



## IV541 - February 2020

# “The financial economy prevents people from deciding”

29 February 2020, by **Françisco Louçã**

### **Who moves in the shadow of world finance?**

The term shadow economy refers to all financial organizations that are not commercial banks and that are beyond the control of central banks, regulation and deposit guarantee: financial agents, investment funds, stock exchange agencies, and so on. Michael Ash and I wanted to investigate these types of organizations because they are at the origin of the 2008 crisis. We were able to verify that most of these organizations are either banks or have a business relationship with banks. That is, the financial system has been reproduced in traditional banking and has multiplied into new forms of savings and financial products, many of them fictitious, whose value is the product of speculation. That is the shadow financial system.

### **You define the current financial system as “opaque, deregulated and strongly speculative.”**

The speculative economy has an even larger dimension than it had before, and during the crisis there was a lot of doctrine and a lot of promises of regulation. But the truth is that today the part of world savings that is under the control of the so-called shadow economy is greater than in 2007. In the face of this situation we have two

alternatives: accepting as an inevitable fact a regime of financial accumulation or the states regaining control of states of international capital movements and considering finance as a public good. The first alternative has a negative consequence: the vulnerability of states and democracy. Countries have less sovereignty if there is absolute freedom of movement of capital because there can be no coherent economic policy decided by and for the people.

### **Is it possible to stop or at least limit this financial speculation?**

In some previous cases it was done. The consequence of the crisis of the 1929 in the United States and the rest of the world was to restrict the freedom of movement of capital and introduce progressive taxes with the New Deal policies promoted by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Then the welfare state appeared in Europe, after the Second World War. However, the paradox is that the response to the most important financial crisis of the twentieth century, that of 1929, was to reduce the aggressiveness of the financial system, while the response to the financial crisis of the twenty-first century has been the opposite, to increase that aggressiveness

### **Is capitalism incompatible with**

### **democracy?**

A very traditional economist like Dani Rodrik says: “Either you have globalization or you have democracy,” and I clarify: “In a globalization without brakes, sovereignty or democracy will be limited.” That implies a risk and we are seeing it in the decomposition of the political reference systems in some very important countries: the United States with Donald Trump, Turkey with Erdogan or Brazil with Jair Bolsonaro. One of the effects of this crisis of democracy is the rise of the extreme right. But, in addition, the destruction of the economic capacity of the states undermines democracy. The financial economy destroys the possibility that the people can decide on their future.

### **There is the impression that democracy is not generating policies that lead capitalism on the right track: there is a certain sense of helplessness on the part of the political regime.**

Capitalism now is aggressive and is characterized by a large concentration of financial income. Large financial groups have even more power than states and that makes them more invulnerable to the pressure of democracy or the pressure of the needs of the people. Controlled capitalism is a dream of the last

century, but we must try to recover the capacity of the people to intervene in their economy, to make politics a thing of the people.

**But neoliberalism has ended up imposing on all fields, even university chairs.**

The crisis of the 1930s left us the rise of Keynesianism and the response in the 21st century has been to radicalize neoliberalism. That causes some historical paradoxes such as that the current extreme right embraces ultra-neoliberal policies without blushing when 80 years ago it was protectionist and statist. That is proof of the arrogance and strength of neoliberalism in our day.

**However, in the last Davos forum there was an intense debate about climate change and inequality, and even the IMF talks about increasing social spending and abandoning austerity faced with so much global protest. Do you see a change of discourse there?**

They are contradictory discourses. In the IMF for many years there have been two different discourses: one, more technical, which is concerned about the social impact of austerity policies, but then there is the official discourse, the discourse of the leadership backed by the governments, which is more aggressive now than in the past. And that has been seen with the sovereign

debt crisis in Europe and with the measures imposed on Greece and Portugal and to a lesser extent on Spain and other countries. But yes, it is true that there is some vulnerability in that official discourse. This also happens in Davos with the discourse on climate change and how to reduce the impact of destructive social policies, but if one looks at the consensus reached, it must be said that the answer is null. And if we refer to social policies, the same thing happens: the European Union has decided to further reduce the budget dedicated to these policies. In fact, the European authorities have had a very negative reaction to the increase in the minimum wage in Spain and Portugal. That reaction is a legacy of austerity policies, which have been imposed as an impregnable dogma.

**Can we respond to this dogma of austerity?**

Yes, for sure. A government can resist. The EU can make all the reports it wants about how the minimum wage does not create employment, but the reality is that the increase in the minimum wage creates jobs, creates demand, creates investment and allows social spending to increase. So, governments can, of course.

**Are the growing inequality and precariousness a consequence of this wild globalization in which we live?**

Yes, sure. By reducing wages, precariousness creates a form of

social discipline, prevents people from having an aspiration and therefore a capacity for collective and social representation that, as in the second half of the last century, may impose some loss to the rate of profit of companies and thus recover some real power for the workers. Precariousness divides and destroys.

**Are we prepared for a new crisis?**

There will be crisis, what remains to be seen is under what conditions. Now there are some differences with respect to what happened ten years ago. The first, and this works as a form of risk control in case of a new crisis, is that a very significant part of the debt is now on the balance sheets of the central banks and that implies that there are more instruments of political control. But on the other hand, it is true that the expansion of speculative policies, the size and vulnerability of the financial system itself together with the instability of the international political system, with Donald Trump, the United States trade war with China, with Germany bordering on the recession and with Brexit, increases risk. In this sense, a crisis, even smaller and with less capacity for financial pollution than in 2008, may be aggravated by the fact that policy makers do not want or are not able to intervene. That is the real problem: having George Bush in the United States was a risk, but having Donald Trump has another dimension, it is almost a statement of intent.

**“To all of them we say - Rule out coalition with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael! - Sinn Féin should seek to lead an alternative minority government”**

**28 February 2020, by John Meehan, Paul Murphy**

**“bucked” the European Trend. Irish voters swung to the left. Since its foundation in 1921 the Irish state has alternated between right-wing governments controlled by either Fine Gael (FG) or Fianna Fáil (FF). [1] This domination has started to break down since the 1990s. The 2020 general election produced a result which never happened before - the combined FF and FG vote fell below 50% to a total of 43.1%. What is your take on that?**

**Paul Murphy:** You can't avoid the conclusion that this was an historic election in terms of the decline of the two traditional establishment parties FF and FG, which together won 43% of the total vote. Not that many decades ago these parties got 80% plus of the total vote in Irish general elections. At times they got over 90%. They dominated politics in Ireland. It is the second worst ever result for FF - the only worse one being the 2011 result - the aftermath of that party's responsibility for the crisis caused by the 2008 crash and bank bailout. It is the third worst ever result ever for Fine Gael, and they come at the same time. In the past when FF had a bad result FG had a good result, and vice versa. So it is very significant. Fundamentally there is long-term decline of the vote share obtained by both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. That process was dramatically accelerated by the 2008 crisis, the 2011 general election result, and the Labour Party was punished in the 2016 general election after serving in a coalition government with Fine Gael.

The 2020 result is a continuation and deepening of that trend. These results are rooted in the 2008 crisis and the response of the capitalist establishment in Ireland. Since 2016 FG has been in government supported by FF in a “confidence and supply” arrangement. The two parties have consistently supported policies that favour the bankholders, the bondholders and big business. That ate away at the traditional working support these parties used to have. In an electoral sense, this has now been filled by a rise in support for Sinn Féin. There's no question that the voters for Sinn Féin are looking to the left. The rate of transfer from SF

proves this. A huge percentage of SF voters went on to vote for parties of the radical and socialist left. This indicates that the SF vote was overwhelmingly a vote to end the cycle of FF and FG rule and have radical change of a leftward character. That is what the majority of that SF vote expressed.

**JM: That is very clear. The result of the election has produced considerable uncertainty. Referring back to what you said about previous backwards and forwards FG and FF governments - one feature is very obvious. The smaller parties which won rising electoral support, and entered coalition with FF or FG, were destroyed in following elections. In the recent past that has included the Labour Party which got its highest ever support in the 2011 General Election - nearly 20 per cent - but in 2020 got its lowest ever share, 4.4%, and 6 TD's. By contrast the Radical Left Bloc won 2.8% of the total vote and gained 5 seats. In other words, it is on the same level as the Labour Party.**

SF got a left-wing mandate. The official party position is that it prefers a left-wing government - which can only happen with the support of the SPBP Bloc, the Green Party, the Labour Party, the Social Democrats, and a few other left deputies. That combination cannot achieve a majority government.

FF and FG are reluctant to go into government together, but this may happen. The Green Party may go in with them. To complete the picture there are 16 other TD's whose politics are right-wing. We do not know yet what the result of this will be.

There is a clear difference between the government policies of SPBP and SF. Can you elaborate on that?

**PM:** SPBP will vote for a Sinn Féin left government. It will not vote for any government that includes the right. Coalition with the right-wing parties in Irish politics has always been a graveyard for parties that receives support on a leftward basis - again, and again, and again. The 2020 SF vote is compared with the Labour

Party “Spring Tide” of 1992. A large left vote was used by Labour Leader Dick Spring to enter coalition with Fianna Fáil, then Fine Gael, and the party was hammered in the 1997 General Election. The Labour rise and fall between 2011 and 2020 was even more dramatic. We also have the experience of the Green Party in government from 2007 to 2011. The party won 6 Dáil seats in 2007, and lost all its TD's in 2011.

So, this has happened very regularly. Parties go in with a mandate for change. FF and FG represent the interests of the capitalist class in this country and block any sort of change that impacts in a substantial way their profits, and their right to maximise their profits. So, for us on the left, that has always been a red-line issue. You can not form a government with FF or FG. Such a government will not deliver for ordinary people.

That was a very strong point in our election campaign. The headline in our leaflets was that we “the only party that will not prop up FF or FG”. That challenged very strongly, fitting in with the mood of many voters. It was an election not primarily about policy - though policy featured - it was primarily about trying to kick out the establishment parties. RISE and PBP repeatedly placed demands on SF to rule out coalition with FF and FG. SF did not do so. That helped to establish a reason for people to vote for the socialist left - we were the only ones who would definitely not put FF or FG back into power.

Post-election, all of the predicted coalition options - for example speculation about FF + Greens + Social Democrats winning a majority - they are all wildly off a majority. Even FF and FG combined do not have a majority. We have again placed a demand on SF to rule out a coalition with FF or FG. They have failed to do that - that's their right, but we are disappointed with that response. We are not surprised! SF publicly says its preferred option is some sort of left government.

Eoin Á Broin TD, a member of Sinn Féin's negotiating team, elaborated: “while Sinn Féin's preference was a left-wing coalition with the Social

Democrats or the Green party the numbers are not there and that became clear on Tuesday after the General Election results." "On Tuesday morning the broad progressive left had 66 TDs and that is not enough for government," he said. "What we have been saying since then is we want a government led by progressive left policies." Mr. "Broin said now the only responsible thing to do is to sit down and talk and resolve issues with the other parties and "try to deliver government of real change". He said Sinn Féin is "interested in speaking to all parties, including Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil". [2]

We want to create the maximum pressure possible on SF not to look to its right - not to go into coalition with FF or FG. Instead we want to fight for a left-wing government. Fundamentally from our point of view a left government would adopt socialist policies taking on the Big Polluters, the Big Landlords, bring core parts of the economy into public ownership. That is what's necessary to create the change that we want.

Given the current parliamentary arithmetic we argue for - in discussions with SF, the Greens, the Social Democrats - to all of them we say - rule out coalition with FF and FG. SF should seek to lead an alternative minority government. We set out how that could happen. The numbers would require FF or FG to abstain on the vote for taoiseach. Pressure can be created on them to do that. A big part of the rhetoric used by the right-wing parties after the election is "the left won the election - now they have to govern. Let's see how they get on with their socialist policies". We say to them "OK. Allow an alternative government without FF or FG to come to power". Such a government would not have a majority. We say to SF is that such a government could and should immediately introduce a series of radical and popular reforms. For example, reduce the pension age to return to 65 - which was a huge issue in the election campaign. Introduce an immediate rent freeze. Increase the minimum wage. Immediately introduce popular policies, mobilise people on the streets, build movements in favour of these policies,

and defy the right-wing parties to block those policies. That would create the potential to win some important reforms. We do not have illusions that would be a long-lasting government. I find it hard to believe that FF or FG would allow such a government to pass a budget of radical reforms. Such a government could be brought down by the right wing parties. Forcing another general election. We have said to SF and others that an election called in those circumstances - where you have people mobilising for change - opens the chance of creating a Dáil majority for a left government. That way, you can push the situation forward.

**JM: Let's wait and see if that happens. It is unlikely, but I can see it is a good approach. There are other possibilities.**

The various right-wing forces could combine to form a government. They have a majority to do that in the Dáil, if they want.

A final possibility is paralysis and a new general election.

Here is a different problem: isn't there a contradiction between the SPBP call on SF to form a left led government in Dublin, when SF participates in a rightwing coalition in Belfast? SF does the equivalent of a coalition with FF and FG in Stormont, where it is in coalition with right wing parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)? Isn't that a massive contradiction?

**PM:** Yes. From my point of view there is a contradiction in the nature of SF's support. People vote for SF because, in an electoral sense, they fill a space occupied by new left formations in other countries - people see them as a reformist party which will improve people's lives. Unfortunately, in the South there is not a strong awareness about the reality of SF's role in the North. In general there is an attitude that things are different in the North. SF spin it very well. "It is a Tory Government, we do what we can," etc. They wash their hands of responsibility - which is rightfully theirs. So, there is a contradiction. It is a living contradiction within SF's support base. We want to engage with

that contradiction. We emphasise the character of SF's vote. What kind of change do SF voters want to see? We are in line with that. We want to deliver - the left should be the foremost fighters for a left socialist government.

For the moment the emphasis is on calling on SF to look to its left and form an alternative minority government. We spoke to SF today. They were very open. They are pursuing two options. One is an alternative minority government, that we agree with. The other is what they describe as a "left led coalition" - which they mean is a government of SF and the Greens plus FF. We made it very clear to them that such a government would not deliver the sort of change the people want to see. SF going into such a coalition would rightfully be seen as a betrayal of the vote for change that people have made. I made it very clear to them today we would not have anything to do with such a government. We would be vociferous opponents of such a government.

**JM: The SPBP Bloc would vote against such a government?**

**PM:** Yes. We will vote against any government which involves FF or FG. If Mary Lou McDonald is nominated for taoiseach as part of a bloc with FF or FG, we will vote against her.

**JM: Can we be clear on this? This is not in other words a tactical issue? It is an issue of principle for the SPBP Bloc?**

**PM:** Absolutely, Yes. It is non-negotiable.

**JM: That particular formula removes the contradiction between the party's government policy in Dublin and Belfast...**

**PM:** Yes - the same thing.

Personally, I think two things would happen if SF pursue that road. One is negative. A sense of demoralisation would take over people who thought they had voted for change - but, once again, their vote for change was used to put in the same old parties.

The other thing that would happen is a

vindication of the approach adopted by the socialist left. Especially if we are seen to have done everything possible to bring about an alternative government excluding FF and FG. That SF let people down. That would be quite a moment in terms of developing left politics.

In relation to the other governmental option - the FF + FG option - That is a real possibility. I think that such a government would be immediately met with working class anger, and potentially a mobilisation against it. There is a sense that when FF + FG have suffered their worst ever general election results, if they operate in such a blatant way to block change people voted for, their government will be very weak. It might not last very long. It could prepare the way for a majority left government.

**JM: I have discussed this with various people who voted for SF, but who are not far away the SPBP policy.**

Let's say FF and FG form a government, supported by 16 independent rightwing deputies, maybe also the Greens. Partly as a joke I suggested that the Kerry TD Michael Healy-Rae could be rewarded with a Cabinet Post as Minister for Culture. The person I spoke to is very active in the Arts Community Sector. You could have Peadar Tóibín (ex SF, anti-abortion) made junior minister for Health.

First there was laughter, then a realisation dawned we would have to do an awful lot more to build an active grass-roots movement on the left to challenge such a government. There is a problem here for SPBP. It has had a relatively successful general election campaign. But there are 3 component parts which are all adopting the same policy at the moment. That is at the level of the Dáil. On the ground we do not have that.

What positive things can be done by RISE to try to resolve that problem?

**PM:** Relatively speaking, the socialist left had a good election. But our vote is down nationally: 2.6% compared to 3.9% and we lost one seat. That was in

the context of the biggest vote ever for forces perceived to be on the left. In many senses the 2020 election felt like we picked up where the 2016 result left off - one crucial fact was different, decisive for the socialist left. We had been at the high point of a massive social movement, which involved a majority of the population in Ireland, non-payment of water charges, which involved hundreds of thousands of people on the streets. We were not quite at the high point of that movement, but still it was a factor. Now you do not have those active movements. The left could have presented a more unified message.

**JM: If we have a right-wing government that has a Dáil majority, the radical left will have to offer something to people at an extra-parliamentary level. It might not seem obvious at the moment, but the radical left will be competing with forces to its right. I think there will be a convergence between the Labour Party and the Social Democrats, perhaps an organisational merger will occur. These two parties will stay out of a new rightwing government; and state their support for a number of progressive campaigns. The radical left will need a unitary approach towards those forces. It will also have to appeal to people who voted for SF.**

The SPBP brand seems to have appealed to many people....

**PM:** That is true. It will be necessary to build social movements around the issues which were important in this general election campaign. For example, restoring the pension age to 65, which became a huge issue. There is potential to organise major street protests with the backing of trade unions and political parties. Negotiations on government formation are likely to continue for at least six weeks. A big national demonstration could take place within that timeframe. It could have a material impact on the outcome of those talks. It would be an example of people power. Similarly, in terms of housing and health. Particularly if we have an FF-FG Government, we should say to people that such an administration can be beaten. Just like we won on

water charges, marriage equality, and repeal of the constitutional abortion ban. [3]

We should have an orientation to building protest movements which can achieve something. It is not just about achieving isolated victories, defensive victories, in the here and now - it is also about preparing to fight for a left government in the future. As part of that, there is a desperate need for a mass party of the left. The existing forces who are part of the radical left learning to work together is an important part of that. On its own that will not constitute the kind of party that we need. Some of those forces, to bring such a party about, are the kind of people involved in the movement for repeal [of the ban on abortion], people involved in the water charges movement, those people can become politically engaged again. Building a political force linked to those forces is an important part of building the kind of left that we need.

**JM: I am putting a tricky question on the table. I noticed on the campaign that priorities at the forefront of people's consciousness were housing, health, pensions, and climate change. Brexit and the North did not feature. A Fine Gael Minister, Heather Humphries, was challenged on this. I give her credit for saying these issues were not at the top of most people's agenda - but that does not mean they can be avoided. It was a "can kicked down the road" when the Irish Government and EU Negotiator Michel Barnier got an agreement with Boris Johnson's British Government that the North and South of Ireland, both sides of the border, would continue to be ruled in accordance with existing EU Regulations. A new Irish Sea border will operate between the island of Britain and the island of Ireland, once Brexit kicks in at the end of 2020.**

RTÉ Brussels correspondent Tony Connelly has put a lot of material on the public record credibly exploring this issue. [4]

It is clear that a "hard Brexit" disrupting this deal would cause a

major crisis for the Northern Ireland State. Boris Johnson's government is trying to dump its promise to install an Irish Sea Brexit Border.

The Irish radical left has a significant policy problem here. There is time to resolve it. What is the mechanism for the Irish radical left to resolve this problem? I put it to you that "it ain't going to go away".

**PM:** I agree. Johnson's Brexit deal was wildly oversold in Britain, and also by the Irish establishment, that was committed to it. The content of the deal only gets us to the end of December 2020. All these questions are going to re-emerge in a very serious way. There are no guarantees about the solutions contained in the Withdrawal Agreement, which are more than imperfect. The Agreement has huge flaws. There are real problems about a hardened border East-West, but also the potential at a later stage for hardening the North-South Border in Ireland. That is, even in terms of the current Withdrawal Agreement. And all of that can be thrown out of the window, again, by the Johnson Government in the run-up to December. Undoubtedly Brexit will emerge as an issue again.

I will say two things about that. One is that the establishment parties will seek to use it again as an argument for "stability". Stick with what you know, because you need people like FF and FG at the helm to be able to deal with these situations. We should reject that. They failed to come up with a particularly good deal the last time around, and we should critique that. Secondly, in terms of the position that we adopt, there is a fundamental problem with all of these negotiations - there are no representatives of ordinary working-class people at either side of the negotiating table. On the one hand you have representatives of a sectional interest of a section of British capitalism negotiating with the European Commission, supposedly on behalf of the European Council, on the other. The European Commission fundamentally representing the interests of different parts of European capitalism - so we do not trust either of those sides.

Instead the interests of ordinary

people should come first. What does that look like? One, a bottom line is that working-class people must not pay the price for a Tory Brexit. We do not have much influence - let's be honest - on the negotiations as they play out. There is a question about organisations outside those negotiations, to ensure that working class people do not pay the price. The idea of common action by working people, trade unionists, etc, across this island - but also workers in Britain - needs to be promoted. For example, the Irish employers' organisation IBEC came straight out the door and used the excuse of Brexit to oppose a raise in the minimum wage. None of that. We reject the idea of "A Race to the Bottom". We are opposed to any redundancies. On the economic questions we keep to that line - we fight against any attempt to put the burden on ordinary workers. On the question of borders - we have to fight against any hardening of borders which is against the interests of ordinary people.

**JM: You may not agree with this. I think the British and Irish ruling classes realised they would experience a serious crisis if a hard Brexit occurred in 2019. The Johnson government looked at it and accepted that EU Regulations would continue to operate North and South of the Irish Border - which kicked the problem down the road to the end of December 2020. That also kicked the problem down the road for the Irish radical left, to be ruthlessly honest about it. Now - and this is a characteristic of the Johnson Government - after making the agreement Boris is trying to undo it as quickly as possible. He cannot be trusted. After the December 2019 British election the Johnson government realised that its Brexit deal on Ireland created a long-term problem for them. The other side of it in Ireland is that most people were unaware of this in the South, but the opposite was true in the North.**

For the first time in my living memory, a Westminster general election altered sectarian electoral geography in Northern Ireland. The Brexit

referendum result in Northern Ireland, when a majority of 56 to 44 per cent voted No to leaving the European Union, caused significant changes to voting patterns. Sections of the normally unionist voting population realised that Brexit, especially a hard Brexit, will be an economic disaster for the people of Northern Ireland. They voted against the DUP, the main Unionist Party.

Isn't there an argument for the entire Irish radical left to make an orientation to the Sinn Féin party and its base on these issues? Whether we like it or not, SF has a more credible Brexit policy than the radical left.

**PM:** We should fight against any hardening of borders. That will be bad economically; and has the real potential to create a dynamic of increased sectarian tension. That is related to what kind of Brexit is ultimately carried out. It is related to the interests of workers in England Scotland and Wales, as well as in Northern Ireland the South of Ireland. If Johnson succeeds in a "Race to the Bottom" Brexit, he will get a Free Trade Agreement with the USA along the lines of TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) which the USA was trying to negotiate with the EU. That will lead to a significant lowering of standards - environmental, labour, consumer - the consequence of that is going to be a hardening of borders. That is definitely not in the interests of workers on this island. The fight against that sort of bargain-basement Johnson Brexit the British government is driving towards - though it is not guaranteed they will achieve it - can be connected to a struggle against the hardening of borders. The left can position itself in that space.

**JM: Finally - a positive note - the open far right got a miserable Irish general election result. They were decimated. A couple of what I call classic *gombeen* (corrupt) politicians - remnants of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil - Verona Murphy and Noel Grealish - played virulent racist cards. It was also significant that a Sinn Féin TD in Sligo, Martin Kenny, an active supporter of immigrants, topped the poll after racists burned his car outside**

**his family home. Active far-right racism has been a miserable failure in Ireland so far - any comment on that?**

**PM:** It was positive that the racist far-right polled badly. A striking feature of the General Election Exit Poll was that only 1% of respondents listed immigration as an issue. That is a positive. People's anger and alienation got a better expression. I have lots of differences with, and criticisms of, Sinn Féin - but their increased vote, and the vote for the radical left was a

better expression. I would say though that we can't be complacent. The far-right did not get votes. There were worrying signs. For example, the National Party, which is an openly fascist party. Its leader Justin Barrett is an open Nazi, a third-positionist (a particular trend of fascist thought). Barrett has participated in far-right meetings around the world. That party stood on an unprecedented scale. It managed to distribute literature, have activities, have a layer of young people around them. The far-right is getting

organised in Ireland in a way that has not been the case in the past. The left is much better positioned to articulate and point a way forward people's anger and alienation. If that opportunity is not seized, at a certain point in time, despite these election results, the pendulum will swing. There will be an opportunity for the right. It does give an added urgency to the kind of task we are involved in. In particular, about building a mass left party. We are still positioned better than them. But it is a warning for all of us.

## Chile: The debate on the Constituent Assembly

27 February 2020, by **Javier Pineda**

In this article, I will only deal with the discussion about a new Constitution, how it has developed, starting from the popular sectors and the ruling bloc, considering that on 18 October 2019 a constituent process was initiated, expressing a new relationship of forces between the social classes of our country. This opened a new political period which will be marked by the struggle between those who wish to maintain the current system and those who wish to advance towards a new political, economic and social system.

In this respect, the constitutive process will be characterized by the manifest will of the popular sectors to dismantle the neoliberal system and its legal order, which necessarily opens up a discussion on the need for a new constitutional text. In this sense, the conflict pits three sectors against each other: the popular sectors, which want profound transformation of this system and think that the current phase is an expression of the class struggle and that it is necessary to advance to an accumulation of social force allowing progress towards a higher stage of the class struggle; the reformist sectors which want changes as far as possible

by concerted negotiation with those who want to maintain the status quo; and reactionary sectors that oppose any change to the current system and its Constitution.

### Why a new constitution?

Chile's current constitution was imposed by a dictatorship and drawn up by the Ortázar Commission - ideologically directed by Jaime Guzmán. [5] The Pinochet regime tried to legitimize it in 1980 by a plebiscite carried out under the state of emergency and without an electoral register. It is true that it has undergone dozens of modifications, notably those of 1989 (with a plebiscite organized under pressure from the military on the street) and 2005 - where Ricardo Lagos signed off the amended text. [6] However, none of them changed substantive aspects of the dictatorship's constitution.

At the heart of this Constitution is the defence of the neoliberal system through the dogmatic protection of property rights, economic freedom and "freedom to conduct business" in

areas of social rights, such as the right to education and to health. This is what has been called the "principle of subsidiarity" which underlies the constitution, even if it is not explicitly part of the text. Not all the standards maintained by the neoliberal system are enshrined in the constitution, but it can be said that its general framework is established in accordance with the provisions already cited.

This central core is protected by a series of "authoritarian enclaves" that maintain the constitution as it was written during the dictatorship. Among these enclaves are the preventive review by the Constitutional Court, the quorums of majority vote needed to modify the organic constitutional laws, the laws of interpretation of the constitution and constitutional reforms. Added to this were the binomial electoral system (repealed in 2015) and the appointment of senators (repealed in 2005). These enclaves are part of a constitution which establishes a system of extreme presidential power (power of veto, exclusive powers to initiate laws), which apart from elections has no mechanisms for popular participation such as

referendums, popular legislative proposals, or participatory budgets, among other measures. The political system excludes the popular sectors from decision-making.

This means that the questioning of the current constitution is a questioning of the neoliberal system put in place more than 46 years ago and of the transition pact, crystallized in the constitutional reforms and the legitimization of the Pinochet constitution in 1989. We can well say that the current mobilizations are not to gain 30 pesos, but to protest 30 years of exclusion of the people from decision-making about the present and the future of our country.

Why a new constitution? We need a constitution which crystallizes the dismantling of neoliberalism and which enshrines the advance towards new economic and social horizons which allow us to question the model of production, reproduction, distribution and consumption of wealth in our country; to regain control of common goods such as water, minerals, forests, marine resources, among others; as well as control of basic services such as electricity and health services. We need a new constitution which effectively guarantees economic, social and cultural rights and political and civil liberties. We need a new Constitution which allows the exercise of democracy, without exclusions and with high levels of direct democracy, so that the institutions of representative democracy are effectively representative. We cannot overlook the fact that this must be understood as an ongoing process of mobilization and deliberation of the peoples of our country, it being understood that the result will depend directly on how the process is carried out.

Our struggle does not end with the change of the constitution, but the conquests in this area will allow us to accumulate popular forces to advance to a higher stage of the class struggle.

## **The demand for**

## **the Constituent Assembly: how to reach a new constitution?**

There are different mechanisms for amending a constitution: expert commissions, Congress, a Constituent Convention and a Constituent Assembly. In our country, Constitutions were created to solve a political problem at a historical moment and were written by commissions of "expert" men in the service of the national oligarchy, excluding the popular sectors and women. This happened from the constitutions of the 19th century until the most recent constitutions of 1925 and 1980.

The most democratic mechanism for modifying a constitution is the Constituent Assembly, which can be defined as an assembly all of whose members are democratically elected by universal suffrage and which has the specific function of drafting a new constitutional text. Historically, it has been understood that the constituent assembly must be sovereign, that is to say that it is not governed by any other power and that it has an initial power, which breaks with the previous legal order. This has happened with historical constituent assemblies such as those following the French Revolution (1789), the Second World War (Italy, 1947), as well as in countries which have suffered military dictatorships such as Portugal (1975), political regime changes through elections (Venezuela 1999, Ecuador 2008 and Bolivia 2009) or a major political crisis (Iceland, 2010).

Unfortunately, attempts have been made to empty the concept of a constituent assembly in order to legitimize dictatorships or authoritarian regimes in Latin America. This was the case with the constituent assemblies of El Salvador (1983) and Honduras (1982), which reduced the concept to a mechanism where the only important thing is the election of its members by universal suffrage. Therefore, and to understand the current debate in Chile, it is

important to emphasize that sovereignty is a fundamental element when talking about the constituent assembly, even if certain sectors want to reduce its meaning to a simple mechanism for electing those who draft it.

In order not to engage in a semantic discussion, it is important to characterize the constituent assembly generated as a demand from mobilized sectors, and which was installed as a necessity of the first order since the discussion on how to generate a transition from the dictatorial regime led by Augusto Pinochet. Unfortunately, the sectors of the Concertación preferred to maintain the constitution of the dictator and not to fight for a new constitution built by the Constituent Assembly, as happened in all the countries of the world which ended an dictatorial regime, ensuring that the rules established by the dictatorship are ended.

We demand a free and sovereign constituent assembly, representative, plurinational and democratic. A free and sovereign constituent assembly means that there is no state power which can put pressure on it to take decisions or impose prior regulations on it; it is the assembly itself which decides on its operating rules and its quorum for their approval. A representative assembly means that if more than half of the population is female, at least half of the members of the assembly must be women. A plurinational assembly means that its composition recognizes that Chile is a country made up of different nations and peoples, and that it is therefore necessary to consider reserved seats for indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant Chileans. A democratic assembly means that all must participate in the election of the members of the assembly, and have the possibility of being elected, which implies: firstly, all people over the age of 14 can vote; Chileans from abroad can also vote in all elections and also be elected; secondly, the system for electing deputies is modified to increase the number of members of the assembly (244 members elected by the districts, more seats reserved as an expression of plurinationality and, after the election results, corrections



to reach parity); and finally the means are given to independents so that they can be candidates under the same conditions as political parties.

The most developed proposal in these terms was that emanating from Unidad Social, which envisages a path to advance towards a free and sovereign, multi-national, representative and democratic constituent assembly. In this discussion, it is important to point out that the constitutive process initiated on 18 October includes all expressions of the people's struggle, including their spaces for discussion and popular deliberation such as councils (*cabildos*), territorial assemblies and the popular assemblies. But the fact that these spaces are part of the constitutive process does not necessarily mean that these spaces are legally recognized, even if they will become a material force of this constitutive process. [7]

We must therefore make a distinction between the constituent process in general, which is really important, and the institutional constituent route, which is one of the concretizations of the demands of the mobilized people. The institutional dimension is that which must be adopted by the existing institutions, because if we were to try to move forward without this, it would mean that we are able and ready for a seizure of power and a revolutionary process. According to our analysis, we are not in a pre-revolutionary situation, due to the absence of organized popular forces, so that in the current situation we must have a dialogue, interaction and confrontation with the current institutions, without being able to go around them.

The constitutional route developed by Unidad Social, in its institutional dimension, involves a constitutional reform establishing the call for a referendum so that the people decide whether they want a new constitution or the maintenance of the current one. In addition, if the people want a new constitution, it is necessary to envisage a second vote to decide if the body which will draft the constitution will be the Congress, a mixed constituent convention (half of the members elected by the Congress and

half of the members elected by suffrage universal) or a constituent assembly (all members elected by universal suffrage). This vote should take place in March or April 2020. Given the majority of the peoples of Chile agree to a new constitution through a constituent assembly, the election of its members should take place on a date different from that of the municipal elections and should be held in July-August 2020.

Once elected on a representative and plurinational basis, members of the assembly must draw up their rules and have them approved by a qualified majority (half plus one of the members of the Assembly). In this case, they could set a higher quorum of approval for certain questions, such as a quorum of 3/5 or 2/3, however, **if they cannot agree, these questions must be resolved by the citizens through an intermediary referendum to decide between alternative formulations**, which must take place at the latest nine months after the Assembly has started to discuss the new Constitution.

Once the results of the referendum are known, the Constituent Assembly must draft the final text of the Constitution, which must be submitted to a ratification vote, which should take place before the next general, parliamentary and presidential elections (August or September 2021), so that the new authorities can be elected by means of the new constitutional rules. This is a proposal from various social, trade union, socio-environmental, student, feminist, human rights organizations, among others, with the support of Territorial Assemblies and Councils. However, **it is a proposal** and the political outlook is in many respects far from this constituent path.

## The ruling bloc and the new constitution

In the discussion about a new constitution, the proposals of the ruling bloc have been differentiated. In the early days, despite pressure from the streets, the government

opposed initiating a process that would lead to a new constitution, admitting only constitutional reforms. This picture changed as popular mobilizations in the streets progressed, forcing it after the general strike on 12 November to accept the discussion on a new constitution. This decision was crystallized by the "Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution", signed by the parties of officialism - UDI, RN and Evópoli - and of the opposition: DC, PR, PPD, PS, RD, Comunes and Gabriel Boric. [8]

Some have resigned themselves to constitutional change but would like everything to change so that things stay the same. In this regard, the main element introduced by the right was the requirement that all decisions of the new constituent body (be it the mixed constitutional convention or the constitutional convention) be adopted by 2/3 of its members. This eliminates the *sovereignty* of the constituent body and grants a right of veto to the right so that constitutional changes do not take place. If the new constitutional process fails, the current constitution is maintained, which means that the right has a fundamental tool to boycott the constitutional process. **This is the central point of this agreement.**

Furthermore, this agreement did not provide for parity, nor for reserved seats as an expression of the country's plurinationality, nor for the equality of independents in the electoral race. Opposition sectors, mainly from the Frente Amplio, justified this agreement on the basis of two arguments:

1. They were under pressure to reach such an agreement, failing which the government of PiÑ±era would again declare a state of emergency and take the soldiers out into the streets.
2. That a historic opportunity was opening up and that it had to be seized before the right returned to its traditional positions.

They added that the Peace Agreement was a floor from which they would bounce, not a ceiling. On the contrary, the UDI maintained that no new element had been added to the

agreement, which signified the adoption of the agreement as it had been discussed on Friday, 15 November, between dawn and midnight. The agreement called for a referendum in April on two issues; the first, to choose whether to amend the current constitution, the second, to decide whether it will be modified by a mixed convention or a wholly elected one.

In the popular sectors, we maintain that a constitutional convention is not the same thing as a constituent assembly, because its decisions are limited, which prevents it from being a sovereign body. The progressive sectors that defend the Agreement only argue that this has been achieved, embodying the transitional policy that builds "democracy as much as possible".

The Agreement for Peace and a New Constitution was supplemented by a Technical Commission, composed of members appointed by the political parties signatory to the agreement. This commission supplemented (for the worse) the Agreement, establishing that the new constitution cannot modify international treaties ratified by Chile and that the constitutional convention cannot take over functions not provided for in the Constitution nor modify the quorum of its decisions, which deprives it of all sovereign character.

This Agreement was approved, without any modification, on Wednesday 18 December by the Chamber of Deputies and Thursday 19 December by the Senate. In both cases, parity, reserved seats and the equality of independents in the elections were rejected. This project was promulgated by the President of the Republic on Monday, 23 December, to issue the supreme decree on 24 December. What are the elements that are already the subject of a law? **The referendum has already been legally convened and will take place on Sunday, 26 April 2020.** The first vote will be on the question "Do you want to change the Constitution" with the following options: "a) yes" or "b) no". The second vote, if the answer to change the constitution is "yes", will consist of two options: change it by a mixed

constitutional convention or a constitutional convention.

In summarizing the above, rules limiting the sovereignty of the constitutional convention have been established. All its decisions must be adopted by two thirds of its members. If the new constitution is rejected, the current one will continue to govern. The possible new constitutional text will have to be approved by a plebiscite of ratification with compulsory vote. This is what has been legalized so far. This is nothing more than what was provided for in the Peace Agreement and the new Constitution.

## What about representation, plurinationality and the participation of independents?

On Wednesday 19 December, one day after the vote on the constitutional reform which convenes the referendum and legalizes the Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution, the Chamber of Deputies again debated representation, plurinationality and the participation of independents - questions which, the day before, had been rejected. This time, the opposition hoped to have the support of Evópoli and sectors of the Renovación Nacional, which it got. On the day, transitional rules were approved which allow for representation, seats reserved for indigenous peoples and the participation of independents through lists. [9]

With regard to representation, it has been established that "the lists formed by a single party, the lists of independent persons and electoral alliances for the constituent body must be composed by alternating a man and a woman, and by placing a woman in first position". [10]

With regard to the participation of independents, it has been established that "two or more independent

candidates may agree to an electoral pact, which will be in force exclusively in the constituency where independent candidates declare their candidacy. The declaration and registration of this list will be subject to the same rules as the candidacies for the posts of deputy. In addition, each candidate on the list, considered individually, must be sponsored by a number of independent citizens equal to or greater than 0.2% (this number was reduced after a first indication of 0.4%), and the list itself must be sponsored by 1.5% of those who voted in the electoral district during the previous legislative election, in accordance with the general count made by the Election Qualification Tribunal". [11]

With regard to the seats reserved for indigenous peoples, it was agreed that they will have 18 seats in the case of a constitutional convention and 21 seats in the case of a mixed constitutional convention. The question of whether each indigenous people (Aimara, Atacameños, Collas, Diaguitas, Mapuche, Quechuas, Rapa Nui, Kawashkar and Yagán) will have at least one reserved seat is still under discussion. The inclusion of Afro-Chileans, Afro-descendants, in this proposal was rejected. Voting, as approved by the Chamber of Deputies, will take place within the framework of a national electoral district with a single register of voters. [12]

However, these questions do not yet have the force of law and are the subject of litigation in the Senate. Some RN Senators are said to be unwilling to endorse the representation proposals, thereby yielding to pressure from the UDI and acting in their own interest. Technically, senators have until June to approve these provisions and the election of members of the convention should according to the government's calendar take place in October 2020, at the same time as the election of municipal authorities. For the approval of these rules, the opposition needs 25 votes in the Senate. It already has 23 votes, which makes the support of Senators Manuel Ossandón (RN) and Felipe Kast (Evópoli) essential to get these issues approved, as was the case in the Chamber of Deputies.

## What should the popular movement do in this scenario?

Compared with the social issues and the political and criminal responsibility for human rights violations, it is on the theme of the constituent assembly that the most progress has been made. But there remains a central threat which is the weapon of the right to slow down the whole process and prevent the change of the constitution: this is the lack of sovereignty of the Constitutional Convention. **Demanding the sovereignty of the constituent body is therefore the priority.** In the current scenario, the demand for an intermediate referendum on alternative formulas on issues on which the Convention cannot reach agreement can be used for this purpose. All those issues on which agreement cannot be reached must be resolved by the citizens, otherwise we are giving the right a weapon to boycott the whole constitutional process.

Technically, the convening of an intermediary referendum or a referendum on alternatives can be done on the basis of a transitional article of the Constitution, which requires the approval of 3/5 of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. How can this be obtained? By making this demand a central demand in the general strike to be called in March, which should have as its central theme the demand for concrete economic and social measures to stop the precarisation of the lives of millions of families in our country and political and criminal responsibility for those responsible for human rights violations.

With regard to participation in the 26 April referendum, it is important that grassroots organizations, including social spaces organized before the Popular Revolt such as the Territorial and People's Assemblies, can take up this discussion, in order to decide if they are going to commit themselves forcefully to vote in favour of a New Constitution and for the option of the constitutional convention, even with its limits, while understanding that lacking sovereignty, it cannot be characterized as a constituent assembly. Before a majority of social

and popular organizations feel ready to participate in this referendum, it is important to understand that the discussion on the character of the process is not yet closed, and that we have the possibility of continuing by imposing the discussion on the intermediary referendum as central, in order to make real the possibility of changing the content of the constitution. Without this we would have a fake constitutive process, allowing the reactionary right to boycott the whole process. But this will only be possible with a general strike.

As for participation in the election of the Convention, it will depend on the development of the situation and on our ability to tip the scales in our favour through popular mobilization. Finally, we must emphasize that the ruling bloc only wants a simulation of constituent processes, clearly having the task of protecting the norms which underpin the neoliberal system in our country. Therefore, in every popular decision, we must keep in mind - paraphrasing the music group Con\$piraZion - that it is only by fighting that we advance, and that we only trust the people.

5 January 2020

## Opposition to pensions counter-reform weakens Macron

26 February 2020, by **Léon Crémieux**

Three new national mobilization days have taken place in recent weeks: on 29 January, 6 February and 20 February. Numerically, these days brought fewer people onto the street, because if the determination is still as strong, the movement no longer relies on the strikers of the RATP and the SNCF confronting the government and no other sector has taken over from them.

Even if social mobilization is expressed with less force, we are still

witnessing a multiplication of strikes in various sectors, occupations and spectacular actions. The strikes continued in the ports, EDF power stations with power and production cuts, and household waste processing centres in Paris and Marseilles with, in the latter, police interventions to clear access to the centres. Striking firefighters were also violently beaten up by the police, gassed and attacked with sting-ball grenades, with 30 wounded, during a national demonstration on 28 January in Paris.

Strikes also took place in the culture sector (the National Library, Eiffel Tower and so on) and teacher-researchers.

The attack on the pension system has brought to light all social injustices, low wages in precarious professions or harsh working conditions. The implementation of the Macron project would further aggravate this situation. The liberal professions, lawyers, doctors, physiotherapists, in particular, also under attack, again

demonstrated on 3 February. The lawyers, in particular, have been present in numerous interprofessional demonstrations and are on strike for the past seven weeks.

In parallel with the fight against the Macron bill, before the February holidays, strikes multiplied in educational establishments, led by teachers and students, linking rejection of the pension counter-reform to rejection and even boycotting the continuous baccalaureate exams. These tests were boycotted, blocked or postponed in a third of schools. Here too, the police intervened, often violently, against high school students, with numerous arrests.

The cause of this boycott lies in the implementation of a baccalaureate reform which worsens social and territorial selection and completes the selection reform for access to higher education. Teachers remain all the more mobilized since Macron's bill would cause hundreds of euros to be lost from their pensions, and the only proposal made by the Minister of National Education is an extension of working hours or additional tasks so that some teachers can compensate for this loss.

In addition, thousands of hospital staff were on the street on 14 February. Hospital staff (70% of whom are women) are continuing their strikes launched almost a year ago against closures of services and hospitals, and the general deterioration of public health: in 20 years, 20% of hospital beds have been lost (100,000) and 40% of local maternity hospitals. 1,285 hospital doctors, including many heads of departments, resigned in mid-January demanding negotiations on budgets and salaries for all categories of personnel, while the government has just announced a totally insufficient "emergency plan". Likewise, ski resort workers have also stepped up strikes in recent weeks to protest against the unemployment insurance reform implemented this year, cutting unemployment benefits for seasonal workers by 30%.

Fifteen months after the start of the *gilets jaunes* movement, France therefore gives the image of a country

where the popular classes are attacked in terms of social rights, wages, pensions and social protection. For three years, the attacks of Macron and his government have continued to open wounds and create more inequalities, without providing the slightest response to the emergencies of inequality and social injustice, climate and ecology, discrimination, or violence against women.

The popular classes are set against a government that thought it had a free hand after neutralizing the other institutional parties in 2017. But Macron's attacks have resulted in further undermining social adherence to the system and reducing resignation among the popular classes. En Marche benefited from the loss of legitimacy of the parties, but it only succeeded in deepening this and becoming itself a victim of this loss of legitimacy. This translates into Macron's isolation in all polls and continuing majority opposition to his pension bill.

Neoliberal capitalism constantly seeks to erase class identities and social gains characterised as corporatist, by promoting the cult of individualism, the culture of precariousness and success "on merit", by praising the successes of the dominant classes justifying their privileges. But, paradoxically, first with the movement of *gilets jaunes* and now with the fight in defence of pensions, Macron has restored meaning to class identity and collective action and made more visible than ever the need for unity of the exploited. He has also succeeded in making the rejection of the wealthy classes and their political and media servants instinctive, as well as the rejection of police violence. Macron and his acolytes are destabilizing French society by choosing an aggressive policy to defend the interests of capitalist groups, without even worrying about the slightest social compromise necessary to make this policy accepted by the "social partners" of the trade union bureaucracies.

The caricature of this posture appeared in recent days in the National Assembly, when, thinking it was serving the interests of the employers, the LREM group

completely opposed a vote proposing to increase from five to twelve days paid leave for employees for the bereavement of a child. In the face of a public outcry, the employers' organisation MEDEF itself asked the government to change its position and to cast a new vote. This lamentable hiccup is revealing at the same time of the ultra-reactionary mentality of this government and its current political fragility.

No leader of the parliamentary majority really dares to step up to defend the "universal" retirement system. No real simulator has been released and it appears that neither women nor farmers, presented as the big winners from this reform, will benefit from this new system, on the contrary. Each week sees a new analysis of the damaging nature of this project, especially for the most precarious, produced.

By choosing a reform claiming simultaneously to increase the legal retirement age and upset all the balances of the current pension systems, Macron is destabilizing his own majority and further reducing his social base. The coming weeks will be fraught with pitfalls for him.

Since 17 February, the National Assembly has been debating a completely shaky bill. It lacks completely the financial component presenting the balance of the system, its resources and its expenditure in the years to come. This question is all the more thorny as the government has for two months, to avoid an extension of strikes in several sectors, made various promises so that the generations retiring in the coming years will not suffer a reduction in their pensions, this obviously implies maintaining benefits in the face of a fall in contributions. Also lacking is the indicator to change the point liquidation value, the government intends to ask the official statistical services (INSEE) for the creation of a new index less advantageous than the growth in average wages.

At the same time, a social conference is being held with the unions and the employers who are supposed to present a project for financing pensions by 2025, in which it clearly

appears that the famous “pivotal age”, that is to say the raising by at least two years of retirement age (62 to 64 or 65) remains the option chosen by the government. The CFDT, the government’s only real trade union ally, will have to agree to bite on the bullet on this issue, without however obtaining any progress on the recognition of arduous jobs allowing early retirement. On the contrary, many trades in the public service will lose the early retirement benefits they enjoyed under the current system (hospitals, garbage collectors and sewer workers, and so on.). This financing conference, which the CGT boycotted, and to which neither Solidaires nor the FSU were invited (although both are representative in the public service) was reduced to a dialogue with a minority of the trade union movement to endorse the choices of the government.

Macron’s LREM movement had to face the departure from the parliamentary group of several deputies (twenty out of 314) and, on the eve of the municipal elections this coming March, in several cities, competing LREM candidacies have emerged, not to mention those who did not want to use the label of the presidential party. So many symptoms of crisis have accumulated in recent weeks, the result of the blows of a social movement, not strong enough until now to block Macron, but strong enough to crack the majority and the government. Moreover, with regard to the municipal elections, Macron’s party appears largely incapable of competing with the Republicans and the PS, or to win town halls other than those of the few cities in which Macronians who were defectors from the PS or Les Républicains were already mayors six years ago.

Les Républicains, severely weakened after the 2017 presidential election and the Fillon fiasco, are taking heart from Macron’s difficulties and positioning several of their leaders for the next presidential elections in 2022. At the same time, they are distancing themselves from this shaky reform which cultivates in particular the animosity of the liberal professions ulcerated by the loss of their particular schemes.

The MEDEF itself, fairly silent until now, is beginning to express its dissatisfaction. The employers’ federation was in no way demanding a global overhaul of the pension system. It only wanted to have the guarantee of no additional expenditure and a reduction in their “charges”, in particular through the raising of the retirement age to 64 or 65. This comprehensive reform is starting to displease them because it offers no visibility on financing and aims to destroy a joint union-management framework that suited MEDEF perfectly, in favour of state control that does not really inspire confidence in business leaders. Indeed, in silence, the joint management of supplementary pensions (ARRCO-AGIRC) has in recent years allowed social setbacks obtained with the consent of the union bureaucracies.

In addition, the employers are not pleased by the reduction of the compulsory scheme to wages below 10,000 euros per month. This will oblige them to participate in the financing of an additional pension (in the form of pension funds) for their senior executives without having for the moment the tax advantages which benefited social security contributions paid by high-wage earners in the current system. MEDEF, while rejecting, of course, any new recognition of arduousness, therefore argues against the proposed ceiling. Above all, it is really asking the government to clarify its financing plan and to clearly decide on the extension of the retirement age. Several neoliberal inspirers of Macron’s reform project (Bozio, Pisani-Ferry) are now openly critical of a wobbly and illegible project. The massive mobilization of the past three months and the rich debate provoked by the social movement are therefore shaking the government.

It is also clear that financing pensions is a political choice, a choice of society. Union activists from the DARES (department for coordinating research, studies and statistics, attached to the Ministry of Employment) have once again demonstrated in a study widely disseminated in recent weeks there is neither a funding problem nor a demographic problem regarding the

funding of pensions. It is true that in 1960 there were four working people for every retiree and today there are 1.7. But meanwhile, excluding inflation, GDP has multiplied by 4.9, GDP per capita by 3.4. Thus, in 1960, the four active workers generated 95,000 euros. In 2020, the active 1.7 generated 142,000 euros. Today, therefore, 1.5 times more wealth is produced to finance pensions. The argument of there being too few active workers is therefore completely absurd.

The real problem, of course, is that of the distribution of the wealth produced. From 1960 to today, employers’ participation in the financing of social protection has fallen from 60 to 40%. It is households, through the taxes paid on alcohol and tobacco, which compensate for this shortfall. The remainder is paid from the state budget, which offsets the relief granted to employers, whereas these sums could finance public services.

The parliamentary debate will continue for several weeks, the various parliamentary opposition groups wanting to take advantage of the destabilization of the Macron majority. But institutional guerrilla warfare cannot, alone, defeat this law. If the parliamentary debates are prolonged, the government will prefer to use article 49-3 which allows a law to be adopted by ending the debate on amendments.

In order to get out of the trap he has built for himself, Macron is trying to make every effort to divert attention from the pensions question. First of all, he sought to project himself as an international head of state, for a common European defence. Then, he went to the Mer de Glace glacier in Chamonix to pose as a defender of the environment and action against global warming, at a time when the Green lists seem poised for some very good results in the municipal elections. Finally, returning to the old foul smelling recipes, he came to Mulhouse to stage an Islamophobic campaign against “Islamist separatism” on which he intends to polarize political life in the coming weeks. It is not certain that all these diversionary gestures will achieve their objectives.

In any case, the only way for a positive outcome of the social movement is always that of a popular mobilization forcing Macron and his government to withdraw their bill. The activist forces can benefit from the assessment of the first phase of the movement in which the strikers of the SNCF and the RATP were the real leadership of the movement. This renewable strike, which started in these two sectors on 5 December 2019, had been prepared three months in advance by in-depth

activist work. Many argue that it is that it is necessary to set such a goal in the most important professional sectors to start by the end of March an overall movement, a renewable inter-professional strike. This goes hand in hand with the proposal for a national escalation in Paris prepared by all the trade union and social movement forces. Beyond the radical left, Solidaires has made such a proposal, which until now has not been

approved by the national inter-union coordination. For the moment, it has allowed the movement to continue, without giving it a strategy, of an objective capable of breathing new life into bringing Macron to his knees. Neither the energies nor the proposals for fair and solidarity-based pensions are lacking. Tens of thousands of activists are available to build a confrontation that can be victorious.

22 February 2020

## The long month of October - the class struggle returns

25 February 2020, by **Javier Zúñiga**, **Karina Nohales**

### Review of the uprising

The cathartic outbreak of Friday, 18 October 2019 is the way in which the Chilean working class has started to make its historical assessment of the post-dictatorial model, a record in which immediate living conditions and the not so recent past of the country are mixed, still in effect through generational and institutional threads. This is a balance sheet which cannot be translated and does not immediately translate into a specific demand or set of claims. It's a transversal challenge. This is a balance sheet that has just started, because there is too much to say when the people have just found their own way of speaking.

The announcement of an increase in the fare for the Santiago metro, an ordinary occurrence, paved the way for the extraordinary. High school students collectively dodged paying fares on 18 October, to be joined unexpectedly the day after by thousands of people. The daily scenario became an epic. In each metro station, there were gatherings where people encouraged others to engage in sabotage which they would

no doubt have condemned the day before. The moments that led to this moment are as innumerable as the biographies that gave birth to them.

Eight hours later, the government declared a state of constitutional emergency and deployed the army on the streets for the first time since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990. [13] Eight hours was enough to dismantle the hegemonic narrative of "never again" of the democratic transition. But no one seemed to care too much, because the government was reluctant to do so and because the people were not afraid. "Never again" has acquired the meaning that it has always had for each social class: for some "never again" refers to the army and its abuses, for others "never again" refers to the class struggle. Thus was inaugurated the most important political moment in the recent history of Chile.

On Saturday 19 October, President Sebastián Piñera announced the suspension of the metro price increase and at the same time a curfew in the capital. An incendiary combination. By then, other parts of the country had already joined the uprising, and both commerce and transport were paralyzed. On Sunday 20 October, the paralysis became total. Large

shopping malls closed and, with the military in front, protected themselves from those who, until recently, were their customers. It was chaos. The first lady of the country attributed the events to an extra-terrestrial origin ... literally! Speaking on national television, Piñera declared war and the soldiers he deployed fired to kill.

At an extraordinary meeting held this same Saturday, 19 October, between social movements and union leaders grouped within *Unidad Social*, the only people proposing a call for a general strike from Monday were feminists, supported by environmentalists and high school students. And although these same union leaderships are not precisely distinguished by their democratic nature and have never called a general strike in three decades of democracy, they clarified that they could not call one without consulting their rank and file, characterising the feminist proposal as irresponsible because of the curfew.

Finally, on Sunday 20 October, feminist, student and high school organizations as well as environmentalists, among others, called a general strike for the next day at a press conference. This call coincided with the impetus given by

the dockers and by certain sectors in the large private copper sector, who effectively went on strike on Monday 21 October. The initiative and the facts put an end to the episode of the deliberations, and the main union leaderships decided that same Sunday, after the press conference in which they did not participate, to call a general strike for 23 and 24 October.

On 22 October, Piñera announced a social plan, proposing to subsidize with state money health, pensions and even wages - all privatized. Piñera, as a good entrepreneur, saw the crisis as an excellent opportunity to do business. Of course, no one accepted this proposal. Chile continued to be a hotbed of fire, and the media began to report on terror. Suddenly you could see everywhere videos of soldiers: the official recognition of the dead and wounded for the first time, denunciations of the policy of sexual violence as well as clandestine detention and torture centres were presented massively. But neither the curfew nor the terror succeeded in defusing the mobilizations or in imposing fear. For the first time in decades, the working class in Chile has felt a sense of power. It will not be easy to erase this.

For months feminists, who were working at the molecular level to call for a general strike on 8 March, had felt the diverse expressions of the living pulsation that has now appeared. They then perceived that there was a will to fight, wide and deep. With a few limited exceptions, the union leaderships proposed a "demonstration" for 24 October, "clearing the streets", in other words, everyone stays at home for one day under a curfew. The next day, more than a million people marched in Santiago, and the National Congress, located in the city of Valparaiso, had to be evacuated. No one was ready to obey the orders of repression. The disconnection of certain union leaderships was evident.

Large marches took place in all regions of the country on 25 October and throughout the weekend, calling for the resignation of Piñera. Anti-military sentiment was undoubtedly one of the mobilizing elements. On 28

October, the state of emergency ended, the soldiers returned to their barracks and there was a change of cabinet and the departure of the Minister of the Interior Andrés Chadwick - all these measures were announced two days previously. The eight new ministers took office in a Moneda Palace surrounded by protesters. On 30 October, the President announced the suspension of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and COP25 meetings in Chile. The first twelve days of the unbroken uprising were thus sealed.

On 1 November, the traditional union leaderships (public sector and professional unions) as well as unions in strategic sectors of the economy (ports, mines and construction) formed the National Strike Committee, calling again for a general strike on 12 November. The convening of a constituent assembly and the implementation of a set of urgent demands were required. Between these two dates, three major national protest days took place - on 4, 5 and 8 November - marked by a repressive offensive, this time by the police, with very high human costs.

A high point was 12 November. This was the first day that the demand for a Constituent Assembly was expressed. The general strike on that day was the largest and most massive in over four decades. Organized sectors and many sectors which had joined political life only recently were among them. It is true that the latter neither follow nor obey the former, but the organized sectors have succeeded in articulating dispersed ideas or proposals in a demand. More than 10% of the country's population participated in various ways in the day of 12 November, which the government called "the most violent of all".

## **A deal nobody wanted**

While 18 October had the merit of ending the government's programmatic agenda, 12 November left little room for doubt. Either the Constituent Assembly (or any constitutional change) will be imposed

by them, on their terms, or it will be imposed by the people, without them. On 15 November, the government and opposition parties signed an "Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution" paving the way for the end of the Pinochet constitution ... on their terms.

The first of these terms aims to protect the government, according to a logic eloquently expressed by Alejandro Guillier, senator and former presidential candidate of the then coalition between the Socialist, Communist, Radical and Christian Democratic parties: "If the president falls, Congress falls. So, we will all go home. The legitimacy crisis is also reaching us." Imitating the "grand pacts" of the transition, they all committed to signing the agreement - a dangerous formula for the new situation. For these elites, it was 15 November, while for the rest of the Chileans it was 46 October. [14] And in the logic of this calendar, the transition was already buried.

Despite the signatories' efforts to present this agreement as a victory for all, it has been impossible to hide the fact that Chile is facing an agreement that no one wants. The right does not want it, having already announced for the most part that it will campaign for a "no" in the first referendum, thus dividing the government bloc. Indeed, of the three parties in the bloc, two - Evopolis and Renovación Nacional (from which Piñera emerged) - have so far been divided and the third, Unión Demócrata Independiente, has announced it will vote against. Alongside them, the far-right fascist Republican Party has already started its "no" campaign.

The Frente Amplio didn't want it either. Of the nine organizations in the bloc, three have signed the agreement. Two weeks later, the "law against rampage" was adopted with the support of FA elected officials. It is a law which aims to punish any form of demonstration and protest with imprisonment. These two acts provoked the departure from the Front of the five founding organizations. The remaining four parties - Revolución Democrática, Comunes, Partido Liberal and Convergencia Social - oppose several

clause of the agreement that was signed. In addition, one of them was completely disrupted by massive resignations at all levels, from the base to the top. In fact, these four parties are incorporated into the social-liberal wing of the existing administration.

This puts an end to the Frente Amplio as a project of an alternative force to institutional alternation. You have to trust the system unconditionally to bind your fate to its administrators at the worst time. From now on, we will see the forces of Frente Amplio playing the sad role of a left face for the Socialist, Radical and Christian Democratic parties. We will also see them lament and proclaim their bitter disappointment each time Christian Democracy breaks its commitments to them in favour of the right. All of these parties will vote for a new constitution and go through the constitutional process. They will try to give an institutional translation "as far as possible" to the political demands that the people will defend in the process. It will be a poor translation, constructed on the basis of the juggling necessary to maintain the new bipolar equilibrium. And, above all, to preserve the political and economic system, of which they are a congenital part and whose profits allow them to survive.

Finally, and most importantly, it was impossible to hide the fact that the agreement fell far short of people's expectations. It was rejected by organized sectors of the working class, and although polls showed the Agreement was well received by the majority of the population, the organized and unorganized masses continued to mobilize. This mixture of rejection, positive evaluation and mobilization is not surprising. In our opinion, this is an agreement by which the parties have protected Piñera, whose support does not exceed 10% and whose resignation has been a transversal demand of the "street". The constituent process was designed in such a way that Piñera comes to the end of his term and the possible new constitution bears his signature. It is a way of ensuring his impunity in the area of political responsibility for human rights violations.

In fact, on the day the agreement was signed a protester was killed by the police during a march in downtown Santiago. By the time the signing took place, the death toll was over 25, the number of wounded and blinded more than 300, and the number of political prisoners more than 2,000. International organizations report a systematic violation of human rights and state violence continues to increase. What kind of constitutional process favourable to citizens could result from such a context?

It is indeed an agreement signed behind four walls by parties contested by the revolt. And it is packaged by those parties.. However, it was the mobilization, which began against rising transport prices, that made it possible to amend Pinochet's constitution in three weeks. If a large part of the population perceives this as a breakthrough, it is because this agreement takes into account the strength of the uprising, that is to say their own forces, even if it aims to subdue them, because they were excluded from political decision making. The social scenario has thus become a vivid display of power and impotence confronting each other at every step.

## **Two aspects of a same policy, two moments of a same fightback**

Through this "Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution", the establishment parties agreed on a two-step policy: repression-impunity and a constituent process. The goal is to deactivate the social uprising by combining the police and the ballot boxes, using a broader participatory key. The expected result is to guarantee their immediate governance and to present a constitution which is democratically developed, a quality the current one lacks, thereby seeking to guarantee their future governance.

According to the schedule agreed by these parties, a referendum must take place on 26 April 2020. The people

will then decide whether or not they want a new constitution and on the body that should draft it, choosing one of the following two alternatives: either a mixed constitutional convention (made up of 50% current parliamentarians and 50% Convention members elected for this purpose) or a constitutional assembly elected entirely by universal suffrage.

Until recently, it was more or less predictable that the right wing majority would bet on a respectable percentage of "no" votes and on a majority of elected officials, in the hope of being able to torpedo the process in the phase of drafting or ratifying the new constitution. To this end, it can use the minority veto power established by the agreement, whereby a third of votes at the convention can block everything when there is no agreement on an issue. According to this plan, they could count on the vote of most social-liberal parties to block the most vital questions for the working class. The wager would be that the new constitution would end up being a kind of Frankenstein's monster, and that therefore the population would reject it during the ratification referendum, in which case the Pinochet constitution - this time legitimized, according to their strange understanding - would continue to apply. Although its realization is unlikely, this plan allows a hard-line sector, which sees itself as "the authentic right", to assert itself.

Recently, these forecasts have been changed to reveal what could be a breach of the agreement before the referendum. The right agreed the constitutional process in exchange for achieving "social peace", but the opposition parties cannot offer this "peace" since they do not control the masses engaged in the uprising. They only influence certain organized sectors, but these are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the events. Andres Allamand, one of the most important figures of the Chilean right, who until recently was committed to vote in favour of the changing of the constitution, said on 8 January 2020: "The constitutional change must be done in a democratic, safe and institutional way. Today, the agreement is subject to uncertainty



and instability and this makes us start from scratch, throwing everything we have built overboard". He is leaning towards **an opposed position** and it is to be expected that this will permeate other sectors of his party, especially senators.

Considered initially as a lifeline in the face of the state of emergency, this agreement appears today less and less as a predictable and controlled event, becoming rather a Pandora's box, which far from remaining closed, seems more open at every step. However, getting rid of it is not such an easy option for the bourgeoisie. It must still support this government, which has two very difficult years ahead of it, for the time being. So far, the social-liberal parties, as well as a minority sector of the right, remain attached to the agreement and to a "yes" vote. They will strive to draft a new constitution that maintains the heart of the model, while "correcting" the lack of legitimacy that the current constitution suffers from.

A series of events indicates that the people will not abandon the street and will not neglect the constituent process. It will continue to challenge during these two moments, within the framework of the same policy. It will do it by all means at its disposal and create new ones, because it understands that just as its action brought about an agreement whose elaboration was foreign to it, its mobilization also allows it to reverse the terms of a very unstable present whose end is not pre-established.

This dynamic was verified during the non-binding consultation carried out by 225 municipalities on 15 December:

- a self-convened vote on options previously deliberated by territorial assemblies, which emerged in October.
- participation in the institutional consultation, despite its limits, convened by the Chilean Association of Municipalities and which aimed to register the majority will in favour of a new constitution.
- support for the demonstration and protest coordinated by the territorial assemblies in the municipalities.

Between 26 April and 25 October, 2020, the date on which the members of the Convention or the Constituent Assembly should be elected, the possibility of a programmatic debate opens, and with it, a moment of politicization of a historic scale, probably the largest since Salvador Allende's election campaign (1970) - the last time that the working class mobilized in elections for a program and not just for a candidate.

The ongoing politicization transcends the constitutional debate. Under a shared concept - "the Constituent" - the classes express different contents. The People's debates on the constituent process are about how they want to live. The new constitution seems to be understood as a container in which all the social demands accumulated for decades will have their place. It is not a question of a unicameral or bicameral parliament, nor of the advantages and disadvantages of presidential or semi-presidential systems, but of social security, the socio-environmental crisis, sexual and reproductive rights, the right to health, free public education, nationalization of natural resources, the right to housing and so on. All these emergencies take programmatic forms in spaces of popular deliberation, but none of them will be materially conquered by the writing of a new Magna Carta.

It is essential to give a central place to these debates while taking care not to reduce the forms of organization which appeared in revolt, nor to refocus the imagination and the desire which has appeared, only with the constitutional institutions. On the contrary, it is necessary to place at the centre of the debate the political conditions and the strength which will make it possible to concretize the prefigurations that the working class has discovered by coming together and which are based on its experience. This vital building block must be nurtured by actions that affirm people's confidence in their own abilities.

## Subverting the

## agreement

The bourgeoisie aspires, with less and less self-confidence, to frame the permanent challenge by what it portrays as a colossal concession: the constituent process. The subordination of the people to the itinerary and the conditions of the agreement is not excluded, for the sole reason that nothing is excluded at the moment. But in the field of probability, two major rationales run counter to this aspiration of the bourgeoisie:

- The first and most important is that this uprising is not based on the demand for the constituent assembly, but on the fact that the living conditions are unbearable. None of the reasons that pushed people onto the street has been mitigated, even to a small extent. These conditions remain intact, not a single concession was made, the intransigence in the face of the emergency was total and deadly.

- The second is that during this long month of October, the working class began to know its collective dimension, experience its strength, place expectations in itself. It decided to respect itself and demand respect. The notion of dignity is a break from the long silent endurance of countless humiliations. The generations are united, the young want to help the old, the old are sorry not to have conquered a better present for the young. They all say: "This time we have to win", "We are not isolated, we can count on each other, we will not be fooled". This dimension of the collective "spirit" - debased by neoliberal individualism, which is beginning to fall apart today - carries a new meaning. This is part of this vision of the constituent assembly which is deviating from the path which had been mapped out and moves forward.

It is a key element in nurturing and affirming the trust that people have placed in their own strength. In this regard, certain tasks are central. Firstly, constituting a "front line" against state terrorism and impunity. The freeing of political prisoners, the creation of an independent and

permanent commission of Truth and Justice which can determine the political responsibilities of the crimes perpetrated against those who struggle, the resignation of Sebastián Piñera, that they stop killing, raping, mutilating and imprisoning us, are essential conditions for widening the path that the uprising has opened.

Secondly, the task of better organising and coordinating self-defence, understood as the task of confining the repressive forces to more secure areas away from the demonstrators, is inseparable from the above. While the "front line" of the demonstrations has shown impressive courage, the confinement is often located in the same area where the mobilisations are taking place. By widening the perimeter prohibited to the repressive forces, if only by a little, high and irreparable human costs can be avoided. These types of measures, which require modest degrees of coordination, have been difficult due to the lack of experience and the lack of centrality that many organized sectors give to the problem. On the other hand, the tendency to centralize the convocation points allows the repressive forces to concentrate their actions, unlike the first days of the uprising, when the simultaneity of hundreds of protest points exceeded the capacity of coverage of the police.

Thirdly, deliberately encouraging the flow of popular imagination in constitutional debates. Since the signing of the agreement, an army of intellectuals, academics and professionals have felt entitled to speak in basic discussion spaces, imposing in the name of their "authorized truths" a limitation on contents deployed during previous discussions on the constitution. There can be no more servile attitude to the limits imposed by the agreement. If these kind of people seek to help from their profession, their task is to affirm and not to weaken the confidence of those who begin to express themselves and to politicize, it should be to support by translating, by presenting as "possible" the "impossible" choices that emerge from these voices. Not to replace them, nor to limit or disown them.

Fourthly, weakening the confidence of

the bourgeoisie by affirming the general sense of the protest. The revolt gave birth to this general sense, but the fragmentation of the working class, and especially the trade union consciousness of the best organized sectors, allows a corporatist approach, which widens the scope of manoeuvre of the bourgeoisie. This is the most difficult problem to overcome, because the organizations which most assert their corporatist character think that they are carriers of the universal, as well as their demands, making extremely difficult the articulations within the social world, which is diverse and very broad. The general political content that the parties should embody cannot be formulated by a working class which struggles, but which does not have its own parties.

## The paths of unity

This political moment brought about reconfigurations and rearrangements within social classes. Political parties, business associations and almost all of the social fabric involved in political life are also being realigned. Existing political formations are changing, experiencing tensions, falling apart. New ones, which challenge the old ones, appear and regroup. It goes from the far right to left groups, but it is also the case with a new social capillarity of the working class which is emerging, expressing what is new and reinventing the old.

The keys to these reconfigurations indicate a growing polarization of society, linked to the legitimacy of the constituent process. Sectors of the bourgeoisie are starting to argue that this process was imposed by a minority of violent demonstrators who hijacked democracy. Sectors of the working class maintain that the constitutive process is diverted by the conditions imposed by a minority which owns the country. These readings will become more and more acute and will enter into open and large-scale conflict.

In this scenario, the anti-capitalist left is entrusted with certain fundamental tasks:

1. Program. Clarifying that the content

of this confrontation stems from the denunciation of the bourgeoisie, from its inability to offer a broad democratic framework for the political participation of the people, denouncing its crimes whether they are protected by law or not. Defending a transversal program which sediments in a unitary and concrete way feminist, ecosocialist and resolutely anti-capitalist contents which are already germinating and are more advanced than in the previous periods. This program, while projecting a horizon, must contain elements for the immediate improvement of the situation of the working class.

2. Alliances. In the course of this conflict, the powerful can count on the press, repressive forces, government institutions as well as their corporations and their parties. The people are more numerous; today they have self confidence, they challenge their current situation of oppression and are getting stronger, but they have no big organizations or parties and those that exist are more or less dispersed. To win the immediate demands and a popular, democratic, multinational, feminist, sovereign and free constituent assembly, broad alliances between the organized sectors will be necessary, alliances whose task is to coordinate efforts so that broad and dynamic sectors of the people take ownership, promote and deepen the content of such a program.

3. This cycle, which is still in its infancy, has shown that existing political instruments have been unable to establish a link with the power of the mobilized working class, which constitutes a strategic task. This raises the question of what type of organization should be built for this new political cycle. There were major ruptures on the left, such as that of the Frente Amplio. There is no point in explaining them in terms of personalities or apparatus logic, although this undoubtedly has an influence. The organizations to the left of Frente Amplio are also divided and often very marginal. In this sense, one has to wonder how they grasp the situation and maintain their vitality in the activity of the working class. These issues must be deliberately put on the table to open debates on

strategic theses in the light of alliances and coordinated actions, to analyse the nature of this political moment, the tasks ahead, the possibilities of radicalization of the current dynamic and what can guide us in the face of given and possible

scenarios. A first task consists of developing these theses, then putting them forward for debate and discussion among the political expressions of the left and also in each neighbourhood, in each social organization, in each place where people are struggling. Paths of unity

which do not place the discussion of strategic directions at the centre of the debate will be doomed to wander into tactical fetishism without historical perspective or radicalism. Today, when history is in front of it, it is impossible to avoid this debate.

## **Palestine: The “deal of the century” or a new attempt to liquidate the Palestinian question**

**24 February 2020, by Joseph Daher**

### **Israel wins on all fronts**

The US peace plan promises Israel total sovereignty and annexation of all of Jerusalem and much of the occupied West Bank (almost 40%), including the Jordan Valley, a strategic portion of land on the Jordanian border, which would thus become Israel’s new eastern border, and most of the West Bank’s fertile land and water reserves, with - obviously - territorial continuity. This plan therefore wishes to materialize politically the conditions that the Palestinians are currently already enduring. There is already a de facto annexation of the Jordan Valley and the rest of Zone C, which is already controlled exclusively by Israeli occupation forces.

The plan also supports the annexation of Israeli settlements in exchange for the transfer of sovereignty to a possible future Palestinian state of 14 Palestinian towns and villages from 1948 Palestine (with a population of Palestinians who hold Israeli nationality) inside the state of Israel. The status of these towns and villages, with their estimated population of 260,000, would become the equivalent of a Palestinian enclave on Israeli territory, as the separation barrier currently prevents direct connection of their lands to that of the occupied West Bank. Demonstrations have already taken place in these regions to

oppose the content of Trump’s plan.

East Jerusalem will remain the indivisible capital of the State of Israel in line with the decision to transfer the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem in November 2017. The capital of the future Palestinian state “ should be in the section of East Jerusalem located in all areas east and north of the existing security barrier, including Kafr Aqab, the eastern part of Shuafat and Abu Dis, and could be named Al Quds or another name as determined by the State of Palestine”.[1]

The possible Palestinian state would resemble the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa, with only a single direct “border” with another state, Egypt (in Gaza), over which Israel would have some forms of control through “specific arrangements” with Egypt. The Palestinian state will have to be demilitarized and would have no territorial continuity. Palestinian security forces will have to focus on preventing attacks on Israel, while more important security issues will be handled by the Israeli state. In this context, it is stipulated that the Palestinian Authority must in the meantime have dealt with the question of Hamas, in order to demonstrate its “clear rejection of terrorism”. [2]

The Palestinians’ right of return is once again completely annihilated because the plan encourages integration of Palestinians into the countries in which they reside (with

the agreement of the host state), or the integration of 5,000 refugees per year for 10 years in member countries of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (with the agreement of these countries). The plan does foresee theoretically the possibility for some Palestinians of integration into the future Palestinian state, but only on condition that this “return” is regulated by a joint Israeli-Palestinian committee. Hopes are therefore very limited in light of Israel’s racist and colonial policies.

In exchange for all of these Palestinian concessions, Trump’s plan promises the Palestinians an investment of \$ 50 billion as a form of “compensation for their efforts to achieve peace”. The plan does not make it clear who is going to pay the bill, and just talks about an international fund that would provide the promised \$ 50 billion. In June 2019, during its economic presentation of the plan in Bahrain’s capital, Manama, the United States had however made it clear that it expected the Gulf monarchies to advance the promised sums.

The Omani, Bahraini and Emirati ambassadors to the United States were present when the so-called peace plan was announced at the White House in Washington. Emirati Ambassador to Washington, Youssef al-Otaibi notably distinguished himself by his remarks on Twitter, hailing a “serious initiative” and “the persistent efforts of the United States

to reach a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement". The Egyptian regime called on "the parties concerned to examine carefully the American vision to achieve peace", and encouraged them "to open the channels of dialogue, under the auspices of the United States, for the resumption of negotiations".

For its part, the Saudi kingdom has opted for a more ambiguous discourse, even if rapprochements with the state of Israel have taken place in recent years. King Salman reaffirmed the kingdom's commitment to the issue of Palestinian rights during a telephone interview with President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas, while later a statement from the Saudi Foreign Ministry thanked the Trump administration for its efforts, encouraging "direct negotiations between Palestine and Israel", under the aegis of Washington.

## Historical continuity with the Allon Plan

The details of the plan are therefore in line with the policy initiated by the Trump administration since coming to power and its willingness to strengthen the United States' alliance with Israel in the region. The United States had indeed decided to close the diplomatic representation of the PLO in the US capital in 2018, in the wake of the announcement of the suspension of financial aid to the Palestinian occupied territories and the American contribution to the budget from UNRWA, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees.

In many ways, this peace plan aims to achieve the Allon Plan (named after Israeli general Yigal Allon when he was Deputy Prime Minister) implemented immediately after the Six Day War in 1967. This plan provided for the construction of Israeli colonial settlements and military bases, so as to ensure strategic control of the Palestinian occupied territories, without annexing the areas where the Palestinian population is concentrated

(villages, cities, etc.), which would be under the control of a collaborationist Arab authority. Initially, the plan was to return these areas to the Jordanian monarchy. Then with the Oslo Agreement signed in 1993, the Palestinian Authority played this role. In many ways, the Oslo Agreement, which died with the outbreak of the 2000 intifada, was also part of the dynamics of the Allon plan.

It is no surprise then, that the whole Israeli political elite from Netanyahu's far-right to the so-called centrist Benny Gantz, support the US peace plan. Gantz asked parliament to vote for it and called Trump a "true friend" of Israel. This shows that no part of the Zionist Israeli political elite can be considered "moderate" or an ally in the struggle for the liberation of the Palestinian people. The various Israeli political organizations agree to continue the Israeli state's oppression of the Palestinians, debating on what different procedures to follow to better achieve their domination.

After declaring the breakdown of the Palestinian Authority's security coordination with Israel, which is highly criticized by a large majority of Palestinians, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, softened his position during the following days, claiming that this was an "option" and not a measure already implemented by the Palestinians. It is not the first time that the Palestinian Authority has used the threat of a breakdown in security coordination with Israel to oppose political decisions. However, he never carried out this threat. The reason is as follows: the continuation of security cooperation with Israel constitutes also a protection in itself for the Palestinian Authority against the ever-growing criticism of its policies by the Palestinian popular classes.

The Palestinian popular classes rejected Trump's plan by organizing demonstrations in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank, as well as in the Gaza Strip. These demonstrations have already claimed the lives of several Palestinians because of the repression of the occupying forces of Israel. Palestinian refugees in various neighboring countries have also

mobilized to reject the Trump plan. At the same time, Israel continues its daily crimes and human rights violations against the Palestinians.

Faced with this new operation to liquidate the Palestinian question, let us reaffirm our support for the struggle of the Palestinian people for their emancipation and liberation against the apartheid, racist and colonial state of Israel. Let us promote solidarity campaigns with the struggle of the Palestinian people and particularly the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign which continues to be successful internationally.

Likewise, it is important to recall two fundamental elements in the context of the Palestinian question.

First, the need to dismantle the colonialism, apartheid and the occupation by the Israeli state, which only brought suffering to the Palestinian population and never allowed for the security of the Jewish population of Israel as its false propaganda claims. Instead, we need the establishment of a bi-national democratic, socialist and secular state in the historic Palestine of 1948 for all (Israelis and Palestinians) without any form of discrimination, and in which any Palestinian, whether an internal refugee or a refugee in foreign countries, has the right to return to the original land from which they were forcibly displaced in 1948, 1967 and after, and also receive financial compensation for what they lost and the pain and suffering they experienced. This must of course be part of a change in the regional political structures.

The second very important element is the need to support revolutionary processes and uprisings in the region in their struggle to overthrow all authoritarian and despotic regimes which are complicit in the suffering of the Palestinian people through their direct or indirect collaboration with the State of Israel. Authoritarian and despotic regimes in the region have all tried to suppress, dominate or control the Palestinian national liberation movement, and are trying directly or indirectly to bury the Palestinian question.

# Algeria: did the presidential election take place?

23 February 2020, by **Nadir Djermoune**

The demonstrators thus intended to denounce the complicity between the new “boss” of Algeria and the “gang” (*issaba*) held to be responsible for plundering the riches of the country. [15] But official propaganda is trying to sell a completely different image of Tebboune: that of a politician who attacked this same “gang” in the short time that he was at the head of the government in 2017. Having become an embarrassment, Tebboune was dismissed less than three months after taking office then replaced by Ahmed Ouyahia, who occupied the post of Prime Minister four times between 1995 and 2019. [16]

Of these two faces of his personality, which will the population retain? That of a man indirectly involved in a drug trafficking case or that of the politician who wanted to tidy up a house delivered to unlimited plunder? The regime has bet on this image of integrity, which was why Tebboune was chosen and designated as the winner of the last presidential election and will try to imprint in the memory of Algerians who will want to believe it.

## A turning point for the regime

The presidential election of 12 December 2019 was neither democratic nor honest (and still less transparent) and did not meet the basic requirement of the protest – namely the opening of a process leading to a new era, defined by a people in struggle.

However, it has marked a turning point for the regime. Its consequences? Not so much the future of the *Hirak* as that of the whole of Algerian society. [17] The official rate of voting participation (39.88%), an entirely artificial figure, is a first indication. In Algeria, a vast territory, the largest part of which is semi-desert, the results of a universal suffrage election, within the framework of the ultra-centralised political and administrative organisation which prevails today, will never be completely transparent or free from manipulation. The battle of the figures, however biased, thus turns out to be useless – such a context would necessitate reconsidering the guiding principles of the country.

Taking into account the protests which have affected urban centres for more than a year – and is indeed the only barometer which can be used in appreciating the political situation – there is no doubt that the presidential elections have been a major breakthrough. Independently of the manipulations that the regime exercises, the choices that it operates are strategic: thus, the combined scores of the five candidates take on the character of a political message by translating the relationships of forces at work within the regime itself.

The insignificant score (7.28%) of the candidate chosen by the Chief of Staff Gaâd Salah, Azzedine Mihoubi – supported by the main political apparatuses that are the part of the Front de libération nationale (FLN) and the Rassemblement national démocratique (RND) – shows a will to

weaken the FLN and RND, even to deliver them to popular vengeance in order to preserve the regime. The score of the Islamo-conservative Abdelkader Bengrina (17.37%), in second position but far behind the winner, sends a strong message to conservative society, which is considered culturally dominant. It is also a way to destabilise what is left of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Mouvement de la société pour la paix (formerly Hamas).

Finally, by placing Tebboune in the lead (58.13%), the regime retains the position adopted from the start of the *Hirak*, namely placing responsibility for the crisis that the country is going through on the back of a limited group: the *issaba*. The criticism of economic liberalism as formulated by the Algerian regime is uniquely moral: this “gang” is above all the fruit of the wildcat economic liberalization for which the said regime is directly responsible. For Tebboune and the regime that put him in power, there is therefore nothing to change in the rules of the economic game. Otherwise, why would his first two short speeches be expressly addressed to “honest” investors, when the majority of demonstrators on Tuesdays and Fridays are essentially students, unemployed, employees, small entrepreneurs and merchants?

It is illusory to expect from Tebboune a democratic evolution which would translate into a just and equitable distribution of work and national wealth. These issues are, however, the hidden part of the iceberg; they will surface in the times to come. For the time being, the stakes are not

economic but political. In this matter, Tebboune - who aspires to return the image of an "independent" statesman, above the parties - adopts the historical position of the regime which consists in discrediting any partisan representation: it seeks in this way to perpetuate the Bonapartist tradition which draws its origins from the politics of Boumedienne (the head of state between 1965 and 1978) at the time of independence, but also from the FLN of 1954-1956. The resolution taken in 1954 by the "six" [leaders of the FLN], namely to lead an armed combat for independence, theorized and programmed by Abane Ramdane and Larbi Ben M'hidi in 1956, instigated the myth of a non-partisan organization realizing unity against the parties within the Front, which were presented as a source of discord. [18] By eliminating these actors, who are unavoidable in political life, the military organization filled the political void that it had itself created.

The historian Mohamed Harbi reminds us in a recent interview that "the FLN was never a party, it was an armed organization". But if such an organization, by nature authoritarian, finds its justification in wartime in the name of the needs of the fight for independence it is different in peacetime; de facto, the organization of everyday life requires plural political life and expressions. The myth of the need to maintain a iron military power has unfortunately persisted. This is where the slogan *Dawla madania machi 'askaria* ("for a civil state and not a military one"), taken up by the *Hirak*, takes on its full meaning. Despite its authoritarianism and its contradictions, the early FLN, especially under Boumedienne, offered at least clearly announced projects; Tebboune, for his part, seems to have lacked any strategy. His vision for Algeria is limited to ensuring the survival of a regime by managing the conjunctural crisis.

## A call for dialogue?

Politically stimulated by the *Hirak*, Algerians expect more clarity and lucidity, both from their leaders and

from the political class. To do this, we must now go beyond the contradictions generated by the history of the country. The first resides in the illusion, inherited from the Revolution (1954-1962) and then duly entertained by the regime, according to which the conflicts which arise within society can only come from abroad (ie the former colonial power) or from "traitors to the nation" (thereby essentialising the notion of popular unity). The second arises from the propaganda, of the regime and its media outlets, presenting any partisan action or expression as a source of discord and manipulation. Admittedly, if the political parties have little weight in the current popular upheaval, civil society does not challenge their existence. We have never witnessed any violence against known party leaders or their acronyms: no hostile slogans against them have been chanted, with the exception of "FLN to the museum" or "FLN out". What we can emphasize is the new place and role attributed to political parties by the protest movement in its demand for autonomy in relation to political or ideological programs.

After the FLN led the people towards their independence in a militaristic and authoritarian manner, it was only following the mobilisations of October 1988 that an opening of the political field, then locked by a single party, took place: the emergence of parties. For a long time stifled, society could not express itself except through these latter, characterized by a doctrinal and ideological over-determination. The drama of the civil war of the 1990s, the consequence of a political impasse, was attributed to the inability to manage the contradictions inherent in political diversity. Today, the fact that the population protests and acts independently is a sign of maturity. The society of "Fridays and Tuesdays" has freed itself from the trauma of the "dark years"; it has liberated public space since 2001 with a collective and spontaneous elan - a form of "psychological maturation, rejecting all interference experienced as paternalism", says the psychologist Dalila Samai Haddadi. [19]

The parties are indeed relegated to the role of critical supporters of the

uprising, not leaders or organizers of the action - and they seem to have understood this. If they avoid putting themselves forward during the demonstrations, they contribute, according to their means, criticisms which, contradictory and subject to polemics as they may be, are still necessary for the progression of the *Hirak*. With the presidential elections of December 2019 taking place, the mobilizations on Tuesdays and Fridays were marked by a certain decline. Certainly, it seems that a process of political impasse is unfolding.. It is, moreover, the parties, associations and trade unions which try to form, according to their respective orientations, alternative projects.

The gap between the protest movement and the action of parties represents an opportunity for the regime: it can attempt to isolate all partisan, trade union or associative expression, going so far as to imprison certain leaders. At the same time, it opens up all of the media spaces that it controls to its own "experts" and supporters. It is in these conditions that the new president launched, timidly and not without ambiguity, a call for dialogue with the movement whereas its dynamic, in the face of a repressive climate of arbitrary arrests and trials, made the designation of intermediaries with whom to discuss almost impossible.

On the other hand, the calls to self-organization lack clarity. It is indeed not certain that they can bring out representatives from the different segments of the movement; moreover, it could be difficult to offer guarantees of the conditions of a democratic settlement without the intervention of parties, associations and trade unions. The *Hirak's* rejection of any delegation of power and any representation by political parties is one of its fundamental characteristics. If this is a strength for some, thereby preventing the regime from breaking the contestation by direct negotiation via potentially corruptible representatives, for others, this represents a weakness: the blocking of any rapid resolution of the "crisis", leaving the door open to drifts and manipulations. Only the expression of the different components of society can get Algeria out of this critical

situation. And the resolution of this contradiction depends on legitimacy, clairvoyance, charisma and the consistency of the project that will be defended by the representatives who could emerge - something we find in the history of all revolutions, like that led by the FLN from 1954 to 1962.

## The scope of the Hirak

To get out of this impasse, it is therefore advisable to open up the spaces of political expression to all forces present and to widen them to new voices and forms of organization that have been asserting themselves for more than a year. To open a horizontal dialogue, the widest possible, and not a vertical negotiation. It would be wrong to think that there is on one side a homogeneous block, the *Hirak*, waiting to be structured, and on the other a government to be overthrown. The two entities are traversed by contradictions, each evolving to the rhythm of the political struggle. The *Hirak* is a form of popular and collective struggle which allows the various components of society to gain freedom. Throughout the mobilisation, the movement never stopped, in the streets, reaffirming its ability to carry the demands of society while adapting to the evocation of the issues. Whatever one may say, the political parties and certain political personalities help it to do so: thus, the question of the constituent assembly, introduced in the debate by political

criticism. Spontaneity also has its limits.

The society represented by the *Hirak* is, in essence as much as historically, traversed by contradictions. To build a political and social future is to work for an organization capable of taking charge of them. The parties, associations and trade unions must be an integral part of this, as well as all of the emerging rank and file structures: student collectives, committees for the liberation of detainees, nuclei of self-organization and so on. A course remains to be maintained: the need for a political change. To believe that it will be done without popular intervention in the sphere of the state and the political field in general is illusory: the democracy so much demanded depends then on the way of envisaging the political structure.

Currently, the edifice of the regime is structured, from the bottom to the top, by the communal popular assemblies (APC), the Popular Assembly of Wilaya (APW) and finally by the National Popular Assembly (NPC) - the presidency of the Republic capping it all. The mode of designation of the members of these assemblies is done by universal suffrage: a purely formal suffrage, devoid of any political consistency. This is where democracy is flouted, and this at two basic levels: by the suffrage itself, which, as we have said, is not transparent and escapes all popular control; and through the terms of decision-making which involve the management of the city and the country down to the smallest detail. These decisions are

concentrated in the hands of the *wali* (the *wilayas* are public territorial organs of government) and heads of *da'ira* (subdivision of the *wilayas* grouping several municipalities), direct representatives of the central government. *Wilayas* and *da'iras* are also spaces and places in which different forms of clientelism takes place..

## Continue the process

Should we revise the operating mode of these institutions to make them more transparent and democratic - by establishing representative popular control represented over the universal suffrage which governs them, for example? Or should we replace all of these institutions with something completely new, with a system of direct democracy, at the base, through popular committees? It must be kept in mind that this is above all, and as in any revolutionary change, a *process* - with highlights and setbacks. What is meant by this term? The term "rupture", whether it is a rupture of transition, of constituent processes or of continuity, is frequently used.. But, under current conditions, it is not certain that a radical rupture can occur overnight or even in the short term. So, we should maintain the course towards a transition which could take the form of a series of ruptures, whether could happen successively or uninterruptedly - the challenge is to maintain the idea of a *permanent process*. [20]

# Anticapitalistas: statement in advance of the Podemos Citizen Assembly

21 February 2020, by **Anticapitalistas**

1) The decisions made by Podemos during the last months point in a direction that we do not share. The entry of five Unidas Podemos

ministers to a progressive-neoliberal government dominated by the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), in which that party controls

the main levers of power. In our view, far from weakening the current political regime of the Spanish state, participating in this government

means integrating Podemos into it and attempting to manage it as the only possible horizon. Anticapitalistas proposal to vote in parliament in favor of establishing a PSOE-led government and move immediately into opposition in order to continue the fight to build a project aimed at developing a constituent majority (a social majority that can challenge the status quo) has been ruled out by the currently existing Podemos leadership. Furthermore, we do not share the policy of forming a political pact, nor that of achieving a social consensus, both of which renounce confronting the great economic powers. In that sense, we find a huge difference between the objectives of the Podemos that we contributed to initiating six years ago and the current organization's drift, a policy which originally determined to challenge the political class and economic elites but has now allied with the former without laying a hand on the privileges of the latter.

2) At the same time, we understand that a large percentage of left-wing people are relieved by the formation of

government. The fear of the extreme right and fatigue after years of mobilization make this position understandable and we understand and respect this thinking. However, we believe that the objectives of this government are less than ambitious, even if we accept that they are limited within the margins of the system. Therefore, our immediate task is to attempt to promote a new cycle of struggle that prevents the movements from abandoning the street: on March 8, we will organize for feminist advances, we will demand the repeal of labor reforms, the regulation of rents, closing the Foreigner Detention Centers (CIEs), prohibit layoffs in companies that receive state subsidies, stop evictions, and break with article 135 of the Constitution that mandates a balanced budget. Without organized popular pressure, there will be no progress. If there are no gains that deserve to be defended, ones that distribute wealth and power in favor ordinary people, a dangerous breeding ground can be generated in which the extreme right can promote its macho, racist, and authoritarian

demagoguery all at the service of rich.

3) Given this framework, without analyzing the slow bleed that Podemos has suffered as an organization in recent years, and without a sufficient process of prior political deliberation, the Citizen Assembly appears merely as a ratification of the Podemos leadership and of the strategy adopted of subordinating itself to the PSOE.

4) Therefore, Anticapitalistas has decided not to participate in the next State Assembly of Podemos and to, instead, focus our discussions on deciding our definite relationship with Podemos, a project that we contributed to founding and to which we have dedicated so much effort. Our internal debate process will culminate on March 28 with a conference in which we will announce our final decision. We wish, without a hesitation, the best of luck to people who decide to participate in the Podemos assembly. We are certain that we will continue to cooperate and work together with them in many areas.

[No Borders News](#)

## The Lebanese Uprising Continues

20 February 2020, by **Rima Majed, Shireen Akram-Boshar**

For more than a hundred days, Lebanon has been beset by mass protests, seeing up to a million people in the streets of a country of less than seven million inhabitants. Now known as Lebanon's "October Revolution," the demonstrations have emerged in response to a range of issues, from anti-austerity, the government's mismanagement of the climate disaster, and the full-scale rejection of the country's sectarian political system, entrenched since the Civil War.

Now in its fourth month, the Lebanese protest movement is at a crossroads. Several government reshuffles have

done little to placate the movement, and as the debt crisis worsens the government continues to seek IMF assistance, angering the protesters further. There are conflicting ideas within the movement about how best to proceed, and unions are just beginning to reassert themselves for the first time in decades.

To discuss the dynamics of the uprising, and its challenges going forward, Shireen Akram-Boshar spoke with Rima Majed.

**SAB: More than a hundred days have passed since the start of Lebanon's revolution. Broad segments of Lebanese society have**

**been involved, with about one in five taking part in protest. What are things like on the ground? How has the uprising maintained its momentum?**

RM: Since the revolution kicked into high gear again recently, there are mass protests every day. Protesters are blocking roads, denouncing the newly appointed government, and demonstrating in front of banks and parliament. But there is also a high level of state repression. Over the past two weeks, it has been particularly bad. Dozens have been arrested and hundreds injured. Security forces have specifically targeted protesters' eyes,



injuring and blinding several.

The banking sector has been the main target during the latest wave. This is because of the daily humiliation imposed by the banks. It has reached an unbearable level. Poverty rates have increased as well as inflation, but it's not just that. It's also that even those who have just a bit of money in the bank are prevented from accessing it, which amounts to forced impoverishment. The only exceptions are those who are very rich, have connections with the banking elites, or who can transfer money abroad. For the majority, the degradation has reached a level such that it's impossible for things to calm down.

This doesn't mean that the streets will constantly be filled with protesters. Students play a critical role in the revolution, and when protests have decreased, it's often when schools and universities have opened again. But this revolution, even more than the others in the region, began because of an acute economic crisis. And so it will keep going.

Nothing has changed in the past three months to encourage people to go back home. A new government has just been announced, but even before its announcement, we knew it would not have the trust of the people. There's no major change in the ruling elite, and there are no serious measures being taken to deal with the financial crisis.

There has been a lot of talk lately about Hezbollah co-opting the movement. I think it's important to highlight that all the political parties, including Hezbollah, have been trying to co-opt the revolution from the very start. The Lebanese Forces, the Phalangists' Kataeb, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Future Movement after the resignation of [former prime minister Saad] Hariri, all tried at different stages to co-opt the revolution and maneuver within it. The panic recently about Hezbollah's presence is mainly because when they mobilize, they bring sectarianism to the streets. They raise sectarian chants like "Shi'a, Shi'a." It doesn't require much analysis to get it.

But the way the revolution has dealt

with it is much better than in our previous protest movements. At the start, there were voices from within the revolution that were saying, "these are infiltrators, we must remove them from the streets, it's Hezbollah." But very quickly this was shut down by people saying that the streets are open; co-option is something that we know we will have to deal with, but it doesn't mean that we have to alienate individuals. These are also occasions to organize differently and to build bridges. The movement has recognized that Hezbollah's base — the vast majority of the Shi'a population in Lebanon — forms a large section of the working class and the working poor.

Having said this, I also recognize that there is a clear danger of political parties, specifically Hezbollah, taking advantage of the revolution. There is an intersection of interest when it comes to targeting the banking system. And this is why the demands to the bank have to be clear in a way that would not leave room for Hezbollah or other parties in power to be able to mobilize around the same demands.

This is part of how the revolution must radicalize and adapt its discourse. Instead of saying, "We don't accept the poor who are the constituency of certain parties," or accusing them of being infiltrators and traitors, we must instead adopt a discourse that links the problem of the banking sector not just with the neoliberal system and the financial system that we are against — this is a discourse that Hezbollah would also agree to even though in practice they have backed all the neoliberal policies for the decade that they were in power — but also a discourse that brings in the political vision we are working for.

**SAB: Lebanon's revolution has been marked not only by mass protest, but also ideological advance and a rejection of the political establishment to an extent not seen in previous uprisings. The revolution has also managed to show the connections between economic and political grievances. To what extent has political consciousness been transformed?**

RM: To a huge extent. This has come from an accumulation of decades of activism, as well as lessons learned from previous movements both in Lebanon and across the region. One example is the 2015 "YouStink" movement. Because of these experiences, the movement is now more aware of class dynamics, and careful not to alienate people who still ascribe to sectarian political parties — particularly the poorer sections of the working class who have come to make up Hezbollah's base. This is a major advance from 2015.

On the other hand, the weakest link is that of organization, which protesters are only now beginning to take up. My fear for the months and years to come revolves around the fact that we haven't yet been able to become organized. It is especially difficult since we are just beginning the process, within the revolution, rather than before it.

To me it seems there are three streams within the revolution. There's a radical stream, or one that has become more radicalized. It has been thinking intersectionally, centering class inequality, gender inequality, and the questions of citizenship, race, and refugees. It is mobilizing around all these issues and making links between them, and demanding an overhaul of the neoliberal economic system as well as the sectarian political system.

The second stream is more liberal. It considers the problem not to be a systemic one but rather a problem of corruption, and that substituting individual politicians for "cleaner" or less corrupt leaders will be enough. This is the more NGO-ized stream. It has a major presence in the revolution, and there are serious debates between it and the more radical stream.

And then there are the vast groups that are not organized, and that are mobilizing in ways that are more ad hoc. This third stream came together organically, it doesn't have a clear political project or vision. The challenge is how to bring these three different streams together in order to advance the movement.

It is important to understand that Lebanon's protesters are challenging not only a neoliberal system, but also the country's sectarian system. The two are inseparable. Protesters' demands for an end to economic degradation — essentially an end to the neoliberal system — through reinstating elements of a welfare state would mean an end to the sectarian system, too. It would mean not having to go to your sectarian za'im [leader or boss] to be able to get your basic needs met, thus making the sectarian system redundant.

The revolution poses a serious threat to sectarian leaders because it is the first time in the modern history of Lebanon that such massive numbers have mobilized clearly against them. Those protesting have an underlying class awareness and view the sectarian leaders as corrupt rulers who accumulate wealth at the expense of the majority. Any mobilization in Lebanon that takes on a class dynamic and brings people together based on interests outside the logic of sectarianism is considered a threat to the sectarian system — which can only flourish by making people dependent on the clientele-based services of their leaders. Any pressure toward labor rights and demands for welfare from the state represent a serious threat to sectarian leaders.

**SAB: The Lebanese ruling class has been working diligently since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 to destroy cross-sect working-class organization and with it, the Left. The progressive weakening of the working-class movement and the Left has impeded any organized fightback, while also depoliticizing much of society. Given this, what are the possibilities for organizing?**

RM: You're right, it's clear that in postwar Lebanon the regime systematically extinguished any possibility for organizing. Not just cross-sect organizing: the first thing they destroyed was the unions. Today, the General Confederation of Unions in Lebanon is completely co-opted by the regime, and represents less than 5 percent of workers. It has done nothing to support the revolution — only issuing a weak statement after

we protested in front of their offices.

But this is a revolution that is so clearly about class issues. And this was clear from the very first day: grievances had to do with taxation, the financial collapse, and the pegging of the Lebanese lira to the dollar. It's impossible to overlook this and just think about political organizing without having to deal with the question of class. It is a good opportunity to organize along class lines and to bring back labor and the social question as entry points for those wanting change.

In Lebanon, the geopolitical focus has taken center stage in the political discourse for decades. Focus on regional tensions and sectarianism has overshadowed class, gender, and labor. The revolution has re-centered discourse onto the social question. And within the revolution, the Left is finally beginning to take seriously the question of organization, rather than continuing to insist on the need for leaderless-ness.

Unlike in 2015, many of the activists today are convinced that there is a need for political organization and for preparing ourselves for the coming rounds of upheaval. Some are trying to organize through communes in the region ('Ammieh), under the name of "Communes of October 17th." Others have organized at the neighborhood level, especially activists who were blocking roads at the beginning of the revolution.

Some groups existed previously, including Li Haqqi and Beirut Madinati, and they are part of larger coordination groups that bring together various groups mobilizing on the ground. Finally, some are trying to create a new leftist coalition that is at once anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarianism, and that is clearly in support of all popular uprisings from Syria to Bahrain.

**SAB: Could you tell us more about Lebanon's Professionals' Association, which you took part in founding?**

RM: For many of us who followed the revolutions in the region, we saw that the only two revolutions that were

able to create some sort of transition were Tunisia and Sudan. It was clear that this was because of the presence of organized and independent unions. Along with others, I was convinced that the only way for us in Lebanon to break with the sectarian, neoliberal system was by reclaiming the unions. It seemed obvious from the start of the revolution that this is our chance to do something class-based. So the question of labor is at the core of imagining political change in the country.

We started to organize within the first few days of the revolution with two main goals. The first was organizing politically to support and push the revolution forward. The second was reclaiming labor and professional unions and organizations. This comes with its challenges, not least the fact that activism has for decades been shaped around values that are very neoliberal, very individualistic, and with lots of internal divisions. But even with all of that, I think this is an initiative that has a lot of potential. It is one of the very few places where I see hope for the long term. It is only by reclaiming our interests as social groups and classes, rather than sects and identity, that we will be able to fight a neoliberal, sectarian system that is constantly trying to make us individuals and not groups based on anything other than sect.

And this is where I think the Professionals' Association can play an important role in changing political culture. The most radical movements in the past decade in Lebanon — all of which are really important initiatives — have also been affected by the neoliberal system. Just look at the names of the movements: Beirut Madinati (Beirut is my city), it's never madinatona (our city); Li Haqqi (for my rights), it's not our rights; Hatha Bahro Li (it's my sea), it's not our sea. And even when the revolution started, those groups were spraying on banks, rudduli masriyati (give me back my money). As if the problem is individual, and if the bank gives me back my money, then I'm fine. This is what a neoliberal system does to our political consciousness. And until we reclaim a different "we" that is not the sectarian "we" but the "we" that is based on our interests as social

classes, it will be very difficult to break away from this system. Because sectarianism is not separate from neoliberalism, it is the other side of the coin. Sectarianism depends on capitalism and neoliberalism, and you need to break with both at the same time.

**SAB: What forces make up the Lebanese Professionals' Association? What has it accomplished thus far, and what is it taking on now?**

RM: The association includes professionals and workers from different sectors including university professors, schoolteachers, engineers and architects, medical doctors, workers in the cultural sector, journalists, and lawyers. The association has planned some of the largest marches during the uprising. It also held a series of public debates in various squares around the country. It is currently organizing internally and working on finalizing its founding documents, including its mission, vision, and internal structure. Through the Independent University Professors' Association, the Professionals' Association has worked closely with students and continues to coordinate with a number of political groups, grassroots organizations, and student groups within the revolution.

**SAB: Lebanon's revolution is currently at a sort of impasse, with protesters rejecting the political system and the elites, and the latter refusing to budge. As the economic situation continues to worsen, and the banks punish working-class people, protesters have responded with a campaign that directly targets the banks. And yet a major demand in the street is still to replace the politicians with technocrats. What's this about?**

RM: This is why I say the revolution is a process, not an event. It has its own contradictions, like everything else, and it is the dialectical relationship between the different streams that is going to create whatever comes next. The short term is going to be very difficult. We don't have a clear alternative to take the place of the current system; there is no vanguard

to steer the way. This is not a revolutionary coup, it is more of a social explosion that has ushered in a long revolutionary process that will go through many ups and downs.

We know that we need a haircut, we need capital controls, but who is going to impose that? The political elites? We know that they won't. Nationalizing the banks — yes, of course. But under which regime? Do I give the banking sector to those who are now in power? And there are big debates over constitutional change, including whether the constitution simply needs to be applied more diligently, or whether we should change the whole constitution. These are all very difficult questions.

This is why I think it's good for the radicals in the revolution to "demand the impossible," as Che Guevara would say. We need to believe in the possibility of change and to fight for it, but also to think of the mechanisms — how do we reach our goal? This is where organization is key, and where clear alternatives to the status quo become important. And this is also where the whole discourse of refusing to provide leadership becomes so clearly counterproductive. What does it mean to be a revolution that doesn't want to get to power?

Even the basic demands for electricity and water clearly show the need for a radical break with the system. We don't need a technocratic government or groups of "experts" to give advice about how to get electricity. It's not rocket science. Lebanon doesn't have electricity, but it's not because we haven't figured out how to get electricity. It's a political problem.

The ruling elites are still acting as if there's no revolution. Although the pressure on them is intensifying, they will keep bouncing back until the revolution has a leadership that is able to translate street pressure into political gains, and to shape a transitional period based on the aspirations of the hundreds of thousands in the streets today. At the moment, the revolution is fueled by the masses who are just angry and exploding, but without a clear strategy to pressure for a particular type of political, economic, and social change.

**SAB: What are the major tactics of the counterrevolution at this stage? Do ruling-class sectarian narratives still have a pull?**

RM: The counterrevolution utilizes three main tactics. The first is co-optation. The political parties insist that they are also against the state, and they are also against the ruling class. All politicians in Lebanon have gone on television saying that they are against the ruling elites, as if they are not part of that elite. And they call on their constituencies to mobilize, only to then create tensions in the streets.

The second tactic is repression, which is imposed via the three main arms of the security apparatus — the police, the army, and the zo'ran, the militiamen of the sectarian political parties. They are very strategic. The last round of heavy repression saw the army using violence against protesters in south Lebanon and the police consistently repressing protests in Beirut for several days, resulting in a number of serious injuries, hundreds of arrests, and a campaign of burning protest tents by the security forces.

And the third tactic is sectarian division. This revolution represents a dangerous threat to sectarian leaders, especially in that it articulates class-based demands. This is why attempts at sectarian division started from the very beginning and very clearly. I mean when you send people to the street to shout "Shi'a, Shi'a," what are you doing? In regions like some parts of the south where almost everyone is Shi'a, they were mobilizing, chanting, "Shi'a, Shi'a," and people were replying to them, "And so are we, and so are we!"

For a country like Lebanon where sectarianism is so ingrained in the everyday, the ruling parties have failed dramatically to stoke sectarianism so far. It means a lot that three months into the revolution, these attempts have very clearly failed. And I think Hezbollah's decision to mobilize against the banks recently is because they realize it's not as easy to whip up sectarianism now. It's just not the same.

Sectarianism depends on the networks of clientelism which are not only about

money but also non-state welfare and security. This becomes more difficult in the context of economic crisis. The question arises, will they be able to provide? There were already cuts

before the revolution started. The situation threatens to expose the shallowness of the sectarian system — if you don't provide the basic services,

people are not going to stay with you.

17 February 2020

Jacobin

# The Trump-Netanyahu-Kushner Apartheid Plan

20 February 2020, by David Finkel

Predictably, the plan rollout was timed to boost Trump's standing with his Christian-Zionist fundamentalist base and the right wing of the Jewish community, and his crony Netanyahu's standing in Israel's pending third election within the last year (the main opposition candidate, Benny Gantz, also welcomed the plan to annex Israel's West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley).

In the White House drafters' calculation, a "peace" deal on any terms would facilitate the strategic project to incorporate Arab regimes and Gulf monarchies, led by Kushner's Saudi buddy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, into the U.S.-Israeli alliance against Iran. That's also what lay behind the U.S. drone assassination of Iranian general Qassim Soleimani.

Writing in *The New Yorker* online (February 10, 2020), however, Bernard Avishai observes that

the Trump Administration's plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace has already been so widely discredited for its one-sidedness and its political deviousness that there is a risk of ignoring its most immediate threat — which is not to the Palestinians but to Jordan.

In Israel, the plan, or "Vision," as the document unveiled at the White House calls it, has been received as an American warrant for the Israeli government to annex West Bank territory. This could precipitate a crisis in the Hashemite kingdom of Abdullah II, whose stability is critical

to Israel's security, and to that of America's regional allies, particularly in any effort to thwart Iranian forces in Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf. [21]

If those are unintended consequences, many others are entirely intentional consequences of previous acts of the Trump and earlier administrations. The handwriting was on the wall when Trump named his bankruptcy lawyer David Friedman, a supporter and financier of the rightwing Israeli settler movement, as U.S. ambassador to Israel, moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, and announced that the United States no longer considers Israeli settlements contrary to international law.

This is entirely in keeping with longstanding U.S. doctrine that international law is only what the United States says it is, and applies when and only when the United States says it does. In any case, the effective result is that Trump has put the final bullet into the corpse of the "two-state solution," which has been dead in practice for quite some time anyway.

## Old Garbage in New Pail

Contrary to Kushner's claim to taking "an unconventional approach," Yehuda Shaul points out in *Foreign Policy* online (February 11, 2020):

(T)he Trump plan is actually as traditional as it gets. In fact, it bears striking resemblance to another plan

published more than 40 years ago. In 1979, the World Zionist Organization released a plan titled 'Master Plan for the Development of Settlements in Judea and Samaria, 1979-1983,' written by Matityahu Drobles, a former member of the Knesset for the Herut-Liberal Bloc — a precursor to today's Likud party — and the head of the World Zionist Organization's Settlement Division, the body responsible for planning and building settlements.

His plan was basically a detailed attempt to execute the then-Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon's plan for settlement expansion — a task that successive Israeli governments carried out with great zeal over the following four decades, placing 640,000 settlers in key areas throughout the West Bank. Trump's vision is actually Drobles 2.0. [22]

The plan's map for disconnected Palestinian areas does break some new ground in its degree of dishonesty, as Shaul states: "Drobles was honest enough to admit what he was doing; he was explicit that what his map described was not a Palestinian state but the means to prevent one. Trump and Kushner support the exact same line of thinking, yet they call this collection of bantustans a plan for 'two states.'"

There's a reason for this deceptive language, which may be the plan's most sinister dimension although it's greatly underreported in the mainstream media. It *envision*s the "transfer" of Arab villages in northern

*Israel, where many of Israel's 20% non-Jewish population lives, to the fake Palestinian "state" — along with the citizenship of their inhabitants.*

This scheme, which would follow the logic of Israel's recently adopted "Jewish nation-state law," is not only an outrage in its own right. It follows a rising trend of ethno-supremacist reaction in many parts of the world. The largest example is India, where the Hindu-nationalist government's projected new "registration" threatens the citizenship rights of hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Muslims who've lived there for centuries.

Don't imagine it's just a faraway trend. Donald Trump, if reelected, might feel emboldened to overturn the 14th Amendment's guarantee of citizenship for anyone born in the United States, setting off a Constitutional crisis that would make his Russia collusion and Ukraine extortion look like child's play. That might be a high crime too tall for even Trump to attempt, but it's never a good idea to "misunderestimate" (as George W. Bush might put it) the criminality of this administration.

Even if for no other reason than the forced removal of 20% of the Israeli-Arab population from Israel, this travesty of a "peace plan" should alarm everyone. At this writing I've seen no leading Democrats calling out this most sinister feature.

Democratic Party presidential candidates and Congressional leaders mostly say they oppose the plan's "unilateral" character with no Palestinian participation. Elizabeth Warren stated, "I will oppose unilateral annexation in any form — and reverse any policy that supports it."

Only Bernie Sanders' Senate office issued a statement that a peace deal must "end the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and enable Palestinian self-determination in an independent, democratic, economically viable state of their own alongside a secure and democratic state of Israel."

Sanders is the one candidate who speaks the words "Palestinian self-determination." That's laudable in the face of the long U.S. bipartisan support for Israeli supremacy, especially as the Bernie-bashing campaign of the Democratic party establishment and corporate media revs up to full throttle.

Regrettably, the potential for achieving meaningful Palestinian self-determination within the "two-state solution" has been strangled by Israeli action and imperialist complicity. Nor does the U.S. ruling class care about Palestine at all, and its cynical endless exercises around a "peace process" with no peace have produced the present result.

The struggle ahead against the Israeli state's imperialist-abetted apartheid-

annexationist "solution" will be long and difficult. It's up to the solidarity movement at the grassroots to intensify our activism, especially around the global Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) campaign, educate our communities, and put Palestinian rights on the agenda from the bottom up.

### **Further reading**

Professor Rashid Khalidi has written several important articles, including [President Trump's Peace Plan Is the Latest in a Century of Outrageous Deals for the Palestinians](#), and given interviews, including ["Yet Another Declaration of War on Palestinians": Rashid Khalidi on Trump's Middle East "Peace" Plan on Democracy Now](#)

Jonathan Cook, a journalist based in Nazareth, Israel dissects Jared Kushner's discussion of the Palestinian Authority's "police state" in [Duh, Jared! So who built the PA as a "police state"?](#). He writes on the sinister "transfer" plan in [Israel's Palestinian minority has good reason to fear Trump's plan](#)

On the growing strength of the fanatical Israeli religious-settler right wing, [Moshe Machover's essay Messianic Zionism: The Ass and the Red Heifer](#) appears in the February 2020 issue of *Monthly Review*.

*February 13, 2020*

[Against the Current](#)

# **Chile: The fissures of neoliberalism and the return of an "explosive" class struggle**

**18 February 2020, by Franck Gaudichaud**

It must be said that the Chilean ruling classes have really sold the image of a "Chilean Jaguar", a model of economic growth and stability. Sebastián Piñera, the billionaire president of the country, even spoke of an "oasis" country: less than a week after these

declarations, we were witnessing the start of an unprecedented social mobilization and he declared on television that the "country [was] at war"!

Behind the window of "modern" and

neoliberal Chile, we find the most significant inequalities on the planet, and considerable levels of exploitation of labour and destruction of nature. Let us recall the violence of capitalism applied since 1973 with the Pinochet dictatorship, then in 1975 with the

neoliberal “turning point” of the “Chicago boys” and continued from the 1990s under the different civilian governments.

The “democratic transition” pact between the centre, the right and the military, praised as “successful” by the advocates of “consensus”, in fact made it possible to legitimize the defeat of the popular camp of 1973 (with the crushing of the “Chilean road to socialism” and the death of Allende), but also that of the sectors of the radical left which sought in the 1980s to bring down Pinochet by arms and mass mobilization. The “democracy” born in 1990 - under the tutelage of the military - is led by a political class which ended up agreeing to keep (with some reforms) the constitution drawn up in 1980. And even if extreme poverty has largely decreased for thirty years, strong social inequalities have been maintained, as has a violently extractivist and predatory development model, in which almost all social activities (health, education, transport, pensions) have been opened up to capital. This is what makes the country's economy today dominated by a handful of bourgeois families while half of the workers earn less than 480 euros per month (while the price of a metro trip to Santiago is one euro).

It is this whole edifice that is in crisis, under the blows of the social explosion of October and a formidable revival of popular struggles. This massive revolt is linked to an accumulation of previous experiences of resistance, those of the struggles of the Mapuche people, of large workers' mobilizations (from 2006-2007), but also of high school students and students (we think of the “student spring” of 2011). We should also underline the multiplication of eco-territorial struggles in the face of the ecological ravages of big companies. Finally, we can cite the mobilizations around the question of a pension system entirely

in the hands of pension funds (capitalization put in place by the brother of the current president, José Piñera, a minister under the dictatorship).

However, the traditional organized labour movement (very weak since the dictatorship) did not play a key role in triggering this social explosion. What emerges first are the struggles of precarious youth, who began jumping over the turnstiles of the metro in Santiago, collectively. Then with the repression and militarization of public space, we are witnessing the widening of struggling social spaces and demands in terms of critiques of neoliberalism. It was at this point that sectors of the workers' movement, and in particular those of the most politicized strategic trade unionism, started to move.

This is particularly true in the case of the dockers of the *Unión Portuaria*, who from Monday 21 October called for a strike while the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) remained paralyzed for a long time. [23] The workers' movement therefore started with two major national strikes (not renewed however), but quite late and with the brakes of some of the leaderships in place. The reactivation of a broad unitary initiative, Unidad Social, in which we find the CUT, the No+AFP movement against pension funds, the feminist March 8 Coordination, and political ecology sectors, has played an important role in shifting the balance of power and making the government back down, particularly on the issue of the state of emergency. Yet here again, procrastinations were numerous and the massive calls for the dismissal of Piñera - by the movement - were not taken up, and nor were those for a general strike, which could have radically changed the situation and called into question the hegemony of the dominant classes.

If the mobilization continues and should grow again in March (with the

end of the summer holidays), state repression also continues: according to the National Institute of Human Rights of Chile, an official body, there are about thirty dead, 3,649 injured, including almost 2,000 by firearms and more than 400 people wounded. For three months, and almost every week, there has been a death on the streets of Santiago.

The strength of the movement is based on the multiple experiences of territorial self-organization, the hundreds of neighbourhood assemblies and *cabildos* (councils) that continue to collectively develop, organize and envisage a Chile without the Pinochet constitution, truly democratic, feminist, ecosocial, post-neoliberal (without the anti-capitalist perspectives being on the agenda at this stage). While parliament and the government try to control the street and tame class conflict with an “Agreement for Social Peace and a New Constitution”, the problem - unresolved - remains that of building a clear ecosocialist perspective, independent of the institutions inherited from the dictatorship, inserted in the struggles, undogmatic - and to establish - finally - a Constituent Assembly, truly resulting from the power of the people, that is to say free, sovereign, joint and plurinational. At a minimum, constitutional change must be articulated with a program of deep post-neoliberal social reforms and the setting up of an independent commission to judge and dismiss all those responsible for state repression. The challenges are enormous, the potential for transformation too, but the political organizations that could carry out such a project are still very weak and in the minority, while the Frente Amplio (born in 2017) has shown throughout the conflict how much it is already largely integrated into the bourgeois order and incapable of embodying a real alternative.

3 February 2020

# Neither Washington nor Beijing - A backgrounder

17 February 2020, by **Au Loong-Yu**

## A Historic Compromise

The first fact is that when London and Beijing signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 both sides had little interest in promoting the democratic rights of the Hong Kong people. Both governments never bothered to allow Hong Kong people to have a voice during and after their negotiation over the fate of Hong Kong, showing their contempt over Hong Kong people. The Declaration from Beijing only vaguely promised "election" for the Hong Kong legislature and executive head after the handover. The main purpose of the deal between the two governments is merely to advance their mutual interest of maintaining Hong Kong laissez faire capitalism and its British colonial law in exchange for UK's commitment to hand back the island to China in 1997. In protecting Western interest in Hong Kong Beijing also see this as a great chance to use Hong Kong as a platform to pursue a complete re-integration into global capitalism and reap commercial benefits accordingly. Both sides get what they wanted. Beijing used Hong Kong to raise huge amount of capital for its corporations, so much so that today's Chinese companies accounts for more than 60 percent of the market value of Hong Kong stock exchange, up from practically zero thirty years ago. Without Hong Kong China would not have risen so quickly. On the other hand, Western capital also uses Hong Kong as a medium to channel overseas investment into Mainland China: more than 70 percent of China inflow Foreign Direct Investment comes from Hong Kong.

Nowadays Beijing repeatedly warned of "foreign forces" intervening in

Hong Kong. We HongKongers do hate these "foreign forces". Since the outbreak of the current protests a British-born Hong Kong Police Force Chief Superintendent Rupert Dover became famous for leading many ferocious attacks on the protestors. In fact, there are hundreds of white police officers holding foreign passports in Hong Kong and cracking down on protestors as well. This led us to one important issue: not only "foreign forces" are always here but also it is, first and foremost, Beijing who tacitly recognized the West, with UK and US as its head, as stake holders in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is not comparable with Ukraine. The so called "one country, two systems", enshrined first in the Sino-British joint declaration and then in the 1997 Basic Law, was from the beginning a historic compromise by Beijing with the West. The Basic Law's solemn promise of "the previous capitalist system and way of life shall remain unchanged for 50 years" is first and foremost to appease Western influence and business interests. That is also why the Basic Law recognizes English as Hong Kong official language, allows the local people to keep their British passport, allows Hong Kong to keep its own British law, that its courts are allowed to hire foreign judges (article 92) and even to the extent of allowing foreigners to be employed as public servants from low to high grades except the ministerial and Chief Executive level (article 101). It is this article which allows Rupert Dover to smash our skulls. The West, with the US and the UK at its lead, surely has been pleased with this arrangement and surely not in their interest to de-stabilize Hong Kong. On the contrary, they need to uphold a Hong Kong as defined by the Basic Law, remains valid until 2047. This is why the UK and US representatives told the Hong Kong pan-democrats

that instead of voting no they should accept Beijing's political reform package in 2014 prior to the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement, even if the package continues to allow Beijing to handpick Hong Kong's Chief Executive, decorated with some form of popular vote.

The defenders of Beijing argue that there are too much colonial legacy in Hong Kong therefore what is needed is another wave of "de-colonisation", by this they mean Hong Kong people are still pro-West, or that its streets still retain the colonial names etc. But obviously Beijing does not want to do away all kinds of "colonial legacy". Actually it is very keen to keep those repressive aspects of all the colonial laws. The Basic Law basically copies the colonial political system which makes the executive overrides the legislature; its Article 8 stipulates that "the laws previously in force in Hong Kong . . . shall be maintained" which practically keep intact most of the repressive colonial laws, for instance the 1922 Emergency Regulation Ordinance, which the Hong Kong government invoke, on 4 October, to ban face mask altogether. Ironically the law was enacted by the then British colonial government to repress, unsuccessfully, the general strike led by the seaman's union - then under the CCP leadership. This time the colonial act has been invoked again by a Chinese led Hong Kong government to crack down on its "fellow country folks". Precisely because Beijing has kept most of the repressive colonial legacy one can argue that what it is practicing is precisely a kind of internal colonisation against the Hong Kong people.

## The Forgotten People

In the Mao era, Hong Kong was already so essential to Beijing that it had to tolerate the colonial government in exchange so as to be able to use the free port to earn one third of its foreign currency during the midst of the Cold War. Beijing had enthusiastically supported the world anti-colonialism movement but its inconsistency over an important port within its territory was mocked by Moscow in the early 1960's [24], leading China to request that the UN remove HK from the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 1972 after it was admitted to the UN a year earlier. But this had not actually abolished the British colonial rule and we were still colonised and suffered from this. Beijing by that time also became more accommodating towards the colonial government by telling their grass root supporters in Hong Kong not to fight against the British but should patiently wait for the liberation from Beijing in an unknown future. That is why when beginning in 1969 there was a new wave of radicalisation among a thin layer of young people who wanted to fight against colonialism they naturally looked to those left currents outside of the Maoists - Anarchists, Trotskyists, Liberal Leftists and social reformers etc. This generation of youth often described themselves as the "rootless generation", as they strongly felt being left alone to face the ferocious colonial government, and neither Beijing nor Taipei was ready to give a hand to.

However this thin layer of left youth could not find a serious hearing among the horribly exploited working people. The latter were mostly being refugees or their descendents from Mainland China who preferred to focus on their job to make ends meet to revolt against the colonial order. That also explains why Hong Kong people had always been very moderate. Their voice for political participation under the colonial government had always been very small. In the 1980s when a change in sovereignty was in sight the voice now became slightly higher but still very

moderate - in 1986 the pan democrats only dare to ask for partial direct election in the legislature but even this was rejected by the UK. Some small group of leftists demanded for self determination for Hong Kong people but absolutely no one bother to listen. They then tried to argue for universal suffrage for the legislature as a starting point of political empowerment for the local. The result was the same. The public were content with Beijing's promise of gradual implementation of universal suffrage. "No need to rush" is the mainstream sentiment.

Six years after the handover in 1997 Beijing took a major move, instead of giving Hong Kong the long due universal suffrage it tried to impose its National Security Bill on the latter, which angered the people and who responded with 500,000 protestors taking to the street in 1st July, 2003. From retrospect, this was just the beginning of a long resistance to Beijing's attempt in finishing off Hong Kong's autonomy altogether. When the Hong Kong people, after waiting for nearly two decades, began to launch a big occupation in 2014 to demand Beijing to honour its promise of universal suffrage for Hong Kong, the latter decided to do the contrary by rolling back Hong Kong's autonomy. The Hong Kong people have always been denied the right to run their own affairs, be it under British or Beijing's rule. But gradually Beijing proves to Hong Kong people that they are worse than the British. Years before the China Extradition bill, Beijing already tried to impose its chauvinist version of "Chinese identity" on Hong Kong which the British had not done: it tried to make the Hong Kong government to replace Cantonese with Mandarin as medium of teaching. On top of it Beijing began to enforce the "National Education curriculum" followed by the "National Anthem bill" which prosecutes anyone who does not sing properly in accordance to the official version. These enraged the Hong Kong public who started to protest. Therefore, when the China Extradition Bill was tabled the Hong Kong people knew very well that a complete show down with Beijing was now inevitable.

## Hong Kong as Beijing's leverage

For a long time the Hong Kong people have fought alone. This only began to change when Beijing under Xi was becoming even more aggressive in pushing for its new Hong Kong and global agenda.

Thirty years ago when Beijing drafted the Basic Law it would not have expected China would rise to the status of being the second largest economy in the world in so short a time. When Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 he now become the most assertive Chinese leader on the global platform of nations. Increasingly he finds it more and more tempting to not only refusing to honour its promise of universal suffrage in the Basic Law, but also to use Hong Kong as a leverage in its global contest with the US in general and in the Huawei case in particular. Hence the attempt to table the China Extradition Bill.

Up until before the tabling of the bill the US government continued to produce a yearly positive appreciation of Hong Kong autonomy in accordance to the Hong Kong Policy Act 1992, which is essential for the US government to continue to recognise Hong Kong as a separate custom territory. It is Beijing's unilateral change of its Hong Kong policy which now also antagonised the US and the West in general as well by tabling the China Extradition Bill.

It is a fantasy to argue that the Bill's sole purpose is to send those wealthy mainland Chinese who are wanted for corruption back to Mainland to be properly prosecuted. The word used in the bill is "anyone" in Hong Kong, not just corrupted Mainland rich people. And it is the time when the Causeway Bay Bookshop Five incident was still fresh in the mind of many. Between October and December 2015, five owners / staff of Causeway Bay Bookshop went missing. In February 2016 Guangdong authorities confirmed that all five had been taken into custody for an old traffic accident involving Gui Minhai, one of the owners. Hardly anyone outside the Chinese government believed the



explanation. It is widely believed that the five were arrested for publishing books about the private life of Xi. [25] What is alarming is not only that this violates the one country two systems principle, but also that two of the arrests were obviously extra-judicial arrests. That is why people from all walks of life, from Hong Kong politician and wealthy class to European and US expatriates here, fear of the Bill and wish it goes away.

Hong Kong has extradition agreements with twenty countries, including the UK and the US, but not with mainland China. The pro-Beijing camp, here in Hong Kong and overseas, argues that since Hong Kong has extradition agreements with the West, why can't it have an agreement with mainland China? It is because no one trusts Chinese legal system. China is not only disdainful of basic due process but also of judicial independence. This distrust is actually recognized by Beijing as well and then codified in the aforementioned article 8 of the Basic Law which stipulates that "the laws previously in force in Hong Kong . . . shall be maintained," which means that Hong Kong is insulated from China's legal system. Without this insulation there is neither Hong Kong autonomy nor "one country two systems". If China's legal system improved significantly then it would be possible to discuss an extradition agreement with China. But in reality it has gone from bad to worse.

In the final analysis, we do not have a version of "one country two systems" as defined by Beijing, namely one remains socialist and the other remains capitalist. Rather the reality is merely two systems of capitalism: in Mainland a bureaucratic capitalism which combines the coercive power of the state and the power of capital, and a Hong Kong laissez faire capitalism. The latter is surely very problematic for working people there, but this capitalism, as defined by the Basic Law, also provides protection on basic human rights which allows the growth of a social movement. Actually, it is this Hong Kong feature which increasingly worries Beijing. Since the turn of the century, more and more people in the Mainland have begun to imitate Hong Kong's social movement

and started organizing, informally or through NGOs. This was the price Beijing had to pay for making use of Hong Kong to help build China's new capitalism. Increasingly Beijing has found the price too high, and since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, Beijing must have thought that it had become strong enough to tear apart the Hong Kong autonomy altogether. Therefore the Hong Kong working people's way of forward is, in the short and medium term, defend and extend our rights so as to prepare for a long term struggle to replace this laissez faire capitalism with a genuinely equal and democratic society.

## **U.S. promoting Hong Kong's democracy?**

Surely the U.S. is also using Hong Kong to target Beijing. It has been on a path of containing China since 2012. The passed Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act (HKHRD) is hailed in Hong Kong as a mean to save its freedom. Actually the bill's name is rather misleading. First, in Section 3, the bill is very clear with its aim: it is the U.S. national interests in Hong Kong that matters. Section 5.a.6 demands an assessment of whether Hong Kong sufficiently enforces U.S. sanctions on certain nations or individuals. Reasons for sanctions include punishing countries or individuals involved in "international terrorism, international narcotics trafficking, or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, or that otherwise present a threat to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States." This is clearly aimed at protecting U.S. national interests, not defending human rights and democracy for Hongkongers. This tying of Hong Kong human rights to U.S. foreign policy is in itself a mockery of human rights. The definition of what constitutes as U.S. national interest will always fall on the U.S. government. Accordingly, this bill also includes mandating the Hong Kong government to sanction North Korea and Iran. Even many countries in Europe are refusing to follow the United States' move to abandon the nuclear agreement with

Iran, since this is clearly Trump's attempt at being provocative.

Neither the defence of US foreign policy, nor its trade war against China, nor its global contest, is our battle. In general, the big contest for global dominance between China and the US is just a fight to divide up the spoils. Yet one should not deny that in terms of the present defence of Hong Kong autonomy in general and the China Extradition Bill in particular there is a narrowly defined common interest between Hong Kong people and the Western countries, given that Hong Kong is such an internationalised city and the West's interest is to a certain extent institutionalised under the Basic Law. We should not be scared of defending our rights or making Beijing to honour its promise of universal suffrage because the US and the UK is also asking for similar thing. Although one must add that the Hong Kong movement needs to conduct their struggle independently. The left should also be aware of the fact that the historic interest of the Hong Kong working people lies not defending the whole status quo as defined by the Basic Law, but rather to go beyond that by extending their rights beyond the Basic Law and not be afraid of colliding with both Chinese and Western corporate interest here when they have built a strong enough movement. But the extension of their rights cannot be expected if the working people here cannot even defend what they are enjoying now.

## **Protest because of social inequality / HK identity**

The 2 million participants on the 16 June march showed that the movement enjoys majority support. The movement is not demanding independence, as Beijing claims. Like all former colonial people, the Hong Kong people are also entitled to the right to self-determination, including the option of independence. However, the Hong Kong movement is unified under the very moderate "five demands". There is a small and loose current that aspires for independence,

but it has no influence in the movement.

Unlike the previous generations, young people do yearn for a Hong Kong identity, but this does not necessarily imply wanting independence. It is also precisely a reaction to Beijing's increasingly nationalist and chauvinist policies. China, under the CCP, has today evolved into a repressive society that few in Hong Kong want to associate with, hence the aspiration for a "free Hong Kong". The rise of a "Hong Kong identity" is not an isolated event either.

## Nativists

A recent survey showed that nearly 40 per cent of students claim to be "localist", but how the radical youth interprets this varies among themselves. Long before this movement the nativist interpretation had the largest influence amongst those who claimed to be "localist". However, when this movement evolved into a huge mobilization it

necessarily displayed multiple and conflicting tendencies. While there is a nativist current exhibiting anti-Mainland immigrant sentiment, there was also a much bigger demonstration trying to win over Mainland Chinese visitors. The left's responsibility is to join the struggle and convince the youth with its democratic and inclusive position rather than standing outside of it.

The third component is the xenophobic localists, who predate the Umbrella Movement of 2014. This current has been weakened since 2016. The Western media love these people, but their organisations are small, not more than two or three dozens, or at most below a hundred. But their politics are still dangerous because Hong Kong society has always been right wing, and people can take up the idea that mainlanders are the problem and should be expelled.

What is interesting to note is that they were so discredited that they lost in

the 2016 election and were hence marginalised. There are a few very small nativist organisations founded by young people but they are so small that they do not have any institutional muscle to enforce their agenda within the movement. If they do have some ideological influence it is only because, firstly, Hong Kong is always conservative within a context of a so called laissez-faire society; secondly, there already exists a crowd who, maddened by Beijing's repression, mistakenly see all Chinese people as responsible and therefore take an undifferentiated hostility towards Chinese people in general. But this nativist current is very small. In general, the self-claimed localists could garner slightly more than 10 percent of the vote but we must bear in mind that not all localists are nativists.

*This paper was written for the German website LUXEMBOURG with the title WEDER WASHINGTON NOCH PEKING - SELBSTBESTIMMUNG FÜR DIE MENSCHEN IN HONGKONG.*

# Coronavirus (2019-nCoV or Covid-19) in France: medical information, thoughts and practical advice

**16 February 2020, by Pierre Rousset**

To date, there is no epidemic of the new coronavirus (2019-nCoV, renamed Covid-19) in France, only a limited number of people are affected. [26] However, the evolution of the disease remains difficult to predict at the international level. In this article, I intend to offer some general information, highlight some health issues, provide links and gather recommendations issued by the competent services. [27]

## World situation

Close to 30 countries and territories are affected. The expansion of the Covid-19 coronavirus is therefore international, although uneven across continents and regions. Europe is one of the affected areas. However, only in China is there a real epidemic for the moment. It is not yet possible to predict what the future progression of the disease will be.

## Situation in France

According to the Ministry of Health, there were eleven "proven" cases of contamination by Covid-19 in France as of 10 February. Five patients (British) were in the Alpine resort of Contamines-Montjoie, where they had been infected during the visit of a fellow countryman returning from Singapore. It was feared that the disease could have spread locally. Screening operations were carried out, but no further cases were

detected. [28]

The condition of one of the patients, a Chinese tourist, was worrying - his treatment was delayed due to a misdiagnosis, but he is also an elderly person very susceptible to pneumopathy and his death was announced 15 February. He is the first person to die of Covid-19 outside Asia. Four others are now cured. The six others, who are hospitalized in isolation, are not considered to be a cause for concern.

So, for the time being, the answer to the question "what to do" is: nothing special. Cases are extremely rare and there is no epidemic.

It is all the more important to stress this because an anxiety-provoking climate, fostered for a time by media coverage, has given rise to explosions of racist behaviour, in this case against people with an East Asian profile. It maybe even more the case in Britain than in France [29] It is obviously important to combat such behaviour systematically.

Another point of clarification: the coronavirus only survives for a few hours (2 or 3?) on an inert (i.e. not living tissue) and dry surface. Packages arriving from China cannot therefore be infected (any more than cooked food - however in case of infection avoid raw or lightly cooked meat).

It is reasonable to be worried about the issue of the new coronavirus because the course of the disease is unpredictable and it will take time for vaccines to be developed. And the effectiveness of the response to a possible epidemic depends on the *quality of the public health service throughout the country*, which is in crisis, particularly as a result of government-imposed austerity policies. We will come back to this point in the light of what the history of the epidemic in China teaches us in this area.

Before doing so, let us look back at some concrete information.

## Symptoms

Symptoms of a new coronavirus infection combine fever, cough, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing (other conditions may have similar symptoms).

When these symptoms are present, unless there are communication difficulties, people are asked NOT to go to hospital emergency departments to avoid the risk of infection, but to call health emergency numbers (111 in the United Kingdom).

After making a phone call, do not leave your home (or the place where you are) while waiting for health services to come if your condition is considered problematic.

## Measures to prevent the spread of the disease

These are the same as for any infectious disease transmitted by air (and secondarily by the touch), and not, for example, as a result of a mosquito bite, such as dengue fever. Close and prolonged contact is required. **If there is a risk of infection**, the following measures are particularly important:

- Information quickly disseminated to the general population.
- Blow your nose in a disposable tissue, do not throw it on the ground, but in a place where it will not be touched by another person. Do not spit on the ground.
- Sneeze into your sleeve (not your hands), cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing (disinfect your hands afterwards, if necessary).
- Wash hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and water. Hand sanitizer gel is also very effective. Washing hands is best if they are soiled, otherwise gel is easier to use frequently.
- When you have not washed your hands, do not put your fingers on your face (mouth, nose, eyes) - not easy!

- Maintain a distance of at least one metre (or two?) from other people. [30]

Eventually, wear gloves and mask, but which one?

## The question of masks

There are two types of masks.

**The surgical mask** This type of *anti-projection* mask is **designed to protect others**. A surgeon, to prevent their sputum from infecting the patient they are operating on. For us, if we are contagious. It is not designed to protect people who are not sick. It prevents the transmission of infectious agents through droplets (saliva...).

There are countries (Japan is often cited) where it is normal to wear a surgical mask as soon as one is infectious (a bad cold, the flu...). It is a civic act of common sense. Unfortunately, elsewhere, this is not customary; so people wearing a mask can be treated as plague-ridden or even insulted (especially, today, if they have an East Asian physique). To top it all off!

*Surgical masks* can also protect healthy people in certain cases, i.e. transmission of "droplets" (flu and other) and if there is not too close contact with the patient's secretions. The protection provided by the surgical mask for people who are not sick is never complete, so the other measures mentioned above should be maintained.

**The respiratory mask.** This type of mask is designed to protect a healthy person. In cases of coronavirus the use of "air" protection masks (FFP2 or N95 type) is recommended, avoiding airborne contamination (fine particles of less than 5 microns). As these masks are much more expensive and fewer in number, they can currently only be used by healthcare personnel.

**Disposal of masks.** Masks have only a limited duration of effectiveness (8 hours maximum, or less?). Once a mask has been used, it must be disposed of properly, never reused. It should be thrown away in a dustbin, if

possible equipped with a lid and a plastic bag. Disposal is through the household waste stream.

The moist environment of the mask helps to keep viruses alive. A new one is therefore needed at least once a day.

For solidarity, it would be important to send masks in quantity to affected areas, such as Wuhan or Hong Kong, but they are out of stock in France and many other countries. The global shortage is now such that the World Health Organization (WHO) itself is unable to equip all healthcare teams. However, solutions have started to be found, initial initiatives have been taken.

In France, where production has been speeded up, the masks are intended primarily for medical staff (although in very limited numbers). They will be on the front line in the event of an epidemic. Nursing staff in contact with patients need full protective clothing. In countries where epidemics are life-threatening, when the protection of health care workers is not sufficient, contamination and mortality is very high among doctors, nurses, stretcher-bearers, nurses' aides, etc., who are in contact with the sick. This is the case in China. [31]

## Coronaviruses and their treatment

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses found in humans and animals. Those that affect humans can cause a variety of symptoms ranging from the common cold to more serious illnesses, including those affecting the lungs, such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

A "new" coronavirus (CoV) is a new strain of coronavirus that has never before been identified in humans. This is the case with Covid-19. It belongs to the same family of viruses as the SARS virus, but it is not the same one.

Because the coronavirus is not a bacterium, it cannot be treated with antibiotics. In the absence of an

effective vaccine or antiviral, patients are kept in isolation (quarantine) and symptoms are addressed. The cure rate is very high and the mortality rate very low.

The blockade of a region is a much-discussed measure, considered by many specialists to be ineffective or even counterproductive (including for political reasons). Quarantine for a maximum of 14 days of people who may have been infected is, on the other hand, standard.

For the time being, it appears that an infected person is not contagious until symptoms of the disease appear, which makes it much easier to control its spread. On the other hand, as the pathology is new and still poorly known, we must remain cautious and not eliminate any possibility of future developments.

## The dynamics of a Covid-19 epidemic

The Covid-19 has already been "decrypted" and sequenced, making it possible to work on vaccines based on those developed for previous, closely related coronaviruses, such as SARS. However, they are likely to mutate and adapt (like the influenza virus).

China offers the only "database" on which to work to understand the origins and dynamics of the epidemic, a critical issue. However, although Chinese research centres have shared the sequencing of 2019-nCoV (which allows international vaccine research), the government does not provide a complete and reliable history of the epidemic. This is now known to be fact. [32]

The WHO and the UN have praised the Chinese government's "transparency" and its fight against the epidemic, but here we are leaving the realm of medical information and entering politics. Knowing that Beijing has been anything but transparent, these statements have been roundly criticized. This reminds us that the WHO is an intergovernmental body and is subject to its constraints. Given the importance of its financial contributions, China's weight in

international institutions is considerable. This should not be forgotten. The WHO remains, of course, an indispensable medical source in the event of a health alert.

For various reasons, official Chinese data on the history of the infection, the number of sick people, the rate of recovery and the mortality rate are not reliable.

It is possible that a significant number of people affected by a mild form of the disease have not found it necessary to declare themselves ill, deeming their condition to be trivial.

The second reason is political. The government tried for at least a month to conceal the information, throwing whistleblowers into prison, such as Dr Li Wenliang, now deceased after being infected with 2019-nCoV himself (he is celebrated among the population as a hero and martyr). The WHO itself was therefore warned only after a long delay, and then Beijing used all its weight to delay the declaration of an international emergency, especially for fear of the possible economic consequences. Even today, the Chinese regime still prohibits the World Health Organization from working with Taiwan, which is considered a Chinese province.

There are other reasons related to the Chinese health system. Local health centres do not have the trained staff or the technical means to deal with an outbreak of this kind. There are not enough kits to test the sick. State-of-the-art hospitals are private, expensive, and the inequalities in dealing with the disease are very great. Today, the state certainly covers the hospitalization costs for coronavirus victims, but it is still necessary to be officially recognized as such.

In Hubei province, the whole health system is now in crisis. Hospitals being overwhelmed by the coronavirus outbreak cannot any more treat other patients, even when their lives are at risk. [33]

If the alert had been issued as early as November 2019 and measures had been taken immediately, it is possible, even probable, that the risk of an

epidemic would have been nipped in the bud. [34]

Protests are growing in China itself and internationally against an authoritarian regime, the social control it exercises, the absence of transparency and the repression of the right of expression. These criticisms are perfectly justified.

The question that must be asked, however, is: do we not have any lessons to learn from the Chinese disaster? Are our "democracies" protected from such mistakes?

Constantly mobilized for more than a year, all categories of medical staff have constantly denounced the collapse of the public health service in France. This is a decisive issue in UK too [35], and in the US [36]

In France, for reasons of incompetence, corruption, subordination to lobbies (Big-Pharma, construction, automobile...), self-protection, judicial stifling, health scandals have followed one another: asbestos, diesel, mediator...

The French authorities have more

than once lied, as was the case after the Chernobyl disaster, pretending that nuclear "cloud" did not reach France. They have knowingly given up the means to follow at risk populations, such as temporary workers in civilian nuclear plants or victims of military nuclear tests. This was again the case during the recent fire at the Lubrizol factory in Rouen: the government refused to carry out massive blood tests, even though the precedent of Seveso (Italy) had shown that this was the only way to be able to subsequently assess the impact of such multiple chemical pollutions.

The "Chinese lesson" is that, in France - and in Britain and elsewhere - the public health service *throughout the country* must be reconsolidated immediately, rather than simply announcing that, in the event of an epidemic, it will have to be "dealt with". That is to say "dealt with" with a very limited number of negative pressure treatment rooms (in which air can enter, not leave), then isolating patients in hospital rooms and, once the services are overwhelmed, confining the least seriously affected patients ... at home, with their families ... In all countries the public health

system must be able to face epidemics and care for other patients. This is not presently the case.

Rising poverty, inequality and precariousness, and the disintegration of the social fabric, also have an impact on a society's resistance to epidemics. The increase in international trade favours the spread of contagious diseases. The neo-liberal order is eroding the defence capabilities of our societies in more ways than one.

15 February 2020

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# After the social explosion of November 2019 in Colombia

15 February 2020, by **Daniel Libreros C**

The call for mobilizations was launched by the trade union federations, repeating the configuration of previous years: routine marches at the end of the year aimed at hampering the negotiations for the minimum wage with the government which, by legal obligation, must be convened in this period. Limits on union capacity stem from the low rate of unionization. They represent only 4% of the total number of employees. This has its origin, in part, in reactionary employment legislation and also in the criminalization of union

resistance. [37] In terms of internal structure, this fragility in the capacity for "social negotiation" refers to the isolation resulting from a form of vertical and authoritarian organization. This, in terms of operation, implies agreements "at the top" between bureaucratized union leaderships, left parties and the non-partisan social left. In addition, their platforms of action are limited to the most immediate demands.

Everything suggested a routine demonstration. However, in the weeks leading up to 21 November, the social

tensions that have arisen in recent months in neighbourhoods, universities, the informal sector and the unemployed started to converge towards this deadline. International news has contributed to this: at the same time, the Ecuadorian indigenous movement was in the midst of attempting to impose an adjustment plan, and in Chile - a country emblematic of Latin American neoliberalism, pointed to as an example by technocrats - a gigantic social explosion erupted which is still keeping the Piñera government at bay.

Thus, the “contagion effect” encouraged the desperate of one of the most unequal countries in the region. The announcement of greater sacrifices imposed on an increasingly impoverished population reinforced the movement of indignation provoked by the “routine” of the daily assassinations of social leaders - without anyone being found responsible for them - and the corruption practiced by politicians and big crony tycoons in order to share the public wealth. All this in the context of a justice system muzzled by the powerful and which obeys the principle of impunity for them.

For this reason, 21 November became a massive mobilization, incorporating large sections of the population who took to the streets to protest against the multiple forms of oppression produced by the established order and the cynicism of its political representatives. For the first time in decades, the streets of the country’s major cities saw millions of people parade despite government blackmail, despite curfew proclamations, despite selective searches before the demonstrations, in short, despite the classic threats of state terrorism. The mobilizations of November 21 had the nocturnal sound support of *cacelorazos* (casserole concerts) in the neighbourhoods, a complicit noise of declarations and proclamations read in the street, thus confirming the enormous social legitimacy of the strike. The following days, the marches and *cacelorazos* continued in the streets, the districts and in the squares, accompanied by the presence of musical and theatrical groups. A show of collective joy, combat and street art.

On Sunday 8 December, some 300,000 people attended the “strike concerts” in various places in central Bogota, in which youth orchestras took part in order to show solidarity with the demonstrators. When the organizers asked for authorizations to hold the artistic day, the town hall offered them the Simón Bolívar Park, a place in the city that allows the concentration of thousands of people, designed for this type of spectacle. But the organizers rejected the offer by taking over the city streets with fixed scenes or others installed on

trucks. It was a question of prolonging the joy throughout the public space, they said. They thus confirmed that there is a popular feeling of re-appropriation of public space, a feeling accompanied by the conviction that the time has come to abandon the fear that has condemned us for decades to be excluded from it. A feeling of reappropriation which is expressed in daily conversations by this symbolic formula: “This country is not the same after 21 November”.

## **The failure of the government’s “internal security” policy**

Traditionally, the main justification of the elites for making social resistance illegal was to present the opponents as collaborators of the guerrillas, thus utilising the internal civil war, which started around the middle of the 20th century. Any protests by the people were considered to be linked to the guerrillas, which served as a pretext to apply emergency legislation to arrest and prosecute leaders in court.

- Negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), “concluded” in August 2016, prevented this argument from being used any longer, opening up new perspectives for the popular movement. These negotiations did not focus on the transition to democratic reforms, which represented the aspirations of democratic parties, organizations or figures who have supported the proposal for a political solution to the conflict for several decades.

The peace agreement was rejected in a referendum on 2 October, 2016 by a right-wing political alliance led by *Uribismo* (named after Álvaro Uribe, president from 2002 to 2010, currently a senator), which brought together the conservative party, the majority of the Catholic Church and the preachers of the evangelical churches. This refusal forced new negotiations between the parties with the presence of *Uribismo*, reducing the content of the agreements which,

passing through the Congressional filter, were subjected to additional restrictions.

The final version of these agreements envisaged a system of justice, truth and reparation represented by the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (Special Justice for Peace - JEP - responsible for all judicial and non-judicial measures to remedy the heavy legacy of human rights abuses in a society emerging from armed conflict or a dictatorial regime), and the Truth Commission. In the case of the JEP, the treatment of those who financed the war (businessmen and large landowners) was so benevolent that appearing before this judicial body was voluntary. Likewise, the “chain of command” test, that is, the responsibility of the principals of both parties, was ignored and, in the case of responsibilities for human rights violations committed by members of the armed forces, the possibility appeared of an amnesty by means of a legal device called “renunciation to state action”.

- The economic agenda also did not indicate structural reforms. Given that the FARC was a guerrilla group with a peasant tradition and that they were present in the so-called *colonato* zones (the peasants work land which does not belong to them but to which they are bound and for which they have to pay a rent under various forms to the owner, and are taxed by the state), the land issue was at the heart of this negotiation. However, the agreement did not include measures effectively calling into question the concentration of land in the hands of large landowners, which had been reinforced during the war both by dispossession of peasants and by recycling and money laundering. [38]

This meant the de facto ownership of seven million hectares was recognized to the big landowners in the *colonato* areas where the FARC was historically present. As for the creation of a land fund composed of three million hectares, supposed to be distributed to the poor peasants of the country, it has so far been unfulfilled.

Another point in the deal was the state’s commitment to invest in marginalized and conflict-affected

regions, but the government also ignored this under the pretext of the current budget crisis. As if that were not enough, 170 demobilized FARC members were killed inside the camps in which they are concentrated - as provided for in the agreements - after having surrendered their weapons.

Despite these limitations in the design and implementation of the agreements themselves, *Uribismo* has tried to dilute their content even more. The Democratic Centre party, to which the current President Iván Duque belongs, presented to the JEP a series of objections to the peace agreement providing for the characterisation as “special peace districts” of 16 regions particularly affected by the armed conflict with a large number of individual or collective victims. The goal: to put a stop to the recognition procedure.

With regard to “public order”, the current government implemented a policy designed according to obsolete “internal enemy” hypotheses. It appointed General Nicacio Martínez as head of the army. The latter had been recognized by the Attorney General’s office as responsible for extrajudicial executions in the Caribbean region (departments of Guajira and Cesar) in 2006, when he was the second Commander and Chief of Staff of the Brigade located in this region. [39]

Once appointed, Martínez reintroduced into army protocols the guidelines that led to the widespread use of extrajudicial killings, which was denounced by the *New York Times*, which obtained information from official sources of murders and arrests of so-called “suspects”. In this context, the former FARC guerrilla, Dimas Torres, was murdered in the municipality of Convención, region of Catatumbo, located in the northeast of the country. He was arrested by soldiers while defenceless. This assassination had the particularity of being known and having been denounced by the inhabitants of the locality, which forced General Diego Luis Villegas, commander of the special forces of this region, to publicly ask for forgiveness and to repeat this before the Peace Commission of the Congress.

Subsequently, in early November 2019 during a parliamentary debate, the public learned of the tragic result of the bombing of a so-called “dissident” FARC camp, perpetrated at the end of August in San Vicente del Caguán, in the department of Caquetá, which killed 18 people. It became clear that the army had been informed before the bombing of the presence of children in the targeted area: the brigade command had been officially informed by the representative of the public prosecutor in this municipality. For months, the military hid what really happened during the bombing. The debate led to the resignation of the then Minister of Defence, Guillermo Botero.

These tensions within the army and between the parliamentary factions of the government confirm the existence of a fissure within the elites between *Uribismo*, which defends the policy of “internal security”, and those who supported former President Santos in political negotiations with the FARC in Havana. The latter believe that the army must adapt to the post-conflict and gain legitimacy. This is why they also demand the implementation of the agreements in their final version and have formed a political bloc called “Defenders of Peace”. This bloc leads campaigns across the country that has been joined by all non-Uribist parties, including the left and human rights movements. They played an active role in the formation of alliances during the last regional elections which took place on 27 October and in which the candidates of the Democratic Centre were beaten in the chief towns of the provinces.

Beyond these inter-elite contradictions, the erosion of the government which pursues the warmongering option is obvious. Popular rejection of the incessant assassination of social and environmental leaders and members of ethnic communities in peripheral regions is finding growing resonance in the cities. The case of the children killed in the bombing of Caquetá aroused collective indignation and found massive resonance during the mobilization on 21 November.

On this day of national mobilization, the people had to face another form of

state terror, the ESMAD (Escuadron Movil Antidisturbios) anti-riot brigades, a police force specializing in the suppression of demonstrations. Created in 2007 under the second Uribe government, these brigades are responsible for the deaths of several people and numerous arrests and beatings. In the midst of a social explosion like the one we are currently experiencing, this arbitrary behaviour has sparked an even greater rejection.

On 23 November, in downtown Bogota, a member of this riot brigade seriously injured an 18-year-old high school student, Dilan Cruz, shooting him at point-blank range. Dilan died a few days later in a city hospital, becoming a symbol of the current resistance. On 11 December, members of the same squadron, using an unmarked car, attempted to kidnap two students who were taking part in a rally outside the buildings of the National University. A bystander, alerted by the cries of the young people, started to record the scene, got into his vehicle and followed the “ghost car” until he was forced to stop. He forced the occupants to identify themselves. Many demonstrators were beaten and brought to justice, others, like in Chile, lost an eye. Faced with these despicable acts, one of the central and unifying demands of the strike, as well as of the democratic movement as a whole, is the dissolution of ESMAD, which this time failed to put an end to mobilizations in the streets.

## The economic “package”

The current international economic crisis has highlighted the fragility of the extractive financial model in Latin America. The sharp fall in international commodity prices during the period 2013-2017 led to trade and budget deficits in the countries of the region, leading to an increase in public and private debt. Under these conditions, and as happens in peripheral economies in times of decline, foreign direct investment (FDI) has decreased. This downturn is directly linked to the fall in investments in the extractive sectors which are becoming less profitable

and in that of portfolio investments because the “risk premium” increases, causing capital flight. Like a self-closing vicious circle, the reduction in foreign investment produces a monetary devaluation and an increase in debt which, by the standards of the macroeconomy of neoliberal domination, leads to adjustment plans whose purpose is to contract demand. But the people, tired of enduring the constant deterioration of their living conditions, rose up to reject them. The October mobilizations in Ecuador and Chile are a demonstration of this. Those in Colombia are part of the same discontent with neoliberal adjustments.

A few weeks before the strike, the Duque government presented to Congress a proposal for tax reform in line with a policy which, since the beginning of the implementation of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, has increased tax exemptions on big capital, while transferring most of the tax burden to the middle and poor layers. This in a country which since 2000 has had to undergo 13 tax reforms of this type, one every eighteen months. And in a country where the concentration of wealth is one of the highest in the region.

The government added to this proposal a reform of the employment code which aims to introduce more flexibility, to the point of establishing hourly contracts and wages; a pension reform favourable to private pension funds, on the recommendation of the OECD; the creation of a state financial holding company which would centralize all the resources of the public financial sector in order to position itself as a competitor on the financial market.

The demands of transnational capital to stabilize an economy in crisis after the fall in the price of oil, the main export, explain the “package” proposed by the government. Colombia has a deficit exceeding 4% of GDP, which increased considerably from 2013 with the fall in the international price of oil as well as the fall in FDI. During the 2013-2017 period, there was a sharp drop in international oil prices and, as a result, oil exports fell by 60.4% and FDI in this sector decreased by

41.3 %. Despite the partial recovery in world oil prices in recent years, the deficit continues to grow, as does the reduction in FDI, which has precipitated short-term capital flight, statistically represented in the decline in portfolio investments.

In this recessive scenario, the devaluation of the currency has reached one of the highest levels of the international average, with the exchange rate against the US dollar now at 3,500 pesos as against 1,800 in 2014, bringing with it the growth of foreign debt, particularly serious in the case of public debt which is already reaching 51% of GDP, with the aggravating circumstance that the country is subject to legislation, imposed by the IMF, according to which the payment of interest is a priority in the establishment and execution of annual budgets). [40]

According to neoliberal ideology, economic adjustment would be inevitable. Therefore, while protesters on the streets are calling for a fairer society, the president and the parliamentary majority continue to introduce draft bills into Congress that are demanded by transnational capital, which highlights the divide between people and institutions, as well as the narrowness of a “representative democracy” based on political clienteles, business lobbies, and secret negotiations, like neoliberalism. In Colombia and South America in general, we are witnessing not only the crisis of neoliberalism as an economic model based on dispossession, but also the crisis of its forms of political representation.

## **The challenges posed by the new political situation**

Since 21 November, the country has seen the emergence of a pluralist movement involving workers, residents of neighbourhoods, the middle classes crushed by taxes and banking usury in the cities. In this social convergence, it is necessary to underline the role of the youth movements which asserted themselves in the confrontation, to demand rights

and to make explicit their distancing from a war which does not concern them anymore.

These expressions of youth have a history in the university resistance movements of a few years ago. In 2011, the National Students Council (Mesa Nacional Estudiantil) succeeded – thanks to a very broad mobilization – in defeating a university reform project promoted by the government of Juan Manuel Santos. And last year, another movement of the same kind managed to obtain additional budgetary resources compared to those planned by the current government.

But today, the range of youth engagement is much broader. It includes the presence of young people who do not have access to university, or those who, having obtained a degree, cannot find a job. [41] It also includes students from private universities forced to go into debt. The same applies to those who, in technical and vocational high schools, have received offers of precarious employment contracts before the end of their studies, as well as for young people who, because of their poverty, cannot complete secondary studies and do not have access to privatized health services, and cannot aspire to a minimum of comfort in their life.

As has happened in other parts of the world, with similar social movements, this youth movement spontaneously takes to the streets to protest using social networks, with the aim of denouncing the consequences of neoliberalism but without knowing its causes. [42] These young people reject the institutions and parties of the establishment, but neither do they feel represented by the left parties or by traditional popular organizations. This youth movement does not accept vertical decisions or authoritarian directions. It seeks to democratize decisions, which gives a lot of strength to its actions. At the same time, the movement expresses a broad ideological pluralism amidst the depoliticization to which neoliberalism has condemned them, hence also their weakness.

Within this ideological plurality, it is necessary to underline two questions



which highlight the crisis of civilization to which contemporary capitalism has condemned us: that of the destruction of nature and that of the preservation of patriarchal society, strongly contested by young female university students and employees.

The plural social movement which supported the demonstrations of 21 November could not establish a balance of forces allowing it to envisage institutional ruptures, such as the resignation of the president or the convening of a constituent assembly, as in Chile. However, during its short existence, it has already achieved the following objectives:

- Overcoming state terror which, for decades, has considered the actions of popular organizations to be illegal by enforcing the state of emergency and equating protesters with appendages of guerrilla warfare.
- Refocusing social resistance in the

cities, both by the way it started and by the themes it offers in its platform of demands.

- Strengthening a human rights movement that denounces the recurrent assassinations of social leaders and demands a democratic policy guaranteeing the definitive end of the armed conflict.

- Putting social inequality at the centre of the national political debate as an expression of the crisis that neoliberalism is going through on the international scale.

The National Strike Directorate, which called the demonstration on 21 November, maintains dialogue with the government. But the sectors of the population which act spontaneously, or which belong to an enormous diversity of social organizations, do not submit to this organization. However, they are dispersed and do not have the capacity to become a different political option.

For the moment, coordination is taking place in neighbourhood assemblies, a territorial form of direct democracy that responds to the dispossession caused by neoliberal town planning, described as “urban extractivism”. [43] These neighbourhood assemblies can become superior expressions of democracy if they manage to centralize and articulate with nationwide movements that resist government policies. This will obviously depend on the continuation of the strike in the first weeks of 2020, which seems possible under the current circumstances, and on the challenges that confrontation with the government poses to the movement. The battle for a political alternative will continue, but in a new context. There is an urgent need for unitary coordination between those of us who are convinced of the need to preserve an anti-capitalist strategy.

*15 December, 2019*

## Ireland's Left Turn

### 14 February 2020, by Daniel Finn

It took nine years and three elections, but the economic crash of 2008 has demolished the Irish party system. The Great Recession stoked up a popular demand for change that the old political class was unable or unwilling to satisfy. On February 8, the established order collapsed under the strain as Sinn Féin overtook the dominant center-right parties, whose combined vote share slumped to an all-time low.

At a time when left parties in Europe have been losing ground to their rivals on the Right and center, the Irish election bucked the trend. Whatever Sinn Féin does next, this was clearly a left-wing vote. The exit poll showed that health and housing were by far the most important issues for voters. [44] Two-thirds wanted investment in public services to be prioritized over tax cuts. 31 percent

agreed with the statement that Ireland “needs a radical change in direction”.

It's possible that this opportunity for change will be squandered. But right now, the momentum in Irish politics is with the Left, and the traditional conservative parties are on the back foot. An election that was supposed to call time on the political turbulence of the last decade has had the opposite effect.

### Varadkar's Gamble

None of that was meant to happen when the Fine Gael leader Leo Varadkar called the snap election in January. Varadkar's party had spent the past four years governing in partnership with its traditional rival Fianna Fáil. Both parties suffered major attrition in the first two postcrisis elections: by 2016, their

combined vote share had dipped below 50 percent (in 2007, it was 69 percent). The only way for the conservative parties to stay in power while excluding Sinn Féin was through an unprecedented grand-coalition deal. Fianna Fáil didn't take any cabinet positions, but its votes kept Leo Varadkar in the Taoiseach's office.

The two parties saw this as an unnatural arrangement and wanted to get back to their long-established routine, with a center-right government facing a center-right opposition and taking turns to steer the ship of state. Varadkar thought he had a convincing message to bring to the voters: a strong economy with some of the eurozone's highest growth rates, a Brexit deal finally struck with the British government, and the promise of stability after years of upheaval. Fine Gael's average polling

score in 2019 was 29 percent, and the party would only need to add a few points for a coalition government without Fianna Fáil support to be viable.

Last year's local and European elections set things up nicely as far as Varadkar was concerned. Neither he nor the Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin wanted to cut a deal with Sinn Féin, so they were delighted to see the party lose two of its three MEPs and nearly half of its councillors. The Irish Green Party, a far more tractable coalition partner, came third with its highest ever vote share. Sinn Féin seemed to be drifting in the doldrums. [45] The party's 2016 performance — 14 percent — had been its best since the 1920s, but still came as a disappointment after the polling figures of the previous year. Now it looked as if that would prove to be its electoral high point.

## Mood for Change

The outcome of the election came as a shock to everyone, including Sinn Féin. The party leadership was prepared for a battle to hold onto its existing seats, and ran a defensive campaign. Before looking at Sinn Féin in particular, we need to ask why there was such a widespread mood for change in search of a political outlet.

To begin with, the much-vaunted economic recovery has never lived up to the hype. Headline figures for GDP are deeply unreliable, because multinational companies use the Irish economy as a clearing house for transfer pricing. In 2015, the official stats purported to show GDP growing by 26 percent. No government minister boasted about that “success story” — it was patently absurd — but they carried on bragging when the same questionable statistics gave a figure that sounded at least halfway plausible. The growth wasn't all fictitious, but it by-passed the majority of Irish workers. In the exit poll on February 8, voters were asked if they had felt the benefits of the recovery: 63 percent said no.

Younger people stressed the importance of housing as an issue: nearly two-fifths of those under the

age of thirty-four said it was the most important factor in deciding how to vote. Runaway home prices have made it impossible for most people in that age bracket to buy their own home, while landlords hike rents to extortionate levels and hotel construction swallows up residential space.

When the Irish economy crashed in 2008, governments led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael spent tens of billions of euro bailing out the banks and property developers who were responsible for the recession. Public money salvaged the financial and property systems, but there was no structural change imposed as a *quid pro quo*, and certainly no attempt to restore the public-housing sector as an alternative to private provision.

Now, the same banks that would have gone to the wall without state support charge interest rates well above the eurozone average, while politicians like Leo Varadkar claim that US vulture funds make a valuable contribution to the housing market. [46] It's hard to blame the shortage of affordable housing on impersonal market forces, when the people whose decisions were responsible for it have names and faces that are well known to everyone.

## Out of the Past

Sinn Féin positioned itself as the party of choice for those who wanted to register their discontent. Unlike the Labour Party and the Greens, it hadn't been in government during the recession, and didn't bear responsibility for the bank bailout or cuts to public services. The party also had a much wider reach and activist base than Ireland's radical-left groups, whose support is concentrated in the larger cities. The first opinion polls revealed a surge towards Sinn Féin, which held up on election day.

It's now the largest party by vote share (24.5 percent), and level with Fianna Fáil on seats won (37 each — although Fianna Fáil has an extra seat because the parliamentary speaker is automatically reelected). The result would have been even worse for the conservative parties if Sinn Féin had

known how well it was likely to perform: the Irish electoral system has multi-seat constituencies, and Sinn Féin could have picked up an extra seat in several districts if it had run more than one candidate.

When it looked as if Sinn Féin was catching up with the center-right parties, they responded with a barrage of attacks focusing on the party's links with the IRA, past and (allegedly) present. To their great frustration, none of those attacks seemed to work. There were a number of reasons for that.

The party now has a younger generation of leaders with no IRA background who've come of age over the last decade: Mary Lou McDonald, Pearse Doherty, Eoin Ó Broin. It was easier to associate Sinn Féin with the IRA when everyone knew that the party president, McDonald's predecessor Gerry Adams, had been a central figure in the IRA leadership for decades. McDonald may not be to everyone's taste, but nobody can accuse her of direct involvement in a campaign of guerrilla warfare that was deeply unpopular in the South.

Politicians and media commentators who are hostile to Sinn Féin have also reduced the force of their own arguments by linking them to an unpopular political agenda. Every time they invoked the memory of IRA atrocities, it came with an implicit addendum: “And that's why you have to put up with rack-renting landlords and a creaking health service.”

That point certainly doesn't apply to everyone in the Irish media. Suzanne Breen of the Belfast Telegraph has been writing for several years about the case of Paul Quinn, a young man from south Armagh who was beaten to death by IRA members in 2007. [47] The party could have acted much sooner to retract and apologize for comments by Conor Murphy, one of its leading figures in Northern Ireland, who had suggested that Quinn was involved in criminal activity.

But far too often, genuinely harrowing cases — like that of Jean McConville — have been crassly instrumentalized by politicians in the South. [48] Those politicians are much less anxious to talk about the past when they deal

with British governments whose state machine has its own grisly record of atrocities during the conflict. [49] The cynicism and double standards make it easier for Sinn Féin to deflect arguments that should cause it real difficulty.

## “Wholly Political”

The other main line of attack suggested that Sinn Féin isn't really a democratic party, because its leadership still follows orders from the IRA Army Council. [50] Responses to this claim tend to be starkly polarized: people either take it very seriously or dismiss it out of hand. Let's look at the 2015 report of the British government's Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), which scrutinizes ongoing activity by paramilitary groups:

The structures of PIRA [the Provisional IRA] remain in existence in a much reduced form. This includes a senior leadership, the “Provisional Army Council” (PAC), and some “departments” with specific responsibilities. At a lower level, there are some regional command structures . . . PIRA members believe that the PAC oversees both PIRA and Sinn Féin with an overarching strategy. We judge this strategy has a wholly political focus. PIRA members have been directed to actively support Sinn Féin within the community including activity like electioneering and leafleting. Some PIRA members are involved in gathering information of interest to the group including details of DR [dissident republican] activities and the attempted identification of covert human intelligence sources (CHIS). A small number are involved in the storage of remaining weaponry in order to prevent its loss to DRs. Individual PIRA members remain involved in criminal activity, such as large-scale smuggling, and there have been isolated incidents of violence, including murders . . . the PIRA of the Troubles era is well beyond recall. It is our firm assessment that PIRA's leadership remains committed to the peace process and its aim of achieving a united Ireland by political means. The group is not involved in targeting or conducting terrorist attacks against

the state or its representatives. [51]

The judgement of British security agencies, on which the IMC draws for its information, should not be taken as sacred gospel. But the IMC report tallies with what we know from other sources. The statement “PIRA members believe that the PAC oversees both PIRA and Sinn Féin with an overarching strategy” is carefully ambiguous: it might be the PIRA members who are being deceived here, not the general public, just as they were deceived over the question of decommissioning in the early 2000s. In any case, that “overarching strategy” is “wholly political” and geared towards “achieving a united Ireland by political means.” The IRA that fought against the British security forces in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is now “well beyond recall.”

Nobody seriously expects figures like Tom Murphy, for many years the leading Provisional in South Armagh, or one-time Belfast commander Brian Gillen to come out of retirement, reconstitute the IRA as a fighting force, and wage war on the British state. [52] When the Irish authorities charged Murphy with tax evasion in 2015, it was a clear signal that they no longer considered him to be a threat. [53] Sinn Féin certainly has a much better chance of achieving Irish unity by political means than through the resumption of a failed military campaign. [54]

Sinn Féin's critics accuse the party of planning to scrap the non-jury Special Criminal Court (SCC), supposedly at the behest of its IRA masters. Originally set up to deal with subversive organizations, the SCC has since broadened its remit to cover gangland crime. Amnesty International and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties have called for its abolition.

The question of the SCC puts talk of the Sinn Féin leadership following IRA orders into perspective. The party says it wants to appoint a senior judicial figure to determine whether the court is still needed, and will go along with whatever they suggest. That means there are two hurdles to clear: first Sinn Féin would have to negotiate a coalition deal with other parties that

allowed for an inquiry, then the inquiry itself would have to recommend abolition of the SCC. The Provisional Army Council can give as many orders as it likes, but the party still has to work through the same political process as everyone else.

## Center on Hold

Sinn Féin wasn't the only party competing for the left-wing vote. Its rivals can be divided into two broad categories, left-center and left-radical. The Irish Labour Party used to dominate the first of these political niches, but it had a terrible election, winning less than 5 percent of the vote. Labour's best-ever performance came in 2011 with an anti-austerity platform, but it reneged on that platform immediately by going into coalition with Fine Gael, alienating its new supporters. Five years later, it lost thirty of its thirty-seven seats. There was no recovery this time around, just continued decline.

It's hard to see where Labour can go from here. The party seems bereft of new political thinking. The Social Democrats, a group set up by two ex-Labour politicians, now have the same number of TDs, with some fresh, newly elected faces to articulate their message. You can get a very similar center-left policy offer from the Social Democrats without any of Labour's recent baggage: we might end seeing a reverse takeover by the new party if Labour carries on treading water.

The Greens had a better day than Labour, with a 7 percent vote share and twelve seats. However, the result will have been a letdown for the party after the Green surge in last year's European election. That increased support reflected a greater sense of urgency about climate change, especially among younger people. But the Greens are a profoundly inadequate vehicle for that sentiment: Ireland's radical-left parties have a much better record when it comes to environmental issues. [55]

When the Green Party leader Eamon Ryan spoke in television debates, there was a striking discrepancy between his accurate diagnosis of the climate and biodiversity crises and the

modest, incremental solutions he put forward. Ryan's party has no equivalent of the ambitious ecological programs recently developed by left-wing forces in Britain and the United States.

## Radical Left

Further to the left, the Solidarity-People Before Profit alliance retained five of the six seats it won in 2016, while left-wing independents like Thomas Pringle and Joan Collins also held on — a much better outcome than seemed likely after last year's local elections. These victories often came down to fine margins, and the socialist groups might not be so lucky next time. But for now, the radical left has preserved its foothold in national politics. That means there's some breathing space to reflect on what they got right and wrong over the last decade.

At their best, Ireland's radical-left forces have punched above their weight on the wider political stage. They were centrally involved in the struggle against water charges, the most important anti-austerity movement after 2008, which mobilized huge numbers of working-class people and forced the government to scrap its plans. [56] They were also the only political actors with a consistent pro-choice policy, before the work of feminist campaigners made it expedient for the bigger parties to get on board. On both water charges and abortion rights, Sinn Féin initially took an evasive and equivocal line, and organized pressure from its left flank had a real impact. The vote for successful left-wing candidates in Dublin and Cork builds on years of activism in communities that had been ignored and abandoned by the political mainstream.

On the debit side, organizational fragmentation has made it harder for the radical left to develop a cohesive political identity and platform. In 2011, the socialist groups stood on a joint ticket as the United Left Alliance (ULA), but that broke up within a couple of years. One of the ULA's component parts, the Socialist Party, then ran candidates for election as the Anti-Austerity Alliance, which in turn

became Solidarity. Even for people who follow politics closely, these comings and goings must have been very confusing.

One TV anchor asked Ruth Coppinger of Solidarity how she expected to build a mass socialist movement when her party hadn't been able to keep one of its three TDs on board since 2016 — a cheap shot perhaps, but telling all the same. The underlying problem is the lack of a pluralist organizational culture, which means that serious political differences tend to result in splits. These problems didn't prove to be fatal this time around. However, that's no argument for complacency: if there's a fresh election in the near future, Sinn Féin will be aiming to maximize its seat share by running extra candidates, and the party would be very happy to squeeze out its socialist rivals in the process.

Ireland's radical left has a vital contribution to make, not least in developing an eco-socialist program that goes beyond the timid approach of the Greens to integrate working-class economic demands with a plan for decarbonization as the climate crisis worsens. It's very important that it retains a voice in national politics.

## Primary Objectives

What will Sinn Féin do with its unprecedented mandate? The party's tactical choices will stem from its underlying political character. [57] One of Sinn Féin's star performers during the election campaign was Eoin Ó Broin, the party's housing spokesman, who represents a west Dublin constituency. Before Ó Broin became a TD, he wrote an important book, *Sinn Féin and the Politics of Left Republicanism* (2009), which looked at successive attempts over the last century to blend republicanism with left-wing ideology.

As Ó Broin noted, his own party had a clear hierarchy of political goals, with national reunification taking priority over socialism. This meant that Sinn Féin's version of left-wing politics, "relegated to a future point in the struggle, would always be underdeveloped, as the more immediate needs of the national struggle took precedence." Ó Broin

urged his party to "end the hierarchy of objectives implied in the party's ideology, policy and strategy," by putting democratic socialism on a level footing with Irish unity. However, the pecking order he criticized remains firmly in place.

It's not that there's anything reactionary or undesirable about the idea of a united Ireland. The partition settlement of the 1920s was a fiasco, and it's perfectly legitimate for Sinn Féin to want to overturn it. The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) contains an agreed mechanism for them to do so, by means of a border poll. [58] Demographic change and the Brexit crisis have made the idea of a vote in favor of Irish unity seem much more plausible than it was at the time when the GFA was signed.

But the "hierarchy of objectives" that Ó Broin described means that Sinn Féin can tack towards the left or towards the center, depending on what seems most advantageous at the time. Sinn Féin is a left-nationalist party for which nationalism comes first. This is ultimately more significant than the fact that its 2020 election program was less radical than, for example, the British Labour Party's recent manifestos, which contained more ambitious proposals for structural change through the extension of public ownership. [59]

## Southern Exposure

Sinn Féin's time in government north of the border hasn't resulted in any major social-democratic reforms, yet the party hasn't paid a significant electoral price for that. However, things are likely to be very different in the South if Sinn Féin doesn't satisfy the desire for change that powered its recent surge.

In the North of Ireland, Sinn Féin is primarily a nationalist party, whose function is to represent a community that suffered many years of political exclusion. As long as it defends the interests of that community, while promoting the long-term goal of a united Ireland, it will have a solid base of support to draw upon, however little progress it makes on a left-wing economic agenda that was never

central to the party's appeal. In any case, Sinn Féin can always gesture towards the lack of decision-making powers: Northern Ireland is still a region within the United Kingdom, not a state with its own national budget.

Sinn Féin won't have the same leeway in the South: either it delivers on at least some of its pledges, or it may find its voters looking for a new home, just as Labour's 2011 electorate deserted the party after it formed a government with Fine Gael and ditched its anti-austerity program. The volatility of Irish electoral politics cuts both ways.

The most important reform promised by Sinn Féin during the election campaign was its housing platform,

developed by Eoin Ó Broin, which calls for an emergency rent freeze, a cap on mortgage interest rates, and the construction of public housing on a scale that hasn't been seen for decades. If carried out, that platform would have a lasting impact on the quality of life for large numbers of people (and probably secure their votes for Sinn Féin, much like Fianna Fáil's own house-construction program in the 1930s and 1940s).

But it would also damage the interests of all those who benefit from the current setup, including the banks and the big players in the Irish construction industry. The same goes for every other social-democratic policy. To supplement their domestic power, conservative forces will also enlist the support of the European

Union, whose budgetary rules they will cite as an insuperable barrier to any progressive economic agenda.

Trying to push through significant reforms in a governing alliance with the center right is the road to nowhere — especially since those parties will be anxious to cut Sinn Féin down to size by scuppering its projects and associating it with unpopular measures. Sinn Féin's well-honed sense of political pragmatism may be enough to stop the party from going down that road, even if its core ideology allows for it. At any rate, the conservative stabilization of Irish politics so ardently desired by the "stake in the country people," as Liam Mellows once called them, hasn't arrived yet. [60]

## Anticapitalistas and Podemos: six years of ups and downs from the Teatro del Barrio to the expected farewell after the coalition government

13 February 2020, by **Andres Gil**

Exactly six years ago, on 14 January 2014, the *Mover Ficha* manifesto was launched, signed by, among others, the now Vice President of the Government, Pablo Iglesias; Teresa Rodríguez; the actor Alberto San Juan; the professor of Applied Economics Bibiana Medialdea; Jaime Asens; Isa Serra; Rita Maestre; Antón Gómez-Reino and Jorge Moruno. Three days later, it was presented at the Teatro del Barrio. That day, Teresa Rodríguez, Miguel Urbán, Ana Castaño, Juan Carlos Monedero and Álvaro Errejón — who had just arrived from Latin America — spoke.

Anticapitalistas, then Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA) — before, when they were in Izquierda Unida, they were Espacio Alternativo and their known leader was Jaime Pastor —, was one of

the legs on which Podemos was launched: that day in the Teatro del Barrio, Urbán was presented as the party's organizational secretary.

Podemos, in January 2014, was the decantation of the 15M movement into which converged the association of students and professors of the Faculty of Politics of the Complutense University, Izquierda Anticapitalista itself, activists from different social movements — Youth without Future, PAH, tides, etc., professors linked to the CEPS Foundation and friends who knew each other from previous activism — Izquierda Unida, UJCE (Young Communists), MRG (Global Resistance Movement)...

Shortly after that meeting at the Teatro del Barrio, [eldiario.es](http://eldiario.es)

published the contents of an [internal bulletin](#) in which IA had set out "the political points of the proposed process in view of the European elections" in the days leading up to the launch of the *Mover Ficha* manifesto. "In this context", states the leadership of IA, "we have the possibility of promoting a process that will culminate in a candidacy for the elections". What are the determining factors? "The presence of a series of personalities with media visibility as the public face of the project [Pablo Iglesias, who was not mentioned], which opens up the option of connecting with sectors of the population on the left that are dissatisfied with traditional organizations."

The difficulties between the trotskyst

family within Podemos and the statewide leadership had existed since a few days before the Teatro del Barrio, in fact. It was at the penultimate minute when Áigo Errejón, just returned from Latin America, wanted to touch up the manifesto, which was vehemently opposed by Urbán, a participant in the project from the very beginning, in the face of a disgruntled Iglesias.

In the end, the manifesto remained as it was, without Errejón's last minute contributions, and Podemos was presented in society in Lavapiés. Five months later, in the European elections of May, it burst into Spanish politics institutionally with five MEPs.

But before those results, Teresa Rodríguez presented an alternative list to that of Pablo Iglesias in the primaries for the European elections in May 2014. Since then, Anticapitalistas has stood for the leading bodies of Podemos, with candidates in the first two state Citizens' Assemblies.

The first time was in Vistalegre I, in October 2014, when Rodríguez brought together various sectors that had arrived at Podemos after its launch, including Pablo Echenique himself. In that Assembly, the leadership the people and even the political project of the newborn Podemos were at stake. It was at this point that Iglesias proposed the "assault on the heavens" that has accompanied the entire evolution of the Podemos leader to the vice-presidency of the government.

Vistalegre I represented the victory of the first leadership led by Iglesias, with Monedero, Errejón, Luis Alegre and Carolina Bescansa. Alegre was the first to fall, in autumn 2016, while the break-up of Errejón and Bescansa came with Vistalegre II, in February 2017.

Precisely two years ago, on 12 February 2017, that Second Citizens' Assembly concluded, in which Errejón and the Anticapitalistas, again, put

forward alternative documents and leadership to Iglesias, who again emerged victorious from the highest body of the party. There was still one year left before Errejón would split, coinciding with the fifth anniversary of Podemos on 17 January 2018, to launch a new political project with Manuela Carmena - Más Madrid, embryo of Más PaAs.

In any case, the relationship between Anticapitalistas and the statewide leadership has gone through better and worse times and lived through tense situations. For example, in autumn 2016 Anticapitalistas and Ramón Espinar made an agreement and won the leadership in Madrid from Rita Maestre and Tania Sánchez; in the statewide campaigns there has been sometimes more Andalusian support and sometimes less; those close to the statewide leadership presented an alternative list around Isa Franco to that of Rodríguez's team in Andalusia; in the last European elections Urbán was placed in a position to be re-elected as an MEP; and the statewide leadership supported José María González, Kichi, for the re-election as mayor of Cádiz.

But in recent times relations have been worsening. On the one hand, because of Rodríguez's political aspiration to convert the Andalusian movement, *Adelante Andalucía*, into a political subject of its own - including registering it legally as a political party with its own membership register and its autonomous leadership, giving *Catalonia in ComA* as an example. An aspiration that is not shared either by the statewide leadership of Podemos or by its main Andalusian partners, *Izquierda Unida*.

But above all, there has been Anticapitalistas' opposition to the idea of a coalition government with the PSOE. From the outset of the negotiations they made their opposition public, and part of their political strategy is to represent those who do not share the perspective of co-government with the PSOE. The consultation of the Podemos

membership was a setback for those positions: it registered 96% of votes in Andalusia in favour of the entry of Unidos Podemos into the Government.

In the farewell video with Pablo Iglesias, Teresa Rodríguez cites several times her opposition to the coalition, a perspective she does not share, but says that she wishes Iglesias and Podemos Unidos good luck in government.

All this has generated a complicated pre-assembly climate, to which we must add the tensions over the position on the process, where Anticapitalistas have been closer to independence; or the electoral process in Madrid, where the political family of Urbán and Rodríguez converged with IU in *Madrid en Pie* for the City Council and, later, that alliance of *Madrid en Pie* did the same with Podemos for the region. That is, de facto, Anticapitalistas already operated as a political space outside Podemos in the Madrid region.

And this is the path that has led to this Wednesday, when Iglesias and Rodríguez have announced a friendly separation in which the hitherto leader of *Podemos Andalucía* is not standing for re-election in May. In this separation, the role of Urbán is key, to avoid an abrupt exit.

The date of the Andalusian Assembly has also been the subject of controversy. The convening of the third State Citizens' Assembly for the third weekend in March has altered the Andalusian calendar, against the wishes of Rodríguez, whose leadership went so far as to accuse the state leadership of "interference" a few weeks ago.

"We are not going to show up, a new team that is in tune with the statewide organization must lead the project," Teresa Rodríguez explains in the video broadcast Wednesday on social networks with Iglesias, with whom she comes together in a hug. "We made the decision t