



## IV540 - January 2020

# The popular demonstrations continue!

31 January 2020, by **Joseph Daher**

### In Iran new massive mobilizations

In Iran, new mass demonstrations have taken place since the Iranian government acknowledged and initially denied responsibility for the crash of a Ukrainian plane over Tehran. An Iranian missile mistakenly shot down the civilian plane a few hours after Iranian missile attacks on US bases in Iraq. The vast majority of the 176 passengers on the Ukrainian plane were Iranian dual nationals, visiting family over the winter holidays and returning to Canada or Britain.

While maintaining pressure on Iran, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau blamed the U.S., saying Monday that without the recent escalation of regional tensions, the 176 passengers on the Ukrainian Boeing would still be alive.

Demonstrators in Tehran and many cities across the country expressed solidarity with the grieving families of the passengers and crew, and also launched hostile slogans against the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran), including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, to the cries of "Death to the Dictator". Soleimani's portraits were also torn, broken and abducted

by the demonstrators, while the demand for the fall of Khamenei and the regime resounded in the streets. The repression was violent with the arrest of more than 30 people and videos on social networks showing police cracking down on demonstrators with truncheons and gunshots, leaving many injured.

Artists and intellectuals joined the protest by cancelling their participation in the Fajr festivals (music, film, theatre and visual arts) that take place every year in February, on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.

Faced with the demonstrations against the regime, Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, responded with a strong speech against the United States and European states, and against the popular protest, while praising the role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and General Soleimani in maintaining security in the region and the country. For his part, Rohani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, delivered a more moderate speech, pleading for better governance and more pluralism and transparency.

### Popular resistance

### continues in Iraq and Lebanon

In Lebanon and Iraq, popular demonstrations are also continuing, although repression is increasing.

In Iraq, Iran and its allies in the country are still trying to hijack the popular protest movement by limiting their demand to the departure of US troops, without any change in the Iraqi confessional and neo-liberal political system. In particular, the Shiite Islamic fundamentalist leader Moqtada Sadr has called for a massive demonstration to denounce the US presence in Iraq and asked his supporters (who took part in the protests and set up tents in Baghdad's main square) to leave the area to join his movement.

Despite pressure and threats, demonstrations and civil disobedience actions continue in Baghdad and in many southern cities, while denouncing the actions of the United States and Iran which seek to turn the country into a zone of settling scores to the detriment of the country's working classes and their struggles.

In Lebanon, the popular revolt against the confessional and neo-liberal ruling class has entered its fourth month of struggle, with a clear tendency towards radicalization, as evidenced

by the almost daily attacks against the headquarters of the Bank of Lebanon and other private banks, and the increasingly violent altercations with the forces of law and order. The repression against the demonstrators was considerably reinforced, with several hundred people injured during

the weekend of January 18-19. At the same time, the working classes in Lebanon are facing a deepening economic crisis, including draconian banking restrictions and a loss of more than 60% of the value of the national currency.

In the face of geopolitical tensions

instrumentalized by the imperialist power of the US and regional powers such as Iran, the struggling popular classes remain the lodestar of progressives and internationalists around the world.

23 January 2020

## From Lula to Bolsonaro

30 January 2020, by **Éric Toussaint**

I arrived in Sao Paulo, the financial and economic capital of Brazil, on the night of 14 November 2019. The city has over 12 million inhabitants. In all the districts I visited poverty is flagrant. You see homeless people living on the street with no access to sanitation of any kind and prey to the most extreme poverty. A significant number of people are undernourished. Reliable sources mention about 100,000 people who live on the streets of Sao Paulo, 25,000 of them permanently and 75,000 on a temporary basis.

I first came to Sao Paulo in December 1991 to participate in the first congress of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT) led by the former metal worker Lula. At that time Lula and the PT stood for the struggle against odious and illegitimate debt. He said among other things 'Any Third World government that decides to further repay the external debt chooses to lead his people into the abyss.' [1]

Lula had led workers' strikes against the dictatorship in the 1980s, and in 1988 a 'democratic' regime replaced the dictatorship after a transitional stage. The bases of the main trade union federation CUT (Central Ãšnica de Trabalhadores or Unified Workers' Central), and of the new party, the PT, had been brought together during the valiant struggle against the dictatorship. The PT had been built from the bottom by activists in social movements and small very active politically radical organizations.

The CUT and the PT were against repaying debt and wanted a citizens' audit. Part of the debt had been accumulated during the military dictatorship which lasted more than 20 years, and afterwards it increased steeply during the debt crisis in the 1980s, a crisis that resulted from commodity prices plummeting while Washington had decided on a sharp increase in interest rates. More generally, the PT clearly stated that radical anti-capitalist policies had to be implemented which were to lead to the construction of a democratic socialist, self-managed and anti-bureaucratic society. This outcome stirred genuine enthusiasm in Brazil and beyond.

I went to Sao Paulo in 1991 in order to prepare Lula's and another PT leader Marco Aurelio Garcia's visit to Belgium at the invitation of the CADTM. The talks were to take place some ten days before Christmas 1991. Eventually for health reasons Lula couldn't come over and was replaced by Marco Aurelio Garcia, who became president of the PT in 2006 and was Lula's main adviser on foreign policy while Lula was president from 2003 to 2011. I met Lula four or five times from 1991 to 2003. I can remember a long discussion we had in Havana in 1993. It followed upon a meeting Lula had had with Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega. Lula explained that in order to become president of Brazil he had to neutralize US imperialism, the army and the Brazilian bourgeoisie. I understood that he meant not to

thwart US strategic interests and to promise the army leadership and big capital that he would implement no measures that went against their interests. Lula told me that he would be the president of all Brazilians, as was all too often said. What I understood was that he would use his experience as a trade unionist to seal a pact between those at the bottom and those at the top, asking those at the top to concede some improvements in purchasing power (i.e. allowing the State to increase social aid with public money) while those at the bottom would accept that nothing would really change at the structural level. This is indeed what he attempted to do when he was president ten years later.

During the 1990s, the position of the PT and the CUT was gradually watered down

I saw him for the last time in June 2003 and stated how much I disapproved of the neoliberal reform he had introduced into the civil service pension system. The meeting occurred on the occasion of the G8 annual summit (United States, Canada, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Russia) in Evian on 1 and 2 June 2003. Several heads of states that did not belong to the G8 had been invited by the French president, Jacques Chirac, who wished to show that the G8, and France in

particular, were open to dialogue with the rest of the world. Among those who had responded positively were President Lula of Brazil and the heads of states or governments of China, India, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Egypt and Mexico. Chirac was trying to give legitimacy to the G8, an informal club of major global powers, at a time when its credibility was in question, particularly after the brutal repression of the counter-G8 protest in Genoa in 2001. President Chirac's guests met in Evian before the actual G8 summit meeting while over 100,000 marched through the streets of Geneva (Switzerland) and Annemasse (France) shouting 'G8 is illegal'. Luis Inacio Lula Da Silva wanted to meet leaders of the European anti globalization movements. There were four delegates: the president of ATTAC France, a woman representative of the Italian Social Forum, a Swedish woman representative of the campaign against the WTO, and myself for the CADTM. The meeting occurred in Geneva in the residence of the Brazilian ambassador and it highlighted the gap between Lula and the international anti globalization movements. [2]

## Changes in the PT and the CUT

To qualify this highly critical assessment, it should be mentioned that the Lula government developed a policy of public aid to the poorest through the distribution of social benefits under the programme entitled Bolsa Familia

It should be pointed out that during the 1990s, the position of the PT and the CUT was gradually watered down. The PT won many elected officials in large cities as well as in small and medium-sized towns. In particular, the PT had mayors elected in Sao Paulo and Porto Alegre, where it gradually adopted a managerial orientation and lost its role as a spur to radical anti-capitalist changes. I followed this

process of adaptation to the institutions of the capitalist state with great disappointment. When Lula was elected President of Brazil at the end of 2002 with a landslide 65% of the votes, he and the PT had fundamentally changed. They no longer really questioned the capitalist system and Lula signed a letter of submission to the IMF in the middle of the election campaign (in August 2002). In this letter, he solemnly declared that if elected president, he would abide strictly by the previous government's agreements with the IMF.

Only a couple of months after his election, he introduced a neoliberal reform of retirement pensions. Lula also appointed as president of the Central Bank one of the big bosses, Henrique Meirelles, former president of one of the major US banks in Brazil, the Fleet Boston. The message was clear: a representative of the capitalist class was at the head of the Central Bank. Lula did not interfere with the army and did not suspend the amnesty extended to those officers of the dictatorship responsible for crimes against humanity. This is a major difference with Argentina where the 1986 amnesty was cancelled in 2005, which made it possible to condemn and incarcerate several military leaders including the major figures of the military dictatorship enforced in 1976. Under the Lula presidency, the Brazilian army participated in the occupation of Haiti, which was denounced by Haitian social movements. The top Brazilian military leader during the occupation of Haiti became a member of Bolsonaro's government in 2019. Under Lula's presidency not a single private corporation was brought back into the public sector. On the contrary, he supported the interests of private corporations that did not hesitate to bribe civil servants in order to secure procurements as was the case for the emblematic construction company Odebrecht. [3]

The Lula government scrupulously repaid its debts without carrying out the audit he had called for when he was in the opposition. To qualify this highly critical assessment, it should be mentioned that the Lula government developed a policy of public aid to the

poorest through the distribution of social benefits under the programme entitled Bolsa Familia (family grant). This programme improved the income of more than 12 million families, i.e. about 20% of Brazil's poorest families. Please note that the amount of aid was limited. At the time of the PT government, a family of three could receive a maximum of 50 euros. It should be noted that Bolsonaro has not stopped this programme which in 2019 benefited 13.5 million families, i.e. one fifth of Brazilian families. [4] In 2019, a poor family could receive a maximum of 200 reales per month (at the exchange rate of November 2019, that is around 40 euros). To be entitled to this grant, the family must show that its monthly income is below 89 reales (that is, 20 euros! or less than one euro a day per family).

## Why did the Lula government not combat illegitimate public debt?

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The Lula government did not combat illegitimate public debt because they did not want to antagonize Brazilian big capital. Questioning debt repayment as a government would have meant conflict with Brazilian big capital, which benefits largely from the debt, buying Brazil's internal and external public debt securities. These insure a high return since interest rates are very high. Questioning debt repayment would also involve conflict with major private banks and foreign investment funds, as well as with the IMF. Lula and the PT leadership wanted to avoid such conflicts. As they



gave legitimacy to the debt, continued paying it and went even further, calling on big capital to contract new public loans, the Lula government was tolerated, or even appreciated, by the bourgeoisie. All the more so as social measures that benefited people with the lowest income increased the purchasing power of the poor, which was good for capitalists' business.

Lula's neoliberal policies resulted in a split within the PT, with a new party emerging to its left in 2004. That party is the PSOL (Party for Socialism and Freedom).

Since 2001 I have often been back to Brazil, for the large gatherings of the World Social Forums (around 100,000 people participated each time), for meetings of the WSF's International Council of which I had been a member from the start and for meetings of social movements. There were meetings organized by the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit, a member of the CADTM's international network. The CADTM's international network repeatedly sent significant delegations to Brazil for WSF activities, particularly in Porto Alegre in 2005 and in Belem in 2009 (when one of the CADTM's world assemblies was held). The political situation has changed a lot. As pointed out above, from 2003 onward, the PT clearly turned away from its revolutionary past to become a manager of the system. This eventually resulted in deep disappointment, not to say distrust, especially since several of its leaders were actively involved in major corruption cases, including Lula himself. Eventually, when the bourgeoisie felt it could manage the country without the PT's collaboration, it exposed the party as corrupt, this while all other traditional parties are just as deeply corrupt or much more. Dilma Rousseff, the PT leader who won the 2010 presidential elections and became president of Brazil in 2011, was impeached by the Senate in 2016, in what was actually an institutional coup d'Etat. [5] But disappointment towards the PT was so deep that the Brazilian people hardly mobilized to defend the PT and its leaders in 2016, and the right-wing vice-president Michel Temer - appointed by the PT in 2011- replaced Dilma Rousseff (PT) as president after

masterminding the institutional coup.

Later, the antisocial policies implemented by President Temer, a corrupt right-wing leader, eventually stirred some popular support for Lula as a credible candidate to be reelected president in 2018. So the judiciary system, largely controlled by big capital, was relentless in its efforts to prevent Lula from running for president. Despite his imprisonment, Lula was the most likely to win and his supporters hoped that he would be able to participate in the elections. This is why the judiciary prohibited him from running and Jair Bolsonaro was elected president end of 2018 and started his mandate in early 2019; Bolsonaro is a far-right politician yearning for dictatorship, a racist, sexist, homophobic, climate-change negationist. He is similar to Trump, while possibly even further to the right. [6] His deeply reactionary and antipopular nature is beyond doubt. On 21 October 2018, at the end of the election campaign, he stated that if he was elected president, he would conduct a purge "such as Brazil has never known". He affirmed that the leaders of the Workers' Party "must all rot in prison," and said of the leftist movements, "they will have to submit to the law like everyone else. Either they leave or they go to jail." Shortly after starting his mandate, he promised to remove civil servants with "communist" ideas. His election is a real tragedy for the Brazilian people and for the international left.

We should not expect Lula to go back to the sources of the PT. His orientation remains the one that prevailed from 2003 to 2016

After Bolsonaro's victory, a large part of the left fortunately formed a united front and demanded Lula's liberation. They got it in early November 2019 and Lula immediately started a political campaign to win the presidential elections in 2022. This being said, we should not expect Lula to go back to the sources of the PT. His orientation remains the one that prevailed from 2003 to 2016. But he might get elected in 2022 since it is

clear that Bolsonaro, if he completes his mandate, will have implemented antisocial policies that increase poverty and deepen the gap between a handful of very rich and the overwhelming majority of Brazil's population. Obviously we need to mobilize widely against the Bolsonaro government and in spite of disagreements with the PT, we need a broad left-wing front within which the PT will play an active part.

## Auditing Brazil's debt from 2000 and Ecuador's in 2007-2008

The Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit is an organization founded in the early 2000s. In 2000, a referendum was organized on popular initiative by the MST (Landless Workers' Movement), the CUT, Brazil's Jubilee South Campaign, the National Conference of Bishops (which has been positioned on the left since the years 1980-1990), with the support of the PT and more than 90 % of the 6 million Brazilians who voted were in favour of suspending debt payments for the time it took to carry out an audit to determine how much of it was illegitimate. [7] There was acute awareness of the illegitimate character of Brazil's debt in a large part of the left and the Brazilian population. Although the audit was provided for in the 1988 constitution, the government had never carried it through. After the popular referendum of September 2000, parliamentary representatives from the PT brought a draft bill to get it done. It was in the aftermath of the referendum that the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit was set up. It subsequently joined the CADTM. [8]

In 2005 during the 5th WSF, the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit, the CADTM and Jubilee South, with the support of the MST, organized a three-day long Tribunal against Debt in Porto Alegre which brought together 1000 participants from every continent

As pointed out above, as soon as Lula became president of Brazil in 2003, he forgot his commitment to set up an audit of the debt.

In 2005, during the 5th World Social Forum, the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit, the CADTM and Jubilee South, with the support of the MST (Landless Workers' Movement), organized a three-day long Tribunal against Debt in Porto Alegre which brought together 1000 participants from every continent.

Next, in Brazil, support for the struggle against illegitimate debt faded mainly because the MST considered that they should rack up their critical support of President Lula's government. As for the leadership of the CUT, they had deserted the fight against debt as soon as Lula came to office as president. Nevertheless, that did not prevent the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit from battling on through thick and thin to denounce repayment of mainly illegitimate debt. The CADTM International gave its constant support to this fight.

In 2007, at the behest of militants combating illegitimate debt in Ecuador, Maria Lucia Fattorelli, the Coordinator of the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit, and myself for the CADTM, became members of the Committee for Integral Debt Audit (CAIC) established by the new president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa. The CAIC's task was to identify illegitimate debts contracted during the period of 1976-2006. Our work, reported to the government in September 2008 and made public in November of the same year resulted in the suspension of payments on a significant part of debt demanded from Ecuador in the form of sovereign bonds mainly held by banks of the USA. The unilateral suspension of payment brought about a resounding victory. [9] Ecuador imposed on its creditors a reduction of 70 % of the debts concerned. This enabled a significant increase in social spending from 2009-2010.

Ecuador with its debt auditing initiative [...] He demanded that Rafael Correa cease applying pressure on Odebrecht and persuaded him to take it to arbitration in a Paris court

It is important to note that President Lula did not help Ecuador with its debt auditing initiative. This is proved by what happened in the case of the Brazilian firm Odebrecht which I mentioned earlier. The firm built a hydro-electric power plant of very poor quality in Ecuador. Odebrecht had overcharged for the work and had not complied with the technical specifications. The plant was so badly built that it broke down. The Audit Committee had identified the debt Brazil was demanding of Ecuador for the plant's construction as illegal and illegitimate. Despite the fact that it was obviously in the wrong, the firm of Odebrecht refused to indemnify the State of Ecuador. In September 2008, to force Odebrecht to fulfil its obligations towards the government of Ecuador, President Rafael Correa sent the army to occupy the installations of the hydroelectric plant. Instead of backing up the progressive government of Ecuador in face of Odebrecht, Lula protested against Ecuador's intervention and recalled his ambassador. He demanded that Rafael Correa cease applying pressure on Odebrecht and persuaded him to take it to arbitration in a Paris court. Correa accepted, though knowing only too well that the arbitration would favour Odebrecht. Indeed, Ecuador lost partially. The government of Brazil and Odebrecht came out on top.

## **President Lula's intervention in 2009 to prevent the launch of a committee to audit odious debt called for by Brazilian**

## **companies in Paraguay**

Now let us look at the case of Paraguay, an enclave country surrounded by Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia. In December 2008, the progressive president Fernando Lugo, who had been in office for six months, invited me to help him create an audit committee of Paraguayan debt. I went to Asunción for a personal interview with the president followed by a meeting with the Paraguayan government. [10]

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It was clear that most of Paraguay's debt could be qualified as odious, as it resulted (as is still the case) from a major agreement made in the 1970s between two military dictatorships: the Brazilian military junta and the Paraguayan dictatorship of General Stroessner. [11] The offending treaty dealt with the construction, running and maintenance of what was at the time the biggest dam in the world, the Itaipu Dam. I had studied the matter in depth using the excellent documentation elaborated by Paraguayan experts. Moreover a former member of staff of the CADTM in Belgium, the Paraguayan jurist Hugo Ruiz Diaz Balbuena, had become an adviser to President Lugo, which made contacts easier. [12] The international audit initiative with citizen participation had withered under pressure from the Brazilian government during Lula's presidency. Note that big Brazilian companies are the main creditors of Paraguay, which they exploit. Although he had intended to sign a presidential decree creating the debt audit committee, Fernando Lugo finally gave in to pressure from Lula and his government who were protecting the interests of the Brazilian firms who were creditors. To persuade the Paraguayan government to drop the idea of an international

It is important to note that President Lula did not help

audit and of questioning the debt claimed by Brazilian firms, Lula made a few marginal concessions and increased the amount Brazil paid Paraguay every year for electricity provided by the Itaipu Dam. [13] That said, despite the pressure from Brazil, an audit was carried out by the Court of Auditors in 2010 and 2011. [14] At the time I went back to Paraguay at President Fernando Lugo's invitation. In June 2012, he was eventually overthrown by a 'parliamentary coup', to use a phrase that had been used in Honduras in 2009 and was applied in Brazil when Dilma Rousseff, who had succeeded Lula as president of Brazil from 2011, was overthrown. [15]

The fact that the right was able to use this form of institutional coup d'Etat, whether in Brazil or in Paraguay, is partly due to the inability of those two left-wing governments to affront creditors forcefully and carry out structural reform. At the beginning of their mandates they enjoyed enormous popular support; but this was deeply eroded by the disappointment engendered by conciliatory policies towards big capital, both local and international. By the time the right decided to take action, people on the left were too disillusioned and disorientated to mobilize in defence of those in power.

## **The Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit from 2009 to 2019**

In 2009, the Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit managed to set up a parliamentary committee thanks, particularly, to active support from the PSOL (Socialism and Freedom Party).

Yet PT MPs joined conservative MPs to prevent the Committee from questioning the legitimacy of Brazil's debt. Then President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) vetoed the organization of such an audit. [16]

The Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit conducted a tireless campaign of consciousness-raising in Brazil. The group trained numerous local sections in Brazil and organized correspondence courses to train activists who wanted to audit debt. They organized several international rallies. The Coordinator, Maria Lucia Fattorelli, also participated in the Greek Public Debt Truth Committee in Greece in 2015. Before that, she had coordinated the publication of a debt-auditing handbook that was translated into French, Spanish and English. [17]

In 2018, during the electoral campaign, The Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit was bitterly disappointed by the presidential campaign of the PSOL candidate, Guilherme Bolos [...]. He considered that continuing debt repayments was not really a problem

In 2018, during the electoral campaign, The Brazilian Citizens' Debt Audit was bitterly disappointed by the presidential campaign of the PSOL candidate, Guilherme Boulos. With the agreement of the majority of the PSOL leadership, Boulos set aside the issue of questioning debt payment. He considered that continuing debt repayments was not really a problem. This caused a profound malaise within the PSOL, to put it mildly.

Indeed, G. Boulos's electoral score as the PSOL candidate for the presidency

fell far below the one the party had obtained in the previous presidential campaign in 2014. In 2014, the PSOL candidate Luciana Genro had vigorously defended the debt audit and the idea of suspending payments on debt identified as illegitimate. G. Boulos only won a third of the votes Luciana Genro had won even though, for the first time, the PSOL had benefited from a considerable government subsidy for the electoral campaign. It only goes to show that by watering down his positions, the PSOL candidate lost part of the radical electorate that had previously supported the PSOL.

Will this be a lasting development? Of the ten PSOL representatives in the Brazilian parliament at present, several maintain a clear position on debt but what is the true position of the party's leadership? At the next PSOL congress, to be held in May 2020, we shall see whether its militants will push for a return to policies more in line with the party's origins.

Within the PT (Workers' Party), which has 53 members of parliament, acceptance of the debt system is deeply anchored in the party's official line and unfortunately we must not nourish any illusions to the contrary.

Despite the criticisms aired above, it is obvious that to counter Bolsonaro, left-wing parties and social movements must unite in the broadest possible front.

Only the future will tell whether the huge social mobilizations that have taken or are taking place in countries such as Chile, Ecuador, Columbia, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Bolivia will find an echo in Brazil.

*Translated by Vicki Briault Manus and Christine Pagnoulle (CADTM)*

# **Being a mayor and a revolutionary in Algeria**

**29 January 2020, by Mohand Sadek Akrou**

## **How can you be a mayor and a revolutionary?**

We can't say that we are revolutionaries, it's a big word, it doesn't fit the context. We are swimming in contradictions. We are not electoralists, but we participate in elections. At the local level, we build direct contact with the population, with the masses. We are at the service of the masses, with a function that tries to minimize the damage. We cannot do much more in a corrupt and backward capitalist system like Algeria.

We are there to accompany the people in their struggle. The only promise we make during election campaigns is that, if the masses want to fight, we will always be ahead of the battle, that they will be able to get behind us to fight. We also say that nothing is given in such a system, everything is taken away, that it is not a mayor who solves the problems, it is the balance of power. We've been sincere from the beginning.

We won this commune through our capital of experience, our militant capital. In 2007, there was a sanction vote against the RCD, the FFS, the Kabyle parties, but also the parties in power - FLN and others.

Our goal is that this should change the class consciousness of the population so that it accompanies us in our mission. It is not easy, in a commune of 18,000 inhabitants, which is totally dependent on public funds, which has few resources of its own and no means to develop them.

## **What is your room for manoeuvre?**

The economic room for manoeuvre is limited because we are totally dependent on public funds. We can only act on the definition of priorities. For example, if we are given five billion centimes in the communal development plans (PCD), it is up to us to rank the priorities, with the participation of the population.

That allows us to show the true face of power. There is material to create local wealth.

We have an iron and limestone mine that was in operation from 1926 to

1957 because it was stopped during the war of liberation by the mujaheddin. The government in power does not want a commune to take charge of itself. Even now, with the oil crash of 2014-2015, there is talk of self-financing the communes but there is no support, no means given to the communes to create their own wealth.

We are a rural, mountainous commune, which can therefore be developed, create employment, in arboriculture, in animal husbandry. In arboriculture, we have engaged in a test of strength with the public authorities for the opening of agricultural possibilities. To do this, the forestry department and the agriculture department are intervening, but they are not doing enough. We are therefore asking for equipment for the commune to be able to develop possibilities to help the farmers invest in their fields.

This is the issue that triggered the conflict with the *wali* (local state representative) for the period 2007-2012. We received him several times to explain the problems and expectations and, in the last two years of our mandate, we forbade him to set foot on our commune if he did not come with machinery, bulldozers, graders, backhoes.

We do not have any factories, there are only shopkeepers, small building material companies such as cinder blocks. The tax system allows us to receive a percentage for the municipality. It is this revenue on which we have freedom of choice for expenditure.

We are therefore immersed in everyday life and we do not really have time to play politics, to capitalise on what we do. There is a huge gap in the development of the municipality. There are 34 villages, there is still a form of tribalism and state subsidies are insufficient to meet the needs of the population.

We are still essentially at the stage of meeting primary needs - basement works for drinking water, sanitation, gas, electrification.

## **How can you involve the population?**

When we call for the mobilization of the population, there is a party that joins in, but there is a habit, a reflex among people, due to a lack of commitment, which consists of saying: you are the mayor, we voted for you, it's up to you to go and bang your head in front of the prefect, the *wali*, the official authorities.

We may have done more than others in the development of a commune like Barbacha, not in the sense of installing production infrastructures, unfortunately, but we were able to develop many projects. Moreover, during the first mandate 2007-2012, we have enormously disturbed the regime, which tried to slow down our momentum. During the second mandate 2012-2017, we won and the regime was forced to invent a procedure that allows minorities to make alliances to block us, so we spent five years without a mayor in Barbacha! But there was enormous resistance against a mayor, chosen by the *wali*, from settling in and the commune was more or less self-managed for five years with an intermediary, the general secretary of the mayor's office, who was placed in charge of day-to-day affairs, the sub-prefect for the last two years.

We have been able to transform the relative majority into an asset in the sense that we explained in a meeting that popular sovereignty has been flouted.

The population has been mobilized for five years, notably in a large rally at the Bejaïa Prefecture, which we closed for one day. The police intervened in the evening and we had 24 detainees. The next day, the population again intervened *en masse*, with buses, all means of private and public transport, and 48 hours after the arrest, we were released.

It galvanized the population, it made them proud to have stood up to the regime. In difficult times, it is good to have an enemy identified so that we can unite and strike together.

During the third term, the current one, we also have a lot of enemies. The Kabyle right, the FFS, the RCD, the FLN, opportunists, those who have interests in the system, who take



advantage of public funds, of land, these people create problems for us. But whatever their slanders, we are the winners because their lies quickly dissipate.

### **How is the town hall useful in the current mobilization?**

In the current context, we have been able to stand out from the rest of the mayors and the communal and *wilaya* people's assemblies. From the very beginning, we engaged our town hall in the movement, giving resources, buses, printing statements and the commune's workers participating in the marches. We were also the first to write official press statements announcing that the commune of Barbacha would not organise the elections.

This produces a double contradiction:

the population is participating in the movement but, at the same time, they want all the problems to be solved within the system. The slogans are that the *wali*, the system must get out, but at the same time to get subsidies for projects, you have to go through the *wilaya*, through the public authorities.

We have also had the possibility of organising conferences and meetings to discuss the real problem, the capitalist system, the rentier system, corruption and the need for a balance of power to free the system.

In relation to our experience and the elections in France, without wanting to give lessons, I think that it is enough not to lie, to tell the truth to the people, the difficulties to be able to develop and the contradiction between the rejection of the system, of

electoralism and the fact of being at the side of the population in the local and regional elections to accompany the struggles. In relation to the yellow jackets, to the law on pensions, to say that the communes that we could win will be in the vanguard of this type of struggle. And to snatch up projects for the communes or regions. Instead of making the capitalists rich, impose them, not the poor workers, peasants, etc., but the poor workers. It is also important to show that what we foresee, thanks to the elements of analysis that we have on capitalism, are actually happening. This is the case, for example, on the ecological issue, or on gender equality. This gives legitimacy to what we do, to our daily struggle.

*Interview by Kamel Aâssat (PST) and Antoine Larrache for [l'Anticapitaliste](#), 17 January 2020.*

## **Megafires in Australia: a climate tipping point, live**

**28 January 2020, by Daniel Tanuro**

### **The spectre of a 'hothouse planet'**

The evolution of the Greenland ice cap provides an important example of a tipping point in the climate field. We know that the disappearance of the entire island's ice cap will raise ocean levels by approximately seven meters. Specialists have observed that the melt has speeded up to a disturbing extent [18], but the ice cap does not seem to have entered an irreversible break-up process yet. According to IPCC, its tipping point would be located between 1.5°C and 2°C heating. At current emissions rates, we would enter the danger zone towards 2040...

Recently, scientists have insisted on

the fact that tipping points can link up via positive feedback (heating effects that increase heating). [19] According to their studies, the disappearance of the Greenland ice cap would release so much fresh water into the sea that the oceanic currents within the Atlantic Ocean would be disrupted. As some of these currents determine the climate in the Amazon basin, the forest in this region would rapidly become a savannah. This change would amount to a second tipping point.

Obviously, a savannah absorbs far less CO<sub>2</sub> than a forest. In consequence, the CO<sub>2</sub> concentration in the atmosphere would greatly increase. This would result in a new increase in heating, so a third tipping point could be crossed. According to researchers, this could mean the breakup of two glacier masses, the Thwaites on the west coast and the Totten on the east

coast of Antarctica. We know that they have been compromised (according to some scientists, the Thwaites has already crossed the point of no-return). [20]

We also know that their disappearance would raise the sea level by around seven metres - as much as the disappearance of Greenland's icefields.

Seven metres + seven metres: in three tipping points we would have reached a fourteen metre rise in sea levels.

And that is not all: permafrost melt, qualitative intensification of the *El Niño* phenomenon, collapse of other parts of the Antarctic ice cap, etc: tipping points could follow one another. What would happen then? According to these researchers, this little climatic domino game would fairly quickly push the Earth to a



â€˜hothouse planet’ regime with an average surface temperature 4 to 5Â°C hotter than today. Our globe has not experienced such conditions since the Pliocene, 1.5 million years ago (well before the emergence of *Homo sapiens*). At the time, the ocean level was 20 to 30 metres higher than nowadays.

The â€˜hothouse planet’ expression sounds like science fiction, but the scientific community takes this scenario in which â€˜positive feedback’ leads to a chain of tipping points. The process would fairly quickly lead to an extremely different world than the one we know today and which our ancestors have known. A world that would certainly be very impoverished in terms of its biological bounty. *Homo sapiens* might survive, but two things are certain: 1) there would be no room for 7 to 8 billion human beings; 2) the poorest would foot the bill, although they bear the least responsibility for ecological destruction.

## A â€˜live’ tipping point

The relationship between all the above and the megafires devastating Australia? Very simple: on the one hand, there is no doubt that this catastrophe is an outcome of climate change (as early as 1986, Australian specialists sounded the alarm bell in the face of this danger, but in vain). What is happening today, alas, confirms their projections) [21]; Moreover, these terrible fires probably constitute a tipping point themselves – a moment speeding up the global ecological crisis.

In terms of biodiversity, the question is already settled. More than one billion animals have perished in the flames. The survivors will struggle to keep on living in deeply changed habitats, the fire has already wiped out several species of plants and animals, and certain unique ecosystems will not regenerate (such as the vestiges of the primary forest that covered Gondwana 250 million years ago! [22]) This is the very definition of a tipping point.

In climate terms, the issue is more complex, as certain phenomena play out in opposite directions, as we shall see.

Before that, it is worth repeating: we must not forget that fossil fuel combustion is and remains by far the main cause of climate tip. CO2 emissions caused by fires have been estimated at 6,73 Gt between 1 January and 30 November 2019. In comparison, emissions due to burning fossil fuels stood at 37.1 Gt in 2018 (33.1 Gt in 2010).

And yet, emissions caused by fires are far from negligible. For example, they are higher than those of the United States, which emits slightly over 5Gt of CO2/year by burning fossil fuels. [23] As the climate system is close to the Greenland tipping point, the fact that gigantic Australian megafires reduce the leeway separating us from the domino effect described above is not a detail.

Fires release large quantities of CO2, black carbon and aerosols. Sent into the atmosphere at a high altitude, these different elements do not have the same impact on the climate. CO2 and black carbon contribute to heating, while aerosols have a cooling effect, as they reflect sunshine (the same thing occurs during volcanic eruptions). However, aerosols fall back down after a few months, while CO2 will accumulate in the air for over a century. Thus, in the long term, the heating effect will win out.

Smoke particles have another heating effect. The soot and aerosols will fall back to earth, sometimes very far from Australia. Recently, brownish soot has been observed on New Zealand glaciers, and it seems, as far as Antarctica. However, ice and snow contaminated in this way see their albedo diminish, so their melting will accelerate. [24]

One major unknown is the impact of the catastrophe on forest survival in the middle term. Australia experiences fires every year. Up to now, the forests have resisted and regenerated. Eucalyptuses, in particular, are very fire-resistant plants. But, on the one hand, the current fires are unprecedented, moreover, the heating

and drought risk making regeneration more difficult, if not impossible. A mature forest can resist hydric stress for a long time, but this makes growth and survival very difficult for young seedlings growing on naked soil, in an atmosphere made drier by the disappearance of forests, where fires also become more probable. Australia is experiencing a multi-year drought cycle. [25] In this context, specialists fear that a large part of the forests will not regenerate and will be replaced by shrub formations, which contain far less CO2. [26]

Optimists will say that Australia has mostly sandy, chalky, gritty and clayey soils, rather light in colour, and that these soils reflect a larger percentage of the sun’s rays when bush grows than when they are covered in forests. Indeed, a broadleaf forest forms a dark mass that reflects only 15% to 20% of rays – about twice as less as light soils. But it is doubtful that this cooling effect of a greater albedo will compensate the heating effect of the CO2 released into the atmosphere by the destruction of millions of hectares of forests.

## Poor forests!

In the world in general, many forests are in bad shape. Whether spontaneous or provoked, forest fires are tending to multiply and heating makes them ever more formidable and hard to master. We have seen this recently, in California, in Bolivia, in Ecuador, in Indonesia, in Congo, in Mexico and in the Mediterranean region (cf. the terrible fire that killed more than 80 people in Greece in 2018)... To the fires are added, in the Global South, deforestations caused by the capitalists’ extractivist frenzy in lumber, pulp, livestock, soya, palm oil, as well as mining, oil or hydroelectric exploitation.

In temperate zone developed countries, the forested area has been increasing for several years. However, for many years now, the trees’ health has tended to decline, largely due to more severe heat waves. Fires have also multiplied even in the most northerly regions, such as Sweden, Canada and Siberia. According to certain scientists, contaminants

caused by fires, very uncommon in these regions, have also been a significant factor in the record melt of the Greenland ice cap, in 2012. [27]

If CO2 emissions continue to increase, it is certain that forest fires will multiply. To what extent? Californian scientists estimate that the relation between rising temperatures is not linear but exponential. [28]. *Earth's Future*, 7, 892-910.]]

As we know, national governments' climate plans ('nationally determined contributions') are taking us to heating over 3°C by the end of the century. According to IPCC, with such a warming, fire frequency will increase on over 60% of the globe's surface. Recently, Brazilian and US scientists came to the conclusion that if policies are unchanged, thirty years from now, they could experience the fate that is Australia's today. [29]

Alas, we have reason to fear that such warnings will not be heard any more than those made thirty years ago by Australian scientists when they warned of the probability that warming would provoke more and more serious fires.

The cause of this wilful deafness does not fall from the sky: it is the product of governments in thrall to capitalist interests, thus of the capital accumulation that inevitably results from competition for markets between private owners of means of production. And yet, it is precisely this endless dynamic of accumulation that causes climate tipping.

## Systematic climate denial

Among these capitalist governments, Australia's is playing a particularly cynical, criminal role. The country is one of the highest CO2/inhabitant/year (more than 15t, more than the United States - only the Gulf monarchies do worse). But since the beginning of climate negotiations, in 1992, the leaderships of the parties in power have their foot on the brake of imperative measures.

As early as the Kyoto protocol negotiations, in 1996-97, Australia

decided to accept no emissions reduction that would have any negative impact on the country's competitiveness. Thus, the country privileged 'emissions credits'. On the national level, it merely planted trees and limited deforestation (not to mention the bounty on killing dromedaries - imported in the 19th century - on the pretext that those animals were major methane producers).

This outlook has been systematically maintained up to the present. In the framework of the Paris agreement, Australia pledged to cut its emissions from 26 to 28% by 2030. As we recall, at that deadline, respecting the goal of 1.5°C maximum with no 'temporary overruns' requires a global average cut in net emissions of 58% on average. In light of its historical responsibilities, Australia's contribution should be around 70%.

The Australian government does not only slam on the brakes when emissions cuts are mentioned. It also cheats, by activating its two favourite gadgets: natural absorption of CO2 and buying carbon credits.

Firstly, the emissions calculation method has been altered to increase the estimate of quantities absorbed by forests. This modification had the dual outcome of re-evaluating upwards the emissions volume during the previous Labor government, then slightly lowering it since the Conservative government is in charge. But watch out: emissions caused by fires are not counted. [30]

Secondly, the Australian delegates to COP25 fought with Brazil, China and India for unsold carbon credit stocks generated within the Kyoto protocol would remain exchangeable within the 'new market mechanism' foreseen in article 6 of the Paris agreement. However, it has been proven that scarcely 2% of these credits actually represented actual reductions. [31]

## Australia, privileged supplier

## of the world capitalist market

The explanation for Australia's climate positioning can be sought in the particular space its ruling class chose to occupy in the international division of labour. A wealthy western imperialist country, governed by whites, Australia is not an industrial nation but an exporter of raw materials: farm products, coal, gas, iron and other minerals that its geographical location allows it to valorise in trade with China. This role as a privileged supplier for the 'workshop of the world' has enabled Australia to be among the few countries generally spared by the 2008 crisis.

Despite a few nuances, the two major parties (Labor and right-wing Liberal/National Coalition) are fundamentally at the service of this system and the policies it requires). Providing raw materials to China requires being particularly competitive, as the competition is tough with 'emerging' countries of the South. Thus, the need to be particularly neoliberal.

The consequences are there, in all fields. Energy: 80% of electricity produced from coal (though there is no shortage of solar resources!). Social: from 2003 to 2015, the average wealth of the richest 20% of households has risen by 54% while the 20% poorest have seen theirs fall by 9%. Environmental: natural resources are offered to the private sector (particularly water; considered a 'mining resource' and listed on the stock market). [32] Democratic: The Australian state has conducted a particularly vile policy of deportation of migrants. [33] and is on the frontline of repression of unions, journalists and ecosocialist movements protesting environmental destruction. [34] Scientific: the government offered 4 million Australian dollars to climate denier Björn Lomborg and would have raised their offer further to base himself at University of Perth. Lomborg had to abandon the idea after an outcry among scientists... [35]

Major extractivist capital's control of Australian political life was at the fore of the last electoral campaign. Coal magnate Clive Palmer (a notorious climate denier, particularly for his plan to extend a coal terminal that would gravely damage the Great Barrier coral reef) invested huge sums (53.6 million AUS\$, more than the rightwing and Labor combined!) to create a sham political party, whose only aim was to steal votes from Labor and ensure the victory of Scott Morrison, who is utterly devoted to Palmer's plans. [36]

## Towards a political and social tipping point?

Megafire 'management' is the reflection of this policy subservient to big capital to its very marrow. The list of the government's misdeeds in this crisis is actually so long that not all of them can be listed in the scope of this article. Morrison was catching the sun

in Hawaii while his country was in flames. Firefighting services are entirely staffed by volunteers and underequipped. Casual disregard by those in power is directly responsible for the fact that at least 23 people have died, more than 2000 households have lost their homes, more than 250,000 residents have been displaced, five million people are inhaling toxic fumes and thousands of terrified people had to seek refuge on the beaches because they were circled by walls of fire more than 70m high.

As a New Zealand journalist wrote, such a balance sheet does not come out of a void: it expresses a deep contempt for the 'common people'. Marie-Antoinette said that starving French people in 1789 could simply 'eat cake' if they had no bread. Morrison seems to think that rebroadcasting cricket matches on TV and the New Year's fireworks (which went on in Sydney in the midst of the catastrophe!) would lead the mass of people to keep on sleepwalking towards climate catastrophe, without drawing political lessons from the disaster, without realising that this

policy leads directly to a scenario where the rich can get by while all the others would simply lay down and die. [37]

The tipping point concept also applies to social sciences, as we said at the beginning of this article. Let's hope that the scope of the catastrophe will mark the beginning of a tipping point in Australian public opinion. And hope that the social majority struggles for those who bear the economic responsibility and their political lackeys pay their debt, which will be a very heavy one. [38] And that an alliance of forces able to put on the agenda the break with productivism, extractivism, neoliberalism, racism (targeting migrants and Indigenous Australians) and the ideology of domination (over nature and over women). The toxic nature of this deadly nexus no longer needs be proven. Another, non-capitalist world, is not only possible, it is more and more urgently needed. Struggle without borders for its emergence.

*13 January 2020*

# Without a Treaty, Australia Day Will Always Be Invasion Day

**27 January 2020, by Lidia Thorpe**

It is rapidly becoming a national tradition to return from the Christmas summer holidays and plunge headfirst into the contentious debate over the date of "Australia Day," our day of national celebration.

The twenty-sixth of January is significant because it marks the anniversary of the arrival of the convict-laden first fleet of ships at Port Jackson. It also commemorates Governor Arthur Phillip raising the British flag at Sydney Cove. It was with this act that British sovereignty was proclaimed over Australia's eastern seaboard.

That moment was a declaration of war on my people, the oldest continuous living culture in the world (at least 120,000 years). This is why we call Australia Day "Invasion Day." For us, it is a day of mourning.

Throwing a national party on 26 January is deeply offensive to Australia's First Nations Peoples. But this should be stating the obvious 'the fact that it needs to be spelled out tells you everything you need know about the denial of this country's past, so widespread among white Australia. It also speaks to the hard work we still need to do to find a true and shared identity that might reconcile

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

There is considerable support for keeping January 26 as Australia Day. But the support is confused; those who support keeping the date say it's important to maintain tradition. Yet the date has only been observed by all states since 1946, and it has only been a national holiday since 1994.

Fewer than half of those who responded to a 2018 poll were able to accurately nominate why 26 January is significant. Many mistakenly suggested it marked the day Australia was "discovered" by explorer and

British naval officer James Cook “which is not the case at all. The land was, of course, already occupied by Aboriginal peoples, but Cook was not even the first European to reach Australia; he was beaten by the Dutch in 1606 and the Spanish later that year. What’s more, Cook first set foot on Australia seventeen years earlier than the First Fleet’s arrival” in April, not January.

As a day of national celebration, 26 January is tarnished. This is not just because of the annual debate. Worse, the date “as well as the lack of a treaty between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia” adds insult to the economic and social disadvantage First Peoples suffer in one of the world’s richest nations. This is a national disgrace.

## Changing the Date Isn’t Enough

In recent years, the “Change the Date” campaign has gained significant momentum, sparking national debate and receiving media coverage across white Australia. If this in one sense suggests a national awakening, it also carries significant dangers for our fight for sovereignty and justice.

One of the first things you notice about the “Change the Date” debate is a glaring absence of Aboriginal voices. This is in keeping with the obsession that Australia (progressive Australia included) has with fretting about the so-called “Aboriginal problem.” For all the talk, this never seems to involve opening the conversation to perspectives, solutions, and leadership by First Peoples themselves.

We are also absent from the debate because “unsurprisingly” many of us aren’t interested in helping to alleviate white guilt by moving the date of Australia Day. Given worsening and horrific deaths in custody and a gap in the life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous men of up to fifteen years, it’s not a pressing concern. In fact, it’s a dangerous distraction from the conversation we should be having, about signing a treaty between black and white Australia.

It shouldn’t be controversial to note that Australia was invaded and that war and mass murder were inflicted on the Aboriginal nations who lived here for thousands of generations prior to colonization.

Just like Native American tribes, Aboriginal people mounted a heroic resistance against colonization. In both cases, many died on both sides. But in both cases, Indigenous fatalities were far greater. That’s why January 26 marks the beginning of a war of racial, cultural, and ecological genocide against my people that continues to this day.

While Black Hawk, Geronimo, Chief Seattle, and Sitting Bull are relatively well-known leaders of the Native American resistance, Aboriginal warriors such as Pemulwuy, Musquito and Windradyne are less famous. Although their bravery in leading the Aboriginal resistance was equal, their histories are only now becoming better documented.

Similarly, it has taken too long to map massacre sites across the country. Work led by the University of Newcastle is gradually rectifying this “so far, they’ve documented a staggering 250 sites between 1788 and 1930. The researchers are still counting.

Today, there is no doubt that successive governors undertook mass murder. This includes Lachlan Macquarie, who led New South Wales’s transition from penal colony to free settlement. For example, in 1816, he ordered that “All Aborigines from Sydney onwards are to be made prisoners of war and if they resist they are to be shot and their bodies hung from trees in the most conspicuous places near where they fall, so as to strike terror into the hearts of surviving natives.”

That’s why Australia Day is, for us, not a celebration. It’s a painful day of mourning.

## Treaty Now!

Without a treaty, the trauma and bloodshed that stretches from our past into the present cannot be confronted;

lasting and meaningful reconciliation will be impossible. Indeed, the absence of a treaty is the single biggest roadblock to Australia growing up as a nation. After all, every other Commonwealth country has signed a treaty with its Indigenous people.

King George III’s written instructions to Governor Arthur Phillip in 1787, ordering the establishment of the colony of New South Wales, make no mention of protecting or recognizing Aboriginal lands. Instead, the continent was settled under the doctrine of terra nullius, or “no one’s land.” Despite partial recognition of Aboriginal land rights under the 1993 Native Title Act, the concept of terra nullius continues to shape the occupation of our land and resources.

A treaty could address this fundamental and formative national myth and help to shed light on a tragic blind spot. This is because, at its core, a treaty is an agreement between sovereigns that recognizes the existence and inalienability of the rights of all parties. Other forms of “recognition,” even if well intentioned, don’t cut it because they do not resolve this fundamental injustice.

Other structural changes have been proposed, including formal, constitutional recognition (in the preamble or body) or the establishment of dedicated Aboriginal representation to interrogate the implications of legislation put before the federal parliament (described by opponents as a “third chamber”). Yet these are dangerous and premature if not first underpinned by a treaty. These measures, like changing the date of Australia Day, need to be negotiated as part of a treaty.

For a just treaty, Indigenous representation cannot be handpicked by non-Indigenous authorities. Instead, every Aboriginal clan and nation across Australia must be consulted on the basis of free and informed prior consent, in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Upon invasion, there were more than 250 Aboriginal language groups. We are not a homogenous group of people. Broad representation is necessary in order that we all



participate.

Although it will be a long and hard fight to get there, we can propose some key principles for a just treaty. As a litany of international examples demonstrate, if we get these wrong, the result may be a bad treaty “ which would likely be worse than no treaty at all.

First, the treaty process needs to be a conversation between black and white Australia. This is why the content of a treaty is not just for Aboriginal Australia to decide; critically, non-Aboriginal Australia must ask itself what it would want to see in a treaty with First Australians. This dialogue is as important as the destination, because it will shape the future of Australia and its inhabitants.

Second, the principle of self-determination must be upheld so that Aboriginal representation on any treaty-negotiating body is genuinely representative and has a legitimate mandate from the nations or clans they come from. The diverse approaches to decision-making and representation among the Aboriginal people in Australia must be respected. After all, no one questions non-Indigenous Australia’s right to determine its own decision-making and representation.

Third, because Australia is still a Commonwealth country and a treaty is only binding between sovereign powers, the people of Australia have two options. Either the country must found itself as a republic capable of concluding a treaty with its First Nations in its own right, or it must acknowledge that power to affirm a treaty lies, in the final instance, with the British Crown. Whatever the case, this is important for two reasons. For one, treaties signed with non-sovereign powers (for example, state

governments) don’t hold enough weight and are far less open to international scrutiny. Worse, for Aboriginal clans and nations to enter into a treaty with a non-sovereign power downgrades their own sovereignty.

Finally, it must rigorously follow the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent as outlined in the UNDRIP.

## **Better No Treaty Than a Sham Treaty**

The government of my home state of Victoria has been the first to progress a treaty with its First Peoples. But they have failed to address any of the above four principles. This means that the Victorian Treaty has neither attraction for, nor credibility with, Blak Victorians, and so fails on every count in regard to the UNDRIP. Most important, Victoria has failed to seize the opportunity to use the treaty process to guide a conversation that builds a shared future between Blak and white.

The process itself has been deeply flawed. The election of Aboriginal representatives to the body charged with designing the treaty, the First People’s Assembly, was a sham from the start, and Aboriginal Victorians knew it. This is why only 7 percent of those eligible to vote did so. After receiving considerable feedback from elders and peers about the process, I withdrew myself as a candidate.

On top of this, some Aboriginal clans within the state were outright denied representation, while other representatives were to be handpicked by Aboriginal “corporations.”

Further, negotiating treaties with separate Australian states and

territories instead of Australia’s sovereign authority has raised myriad problems, including questions as to whether such a treaty would bear any international validity.

This is particularly dangerous because, as the first state to begin a treaty process, Victoria will set a precedent that will inform future treaties elsewhere. The governments of Queensland and the Northern Territory are already planning to follow Victoria’s example.

In part, Australian states and territories are going it alone and developing state-level treaties because the prospects of a federal treaty are so poor. (This is the case even with the country’s first ever Aboriginal “ not white “ Minister for Indigenous Affairs.) But short-circuiting the national level is a dangerous move.

Until acknowledged and addressed, the trauma and bloodshed of Australia’s colonial past will continue to shape its present. To break with this, Australia will need to transform itself radically, to dismantle racist structures and mentalities that persist today, and to redress the ongoing oppression of Indigenous Australians. Without a treaty, this will be incomplete.

Whatever political form justice might take, only a treaty signed with Australia’s First Nations will provide a durable basis for recognition between white and black Australians.

Only then will it be possible to resolve the annual debate about Australia’s national day. The day a meaningful and valid treaty is signed with First Nations Peoples will be the first day Australia can celebrate without shame or denial.

Source [\*Jacobin\*](#), 23 January 2020.

## **The mobilization is continuing, so is Macron’s isolation**

## 26 January 2020, by **Léon Crémieux**

In fact, the day of mobilization called by the inter-union for January 24 was the expression of an enormous mobilization with a net increase in participation in all cities: one and a half times more than on 16 January. Even if this was less than the two big demonstrations of last December, and despite the end of the all-out transport strikes, the atmosphere was one of joy, combativeness and strong determination everywhere. There was a strong presence in the demonstrations from the railway and education sectors; also from the rest of the civil service, the energy sector, the port and dock workers, culture... And many lawyers.

The government and its media followers would like to act as if the episode of challenge to its counter-reform was over. In the last few days the government and the employers have been cultivating the repression of employers and police against the leaders of the movement, and are raising their voices against the radical expressions of the movement. But neither the political climate nor the new information on the real content of his planned "reform" gives him the slightest serenity.

No minister, let alone Macron himself, has been able to take part in an inauguration or public demonstration without encountering popular hostility. Emmanuel Macron and his wife, themselves, had to flee from the Parisian theatre where they were attending a performance on 18 January: several dozen opponents of his reform had gathered in front of the theatre. Likewise, several offices of En Marche MPs have been tagged in recent weeks, as they were a year ago during the major mobilisations of the Yellow Jackets.

Hostility to the counter-reform is not waning, on the contrary, it is growing in public opinion. Several polls indicate that almost 2/3 of the population wants Macron's project to be withdrawn outright, and concern is growing about the consequences of the reform.

As new elements of the new system are revealed, this rejection grows. To put it plainly, Macron and his government have totally lost this political battle: their plan is now well known and totally unpopular.

This unpopularity, of course, concerns all those who, suffering unrecognized hardship at work, would have to continue for two or three more years to receive a pension of which they do not know the amount. The Minister of Labour Muriel Penicaud has clearly indicated that she is opposed to reinstating the hardship criteria removed by Macron in 2017 at the request of employers. These criteria granted (very selectively, by the way) early departures for handling heavy loads, awkward positions, exposure to mechanical vibrations, and exposure to dangerous chemical agents. This concerns industrial workers and technicians, health care personnel, construction workers, among others. In the last few days, the Minister of the Civil Service has clearly announced that, while granting derogations to law enforcement personnel, customs officers and firefighters, he is purely and simply abolishing the "active categories" present in the public services (allowing early departure up to now), such as sewage workers, who have a very high early mortality rate and a life expectancy 7 years lower than the average for workers (17 years lower than that of managers).

Everyone has something to lose. The disapproval is massive among lawyers, and is reflected in dozens of "discarding robes", a symbolic demonstration which the Minister of Justice herself experienced in Caen in early January. These demonstrations of the discarding of tools, garments and work symbols have multiplied on the part of hospital workers, labour inspectors and teachers. In many demonstrations, groups of women dressed as "Rosie the riveter" (the image of the American arms industry worker during the Second World War) organize flash mobs and sing a song

taken over by the ATTAC association to denounce the planned cuts in women's pensions.

In a completely different vein, a frontal criticism of the project even comes from a source where one would least expect it, that of the army.

The Supreme Council of the Military Function, a very formal body for consultation with the Ministry, has just issued a categorical letter. While the soldiers and gendarmes seemed to be spared by the "universal" scheme, this Council simply states that it cannot give a favourable opinion on the project, "the introduction of a calculation rule based on the entire career and no longer on the last six months will inexorably lead to a reduction in pensions", up to 20% according to their calculations.

In a new slap in the face for the government, the *Conseil d'Etat*, the highest administrative law body, which must give an advisory opinion on any proposed law, has just issued a very negative opinion on the pensions bill. It criticizes head-on a bill "with dubious financial projections", and a subsequent recourse to dozens of as yet unwritten ordinances. But, on the substance, it indicates that the new system cannot claim "universality" and equality of treatment, since it provides for five different schemes (civil servants, magistrates, military, sailors, agricultural employees and farmers) and many rules of derogations in these five schemes. In addition, it throws two time bombs into the government's garden. The Council recalls that the law cannot provide for provisions to be adopted at a later date, in another law, concerning the increase of teachers' salaries and it also states that the draft cannot provide for subsidizing the Supplementary Pension Fund for Seafarers. These last two points undermine two pillars of the government's shaky scaffolding: those aimed at calming teachers and seagoing personnel.

In addition, the managers of the

current collective supplementary pension system (ARRCO-AGIRC) have just calculated that the future scheme, with the cessation of contributions from high salaries (over 120,000 euros per year) will generate an imbalance of 3.7 billion euros per year for 15 years. It will indeed be necessary to continue to pay high pensions for retired executives, while active executives will have eliminated a whole part of their contributions.

So, politically, this government has not caught its breath, while wanting to settle very quickly an issue that was supposed to be a social triumph for it.

Another trap that it has set for itself is also fast approaching: that of the Conference on Financing, a manoeuvre found at the beginning of January to break its isolation and obtain the approval of the CFDT and the UNSA.

We are already facing a paradox: the government is facing a large-scale movement and is putting forward its willingness to negotiate... with the only two unions that are not involved in the mobilization! But the trap is going to close quickly since this conference will only be able to put the "pivotal age at 64" back in the frame, forcing retirement two years later, or lengthening the number of years worked necessary to retire (43 years

today). Two Swords of Damocles hanging over employees retiring from 2022.

All in all, we are therefore a long way from the government's propaganda dressing up as a project of social justice and limited to the abolition of the "42 special schemes".

But this political isolation, this majority rejection of Macron's project, this mobilization of hundreds of thousands of workers and social movement activists has still not created the balance of forces sufficient to make Macron yield.

The lack of preparation for this battle in September is now being paid for in many professional sectors, contrary to what was the case at the SNCF and RATP.

Until recently, there was no widespread awareness of the disastrous consequences of this reform, including in the civil service or energy sectors, or in the major companies in the automobile, aeronautics or chemical industries, which could have a significant impact on the balance of forces.

Numerous port and energy sectors have entered into movement in recent days, but with a real gap in relation to the mobilization in the national railways and Paris region transport.

The challenge of the coming weeks is to maintain and deepen the political isolation of the government, through numerous spectacular actions, blockades, demonstrations, occupying the maximum political space; and to put forward in the most unitary way possible the indispensable solutions to put an end to lives of precariousness and low wages leading to miserable pensions. This is the work systematically carried out by tens of thousands of activists, the real political vanguard of this movement, present in the locally in the cross-sectoral general assemblies of strikers and union coordinating committees.

But everyone is also aware of the need to develop strikes in sectors, particularly in the public sector, which have not had borne the same burden of many strike days in recent weeks.

Concerning the strengthening of the mobilization and the balance of forces, Olivier Besancenot has made the proposal in recent days that the entire labour movement should agree to organize a national mobilization, a mass demonstration in Paris organized from all the cities of the country to impose the popular will to withdraw this counter-reform. This proposal will perhaps make its way.

*25 January 2020*

# Why They Killed Patrice Lumumba

**25 January 2020, by Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, Sa'eed Husaini**

Born in 1925, Patrice Émery Lumumba was a radical anticolonial leader who became the first prime minister of the newly independent Congo at the age of thirty-five. Seven months into his term, on January 17, 1961, he was assassinated.

Lumumba had become an opponent of Belgian racism after being jailed in 1957 on trumped-up charges by the

colonial authorities. Following a twelve-month prison term, he found a job as a beer salesman, during which time he developed his oratory skills and increasingly embraced the view that Congo's vast mineral wealth should benefit the Congolese people rather than foreign corporate interests.

Lumumba's political horizons

extended far beyond the Congo. He was soon caught up in the wider wave of African nationalism sweeping the continent. In December 1958, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah invited Lumumba to attend the anti-colonial All African People's Conference, which attracted civic associations, unions, and other popular organizations.

Two years later, following mass demands for a democratic election, the Congolese National Movement headed by Lumumba decisively won the Congo's first parliamentary contest. The left-nationalist leader took office in June 1960.

But Lumumba's progressive-populist proposals and his opposition to the Katanga secessionist movement (which was led by the white-ruled colonial states of southern Africa and proclaimed its independence from the Congo on July 11, 1960) angered an array of foreign and local interests: the Belgian colonial state, companies extracting the Congo's mineral resources, and, of course, the leaders of white-ruled southern African states. As tensions grew, the United Nations rejected Lumumba's request for support. He decided to call for Soviet military assistance to quell the burgeoning Congo Crisis brought about by the Belgian-supported secessionists. That proved to be the last straw.

Lumumba was seized, tortured, and executed in a coup supported by the Belgian authorities, the United States, and the United Nations. With Lumumba's assassination died a part of the dream of a united, democratic, ethnically pluralist, and pan-Africanist Congo.

The murder of Lumumba and his replacement by the US-backed dictator Mobutu Sese Seko laid the foundation for the decades of internal strife, dictatorship, and economic decline that have marked postcolonial Congo. The destabilization of Congolese society under Mobutu's brutal rule "lasting from 1965 to 1997" culminated in a series of devastating conflicts, known as the first and second Congo wars (or "Africa's world wars"). These conflicts not only fractured Congolese society but also engulfed nearly all of the country's neighbors, ultimately involving nine African nations and around twenty-five armed groups. By the formal end of the conflict, around 2003, nearly 5.4 million people had died from the fighting and its aftermath, making the war the world's second deadliest conflict since World War II.

Particularly in light of the Congo's turbulent trajectory following his assassination, Lumumba remains a source of despair, debate, and inspiration among radical movements and thinkers across Africa and beyond. Jacobin contributor Sa'eed Husaini recently spoke with Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, a leading Congolese intellectual and the author of a biography of Lumumba, about the life, death, and politics of the radical nationalist leader.

**SH: Arguably the best-known event of Lumumba's life remains its tragic end. Though there has been at least some symbolic acknowledgment of Belgium's role in Lumumba's murder, no such reckoning has occurred in the United States. From your perspective, what would a full restitution for Lumumba's murder look like?**

**GNN:** There cannot be a full restitution for Lumumba's murder. No amount of money or other form of compensation would do justice to the harm suffered by the Congo in losing a thirty-five-year-old visionary leader who could have helped build a great country. No amount of money would do justice to his children after having grown up without a loving and supporting father to guide them through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. And the same goes for his wife and other relatives, whose loss could not be mitigated by material acquisitions.

What is needed from all the accomplices in Lumumba's murder is, first of all, an acknowledgment of the crime they committed against him, his family, the Congo, and Africa; an apology for the harm done in this regard; and an effort to honor the Congo's first democratically elected leader by promoting his legacy through schools, public education, and cultural events in all the countries whose leaders took part in his disappearance, beginning with the Congo itself.

**SH: Despite growing up in his ethno-cultural homeland, Lumumba came to be known for his ardently multiethnic and even pan-African worldview. Were there**

**aspects of his early upbringing in Sankuru that predisposed Lumumba to place a high value on Congolese unity and ethnic diversity?**

**GNN:** While the Sankuru region of the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) is mostly known as the home of the Tetela people, to which Lumumba himself belongs, it is inhabited by people of other ethnic groups who ended up there either because of the activities of the Swahili-Arab slave traders or those of Belgian colonialists. These groups include the Kusu of Maniema, the Luba, the Songye, and other groups from the Kasai region, as well as the Mongo of Équateur.

In addition to growing up in a multiethnic environment, Lumumba's formative years as a middle-class civil servant took place between 1944 and 1956 in Kisangani (then Stanleyville), one of the major cities in the Congo and an area of ethnic diversity.

**SH: You write that as a postal official in the Belgian colonial service, Lumumba was initially enamored by the possibility of "matriculating" or dropping his status as a "native" Congolese in favor of the status of an évolu  , or honorary European. At what point did Lumumba abandon this hope of attaining elite status in colonial society in favor of a radical opposition to the Belgian colonial project?**

**GNN:** Lumumba acquired both the civic merit card and the matriculation status in Kisangani, but these achievements of upper mobility in the colonial situation were a sham because racism continued to raise its ugly head through the color/wage bar.

Although entrusted with a job usually reserved for Europeans as manager of the money orders service, Lumumba's salary was determined by his race, not his functions. He earned the equivalent of \$100 USD in 1956, somewhere between one-tenth and one-fifteenth of the salary of a European civil servant doing a similar job. His European colleagues also received free housing, a car, and a fully paid, six-month vacation back



home to Belgium every three years.

These and other realities of the colonial situation eventually made him abandon his naive hope of seeing whites and the évolués working hand in hand to lift up the “ignorant masses” in a Belgian-Congolese community and pushed him in the direction of African and Congolese nationalism.

**SH: How did Congolese nationalists view violence as a means of attaining political independence, and where did Lumumba stand on this question?**

**GNN:** In general, Congolese nationalist leaders were strong believers in nonviolence, and Lumumba was no exception. This is why they were all shocked by the mass uprising for independence on January 4, 1959 [which erupted in Leopoldville, present-day Kinshasa, after members of an anticolonial party were denied the right to assemble. Celebrated today as the Day of Martyrs, it was the first major outbreak of violence in the independence movement and marked a turning point for the anti-colonial struggle].

Later on, these leaders understood that mass violence was a bargaining chip in their confrontations with the colonial masters, as the latter found it difficult to maintain law and order in the vast Congo once the masses had rejected colonial authority and were unwilling to obey colonial administrative directives.

**SH: What role did international mining companies play in encouraging the province of Katanga to secede from the Congo, and how did this contribute to the origin of the Congo Crisis?**

**GNN:** With their mineral empire running from Katanga to the Cape, international mining companies did not like the idea of having a radical nationalist government in the Congo — one likely to reduce their profit margins with higher taxes and royalties in order to improve the livelihood of ordinary Congolese. This is why these companies, which had

rejected efforts by white settlers to get a piece of the pie as their counterparts in South Africa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and South West Africa (Namibia) had done, switched gears by forming an alliance with racist white settlers and right-wing lobbies in the United States and the United Kingdom.

This alliance not only endorsed the long-held dream of white settlers to gain political power in Katanga, but also provided the funds needed to sustain the secessionist drive in Katanga, with help from Belgium, Britain, and France.

**SH: One could say that the origins of the Congo Crisis lie in a chance alliance between Belgian settlers and corporations, uniting with business and state interests from the white-ruled states of southern Africa. You describe this alliance as a “counter-revolution against national liberation,” given that it was formed to oppose the radical nationalism sweeping the continent. Could you say more about this alliance?**

**GNN:** The Congo Crisis cannot be understood without reference to the Belgian-engineered Katanga secession in collaboration with international mining companies, which recruited white mercenaries to join Belgian troops in backstopping the secession. The UN refusal to use force to expel Belgian troops and the mercenaries led to the dispute between Prime Minister Lumumba and UN secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld, who shared the same worldview as major Western powers and was very hostile toward Lumumba, as shown by the cable traffic in UN archives.

**SH: So why did this combination of previously competing international and local actors ultimately come to agree that Lumumba’s assassination was necessary?**

**GNN:** He was the single most important obstacle to their scheme of establishing neocolonialism in the Congo, as they started on July 11, 1960 in Katanga.

**SH: Lumumba delivered many memorable speeches and also**

**wrote many moving letters. In 1960, he wrote to his wife from prison: “The day will come when history will speak. But it will not be the history which will be taught in Brussels, Paris, Washington or the United Nations. It will be the history which will be taught in the countries which have won freedom from colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history and in both north and south it will be a history of glory and dignity.” Was Lumumba also able to articulate a specific vision for how he intended to transform the state and Congolese society during the brief period in which he served as prime minister?**

**GNN:** We do get a glimpse of his vision for postcolonial Congo in several of his major speeches and letters. While preoccupied with the unity, independence, and sovereignty of the Congo, due of course to the counterrevolutionary situation facing the country from July 10 to 11, 1960 (the Belgian military invasion and the Katanga secession, respectively), his main concern was how to transform the inherited structures of the state and the economy in order to improve the quality of life of ordinary Congolese.

**SH: Like Amílcar Cabral, Thomas Sankara, and Steve Biko, Lumumba’s martyrdom transformed him into a powerful symbolic force that continues to inspire radical movements across Africa. In your preface, you briefly describe the inspiration and sudden disappointment you felt at the time as a high school student (who was expelled for anti-colonial activities) witnessing Lumumba’s meteoric rise and tragic assassination. As Africans and in the wider world, have we truly reckoned with the historical trauma that came from witnessing the assassination of some of the continent’s most promising leaders?**

**GNN:** Since all the assassinated leaders you mention were victims of world powers and/or their allies in Africa, like fascist Portugal and apartheid South Africa, I don’t see

why the world powers responsible for eliminating those African leaders they detest should be concerned with the impact of those assassinations on Africa.

It is up to us, Africans, to make sure that we follow the teachings of Amílcar Cabral on knowing our own weaknesses and finding ways to overcome them, and those of Kwame Nkrumah on collective continental security through an African military

high command. We need our own equivalent to NATO to ensure the security of our people and that of our endangered progressive leaders.

Source: [Jacobin](#).

# A presidential election to ensure the system's continuity

24 January 2020, by **Kamel Aïssat**

The 22nd of February 2019 was the first time that the people had mobilized across the country since independence. It was an uprising against the humiliation of being ruled by a “living dead” president, “a frame”. [39] Bouteflika's candidacy was the straw that broke the camel's back after 20 years of monarchical drift, policies of impoverishment of the broad masses and a regression of all fundamental freedoms. He attacked trade unions and associations, which have been swallowed up by the government. All mediations were broken, in favour of a royal consensus.

Many state-owned enterprises were sold to the nouveaux riches. Bouteflika tried to emancipate himself from the army, accelerating the clan war which seeks to define the clan who will redistribute the oil rent, and for whose benefit. The civil war produced a deep political crisis, with the impossibility of practicing politics. Regions have resisted, particularly in Kabylia in 2001, but the process has not spread. The current situation is the product of these elements.

## A movement that never stops

In early March, the people became aware of their strength, especially around the day of March 8 and the general strike that led to a crack in the regime which resulted in the sacrifice of Bouteflika, who embodies

the new financial bourgeoisie. Bouteflika's departure strengthened the people's confidence. This led to the failure of the July 2019 election, as the people believed that rupture with the regime could not go through a presidential election.

During the summer there was an attempt at recomposition within the regime. On 12 September 2019 the military chief of staff decided to call elections, and the frontman president, Bensalah, called them for December. Meanwhile, we demonstrated in Biskra at 50°C, in Algiers every week despite the heat. The people formulated their demands: “that they all leave”, “el Blad Bladna N'dirou raina” (“the country is ours, we do what we want with it” and “independence”. Behind this slogan is the understanding that independence was confiscated by the border army, the only political force organized at the time. It is said that while the entire population was thin, these “*djoundis* (combatants) from the borders” were fat. The people have never been consulted on how to build Algeria. Attempts to draft a constitution in 1963 were imposed on the people.

On 13 October 2019, the day the hydrocarbons bill was presented, the mobilization was significant and the slogan “they sold the country” gained even more force. The social question had been posed. On November 1, 2019, the anniversary of the start of the War of Independence, the people

came out to say “we want to continue our revolution”, “we want to take power”, denouncing the regime as an agent of French colonialism, of Macron and Total. The law was written by an American research consultancy! There were also mobilizations against the finance law. A slogan expresses the situation well: “shale gas for the Americans, natural gas for France, and for the Algerians, tear gas”.

## An illegitimate election

On Thursday 12 December, election day, we had immense mobilizations, among the largest since the beginning of the movement. But nobody talked about it in France, because the only allies of the regime are France, the United States, China, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It has no popular support.

There was a co-optation: the Constitutional Council, appointed by Bouteflika, made a *fatwa* to extend the mandate of Bensalah and the government, to change the composition of the government. The election of 12 December was organized by an illegitimate government, by an illegitimate president, including from the point of view of the constitution which is no longer in force since 5 July, convened from a barracks, to co-opt front figures and to ensure the continuity of

the neoliberal and undemocratic regime.

The elections in France were protected by the CRS, while Algerians peacefully demonstrated outside the Embassy in Paris. In Algeria we are told that 9 million people voted, or a 39.9% rate of participation. But none of the 8 TV channels has succeeded in broadcasting images of people who voted. We saw soldiers in line, well disciplined, going to vote, but nothing else. In Bejaia, to go to vote, they broke the wall between the barracks and the school, instead of going outside! The Islamist-influenced Al Magharibia channel, which supports the movement and broadcasts from Paris, was suspended last October with the agreement of the French government.

The two weeks before the elections, a bludgeoning took place: we were told to watch out for the Islamists. But they don't represent anything today. We were told that the movement was a Kabyle disorder, but arrests were made everywhere ... and the Kabyle flag was waved all over the country. The government denounced a supposed foreign intervention, but everyone remembers that the French ministers came for years to explain to us that our president was lucid, intelligent, and had a great culture when he was a vegetable! They also relied on a resolution of the European parliament demanding "the immediate and unconditional release of all those accused of having exercised their right to freedom of expression" to incite nationalism and organize demonstrations for the regime... while the government has unfair agreements with the European Union, for example the establishment of the LMD system in higher education, which contributes to blocking the future of Algerian youth.

Tebboune, in his inaugural address, praised businessmen. He did not salute the struggling people, the workers, the unemployed, women, or even his voters. On the other hand, he tried to appeal to nationalist sentiment. The night of the election, while Macron noted "the election of Mr. Tebboune" the latter replied "I will not answer to him [...] I was elected by the Algerian people and I

only recognize the Algerian people"... then they spent an hour on the phone. As Mohammed Harbi says, France did not leave Algeria, it came with capitalism, and left capitalism behind it.

## **A politicization without alternative, without political program**

On 12 December the government co-opted a president, Tebboune, who embodies the continuity of the system and the depths of the Algerian bureaucracy, a former minister of the interior, a former housing minister, and a former prime minister under Bouteflika. The people do not accept this president. On Friday the 13th, demonstrators came with bags of flour, and put flour on their faces, because Tebboune's son was involved in a cocaine trafficking case... The central slogans concern the illegitimacy of the president. But the dominant discourse spread, notably in the media, is the relief of finally having a president. There will be a reflux from the mobilization. This already happened at the time when Bouteflika resigned, because part of the people rose up only against humiliation, and it was the youth who imposed the continuation of the movement. In March, April and May, clandestine emigration ("Harraga") virtually disappeared from the statistics, as the hope for change emerged, and then resumed during the summer.

The movement is peaceful because the people know that it has no relationship of military forces with the regime. The strength of the mobilization is the huge size of the Friday rallies. On 12 December 450 young people were arrested in Oran. In Bejaia, a general strike was organized, with the participation of the unions, before December 12. This department, which has accumulated organizational traditions since the 1980s, with self-organization, demonstrations on May 1, and martyrs from the mobilizations

of the 1980s, has the role of paving the way for the whole of the country.

The movement is fundamentally democratic. But there is not a gap between democratic and social issues. In February, the PST (Parti socialiste des travailleurs - Socialist Workers' Party) was the only organization to advance the question of the Constituent Assembly. One of the roles of the Pact for the Democratic Alternative in which we participate is to structure the debate, not to leave it to experts and technocrats. Some PAD organizations consider that the transition can go through a presidential election, but the movement has forced them to evolve. Others want to negotiate with Tebboune but so far the strength of the movement has prevented such negotiation, since the starting point is the end of the system, and the only possible negotiation is the modality of that end, the transition.

## **A new Algeria has been revealed**

Regarding the perspectives, there was a battle, a first half, which is over. We are going to enter a second battle, to clear out the system. The movement is producing its own alternatives. This alternative we call the sovereign constituent assembly, that is to say, redefining the Algeria of tomorrow, as young people see it today. To settle all democratic and social questions: the situation of women, which is a very important question, the place of religion, the right to work, the distribution of wealth. We are talking about a sovereign constituent process because it must take place under popular control, rather than being drawn up by experts. It should be drawn up by the organised people. They begin to self-organise, at their own rhythm, with political debates in many towns.

Whatever the outcome of the movement, there will be a new way of organizing, of doing politics. People do not organize themselves from a concept, but from the reality of the situation, of needs. In 2001, the movement started on 18 April and on 25 April came the first call for self-

organization. It organized itself to face the killings of young people and stop the riots by transforming them into conscious action. The first popular committees organized the recovery of tires and tobacco looted during the riots. And more fundamentally to deal with repression. But it is also the product of the experience of the activist generation of the 1980s which is found in Beja's. The current

movement will not follow this path. Self-organization exists today on democratic issues, in particular the release of detainees, solidarity with families who are in need, paying and transporting lawyers and demonstrators for trials and to debate. It has been also embryonic but very effective in trying to prevent the December 12 election.

If there is a constituent process, self-

organization will also take its place because it is not for the state apparatus to organize elections, it is for the people to do it, because that is the only guarantee to prevent fraud and impose popular control on elected officials. Today, the level of awareness has not been seen since independence.

10 January 2020

## **“We the (Seditious) People”: Repression and Revolution in South Asia**

**23 January 2020, by Ammar Ali Jan**

The recently concluded Students Solidarity March in Pakistan created excitement across the barren political landscape of the country. It was a remarkable achievement to organize mass rallies in 53 cities in a country that banned student politics thirty-five years ago. Not only did the sheer numbers of the march take the government and the public by surprise, but the left-wing slogans chanted by the assembled youth stunned the establishment. The ruling elites of the country thought they had long buried the ideas of socialism, whose return on such a wide-scale could only appear as a ghost haunting their consciousness.

This is why their response to the march has been absurdly contradictory. On the one hand, the highest echelons of the government (including the Prime Minister) announced support for the restoration of student unions in Pakistan. On the other hand, the state slapped charges of sedition on the organizers of the march and jailed one of the participants, Alamgir Wazir, in Lahore.

I am one of the individuals accused of sedition “merely for participating in a rally demanding student unions, safe campuses, and greater funding for higher education in Pakistan. It is

indeed bizarre to be termed an enemy of the state for voicing dissent over the disastrous conditions of higher learning in the country. But one is horrified (and strangely comforted) to see the sedition law used just as pervasively across the border, in India. One feels part of a larger community experiencing collectively the madness engulfing our region “one that equates loyalty to the ruling dispensation with patriotism, and resistance with treason.

Politics has always been split between those who view it as a means to accumulate more power and those who consider it a vehicle for pursuing justice. It is the latter conception that is being criminalized across our region. The suppression of dissent using the sedition law raises larger questions about the nature of state and society relations as well as the place of violence in contemporary South Asia. I share a few reflections on the subject as we await the judiciary's decision on sedition charges against us for daring to exercise our democratic rights.

### **Sedition and**

### **Popular Sovereignty**

The subcontinent is witnessing a strange rebirth of nationalism. Historically, the phenomenon fuelled anti-colonial sentiment to wrest control from the mighty British Empire. The category of “The People” emerged as a response to the denial of citizenship and democracy to Indians by a colonial regime that justified its loot and plunder in the name of the civilizing mission. The alien sovereignty asserted by the British was challenged by the notion of “popular sovereignty”, which insisted on the autonomy and self-determination of the Indian people.

The birth of the nation was thus intertwined with the birth of the People, the former becoming the vehicle for expressing the popular will. The colonial state viewed calls for liberty and freedom by Indians as attempts to undermine imperial sovereignty over the subcontinent. The sedition laws were among the most widely used legislation to curb the burgeoning freedom struggle across India. They were used against militant organizations such as Ghadar and Anushulan Party, as well as mainstream leaders such as Tilak,



M.N. Roy, Gandhi and Maulana Azad. For these leaders, sedition charges became a rite of passage for displaying their loyalty to the nation.

This is the reason why Michel Foucault's work does not capture the genealogy of the prison system under colonial conditions. In India, jails failed to attain the power of disciplinary institutions that could produce subjugated subjects. Instead, by deliberately breaking the law, anti-colonial fighters transformed jails into public theaters that produced political celebrities out of individuals embodying the suffering of their people.

Thus, popular sovereignty was represented by those who were willing to separate themselves from the existing colonial order. Dissent, nation, and the people were intimately tied together in the anti-colonial struggle.

Today, we are viewing an accelerated dismantling of this history, as the nation is being defined not by the people, but by majoritarian groups or lifeless state "institutions", and dissenting voices are the primary targets of sedition laws. It is the tragedy of our so-called post-colonial world that "The People" have been refashioned from being "sovereigns" to mere law and order problems, wiping out the memory of nationalism's entanglement with dissent and insurgent populations.

It is even more absurd when the state acknowledges the sovereignty of the People while simultaneously viewing them as seditious. Indeed, who are the people being seditious against if they are the rulers? Yes, the people may indulge in unlawful, even criminal, activities but how is it possible for them to overthrow their own sovereign rule? More importantly, what is it about the nature of our state apparatuses that predominantly view their own people as potential security risks?

## State as Counter-

## Revolutionary Machine

In the 1910s and 1920s, there was a flurry of cases against Indians who were deemed to be part of a foreign conspiracy to overthrow imperial rule. This fear of "foreign intervention" emanated from the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and Lenin's open support to anti-colonial struggles. Communism was designated as the primary threat to colonial rule: Sir David Petrie, head of Indian intelligence, termed it "a plague" that threatened to engulf British India.

It is this fear of communism, and more broadly "Revolution", that fuelled the formation of an apparatus that could pre-empt any radical upheaval. As Russia witnessed an imperialist-backed counter-revolution immediately after the Bolsheviks took power, Herbert Marcuse suggested that the fear of the Russian Revolution forced other governments to begin counter-revolutionary violence even before there was a revolution. In a temporal reversal, most parts of the world experienced counter-revolutionary measures prior to revolutionary upheavals.

India was no different, as the British went about turning the colonial state into a counter-revolutionary machine during the inter-war period. Not only were anti-government actions deemed seditious, but even the circulation of "dangerous ideas" was viewed as a threat to colonial sovereignty. The most famous demonstration of colonial paranoia was the Meerut Conspiracy Case in which partisans of the communist movement were handed life sentences. Their alleged crime included the possession of books written by Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Radical thought itself had to be criminalized.

The witch-hunt against revolutionaries defined the late colonial state as imperial officials launched a colossal international effort to "neutralize" Indian radicalism. This effort involved not only the intelligence and security apparatuses, but also the judiciary, the heavily censored media, as well as local administration. For example, in

the Meerut Conspiracy Case, the judiciary accepted the arguments of intelligence agencies connecting the possession of revolutionary literature with conspiracy to overthrow the government. Similarly, the 1920s and 1930s were characterized by what Chris Bayly famously called "knowledge panic", as local administrators across the country began competing in unearthing plots against "His Majesty's Sovereignty over his Indian Dominion".

It is this paranoid and violent apparatus of governance that the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan inherited in 1947. The tension between the ideas of republicanism and draconian state authoritarianism stems from the twin inheritance of anti-colonialism and the counter-revolutionary state. The republicanism that inspired both the Indian and Pakistani constitutionalism was underpinned by the reality of inheriting a state machinery that was designed to thwart any attempts at instituting popular sovereignty.

This tension explains why many liberal commentators remain perplexed at the incredible forms of violence perpetrated by the republican founding fathers. The debate often hinges on the personal beliefs of prominent characters in the freedom movement. But their personal dispositions are secondary to the strategic choices made by the subcontinent's ruling elites. The most significant was the decision to pursue republicanism without uprooting the ills emanating from the social structure or dismantling the state logic that viewed the public with suspicion.

As such, the birth of the free nation coincided with the colonial management of populations along religious lines. While members of the constituent assembly in India were debating the lofty ideals of equality and fraternity, the Indian state was carrying out a massacre of peasants in Telangana (1949) who were daring to fight for these ideals in the country's rural heartland. Similarly, soon after independence, the Pakistani state launched a crackdown on trade unions, students, and ethnic dissidents, eventually elevating the

military to the “neutral arbitrator” in factional disputes among political elites, a role that the colonial authorities were most comfortable performing in the subcontinent.

## Militarized Governance

In our brief genealogy, we witness how the logic of governance remains incongruent with the polite language of constitutionalism. This logic was not just forged under decades of foreign rule, but also represents the militarized control of our societies during the two world wars and the counter-revolutionary impetus of the inter-war period. In other words, war remains an essential technique of governance to manage populations across South Asia. This is not only true for the violent suppression of the people’s movement at independence, but continues to structure the relationship between citizens and the state today. It is most evident in relentless internal military operations, whether it is intended to occupy a territory (Kashmir) or to get access to mineral resources (Jharkand, Balochistan).

In fact, charging citizens as “seditious” points to the continuation of the war logic in the postcolonial state. Dissenting individuals are seen not as airing grievances against the government but as declaring war on the entire polity. They must be treated as enemies and removed from the legitimate political community. Sedition charges are thus used to identify and isolate certain individuals from the mass. The purpose of these allegations is not to target the individual but to produce a general effect of fear and paralysis in society.

It is worth noting that the charges of sedition still have little to do with any actual actionable plans for the overthrow of the government. Instead, they have recently been invoked against individuals for chanting slogans, writing columns, or giving speeches. Just like space is partitioned with barbed wires and check-posts during military conflicts, sedition laws aim to violently patrol the boundaries of acceptable speech and thought in

the public sphere. They permit the functioning of managed democracies in which critical questioning of the status quo places individuals outside the framework of citizenship and portrays them as potential enemy combatants.

This war logic also explains the frequent invocation of foreign “threats” by postcolonial governments throughout South Asia. In particular, the Indian and Pakistani states invoke the other’s name as a mechanism for internally disciplining their populations. The charges against students and public intellectuals in India of being “ISI agents” demonstrate how anxious the Indian ruling elites are to delegitimize critical thinking (while inadvertently providing the ISI with a monopoly over intelligent discourse in India). Similarly, allegations of being “RAW agents” are hurled across the political spectrum in Pakistan, making RAW appear as the most popular political party in the country.

## Traitors of the World Unite!

A year after independence, the Communist Party of India released a now infamous pamphlet declaring, “Ye Azadi Jhooti Hai” [This is a false freedom]. The slogan became a rallying cry for an insurgent party announcing its intent to overthrow the Nehru government that had launched a brutal crackdown on peasants’ and workers’ organizations across the country. The uprising quickly collapsed, the membership of the Communist Party dwindled, and B.T. Ranadive (the Party’s General Secretary and architect of the radical line) was forced to resign from the party leadership.

Much has been written about the clumsy nature of the “Ranadive line” in 1948. Yet, despite strategic blunders, this position demonstrated a certain truth in identifying the relationship between the state and citizens in postcolonial India. The exit of the British after formal independence led to the loss of a historical referent which sustained anti-colonial struggles. Yet, Ranadive

fully grasped that neither the absence of the colonial enemy nor the language of constitutionalism entails actual freedom for the people. The real problem to grapple with was the nature of the state that remained allied to imperialist interests and committed to governing under the militarized logic of late colonialism.

We have tragically failed to transcend this question even today. In Pakistan, we have a rentier state that acts like a landlord to lease out its land and labour to the highest bidder, be it capitalist America, “Communist” China, or “Islamic” Saudi Arabia. In India, the elites have violently thrust the country’s peasantry and indigenous populations into cruel forms of exploitation to appease global corporations. The situation reflects not just the arbitrary relationship between the people and the state, but also the deep incorporation of these postcolonial polities into the chaos of the contemporary imperialist system.

The widespread labeling of opponents as traitors shows that the counter-revolutionary tendency has become incompatible even with limited forms of democratic practice. As more and more ideas become incommensurable with the logic of governance, we are witnessing the emergence of an unbridgeable split in our societies. The cries of “Azadi” are beginning to reverberate across the region. The state and its lackeys are responding with the language of exclusion and violence. War is the unconscious principle of our contemporary present.

The allegations of “foreign agents” symbolizes this moment in which anything that exceeds the normative framework of power is deemed foreign. Liberal politeness is hopelessly inadequate to confront the aggressive reactionary onslaught that keeps transforming dissenters into traitors. If the Right is uniting behind the fear of phantoms, it is time the Left assumes its historical role of confronting the antagonisms that shape our defaulting present.

Only a force that can acknowledge the antagonism at the heart of our nation-states will be able to lead the fight for freedom that our societies yearn for. “Revolution” is the word that has

historically mediated the dialectic between tyranny and freedom, the possible and impossible, the present and the absent. Today, we urgently need to rediscover the valence of the revolutionary tradition in the face of a cruel and punishing system. Much like

the 1920s, it is the ‘traitors’ who are keeping the notion of the People alive through their dissent and resistance. Perhaps, as a response to the global onslaught of the Far-Right, we need an internationalism of the

traitors of the world. Those who will provide us the strength to defend popular sovereignty against the counter-revolutionary machine, and can allow us to redefine what it means to be patriotic in an era of pervasive authoritarianism.

# Fighting back is the only way out of Bolsonaro's Brazil

22 January 2020, by **Esquerda Online**

It is common to joke that in Brazil the year begins after Carnival (the last week of February this year), our biggest festival of popular culture, marked by irreverence and political satire. But in these times of Bolsonarism we cannot afford to lose any time. And this new year, in particular, Brazil's exploited and oppressed must confront unprecedented challenges. We want to point out three themes around which we believe the Brazilian left must focus its attention, themes which demand social mobilization and unity.

## Attacks on democratic freedoms

One of the most sensitive issues in the current Brazilian political scenario is that of democratic freedoms. We must be rigorous in our analysis: in Brazil, we no longer live in a liberal democracy, but neither do we live in a dictatorship. At the same time, the direction is clear, we are experiencing an authoritarian escalation in the country.

Bolsonarism's strategic project is the eradication of Brazil's democratic regime. However, it does not yet enjoy majority support among the different fractions of the bourgeoisie, nor of their representatives in parliament. Although there is a powerful unity among the ruling class around

neoliberalism, there is, as yet, no such consensus for the installation of an openly authoritarian regime.

The year began with the scandalous decision of a judge in Rio de Janeiro authorizing censorship against the producer of the popular and irreverent Porta dos Fundos program that recently produced a “gay Jesus” film for Netflix. Fortunately, the Supreme Court reversed the magistrate's decision. Yet, if threats of censorship were not enough, the headquarters of the production company Porta dos Fundos came under attack by fascists on December 24. To date, only one of the criminals has been identified and, after he was issued a judicial warning and released from custody, he left the country. Nobody has been arrested.

## Unemployment and privatizations

Unemployment is one of the biggest social wounds in Brazil today. The year ended with more than 12.5 million unemployed. Another 4.6 million people are discouraged and have given up looking for work.

Neoliberal measures sold as necessary reforms to make the economy grow and modernize labor relations were mere deceit. Only the big businessmen, bankers, and international moneylenders won while workers' protection and retirement are under attack.

At the start of 2020, the official line is that only by privatizing the Petrobrás state oil company, Banco do Brasil, and Caixa Econômica Federal (the largest state-owned financial institution in Latin America) will the country grow again and generate jobs. But this is just another lie from Minister of Finance Paulo Guedes and Bolsonaro to deliver our national wealth into the capitalists' eager hands.

## Subservience to US imperialism

Brazilian diplomacy is in shambles. Bolsonarism destroyed important assumptions within the Foreign Ministry that guaranteed Brazil's international policy not be linked to the United States on many issues. One such recent example was Brazil's United Nations vote against a resolution condemning the criminal and inhuman U.S. economic blockade against Cuba. The only countries that voted with the U.S. were Brazil and Israel.

In 2020, Brazil's tethering to American interests is growing tighter. For instance, in the confrontation between the U.S. and Iran after the assassination of General Soleimani, Brazilian diplomats sympathized with the U.S., referred to Iran as a terrorist state, and failed to condemn the death of the Iranian military leader. President Bolsonaro even declared

that Soleimani was not a general.

## Fighting back is the only way out

It is wrong to think this new year will be easy. Year II of Bolsonarism promises many attacks on democratic and social rights and our national sovereignty. On the other hand, we

can, and must, place our bets Brazilian workers' capacity to resist. When hundreds of thousands of teachers, education workers, and students struck in May and June of 2019 creating what we called an Education Tsunami, we managed to prevent attacks by Bolsonarism against public universities and federal education institutes.

And we need only look to the intense

mobilization in France as an example, where a long and decisive general strike in public transportation has pushed the government back from its plans to raise the minimum retirement age. French workers are providing an important example to inspire the Brazilian working class, building resistance to Bolsonaro's attacks is the only way out.

*13 January 2020*

## The Puerto Rican Summer

**21 January 2020, by Rafael Bernabe**

The summer of 2019 will go down as a major moment in Puerto Rico's history. Between July 10 and 25, street protests—unprecedented in their intensity, persistence, diversity, and size—led to an unprecedented result: The Island's highest government official was forced to resign. Never, under Spanish or U.S. rule, had a governor been forced to leave office through mass mobilizations from below. An indignant population was not willing to wait for the 2020 elections, not even for an impeachment process to be initiated and completed, to remove Governor Ricardo Rosselló from office: Bypassing institutional forms and calendars, unflagging protests demanded and obtained the departure of Rosselló, who until the end claimed that he had not broken any laws.

### The July Days

Two events triggered the first picket lines in front of La Fortaleza, the governor's residence in Old San Juan, and the initial calls for Rosselló's resignation. On July 9 the press leaked several pages of a conversation on the messaging app Telegram between Rosselló and some of his closest collaborators. The chat was full of sexist and homophobic comments and of attacks formulated in vile and vulgar language on the press, political opponents, and even some members of

the governor's own party. The following day, several members and former members of the Rosselló administration (among them Julia Keleher, former secretary of education) were arrested by the FBI and indicted for corruption.

Beginning on July 9 with a few dozen activists, pickets grew in size with each passing day, reaching several hundred by Friday July 12. Early on Saturday, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, a noncommercial independent press center, released an 889-page transcript of Rosselló's Telegram chat with his aides and collaborators. The level of chicanery, contempt for others, dishonesty, sexism, and homophobia was sickening. That day, close to a thousand gathered in front of La Fortaleza in a protest that ran continuously from noon until past midnight. At one point the protestors moved to the back gate of La Fortaleza (the access actually used by vehicles entering or leaving the governor's mansion), where the first serious skirmishes with the police took place.

On Sunday July 14, a march by several public school teachers organizations, planned before these events, became a major protest, with several thousand participants demanding Rosselló's resignation. Protests continued after the march arrived at La Fortaleza in midafternoon. By nightfall, the first

significant violent confrontation ensued, as the police tried to clear the streets around La Fortaleza. This became a fixture of these demonstrations: At some point around midnight the police moved to clear the streets of Old San Juan, pepper-spraying the crowd, inundating the city with tear gas, and sometimes firing rubber bullets. As the saying went at the time, "In Puerto Rico the Constitution goes to bed at midnight."

On Monday July 15, the mobilizations took a huge step forward, as two protests, a march from the Capitol building to La Fortaleza called by the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizens Victory Movement) and several labor organizations, and a rally in front of La Fortaleza called by the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción (Feminist Collective in Construction), the well-known singer iLe, and other individuals and groups, converged and flooded the narrow streets of Old San Juan with close to 20,000 protestors. That night, while the latter battled with the police in the streets of the Old City, several labor unions, political organizations, and collectives, in collaboration with a set of artists (including iLe and representatives of Residente, who was in contact with Bad Bunny and soon joined by Ricky Martin) agreed to call a new march for Wednesday July 17, from the Capitol to the Plaza Quinto Centenario.

The gathering also agreed on a set of



basic demands besides the resignation of Rosselló, including the audit of Puerto Rico's debt and a moratorium on debt payments until it was completed, an end to austerity measures against working people, and the declaration of a state of emergency to address violence against women.

On July 17 around 200,000 marched demanding the governor's resignation. This was already the second-largest march ever held in Puerto Rico, only surpassed at that moment by the February 2000 march against the occupation of Vieques by the U.S. Navy. The daily rallies continued in front of La Fortaleza, while protests erupted in towns around the Island. On Friday July 19, a march called by the union movement again filled the streets of San Juan with several thousand protestors.

By then a call for a paro (one-day strike) on Monday July 22 had begun to circulate on Facebook and other social media. On Saturday July 20, a meeting of the major unions decided to pick up this call and to provide the logistics to make the mass protest action possible.

On July 22 between 800,000 and a million people filled San Juan's broadest highway, the Expreso Las Américas. This is close to a third of Puerto Rico's total population. The equivalent would be a march of 80 or 100 million in the United States. The following day another major march, from the financial district in Hato Rey to the centrally located Hiram Bithorn Stadium, was called for July 25. By then the pressure from the street could not be resisted: Just before midnight on July 24, Governor Rosselló announced he would resign effective August 2.

## The Road to 2019

What caused this tremendous social explosion? The indictment of Keleher and other government officials and the indignation provoked by the Telegram chat played a role. But government officials had faced similar accusations in the past without provoking such a response. Nor is it likely that the text of the chat alone, offensive as it is,

could provoke marches of 20 thousand, then 200 thousand, then 800 thousand or a million persons. The arrests and the chat were the drops that made the proverbial cup overflow. The causes of the summer of 2019 run deeper.

Three processes were particularly significant: first, Puerto Rico's economic depression since 2006; second, the harsh austerity policies imposed on Puerto Rico's working people since 2006 by the insular government and, after 2016, by the Federal Fiscal Oversight Board; and third, the criminal mismanagement by both insular and federal agencies of the emergency provoked by the catastrophic impact of Hurricane María in September 2017.

Puerto Rico's economy, measured by real GDP, has shrunk by about 1 percent annually since 2006. Close to 250,000, or 20 percent, of the jobs that existed in 2006 have disappeared. The number of manufacturing jobs, which was close to 180,000 in the late 1990s, now hovers around 70,000. The labor participation rate fluctuates around 40 percent. Migration to the United States has accelerated, as thousands seek employment they cannot secure in Puerto Rico. Population has fallen from around 3.8 million in 2010 to an estimated 3 million today (some estimates go as low as 2.9 million). Many in the younger generation feel that they have no future in Puerto Rico. Over this period of worsening material conditions, a feeling combining anger and hopelessness simmered in many minds. People were torn between resignation and the desire for change.

Since 2006, the government of Puerto Rico responded to the worsening economic situation and its decreased income with increased borrowing. Total public debt grew 64 percent between 2006 and 2014, from \$43 to \$73 billion. Inevitably, servicing the growing debt demanded an increasing portion of the public budget. By 2014 more was spent servicing the debt than financing the public school system. Default on debt payments was a matter of time. On June 29, 2015, the governor of Puerto Rico admitted that Puerto Rico's debt was, as he put it, "un-payable."

Congress responded with the adoption in June 2016 of the Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Stability Act, or PROMESA (promesa means promise in Spanish). PROMESA created a nonelected, federally appointed oversight board, with broad powers over Puerto Rico's state finances. Since its installation, the board's proposals and plans have followed the neoliberal script. The debt crisis is attributed to "big government"; economic stagnation to excessive regulation plus labor benefits and protections. The desired cures follow from this diagnosis: cutbacks in government spending, privatization, and attacks on labor rights and benefits.

Thus, since 2017 Puerto Rico's working people were faced with intensified austerity measures that worsened their material prospects, already shaken by the economic crisis. But such measures did not begin with the oversight board, or the Junta, as it is called in Puerto Rico: They go back to 2006, when the government of Puerto Rico encountered its first budget crisis, which forced it to close many agencies during a two-week period. Such austerity measures have included a new sales tax (originally 4 percent in 2006, later raised to 11 percent); mass firing of government employees (around 20,000, through Law 7 of 2009); attacks on public employee benefits and rights (Law 66 of 2014, for example); reform of the public sector pension systems, reducing benefits and making them market dependent and thus uncertain; and the gradual elimination of around 90,000 public sector jobs through attrition. In 2017, the Rosselló administration began its tenure with a labor law reform reducing private sector workers' rights to paid vacations, sick leave, and end-of-year bonuses. To this the Junta has now added further cuts in government spending (halving the budget of the University of Puerto Rico, for example), increases in the cost of government services (such as tuition at the university), proposals for further attacks on labor rights (for example, repeal of protection against arbitrary firings), and the closing of more than three hundred schools (a policy pursued by Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, now under

indictment for corruption).

Hard hit by economic crisis and austerity policies, Puerto Rico was overrun by Hurricane María in September 2017. The Island's deteriorated infrastructure and public services collapsed. The storm itself killed around thirty persons, but more than 4,000 died in the following weeks due to breakdown of electricity, water, transportation, and medical services and the criminal incapacity of the insular and federal governments to adequately and rapidly address the emergency. Besides this, the storm caused an estimated \$80 billion in material damage. While protests were hard to call during the worst moments of the emergency, by 2018 memorials for the dead of María had been organized by different groups, which denounced the role of the government's negligence in this tragedy.

It is not a coincidence that the summer of 2019 was sparked by the arrest of Keleher, who is associated with the closing of schools, and that some of the comments in the infamous chat that caused most indignation were the callous jokes about the bodies of the dead still stored in trucks used as makeshift morgues. Rosselló thus became the focus and target of the resentment, anger, and frustration generated by a decade of economic crisis, austerity policies, and government insensitivity and inefficiency. Needless to say, the mass rejection of sexist and homophobic comments was also magnificent and an indication of the significant, if still not sufficient, shift in Puerto Rican culture provoked by years of struggles around women's and gay rights: Comments that in the past would have been ignored or excused were massively considered sufficient grounds to demand Rosselló's resignation.

## The Myth of Spontaneity

Perhaps the greatest gift of the summer of 2019 was a revived feeling that things can change, that people can change them if they mobilize massively and persistently

enough—in other words, that protest and struggle do work, contrary to what the commercial media and political commentators constantly assert. Fatalism and a sense of impotence were suddenly replaced by a feeling of hope and of possibility, best exemplified by the slogan “We are more and we are not afraid” (“Somos más y no tenemos miedo”).

These events demonstrate that success depends not on the increasingly radical actions of a small but militant minority but rather on the incorporation of ever-growing sectors into the movement. But this lesson should not be turned into a denial of the importance of activist organization. The summer of 2019 had no individual or collective leader or spokesperson. This has given rise to the notion that the movement was an event not prepared by previous initiatives, that it was a spontaneous mobilization, promoted by “the people,” without the need for “traditional” organizations or structures.

This is wrong on two accounts. The explosion of 2019 was prepared over the years by a long series of large and small protests (pickets, rallies, paros, other strikes, marches, acts of civil disobedience) by student, women's, environmental, and working-class organizations. The amazing speed with which the movement “spontaneously” embraced the idea of the paro cannot be explained without the many similar actions against privatization and austerity measures in the past. Those who had participated in those mobilizations easily recognized many of the “old” slogans that were now picked up by an unprecedented number of people.

Second, the largest marches, above all the July 15, 17, 22, and 25 mobilizations, did not and could have not unfolded as they did without the planning, coordination, staffing, and financing of many organizations, and, above all, labor unions, whose role in this process has not been duly recognized. Sound systems, water stations, route coordinators, speakers' platforms do not spontaneously materialize: They are the result of conscious initiatives by organizations that complemented the desire to

protest and mobilize that went far beyond their ranks. If anything, the summer of 2019 exemplified the fruitful interaction of massive, spontaneous initiatives and of organized support for them: It is that interaction that we must seek to maintain in the future.

## Moving Forward

On many occasions the protests against Rosselló expressed rejection of the Junta and vowed to continue the struggle against its policies once the governor was forced to resign. In order for this to happen the movement needs to acquire several aspects it still lacks.

The many groups that participated in the summer of 2019 need to create a coordinating organism, a democratic, flexible structure, but a coordinating structure nonetheless. They need to formulate and agree on a minimum program to inform and guide their actions (including such issues as the debt, privatization, pensions, austerity measures, women's needs and rights, economic reconstruction, renewable energy, food sovereignty, and decolonization, among others). And the movement needs to elaborate a political orientation: It must determine how to transform its demands into state policy, something that cannot be done through the two ruling capitalist parties, the Partido Nuevo Progresista and the Partido Popular Democrático (the New Progressive Party and the Popular Democratic Party).

Put otherwise, the movement must make sure that its merits do not become the source of one-sided conclusions. The movement was characterized by the healthy absence of self-proclaimed “vanguards,” the lack of bureaucratic control by union or other leaders, and by a widespread mistrust and rejection of traditional politicians and of the two corrupt dominant electoral machines. But these strong points must not become the source of self-defeating practices. Rejection of “vanguards” and of bureaucratic control should not lead to a cult of spontaneous action or an underestimation of the need for organization and coordination. Rejection of corrupt politics and

electoral machines should not collapse into rejection of politics, dismissal of the need for political organization, or a blanket opposition to electoral participation. Recognition and celebration of the wonderful commitment of Puerto Rican artists and stars must not lead to reliance on celebrities (which the press is always happy to promote) nor obscure the need for a well-defined program.

An unfortunate discourse present in the mobilizations and in some of the assemblies organized in the following weeks called on participants not to bring the banners or insignias of political parties to the mobilizations. This idea was rooted in the justified rejection and mistrust of the two corrupt electoral machines, but it was also linked to the notion that parties and political "colors" divide the people and that unity requires or benefits from their suppression. In some cases, the argument seems to be that parties and party politics are Puerto Rico's fundamental problem.

This, which we have called the "politics of anti-politics," is wrong on several accounts. It confuses unity with uniformity. It censors political expression. Unity does not require either. All groups and organizations, even political organizations and parties, should be free to bring their banners, flags, or literature. Furthermore, it is wrong to think that parties divide the people: Class and other divisions exist, with or without the presence of political parties. Puerto Rico's problem is not "party politics" but neoliberalism, the crisis of its dependent capitalism and colonialism. The movement cannot ignore politics or the need for a political program. Such a program can only emerge through open debate and the critical examination of different proposals and political projects, whose advocates should be welcomed to present and circulate them.

To orient our present struggle, we have suggested a minimum program, which is, of course, subject to discussion and amendment:

1. Revoke PROMESA.
2. Maintain the stay on claims by creditors on Puerto Rico's public

debts.

3. Audit the debt, annul the illegitimate portion of it, and renegotiate the remainder with three priorities: protecting pensions, protecting essential public services, and retaining resources required for economic renewal.

4. Declare a moratorium on debt payments until the audit has been completed.

5. Adopt an economic reconstruction plan, centered on reinvesting profits generated in the Island, that must include a reconsideration of the existing tax-exemption policies.

6. Stop austerity and privatization measures and revoke recent labor law reforms.

7. Democratically reform the public sector with active labor and citizen participation.

8. Self-initiate a process of decolonization and self-determination through a constitutional status convention.

9. Seek and obtain sizable funding from Congress for Puerto Rico's economic reconstruction as well as action for Puerto Rico's decolonization.

We are sure that this program is quite compatible with the needs and orientation of progressive forces in the United States. Joint work against our common enemies must be an essential part of our shared agenda.

Source: Winter 2020 issue of *New Politics*.

#### Notes - the original markers could not be retrieved

1. For a more detailed discussion of this background, see Rafael Bernabe, "Puerto Rico: Economic reconstruction, debt cancellation, and self-determination,". For wider background see César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

2. Lara Merling, Kevin Cashman, Jake

Johnston, and Mark Weisbrot, "Life After Debt in Puerto Rico: How Many More Lost Decades?" (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2017), 6.

3. Merling et al., 6.

4. Tax revenue fell in real terms since 2005. See José Caraballo Cueto and Juan Lara, "From deindustrialization to unsustainable debt: The case of Puerto Rico" (2016), 12.

5. For further analysis on the debt crisis, see Rafael Bernabe, "Detrás de la crisis de la deuda de Puerto Rico," CADTM, July 30, 2015, and "El régimen de los acreedores y la crisis de la deuda: aspectos del contexto general y el caso de Puerto Rico (2014-16)," *Revista Jurídica de la UPR*, 85:3 (2016), 6. For our analysis at the time see Rafael Bernabe, "Puerto Rico's New Era: A Crisis in Crisis Management," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 40:6 (Dec-Nov. 2007), 15-20.

6. For further on the austerity policies and their ideology, see Rafael Bernabe, "Punitive Neoliberalism in Puerto Rico," *Against the Current*, 191 (Nov.-Dec. 2017), 8. For an analysis and proposal written soon after Hurricane MarÁa see Rafael Bernabe, "Punitive Neoliberalism in Puerto Rico", *International Viewpoint* (7 October 2017).

7. Rafael Bernabe and Manuel Rodríguez Banchs "La política de la anti-política," and "Verano 2019: balances y perspectivas".

8. In 2015 the government of Puerto Rico created a Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of the Public Credit. It was ignored by Governor Alejandro García Padilla's administration and dissolved by the present administration. It managed to prepare two preliminary reports on central government bond issues since 2014 and Electric Power Authority bonds issued in 2013. Both found irregularities that make more than \$30 billion in debt illegal. The initial report, *Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of the Public Credit: Pre-audit Survey Report* is found [here](#). The second pre-audit report is here. For well-documented

arguments for radically reducing or canceling Puerto Rico's debt see Merling et al., cited above; Pablo Gluzmann, Martin Guzman, and Joseph E. Stiglitz, ["An Analysis of Puerto Rico's debt: Relief needs to](#)

[restore debt sustainability,"](#) *Espacios Abiertos* 2018, 2, 3, 5.; and Joanisabel González, ["Paying bondholders not viable,"](#), *Nuevo Día*, English web version, December 12, 2017.

9. See Rafael Bernabe and Manuel Rodríguez Banchs, ["Open Letter to the People of the United States from Puerto Rico, a Month After Hurricane María,"](#) *International Viewpoint*, October 19, 2017.

# A second wind to defeat Macron

20 January 2020, by **Léon Crémieux**

The strike movement is still supported by a large majority of the population, support shown by the flow of donations into the strike funds, the various expressions of sympathy even from employees inconvenienced by transport strikes, support shown by all the opinion poll institutes, reminding us week after week that the movement is approved by two-thirds of the population.

Moreover, the same proportion of the population, two-thirds, is expressing growing concern about the reform and the future of their pensions.

Macron hoped to end the strikes with the letter sent to the unions on 11 January.

In that letter, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe pledged to remove temporarily from the bill the "pivotal age", the obligation to work until the age of 64 in order to obtain a full

pension. He also agreed to the CFDT's request to organise a conference on the financing of pensions which could possibly propose another measure to achieve the 12 billion in savings in the pension insurance accounts required by the government.

This manoeuvre by the government came at a time when the government was on the defensive, unable to rally public opinion to its reform and having failed to quell the strike over the holidays. Philippe's inflexible stance, having succeeded in alienating the CFDT, was even criticized within the presidential majority.

This "retreat" was applauded by the press. The leaders of the right-wing party the Republicans, only too happy to get back some space faced with Macron, denounced this "retreat of the reform" after "multiple concessions to the special schemes".

On the side of the trade union movement, only the CFDT and UNSA applauded this announcement, too happy to find a way out.

This manoeuvre had no effect on the strikers, but it was once again an opportunity for government ministers, widely supported by editorialists in the main media, to denounce the determination of the strikers and the unions.

On the other side, it should be noted that a fairly solid trade union front was maintained, bringing together the CGT, CGC, FO, Solidaires and the FSU in the fight for the withdrawal of this so-called reform, unions that represented 56% in the professional elections for, while the CFDT and UNSA represented only 31.2%. (The CFDT is still presented as the leading union in the country, although it only exceeds the CGT by 0.1% of the votes in total, 24% against 23.9%). [