over there". By responding as best we can, we build ourselves certainly, but as an *internationalist organization*.

Bolshevism, Balfour and Zionism: A tale of two centenaries

12 February 2018, by Roger Marwick

The Bolsheviks rode to power on the back of an armed insurrection in Petrograd on November 7, 1917 (October 25 in the old Russian calendar). Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin immediately declared: "We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order." Two days later the fledgling Workers' and Peasants' Government issued its famous first decree: "The Decree on Peace," which amidst the carnage of the First World War called for

A just and democratic peace...an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign territory and the forcible annexation of foreign nationalities) and without indemnities.

The Balfour Declaration was a letter dated November 2, 1917 from British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. Published on the very same day as Lenin's "Decree on Peace," it read:

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

The Balfour Declaration had been in the making for some time. Indeed, in 1916, the same year that the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement secretly planned to divide up a post-war Middle East between Britain, France and Tsarist Russia, Balfour, then First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote to then

head of the General Zionist Council, Chaim Weizmann: "You know Dr Weizmann, if the Allies win the war you may get your Jerusalem." [62] The published version of the Balfour Declaration was actually watered down from that which had originally been approved by British Prime Minister Lloyd George and the Foreign Office. It had proposed that all of "Palestine should be reconstituted as the national home of the Jewish people." [63]

Not surprisingly, there is considerable contention about Britain's motivation in making the Balfour Declaration. One school of thought, not without basis, has emphasized British concerns about the outbreak of Revolution in Russia in February/March 1917 which threatened the British-French-Russian Entente war effort against Germany and its allies. In this perspective, the only important motive behind the Balfour Declaration was to give Jews in Russia, whom it was presumed had decisive political influence in revolutionary Russia, an incentive to oblige the Provisional Government to continue to wage war on the side of the *Entente*. There is certainly evidence that for some British officials involved in the development of the Balfour Declaration the revolutionary situation in Russia by October 31, 1917 was a major consideration. [64] As an unnamed British high official stated at the time: "A pity our Declaration did not come four months earlier. It might have made all the difference in Russia." [65] Behind this perspective was the assumption, rooted in the anti-Semitism which pervaded the thinking of Britain's conservative political elites at the time, that Jews in Russia were part of a powerful collective entity: Zionists and extreme revolutionaries who were spreading harmful pacifist

propaganda.

Undoubtedly, British anxiety in 1917 that Russia continue fighting Germany and its allies was a consideration in wooing Russian Zionists but it should not be viewed in isolation from Britain's imperial ambitions in the Middle East. [66] Emblematic of this was the outlook of Winston Churchill, who combined pro-Zionism with visceral anti-Bolshevism. As early 1908, then Member of Parliament Churchill had assured a leader of the Jewish community in his local constituency of Manchester that "Jerusalem must be the ultimate goal." [Hurwitz, "Churchill and Palestine," p. 4.] By 1920, Churchill, by then War and Air Minister and chief proponent of British intervention in the Russian Civil War against the Bolshevik Red Army, saw Zionism as both a powerful antidote to Bolshevism and as an instrument for securing British interests in the Middle East; above all in Palestine.

"Zionism Versus Bolshevism"

In a 1920 newspaper article melodramatically entitled "Zionism Versus Bolshevism. A Struggle for the Soul of The Jewish People," Churchill expounded his perspective on the Jews. [67] It was replete with racialized, anti-Semitic stereotypes common among British Tories. Distinguishing between "Good and Bad Jews," Churchill opined that "It would almost seem as if...this mystic and mysterious race had been chosen for the supreme manifestations, both of the divine and the diabolical."

Continuing in this crude, racist vein, Churchill identified three categories of Jews, two of whom he obviously put in

the “good” category: First, were the “National’ Jews...who...while adhering faithfully to their own religion, regard themselves as citizens” of a country. Second, were the “International,” “terrorist” Jews. These were the “sinister” Bolsheviks who had fomented the Russian Revolution: “With the notable exception of Lenin,” he observed, “the majority of the leading figures [Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek] are [atheistical] Jews.” Third were the Zionists, whom he saw as a formidable antidote to Bolshevism: “Zionism...has already become a factor in the political convulsions of Russia, as a powerful competing influence in Bolshevik circles with the international communistic system.”

Churchill called on the “national Jews” to join with the Zionists to “combat” the “Bolshevik conspiracy.” For this reason, he endorsed not just a Jewish “home” in Palestine but the Zionist project for a Jewish “state” “by the banks of the Jordan” River: “A Jewish State [of three or four million Jews] under the protection of the British Crown,” he declared, could thwart Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs Leon Trotsky’s alleged “schemes of a world-wide communistic State under Jewish domination.” For the imperial warlord Churchill, the stakes were very high: The contest between “Zionist and Bolshevik Jews” was nothing “less than a struggle for the soul of the Jewish people.”

War on “secret diplomacy”

Notwithstanding Churchill’s hyperbolic rhetoric, in reality at stake was a struggle for British imperial domination and exploitation of the colonial world that was imperiled by the Bolshevik Revolution. On November, 22 1917, barely a fortnight after the Bolsheviks had come to power, Trotsky had put forward diplomatic “proposals for a truce and a democratic peace without annexation and without indemnities, based on the principle of the independence of nations, and of their right to determine the nature of their own development themselves.” The very next day, Trotsky declared war

on “secret diplomacy,” publishing in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, the newspapers of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet government respectively, the hitherto secret Sykes-Picot Agreement to carve up the dying Ottoman Empire. This agreement was a British betrayal of the Arabs, whom the British had promised independence in the 1915 McMahon-Hussein correspondence in return for Arab military support in the war against the dying Ottoman Empire—Germany’s Middle East ally. In his war “war on ‘secret diplomacy,’” Trotsky was indeed the Julian Assange of his time. Furthermore, in December 1917 the Bolsheviks added fuel to anti-imperialist fire by calling on the Muslims of the Middle East and Asia as a “holy task” to “overthrow the imperialist robbers and enslavers.” There is no doubt that the Bolsheviks’ unqualified support for colonial national self-determination was a threat to the determination of the victorious World War powers to re-establish their colonial hegemony. Where 1919 Versailles Peace treaties provided for selective self-determination or none at all in the colonial world, Lenin’s “Decree on Peace” universalized this principle. [68] For Churchill and his ilk, the Bolsheviks were the spoilers of the imperial world system.

British imperial motivations

Notwithstanding Britain’s fear of the Bolshevik Revolution, London’s primary motivation in championing the Zionist cause in Palestine was its immediate interests in the Middle East, which preceded the revolution. A Jewish state in Palestine, Churchill categorically declared in his February 1920 article, would be “in harmony with the truest interests of the British Empire.” Already, in 1916, British Prime Minister Lloyd George had privately declared his first priority was to obtain sole British suzerainty of Palestine, notwithstanding ostensible commitments to his French allies. Palestine would be invaluable as a bulwark to reinforce British rule in Egypt, which it had occupied in 1882, thereby securing the Suez Canal as a key conduit to British India, still the

“jewel in the British crown.”

A British pro-Zionist declaration had a number of advantages in furthering this strategic objective. Firstly, it would impede Germany establishing its own relationship with the Zionists, although the Zionists insisted Britain should be their sole agent in the Middle East. Secondly, but more importantly, a British pro-Zionist declaration was needed to circumvent the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement to prevent the French from obtaining the part of Palestine that had been promised to them in that agreement. Lloyd George and Sir Mark Sykes had both agreed that a promise to the Zionists could mask British aspirations for a post-war protectorate over Palestine in order to avoid a confrontation with French, thereby imperiling the Entente. [69] To that end, on August 14, 1917 Sykes had suggested that the solution to the problems posed by opponents to the goal of sole British suzerainty of Palestine was “to get Great Britain appointed trustee of the Powers for the administration of Palestine.” Clearly, there was no honor among imperial thieves!

Anglo-American relations

A Third consideration for Britain, in light of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s opposition to annexation, was the need to placate American sensibilities over the issue of Palestine. Britain was convinced that only U.S. military might could win the war against Germany, which the U.S.A had entered on April 1917. However, this also increased British dependence on the U.S. which would strengthen the hand of Wilson. For Lord Balfour, the importance of a declaration lay in the pro-British propaganda it could create among Zionists in both America and Russia. This would have several benefits for Britain. First, given that by 1917 Britain was militarily and financially dependent on the U.S., influencing American Zionists could ameliorate this humiliating dependence. Second, in line with prevailing conservative prejudices, the British Foreign Office believed that American Jews were very influential

and pro-Zionist: a declaration in favor of Zionist aspirations would mean that they were more likely to espouse British interests in Washington. Third, British suzerainty over Palestine could be masked as Jewish “self-determination” thereby placating both Woodrow Wilson and the French. [70]

On October 31, 1917, the British War Cabinet finally agreed on what came to be called “The Balfour Declaration.” It was quickly reinforced by British boots on the ground: on December 9, 1917, British Imperial forces under General Edmund Allenby took Jerusalem from their German commanded Ottoman counterparts. In these circumstances, Jewish “self-determination” became a diplomatic fig leaf for British *force majeure* in Palestine, which, based on British belief in the collective power of world Jewry, Zionist influence would facilitate. Sykes himself made this quite clear in a memorandum penned on March 3, 1918:

The important point to remember is that through Zionism we have a fundamental world force behind us that has enormous influence now, and will wield a far greater influence at

the peace conference. If we are to have a good position in the Middle East after the war, it will be through Zionist influence at the peace conference that we shall get it. [71]

Sykes proved dead right. Under the terms of the 1919 Versailles peace conference and the May 1920 San Remo conference of Allied powers, without waiting for League of Nations endorsement and with a clause providing for implementation of the Balfour Declaration the Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain was rewarded with the Mandate of Palestine.

A Jewish state

Ten months later, in March 1921 Colonial Secretary Churchill visited Cairo and Jerusalem with the express intention to “rearrange the Middle East.” Churchill unilaterally divided the British Mandate into a “Jewish national home” and a “Transjordanian Emirate.” His visit was followed soon after by the May 1921 Arab riots in Jaffa, in good part triggered by Arab concerns about the increasing level of Jewish immigration into Palestine. Resultant recommendations for a cap

on Jewish immigration by the British High Commissioner in Palestine, Sir Herbert Samuel, alarmed British Zionist leader Weizmann. Lloyd George and Balfour, in the presence of Churchill, personally reassured Weizmann that by the Declaration “they had always meant a Jewish state.” [72] Their promise was realized in May 1948, when Britain relinquished Mandatory Palestine and Israel declared itself an independent state.

The 1917 Balfour Declaration and the Bolshevik Revolution were conflicting actions by counter-posed forces, rationalized by competing worldviews. On the one hand, an internationalist revolution, driven by vast, insurgent working-class and peasant movements, which explicitly allied itself with the aspirations of subject, colonial peoples. On the other, a major imperial power intent on prosecuting its interests in the Middle East and Russia under the guise of Jewish self-determination. A century on, their irreconcilable legacies continue.

Source **MR Online** January 2018
“Bolshevism, Balfour and Zionism: A tale of two centenaries”

The Kurdish Crisis in Iraq and Syria

11 February 2018, by **Joseph Daher**

The massacre by chemical weapons against the Kurdish population of Halabja in 1988 by Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime [then supported by the U.S. and other Western governments “eds.”] is particularly remembered. About 5000 Kurds perished in this massacre. This attack was part of Operation Anfal launched by the authorities in Baghdad during this period, which killed over 182,000 people and destroyed more than 90% of the Kurdish villages.

The Iraqi referendum also demonstrated, once again, the failure of the models of the capitalist, chauvinist and centralized nation-states of the region, which have

consistently repressed, erased, and/or denied the plurality of their societies by affirming the supremacy and/or domination of an ethnic group over others, a religious sect over others, or both at the same time.

In Syria, a solution for the Kurdish issue and for an inclusive Syria cannot be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper “people” or “nation” and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in the country and elsewhere.

The destiny of the Kurdish people in Syria was and remains intrinsically linked to the dynamics of the Syrian

uprising and, therefore, its future is in danger, just as with the rest of the protest movement. This is why we should not isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution.

Any possibility of self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria, as well as in Iran and in Turkey, has to go through common struggle with the popular classes of these countries against the various fractions of the bourgeoisie that dominate these states, whether they are from reactionary Islamic fundamentalism or nationalist chauvinism, or a mix of both.

That is why we must support the right of self-determination for 28 to 35 million Kurdish people in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. We need to denounce these authoritarian regimes, as well as international and regional measures and pressures that prevent Kurdish populations from deciding their own future.

The Iraqi Kurds' initial enthusiasm following the massive victory of the "yes" vote (at over 92% in favor of independence) on September 25 quickly gave way to multiple threats and military offensives against the autonomous territories under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) since 1992.

Composed of three provinces of northern Iraq, this broad swath of land stretching from the Iranian to the Syrian border with Kirkuk at its center and claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad was lost in mid-October. The loss included the oil-rich city of Kirkuk (see the map below).

Meanwhile the Iraqi government led by the Shia Islamic fundamentalist party al-Dawa, with the support of Turkey and Iran, is continuing its pressure to obtain new concessions from the KRG.

In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), through its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), which dominates the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition of fighters, has accumulated victories and controls new territories in Syria, mostly, but not only, at the expense of the jihadist group Islamic State/Daesh (IS/D). It has accomplished this with the support of both the U.S.-led International coalition and Russia. In November, the SDF controlled nearly a quarter of Syria.

The last major success of the PYD was the expulsion of the IS/D forces from Raqqa in Syria, although not without deep humanitarian cost for its inhabitants. This positive situation, however, comes with threats from various actors including Turkey and Iran, as well as the Assad regime. The latest example being the Turkish military offensive, assisted by reactionary Syrian opposition armed

groups, on Afrin since January 20.

Iraq, or the Fallen Dream

On October 16, Iraqi forces and Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) captured the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields from the Kurdish forces. This action followed an agreement concluded between Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi and a faction of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a political rival of the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). [73]

Kurdish peshmerga affiliated with the PUK and KDP either withdrew or fled. During his resignation speech on October 29, former President Masoud Barzani accused his political rivals of "high treason" for yielding territory, particularly Kirkuk, without a fight. The referendum and government backlash have also revealed deep divisions among the Kurdish political parties and increased them.

On November 1, President Barzani resigned and passed on many of the powers of his office jointly to his nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Judicial Council.

This resignation appeared at first to be a significant concession by Barzani's KDP, following the failure of the referendum, to relieve the impasse surrounding his extralegal retention of office, and raised the possibility of democratic reforms.

In fact, it is an attempt by the KDP to maintain its domination over the KRG, and for the PUK to hang on to what remains of its long-standing and exclusive power-sharing relationship with the KDP in an increasingly volatile and polarized political environment.

Barzani remains nevertheless influential as head of the ruling KDP and still sits on the High Political Council (HPC), a non-governmental body that emerged after the referendum that can act

independently of the KRG's legally established institutions. [74]

More than 183,000 civilians have been displaced by the conflict, including 79,000 from the city of Kirkuk, which the Iraqi government conquered on the first day of its offensive. The KRG lost about 40% of its previously held territory as its forces withdrew from the disputed areas.

Source: IHS Markit Conflict Monitor

The Iraqi government has continued to threaten the KRG and demand new concessions regarding its sovereignty. It wants control of all border checkpoints, including the Turkish frontier that has been controlled by the KRG since 1992; the Saddam Hussein era.

The KRG sought to defuse tensions with the Iraqi government with a ceasefire on all fronts, continued cooperation in the fight against the IS/D and joint deployments in the disputed territories claimed by both sides.

The Kurdish defense department said the offer for joint control of the frontier was part of a "deconfliction" proposal made to Baghdad on October 31. One of the border crossings, Fish-Khabur, is strategically vital for the landlocked KRG, as the point where oil from northern Iraq crosses into Turkey.

The Iraqi government also demanded that the KRG stop exporting its own oil and hand over sales to the Iraqi state-oil marketer SOMO. Baghdad is actually discussing with Ankara to let SOMO sell Kurdish crude that arrives by pipeline.

Until mid-October about 530,000 barrels per day (bpd) arrived in Ceyhan, the Turkish terminal on the Mediterranean, via the pipeline. Half came from the KRG's oilfields, the rest from Kirkuk.

The Iraqi government was supported directly in its military actions by the neighbouring states, Turkey and Iran. Ankara and Tehran actually fear that an Iraqi Kurdish independence process will have consequences for their own Kurdish minorities, who also suffer from the discriminatory and

oppressive policies of these regimes.

Turkey, Iran, Russia, and Western Countries

Turkey, which had excellent relations with the KRG and the Barzani family, and is the primary investor in Iraqi Kurdistan, denounced the referendum as a “terrible mistake” and reiterated its support for “the territorial integrity of Iraq.”

Iran pledged to stand by Baghdad and Ankara against the outcome of the referendum for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. Ali Akbar Velayati, chief adviser to Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared that “Muslim nations will not allow the creation of a second Israel.” The conservative press in Iran described the referendum as a “Zionist plot” to destabilize the region.

Political and military collaboration among Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran intensified throughout this period against the KRG.

The Iranian regime benefited directly from its participation through the PMF in the conquest of Kirkuk by positioning itself to take control of oil exports from this region rich in oil. Under a new arrangement with Baghdad, Tehran will receive 15,000 barrels per day worth nearly \$1 million, rising gradually to 60,000 bpd. Iran and Iraq also revived a project to build a pipeline to carry oil from Iraq’s Kirkuk fields to central Iran and onwards for export from the Gulf.

The Iraqi government actually signed a memorandum of understanding with BP (British Petroleum) in mid-January to boost production capacity from 700,000 to 750,000 bpd, while it currently can pump about 450,000 barrels a day, from the northern Kirkuk oilfields, which were taken back in October by Iraqi government forces.

At the same time, the U.S. and European countries opposed the referendum and the idea of independence. Western countries repeatedly reiterated their opposition

to both the referendum and the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. They feared that these developments would lead to more regional instability, weaken the “war” against the IS/D, and lead to unrest in disputed areas such as the multi-ethnic and wealthy city of Kirkuk.

Russia, which invested over \$4 billion in the Kurdistan region’s energy sector, overtaking the U.S. as the largest investor, declared on its side “that the disputes between Baghdad and Erbil must be resolved by dialogue with the aim of finding a formula of coexistence within the Iraqi state.”

On November 6, the KRG declared that it would respect the ruling by the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court, which declared that no Iraqi province could secede. “We believe that this decision must become a basis for starting an inclusive national dialogue between (Kurdish authorities in) Erbil and Baghdad to resolve all disputes,” the KRG said in a statement.

However, this did not prevent, on the same day, the Iraqi cabinet from proposing a reduction of the Kurdistan region’s share of the 2018 draft federal budget to 12.6 per cent. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the region has been entitled to 17 percent. [75] The Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi reiterated, at the beginning of January, his refusal to allow the Iraqi parliament to change the KRG’s share of the 2018 budget. He insisted that Erbil’s demand for 17 percent belonged in the past. The first reading of the Iraqi budget for 2018 was actually boycotted by the Kurdish MPs, mainly over the contentious issue of budget sharing, demanding a return of the KRG share to 17 percent.

The reduced budget would dramatically add to the KRG’s financial difficulties and is viewed as a punitive measure. Additionally, the draft budget would distribute the Kurdistan region’s share directly to the three provinces, further undermining KRG’s control over the allocation of funds.

At the time of the writing, negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad have not been successful and are still ongoing,

despite the first meeting of the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani with the Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi after the failure of the September 2017 referendum in mid-January 2018 in Baghdad. They then met a second time at the World Economic Forum of Davos in Switzerland.

In recent months, the economic crisis deepened in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, leading to three days of protests in December in a number of Kurdish towns where government party buildings were set on fire. The KRG security police violently repressed violently the demonstrations, killing six protesters and injuring hundreds. After the protests, Abadi promised to pay some of the salaries of Kurdish civil servants, pending validation of their employment. The Iraqi government formed ten committees to audit the list of KRG’s Health and Education Ministries in order to get precise information, expressing concerns about corruption. As for demands for negotiations, Abadi repeated that Erbil has to commit first to the constitution and hand over all border posts to the Iraqi federal forces, as well as withdraw to the pre-2003 borders.

In the beginning of February, the Kurdish MPs reiterated their call for the KRG budget share to be increased to 17 percent and urged Abadi to hasten efforts to send the salaries of employees of the health and education ministries. They also called for the international flight ban on Erbil and Sulaimani airports to be lifted and steps made towards resolving the Kirkuk issue. At the time of writing, Abadi had not answered positively to these demands.

In short, the Kurdish population of Iraq has suffered a new and terrible blow as most countries define their own interests in opposition to Kurdish independence.

Syria After IS/D

Although mostly limited to the military field, the PYD in Syria has developed closer relations with the U.S. and Russia in the past few years. But recently the relations became more tense with the latter.

Within the strategic framework of "IS/D first" and the complete failure to assist Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces to combat the IS/D, Washington increasingly supported the PYD and the YPG-led coalition known as the SDF, where were established in October 2015. They were created officially as a response to fight the "terrorism represented by the IS, its sister [organizations] and the criminal Ba'ath regime" according to its founding statement.

The SDF was actually established to provide a legal and political cover for American military support for the PKK-affiliated group PYD in Syria. U.S. support for the SDF continued in its struggle against the IS/D in 2016 and 2017, while Russia prevented any direct confrontation between SDF and Turkish forces by creating de facto buffer zones between both actors in some areas.

The SDF was seen especially by the U.S. as the best actor on the ground to fight the IS/D. The U.S. notably supported SDF units to expel the IS/D from Raqqa and its surroundings. The military campaign against Raqqa, as previously seen with the Iraqi city Mosul, resulted in destroying more than 80 percent of the city.

There is a humanitarian crisis with a serious shortage of food, medicine, electricity, drinking water and basic necessities. In the four-month offensive on Raqqa, between 1300 and 1800 civilians were killed. [76]

Some 270,000 to 320,000 people have been displaced by the fighting and are living in miserable conditions in overcrowded camps on the outskirts of the city. They will not be able to return until the city is cleared of the mines and explosives scattered by the IS/D, which might take months.

By the end of October, with the loss of Raqqa, the IS/D controlled less than 10 percent of Syrian territory "compared with 30 percent at the beginning of 2017. More than half lies in the province of Deir Zor, close to that of Raqqa. The IS/D was the target of two separate offensives in Deir Zor: one led by the regime's troops and its allies, supported by Russia, the other by the SDF, supported by the U.S..

The province of Deir Zor also suffered tremendously from these offensives and bombings. From September 10 to the beginning of November, between 660 and 880 civilians died, while more than 200,000 people fled the province.

Regime forces took full control of the city of Deir Zor in November. The IS/D proto-state crumbled nearly completely at the end of 2017 under the pressure of multiple offensives in Syria and Iraq.

In mid-November, the Syrian regime's army and its allies, Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias, with the assistance of the Russian air force, were fighting the IS/D in desert areas near Albu Kamal, the last town the jihadist group held in Syria, near the border with Iraq. Albu Kamal was a major supply and communications hub for the IS/D between Syria and Iraq, and was a big prize for the Iranian-backed militias.

However, this succession of defeats has not prevented the IS/D from multiplying suicide operations and car-bomb attacks in different regions of the country. The jihadist group has also increased the abuses against civilians in the areas from which its soldiers are withdrawing.

The PYD's Moscow representative, Abd Salam Muhammad Ali, declared at the beginning of December that the SDF could be integrated into the Syrian army if a political solution that satisfied all parties was found. However, in September 2017, the leading PYD politician and co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, Ilham Admed, revealed that the PYD officials had already met with the Assad regime twice, but the Russian-brokered dialogue went nowhere.

Russia was unable or unwilling to override a Turkish veto of the PYD participation in January 2017 peace talks in the Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, during which both the representatives of the opposition and of the regime rejected any Kurdish autonomy.

The rapprochement between the Turkish and Russian leaders, Erdogan and Putin, following Turkey's shooting down of a Russian fighter jet in 2015,

did not improve PYD's situation, following the failed military coup of a section of the Turkish army in July 2016. That August, the Turkish forces formed a coalition with the Syrian armed opposition forces in a military campaign called "Operation Euphrates Shield." They targeted both the IS/D and the PYD in Syria and their intervention was not opposed by Russia, the U.S. or Iran.

Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Nurettin Canikli, even acknowledged in December 2016 that Turkey "would not have moved so comfortably" without the rapprochement with Russia, which effectively controls parts of the northern Syrian air space. This demonstrated that Russian interests were not similar to the PYD. The Operation Euphrates Shield succeeded both in rooting out the IS/D from the Turkish border and in preventing the PYD-YPG from connecting its main territory in north-eastern Syria with the city of Afrin.

Similarly, interactions between the U.S. officials and the YPG commanders remained largely informal. Brett McGurk, the U.S. special presidential envoy for the anti-IS/D coalition, visited the YPG-controlled areas, Rumeilan and Kobani, twice, in January and September 2016. He was filmed with the YPG-PYD and SDF commanders but did not discuss the issue foremost on the PYD group's mind: The U.S. protection and recognition of the self-rule area.

Not wishing to encourage Kurdish autonomist ambitions that would further upset Turkey, Washington also avoided providing economic support to the PYD-controlled areas. After Ankara fumed over a U.S. decision to arm SDF fighters for the offensive on Raqqa, the U.S. Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, during May 2017 talks with the Turkey's Prime Minister, voiced strong support for Turkey's fight against the PKK militants.

The U.S. has maintained the PKK on its terrorist list throughout these years. This prevented PKK leaders from speaking directly to the U.S. military commanders. (They did so through the PKK's YPG associates, in their capacity as the SDF

commanders.) In June 2017, Washington even pledged to Turkish officials to take back weapons supplied to the YPG after the defeat of the IS/D.

The PKK leader, Riza Altun, pointed out that the U.S. behavior towards the Kurdish issue in Syria “is double-edged depending on its interests, and the relationship with Washington is therefore tactical in nature.”

On October 31, Major General James Jarrard, the Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve commander declared that the U.S. would continue to support the SDF after the military defeat of the IS/D, but he claimed to not know for how long.

Similarly, he failed to answer whether, in case the Assad regime tried to wrest control from the authorities governing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the United States would support the SDF. On their side, the PYD leaders voiced support for a longer-term role for the U.S. forces in Syria once the IS/D is defeated and until there is a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

The PYD faced the contradiction that Russia and the U.S. were not ready to jeopardize their relationships with Turkey to support any Kurdish autonomy plan whether in Syria or elsewhere.

The rapprochement at the end of 2016 among Iran, Turkey and Russia threatened the PYD’s interests even more.

The Syrian regime’s military advances also demonstrated Damascus’ unwillingness to accept a rival actor in the territories recaptured from the IS/D, as shown by the multiplication of clashes with the SDF. The fact that for tactical reasons both actors avoided each other’s major infighting in the past few years, [77] and that there are examples of on-the-ground tactical cooperation, do not change the fact that the two factions are strategically opposed.

In mid-June 2017, U.S. warplanes shot down a Syrian jet in the southern Raqqa countryside because it dropped

bombs near SDF positions. In mid-September, Russian air forces targeted positions of the SDF, causing injuries, east of the Euphrates River in Syria near Deir Zor. Although Moscow denied bombing SDF forces, the U.S. coalition and the SDF argued otherwise.

The pressure on SDF forces continued to mount as they suffered a new attack carried out by Russian and regime forces against their positions in Deir Zor province on September 25.

On its side, the Damascus regime has repeatedly declared that it would not allow the PYD to threaten the country’s territorial unity and that “Those who will move in those directions know what price they have to pay.”

A high Syrian regime official, Bouthaina Shaaban, actually declared that the Syrian government was ready to fight the SDF, characterizing them as an illegitimate foreign force just as is the IS/D. For officials in Damascus, Raqqa is still considered an occupied city.

In the midst of worsening military and political tensions between Damascus and its allies on one side and the PYD, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem affirmed at the end of September that the Syrian government was open to negotiations with Kurds over their demand for autonomy within Syria’s borders. This declaration was merely rhetorical, as it did not provide any political content to the meaning of “autonomy” used by officials in Damascus.

Walid Moallem’s ambiguous statement sought short-term understanding with the PYD by possibly providing the Kurdish movement with a sort of political arrangement to try and avoid a scenario of complete separation similar to Iraqi Kurdistan.

It might also pressure the Turkish government, which sees a Kurdish autonomous region under the leadership of PKK’s sister organization as a danger. The statement of the Syrian Foreign Minister was made on the same day of the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq, which was completely rejected by the

Syrian regime.

Despite the cautious readiness of some PYD officials to engage in dialogue with the regime, Ilham Ahmed remarked that in both their meetings Damascus officials “did not appear serious” about talks on the future of the autonomous regions and the demand for a federal system for Syria. The Syrian regime through the voice of its dictator Bashar al-Assad has promised to restore the authority of the state over the entire national territory, including Raqqa.

Turkey, Syria, and Afrin military offensive

In October 2017, the Turkish army deployed once again in Syria, this time in Idlib province in northern Syria, setting up observation posts as part of a mission to control the SDF. Initially the mission was officially aimed at dislodging Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a military alliance dominated by the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra.

The HTS actually has agreed not to interfere with Turkish operations along the border and is therefore relatively spared, for the moment, by Ankara. This Turkish military deployment, in collaboration with Syrian armed opposition groups, is part of the so-called de-escalation agreements reached with Iran and Russia. The objective is to isolate the city of Afrin [78] controlled by the SDF.

The Turkish pro-government daily Yeni Safak did not hesitate to use as a headline in one of its editions: “Today Idlib, tomorrow Afrin.” The Turkish government also placed opposition armed groups that it sponsors in the areas.

The Turkish forces continued their incursions into the northern territories of the country throughout the end of 2017, while in mid-November Erdogan declared “We need to cleanse Afrin of the structure there called the YPG terrorist organization.”

In January 2018, the Turkish military assisted by pro-Turkish Syrian

reactionary opposition militia groups, mostly composed of Islamic fundamentalist movements, launched a large-scale air and ground offensive, dubbed "Operation Olive Branch", on Afrin province. The Turkish army used as a pretext an announcement by a military spokesman for the U.S.-led global coalition against the IS/D to build a 30,000-strong border force under the command of the SDF. In Ankara's opinion, the U.S. decision meant that the U.S.-YPG partnership would not end with the collapse of the IS/D, as the Turkish government had hoped. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Etilaf), composed mostly of liberal and Islamic conservative and fundamentalist groups and personalities, have not only supported the Turkish military intervention and continued their previous chauvinist policies against the Kurds in Syria, but are also participating in this operation by calling on Syrian refugees in Turkey to join the Syrian armed opposition groups fighting in Afrin.

Videos have emerged since the beginning of the military operation against Afrin showing racist and hatred discourses against the Kurds among some of the Syrian fighters, as well as slogans in favour of Saddam Hussein and Erdogan. They also mutilated the corpses of Kurdish YPG soldiers and displayed it on social medias, notably of member of the Kurdish Women's Protection Units, fuelling ethnic tensions.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the Afrin operation would be followed by another against Manbij and all the way to the Iraqi border to clear the YPG from its frontier. Erdogan also threatened any voices in Turkey critical of "Operation Olive Branch", notably stating in reference to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), "that wherever you go out on the streets, our security forces are on your necks". Nearly 600 people have been arrested for participating in protests or / and social media posts criticizing the Afrin military offensive in Syria, including politicians, journalists and activists, while Erdogan accused the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), which opposed the campaign and called for

peace, of betrayal and of being a gang of slaves and servants of imperialism. The day after Erdogan's comment, a Turkish prosecutor ordered the detention of 11 senior members of the TTB, including its chairman, under the accusations of "propaganda in support of a terrorist organization, and provoking the public." With the exception of the HDP, the rest of the main parties in Turkey, including the fascistic National Movement Party (known as MHP) and the Kemalist Republican People's Party (known as CHP), support Turkey's military intervention.

Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, defended the operation saying it was solely aimed at securing his country's security and protecting Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens from "terrorist organizations".

This intervention occurred with the relative passivity and acceptance of the main powers involved in Syria. Despite a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry expressing "concern" and calling on the parties "to show mutual restraint", Moscow, which controlled large parts of Syrian air space, gave Turkey the green light for this invasion and withdrew its armed forces from the areas targeted by Turkish forces toward the cities of Nubl and al-Zahraa, both of which were under regime control. Russian officials had demanded that the YPG hand over Afrin to the Syrian regime to "stop" the Turkish attacks on the region. Russia also saw the operation as a way to deepen the wedge between the NATO allies Ankara and Washington in light of the latter's support for the YPG. Furthermore, Russia probably estimated that, threatened with invasion by Turkey and its proxies, Syrian opposition armed groups, the YPG would become more open to Moscow's earlier demand to hand Afrin back to the Syrian regime.

On February 6, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, actually declared that Turkey and Russia have no disagreements over Ankara's air and ground offensive into northern Syria's Afrin region and the two countries are in close contact over the operation.

On its side, the U.S. remained rather passive stating that it understood the security concerns of Ankara that gave advance warning of their operation, only urging Turkey to exercise restraint and ensure that its military operations remain limited in scope and duration. On January 31, Turkey urged the U.S. to halt its support for Kurdish YPG fighters or risk confronting Turkish forces on the ground in Syria. In Washington, the Pentagon answered that it carefully tracked weapons provided to the YPG and would continue discussions with Turkey, while adding that Turkey's operation into Afrin was not helpful and was taking focus away from fighting Islamic State.

Facing this situation, the self-autonomous government of Afrin, under the PYD's rule, called on Damascus to exercise its sovereign duty towards Afrin and protect its borders with Turkey from the occupying Turkish forces. The Syrian regime has denounced rhetorically from the beginning the Turkish intervention against Afrin and threatened to shoot down Turkish jets in its airspace, but has not moved its armed forces to halt it. Russia's collaboration in the Turkish military offensive and Damascus' military weakness prevented it from stopping "Operation Olive Branch", while it might have been interested to see the Kurdish YPG forces weakened.

In addition to this, a major new incident took place on the night of February 7 to 8 between the U.S. forces and their Syrian Democratic Forces (FDS) allies on one side and the pro-regime forces on the other in the province of Deir Zor, causing between 45 and 100 deaths in the ranks of pro-regime militants. Damascus called this act an "aggression" and "massacre". After this event, however, a Pentagon spokesman declared that Washington "does not seek a conflict with the regime." Hostilities began when fighters affiliated with the Assad regime crossed the Euphrates, in violation of the Russian-American agreement that made the river a dividing line: in the west the pro-regimes, supported by Moscow, and is the SDF, supported by the United States.

During the same period, the two main Syrian Kurdish political actors, the PYD and KNC, boycotted the Sochi Conference in Russia, called the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, in order to advance peace negotiations in Syria at the end of January. The PYD considered the Sochi Conference meaningless after Russia did not oppose Turkey's military offensive in Afrin while collaborating with Ankara. The KNC decided not to participate after Moscow refused to accept their demands, which mainly included the Kurdish cause in Syria to be one of the key agendas of the congress, and in light of Moscow's cooperation with Turkish offensive against Afrin.

The Turkish military operation against Afrin and the very recent failed Kurdish independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, showed that international and regional powers have no willingness to see any Kurdish national or autonomist aspirations come to fruition. It is evident that the previous support of Moscow and Washington for the YPG, and the YPG's support for the Russian air and military campaign alongside the Assad regime at the end of September 2015 did not prevent Ankara's military aggression against Afrin.

More broadly, the Afrin operation reflects the weakness of all democratic and progressive actors in the face of the Assad regime in Syria and its allies' destruction of the Syrian revolution, and the consequent renewed power of this regime, which has received acceptance by all international actors.

Conclusion

Support for self-determination, which can take diverse forms such as independence, federalism or recognition of the Kurdish people as an entity with equal rights within a state, must not mean being uncritical of the policies and collaboration with various imperialist countries by the various Kurdish leaderships of the Barzani clan, the PKK/PYD or any other Kurdish political parties.

Of course this is not to say that we consider these forces as similar. We can express, for example, critical support to the PKK/PYD "we can notably talk of positive policies regarding women's rights and secularism, among other things" while progressives should oppose the Barzani clan's neoliberal and conservative policies and their links with Israel.

However, collaboration by some Kurdish forces with imperialist forces can't be used to justify the refusal of the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people, as did some chauvinist leftists in the region. As the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin said:

The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another "Great" Power in its equally imperialist interests, should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy [the socialist movement of the time] to renounce its

recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous cases of the bourgeoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.

What is important to understand here is that Kurds in the past have been used by authoritarian regimes and imperialist actors to serve their interests before being sacrificed when these interests changed. This has occurred before and most probably will happen again.

In this perspective, the unity and independence of the popular and working classes without any forms of discrimination (race, religion, gender, etc.) in the region is of course the only way for the liberation and emancipation of all.

Workers' struggles alone will not, however, be sufficient to unite the working classes. Socialists in these struggles must also champion the liberation of all the oppressed. That requires raising demands for rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups.

Any compromise on the explicit commitment to such demands will impede the Left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society. This means also supporting the right to self-determination of the Kurdish populations throughout the region.

February 9, 2018

2018: Whither Hong Kong?

10 February 2018, by Promise Li

Demosisto is a movement-based party that stepped into the forefront of Hong Kong's political turmoil in the wake of the Umbrella Movement. The party was formed by the young stars of the 2014 social movement, leaders of the student activist group

Scholarism, Nathan Law, Joshua Wong, and Agnes Chow. With Chow's disqualification, the Hong Kong government has effectively barred thirteen localist and pro-independence leaders from taking political office since the Umbrella Movement.

Demosisto's Nathan Law won a seat in Legislative Council in 2016, but was quickly disqualified for taking his oath of office "improperly" (giving dissident speeches before taking his oath and taking the oath "in a questioning manner") and later

imprisoned for his participation in the Umbrella Movement occupations and protests.

Increasing Repression

Chow's disqualification marks a new era in the repression of pro-democracy political leaders in Hong Kong. Since the 1997 handover from Britain to China, long-time dissident leaders, ranging from left-wing social democrats to populist right-wing leaders critical of the Chinese government, have still been able to run and serve as Legislative Council members. The political heterogeneity of the dissident camp has led to unexpected alliances and splits, most exemplified in the recent schisms in the so-called social democratic party, League of Social Democrats (LSD). LSD was formed as a coalition of populist politicians known for their provocative direct action tactics both in and out of LegCo, including members like Leung "Long-hair" Kwok-hung (former member of the Trotskyist group and one-time Chinese section of the Fourth International Revolutionary Marxist League in the 70's) and right-wing populist Wong Yuk-man. Wong and many of the right-wing elements broke away from LSD in 2011, forming their own political party, People Power. The uneasy alliances and struggles in the pan-democratic camp, from LSD's internal political tensions, to the long-time establishment liberals like the Democratic Party and most recently, the youth-led Demosisto, reflect the contradictions and diversity of Hong Kong's democratic movement and civil society as a whole.

The Umbrella Revolution, as much as it reinvigorated a new generation of Hong Kong youth into political and civic engagement, also provided the opportunity for the government to launch a new wave of political repression. In the electoral scene, the "oath-taking controversy" last year led to the ousting of long-time elected LegCo members like Leung, and newer members like the social progressives Lau Siu-lai and Nathan Law and the right-wing populists Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching.

The "disappearances" of Lee Bo and other dissident Causeway Bay Books booksellers in late 2015 into Mainland China shocked the city, and Lee's subsequent testimony of his eight-month detention in China shed light on China's encroaching abuse of human rights in Hong Kong.

Disqualifying Democracy

The statement from the election committee detailing Chow's disqualification expresses the Chinese and Hong Kong governments' anti-democratic sentiment and audacity to openly challenge the basic autonomy and rights of the Hong Kong people. According to the release, Chow is ineligible for public office because of her stances on Hong Kong's self-determination. The release states:

"Self-determination' or changing the HKSAR system by referendum which includes the choice of independence is inconsistent with the constitutional and legal status of the HKSAR as stipulated in the Basic Law, as well as the established basic policies of the PRC regarding Hong Kong."

And thus, anyone who "advocates or promotes self-determination or independence by any means" would be unable to uphold the Basic Law and serve as a member of the Legislative Council.

The distinction between "independence" and "self-determination" is a central one in today's political climate in Hong Kong, and can become an important indicator of the ideological background of the different forces in the pan-democratic camp. With some exceptions, like Wong Yuk-man, who advocates for a fairly indefinite extension of the current "One Country Two Systems" arrangement, the right-wing nativist groups like Youngspiration tend toward a crudely formulated "nationalism" (a relatively new phenomenon in Hong Kong political history) in the name of the city's right to not only political autonomy, but also independent sovereignty. Chow and Demosisto distinguish themselves from these

groups in that they do not advocate for Hong Kong independence, but instead the right of citizens to choose their government, and push for "democratic self-determination" and "political and economic autonomy from the oppression of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and capitalist hegemony."

But even this distinction is sometimes lost in reality. Demosisto and Youngspiration emerged from the same political milieu, despite their ideological differences; both were the new lights of the Hong Kong mass movement in the early-2010's, and both suffered a similar fate in the oath-taking controversy that saw both parties' leaders democratically elected and unjustly deposed. For a newly-politicized generation of youth that spurred to action not on the basis of any Marxist political tradition but mainly in reaction to China's increasing authoritarianism, ideological distinctions between these groups are largely neglected, even by their leaders.

Chow's disqualification would further encourage the forgetting of these crucial ideological differences. The bigger implication in the decision to disqualify Chow's candidacy is that not only Demosisto leaders, but also other localists from left to right who have risen to prominence through the recent mass mobilizations, are now actively forbidden to hold any form of electoral political power. In other words, China is keen on directly attacking Hong Kong's democratic mass movement and controlling the HKSAR government as directly as possible.

Whither Hong Kong?

The increasingly dire political situation in Hong Kong reminds us that continuing to attend to the radical left critiques of the Umbrella Movement can be an effective place to find solutions. As in the Tiananmen Square massacre almost thirty years ago, the question of class participation and the intersection between the workers' movement and the larger mass movement is key. In both

Tiananmen and the Umbrella movement, working class support proved to be decisive, but the weakness of the labor movement in mobilizing freely and broadly in both instances stunted the potential of both mass upsurges.

As long-time Hong Kong-based labor activist Au Loong-yu notes, while many labor organizations and workers, including the 160,000 member strong and influential pro-democracy Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), joined the Umbrella Revolution, their ideological weakness and center-right drift into the aegis of liberal-democratic leadership and alliances obscured their voices and possibility for leadership and exercising real power. [79] The lobbying and organizing efforts of the other influential labor group, the pro-Beijing Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU), further divided workers' participation in the movement into opposing camps.

But the Hong Kong labor movement is far from being entirely compromised and ineffective. The widely-publicized 2013 Kwai Tsing dock workers' strike [80], led by the HKCTU-affiliate Union of Dock Workers, was one of the most effective and longest running labor actions in recent Hong Kong memory. The strike received unprecedented public support. Student groups like the Hong Kong Federation of Students and the small socialist collective Left 21 were among those who helped the workers by collecting supplies and raising funds for striking workers and their families. As a result, the workers and students disrupted operations in the world's third busiest port for more than a month.

As a rich and expansive article by the anarchist Nao blog explains,

"Though there was no immediate connection between the original Occupy, the strike and the present protests, it's clear that each was generated by the same economic stagnation and intensifying class antagonism. More importantly, each movement has created a shift in people's general political awareness, and this new awareness has become

the base of support for subsequent movements." [81]

In the face of the electoral defeats and setbacks, increasing organizing opportunities and political connection between the student-led social movements and workers' struggles must be pivotal. The losing battle in the war of position in the electoral sphere signals that progressives and radicals must turn toward building mass support on the ground level, and concretizing the ephemeral alliances between workers and students.

Outside of the electoral realm, the geography of Hong Kong allows for innovative anti-capitalist resistance strategies. One of the world's most compact and yet most cosmopolitan cities, Hong Kong's landscape expresses what social theorist Michel Foucault calls a "heterotopia," a single real space that may contain several other spaces. Direct actions like the dock workers' strike entail taking up real, local space through material struggle, and yet may cause immediate global ripples through the unique position of Hong Kong being a key international financial center.

Land ownership and territorial rights, especially the issues of gentrification and rampant development, are not only a frequent nexus of contention in China and Hong Kong, but also often draw the attention of different parts of the radical left and directly center the struggles of the most disenfranchised populations of the city. The Star Ferry protests in 2006 and the Hong Kong High-Speed Rail Link controversy in early 2010's directly spurred the growth of local grassroots left collectives such as Left 21 and the still-operating Land Justice League. The recent storming of the Legislative Council by activists over disputes in the New Territories land plan in 2014 and the public outburst toward the proposed Hong Kong-Guangzhou High Speed Rail Project last year demonstrate that problems of gentrification, land use, and territorial sovereignty remain a central point around which the left can organize and coalesce. [82]

Most importantly, developing solidarity between working-class and social movements in Hong Kong and

China continue to be essential. A new discourse of right-wing, anti-immigrant populism also played an influential role in the youth movements, fostered by the deep inefficacy of the C. K. Leung administration. Parties like Youngspiration, Hong Kong Indigenous, Civic Passion, and People Power, which advocate for an exclusionary and uncritical sense of Hong Kong independence and sometimes even look to Hong Kong's colonial past in nostalgia, often played active roles in the popular movements of the past decade. We must maneuver away from and out-organize these forces in order to re-center the conversation on working-class solidarity between China and Hong Kong and the city's political autonomy.

An Anti-Capitalist Hong Kong

Hong Kong played a central role in China's rapid turn toward capitalism, or "socialism with Chinese characteristics," from the 70's onward. From early Chinese investments in HK-based companies in the 90's to China developing their first offshore renminbi hub right in Hong Kong, Hong Kong has long been a place of capitalist experimentation for the PRC regime. Hong Kong's social and political ills must not be seen in isolation from China's developing neoliberal policies and concomitant labor problem. China's ever-expanding bubble of rural migrant labor may not prove sustainable with the party's rigid authoritarianism and expanding neoliberal economy. [83]

The Wen Jiabao-era "harmonious society" reforms and even Xi's recent reforms to the oppressive hukou system merely put a bandage on a broken bone. Un-sanctioned violent strikes have been increasing, and despite the inability to sustain a broad labor movement, many instances of cross-factory or even cross-city strikes and demonstrations have occurred. Given the deep economic interdependence between Hong Kong and China, the elephant in the room for Hong Kong's pan-democracy camp is that any real systemic change in Hong Kong is unlikely unless we can

build room for solidarity with the working class, students, and activists in China.

In the international context, Hong Kong's democratic resistance is also important because the city is an opening to China, which occupies a unique position in the global economy. As a rapidly developing capitalist superpower and alternative to U.S. imperialist hegemony, China is also carving out its own brand of imperialism and capitalist hegemony. For one, China's 62 billion dollar investment into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has raised speculations that the project will lead to unsustainable debt for Pakistan. For a 'communist' country whose late

premier Zhou Enlai once espoused the 'Principles of Foreign Aid' that were lauded by the left as visionary and equitable, China has degenerated into what it had once condemned. [84]

In this light, the struggle for democratic and economic rights in Hong Kong becomes an important conjuncture in the larger movement to overturn China's new capitalism. Demosisto's steady demise over the past year with the arrests and/or electoral disqualification of most of its leaders forces us to critically re-examine the legacy of the Umbrella Movement and next steps. Demosisto is by no means a radical or revolutionary party in any sense; the

Umbrella Movement student leaders' turn toward electoral politics and increasingly diplomatic relationship with the United States signal that another model for mass resistance against Chinese authoritarianism is needed. But, we must acknowledge their pivotal role at the forefront of the mass mobilization in the past few years. Perhaps a whole new terrain of struggle is necessary, one that might be unearthed precisely not by forgetting the valiant vanguard of the early-2000's mass upsurge, but by learning from its contradictions, errors, and successes.

February 8, 2018

[Solidarity](#)

Campaign for ecological development in Rojava

9 February 2018, by Jürgen Holst

Through enormous sacrifices, the Kurdish people have liberated large areas in the North West of Syria, (which they call Rojava) from the stranglehold of Daesh and the Syrian state. The bitter struggles around the Kurdish town Kobane that was liberated in January 2015 are the best known of these sacrifices. During the withdrawal, ISIS destroyed everything. Towns, fields, agricultural equipment and seed has been destroyed, burned down in order to make reconstruction more difficult.

Now these areas are being rebuilt. Several projects have been launched in order to assist the population in the liberated areas to rise again. German activists have collected to start to build a hospital in Kobane. Danish activists have assisted, among other things, by donating important hospital equipment. School projects have been started around Kobane - a minimum of 10 schools including school gardens, cooperatives, several with a specific women/feminist perspective in order to further economic independence of

women which can be seen [here](#).

In August of 2016, a university was opened in the capital Qamishli in Cezire Canton, which collaborates with, amongst others, with the university Paris 8. [85].

But there is still a long way to go.

The Kurdish liberated areas suffer from a very damaging trade embargo from all their neighbours - Turkey, Iraq and Daesh/Assad in Syria. For eighteen months, consequently, it has been almost impossible to trade commodities, to send post and emergency aid or to enter the liberated areas. As the Assad regime controls all Kurdish passports, people are prevented from traveling to establish collaboration/trade with other countries.

In order for the reconstruction to succeed, it is essential that agriculture and food production is started as soon as possible. Production fell dramatically because of a wide spread

shortage of fertilizers and pesticides. Conversion to ecological cultivation methods could give higher yields as would the use of untilled land. This would also create greater independence from Rojava's reactionary neighbours and their embargoed goods.

The Kurdish authorities have, despite the enormous challenges, declared that they want to further a change to ecological sustainable agricultural production.

An ecological agricultural school project

An international and Danish reconstruction project is focusing on furthering the development of ecological agriculture in Rojava.

In August 2015, an initiating group of Danish ecologists, sympathizers and Kurds initiated a

Danish/Kurdish/international Solidarity and Support Association; "Ecological Rojava" which works to further an international ecological agricultural school project in Rojava. The agriculture School has several elements and partial projects:

- Building an agricultural school in Rojava in the long term.
- Planting trees and berry producing bushes for shelter s in drought stricken grain producing areas.
- Assisting the development of a Kurdish-speaking ecological agricultural education in Rojava for instance by furthering international academic collaboration of ecological knowledge and methods.
- exchange of knowledge about work environment, sustainable energy and cooperatives.
- Helping produce ecological quality food which could be sold locally.
- Participating in giving inspiration in collaboration with other liberated Kurdish cantons on the development of ecological agriculture.

The school must support the education of ecological farmers in the area so that they can later start their own local ecological farms or cooperatives.

The trip to Rojava May 2017

To establish a network in Rojava and further the development of the agricultural school project, two people from "Ecological Rojava" went on a trip to Rojava for a week in May 2017. They undertook the journey with a Danish/Kurdish doctor and nurse, who provided a sizeable amount of medical equipment for the Kurdish hospitals in Rojava.

"Ecological Rojava" visited several Kurdish authorities, agricultural commissions, the university in Qamishli and local farmers to present the idea of attempting the development of ecological farming and in the long term, an ecological agricultural school. Even though the ruling political parties, such as PYD

(the Democratic Unity Party) and authorities on the highest level want ecological change, a fundamental knowledge of ecological cultivation methods and techniques are absent; even at university level in Rojava.

We stayed in a rehabilitation centre/military hospital approximately 2 km from the Turkish border. The centre received mentally or physically wounded soldiers (soldiers in the sense of those involved in guerrilla warfare) from the Kurdish self-defence forces, YPG and YPJ (the women's organisation). At the rehabilitation centre, the less unfortunate soldiers assisted those who were badly wounded under medical supervision of a doctor in the production of plaster and wooden artificial limbs for hands, arms and legs lost in combat. They also helped each other training in the use of these new limbs. Additionally, a psychologist worked at the centre to relieve trauma. Everybody wore uniforms, except the psychologist. They also had small vegetable gardens the wounded soldiers could look after during their convalescence.

Many of the young wounded soldiers were in the early twenties and had no family; their parents had disappeared, been imprisoned in Turkey or other places. Some had joined the YPG to participate in the struggle against intolerance and Islamic State's atrocities, for freedom, internationalism, the right to free cultural structures, democracy and socialism.

Although they did find time for humour and laughter, there was an aura around them of restrained seriousness and sorrow, rooted in their personal stories. As a 24-year-old soldier, whose wife had been killed at a rally right in front of him by the Turkish military in their hometown, with a small tear in one eye, quietly remarked at midnight before he left our room with his rifle on his shoulder for a mission: "War sucks!" The YPG and the Kurdish democratic project had become his family.

The distance between these young soldier's stories/reality and the Turkish, Saudi Arabian and Western media's one-eyed and stereotyped need to depict impoverished Kurds at

the bottom of society as dangerous terrorists is immense. Unfortunately, the Kurdish hospitals lack much necessary medicine and medical equipment that our western NATO-allies, ISIS and Northern Iraq's embargoes keep out.

Democracy in Rojava

The concept of "Democratic Confederalism" that the Kurds have developed and fight for has an anarchistic history from the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. Today it has the practical consequence of approximately 500 autonomous local "basic popular assemblies" of not more than 200 participants who control and defend themselves. Local assemblies elect delegates for the next autonomous "town popular assembly" - level, where they elect delegates for "city- and district popular assemblies" which elect - as the final level - delegates for the three autonomous cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Cizire. Otherwise, there is no national state. The capital Qamishli is in the autonomous canton Cizire.

The concept of "Democratic Confederalism" has an in-built idea of basic democracy, ethnic diversity and feminist approach to the organisation of society, citizen's influence and leadership practise. As was the case during the Paris Commune, the delegates can be withdrawn and they are not paid for their participation in the democratic system - not even at the highest level.

As we all know, all the posts in the leadership have a double function? - at least: male and female and usually ethnic co-leadership too. We encountered this type of democratic structure in all the committees, canton parliaments etc. we met. We also met a female leader from a non-socialist party who obviously had an entirely different vision for Rojava than PYD's socialist position, but she told us that she could participate in the democratic forums, like everybody else.

These reflections from one week's stay should of course not to be taken as the

only truth. Many things that we may not have grasped, can have taken place. Nevertheless, the various political representatives we met confirmed these experiences.

Just like PYD's support according to their own statements varies from 50 - 60 percent in the various autonomous cantons, depending on the different populations groups' positions, maturity etc. They state that Barzani's sister party in Syria - that cooperates with Barzani's non-socialist Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in Northern Iraq, and with the Turks in Northern Iraq that are behind the trade embargo against Rojava and allows the Turks to bomb PKK in Iraq, instead of helping their Kurdish brothers and sisters, are represented with various degrees of strength in the three cantons. That the KPD, which is completely corrupt in Iraq, operates in Syria and governs the federal provinces in Northern Iraq with economic support from Turkey, is allowed to participate in the various popular assemblies in Rojava does say something about the democratic disposition of PYD. Hundreds of arguments for proven injurious activities supported by the KDP are available, but this hasn't led to their expulsion from democratic Rojava. This autumn there are new rounds of elections to the various autonomous popular assemblies and areas. It is going to be interesting to see how the relative strength in Rojava may have moved and which political projects it will evolve when, before long, ISIS is chased out of Raqqa.

We talked to international activists, who had travelled from, for instance, Denmark or the USA to Rojava to support the Kurdish troops for self-defence, the YPG that involves many different ethnic groups and sacrifices life and livelihood to liberate Kurds and other ethnic or religious groups (Assyrians, Arabs, Christian Yezidis etc.) and defend the democratic construction of the areas. After a brief trainee period of a month, with only a small focus on the military part, foreign supporters are placed in different parts of the self-defence troops according to their wishes, if they have any.

When we drove through the capital,

Qamishli, by night, there were no traffic lights or street lamps, but out of the dark by every crossing a number of AK-47-armed Asayish (local security troops) appeared - quite undramatically - and made sure that the drivers had peaceful intentions. Our own chauffeurs - who also carried an AK-47 - greeted their comrades undramatically, so that we could move around effortlessly. This was a hugely peaceful experience in a region, where obviously the entire society is in a state of military alert due to the war just a few hundred kilometres away. By the frontier, 20.000 SDF soldiers (Syrian Democratic Forces) under the leadership of YPG had just recently won a battle for the extremely important town, Al Tabqa and the Euphrat dam, which was the last big ISIS-town before the ISIS-stronghold Raqqa. The battle of Raqqa has been going on for a while and SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) are mobilising to send in nearly 35.000 soldiers (more or less half their troops) while I write these lines. The Kurds make these sacrifices, even though Al Tabqa and Raqqa are quite a distance from the traditional Kurdish areas in Rojava!

The Kurdish project in Rojava has, during the revolution, developed to incorporate political visions and democratic structures that reach far outside the "traditional Kurdish areas." The visions of feminism, ecological change and democratic confederalism (originally an American/anarchist influence on Abdullah Å-calan who is held by the Turkish state on the prison island, Imrali and subsequently on the PKK and PYD in Rojava) has now become a common unifying vision and perspective for many of the conflicts in the Middle East if you ask the ideologists in PYD. The vision is not particularly Kurdish, but can embrace all oppressed ethnic groups and persons. It will be interesting to see if "democratic confederalism" can be established in areas where the Kurds are small minorities in comparison with other ethnic groups and what Assad will come up with when the fights die down and he maybe gets the opportunity to regain power over larger areas in Syria.

We gave presentations about cooperatives and Danish experiences

with the development of co-operative agricultural companies in different agricultural commissions in Rojava and presented short videos about mechanical weed control in Danish ecological fields. We also established some ecological farming to test the use of nitrogen fixating crops in the university garden, since the ecological plant based fertilising principles are virtually unknown in Rojava. We are planning a new visit later this year to develop further our cooperation in Rojava, visit and document other attempts with ecological change from international activists in the liberated areas and launch more eco-field projects.

Our parallel work with the development of an international academic network at university level between Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France and Qamishli is essential for the accumulation of knowledge and farming techniques for ecological agriculture in Rojava and for it to spread in society subsequently.

Join the campaign!

We made half of a documentary on our trip to Rojava, which is now part of the information- and solidarity work in Denmark, Sweden and Germany. Teasers are available in Danish and English at our [website](#) and on [Facebook](#) .

Everybody who wants take part in building up one or more of these solidarity projects is very welcome to join the campaign. For instance, our organisation needs people with fundraising, social media and international campaign as well as international academic networking skills.

All national as well as international activists who wish to support a sustainable development of ecological agriculture and renewable energy in Rojava can become members of "Ecological Rojava" for 200 kr./27 Euro per 6 months by depositing the money in "Merkur Andelskasse": reg.: 8401 Account No.: 1268160.

Learn more about the project at the [English website here](#).

The rightward drift of SYRIZA

8 February 2018, by **Antonis Davanellos**

By that date, the government will have to avoid two reefs. On the one hand, the "stress tests" on Greek banks (National Bank of Greece, Piraeus Bank, Alpha Bank and Eurobank), where it hopes the creditors and the European Union Commission will accept the application of less stringent criteria in order to avoid a new recapitalization of banks that would explode the optimistic vision of the Greek economy currently being disseminated. On the other hand, the communications strategy of Tsipras who, despite all the problems, is already preparing for the next elections. The 4th evaluation (spring 2018), which will lead to further austerity measures, is still in prospect.

Provided that the government manages to overcome these risks, it could hope to obtain a promise of measures "easing" the Greek debt, mainly a larger spread over time of the essential repayments. In all cases, the creditors for the moment say that the debate on the debt will be officially opened after August 2018.

It should be noted that the formal end of the 3rd memorandum does not mean the end of the brutal memoranda policies. As was explicitly agreed during the Tsipras signature of the 3rd memorandum, all laws, rules and regulations, associated with the memorandum, all the neoliberal counter-reforms of the last eight years, will remain in force, as will the "surveillance" of the economy until 2060 (that is, until at least 75% of the debt is reimbursed).

The "omnibus bill"

The arrangements put in place during the third evaluation included several brutal measures. The most

controversial article in this law is the one that allows banks and administrations to proceed electronically with the auctioning of the homes of families who are unable to pay their debts. The government has already tried to conduct large numbers of auctions.

But it has encountered significant resistance, with mobilizations (within which Popular Unity - LAE - has played a leading role) which have prevented the courts holding hearings and making auction decisions. The government has attempted repression, and failed miserably, leading to ever more numerous protesters in front of and inside the courts. Also, the appearance of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) in these actions, after much delay, has helped to cement the belief that we can defeat the government on this question, crucial for the banks and creditors. The government is trying to avoid this clash by organizing auctions in hundreds of notary offices across the country. But the auction programme involves such a large number of cases that there is realistic hope that the resistance movement will move to the neighbourhoods to fight the battle to halt evictions

An emblematic reactionary turn was also seen in the radical change in the law which governs the right to strike. This law was won through intense labour struggles during the period after the fall of the dictatorship [1974]. Today, a government which is left in name only has decided that for a strike to be declared, 50% +1 workers in a company or branch must be present and approve the decision to go on strike. Such a regulation was for decades the wish of the most extreme capitalist leaders, a wish that seemed

until now unachievable.

Undoubtedly, the "omnibus bill" contains many other critical measures, such as major cuts in family allowances and pensions, as well as further facilitating privatization within "strategic sectors" such as electricity or water.

Strike

This government policy has been systematically supported by the trade union bureaucracies in the public and private sectors that, under the leadership of a coalition of cadres from PASOK, New Democracy and SYRIZA, have done everything to prevent serious mobilizations. Thus, the big confederations have refrained from strike action leaving workers who intended to engage in such struggles without protection and support.

All the weight has fallen on the shoulders of the rank and file unions where the left is a motor force. But, even at this level, the attitude of the KKE, proposing a one day strike at the time of the "suitcase law" vote, without prior mobilizations, reduced the importance of this strike, transforming it into symbolic action "for honour". Taking account of all this, we believe that participation in the strike was larger than expected, but largely insufficient in terms of what would have been needed to stop the government offensive.

The strike enjoyed particular support in public transport (almost 100%) and in the navigation sector. Nevertheless, this transport strike was an obstacle to getting to the places where the demonstrations were called. Thus, gatherings were attended mainly by

determined left political activists.

Once again, the post-2015 experience has been confirmed in Greece: people are indignant and angry, but for now this does not translate into direct mass action, because of the lasting disappointment caused by the defeat of 2015, and the lack of a convincing political alternative to end brutal austerity.

The drift to the right

Tsipras, capitalizing on the popular and working-class disappointment, is rapidly shifting his social base and turning towards the dominant classes. SYRIZA has already organized around it an alliance with the circle of capitalists it called before 2015 “the dark side of entrepreneurship”. Capitalists who have built fortunes in various trades, gambling, money laundering, a strong presence in football and who, always, depend on good relations with respective governments.

SYRIZA is extending its relations with the most traditional “families” of the bourgeoisie, thus taking advantage of its relations with the banks and a specific instrumentalization of privatization. That is to say, it takes care, while attracting foreign investment, to secure a place and a role for indigenous capitalists as “local partners” of international funds and transnational corporations, claiming to withstand, in the face of the superior forces of the “international markets”, a “de Hellenization of companies”.

But mainly, the SYRIZA leadership stresses stability, arguing that the SYRIZA-ANEL government has applied the memorandum provisions while significantly reducing the reactions of the working masses, by establishing a climate of peace in the country for the first time in years.

The ambition to serve the interests of the dominant class as a whole is extended, and not by chance, to support for the most inflexible inclinations of Greek nationalism in the region. The government, headed by defence minister Panos Kammenos

(Anel) and Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias (SYRIZA), has had no problem in continuing the policies of the right in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean: open support for the United States, the intensification of NATO’s presence in the Aegean Sea, strengthening of the “axis” with Israel and with the Sissi dictatorship, with the aim of isolating Erdogan’s Turkey, seen as unstable and ambivalent. The aim of this is that Greece would gain a share in the oil and gas in the eastern and south-eastern Mediterranean, and would see a strengthening of their centre of gravity in terms of developments and prospects in Cyprus.

Recently Greek diplomacy has turned to the western Balkans, with the aim of resolving the dispute with the Republic of Macedonia about its “name”, on the terms dictated by the Greek state. With the full support of the United States, the EU and NATO, the Greek “negotiators” require a new name for the neighbouring country, a “composite name” (apparently “Nova Makedonja”) which would replace that of “Republic of Macedonia” for all uses (inside the country and internationally, in official language as in everyday life), which would be written in the Cyrillic alphabet and used internationally without being translated or conjugated.

The change of the name of the neighbouring state should be compulsorily referred to in the characterisation of its language and that of citizenship. This absurd violation of the right of democratic self-determination is solely intended to guarantee the exclusive Greek use of the term Macedonia. The “arrangement” has as its real objective the immediate integration of the Republic of Macedonia into NATO (presumably at the next summit in July 2018) and the start of the process of its integration into the EU.

The real negotiation was between the great Western powers and the Greek state, on the guarantees which would be sufficient for the lifting of the veto on Macedonia’s joining NATO issued by the Karamanlis government during the Bucharest Summit in 2008. That is why today NATO and the EU are

putting relentless pressure on Zoran Zaev’s government (using even the influence of the Albanian parties with little concern for “Macedonian” self-determination), so that it accepts the conditions laid down by Greece, indicating to the Skopje government that “there is no alternative”.

By following this policy, and by the assertion that the extension of NATO in the Balkans will strengthen peace (!) and democracy (!) in the region, the Tsipras government is striving to include in its balance sheet a “national success”, by the resolution, on the basis of the line of the United States, of a problem that has stagnated for decades. [86]

These tactical moves put pressure on the leadership of New Democracy, incarnated by Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Being aware of the benefits expected by Greek capitalism, Mitsotakis is maintaining a “responsible attitude”. But the right wing of the party and the nationalist far right beyond New Democracy are reacting at the ideological level, organizing nationalist gatherings in January in Thessaloniki, with 100,000 protesters according to the police, in collaboration with the Orthodox Church. But even they take care not to raise their tone too much: so as not to scuttle government policy by provocations on the one hand, and on the other so as not to reduce the prospects for a New Democracy election victory. [87]

This is a real incursion of Tsipras into the political project of the right. Through this, SYRIZA tries to compensate for the loss of its influence among the popular and working-class layers, or to reduce it. However, there is every reason to believe that this tactic has had no spectacular results, or not yet anyway. As one radical critical analyst has put it, Tsipras is on the way to a political and electoral battle where he will learn that the weak resistance of the popular classes is one thing, but their assent, even if only electoral, is something else.

What is still needed in Greek politics, from the point of view of the interests of the workers, is the creation of a massive pole of the radical left, which

would serve as a point of reference for important sectors that supported

SYRIZA but are today disappointed by

its politics and by its accelerated movement to the right.

Thinking politics

6 February 2018, by Daniel Bensaïd

Praxis: In the lecture you gave in Buenos Aires, in the offices of CLACSO [88] you mentioned the fact that globalization does not eliminate the paradigms with which we think about politics, but that it does upset the whole system of ideas of the era of modernity that opened up in the eighteenth century. To what extent have these concepts been reformulated, or more precisely, what should we reformulate and with what consequences for the socialist class struggle?

Daniel Bensaïd: I only wanted to underline the scale of the change of epoch. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR, historians talk a great deal about the "short twentieth century", as if it was simply a case of a parenthesis opened by World War Two and the Russian Revolution and closed with what they consider to be "the end of communism". This periodization enables Marx to be treated as a dead dog, by presenting the return of the liberal philosophers of the seventeenth century (Hobbes, Locke) and Tocqueville, as well as the founding fathers of the United States, as the last word in political philosophy. Furthermore, it is remarkable that the 1990s were marked in the intellectual debate (in Europe at least) by the return in force of this philosophy, which aims at reducing politics to a moral manager, by suppressing the conflicting charge of the social question. Alain Badiou put great stress on this in *Peut-on penser politique* (1985) and his *Métapolitique* (1998), as well, moreover, as Jacques Rancière in *Au bord du politique*.

In reality, the problem is much more profound. What globalization is

shaking up is the whole of the modern political paradigm that was constituted and systematized, from the English Revolution of Cromwell to the French Revolution: the concepts of sovereignty, territory, borders, the people, the nation, interstate international law, national wars, were articulated in order to provide the framework of political thought.

We find a very interesting illustration in Foucault's lecture on "Security, Territory, Population", which deals precisely with this period. What is important is that the (revolutionary) politics of subversion of the established order used practically same approach by turning it round: citizenship - but social; sovereignty - but popular; liberation of territory; socialism, state or national, etc. This is absolutely banal in the relations of subalternity (such as Gramsci very well understood them). But it is also what determined the great strategic hypotheses of the experiences of the Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions (as well as the defeats of the German and Spanish revolutions in the 1920s and 1930s).

The insurrectional general strike (the hypothesis of October) had as its aim taking control of the seat of a centralized state power: the capital ("head") of the nation transformed into a Commune (not only of Paris in 1871, but of Petrograd in 1917, Hamburg in 1923, Barcelona in 1937, etc.). The prolonged popular war had as its aim the liberation of territories, leading to a territorially institutionalized dual power. It is obviously a case of extreme "models" or ideal types, whose reality always presents us with hybrid variations, and that is why I prefer the more flexible (because subject to the test of

practice) term of strategic hypotheses.

However, from the beginning, (the Thatcher/Reagan years) of the counter-attack and the liberal counter-reform, the strategic debate seemed to have fallen to level zero until quite recently (what I would call an eclipse of strategic reasoning) being replaced by on the one hand, stoical rhetoric of resistance ("hold fast", don't give in, keep the faith, faced with the unacceptable, even without any longer believing that another world is possible); and on the other by what I call a theology of miraculous events (Badiou, and in more nuanced forms, Holloway or Negri). It is precisely because the categories in which the revolutionary experiences of the past have been theorized, without being completely outdated, and especially without having been replaced, are becoming insufficient to think politically about the present. I will take just two examples.

Every strategy implies questions of space and time, and a dialectic between the two (summed up well by Mao's formula: give up space to gain time). For two centuries, the opposing classes have confronted each other (not exclusively, but principally) in a common strategic space, that is, the national sphere delimited by its frontiers and centralized by a state. Of course, we have lived for a long time in a plurality of spaces: domestic, the neighborhood or village, the region, the nation, the continent and the world. But among these spaces, there was in a way a dominant space: the national space.

Contrary to what Negri and Hardt tend to say, it has not disappeared, but it increasingly overlaps with continental or global spaces, on the one hand, and on the other it is

disaggregated by policies of so-called decentralization. Furthermore, different social layers of the population tend to evolve in different spaces of representation and representations of space: while the European élites who follow the indexes of the Tokyo and New York Stock Exchanges and who feel at home in international airports have a lived experience of the European or world space, it seems likely that young people confined to suburban ghettos and whose families are recent migrants live in another spatial dimension. In particular, it is not sure (given the crisis of the education system and the massive level of precarious work) that they conceive the national sphere as a concrete reference, or that the European space is for them anything else than a monetary space: the space in which they live is probably split between the limited horizon of the neighbourhood or the housing estate and the imaginary space of the country of origin (which most of them have not known and to which they will not return) or a space, just as imaginary, of a religious community.

Defining a common strategic space, in which the national level remains the decisive link, thus presupposes a sort of sliding scale of strategic spaces that closely articulates actions at the local, national and international levels, even more closely than did the theory of permanent revolution (which was, however a pioneer in this field). That is why, having more or less assimilated into revolutionary thought the notions of non-contemporaneity, of setbacks, of the discordance of times, it seems to me just as necessary today to think about the production and discordance of spaces. The work of Lefebvre and David Harvey can help us.

The second example to examine more deeply (there would be others) would be that of the "revolutionary subject".

I do not claim here (I have tried elsewhere) to deal with the plurality and strategic unity of social movements, but rather with representation in terms of the subject, a category which is also a part of what I have called the political paradigm of modernity which emerged, among

other things, with the Cartesian ego. This category is to a certain extent in solidarity with classical psychology and its relation to politics (citizenship, civic consciousness, the opinion of the elector, etc.). In fact, the great subjects of revolutionary change - the three capital P's in particular: People, Proletariat, Party - have been fantasized as great collective subjects, with consequently a debatable dialectic of the in-itself and the for-itself, of the conscious and the unconscious. The problem should be posed differently today: how from a multiplicity of actors who can be brought together by a common negative interest (of resistance to the commodification and privatization of the world), can we make a strategic force of transformation, without resorting to this dubious metaphysics of the subject. However, I point out that, for me, the class struggle is not one form of conflict among others, but the vector that can traverse other antagonisms and overcome the closed character of clan, party, race, etc. (I addressed these questions in *Cambiar el Mundo*, published in Spanish).

All this to say that the new cycle, still in its infancy, initiated fifteen years ago, does not aim at a return to pre- (or counter-) revolutionary political philosophies (even the return to the Enlightenment, when we counterpose its abstract humanism to the French Revolution and the Terror, may become reactionary), but a deepening and broadening of Marx's legacy (the actuality of which is that of *Capital* itself) to the test of capitalist globalization. As Derrida said: no future without Marx. With, against, or beyond, but not without him. This does not mean a religious pilgrimage to the sources of an original Marxism, but it does mean that we will not think about the present without passing by it, so true is it, as Deleuze repeated, that we "always start again by the middle".

Praxis: How should we think of a "sliding scale of strategic spaces" and how can we associate it with the concept of spatial-temporal reformulation studied by David Harvey?

Daniel Bensaïd: I have already referred to the usefulness that Harvey's problematics can have in this

regard. But I think it's a matter of drawing the political consequences. I will take an example of this sliding scale, a little mysterious if we remain on the level of generalities, in the case of France and Europe. I believe, unlike Negri, as I said in the previous question, that the national link remains important, because the nation-state is weakened, but it has not disappeared. It continues to structure the relationship of social forces (the labour market remains segmented nationally and does not have the fluidity of the movement of goods and capital). These relationships of forces are partly embedded in legal relations (social rights, social protection systems, labour code) determined by national histories and the corresponding social struggles.

Moreover, even though a growing part of law is produced at European level, it is still the states that must decide (unanimously on most issues, or by qualified majority). Likewise, more than 90 per cent of international law remains treaty law, i.e. interstate law, in the absence of supranational constitutional or legislative power.

Thus, if the referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty (which is indeed a treaty ratifiable by states) had taken place by majority vote in a common European space, it is likely that the "yes" to the liberal treaty would have won and would have been law for all member countries, including those (such as France or Holland) where it would have been in a minority. On the other hand, the "no" victory in France and Holland reveals (more than it produces) a crisis of the liberal software of European construction, modifies the balance of power, de-legitimizes liberal policies, and can serve as leverage or encouragement for the struggle in neighbouring countries whose population unenthusiastically perceived the treaty as a fatality to be resigned to. The national level remains important, especially as a point of support for the defence of social benefits, and is not necessarily "nationalist" or "chauvinist" as Negri seemed to believe.

On the contrary, in France, the "left no" prevailed over the "right no",

opposing it in particular on the issue of immigration, solidarity with undocumented migrants, opposition to the war in Iraq and counterposing a project of a social and democratic Europe to liberal Europe. But at the same time, when it comes to formulating, beyond the "defence of social gains", transitional proposals for a counter-offensive - on public services, on the common currency, on budgetary policies, on harmonization of social rights, ecological policies, etc. - we must take the initiative at least at European level, because it is at that level that we can today effectively implement an economic and social relaunch, an ecological development of the territory, a public transport network, an energy policy, etc.

At the same time, competitive liberal decentralization at the regional level (transferring budgetary responsibility in the fields of education or social amenities to the regions) must be opposed by self-management and democratic decentralization. And also on questions such as health policies, environmental agreements, and even more so military issues.

In fact, the discordance of spaces does not only concern a political scale, but the dissociation of different spatial functions. Let us take the space of the European Union. There is an institutional space (the Brussels Commission and the Strasbourg Parliament), a judicial and police area (called Schengen), a military space, more than one, even (NATO, but also intra-European pacts), a legal space (the Luxembourg Court), not to mention the "enhanced cooperation" which associates a variable number of partner countries according to the themes concerned. These different spaces are not superimposable. They cover in each case different territorial units and associate different state partners.

That is why it seems to me, even though the level of the national states remains decisive in the chain of powers, that we must get used to a kind of strategic gymnastics in order to intervene simultaneously at these different levels and to make strategic alliances from the point of view of the oppressed.

Praxis: In recent years, two very different theoretical spaces have had a significant impact. One refers to what is usually called autonomism, which has emphasized the idea of "dispersion of power," anti-power and the idealized celebration of disorganized and horizontal spontaneity. The other values political action as the moment of the contingent event. Post-Marxism, in particular, structures its theory through discursive articulatory spaces, constitutive of hegemonies, but refuses any social anchoring for its articulatory practices. What remains as spaces between the spontaneous and anti-state territory of autonomism and politics without social anchoring or structural determinants, expressed both in the unexpected and a-conditional event of Badiou, and in the previously mentioned "contingent pluralism" of Laclau?

Daniel Bensaid: I have often written, especially in controversies around the books of Negri and Holloway, that there is, in these rhetorics of anti-power (or changing the world without taking power) rather the sign of a difficulty (or powerlessness) than the beginning of a solution. The "dispersion of powers" has a part, but only a part, of truth, insofar as the formula records a multiplication of forms, places, and power relations. But in this dispersion, all powers are not equivalent: state power and the power of property are not soluble in networks (or rhizomes) of powers, and they remain central strategic questions. Moreover, while these discourses on spontaneity, decentralized action, a "logic of affinities" opposed to the "logic of hegemony" (this is the theme of a recent book by Richard Day in Canada), liquid society against solid society, etc., while all these discourses pretend to thwart the pitfalls of the hegemony of capital over the forms of opposition of the dominated, in reality flexible network movements only reflect again the flexible and reticular organization of globalized capital.

Beyond your question about Badiou (I published in a recent issue of *Contretemps* a critical interview with him on this theme), it seems to me that two types of philosophical issues have, since the 1980s, valiantly expressed a refusal to capitulate and

submit to the (liberal) climate of the times. On the one hand, a categorical imperative of resistance (in France among writers inspired by Foucault, such as Françoise Proust - and myself if you look at the titles of some of my books: *Eloge de la résistance À l'air du temps*, *Theorèmes de la Résistance*, *Résistances*, *Essai de taupologie générale...*). On the other hand, taking a bet on the unconditioned event, appearing suddenly from nothingness, resembling a miracle, which seems to me present in Badiou even if he sometimes qualifies this approach. Besides, many of Negri's and Badiou's writings have a clearly theological tone. The important thing is that if the event comes out of nothing, if nothing announces it or prepares it, if there are only post-event and not pre-event subjectivities, then all strategic thought and organization become impossible. Only "fidelity to the event" remains, once it has happened.

Praxis: In your book *Marx for Our Times* [89] you come back to fundamental themes addressed by Lenin on national crises, decisive opportunities and finally you save politics as an art, against social determinism or the philosophy of history. But does this insistence on revalorizing the validity of revolutionary political action not to a certain extent weaken politics as spaces of everyday power?

Let me explain myself: the fashion of contingent, timeless, unforeseen policies neglects to the point of making them disappear, the power struggles in which every moment of the day-to-day class struggle is located. Rancière, for example, rejecting the idea that "everything is political", considers that the domination of capital in everyday life falls within the sphere of norms of government, but not, properly speaking, politics. In the camp of Marxism, do we not run the risk of depoliticizing the forces and resources of permanent power, giving especially importance to decisive moments and revolutionary conjunctures? After all, according to Gramsci only an accumulation of long-term social and political forces, political education and the constitution of hegemony can resolve an unexpected revolutionary

crisis favourably. How can we combine the patient accumulation of political fields of force and the violent irruption of the revolutionary crisis?

Daniel Bensaïd: Your question is huge and raises a lot of problems at the same time.

1. Benjamin's formula that "politics now takes precedence over history" is, in its brevity, fraught with major consequences. It eliminates a deterministic conception of history, or a secularized form of predestination towards a paradise regained. If politics takes precedence over history, the outcome of the struggle is never decided in advance. The present is not a simple link in the temporal chain that would necessarily flow from the past and prepare an equally necessary future. It is a moment, fully political, of decision between several possibles. Hence the importance of the event. But the event is not a miracle coming from nowhere (from the "Void", according to Žižek or Badiou). It fits into a field of possibilities that is historically determined. That is why the concept of crisis (unlike the "Void") is an essential strategic concept that articulates the necessary and the contingent, the historical conditions and the unpredictable event, etc. As Gramsci aptly pointed out, we can only foresee the struggle, not its outcome.

2. From this follows the answer to the relationship (the link) between the movement and the goal, the daily struggle and the strategic target of the struggle for power. When Rancière and Badiou talk about the scarcity of politics as opposed to the "police" of ordinary management (Rancière), or as opposed to any institution whatsoever (Badiou - in the same way that he counterposes truth, which is precisely of the order of the revelation of the event, to knowledge), they reduce politics to exceptional moments, to intermittent illuminations, which make it difficult to conceive permanent action in everyday life, the accumulation of forces, action on the relationship of forces, in short the articulation between strategy and tactics. In Badiou's case, for example, there is the principled opposition to any electoral participation, whereas,

although the electoral terrain is full of traps, it is nevertheless a constituent of the overall relationships of forces.

Marx sometimes flirts, in his own way and in a very different context, with this intermittent conception of politics reserved for moments of a rise of the social movement or moments of open crisis (1848-1852, 1864-1872). That is why, in periods of ebb, he dissolved organizations that had become nests of petty intrigues (the League of Communists, then the First International). One can say that his thought, extraordinary in its powerful critique of the existing order, remains in an embryonic state - in relation to the nascent state of the labour movement in his time - on the strategic plane (*The 18th Brumaire*, the writings on the Commune...). The "revolution in the revolution" is Lenin, thinker of the continuity - political and organizational - between the movement and the ultimate goal (I refer you to this point in my article on politics as a strategic art in *Cambiar el Mundo*). It is he that systematizes the concepts of revolutionary crisis, dual power, the party as a strategic operator. The debates of the Third International on the united front and transitional demands (and the decisive contribution of Trotsky on these questions) and the problematic of hegemony with Gramsci fit directly into this legacy.

You ask: "How to combine the patient accumulation of political forces with the violent irruption of the revolutionary crisis? That is our problem. There is no recipe or instructions to use. Here we should bring into the equation the sociology of organizations. Every organization generates its routines and its conservatisms, its more or less developed forms of bureaucratization. We can find ways to resist them, but we do not completely escape them, because they are the effects of fetishism, alienation, the division of labour, which characterize the societies in which we struggle. And we always struggle on the terrain, and partly in the terms of the dominant classes. That is why the question "how, from nothing, to become everything" is so perilous.

The most intransigent revolutionary

discourse does not guarantee anything about the behaviour of those who hold it in critical situations. As proof, the divisions of the Bolshevik Party and its most experienced cadres at the time of the decision of October. At the same time, without the accumulated collective experience, without the education of a network of cadres, etc., the Lenin of the April theses and the insurrection could not have prevailed against the inertia and the routine of the "committee-men" trained for clandestine action. The crisis is a sudden change of pace. That is why I talk about the party as a "gearbox".

Praxis: Neoliberalism with its planetary globalization is very similar to what Marx described in the *Communist Manifesto*. In these new circumstances, it is possible that the conditions of the revolutionary struggle are different than in the past. You said that strategic thinking has disappeared from the programme of the left movement. Under what conditions should we think revolution today? On what basis can we think of the idea of rupture, which would be able to take into account the experiences of the past and to preserve the idea of plurality as the essence of the revolutionary capacity of the working class? I am thinking mainly of the "professional dangers of power", of the authoritarian hyper-politicism of Stalinism, which instrumentalized from the soviets to socialist ideology, according to its caste interests. In short, how can we combine the struggle for power with the libertarian aspiration that Lenin expresses in texts like **State and the Revolution**? At the same time, how can revolutionary politics be conceived while globalization reconstructs globalized terrains of political action?

Daniel Bensaïd: Another huge and multiple question.

1. I did not say that strategic thinking has "disappeared" from the agenda. I spoke of an "eclipse" of strategic reason since, say, the 1980s. How to go beyond that? That will require accumulating new founding experiences. No answer will spring from the fertile brain of a genius. It is enough to think of the time it took, and the accumulated experiences

(1848, the Commune, 1905, 1917, the German revolution of 1918-1923, the republic of the councils in Bavaria, etc.), so that the strategic problematic of the Third International could take shape. However, we are only at the beginning of a new cycle in a new context. We already see, under the effect of the situations in Venezuela and Bolivia, the - negative - assessment of the Lula government, the 2001 explosion in Argentina, that the debate is taking on colour again. Holloway's somewhat hollow rhetoric, for example, already seems in part very dated and old. In any case, it hardly allows us to enter into the concrete discussion of the present situations. The turning point of the Zapatista's Other Campaign, whatever the immediate result, is another indication of this revival of political questions of orientation, both at the national level (what to do in Bolivia, in Venezuela, in the concrete context of the global relationships of forces?), and regarding what could be a continental alternative to ALCA, etc.

2. You raise more widely the question of the very idea of revolution. The term already has a long history, and a complex one. It is part of the political paradigm of modernity that I evoked (dynamic conception of acceleration, the new semantics of time analyzed by Koselleck, the relation to the idea of progress...). It becomes problematic when the paradigm itself is shaken. That is why it seems useful to me to distinguish different contents evoked by the notion of revolution.

The most general is the millennial aspiration to another possible (better) world, an uprising against injustice and inequality. The revolutionary aim is the expression in the framework of modernity of this great hope of long duration. It became charged with of a

more concrete content during the nineteenth century, with the birth of socialist movements, as evidenced by the distinction established by Marx, from *On the Jewish Question* (1844) between "emancipation that is only political" or civic (the political revolution), and human emancipation" (or social emancipation), to which the French revolutionaries of the time responded with the theme of "the Social Republic" opposed to the Republic itself, which can be a Thermidorian or colonialist republic.

This programmatic content of the social revolution crystallizes, beyond the differences between libertarian, socialist or communist currents, around the question of ownership and social appropriation (cooperative, self-managing, nationalized) as an alternative to the despotism of the market and of private property. This question remains more relevant than ever, it even extends from the problematic of enterprises and public services to the crucial questions of the common goods of humanity and intellectual property. This is in my opinion the strong point, the discriminating content of a revolutionary policy today, which gives meaning to the word revolution, while our adversaries want to make it a synonym for violence. The third dimension, more specifically strategic (the forms of struggles for power), of the word revolution is today obscured by both the avatars of the twentieth century and the consequences of globalization. On this point, it is necessary to observe "the real movement of abolition of the existing order", the new forms emerging from the struggle of the oppressed, etc. No one had imagined the Commune before the Commune, the soviets before the soviets, the workers' councils of Turin or the militia of

Catalonia before their appearance. That is precisely the force of innovation of the event, to which revolutionaries must remain attentive and ready to react. There is, moreover, but this is not the place to approach it too superficially, an important and specific debate on revolutionary violence and social violence in the light of the trials of the past century.

3. I have already mentioned the question of bureaucratization, of the "professional dangers of power". Today we have the advantage of knowing that they exist and of knowing more about their mechanisms, to better attempt to ward them off. For us, relations between independent social movements, parties, states and political organizations are clearer. So are the questions of trade union democracy and democracy within parties. We now consider that political pluralism is a principle (a conclusion at which Trotsky himself only arrived in *The Revolution Betrayed*). More generally, democratic culture has progressed and has taken hold of new means of communication that enable it in particular to break the monopoly of centralized apparatuses (political or trade-union) over information. The diversity of the social movements, the impact of feminism on the whole of society and of culture, all that works in our favour. It nonetheless remains that tension is still inevitable between the logics of power and the demands of self-emancipation, between the collective and the individual, between the right of the majority to decide and the rights of minorities, between socialism from below and a necessary degree of centralization and synthesis. In other words, the hypothesis of a "libertarian Leninism" remains a challenge for our times.

Interview with Yassin Al-Haj Saleh

5 February 2018, by Matilde Dugaucquier, Mauro

Gasparini

Can you tell us a bit about your story?

It's a long journey ... I stayed in prison for many years. I was a member of a Communist party opposed to the regime (there is still a pro-regime "Communist" party today, led by the Bagdash dynasty). When I was a medical student in Aleppo in the 1970s, I joined the Communist Party - Political Bureau [also known as the Syrian Communist Party Riyad al-Turk], which was taking stronger and stronger positions against the Assad regime. We had disagreements about the relationship with the USSR as well because we were influenced by Eurocommunism, which at the time appeared to be a more democratic and open trend. It seemed to me more progressive to defend not only social justice but also democracy and liberties.

I was in my third year of medical studies when I was imprisoned for 16 years. I was interrogated and tortured, but my life was not in danger at that time. Prison conditions were "negotiable" for about 14 years. Then they deteriorated and were extremely hard in the 16th year, which I spent in the terrible prison of Palmyra. At first, I was entitled to family visits and books. The books saved me. I love reading and I learned more in prison than at university. These were years of learning, through books, friends, comrades. It was obviously very difficult to lose 16 years of my youth in prison. But at the same time, you can resist and change yourself. That's what I did, unconsciously and that was what I had to do in those circumstances. I wrote a book about this formative and emancipatory experience. I'm told it's more a book on liberation than on imprisonment, by the way.

In 2000, I was finally able to finish my medical studies, but I never practiced. I had not been brave and confident enough to become a writer and translator, but that's what I'd always wanted to do. I then wrote some articles and translations. The year

2000 was also the year of the death of Hafez El-Assad and the passing of power to his son Bashar. I moved to Damascus, it was a good place to observe the changes underway and the elements of continuity.

The era of Bashar brought new policies, especially at the economic level, with the deepening of liberalization. A class of nouveaux riches, who had used their privileged positions in the regime's apparatus to ensure their ascent and enrichment, began to take power and control of the state. This is the meaning of the liberalisations of the 2000s.

I was in a position to observe and write about all this, but of course I suffered censorship: I had to go to court ten times for writing or saying this or that Two weeks after the revolution began, after Assad's first speech on March 13, 2011, I decided to go into hiding. I did not want self-censorship anymore. Because we had just entered a new stage of our history where finally we could say what we thought.

With the help of many friends, I left our home in Damascus where I had lived for three years and settled alone in the suburbs for two years. After that, there was not much sense in staying: I was not useful to the revolution and it became dangerous with all the checkpoints and the mukhabarat [intelligence services] that came into the houses of the neighbourhood. So, I left in April 2013 for Douma, in eastern Ghouta, not far from Damascus. After I arrived in Douma, our friend Razan Zeitouneh joined me with my wife Samira Khalil.

My idea was to go to Raqqa, which at that time was out of the regime's control. I thought I could learn things and help on the spot. But I was only able to leave Douma in July 2013. One of my brothers was kidnapped and along the way, a friend told me that my older brother Firas had also been kidnapped. The situation was bad, I could not go in and the trip was very dangerous. Few people knew where I

was. One of them, my doctor, was also kidnapped on November 2, 2013. In the meantime, I left Syria for Turkey. I had been there for less than two months when Samira and Razan were abducted ... I have been living in Turkey ever since.

No offense to some revisionists, breaking the monopoly of state violence was one of the major political turning points in Syria.

Can you put the Syrian revolution in perspective? What is its significance for the country, the region, and globally?

The context is obviously the "Arab Spring" that began after this young Tunisian, who had been insulted and humiliated, immolated himself. At that time, the idea of "revolutions of dignity" was making its way. I wrote an article about this just three weeks before the outbreak of the revolution in Syria. People were fed up with the insults of the security services, being forced to pay bribes for anything and everything. We did not want to be humiliated by those in power, we did not want to pay for everything, and many were already poor enough. People wanted to reappropriate politics, talk about public issues in public, take active public space together to say "no", to sing, to act ... The Syrian people had been living under the threshold of extreme political poverty for decades. We were not allowed to say what we thought, or to express ourselves about public matters, or to gather, not even in private spaces. Hence the importance of gatherings in the public space, of dozens, hundreds or thousands of people.

But we were faced with a real war from the very beginning. That's why I think it's not fair to deny the Syrian people the right to face a regime at war with them with weapons. We wanted to reclaim politics peacefully, they wanted to stop us by shooting at us. So, we wanted to break the state monopoly on weapons. For the longer the state monopolises violence, the

longer it reduces us to slavery. And we succeeded after six or seven months of continuous deaths ...

It is certain that this process contains many contradictions but taking up arms was absolutely legitimate and ethical in my opinion. No offense to some revisionists, breaking the monopoly of state violence was one of the major political turning points in Syria.

Of course, the end of this monopoly has also benefited groups like Al-Nusra / Al-Qaeda and Daesh. But that was not the only cause, far from it. These groups are linked to other dynamics, such as the presence of al-Qaeda in Iraq after the US occupation and the support that the Syrian regime gave them for years; also the release by Assad of hundreds of Salafists who were in Syrian jails, including Sadnaya; or the Salafist networks in the Gulf and the masses of petrodollars in the hands of religious people who have nothing to do other than paying fanatics in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. This explains the emergence of these groups.

Throughout all these years, many foreign powers have intervened, but the Syrian people have not been significantly supported by any international power. China and Russia paralyzed the UN Security Council, which gave birth to the group of "Friends of Syria": the United States, France, the Arab countries and so on. And it was the United States that killed this so-called group, especially after the 2013 chemical massacres and the agreement that followed. This agreement, the most sordid and criminal that there was between the United States and Russia, gave a license to kill to Assad, by all possible means except the one that these powers prohibit.

In fact, even chemical weapons have not been banned since it has been established that many attacks have been conducted since, including chlorine gas. This was possible as long as the regime massacred noiselessly, as long as it avoided a massive massacre like in Khan Sheikhoun this year. With the 2013 chemical agreement, Islamist nihilist organizations like Nusra and Daesh

have received a huge boost to their recruitment campaign. Committing such crimes gives these groups an excuse to do what they want. The Syrians were not protected after such a massacre and the nihilist organizations were able to say: "Look, the world has nothing to do with us, they are all our enemies and enemies of Islam."

And in a sense, they are right, even if they have no solution to the problems of Syrians -but no one currently has those solutions. The opposition is in a bad state. Its members, from my generation, are too dependent on the regional powers and do not represent a credible and viable alternative to the regime. The United States intervened in 2014 only against Daesh, and first in Kobane, where they delivered food and weapons, which has never happened elsewhere. A year later, the Russians intervened.

The United States is leading an international coalition today, with many countries. We have four of the five members of the Security Council who are at war in Syria against organizations responsible for 5% of civilian deaths. The person responsible for more than 90% of these deaths, Bashar Al-Assad is still there and can continue his misdeeds. I often speak of a "Syrianized" world: since this chemical agreement, it is not only Syria, but the situation of the world in which we live, and it becomes more and more clear that is a world in crisis...

Kobane had a great resonance in Western Europe and many progressives took a stand for Kurdish autonomy in Syria. What do you think of the situation in Rojava?

There are two agendas: that of Kurdish rights in Syria, which I defend and which I have always defended, and that of the PKK. Syria has become a new field for their struggle and puts them in better shape vis-à-vis the Turkish government. That's why they are in Raqqa today and they are hunting residents of the city. They are a tool in the hands of the Americans under cover of their war on terror. Many people on the left, who do not know anything about Syria, take sides

with this authoritarian and ultranationalist party -of course I know their propaganda, their idea of democratic confederalism, but it is empty of content ... There is already a concentration camp where 8,000 people accused of being members of Daesh are locked up. And they have to prove the opposite to get out.

Thanks to Daesh, some criminals look cleaner than they really are. I do not mean that the PYD is criminal, but it is clear that they are not the ones who decide the goals. They do not control anything of their struggle, it is the Americans who decide everything, and they are moving away from their ideal: freedom and an autonomous Kurdish region. Afrin, a Kurdish region north of Aleppo, is now threatened by the Turks. Who will defend Afrin, if they are all in Raqqa? The Americans are brutal, arrogant and at the same time stupid. They are guided by ideas from colonial anthropology that view the Arabs as a people made up of tribes only. And the Kurds are a tool in this approach to Syria in general, and the fight against Daesh in particular. They use a modernist discourse that speaks to the Western middle classes, especially by highlighting these unveiled women fighters. But this is not something new that the Kurds of Syria have invented, it has to do with the historical struggle of the PKK. The PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK in Turkey and it shows expansionist tendencies in Syria.

People in Europe should at least have a more nuanced view of this situation. I support the separation of the Kurds, but in practice it is almost impossible. If we want to be rational, a Kurdish state that includes part of Turkey, one of Iraq, another of Iran and of course one of Syria, that makes sense. But in Syria alone, it does not have any. Of course, autonomy, some form of federalization is possible and desirable.

What can still be done to support the demands of the Syrian people? What would you say to those who want to make alive the hopes awakened by the Syrian revolution?

All politics in Syria should focus on the rights of refugees, bereaved and

injured people, who represent a very high percentage of the population. And we know that the Geneva process ignores these problems. Our priority is therefore (and here you can help) to defend the rights of those who have been tortured, killed, humiliated, who have lost their homes, their jobs and of course the 80% who live below the poverty line. Today, in Syria, to be revolutionary (or to have simple ethical principles) is to think of politics in these terms. And I am sorry that the traditional opposition does not take these issues into account. I think we can build the Syrian cause around these issues, even if it is not easy and if we are isolated ...

I was invited to Brussels in April for a rally of Syrian civil society groups under the patronage of Staffan de Mistura [UN Special Envoy for Syria]. Part of the agenda was about peacekeeping. I was surprised they invited me and I said, "I can come but I do not agree with your agenda. If you accept it, I can suggest something else and try to convince the audience."

And they refused, we had to accept the agenda they imposed. I really felt that I was being denied the right to represent my cause and to set priorities, to have a say in who really knows what's going on and to defend the rights of victims. These people want to take ownership of our change. They consider that change will have to take place if it suits them. Macron said recently that there is no alternative in Syria. No alternative for whom? For you or for us? We would take anyone! [laughs] There is no need for an alternative to put a criminal out, full stop! It's our society and you do not have the right to ask us for guarantees. Besides, we guarantee that it will be a big mess for many years to come. It's always a mess after revolutions! But for Americans and Europeans, the lesser evil is Bashar Al-Assad, who is responsible for the death of 90% of our victims. For them what matters are not our lives, but the threats to their interests.

What links can you draw between the reality of the revolutionary processes in the Arab world and what we draw from the legacy of the Russian revolution of 1917?

In fact, I do not have the answers to all that. There is a crisis of revolutionary thought in the world, a crisis of reflections on political change and the global situation. More and more, I realize that there are no real revolutionary forces anywhere in the world. There are individuals of course, and small groups and organizations but no historic revolutionary movement today. This may be one of the effects of globalization in recent decades: the privileged become stronger, control the media and the public space, create a demand for security with the fear of immigrants, Muslims, "terrorists" ... It seems that this strategy has been victorious so far. There is fragmentation of the political field in each country and at the global level. It is a paradox: on the one hand, people know more about one another, the world is gradually becoming unified; on the other hand, there is a gradual fragmentation of political life, even in Western countries. These dynamics may explain why we do not see revolutionary movements capable of unifying struggles, linking contradictions and developing a revolutionary strategy. I hope it's just a matter of time. I hope to be an agent in explaining and participating in the change. But for now, I do not see any way out of this situation. We, the revolutionary agents of change, are in a position of extreme weakness and we have many struggles to be waged within the Left itself.

I think the traditional left is no longer revolutionary or even progressive. As Syrians, we have good reason to complain and resent these left-wingers in the West, but also in our country or in Turkey. The perspectives of this left are outdated, it remains stuck in politics from above, and persuaded that imperialism is something that lies somewhere in the United States or London and not a global system. I wrote a long article on Syria and the "anti-imperialist" left.

How do you perceive the Western left in general and more particularly its role in the Syrian crisis?

The left is composed mainly of people from the middle classes, which are not revolutionary classes. The typical

western left-wing activist or activist today has a passport, has a good university, can visit many countries, read the books he / she wants. These people are not threatened with arrest for such writings or words, can organize rallies in the streets and squares. They can demonstrate, say no, say that Trump is an animal and at the same time, these left-wing people tend to want to give us lessons. That's what I do not like: they do not know much about Syria and have not provided any interesting or original idea about the country. That goes for Chomsky, Fisk, Patrick Cockburn, of course Tariq Ali ...

I also think that the revolutionary forces should forget about the Soviet Union. When I was 20 or 30 years old, it was very important for my generation to criticize the Soviet Union. Perhaps today it serves to justify liberalism, neo-liberalism and liberal democracy in the West. Of course, liberalism is not a utopia and we really need a utopia. And in a way, dystopian creations like Daesh and even Al Assad are the symptoms of the absence of a new project that allows us to move forward. Without a global progressive project, we cannot work at the national level, whether in Belgium, Syria or Egypt. Still, we must forget the Soviet Union as well as those who cannot forget this experience or criticize it. You, the younger generations, are in a better position to think about this, especially because you are mobile, you can meet people, immigrants, refugees. You can find out more about Syria, Palestine, South Africa ...

You said that we need a new project for the left and you mentioned internationalism, at least a left more aware of what is happening in other countries and more able to practice solidarity and to understand other societies, to communicate ... But it seems that we are far from having groups and networks that are strong enough to build this solidarity'

It was easier in the past, when we identified ourselves through the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. After the experience of twentieth century socialism and the transformations of capitalism, I think

we need more than that. Our problems are not only related to traditional forms of exploitation but also to the capacity of capitalism to turn any struggle into a religious, ethnic, racial, sectarian conflict ... In your countries, this translates into hostility towards non-whites. We are more affected by sectarian politics. It is therefore not enough to say that the bourgeoisie distorts the consciousness of the masses. Ideas about identity politics first appeared in the left, especially in the United States and in Europe to a certain extent, a progressive movement to defend identities marginalized by the system: black people, other people of colour, Muslims, Jews... I think we have to rethink this problem because, when social struggles are racialized, sectarianized or racialized, they carry within them the possibility of massacres and genocides.

There is also the problem of the environment. Twentieth century socialism has been as terrible for the environment as capitalism because of the development and growth cult that it has developed. Both systems shared the same cult of industry, control of nature. Today, global warming represents a great threat to our region, the Middle East and also to Africa. In a way, the Syrian revolution is linked to this problem: three or four

years before the revolution we had bad seasons and more than 300,000 families were affected. In the future we could see waves of refugees who are not related to politics or war but to global warming

Can we say that the Syrian revolution, and the Arab Spring as a whole, has revealed the weakness of the international left and the magnitude of the task ahead? And what does the counter-revolution look like today? Of course, we have one of the worst examples in Syria, whether at the national or international level, state and non-state armed groups.

I used to say that we have three enemies in Syria, not one: the regime and its allies - which today are Iran, Hezbollah and Russia; the Islamist-nihilist organizations of the global jihad (I speak of Sunni jihad, since the Shiite jihad is allied with the regime) - these come perhaps from a hundred different countries, that is to say it is a global conflict, especially since Syrian people are everywhere now [...]; the third is imperialism, and I do not speak here only of American imperialism, but also of Russian imperialism.

It's not just a battle against the

regime, it's a huge battle and it's not just about us anymore.

So, I think that on a global scale today, to be revolutionary is to fight against these three enemies.

Against local authoritarian regimes like ours (or that of Sissi in Egypt, or the Lebanese army which, just a few days ago, humiliated and killed Syrian refugees after arresting them). Against nihilist organizations that are certainly Islamist today but could take another form ... Olivier Roy said that what we are witnessing today is an Islamization of radicalism, not a radicalization of Islam. It means that many people are searching for radicalism today and want to fight imperialism. And that's how they become Islamists. Many of them do not come from families where Islam is practiced, but Islam provides a cultural base for their emotions.

We must therefore give a new meaning to life, invent new situations, new experiences, new practices when we fight against these three enemies: the ruling elites, the nihilist, Islamist or other organizations, and against global hegemonies. This battle must aim at appropriating the world, as in Syria we wanted to reclaim our country. We are the population of this planet and we want to take it back from those who rob it ...

Class war ?n t?me of war

4 February 2018, by **Metin Feyyaz**

On January 21, while Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was announcing his military operation against Afrin, at the same time in the city of Bursa, which is the heart of the automotive industry in Turkey (and one of the most important hubs for the entire European automotive industry), trade unions in metal industry were coincidentally announcing their strike decision which would affect most of the industry in that city.

During his announcement, Erdoğan

threatened anyone who protests against the attack on Afrin saying that they will pay a serious price. In the same way, a few days after announcement of the strike in the metal industry, a decree was published prohibiting these strikes in the metal industry, saying these strikes are harmful to national security. Because even though the main target of the military operation, cynically named "Olive Branch" is the Kurdish enclave in Afrin, Erdoğan's "real enemy is always at home". That's

why he wants to silence any sort of opposition to war and any sort of demonstration by workers to defend their working conditions in the same time.

The strike decision in the metal industry was a result of ongoing collective bargaining negotiations with the Metal Employers Union. The main issues in dispute were wage increases and the length of the agreement. The unions asked for a two year agreement, but the metal employers

were pressing for 3 years. Following wildcat strikes in May 2015, against the main union in metal sector over bad working conditions and low wages, which were very militant but resulted in mass dismissals, in this bargaining term even yellow unions were more cautious. [90] All the unions were forced by workers to take a strike decision after the failure of collective bargaining negotiations.

The automotive industry produces the country's biggest export item. According to research by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce in 2016, Turkey's 4 biggest exporters from any sector were all multinational automotive companies. Ford was the first one with US \$3,958 billion, second FIAT's joint venture with \$3,247 billion, third is Renault with \$2,834 billion, Toyota \$2,685 billion. (these figures are just the exports of the companies). But despite this enormous wealth, automotive workers working in multinationals such as Renault, Mercedes, Ford, FIAT etc, earn as little as \$390 Euros per month for a 45 hour week. So the demands of the workers for better working

conditions overcame the political environment in the country where every sort of demand is labelled as treason.

But then the war came to help the unions who were reluctant to take the decision to strike. Just after the launch of the military campaign, the rhetoric of "national security" emerged again and the Türk Metal union made a declaration, saying that "we are standing alongside the Turkish Armed Forces with all our heart and therefore the board of directors of the Turkish Metal Trade Union has decided not to take action in the city squares or on the streets, taking into consideration the circumstances of our country due to the operation carried out beyond our borders by Turkish Armed Forces." They withdrew from the strike, but the other union involved, Birlesik Metal, issued a statement saying they would go ahead [91]. In the end the strike, planned to start on February 2, did not go ahead because as following negotiations, the workers were given a significant wage increase - 24 per cent for the first six months. [92]

Erdo?an was talking about and preparing this military attack for a very long time. Turkey tried to get support (or at least consent) from the USA and Russia before starting this military operation. Now a week after the start, it is possible to find many videos and images of destruction created by air strikes of Turkish army and torture of prisoners by Turkish backed Islamist militias. After the start of the war, the government kept their promise and detained around 400 people because of their social media posts against the war. The entire executive council of Turkish Chamber of Medicine were arrested because of an anti-war declaration called "War is a public health problem."

War is rather useful for the Erdo?an government in trying to solve their governing crisis. Their rhetoric, based on national security, has succeeded in bringing together all sides of Turkish society. This pretext of a national crisis, allows the government to advance their already authoritarian agenda - even including banning the planned strike by metal workers.

Russian Presidential elections 2018: predicable results with unpredictable aftermath

3 February 2018, by Ilya Budraitskis

The turnout Problem

Ongoing economic crisis, a decline in most people's incomes, and increasingly glaring social inequality, are causing a mood of protest that can no longer be expressed within existing political institutions. Passive discontent is increasingly manifest in absenteeism, or in people "voting with their feet." As a result, the most recent parliamentary elections in Autumn 2016 were an alarm bell for

the authorities"turnout was 47.8% across the country, while barely over 30% of voters turned out in major cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Russians' low interest in elections has been a boon to the authorities in the past, making election results more predictable, and helping Russia's ruling party United Russia get into power. However, low turnouts in today's political climate have become a clear threat to the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's upcoming victory. In December, polls indicated that 58% of

voters were planning on voting in the presidential elections, 30% of whom only answering that they would "most likely" be turning out to vote.

Ahead of the March 2018 elections, the Kremlin administration has unofficially promoted a "70-70" scenario, whereby Putin would receive 70% of votes from a 70% turnout. Yet the Kremlin has repeatedly stressed that such a sharp increase in electoral activity cannot be achieved at the local level solely through so-called "administrative resource" mobilizing budget-

dependent employees and pensioners who rely on local authorities. According to the Kremlin's plan, the elections must result in a triumphant victory for Putin, but without precipitating claims of massive electoral fraud, as was the case in 2011 when news of widespread falsifying of ballots triggered protests in the streets.

The Kremlin is hoping to accomplish its aim by engineering increased interest in the elections, [by organizing concerts and local events on the day of the vote](#), lumping the presidential election together with separate referenda on pressing local issues, and, most of all, by creating the impression of real political competition among the candidates.

Despite the fact that Putin, in his characteristic "Caesar" fashion, rising above the mob, has refrained from taking part in any debates, the other participants in the campaign have to pretend to be involved in a battle among themselves within the framework of the scenario approved at the top. Their common goal is to draw currently apathetic or skeptical potential voters into participating in the elections, and, just as importantly, to divert attention away from the campaign for boycotting the elections, called for by the well-known opposition politician Alexei Navalny. So, who are the people in this strange election race?

Candidate Putin

Vladimir Putin officially announced his candidacy in the upcoming elections on December 6, at a speech before workers at the GAZ car manufacturing plant in Nizhny Novgorod. Reminiscent of the start of his previous term, both place and audience were selected in line with the president's man-of-the-people, above-party-politics image.

Back in 2012, Putin's election campaign focused on combating the West's secret agents within the opposition, and fighting for "traditional values." Appealing to "ordinary people," as opposed to complacent and unpatriotic members of the middle class, Putin made a point

of combining conservative and paternalistic rhetoric. One of his main promises was a sizable increase in public sector salaries. Immediately after his victory in Spring 2012 Putin issued the "May Decrees", which required regional governments to comply with his plan to raise wages, as well as to report regularly on their progress in front of TV cameras before the head of state. Raising wages during an economic recession, with government policy as a whole sought to reduce spending, meant that the "May Decrees" actually resulted in job cuts in order to pay for the salary increases of those who kept their positions, not to mention some massaging of the statistics.

Today, the authorities no longer have the resources necessary to back up the theory that "stability" means higher incomes. On the contrary, Putin's third term has seen inflation and a sharp decline in living standards. The incumbent president's two most loyal electoral demographics—"pensioners and state employees"—have been the greatest losers from the government's "anti-crisis" policies in recent years. Putin is no longer in a position to fire off promises to raise living standards; he can only try to assure voters that there won't be another sharp collapse. This is why Putin insists that active foreign policy and escalation of militarist hysteria inside the country will be put on the back burner in his new term. Announcing his candidacy in early December, he solemnly declared the end of Russian military operations in Syria. The issue of East Ukraine has also been deliberately removed from his campaign's narrative. The new consensus is that Russia should focus on fixing its domestic problems, while the frozen conflict in the Donbass region following the Minsk Agreements goes on indefinitely.

Putin's official electoral manifesto is yet to be published, but we know it is being written under the guidance of Alexei Kudrin, a former finance minister and a key strategist of Putin's neo-liberal policies in the 2000s. The main vision will be of [modest growth in spending on education and health paid for by tax increases, raising the retirement age, and more "targeted"](#)

[social policies](#). Once again, the government's continued course of compensating for the consequences of the economic crisis by reducing living standards will be dressed up with false declarations about "investing in human capital."

Given the total substantive vacuity of Putin's electoral campaign, the main emphasis will be on the absence of any alternative. Voting for the incumbent president should seem like simply fulfilling one's patriotic duty. Hence the scheduling of the vote for March 18, the official day of Crimea's "reunification" with Russia.

The Communists' New Candidate

Perhaps the Kremlin's most successful move to attract attention to the election was the emergence of a new candidate from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), Pavel Grudinin. Over the past decade, the CPRF has once and for all transformed itself from a mass activist party into a bureaucratic structure focused exclusively on participating in elections. The party's leadership has become fully integrated into the "managed democracy" system, supporting the president on all key political issues. The CPRF's permanent leader Gennady Zyuganov has long ceased to be seen as a serious alternative to Putin. His personal ratings at the end of 2017 were less than 4%. It was clear that Zyuganov was no longer able to attract a "protest electorate," the mobilization of which had been traditionally the responsibility of the CPRF within the existing political order. A collapse in support for the Communists in the upcoming elections could lead to an imbalance in the fake party system, which in turn could cause a serious crisis within the party itself. However, a solution has been found. At the end of December, the CPRF Congress approved the official candidacy of non-partisan businessman Pavel Grudinin.

Grudinin's calling card is the enterprise he owns on the outskirts of Moscow, which bears the loaded name "Lenin State Farm" ("Sovhoz"). In

reality, this “sovhoz” has long become a joint stock company, with controlling stakes held by a small group of managers, while Grudinin owns a 40% share. Most revenue from this particular “sovhoz” comes from renting out land to wholesale supermarkets and dealer centers, for companies such as Cash & Carry, Toyota, Nissan, among others. None of this, however, has stopped Grudinin and other CPRF functionaries from portraying this business as an “oasis of socialism,” where workers enjoy access to Soviet-era social programs. Grudinin presents himself as the candidate for a coalition of “patriotic forces,” rallying together the extreme left, imperial nationalists, and “nationally-oriented” medium-sized businesses around the CPRF. Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov, who probably sees this as a way into “big politics,” is actively involved in Grudinin’s campaign in the same way one might expect to see retired patriotic army generals.

Grudinin’s non-party affiliation also benefits the CPRF leadership, as it means no changes within the party. This is most likely a “marriage of convenience” that will come to an end immediately after the election.

His constant presence on Russian television talk shows, typically under strict control from the top, suggests that Grudinin is in the Kremlin’s good graces. Grudinin’s manifesto contains nothing new compared to the usual set of CPRF proposals—increases in social spending, restrictions on capital outflows, developing the domestic market, and so on. However, his fresh public speaking style and lively presence in the media are already making him an almost guaranteed second place in March (as of mid-January, Grudinin’s rating was about 7%).

The Liberal Opposition

One of the Kremlin’s main challenges within the narrative framework of the March elections is to distract liberally-inclined voters from the idea of a boycott. Two candidates, Grigory Yavlinsky and Ksenia Sobchak, have

been put forward as a way to engage liberals in the campaign spectacle.

Yavlinsky, the long-serving leader of the Yabloko Party, is a veteran of Russian politics from the 1990s. His message has never shifted: Russia has been taken over by an authoritarian, nationalist regime, which must be removed peacefully, and be replaced by civil liberties and “European values.” Yavlinsky openly declares that he has no chance of winning these elections, as their result is already common knowledge. However, he presents a vote for him as an ethical choice, a demonstration to the authorities that there is a part of society in disagreement with corruption, imperial aggression, and social inequality.

The second liberal candidate, Ksenia Sobchak, best known previously as a presenter on entertainment television shows aimed at young people, also claims to be a protest candidate. She has called on young voters to use the election as a way to express their dissatisfaction with a lack of systemic justice and a lack of social mobility. There have been repeated accusations that Sobchak’s candidacy is a ruse, secretly supported by the Kremlin, to disorient would-be supporters of Alexei Navalny.

A negligible result for both candidates—as currently predicted, no more than a combined 3-4% of the total vote—will also allow pro-government voices to assert that there is little demand for political liberalization in Russian society.

The Eternal Zhirinovsky

Third place in the upcoming elections is likely to be pocket right-wing populist Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Zhirinovsky has run in all presidential elections in Russia since 1991. His brand of politics is to promote absurd and incommensurable demands—like lowering the price of vodka or bombing America—that project the irrational imaginings of lumpenized lower social classes. Zhirinovsky’s ticket will help increase turnout among this demographic.

Navalny and the Boycott Campaign

Anti-corruption campaigner and anti-establishment populist Aleksei Navalny was not allowed to run in the elections due to trumped-up criminal charges, on which he was provisionally convicted several years ago. However, the real reason for the Electoral Commission’s decision lies in the unpredictability of a would-be vote for Navalny. He has proved capable of garnering significant support from voters. Over the past year, in response to calls from Navalny, several nationwide public protests have taken place, demonstrating a growing mood of protest among young people and provincial middle classes. Navalny has also managed to establish a formidable network of supporters, with operations in all major cities across the country, and nearly 200,000 registered volunteers—effectively the sole mass opposition organization in the country.

Navalny’s campaign manifesto consists of a series of populist demands, a portion of which are distinctly social in character, such as combatting “illegal enrichment,” progressive taxation, and limits on police and defense spending. Even his campaign’s chief slogan, “wealth for all, not just for the 1%,” clearly reflects its anti-elite orientation. At the same time, Navalny regurgitates liberal calls for the “demonopolization” of the economy (read, privatization of state assets), while flirting with nationalists by calling for the introduction of visa regulations for migrant workers from Central Asia.

Under current political circumstances, Navalny’s campaign policies are ultimately of marginal concern. Unlike Navalny, Yavlinsky has a clear message advocating rights for trade unions; Grudinin is focusing on the nationalization of natural resources; Sobchak—alone among the candidates in this regard—is calling for gender equality and an end to discrimination against sexual minorities. Navalny’s main significance is not in his program, it’s in his principled promotion of

grassroots mass protest. He insistently repeats that only engaged street politics, as opposed to fake elections, can change the current state of affairs. In early January, Navalny openly called for a “voter strike,” an active election boycott combining non-participation in the vote with mass protest events and monitoring of potential fraud at polling stations.

The Left’s Position

The leftist movement outside the CPRF has been divided in regard to the upcoming elections. A significant

number of its ranks are leaning toward an active boycott, others support Pavel Grudinin, while the small Stalinist Russian United Labor Front (ROT-Front) is still trying to register its own party “workers” candidate. The situation as I’ve described it here points to the conclusion that any participation in the March elections will ultimately contribute to a temporary stabilization of the current regime, and the legitimization of another six years of personal rule by Putin.

That said, uncritical support for

Navalny could end up diluting his populist movement, a risk magnified by its clearly leader-centric and anti-democratic character. An independent movement for a “boycott by the left,” which would articulate an anti-capitalist alternative to Russia’s existing political and social order, could, through coordinated unity, draw a line between a leftist position and that of Navalny, while also laying a foundation for a subsequent consolidation of Russian radical leftists who refuse to play by Kremlin rules.

[LeftEast](#)

The AFL-CIO Convention: Beginning of the End or Steps toward a New Beginning?

2 February 2018, by **Cyryl Ryzak**

Within St. Louis’ history is an extended case study of the American working class’ past militancy and current predicament. The great boom of capitalist development in the mid-nineteenth century caused a migration of workers from Europe and agrarian areas of the East Coast to the growing industrial towns of the American Midwest.

When this great boom came to a screeching halt, becoming the Long Depression of the 1870s, manic railway expansion across the United States came to haunt the bourgeoisie in 1877, as workers across the United States struck against the railway companies. In St. Louis, the railwaymen were joined by workers across industries in a General Strike that became an almost Paris Commune-type situation.

Fast forward to present, St. Louis reads as a characteristic case of contemporary American capitalism’s triplet blights: de-industrialization, urban collapse, and union decline. The former railroad hub’s fortunes fell with that mode of transport; employment in meatpacking and

leather goods vanished. With the decline of these industries came the decline of unions. With decently paying union jobs gone, the small businesses which sold to St. Louis’ heavily black working class also went bankrupt. With both its workforce and circle of employers shrinking, the municipal authorities found themselves with a much narrower tax base. The authorities responded with austerity. Taxes went up and public services were cut. The combination of all these factors led to mass flight. The city’s resident population [was halved between 1960 and 1990](#).

Given St. Louis’ character as a microcosm for neo-liberal pathologies as well as its historical symbolism, the failure of the labor movement to seriously challenge capital’s offensive in the final quarter of the last century was staring the delegates right in the face. In an alternative universe, the setting might have acted as further motivation to throw away failed strategies and begin to put an end to the erosion of worker power in the United States. There would be a certain historical justice if labor historians of the future could the write

the words: “In St. Louis, a city ravaged by de-industrialization and urban decline, the AFL-CIO finally turned to the left and laid the foundations for a socialist labor movement which fundamentally transformed American society in favor of the working class.”

Growing Polarization within the Labor Movement

The actual course of events, unfortunately, did not conform to this fantasy. [93] If the history books pay any attention to the 2017 AFL CIO convention it will be as yet another stepping stone in the growing polarization between the emerging, yet still poorly defined left-liberal faction pushing for a more social movement oriented direction and a business unionist bloc.

The fragility of the federation was reflected in the attendance, reportedly

lower than before. Unions no longer with the AFL-CIO, such as the ILWU, did not, of course, show up. Representation from Central Labor Councils was down as well.

The elephant in the room was the political situation, now substantially worse since the last convention in 2013. The Republicans have seized the Senate and the White House, and continued their almost unstoppable conquest of state government. The legislative horror of a National right to work law poses a severe threat, while the president staffs the Department of Labor and NLRB with anti-labor functionaries.

Above all, the most immediate threat to the AFL CIO is the Janus case. The incredible harm which this ruling would do to public sector unions would undermine the existing structure of the federation. Further, if the more parochial, conservative building trades pull out, the AFL-CIO would be reduced to a largely volunteer operation.

The slogan of the convention: “Join Together, Fight Together, Win Together” expressed the aim of AFL-CIO leadership: to keep the affiliated unions from breaking decisively. There were obligatory references to the need to organize and to the dire political straits in which unions have found themselves. Nobody, however, takes the rhetoric seriously. Despite the AFL-CIO leadership urging greater efforts at organizing in the 1990s and 2000s, the labor movement continues to suffer from an inability to break its weak position. AFSCME and AFT are focusing on internal organizing against National Right to Work. The recent failures to organize southern manufacturing were unacknowledged.

Labor’s currently defensive position, its almost total reliance on the survival of public sector unionism, is the product of a long decline. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, union membership in 2015 was [only half of the 1983 rate](#). But in 1983 it was only 20% of the labor force. Even in its supposed golden age in the 50s and 60s, after purging the labor left, American labor was afflicted with a syphilis of bureaucratic inaction, famously symbolized by George

Meany’s claim that he never walked a picket line. This refusal to go beyond the confines of limited, legalistic industrial relations, a dependency on any Democratic Party politician no matter how right wing, and failure to organize outside of the urbanized Northeast and Midwest were the structural roots of labor’s current crisis.

The left-liberal wing took initiative at the convention to push for a more independent, social movement-oriented labor movement. Unfortunately the weight of conservative forces makes transforming a united AFL-CIO into an adequate instrument for class struggle unionism currently unimaginable.

Independent Political Action on the Agenda

Meetings held by Labor for Our Revolution, the carry-over organization from Bernie Sander’s labor supporters, and the APWU on the topic of a labor party were relatively well attended. On the other hand, despite the acknowledged need for labor to adopt some form of political action independent of the Democratic Party, no one believed labor had the ability to play a serious political role on its own.

The need for political independence was vaguely acknowledged by a resolution put forward by AFSCME calling for an end to a “lesser of two evils” politics. It was acknowledged that labor wins around issues not Democratic Party personalities. This resolution was offered as an alternative to a much stronger political independence resolution proposed by Mark Dimondstein, the pro-labor party leader of the APWU. In the end, both resolutions were passed together

The left pole of at the convention was anchored by the APWU and National Nurses United. The Nurses, who had boycotted the previous convention, were Bernie Sander’s main labor backer. Despite Sanders’ popularity, it was impolite to mention his name at

the convention. Any accommodation towards even the soft left could not go too far.

A Step Forward for Medicare for All

The Left’s greatest success at the convention was getting a resolution passed in favor of Medicare for All which will enable single-payer organizing by labor on the local level. The Labor Campaign for Single Payer (LCSP) dominated the discussions surrounding healthcare. Coordinating with allies, LCSP had the mics at the convention covered, and were in tune with the sentiments of the majority at the convention.

LCSP however faced a hurdle in the resolution committee which was packed with representatives of the building trades. The building trades, the main conservative force in AFL-CIO, wanted to concentrate on going after the Cadillac tax. Unions that have large Taft Hartley funds are concerned about how single-payer would affect their funds. In the end, however, the LCSP carried the day. The building trades chose not to block the momentum for single payer. Medicare for All gained the support of not only the APWU and the NNU, but industrial unions such as the CWA, UAW and the Steelworkers.

A Step Backward on Green Jobs

The success of the left in healthcare was not mirrored in efforts to push labor to take a stand on the environmental question. While a resolution was passed recognizing the problem, it lacked a sense of urgency. Moreover, a thorough policy addressing climate change by creating jobs in the clean energy was lacking. The Labor Network for Sustainability, which had advocated for a comprehensive climate change resolution, [criticized the approved resolution](#) for its vagueness in formulating a “green jobs” creation policy.

On climate change, undoubtedly the

victors were a conservative bloc composed of the building trades and the extractive industrial unions. The UMW, despite its militant tradition, from spearheading the CIO to the Miners for Democracy movement, stuck by their immediate interests in defending the coal industry from environmental constraints.

Challenges Facing Just Transition Politics

Unfortunately, the conservative stance of extractive industrial unions is almost inevitable. The left's position hinges upon "just transition"—, that is, industrial policies geared towards promoting sustainable jobs which would match or improve the employment, pay, standards, and benefits of workers in industries detrimental to the environment. The problem, however, lies in the absence of any force capable of pushing for such a transition. The labor movement is too weak and the Democratic Party is disinterested. The Republicans in power are certainly not going to implement a just transition. It simply

is far more pragmatic for the UMW to stick by their industry than bet on something that seems unrealizable in the short term.

The real tragedy is that just transition is the only hope for depressed coal mining communities. Even if environmental regulations were lifted, even if coal mining was more heavily subsidized, the only way for coal mining to survive as an industry in the face of growing competition from natural gases are drastic cuts in capacity. For coal companies to restore their profitability, there would have to be a massive wave of coal mining closures amounting to a loss of about 160 million tons according to a [report](#) from business magazine McKinsey Quarterly.

The environmental question demonstrates that workers only have two choices: the ecologically blind capitalism of the coal bosses, whose fraudulent appeals to miners mask the exploitative relation between them, or a socialist industrial policy based on just transition. This dichotomy corresponds with the fundamental issue at the heart of the labor movement's growing polarization. Either the labor movement remains a

federation of organizations who put the short-term interests of their respective industries first or it becomes a movement for social transformation in the interests of all workers.

Underneath the Complacency A Progressive Force Begins to Stir

The 2017 AFL-CIO convention did not resurrect the spirit of the St. Louis general strike; but, while this was not the decisive battle, there were some signs that the future belongs to an emerging left. The victory on healthcare and the fact that the leadership was forced to acknowledge climate change and pay lip service to independence from the Democratic party in very watered-down resolutions show that the tide may be turning. The convention may have been a depressing ritual of self-affirmation in the face of an increasingly grave predicament, but underneath the complacency, a progressive force begins to stir.