



## IV554 - March 2021

# “When it comes to social justice, economic and social changes, real reforms, we’ve seen nothing”

31 March 2021, by [Ahlem Belhadji](#)

### **What overall balance sheet can we draw ten years after the Tunisian uprising?**

The Tunisian revolution has not met the expectations of the young and the less young who supported it, but there is still this flame of change, this energy to make demands, to continue to make demands, to mobilize to improve this or that thing, this interest in public affairs (each political act is analysed, commented on). All Tunisians participate in this.

At the overall level, the balance sheet of ten years, we can say that what happened in 2011 and since is far from meeting our expectations, whether economically, socially, or politically. The few gains that we have had are still significant: we have freedom of expression, a democratic alternation in power, free and transparent elections - apart from the financial control of elections, it's the same everywhere but with us it is not at all controlled. And also, a constitution which guarantees freedoms, equality, social and economic rights. But when it comes to social justice, economic and social changes, real reforms, we've seen nothing.

This decade has been the decade of political Islam, which has been governing continuously since the 2011 elections, often in alliance with figures

from the former regime. They have allied themselves in different ways each time, and in the face of this the left has been unable to assert itself, to carry forward the demands arising from 2011.

### **The root causes of the revolution are therefore still there ...**

For my part, I tend to say that it is a revolutionary process that is still ongoing, based mainly on the scope of social movements and social mobilizations, but also political demands, which remain radical: social justice, distribution of wealth, and opposition to all those who want to appropriate and divert the aspirations of 2011, first and foremost political Islam.

The deep waves are still there, they still animate the popular Tunisian heartlands, with many social layers, because apart from some democratic gains the results are not there. We currently have an explosive economic situation, a national debt ratio that exceeds 90%, the impoverishment of many layers of society, a disengagement of the state in terms of health and education ... An unprecedented economic crisis, with a social crisis of magnitude, an increase in the unemployment rate. In addition, there is corruption, which is wreaking havoc, the increase in the parallel economy which represents more than

50% of the Tunisian economy: economically and socially, we are short of everything.

Politically, there is great instability. If we correlate it with the revolutionary process, it shows that there is no equilibrium yet, that there is something that continues to make things move in Tunisia. Every three or four months we have a new government. I'm in the health sector, we have had 17 ministers since 2011! This political instability indicates the regime's failure to stabilize things, whether those from the old regime or their allies in political Islam, the two allied forces of the counter-revolution in Tunisia. They have failed to establish a stable regime.

### **Didn't Ennahda's commitment to the neoliberal and counter-revolutionary agenda cause internal tensions and rifts with their popular electorate?**

It is clear that Ennahda, and it has been thus from the start, has pursued utterly neoliberal policies, coupled with horrific level of corruption, which people see and recognize today. This translates into the level of votes, they lost a lot: if we calculate in numbers of voters, they lost a lot, they have barely a third of the votes they obtained in 2011. Their policy has been a fiasco: the past decade is one of Ennahda's failure to pursue its policies, be they

ideological/religious or economic. They had promised to create 500,000 jobs and nothing has been seen, despite their unlimited adherence to neoliberal policies and international bodies which they have tried to charm on several occasions.

This has created rifts inside Ennahda and led to discontent among his constituents. The internal fissures

were manifested by some criticism and a few resignations, but the Ennahda movement remained able to keep a certain unity within, and above all to play a double game: they sidelined the most ultra, the most radical elements internally, and they supported, outside, the Coalition of Dignity, al-Karama, which has quite a few elected officials and seats at the moment, which is a rotten and

conservative far right, but which is today the radical wing on which Ennahda relies.

The current crisis, I believe, is no longer the crisis of Ennahda's legitimacy, but rather the crisis of the absence of an alternative, with the inability of the left forces - like the centrist forces - to organize and propose an alternative.

## The authoritarian liberalism of President Macky Sall

30 March 2021, by [Paul Martial](#)

On 3 February, a complaint for rape was lodged by a young masseuse, Adjil Sarr, against MP Sonko, one of the main opponents of President Macky Sall. After a majority vote authorizing the lifting of his parliamentary immunity, Sonko went to the judge's summons on 3 March, accompanied by thousands of protesters. Violence broke out and he was accused of disturbing public order and imprisoned. This detention will provoke continuous and violent demonstrations throughout the country.

### Surfing on the social crisis

Ousmane Sonko occupies a special place in the political arena with his organization PASTEF (Patriotes du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité - Patriots of Senegal for Ethics, Work and Fraternity). His political credo is based on three themes: the fight against corruption, an anti-French discourse and a strong religiosity. This is what makes him extremely popular among the youth, who share these concerns. Disbarred from the civil service for denouncing corruption, he cultivates his image of probity. Each meeting is an opportunity for him to denounce the plundering of Senegal by France and he does not miss any opportunity to show his attachment to Islam. This type of anti-system and anti-corrupt

elite political profile can be found in Mali with Imam Dicko, or in Uganda with Bobi Wine, and has a great resonance among young people.

Although Covid-19 has fortunately hit West Africa less hard for the moment, the social and economic consequences are disastrous in a country where 47% of the population is below the poverty line. The introduction of a curfew has restricted the informal economy, which remains the only means of survival for the most precarious. A large part of the youth is jobless, and sees no other perspective than to go to Europe via the Canary Islands in the most perilous conditions, or to come and reinforce the extremist religious currents. For these young people, Ousmane Sonko has become a spokesman, and they see in the recent events a plot hatched by the government. The two most serious opponents of Macky Sall, Karim Wade and the mayor of Dakar Khalifa Sall have been, in recent years, out of the race because of indictments. In this case of rape accusations, the young woman Adjil Sarr claims that Sonko forced her to have repeated sexual intercourse, which the MP refutes, justifying his presence in the massage parlour by back problems. And women's rights are the big losers: feminists who question Sonko's word are threatened, while the government tries to instrumentalise women's words.

### Repression on all fronts

The speed of justice is in any case variable. Indeed, when there is a body of evidence of corruption against Aliou Sall, the president's brother, he is not only not bothered at all, but he is even offered the post of director general of the Caisse des dépôts et consignations (a governmental financial institution).

Macky Sall's authoritarian drift is worrying. During demonstrations, he did not hesitate to use armoured vehicles against the crowd. His Minister of the Interior called the demonstrators terrorists, the government suspended two television channels for broadcasting videos of the demonstrations, and cut off the internet on several occasions. Finally, the ten or so deaths and hundreds of arrests testify to the violence of the repression.

Even before the Sonko case, members of the PASTEF organization were imprisoned. The same goes for radical anti-imperialist activists who criticise the looting of the country by France with the complicity of the authorities. The idea was to silence any challenge to France's domination of Senegal.

This exceptional mobilization shows the frustration of a youth without a future, victim of a deterioration of its living conditions. The answer lies in a deep social transformation of the

country, which is absent from Ousmane Sonko's agenda when we

see his party's programme.

25 March 2021

# Puerto Rico's Multi-layered Crisis

29 March 2021, by [Rafael Bernabe](#)

Puerto Rico's present situation can be described as a multi-layered crisis. Its main features are the chronic problems arising from the colonial and dependent nature of its economy; the crisis of that colonial economy since 2006; the debt crisis, officially recognized in 2015, resulting from the government's response to that crisis; and the policies imposed by the Federal Oversight and Management Board since 2017.

On top of this, we must add the catastrophic impact of Hurricane Maria in 2017, a series of earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the inadequate government response to these disasters.

A Colonial Economy

Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States in 1898, as a result of the Spanish-American War. Since then Puerto Rico has been burdened with a typical colonial and dependent economy. Its main productive sectors have been controlled by U.S. capital and its market flooded by U.S. imports. Its economy has shifted from one form of overspecialization to another, from the sugar industry before the Second World War, to light manufacturing during the postwar boom and capital-intensive operations (such as pharmaceuticals) since the mid-1970s.

External control has meant that a sizable portion of profits generated on the Island are not reinvested there. At no point has this colonial economy generated enough jobs for the insular labor force: mass unemployment and underemployment (registered as high unemployment rates and low labor participation rates) have been a feature of Puerto Rican society even during the periods of rapid economic expansion, such as the postwar boom.

Mass unemployment tends to depress wages, which have remained the

lowest in any U.S. jurisdiction, even after the extension of the federal minimum wage to Puerto Rico in the late 1970s. By the end of the postwar boom — half a century ago — its per capita income had reached half of that of the poorest state (Mississippi). It has remained in that relative position since then.

More than 45% of the population, and more than 55% of children, live under the official poverty line. This makes a large portion of Puerto Rico's inhabitants eligible for federally-funded welfare programs, which compensate (inadequately) for the failings of dysfunctional colonial economy.

Lack of employment and poverty have also propelled Puerto Ricans to migrate to the United States, which as U.S. citizens they can enter without legal restrictions. [1]

## Puerto Rico's Long Depression

Despite its colonial limits, economic growth in the postwar period, and less spectacularly in the 1990s, resulted in palpable progress in living standards for most Puerto Ricans: health, education, housing conditions, access to drinking water and electricity were considerably improved. Wages in manufacturing and many service operations rose, compared to the meager levels of the formerly dominant agricultural sector.

Such improvements are now far in the past: beginning around 2006 Puerto Rico slid into a crisis that continues to this day. The economy has not grown for the past 15 years. Around 20% of the jobs that existed in 2006 have vanished. More than half of the close to 180,000 better-paid manufacturing jobs that existed in the mid-1990s

have vanished as well.

Migration has accelerated since 2010. Puerto Rico's population has fallen from close to 3.8 million to an estimated 3.1 million today (some estimates go lower). This affects all sectors of its working class, but young people in particular have little hope of economic security — not to speak of a meaningful and satisfying application of their talents and abilities.

The causes of this long depression are varied. Briefly put, Puerto Rico's official economic policy has centered on three elements: a tax-exemption policy which allowed U.S. capital to operate in an almost tax-free environment; low wages, compared to the United States; and unimpeded access to the U.S. market.

Beginning in 1996, Congress began a ten-year phaseout of the federal tax exemption for U.S. corporations operating in Puerto Rico. This exemption had never generated adequate economic progress for the Island, as we saw, but Congress replaced a faulty incentive with nothing.

At the same time, free trade policies in the Americas and globally granted low-wage areas freer access to the U.S. market, reducing Puerto Rico's advantages in this regard. The long recession of 2008 dealt another blow from which Puerto Rico's colonial economy has never recuperated.

Debt Crisis, Austerity and PROMESA

As Puerto Rico's economy stagnated and shrank, government revenues fell. Successive administrations responded with slight revisions in corporate-tax policies and, above all, increased borrowing and austerity policies. Beginning in 2006 these measures were combined — for example, through the issuing of the new debt known as COFINA — to be paid by

increased sales taxes.

This was followed by Law #7 in 2009, which led to mass firings of more than 20,000 public employees. In 2014 Law #66 curtailed benefits, labor rights and collective bargaining in the public sector. This was combined with the reduction of public employment through attrition, and increases in the cost of services (fees and tuition at the University of Puerto Rico, for example), among other measures.

But borrowing also grew at a rapid pace: public debt expanded by 64% from \$43 to \$73 billion between 2006 and 2014. With a shrinking economy and stagnating government revenue combined with the rapidly growing debt burden, no matter how harsh the austerity policies, it was only a matter of time before Puerto Rico's government defaulted on its debt payments.

By late June 2015 Governor Alejandro García Padilla officially recognized that Puerto Rico's public debt was, as he put it, "unpayable" and would have to be renegotiated. To aggravate Puerto Rico's economic, social and debt crisis, in September 2017 the Island was hit by Hurricane María, killing more than 4,000 and causing material damages estimated at \$80 billion.

This was followed by a series of earthquakes in early 2020, which disabled important installations (including an important thermoelectrical plant) and left many homeless. In turn it was followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which paralyzed most of Puerto Rico's economy for several months.

Back in late 2016, after Puerto Rico's default and recognizing that part of the debt would have to be renegotiated, Congress adopted the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which created the Federal Oversight and Management Board, better known in the Island as the Control Board, or la Junta, for short.

While recognizing that part of Puerto Rico's debt would not and could not be paid, it set out to make sure that as

much as possible would be paid, at the cost of increased sacrifices by the Puerto Rican people. To achieve this la Junta supervises the adoption and revision of five-year fiscal plans by the government of Puerto Rico and its annual budgets to make sure they fit the objectives fixed by the fiscal-plan. PROMESA, it should be pointed out, provides no funds for Puerto Rico's economic reconstruction.

To formulate its budget policies la Junta contracted the firm McKinsey and Company, a global consulting outfit known for ruthless anti-labor policies.

The Junta's diagnosis of Puerto Rico's problems can be briefly summarized: the debt crisis is attributed to "big government," and excessive regulation and labor rights are blamed for economic stagnation. This neoliberal dogma leads to the usual prescriptions of cuts in government spending, privatization and attacks on labor rights and benefits.

Even mainstream economists have pointed out that these policies are socially destructive and counterproductive, since they have what they describe as a deflationary impact, in other words, they prolong the present economic crisis.

A study conducted by Joseph E. Stiglitz and two associates concluded that Puerto Rico's debt had to be reduced by 80%, if the Island was to pay for its essential services and adopt measures to revive its economy. That figure surely went up as a result of the impact of Hurricane María, earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic.

A considerable part of Puerto Rico's debt has been bought at a heavy discount by hedge and vulture funds, who now seek payment at face value, which would ensure them extraordinary profits.

There is also ample basis to suspect that a considerable portion of Puerto Rico's debt is unconstitutional or illegal, which has fueled the demand formulated by labor and other organizations that no agreements be reached and no payments be made until the debt has been fully

audited. [2]

Nevertheless, negotiations with Puerto Rico's creditors, conducted by the Junta on behalf of Puerto Rico under Title III of PROMESA, resulted in an agreement very favorable to the COFINA creditors. The agreement with the holder of general obligation debt (GOs) under discussion at the time of writing also fails to reduce debt to a sustainable level, while imposing new sacrifices on the Puerto Rican people.

Presented as a means of liberating Puerto Rico from PROMESA and the Junta, the agreement will probably result in a new bankruptcy when it proves to be unworkable. Puerto Rico is faced with a dire choice between the agreement favored by the Junta and the even worse terms favored by some bondholders and some of Trump's recent appointees to the Junta.

The debate and the fight over this agreement, which should be rejected, will be major issue inside and outside the legislature in the early months of 2021.

## **Fragmented, Discontinuous Resistance**

Austerity and the policies of the Junta have not gone unchallenged. Unfortunately, however, resistance has been fragmented and sporadic.

The adoption of Law #7 in 2009 provoked widespread mobilizations and a one-day general strike (paro general or paro nacional) of largely public employees. But the fight was led by two rival coalitions (linked to different sectors of the labor movement), a division which hindered effective action and contributed to the movement's collapse after the paro general in October 2009.

Law #66 in 2014 also generated strong resistance, above all by public corporation unions. (Public corporations are government-owned entities that have financial autonomy and issue their own debt.)

The movement failed to reverse Law #66, as the government succeeded in falsely portraying the unions as defending their “privileges.” The lack of a united front bringing together union, social and community organizations again weakened the resistance by part of the working class.

Students at the University of Puerto Rico have been at the vanguard of the fight against austerity measures imposed by the Junta and the collaboration of university administrators (through tuition hikes, for example). A prolonged student strike in 2010 won considerable support beyond the university. But other paros and strikes in 2017 and later years failed to generate the same degree of support.

Meanwhile, groups large and small kept up the fight around other issues including women’s rights, environmental struggles, the demand for an audit of Puerto Rico’s debt, and the need to address the needs of those affected by Hurricane Maria and the earthquakes and the pandemic. Vital as these initiatives have been, they were separate and dispersed actions: no coordinating body or common program emerged to bring them together as parts of broad united front.

Then, in July 2019 Puerto Rico was hit by a different kind of hurricane. In a momentous week, former Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, who had presided over the closing of hundreds of schools, was arrested by the FBI and indicted on corruption charges. At the same time, long portions of a shameful Telegram chat between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his inner circle were made public.

The conversation was full of sexist and homophobic comments. It included vile attacks on political opponents and journalists, and even joking references to the bodies of those who died as a result of Hurricane María or its aftermath. Indignation swept the Island and soon led to protests demanding Rosselló resignations.

## **The Summer of 2019: Social Explosion**

In a few days, pickets grew from a dozen, to hundreds and then thousands of participants. On July 15 close to 30,000 demonstrated in Old San Juan. Daily and nightly protests often concluded in confrontations with the Police, who regularly cleared the streets with massive use of teargas.

On July 17 more than 200,000 marched demanding Rosselló’s resignation. Protests of all sorts (marches, pickets, vigils, roadblocks, etc.) spread across the Island. On July 22 more than 500,000 filled Puerto Rico’s widest highway, the largest gathering of any sort in Puerto Rico’s history.

Close to midnight on July 24, Governor Rosselló announced that he would resign his post as of August 2. It was an exhilarating and invigorating popular victory, truly unforgettable for those who experienced it. For the first time in Puerto Rican history, under Spanish or U.S. colonialism, a ruler had been removed from office through mass mobilization.

The social explosion of the summer of 2019 cannot be attributed merely to Keleher’s arrest or the reaction to the infamous Telegram chat, offensive as it was. It was rather a concentrated expression of the anger and frustration accumulated over a decade of uninterrupted economic crisis, austerity policies and the incapacity of often corrupt politicians to provide alternatives.

Some have described these extraordinary events as a “spontaneous” insurgency, while others argued that they indicate how traditional forms of organization, such as labor unions or political parties, are now obsolete. This is wrong on two counts.

The road to the Summer of 2019 was prepared by dozens of deliberate initiatives by all sorts of activist organizations: feminist groups, environmental campaigns, student organizations, labor unions, LGBTQ

coalitions, collectives opposed to the Junta’s policies, socialist organizations, and many others.

People knew what a paro was and how it works, not spontaneously but thanks to many previous struggles and initiatives. The speed with which the call for a one-day paro spread through social media, and was embraced overnight by hundreds of thousands, can only be explained by the fact that years of labor and student actions had familiarized the public with the notion and practice of paros, which they could thus readily understand as a tactic appropriate to the fight for Rossello’s resignation.

Similarly, far from being superfluous, labor unions provided much of the material and personnel required to carry out the largest mobilizations. One cannot gather several hundred thousand persons without deploying sound trucks, route guides, vehicles for the press, portable johns, first aid teams, and speaker platforms, most of which were provided by unions. [3]

Grand as the Summer of 2019 was, its aftermath was marked by the problem of fragmentation. Those who wish to build on that experience now have the challenge of creating some kind of broad coordinating body, capable of attracting labor, feminist, student and environmental organizations, and able to adopt a shared set of demands or program.

### **Electoral Terrain and Coming Battles**

The discontent that exploded in the Summer of 2019 undoubtedly had an impact on the 2020 electoral results. Rosselló in 2016 had won the governorship with 42% of the vote. Close to 20% of those who voted supported forces other than the two historically dominant political parties, the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP).

Those new forces included independent candidate for governor Alexandra Lúgaro, who obtained 11% of the votes cast and the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador, which had also participated in the 2012 elections.

In early 2019, on the eve of the Summer of 2019, a group led by Representative Manuel Natal who had abandoned the PPD, independent candidate Alexandra Lúgaro, the Partido del Pueblo Trabajador and labor, feminist and LGBTQ activists joined to create the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC).

The MVC adopted a clear-cut anti-neoliberal program, committed to the defense of working people, women and the environment and opposition to the PROMESA policies imposed by the Junta. It called for an end to the existing colonial relation but was open to the participation of supporters of different status options, including independence, statehood or some form of sovereign free association.

Five parties participated in the 2020 elections: the PNP and the PPD, the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (PIP), the MVC and the new rightwing religious-fundamentalist party, Proyecto Dignidad. In the last four elections the PIP had obtained less than three per cent of the vote.

The November 2020 elections registered a new reduction in support for the traditionally dominant parties. PNP candidate Pedro Pierluisi won the governorship with a mere 33.24% of the vote. The PPD, whose gubernatorial candidate received 31.75% of the vote, won majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. But the most salient fact about the elections was the encouraging result for the more progressive forces, the PIP and the MVC.

The MVC and PIP candidates for governor each received 14% of the vote. No pro-independence candidate had received a comparable portion of the vote since the 1950s. The MVC elected four legislators (two representatives and two senators), which again, no “third party” had achieved since the 1950s. The PIP elected one senator and one representative.

The MVC delegation is composed of Afro-Puerto Rican feminist and LGBTQ activist Ana Irma Rivera Lassén, social activist and civil rights lawyer

Mariana Nogales, young lawyer José Bernardo Márquez, and the author of this article. The elections were marred by an unprecedented number of irregularities through which the MVC was quite likely deprived of two additional victories: the election of a fifth legislator and of the mayor of San Juan. [4]

MVC and PIP legislators are now in a better position to introduce legislation to audit Puerto Rico’s debt, block the policies of the Junta, reject the proposed agreement with the holders of Puerto Rico’s debt, restore labor rights, revert privatization measures and strengthen women’s rights among other objectives.

Most of these measures, however, have little chance of being adopted unless they are supported by significant mobilizations outside the legislature. This is the main task posed for the coming months: to connect legislative initiatives with an intensified and, hopefully, better coordinated activism by labor, women’s, student, pensioners’, environmental, LGBTQ and other movements.

## A Mandate for Statehood?

The “status issue” is at the center of Puerto Rico’s politics. Should Puerto Rico become a state of the United States, an independent republic, or a republic (or sovereign entity) associated with the United States? Those are the options incessantly debated as alternatives to the present colonial status.

The November 2020 elections included a referendum on this issue, which some have hailed as a “mandate” for statehood that liberal and progressive persons and forces in the United States should embrace.

The question posed in the plebiscite was basically “statehood, yes or no.” The referendum was enacted by the legislative majority of the pro-statehood PNP, against the opposition of the PPD and the PIP. Indeed, the objective of the PNP was to obtain a clear mandate for statehood.

The referendum result was 52.52% for and 47.48% against statehood (a difference of 63,000 of 1,248,176 cast). This can hardly be described as a decisive endorsement for statehood. If anything, it reflects a rather evenly divided opinion on this issue.

Put otherwise, in the referendum close to 48% of those voting opposed statehood. This is all the more remarkable since proponents of the Yes vote had ample funding, enabling them to run slick TV ads, for example, while the No campaign had far fewer resources.

Since voter participation in 2020 was 54.72%, statehood’s vote represents 27.8% of the registered voters. As indicated, this was also the election in which the vote for the PIP’s candidate for governor jumped from 2.13% to 14%.

Thus, although statehood has significant support in Puerto Rico, there is no mandate and the issue is far from settled.

## Statehood and U.S. Progressives

At first sight, support for statehood for Puerto Rico may seem like a logical position for U.S. progressives. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, federal legislation and presidential decisions apply to them, yet they have no voting representatives in Congress and cannot vote in presidential elections. Statehood thus would be a way of doing justice to this disenfranchised community.

The problem with this reasoning is that it ignores the fact that to escape its present colonial status Puerto Rico has at least two other alternatives besides statehood, namely independence and some form of sovereign free association with the United States. Who then should decide which road Puerto Rico should take?

The only democratic answer is that this is something for the Puerto Rican people to decide. Therefore, U.S. progressives should demand, not statehood, but a fair self-determination process for Puerto

Rico. [5]

A more elaborate defense of statehood as a progressive goal points out that Puerto Rico's colonial status was enabled by the doctrine of non-incorporation formulated by the U.S. Supreme Court in the early 1900s.

In a series of decisions known as the Insular Cases, the doctrine established that the United States could control territories which were possessions but not part of the United States. In contrast with other past or then existing U.S. territories, these were non-incorporated territories.

This policy of non-incorporation was adopted by basically the same Supreme Court which a few years earlier embraced the infamous "separate but equal" doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and thus validated racial segregation across the U.S. South. While *Plessy v. Ferguson* was revoked in 1954 and official segregation ultimately dismantled, the Insular Cases are still in the books and the colonial relationship that they enabled remains in place.

From this unobjectionable historical account of the links and parallels between racial segregation and colonialism, some conclude that the U.S. Supreme Court should revoke the doctrine of non-incorporation. This would presumably redefine Puerto Rico as not a possession but part of the United States, and thus as a future state.

But this would mean that Puerto Rico's future would be determined by the U.S. Supreme Court and not the Puerto Rican people. In other words, from the undeniable fact that racial segregation and colonialism were linked historically, it does not follow that the solution of the colonial problem can be imported lock, stock and barrel from the dismantling of segregation.

Despite some problems, a bill recently introduced by representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nydia Velázquez is a step in the right direction. Instead of seeking statehood, the bill provides for the election of a Status Assembly that in collaboration with a commission

designated by Congress would elaborate non-colonial status options for Puerto Rico.

One of these options would then be presented to the Puerto Rican people in a plebiscite. If it receives majority support, it may be enacted by Congress. As can be appreciated, this leaves the final decision in the hands of Congress and may keep Puerto Ricans voting pointlessly for an option that the former is not willing to enact.

This could be remedied if the bill instead mandated that, after the consultation between the Status Assembly and the Congressional commission, Congress would adopt legislation enunciating the options it is willing to enact. Puerto Rican people would vote to choose between those options. [6]

## Voting No

But even while embracing the demand of self-determination for Puerto Rico, U.S. progressives are entitled to ask why some of us oppose statehood and voted against it on November 3.

Support for statehood in Puerto Rico is based on the calculation that U.S. living standards are significantly higher than living conditions in Puerto Rico. From this, the conclusion is drawn that making Puerto Rico a state would equalize Puerto Rico with the United States.

But there is an evident flaw in this argument. Statehood would perpetuate the conditions that have perpetuated its colonial dependent economy, with all its limits and consequences.

Statehood implies the free flow of goods, money, capital between Puerto Rico and the United States, but these are the conditions under which Puerto Rico has evolved over the past 120 years. They have not led to a leveling of Puerto Rico with its metropolis, nor a minimally coherent or balanced evolution of its economy.

It is true that statehood should lead to an increased inflow of federal funds. But Puerto Rico already receives a significant amount of federal funds.

They compensate for the limits of its colonial economy. Increased funding would mean increased compensation, but the conditions making such compensation necessary would remain in place.

What best fits the needs of the Puerto Rican people would be their political organization as an independent republic, capable of determining the economic and social policies best adapted to a socially just and ecologically sound development, in collaboration with other peoples, and in particular, in collaboration with the people of the United States.

U.S. progressives must struggle for such an outcome, while supporters of Puerto Rican independence cannot be indifferent to progressive struggles in the United States.

The struggle for Puerto Rico's right to self-determination, for independence under just and adequate conditions for its people, and the fight for social change and justice in the United States, are convergent struggles that should jointly be embraced by progressives in the United States and Puerto Rico, including of course Puerto Ricans in the United States.

*Source Against the Current March/April 2021.*

## Footnotes

[1] For further background about Puerto Rico under U.S. rule see César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[2] For more background on Puerto Rico's economic and debt crisis see Rafael Bernabe, "Puerto Rico: Economic Reconstruction, Debt Cancellation and Self-Determination," *International Socialist Review*, 111, Winter 2018-19.

[3] For a more detailed account of the Summer of 2019 and the ensuing debates see Rafael Bernabe, "The Puerto Rican

Summer," *New Politics*, XVII: 4 (Winter 2020).

[4] For more on the elections results see Jorge Lefevre Tavárez, "A reflection on the Puerto Rican elections".

[5] For further considerations on this see Rafael Bernabe and Manuel Rodríguez-Banchs, *Counterpunch*, April 9, "Solidarity without Erasure: Responding to Trump on Puerto Rico," 2019. and "Open Letter to the NAACP on Puerto Rico," July 10, 2018, published in several websites

including [Solidarity](#).

[6] For a more detailed discussion of this bill see Rafael Bernabe, "On the bill for a 'Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2020' by Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Nydia Velázquez".

## Kurdish spring defies Erdogan

28 March 2021, by [Mireille Court](#)

This year's Newroz had a special character because Turkey, like almost every country in the world, is undergoing the wave of Covid-19, but also because another virus is eating away at democracy in Turkey: its Islamo-conservative government in alliance with the MHP (Nationalist Action Party), the far-right party whose supporters, the "Grey Wolves" nebula, have just been banned in France.

### Towards the banning of the HDP?

In recent months, ten HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) MPs have had their parliamentary immunity lifted. They were convicted on various pretexts, such as participation in a demonstration in support of Kobane besieged by jihadists, or alleged links with Ankara's *bête noire*, the PKK. On 17 March, Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu's parliamentary immunity was lifted so that he could serve two and a half years in prison, following a tweet more than two years ago. The MP was well known for his tireless defence of human rights and freedoms in Turkey. The next day, the arrest of the co-chairman of the Human Rights Association, Öztürk Türkdogan, was announced. Sixty HDP mayors have been removed from office and

replaced by administrators since their election in 2018, and the arrests of HDP activists and cadres have accelerated, with more than 800 currently in prison, awaiting heavy sentences.

But the worst is probably yet to come, as the Turkish government has just officially asked the Constitutional Court to ban the HDP as a political party. The Constitutional Court, the highest court in Turkey, inherited from the 1982 Constitution and the 1980 military coup, can ban a political party and cut off its public funding. Moreover, the request is accompanied by a ban on hundreds of HDP cadres and middle-ranking officials from reforming another party under a different name and simply from being politically active.

### Erdogan wants to gag the Kurds

The Kurdish movement is used to repeated bans: HEP, DEP, HADEP... have been banned, often running for elections in alliances. The HDP is different, it is a broad party, supported by a significant part of the population and the Turkish left, well beyond its roots in the Kurdish movement. In June 2015, this very young party obtained almost 14% of the votes in Parliament, 80 deputies, and caused the AKP to lose its absolute majority, something that

Turkish President Erdogan has never forgiven it. Even after the dissolution of parliament and months of simmering civil war fomented by the far-right and AKP supporters, the new elections in November 2015 saw the HDP win 68 MPs in parliament. This confirmed it as the third largest political force in the country,

The AKP government and its far-right allies therefore want to finish off the HDP, but they had so far taken small steps, removing a co-mayor like the one in Diyarbakir, Gultan Kisanak, and sentencing her to 11 years in prison, then a deputy, then another co-mayor, another deputy... This has allowed them to test the reaction of the "international community" and Europe. In the total absence of any reaction, apart from a few disapproving grumbles not followed by any sanctions, he has resorted to the big means. Turkish President Erdogan wants to gag the Kurds of Turkey for good and crush the Kurds of Rojava with his F16 bombs.

But the young and joyful crowd from Newroz to Diyarbakir and in all the cities of the region, waving thousands of HDP flags, was there yesterday to remind him that the game is far from being won.

24 March 2021

Translated by *International Viewpoint* from *l'Anticapitaliste*.

# “They were all the more monstrous because they were women, they transgressed everything”

27 March 2021, by [Mathilde Larrère](#)

**What can we say about the role of women during the events of 18 March 1871 which marked the beginning of the Paris Commune? Can we draw a parallel with other revolutionary days where the place of women is often highlighted, like the march on Versailles on 5-6 October 1789, and the demonstration for International Women’s Day on 8 March 1917 which started the Russian Revolution?**

There were a large number of women on 18 March to prevent the soldiers from seizing the cannons of the Butte Montmartre, which can be explained quite simply because it was early in the morning and women got up first to look for water, fuel and so on. But there were also men - if only because the women raised the alarm - and in particular the *fédérés*, who were all men inasmuch as the National Guard was closed to women. [1] So, when the soldiers and the people fraternized on the Champ des Polonais, it was quite mixed. On 5-6 October 1789 [during the French Revolution] women were the driving force (it was a corporation of women, the Dames de la Halle, which launched the movement), before being joined by the National Guard; and on 8 March 1917, it was International Women’s Day (this day has since then been fixed on 8 March). But, in these different cases, everything happened as if the role of women during these days was only retained in return for their being rendered invisible the rest of the time, whereas they were also present on 10 August 1792, during other events of the Commune, the Russian Revolution and so on. Their presence is thus visible when linked to their social and domestic role, in particular taking care of food: on 5 October 1789 it was a revolt about wheat, it was bread that they went to seek in Versailles, even if ultimately it was the king they brought

back; and on 8 March, 1917, for many women in St. Petersburg, those from the working-class neighbourhoods, it was less a demonstration for women’s rights than a demonstration for bread and for peace. Their participation in revolutionary events should not therefore be restricted to these days, however inaugural.

**Afterwards, they were not able to participate in the official institutions of the Commune. Did they demand it?**

The right to vote for women was not considered in electing the Commune on 26 March, and in fact there was relatively little demand for it. The right to vote was not a primary demand of women at the time: they had many others, and this is even more true of female participants in the Commune, who for the most part were socialists or “Montagnardes” (social democrats), but we will come back to their demands. It was the same thing during the French Revolution: we talk a lot about Olympe de Gouges and her Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens, which is a way of demanding the right to vote (without ever saying it explicitly), but the work of Dominique Godineau on revolutionary women shows that they asked much more to be able to join the National Guard than for the right to vote.

**Was the participation of women in the fighting something specific to the Commune?**

No, women have always been in combat, but we have to clarify what it was about. Fighting with arms in hand was more limited for women in the revolts before the Commune, if only because women did not necessarily know how to use guns, and because there was a weight of mentalities which made it impossible to imagine

that women could kill when they give life. So they were kept away from the rifle. On the other hand, they took part in the barricade fighting (in particular in 1830 and 1848). The barricade is there to obstruct a street, and the soldiers rush into the street and are stranded. The fighting then takes place in two dimensions: on the one hand, there is a face to face between the soldiers and the barricade (on which there are armed men), and, on the other hand, the people throw various objects from the windows - and in many cases this was women. This second dimension is just as important (for those working on law enforcement during the July Monarchy riots, there were more skull fractures than gunshot wounds), but it is often overlooked. In addition, women reloaded the guns, treated the wounded, supplied the barricades and so on. The specificity of the Commune is that women more often participated in the fighting with weapons in hand, especially on barricades abandoned by male combatants.

**One of the significant women’s organizations during the Commune was also linked to the fighting: the Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded. Can you say a few words about it? What other types of settings could women organize themselves in?**

Yes, this was an organization created by Élisabeth Dmitrieff, who was the envoy of the IWA [International Workers’ Association, official name of the First International], from London to Paris. Originally there were two men who had to leave, but one of them couldn’t leave because he was ill, and she replaced him at short notice.

This organization is interesting in its two aspects: the defence of Paris, which corresponds to the transgressive demand of women to be

able to bear arms; and care for the wounded, which, on the contrary, falls under the traditional role of women in the gendered distribution of tasks. It was the most structured organisation and was quite centralized, with three levels: local committees by arrondissements, in which representatives were elected constituting a committee, and finally an executive commission headed by Elisabeth Dmitrieff.

But other organizations existed, clubs in particular, such as the Montmartre club, in which André Léo participated. There were, moreover, certain tensions between these organizations: for example, when André also joined the Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded, this dual membership greatly irritated Élisabeth Dmitrieff. These different executives were “women only” (even if the term is anachronistic), directed and organized by women, just like the women’s clubs during the French Revolution or in 1848 (as well as the newspapers in 1848) although in some cases men could help. Women understood that this is how they should organize themselves in order to be able to act and be heard!

### **What other famous female participants in the Commune can we name?**

Apart from Louise Michel, all of them are largely forgotten. And if we remember Michel and, to a lesser extent Brocher, it is mainly thanks to their writings. Yet many other figures deserve to be known. For example, André Léo, author of a major text, “La guerre sociale”, in which she denounces the desire, for a century, “to make a revolution without women”; Dmitrieff, who has disappeared and about whom we know very little after the Commune; Paule Minck; or even Nathalie Lemel, a little better known, close to Eugène Varlin, who before the Commune had created an important workers’ and popular cooperative canteen, La Marmite. But for most of the *communeuses*, we have few documents, apart from a few names on posters or the records of their trials in Versailles. That being said, even if they are a little more so than women, the male *communeux* are also relatively unknown, with the

exception of Vallès, Courbet, Pottier and so on.

### **Besides entry into the National Guard and more generally the right to bear arms, what significant demands were made by women during the Commune?**

They demanded what the women of 1848, to whom they were quite close socially and through political training, were already demanding: the right to work, and to be paid the same wages and therefore the same recognition of qualifications as men. They also demanded the right to education, the right to divorce, the recognition of “illegitimate” or “natural” children, the recognition of concubines (that they have the same rights as married women), and some, notably Louise Michel, demanded the abolition of prostitution.

### **Which of these demands were met?**

Within the framework of the Women’s Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded, there was a lot of thinking about the work of women and Élisabeth Dmitrieff managed to wrest promises of equal pay, and there was even a decree, for a particular profession, guaranteeing equal pay; it even established cooperatives of producers (of women therefore). For instruction, many schools for boys and girls were opened. Concubines were recognized, since the Commune decreed that the wives or concubines of National Guards wounded or killed in combat could receive a pension; and there was also a recognition of natural children. On the other hand, women were not accepted into the Federated National Guard: they took up arms themselves during the *Semaine sanglante*.

### **What was the place of women in the labour movement at the time?**

It was very difficult. Not only was the labour movement dominated by men, but a number of currents were against women working, which they considered unfair because they were paid less. And they began to see them - even if this would be more the case later - as strike-breakers, which is not confirmed in the sources available

since the division of labour was so gendered that a woman was not going to perform a man’s job.

They also considered factory work to be unethical, and there were many within the labour movement and the International who wanted women, especially married women, to return to the home, even if it meant working from home, that is to say in even worse conditions than in the factories. In the French labour movement, there is added to this the weight of Proudhonism, and the deep misogyny of Proudhon.

This was certainly not the case for all activists. For example, Eugène Varlin was very much in favour of equality between men and women and in particular equal pay, and when he founded La Marmite with Nathalie Lemel, she had the same organizational role as him. But they were minorities: there were several congresses or conferences of the International before the Commune - notably during the universal exhibitions - which ended with texts that were deeply misogynistic and opposed to the work of women. It was against this that Dmitrieff, André Léo and Paule Minck fought before the Commune: they gave very well attended lectures where they defended the right to work and equal pay. The slogan “equal pay for equal work” is a slogan of the Paris Commune.

### **Can we speak of a feminist movement in France at the time?**

It is difficult, because the Second Empire had largely crushed the feminist movements which had been able to form in 1848. It was reborn slowly, around these figures like André Léo or Paule Minck, but also Maria Deraismes, at the head of the newspaper *Le Droit des femmes* founded in 1869, and which played an important role in the Association pour le droit des femmes created in 1870.

But it was especially within the labour movement that a socialist feminism, or a feminist socialism, organized itself. It was after this that a feminist movement developed outside the labour movement, around the suffragettes, with Hubertine Auclert

and Marguerite Durand.

### **After the end of the Commune, did women suffer any specific repression from the Versailles?**

Yes, but it is ambivalent. On the one hand, more women than men benefited from dismissal, where it has for a long time been said that justice was more lenient with women. But, on the other hand, if we look at the people who were convicted, we notice that women had harsher sentences: 13% of the women convicted were sentenced to death, against 0.9% of men convicted; and 13% were sentenced to forced labour and 13% to deportation, while these figures are 2.3 and 11% for men. Because they broke all the rules! They were all the more monstrous in the eyes of the *Versillais* because they were women: they transgressed the order of the sexes by leaving the place reserved for them at the time (the kitchen and the

cradle) and entering politics - and obviously entering it by the revolutionary route. This is how we can understand the figure of the *petroleuse* through which female supporters of the Commune were stigmatized. From the first fires of the Commune, this stereotype is present: it is found in the Versailles press, iconography, and trials, which always tried to prove that they had started the fires (the *Versillais* forgetting that they were the ones who sent the first firebombs!).

### **Did the defeat of the Commune have negative consequences for the situation of women and their demands in the years that followed?**

Not particularly. There was the restoration of "moral order" by the *Versillais*, but it affected everyone, it was not unique to women. And when the Third Republic was established, it certainly excluded the right to vote for

women, but because women were considered too *cléricales* [under the influence of priests] without this having a direct link with the Commune. There was therefore no "backlash" as there was after the French Revolution with the promulgation of the Civil Code (1804). The advances obtained were suppressed, one after the other, but this is true of all the work of the Commune, which has been erased.

*\*Interview conducted by Yohann Emmanuel for l'Anticapitaliste la revue.*

## **Footnotes**

[1] The *fédérés* were men from the battalions of the National Guard of the different arrondissements which federated together to defend Paris from the Prussians.

# **Broad response to the neoliberal authoritarianism of the right-wing government**

26 March 2021, by [Panos Petrou](#)

A week before the January 2015 elections, right-wing politician Makis Voridis [the current Minister of the Interior] spoke at a small local meeting in support of the right-wing New Democracy party. He then declared: "We will never cede the country to the left [...] What our grandfathers defended with their rifles [a reference to the civil war of 1946-1949, when the nationalist armies imposed a regime of white terror against the guerrillas of the Communist Party], we will defend with our votes next Sunday. Don't kid yourself. Next Sunday, it's not just about choosing a party, or choosing an economic program. This is a huge ideological confrontation between two different worlds."

His camp lost the battle that time and Syriza ended up forming a

government [the first government took office on 27 January 2015]. The rest is known. The effort to find a compromise with the troika [IMF, ECB, and European Commission] and the Greek ruling class led to the capitulation of Alexis Tsipras and the signing of the third austerity memorandum. The demoralizing defeat of 2015 [Tsipras accepted the conditions of the troika, despite the victory of the "no" vote by more than 61%, in the referendum of 5 July 2015] paved the way for the return of the right to power.

In the 2019 elections, New Democracy won an important electoral victory, which was also a political victory. The polls suggested a shift to the right in public opinion. Syriza's capitulation and the ideological shift that followed in an attempt to justify this betrayal

and defend the austerity policies that the Tsipras government implemented reinforced the TINA (There Is No Alternative) doctrine. Neoliberalism (a.k.a. "creating a favourable environment for investors") was rehabilitated as the only way out of the crisis, while New Democracy had stimulated feelings of social conservatism as a way to strengthen its position while in opposition.

Makis Voridis was now in the mood for revenge: "We will make all necessary interventions to ensure that the left never returns to power". He wasn't that worried about Syriza's electoral prospects. As he said in 2015, "it isn't a party". Voridis is one of the most sophisticated representatives of the contemporary far right in Greece. He spent his youth in neofascist groups, using weapons against anti-fascist

protesters in the streets of Athens. He then joined the more “parliamentary” far right party LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally), before joining New Democracy. He likes to mention Antonio Gramsci and the concept of “hegemony” in his speeches, in order to explain his long-term plan of “forcing a strategic defeat on leftist ideas - something greater than a given electoral percentage, something that exists in universities, in the arts, in the trade unions, in the minds of people”.

Of course, while emphasizing “hegemony” and “ideas”, Vouridis also knows the importance of force and violence in governing. But his days as an armed right wing fighter are over. And today we find him in love with “our liberal democracy”. He will defend the repressive forces of “our liberal democracy” against trade union strikes, left-wing mobilizations, anarchist squats and protesters who block the streets. You could say that as Vouridis moved away from his past extreme neo-fascist tactics, “our liberal democracy” was moving in his direction, so they met halfway. Since January 2021, Makis Vouridis has been the Minister of the Interior. And the decades-long “war against the left” is now the real project of the current right wing government led by the so-called “centrist” Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis hoped to use the political defeat of the left to impose a strategic defeat. The demoralization after 2015 seemed like a golden opportunity to render concrete the slogan of successive governments over the past decades: “We should end Metapolitefsi”. “Metapolitefsi” literally means “change of political regime” and describes the transition to democracy after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. But it is a politically charged term, which is used to refer to the militant traditions of the 1970s, to the conquests of the workers’ movement and to the “hegemony of the left” which haunts the thoughts of Vouridis.

## **Governmental offensive**

Very quickly, the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis went on the

offensive, aiming to implement ultra-neoliberal policies and upset the balance of power between workers and employers. He drew on the tragic precedents set by the Syriza government and tried to accentuate this orientation, without the “ideological reservations” Alexis Tsipras’s party had entered during its changes.

Since last March, the appearance of the pandemic has been a new factor. On the one hand, the management of the pandemic has been a disaster. The government has refused to implement any policies that might help deal with the situation. Bars and restaurants can be closed for months as retail businesses open and close, but there has never been a real shutdown in major sectors of the economy (factories, construction, offices and so on), nor any effort to impose health safety measures on employers. The already crumbling National Health System (NHS) had to go to war without new soldiers (doctors) or weapons (intensive care units, massive capacities of analysis and so on). The public transport system, also in poor condition, has not been strengthened to avoid rush hour crowds. Indeed, most employees are still forced to go to work as usual and then endure curfews and restrictions that affect their “free time”. Student demand for smaller class sizes that would allow schools to reopen safely went unanswered, as this would involve hiring more teachers and/or building more schools.

Any effort to deal with these problems would mean a break with the neoliberal orientation. New doctors, new hospital units and beds for the NHS, new drivers and a new fleet of vehicles for public transport, new teachers and new schools, new staff for the employment inspectorate could be “permanent” solutions and therefore remain in place after the pandemic, which the neoliberals cannot tolerate.

These elements contributed to the failure of the fight against the pandemic. While various travel restrictions and night curfews have been in place continuously since last November, cases of infection continue to rise [233,000 cases and 7,361

deaths]. At present, intensive care units in Athens are full, and doctors say hospitals in the Greek capital are about to face a “Bergamo” situation (choosing which patients to save, as was the case in the Italian city). Meanwhile, financial support for workers in sectors that are closed or have been most affected by the downturn is the bare minimum. Most of the public funds are used to “support” the proprietors, while crumbs are left for the employees.

The government has not simply failed to deal with the health and economic crisis. It has used the pandemic to deepen its neoliberal option. As protests, trade union meetings, student meetings and all manner of activities were made more difficult or impossible by the pandemic, the government refused to back down on further attacks. It began to pass law after law in parliament, hoping to sidestep social resistance. It also instrumentalised the pandemic in order to strengthen repression. One part of the state has benefited from an increase in public spending, for new staff and advanced equipment: the police.

After the incredible anti-fascist rally last October during the Golden Dawn trial, the government launched a preventive counteroffensive. Article 11, which protects the right to demonstrate, has been suspended twice, by a decree of the chief of police (!), in order to ban mass gatherings on 17 November (the anniversary of the student uprising against the military junta in 1973) and 6 December (the anniversary of the murder of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos by the police, which sparked a youth revolt in December 2008). Subsequently, a dozen left-wing feminist activists were arrested for simply waving a banner in Syntagma Square in protest against violence against women on 25 November. The law passed last summer, aimed at “regulating” protests, gives the green light to police to arbitrarily decide “the extent of the estimated threat” and to ban or reduce public gatherings.

## Resistance in the pandemic

Meanwhile, fear of the pandemic itself and state repression forced us to organize a kind of “delegated resistance”. Small symbolic activities organized in a “semi-clandestine” environment by militant minorities expressed the feelings of a wider layer of the population who were unwilling or unable to take to the streets. Given the weakness of the social movements, we considered that the new law and the disproportionate use of the police against small symbolic mobilizations had a preventive character. The government, realizing that anger is boiling below the surface and that the impact of the economic crisis will worsen over time, has attempted to impose a “new normal” where protests are dangerous, where activist minorities will be isolated and face severe repression before they can appeal to and mobilize more people.

The main problem with New Democracy is that a pillar of its “counter-revolution” has been broken. Neoliberalism has been in a state of permanent crisis since 2007. Mitsotakis wanted to follow in the footsteps of his idol, Margaret Thatcher, forgetting that the “Iron Lady” asserted herself at a time when neoliberalism was booming, and economic growth could sustain the false promise of “trickle down effects” for some time. In contemporary Greece, the glorified private sector has been hit hard during the pandemic. The economic crisis has even hit part of the government electorate hard: small business owners and some professionals; a sector of the petty bourgeoisie who hoped that a “business friendly” government would be the solution to their problems and who are now facing disaster. Employees have been under extreme pressure since 2010 (and even the “good old days” before the crisis weren’t so good for many of them). The restoration of neoliberal orthodoxy as “common sense” and the transformation of Greek society into a “business-friendly” environment encountered obstacles, including struggles by workers. The government has therefore strengthened the second

pillar of its “war on the left”: authoritarianism and conservatism. While the police repress, an ideological offensive attempts to discredit the radical left by presenting it as the “enemy within” which deserves to be brutalized. “Law and order” became the only rhetoric New Democracy had to offer to its conservative support base, which was crumbling under the weight of the financial crisis.

This mentality has guided the government ever since. Here is a small but telling example. Right in the middle of a Greek version of #MeToo, where women, mainly in the arts and sport, broke their silence and told their stories of sexual harassment, it was revealed Dimitris Lignadis, appointed by the government as artistic director of the National Theatre, had systematically raped adolescents. After the initial efforts to cover for him failed, he was eventually sacrificed. But the Minister of Culture, Lina Mendoni, has remained in her place, despite numerous calls for her resignation. Normally, replacing her would have been easy and inexpensive “damage control”. But this is where the “war cabinet” mentality prevailed. Mitsotakis protected his minister. She has been presented by the right-wing media as a victim of left-wing propaganda targeting her for promoting “investment-friendly” policies in the field of culture. Lignadis’s lawyer decided to build on this account, trying to portray his client as the victim of some sort of leftist conspiracy. He was supposedly paying the price for trying to reconnect the National Theatre with the “traditional ancient Greek spirit” and eliminate “decadent leftist influence in the arts”.

## The Dimitris Koufontinas case

It was in this situation that the prisoner Dimitris Koufontinas, a former member of the dissolved armed group “November 17” (17N), began a hunger strike to protest against his (umpteenth) unfair treatment. Koufontinas was treated harshly throughout his time in prison, with state bureaucrats consistently denying

him rights that are accorded to all other prisoners with similar sentences. Both New Democracy and the US Embassy have traditionally been very firm in their opposition to any humane treatment of the 63-year-old prisoner. The latest example is scandalous. The government has passed a law that prohibits a certain category of prisoners from being transferred to rural prisons. It also has a retroactive effect. The only prisoner who fit the profile of this new arrangement and who was already in a rural prison was Koufontinas, so this was essentially a law designed specifically to remove him. The law provided that detainees were to be transferred to the prison where they were previously held. But the government circumvented its own law and transferred Koufontinas to Domokos high security prison [central Greece], not Korydallos prison [Piraeus district], where he had spent most of his sentence (and where it would have been easier for his family to visit him). Koufontinas was forced to go on hunger strike on January 8 to demand the correct application of a punitive law that had been passed against him in the first place!

The government has treated the hunger strike with savage cynicism. Vengeance against Koufontinas was combined with the “war mentality” of New Democracy. Mitsotakis has made it clear that the government will not back down and is ready to let Koufontinas go to his death. It was a new impersonation of Margaret Thatcher, who left Bobby Sands and his comrades to die in prison [in May 1981], in order to prove that “the lady’s not for turning”. This vengeance also carried a strong symbolism. Dimitris Koufontinas was forged during the militant years following the military junta, and “17N” is a product of that time. Displaying zero tolerance and denying minimum rights to this particular prisoner fit into the logic of the slogan “we should end Metapolitefsi”.

For some analysts, this was an imitation of the “strategy of tension”. The original strategy was implemented in Italy in the 1970s, at a time when there were left-wing armed groups. In the absence of such groups, the contemporary Greek version has

raised the spectre of “armed violence”, 20 years after the dissolution of 17N and the end of this cycle, through a scandalous effort to change the narrative: a matter of human rights and democracy has been portrayed as a “fight against terrorism”. Hence, all those who supported the hunger strike and demanded respect for Koufontinas; rights were portrayed as “sympathizers of terrorism”. The media acted as if the issue concerned Koufontinas’ past actions (for which he had been in prison for 17 years) and not his treatment as a prisoner. Right-wing commentators have suggested that this “serial killer who has no remorse” should not have any rights (or even that it is fine to let him die). Facebook posts supporting these demands have been removed and user profiles have been removed for “supporting the actions of a terrorist group!” Police have set a new standard in law enforcement. Attempts to rally a few dozen people in support of the hunger striker were violently dispersed by riot police units even before they had a minimum of time to assemble and raise their placards.

The cynical handling of the hunger strike, which included tolerance of Koufontinas’ potential death, was the culmination of the campaign to destroy the radical left, while appealing to the instincts of “law and order” conservatives and radicalizing them to a higher level (that of coming to terms with the idea of imposing a death sentence on an “extremist” and brutalizing anyone who opposes this as a terrorist sympathizer). This strategy was intended to set a precedent for all future struggles. The vision of this strategy could be roughly described as follows: a tiny minority who insist on active resistance will face brutal repression, while part of the population is too afraid to mobilize and the other applauds the police for dealing with the hated “extremists”.

But things have changed. Over January, university students staged massive resistance against the new law accelerating the neoliberal transformation of higher education and establishing the permanent presence of police forces inside the campus. The weekly protests against

this new law brought together thousands of students, marking the end of the period of “delegated resistance”. The “Koufontinas affair” took a different turn. Week after week, his health deteriorated, and it became evident that Greece was on the verge of becoming the country where a hunger striker had died for the first time in Europe since 1981. Academics, artists, doctors, lawyers, members of the European Parliament called for their rights to be respected. The Greek Ombudsman, the Greek section of Amnesty International, the Greek Association for Human and Citizen’s Rights, and even the Association of Judges and Lawyers blamed the government. The whole parliamentary opposition (except the far right) demanded his transfer to Korydallos. Demonstrations in support of the hunger strike are becoming daily and growing. A significant section of society, whose opinions on Koufontinas vary (from sympathy to hostility and everything in between), express their rejection of the state’s brutal behaviour towards him. The only public intervention clearly supporting the government has been that of US state officials, who are responsible for the Guantanamo prison and secret CIA detention centres around the world.

## Police repression

Meanwhile, something different was bubbling under the surface. The police did not just brutalize demonstrators. Charged with enforcing curfews and travel restrictions, educated to regard “unruly youth” as an enemy, high on the government strategy of “law and order”, the cops rampaged through the neighbourhoods, parks, and the public squares of Athens. People have accumulated bitter experiences of daily encounters with a police force that operates with the arrogance and brutality of an “army of occupation”. At an underground level, the “paradox of repression” appeared. According to this schema, repression is constantly used as a means of pacifying a population which cannot be won over by persuasion. But at some point, the constant use of repression ceases to terrify the population and ends up exasperating them even more. The

events in Nea Smyrni, a municipality in Attica, served as a catalyst.

In the public square of Nea Smyrni, police threatened a family which was sitting on a bench (and therefore not doing “active exercise”, which is the officially authorized reason for going for a walk). The local youth supported the family and soon police reinforcements arrived to “pacify the hostile crowd”. A young man was brutalized, but this scene was recorded by other citizens with their smartphones and spread around the internet. The initial version of the police which was readily reproduced by all the mainstream media (the police faced a “violent ambush” and so on) was ridiculed by locals who described what really happened. That same evening, more than a thousand residents marched from the square to the local police station, where they were attacked with tear gas and dispersed.

The video was broadcast everywhere, and the young man’s cry “I’m in pain!” while he was being beaten became a battle cry to thousands of people, akin to the impact of George Floyd’s “I can’t breathe” on US society. Even the media were forced to change their rhetoric for a day, to show some sympathy to the victims of police violence and to exert some pressure on the police representatives who shamelessly supported their colleague, who “made a mistake” and who “unfortunately was filmed” (!). These images “should not be used to discredit the valiant police force by the usual people suspected of anti-police sentiment”.

The next day came the earthquake. More than 10,000 people gathered in the central square of Nea Smyrni. In the difficult times we have been through, a demonstration of this size would be celebrated as a great success, even if we were talking about a central mobilization for all the citizens of Athens in Syntagma Square. But this was only a local protest. Everybody was there. Unions affiliated with the Communist Party, forces of the radical left, anarchist collectives, residents who had never demonstrated before, even football supporters decided to put aside their differences for a day and march

together against police brutality. Later that day, skirmishes broke out between some protesters and the police. A motorized police unit - notorious for its brutality and constant tactic of charging protesters with their motorcycles - attacked. This has happened many times in the past, but this time some protesters fought back, and a unit member was beaten and ended up in hospital.

It was then that an ideological counterattack was unleashed. The media immediately shifted the debate from police brutality to that of "violent thugs who almost murdered a police officer". The prime minister intervened on a television special to denounce the incident (without even mentioning the victim of police brutality). All of a sudden, everyone was supposed to forget everything that had led to this outburst of rage and sympathize with the police. Meanwhile, in the streets of Nea Smyrni, the police sought revenge. An entire municipality suffered from their frantic activity that night, in the surrounding streets, inside shops and apartment buildings. A video was posted that summarizes their state of mind after the attack on their colleague. His unit was filmed yelling "They're finished! We're going to kill them! We're going to fuck them!" Many incidents of police violence were recorded by local residents and posted online.

## Two parallel universes

It was like two parallel universes. For the mainstream media, the "story of the day" was the drama of the injured policeman, while social media was overrun with various videos of savage police violence in the streets surrounding Nea Smyrni and locals shouting from their balconies "Get out of here!" or "Leave the children alone!". The distance between reality and media coverage was another factor that enraged people - as in the 2015 referendum, when the mass media were heavily discredited for their role in supporting a yes vote for the measures of the troika. Kyriakos Mitsotakis did not strengthen his position when he warned young

people that "social media is a threat to democracy because it provides a distorted view of reality", at a time when it is the "respectable" media who constantly distort reality to protect the government and the police.

The ideological counteroffensive has failed miserably. The first national poll showed a majority with a negative opinion of the police (excessively violent) and believing they were responsible for the small riot in Nea Smyrni. But what is more important than opinion polls are the streets. By the weekend following the events of Nea Smyrni, all parts of Athens and many cities in Greece were filled with demonstrators. It is difficult to estimate the total number. But many municipalities or districts have seen the biggest local protests for many years. Dozens of simultaneous local protests each gathered a few thousand people each. The "decentralization" of the protest was a strategy discussed in the radical left as a way to deal with the twin problem of the pandemic and state bans. Some groups had attempted such a tactic on 6 December 2020, with many local events commemorating Alexis Grigoropoulos and the 2008 uprising, instead of trying to assemble once again at the traditional downtown meeting point in Athens where dozens of police units were already "waiting" for us. It was a success, but nowhere near what happened on 13th and 14th March. This time around, the strategy of "decentralization" met the real need for a critical mass of people to protest in their neighbourhoods, to claim their right to public space against the police. The police did not even show up to try to stop what can be described as a "peaceful revolt" made up of multiple "guerrilla" type protests.

Local protests were diverse. Local anarchist groups, left-wing organizations, some trade unions, and collectives active in social solidarity organized them, according to their strength in each district or neighbourhood. They were filled with anger. Against the police, against the management of the pandemic, against the priorities of public spending and so on. A single cry combined all the grievances: "Mitsotakis, you bastard!"

It was an echo of the past: this slogan was launched in 1965 against the father of the current Prime Minister, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, during the "Youliana" (the "July events"), a revolt against the monarchy unleashed when the Palace toppled a centrist government with the help of Mitsotakis, who had orchestrated the defection of a crucial number of centrist deputies. The slogan became popular again in 2021, to express disdain for the son of one of the most powerful families in Greek politics. Michalis Chryssochoidis, the minister in charge of the police, was another target of the protesters' chants. This former social democrat [a member of Pasok in 1974, who switched to New Democracy in 2019], who became the favourite of the CIA and a star of "anti-terrorism" after the dismantling of "17N" [in 2002], is now the widely despised and ridiculed "sheriff" for his earlier statement that "the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods applaud when they see our police force marching through their streets".

Young people made up the bulk of the local demonstrations. Of course, people of all ages came, but the massive presence of young people was significant. It's an interesting development. There are generations of people whose brief lives were marked by two major economic crises and a pandemic which is still ongoing. They face bleak prospects in the job market, their social life is under constant pressure, they are the ones who usually suffer daily harassment from the police in squares and public parks and the prime minister constantly designates to lecture them. But they are also the ones who did not experience the defeat of 2015 in the same way as felt by previous generations who struggled for many years before Syriza came to government and felt exhausted and demoralized after the betrayal.

## Other struggles

This feeling of defiance also feeds into other struggles. The same week as the demonstration in Nea Smyrni and the local protests, we also witnessed: the feminist strike of 8 March, a student march against the new university law, a central protest that combined

solidarity with Dimitris Koufontinas and the overall struggle against authoritarianism and repression. Several thousand people took part in these mobilizations. In the following days we had the mobilizations of actors from various cultural backgrounds, combining their grievances for the lack of financial support during the lockdown, their rejection of efforts to impose censorship in the arts using “anti-terrorism” legislation (similar to that which recently led to Catalan rapper Pablo Hasel being imprisoned) and the anger unleashed by the Greek #MeToo in the arts. Then, on 17 March, a mobilization of health personnel was supported by many people. In short, a government that has embarked on a campaign to seriously curb public protests has recently faced almost daily mobilizations.

This development has had another side effect. It is said that determined and desperate hunger strikers need something to hope for in order to change their minds and not sacrifice

themselves. While New Democracy refused to grant Dimitris Koufontinas his rights, happy with or even desiring his death, the brief “spring” of social resistance gave Koufontinas reason to hope for the future. He finally ended his hunger strike, saying that “what is going on there is far more important than the question that started it” and that the existence of dynamic social forces resisting authoritarianism “is a new hope”. While the mass movement did not force the government to back down, it avoided the grim prospect of a tragic death.

The government is under pressure and the days of arrogant self-confidence that defined the beginnings of his term are behind it. But its future is far from determined. The “war on the left” may prove successful by “circling the wagons” of the conservative electorate, which has become radicalized. The main opposition party, Syriza, is hardly an “opposition”, choosing the conciliatory language of respectable politics, national unity and so on. The anti-capitalist left is still fragmented,

confused and/or healing its wounds from 2015. The trade unions have been severely weakened and the “new movements” lack critical foundations for the moment.

But it seems that we are entering new ground, with possibilities to counteract, in a very initial way, the effects of the political defeat of 2015. The vibrant energy of the younger generations, combined with a possible reactivation of a sector of political activists with experience of struggles can constitute an element favourable to a new political phase. Today, mainstream media columnists tend to refer to the youth uprising of 2008 and the “movement of the plazas” of 2011. Optimists reassure their audiences that “this will not happen again”. The more cautious warn that “we have to make sure this does not happen again”. In any case, it is revealing that the ghosts of past struggles are coming back to haunt them.

*Translated by International Viewpoint from A l'Encontre. Subheads by IVP.*

## Italy's Amazon Strike Shows How Workers Across the Supply Chain Can Unite

25 March 2021, by [Francesco Massimo](#)

A year into a pandemic that has put them under ever more strain, yesterday, Amazon workers held a twenty-four-hour strike across Italy. In the first nationwide strike in the company's history, workers mounted picket lines to protest exhausting work rates, despotic management-by-algorithm, and the company's lack of accountability to its hires. The strike day was particularly historic because it involved all Amazon logistics workers, from warehouse employees to delivery drivers.

An obvious key focus for the strike was Amazon's large distribution centers (“fulfillment centers”) where thousands of goods are stocked, picked, and packed, yet the strike extended to the mid-range sortation centers (where boxes are dispatched)

and the small “last mile” delivery stations. Decisively, it also included the drivers, who are outsourced and not recognized as Amazon employees, even though they work under the direct control of its algorithms.

Claiming 75 percent participation, the one-day strike thus represented a historic moment for the labor movement — and for Amazon itself. Yet the struggle also needs to be extended, including to the international level, if it is to really hit Amazon's logistics operations and push back against the company's most exploitative practices.

### Calling the Strike

The strike was called on March 10,

after the sudden breaking off of negotiations between Amazon Italia Logistics (a subsidiary running operations in seven Italian fulfillment centers) and the logistics branch of the CGIL, CISL, and UIL union confederations. After two meetings back in January, unions expressed satisfaction that a discussion was underway. Yet the company made no concrete commitments on their specific demands, centered on a company-level collective agreement on working conditions, health and safety, work intensity, schedules, bonuses, and meal vouchers.

The company could not have refused all discussion. In Italy, trade unions still enjoy relatively strong institutional power: total membership is among the highest in Europe and

unions are still influential in policy making. But, consistent with its classic strategy, Amazon worked to buy time rather than respond to union demands. Despite unions' optimism that they could negotiate traditional industrial relations in the firm, social dialogue turned out to be a dialogue of the deaf.

The negotiations blew up two weeks ago at a meeting where the company refused to recognize its social responsibility toward subcontracted drivers. It issued a statement insisting that "for deliveries to customers, Amazon Logistics uses third-party suppliers. Therefore, we believe that the correct interlocutors are the suppliers of delivery services, as well as the business associations that represent them." The three unions blamed the company for the collapsed negotiations and declared a national strike — involving not only drivers but the entire national distribution network.

In the past, the different working conditions in different parts of the logistical chain, as well as the different levels of union organization, had prevented any such nationwide strike. The earliest organizing took place at the Piacenza fulfillment center, opened in 2011. It took five years to unionize the first group of workers there, and in 2017, it was home to Italy's first Amazon strike. The result was union recognition by management and the stipulation of a plant-level collective agreement on working time and night shifts.

Since then, the unions' strategy has been to extend this agreement to other areas, especially bonuses, health and safety, and information rights. But the company refused to seriously discuss these questions — and only conceded an annual renewal of the agreement on night shifts in 2019 and 2021. For both Italian and US Amazon management, the agreement following the first strike was only ever meant to be an exception. Moreover, the unions seemed either unwilling or unable to mobilize — nor were fulfillment center staff exactly putting irresistible pressure on them to do so.

## One Strike, Different Conditions

Yet the period following this first strike also saw Amazon's Italian operations grow massively, through a vertical integration process which extended across all European countries.

In 2017, Amazon opened two new Italian fulfillment centers, in Vercelli (between Turin and Milan) and Rieti (near Rome). In 2019, it created another one on the outskirts of Turin and, in 2020, three more in Rovigo (in the northeast), Pomezia, and Colleferro (not far from Rome). It also created autonomous delivery branches, with twenty-five stations where delivery drivers load orders into their vans and start their shifts. This time, unionization didn't take so long as in Piacenza: the previous strike accelerated organizing efforts, and Rieti and Turin were rapidly unionized. Drivers also organized, first in the country's wealthiest region, Lombardy — where most of them operate — and then in Rome, Genoa, and Tuscany.

Represented by the logistics branch of the CGIL, CISL, and UIL union confederations, drivers are the newest addition to the Amazon workforce. Until 2015, when Piacenza was the only fulfillment center, distribution had instead been subcontracted to large logistics firms such as UPS and SDA or to the national postal service. But from 2016, the company started building its own mid-range network, with small delivery stations on the outskirts of Milan and then Rome, to receive the boxes prepared and sent from the fulfillment center.

The couple dozen workers operating each delivery station are employed by Amazon, but subcontracted drivers collect and deliver the goods to customers. Today, Amazon logistics subsidiaries employ more than 4,000 workers, plus around 10,000 temps (according to the unions, that is; no official figures are made public). The exact number of drivers subcontracted by Amazon for "last mile" delivery is

also hard to judge, given the extreme fragmentation of this workforce (see chart).



Permanent employees of Italy's two Amazon logistics companies. Amazon Italia Logistica manages the large hubs (fulfillment centers) and Amazon Italia Transport the delivery stations. There are also about 10,000 temp workers, hired and fired according to seasonal peaks of activity, and an unspecified number of drivers. According to Riccardo Chesta's data on Lombardy, there are at least 1,500 drivers in this region, which represents around 20 percent of the e-commerce market.

Being a driver is even harder than being a fulfillment center worker. Both have to deal with demanding work rhythms, constant control, and a total lack of autonomy. But drivers' conditions are especially precarious: while Amazon plans and monitors their work (determining their routes, workloads, hours, and evaluations), it doesn't count them as employees and accepts no responsibility for them.

At the bottom of the chain of command, drivers have to cope with the most intense exploitation and the greatest "flexibility." Outsourced delivery firms hire them in the thousands during the peak season. These firms are set in competition by Amazon, to deliver more, and faster — a pressure which is then heaped on the drivers.

The productivity bar is raised in each peak season, forcing workers to do ever more to satisfy management demands and digital control. After peak season, the new productivity standard is maintained, but half the workforce is laid off, and the rest have to continue at the higher pace. According to unions, "in the first few weeks of 2019, Amazon drivers were delivering up to twice as many packages per day" as the industry average.

Behind these increased workloads is the fact that Amazon's market share has grown massively without a commensurate rise in the number of

stable jobs. Yet this is also driving complaints among workers, who know their difficult job navigating traffic in Italy's main cities is undervalued. The intense pressure they are under explains why many of the strikes that first emerged among drivers were spontaneous. In these actions, workers demanded an end to managerial harassment, incessant productivity increases, and the so-called franchise system, which forces workers to pay penalties to their employers for traffic fines or damage to their vans.

The first drivers' strike in Milan in 2017 was followed by others in 2018. That October, a supply-chain-level collective agreement was signed by the confederal unions and the business association for the outsourced delivery firms — though not by Amazon itself. However, this did not satisfy the workers, and, in January 2019, they organized another walkout, together with the confederal unions, across the Lombardy region. This strike was an important step forward: it involved coordination across this large region, no mean feat among an individualized and fragmented workforce, though it still involved only drivers and not warehouse staff.

## State of the Unions

Italy isn't the only country where Amazon workers have been on strike. Germany was first in 2013, followed by France in 2014, Italy in 2017, and Spain in 2018. These strikes were basically site based. Given the rapid growth of Amazon's logistics network, unions were unable to keep pace with new openings and unionize all the sites. A partial exception is France, where labor legislation promotes mandatory workplace elections. This encourages a union presence at all sites as well as centralized collective bargaining in the subsidiary that manages the fulfillment centers there, Amazon France Logistique. This favored coordinated mobilization during the pandemic, when unions called for a national strike across fulfillment centers. Yet this did not extend to smaller hubs, or drivers,

who are either employed by the separate Amazon France Transport or outsourced.

Across the Alps, Italy's confederal unions faced the same problem. The firm structure is similar, with one subsidiary in charge of logistics operations (Amazon Italia Logistica) and another for the delivery stations (Amazon Italia Transport), alongside a galaxy of small- and medium-sized outsourced delivery firms. Yet here, unions had more foresight in their strategy for organizing the whole workforce. They realized that last-mile delivery was a weak point of the Amazon network — and the level where exploitation was at its highest. Therefore, the unions, especially the CGIL's logistics branch, invested in organizing drivers. And, as the first spontaneous walkouts in 2017 showed, drivers didn't have to wait for the unions' green light before taking action.

Building a common strategy for all Amazon logistics workers was hardly easy — and the confederal unions' structure, rigidly divided into industry-level federations, makes coordination among drivers and warehouse staff difficult. For instance, Amazon's oldest Italian fulfillment center, in Piacenza, is covered by the collective agreement for the commerce sector, whereas the rest of its operations come under the agreement for the logistics and transport sector. This means that warehouse workers, employed by the same subsidiary but operating at different sites, are represented by two different union federations.

Such an artificial division, the product of Amazon's decision to sign two different collective agreements — and reproduced by the unions' industry-level structures— not only makes coordination among workers and union delegates harder, but also frames their thinking. Some do not consider such coordination a priority because “workers under the commerce contract don't have the same problems as their colleagues with the logistics one.”  
Grassroots Organizing

However, the stakes were high and sooner or later such obstacles needed to be overcome. Amazon is one of the

world's largest employers and is in the vanguard of the digital “revolution.” It is a powerful monopoly that seeks to disrupt the rules of the game, from labor regulations to antitrust and tax laws. The pandemic, and the reorganization of the capitalist economy that followed, have only heightened its power.

For these reasons, this strike has undeniable political importance. But the importance of the unions' decisive move should be understood within the wider dynamics of Italian industrial relations, especially in the logistics sector.

In the last two decades, Italian confederal unions went through a process of institutionalization — following an embrace of social dialogue and corporatism from the 1990s onward, which fueled a process of incorporation into the Italian state. Unions gained access to policymaking — but in exchange conceded wage devaluation and an end to industrial conflict.

This especially hurt unions' ability to mobilize the periphery of the labor market — notably, the emerging logistics industry. It also made it harder to resist labor market deregulation, wage cuts, and management's increasing discretionary power. Workers in the logistics sector, especially migrants, were segregated in a fragmented chain of outsourcing: large logistics companies subcontracted warehouse work to cooperatives under deregulated and often illegal conditions. These cooperatives, especially, blackmailed migrant workers — whose permits to live in Italy are tied to their jobs — in order to impose overtime, unpaid working hours, and despotic rules.

The confederal unions took no serious initiative on this front, partly because of the historically good relations between the cooperative movement and the trade unions. Ultimately, this status quo was disrupted by the formation of rank-and-file unions SI COBAS and ADL COBAS. From 2011, these independent unions, made up of grassroots activists and logistics workers, began making waves across Italy, and changed the balance of

forces in the sector.

COBAS's successes owed much to its flexible union structure, which relied on preexisting migrant community ties and allowed migrant workers to take leadership roles. Also key were its weapon of sit-ins and blockades at the warehouse gates. This allowed workers to paralyze the circulation of goods. The pressure considerably improved economic and working conditions and brought a wave of revitalized union organization to the sector. Today, SI COBAS and ADL COBAS are the most representative unions in some of Italy's most important express and courier firms.

This also brought harsh repression: picket lines attacked by employers' henchmen or the police, employers' lockouts, politically motivated layoffs, judicial charges, fines, and trials. Just last week, SI COBAS activists in Piacenza were arrested after a difficult but victorious strike against FedEx-TNT.

Amazon was, in fact, the only firm where COBAS was not able to establish a significant presence. This could be explained by the peculiarity of its employment conditions, the style of HR methods, and, especially in fulfillment centers, the relatively greater promise of stable employment.

This also helps explain the Amazon strike's political importance for the more established confederal unions. This walkout was triggered by a sudden stop in negotiations, and the unions want to show the multinational their strength. But, loyal to their narrow conception of social dialogue, their aim is to force Amazon back to the negotiating table — to establish the normal industrial relations that exist in other sectors.

Victory is anything but certain — Amazon's strategy is to avoid any serious engagement, especially when it comes to wage levels and workers' control over the labor process. Added to that, the Italian branch has no

effective decisional power or legitimacy to sign an agreement without the consent of Amazon HQ in Seattle. The company has managed to pursue this strategy successfully so far, and will continue to do so until unions and workers can really hurt the ordinary functioning of logistics operations and stop the flow of goods.

Monday's strike is historic for the labor movement. But whether it can also prompt a broader revival of the unions depends on workers' ability to keep the fight going and extend it to other workers, such as temps, Amazon's call center operators, and workers from other firms. For now, one positive sign was the action by UPS drivers in Milan who refused to deliver Amazon's products on the day of the strike. Such solidarity is fundamental to overcoming the division among different groups of workers — and building an international front against the multinationals.

Source [Jacobin](#).

## “The Commune is an ode to emancipation, which crosses time”

24 March 2021, by [Olivier Besancenot](#)

**For this book, you have chosen a rather original format, since it is a political fiction, recounting a visit by Marx to Paris during the Commune. Why did you make this choice?**

It followed on a discussion with Michael, and I think it was Michael who came up with the idea first, with the goal of doing something a little out of step with what has already been done and which will be repeated on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Commune. Basically, it was a question of finding something striking, original, to illustrate Marx's thinking on the Paris Commune. We therefore imagined this clandestine, improbable journey of Marx, led by his daughter Jenny, within the Commune itself, with meetings with some of its leading figures, in order to bring out Marx's

political thinking on the Commune. It is actually remarkable to see how his ideas emerged in the heat of the action. A pertinent immediate analysis (the Call to the International, [\(The Civil War in France\)](#)), but also a political, strategic, global questioning. This is one of Marx's great strengths: to be able to understand that from the unfolding of events themselves can be born a process of emancipation that has not necessarily been imagined on paper, in think tanks, or even in the offices of the International. Marx's writings on this famous force of emancipation that was finally found when he speaks of the Commune, were extremely advanced in relation to a whole range of sectors of the workers' movement, the revolutionary movement, with even intonations that are sometimes more libertarian than those of some libertarians. A reflection

on emancipation, on confrontation with the state apparatus, on the need to build forms of political, democratic sovereignty...

**Exactly. To put it in a very synthetic way: what did the Commune change for Marx?**

I would say that it was the idea that it is not enough for the state apparatus to change hands, from a social class point of view, in order to change the nature of the state, in that it is an oppressive system, a boa constrictor, to use Marx's phrase, which stifles civil society and democracy. And therefore that it must be extinguished, that we should go towards the extinction of the state, and that one of the possible avenues for this extinction was shown by the policies of the Commune in action: revocability of elected officials, a cap on the

remuneration of elected officials and magistrates, etc. All these concrete policies that call into question the heart of the bureaucracy that is the state apparatus. And with the Commune there was a beginning of extinction, which could not really be fully illustrated because of the duration of the Commune [72 days], but a glimpse of the future all the same, and that Marx immediately understood that and immediately analysed it. And this would have an impact on Marx's thinking, on the debates and the culture of the workers' movement in general.

Marx followed all the debates, what was happening in the world, the social and political situations, and while he had not imagined that the insurrection would come from Paris, he delved into the analysis of the Commune, immediately, although he had been a little caught off guard and was at the time immersed in reflection on the analysis of the capitalist system and its crises. And his strength was to produce analyses as events unfolded, to grasp their scope.

**To bring all this to life, you imagine encounters between Marx and certain personalities of the Commune, in Paris, during the insurrection. Looking at them we notice a significant presence of women: Louise Michel, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Nathalie Lemel, but also of course Jenny Marx who accompanies her father. Is it from a desire on your part to highlight in particular the role of women in the Paris uprising?**

It was not necessarily theorized and constructed, but we realized, as we looked at real figures, that women played a central role in the social and political history of the Commune. This was the case from the start of the uprising, with the protection of the guns against their potential takeover by the Versaillais in the streets of Montmartre, at the call of the vigilance committee of the citizens of Montmartre, around Louise Michel in particular. But it was also the role and the place taken by women, against the zeitgeist of the time, because machismo was present, even within the International and in the various revolutionary clubs. A revolutionary

event such as the Commune, but this applies to all revolutionary events, is the outpouring of phenomena that have been simmering in society for months and months, or even more, which was the case in Paris, with in particular a multitude of revolutionary clubs, in which women became more and more involved. We can also think of the siege of Paris by the Prussians, during which Nathalie Lemel was, with the cooperative "La Ménagère" and the restaurant "La Marmite" at the centre of popular solidarity and mutual aid, to come to the aid of almost 10,000 Parisians who were dying of hunger. So the Women's Union, which was formed in the eye of the storm of the Commune, was the product of all this previous work, and when Élisabeth Dmitrieff (representative of the International) arrived and participated in the founding of the Women's Union, much of the activity was already underway, entrenched.

**It is true that when we think of "the women of the Commune", it is the figure of Louise Michel who comes most often to mind, sometimes, often even, "forgetting" Elisabeth Dmitrieff. This is not the case in your book, where she occupies an important place, commensurate with her role during the Commune.**

It is true that she is less well known than Louise Michel, and that she remains a name that evokes something, but we do not really know what. However, her name, beyond the feminist struggle, the struggle for women's rights in the heart of the Commune, with the Women's Union, is also associated with self-management. Elisabeth Dmitrieff and her action represent one of the first examples of self-management on this scale.

Dmitrieff influenced the Commune as much as she was the product of it. She was a young Russian immigrant who became completely caught up in Chernychevsky's novel *What is to be done?*. A novel whose heroine emancipates herself from her own milieu, made up of arranged marriages. She draws inspiration from the traditional forms of pooling of goods and production that existed in some localities of the Russian

peasantry, which was known as *obchchina*, and transposes it to workers' cooperatives. Reading this novel inflamed Elisabeth Dmitrieff, who emancipated herself from her milieu, politicized herself, especially alongside political refugees in Switzerland, where she met Marxists, then went to London and met Marx, discussed with him... Kristin Ross talked about all this in *The Imaginary of the Commune*. And when she arrived Marx appreciated her and took her into consideration, to the point of sending her as her emissary to Paris during the Commune, so that she could be his eyes and ears.

After a few days she found herself at the head of the Women's Union, alongside Nathalie Lemel and others, and her first project, which she discussed with Léo Frankel, was to form self-managed workers' cooperatives, where the workers would pay themselves, to make for example fabrics for sandbags for the ramparts or uniforms for the National Guard. So Dmitrieff also represented an experience that was unfortunately also aborted because of the short duration of the Commune.

**How did you choose the different characters Marx encounters in your book? Did you try to fix criteria to give an "overview" or did these characters impose themselves?**

We didn't make a cast list, we did it instinctively, I think. As we do each time we write together, Michael and I shared out the chapters, and then the names imposed themselves, added up together... The question we asked ourselves, because it is the limit of the genre, was the risk of redoing a history of the Commune a little too "from above", with names that we already knew. But what guided us were Marx's writings on the Commune, so we were obliged to follow the thread of the political relations that Marx had, often remotely, at the time, and thus to have him discuss with these personalities.

**So to sum up, a book on the Commune, on Marx's thought, but also a book that is meant to say things about current events?**

The Commune is an ode to emancipation, which crosses time, and a good reminder in the face of all bureaucratic flaws.

It is also a way of resourcing ourselves in internationalism. Because yes, the Commune was born from a popular uprising against the siege, the advance of Bismarck's troops, and the will to win the war. But among the great figures of the Commune, as well as among the anonymous Communards, there were thousands and thousands of exiles, often political, but also economic: Prussian, Italian, Polish, Russian... The Commune was an internationalist act.

And it is also a way of remembering that our political history did not begin with the Russian Revolution of 1917. It has previous roots, and all the debates that irrigated the international workers' movement following the crushing of the Commune, emphasizing in particular what the Communards had failed to do - seizing the Bank of France, marching on Versailles, etc. - make it possible to understand what the political obsessions of the Bolsheviks were. We understand better the famous dance in the snow of Lenin on the day when the Russian revolution had "held" for a day longer, compared to the Commune.

Across time, the Commune is not only

its failures, but a source of living inspiration, the first experience of popular emancipation and power, of the power of the exploited and oppressed, with all its limitations, but which speaks to us across the decades. And we realize that, 150 years later, it is an unresolved matter with the powers that be: the Commune still does not have a good press in the thinking of the ruling class, and we see to what point the attitudes that produced Versailles have not disappeared.

*Interview conducted by Julien Salingue. Published in the **Hebdo l'Anticapitaliste**, issue 560, 18 March 2021.*

## Anti\*Capitalist Resistance (ACR) - a new political regroupment

23 March 2021, by [Dave Kellaway](#)

In January the first of the two planned conferences, organised to found the new group, was held. It adopted documents on the British and international political situations as well as a constitution and statement of aims. All documents are available on the [ACR website](#). Sometime later this year we hope to hold a conference with physical participation (pandemic permitting) to conclude the process.

The journey towards this point began with discussions between some Mutiny and SR comrades on the ideas contained in [William Robinson's](#) books about the connection between neo-liberal capitalism and new forms of fascism. This resulted in a book [Creeping Fascism](#) written by comrades from both organisations. Since then some of the same comrades have written [System Crash](#) which builds on the ideas of the first book.

However the convergence has not come about just because of some agreement on global theoretical analysis but on a number of key political questions such as Brexit, Corbynism, ecosocialism, internal democracy, further regroupment on

the left and internationalism.

In the debate about **Brexit** - whether Britain should leave the European Union - we all stood on the same line of a critical remain vote. We opposed groups like the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) or the Socialist Party (SP) who argued for a progressive Lexit. The latter groups, the largest of those organised completely outside the Labour Party, saw Brexit as an "opportunity for the left". They downplayed the reactionary consequence of the vote, that much of it was inspired by racist attitudes to migrants and a nationalist "little England" ethos. Events have shown their failure to mobilise any sort of progressive Lexit coalition and the further strengthening of a hard right agenda, today firmly entrenched inside Johnson's Conservative party.

Our convergence is taking place amidst the **defeat and disarray of the Corbynist left** inside the Labour Party and the ascendancy of a new moderate leadership under Starmer who is carrying out a undemocratic witch-hunt of the left. We all enthusiastically joined in the Corbyn

movement and we work today inside the Labour Party to defend the gains of Corbynism in terms of policies and those positions currently held by the left. At the same time we have drawn a common balance sheet. We share the idea that it is illusory to think you can build up a left social democratic majority in the party that will seamlessly win the whole party to those positions without there being a significant split. Today we still work with activists inside Labour but without the perspective of a left social democratic government and with a different balance between internal work and building mobilisations outside the Party. Conversations with Labour leftists about building a socialist alternative have changed.

Groups like the SWP and the SP mostly write off the efforts of the left inside Labour and just call on them to leave and join their groups. The ACR thinks this is sectarian and misunderstands the continued structural role of Labour in the overall labour movement as an "alternative" government and as an organisation integrating the trade unions. Our members are active in the defence of

Labour party members “suspended” or expelled by Starmer and participate in important debates on issues like the Green New Deal or Proportional Representation.

Thousands of militants have left the Labour Party, angry with Starmer’s rapid shift to the centre and even further towards the disastrous policies associated with Tony Blair. Setting up a new revolutionary current at this time could help us win over some of these, often younger, activists. How far to work in the local Labour Party entirely depends on how active the local party is and how tightly it is controlled by the right wing.

The strapline to the ACR website masthead is “**fighting disaster capitalism with ecosocialism**”. Unlike most orthodox left groups we openly embrace the term ecosocialist. It underpins our regroupment. Our common analysis is that socialism is not just a question of breaking the capitalist state and having common ownership but is also about a completely different relationship between humanity and nature. The work we do in the leadership of the Zero Covid campaign is informed by our ecosocialist analysis of the causes of the pandemic.

Many of our members have long experience of the British radical left. We have seen how destructive a certain orthodox notion of democratic centralism can have on **developing a lively, rich political culture**.

Combined with a top down command structure often enshrined in the body of one or two “guru” figures this has burnt out and wasted the talents of many good activists. Our alternative to that democratic centralism is **revolutionary democracy**.

From the outset the ACR wants to establish a broad and diverse political debate. We are not afraid of public disagreements between comrades and we do not expect people to defend positions they disagree with. While we will come to majority positions that will be expressed in the political decisions and actions we take, we will not close down debate or push people who are in minority out of the organisation.

Division and fragmentation on the radical left weakens our impact and alienates what is a growing audience for our ideas. We want to **actively pursue further revolutionary regroupment**. Our website, publications and meetings will reflect that approach. We do not see every left current or group as competitors but see many of them as potential components of a future revolutionary group which could have a real mass influence. Having a healthy internal debate where differences are tolerated is essential if we want to further regroup. Women, black and LGBT comrades also have the right to discuss together and play a full role in the group. British left groups have a poor record on their relationship to women running the gamut from leader sexual abuse, rape denial to low

female participation.

**Progress** with ACR so far has been positive. We are on course to have a group nearly twice the membership of Socialist Resistance. Traffic on our website is increasing and fresh articles are published daily. Comrades are active in the leadership of the Zero Covid campaign which has organised zoom meetings with authoritative national and international speakers bringing several hundreds together each time. Internal groupings for trade unionists and women have been set up to organise our work. Public zoom meetings on Palestine, Eco-socialism and Women have drawn a public that is broader, more feminine and younger than SR has done in the recent past. A “critical university” series of political education is now into its second session. Local and regional branches are in the process of being set up.

Socialist Resistance members will be maintaining **membership of the Fourth International** and we hope to win the new organisation as a whole to affiliation in the future. It is not a coincidence that the strong **internationalist** approach of these comrades has brought them together with SR which has always placed internationalism at the heart of its politics. We are learning a lot from our contact with the new comrades and we hope in turn they will see the political importance and practical usefulness of our international current.

## The Netherlands shifts right, again

22 March 2021, by [Alex de Jong](#)

That the pro-business, secular government party VVD (the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy) could once again become the largest party is not just the individual merit of its leader, prime-minister Mark Rutte. Their result of 35 out of 150 seats (a gain of two) mainly shows how effectively Rutte represents their combination of neo-liberal economics and Dutch chest-beating. In a world that is adrift, the VVD and Rutte present “The Netherlands. Ltd” as a

safe investment. At least, as long as it is run by people who know the tricks of the trade. Thus, the VVD profits from both the increasing nationalism and from fear of change in an uncertain time.

According to polls, the centrist liberal party D66 has drawn votes away mainly from the left, growing with four seats to 23. In the first place from it drew votes away from the Green party, GroenLinks (GreenLeft). In the

disastrous result of the left, the almost halving of GroenLinks (from 14 to 8 seats) was the biggest factor. But the social-democratic PvdA and the leftwing SP also lost considerably to D66. D66 is seen as a dam against the rising “populist” tide. D66 party-leader Sigrid Kaag can be grateful to far-right leaders Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders: the threat of their far-right agenda could make D66, a governing party and accomplice of the VVD, appear as an alternative in the

eyes of many progressives. D66 and the firmly millionaire-funded newcomer pro-European Union liberal party Volt won many of the votes that had gone to GroenLinks last time.

In 2017, GroenLinks had had extraordinary success with a campaign that radiated enthusiasm and idealism. GroenLinks leader Jesse Klaver, however, quickly showed that he did not want to be an opposition-leader and that his main aim was to participate in government in cooperation with the right. On issues such as climate and migration, GroenLinks and D66 were virtually indistinguishable, leaving many GroenLinks voters with little reason not to vote for the governing party straight away. Voters who could not resign themselves to this went to Volt for a large part. Presented in a very favourable fashion by important media-outlets, the Dutch branch of Volt Europa entered parliament with three seats.

The PvdA was only able to hold on to its nine seats. Since the 1990s, the PvdA's usual yo-yo movement of left-wing rhetoric in opposition, followed by governing in coalition with the right, disappointment, and electoral punishment, became increasingly extreme. With clever marketing and the argument of "strategic voting", the PvdA was able to recover several times, but in 2017 the string snapped. The PvdA lost 29 seats - the heaviest election defeat in Dutch political history. This year, the strategic vote went to D66. Only the voter base of the Christian-Democratic CDA is older than the PvdA's.

The defeat of the SP was expected. Still, losing five out of 14 seats was a harder blow than many of its activists had counted on. Although comparable in terms in seats, a difference between GroenLinks and SP is that for the latter, its electoral defeat is part of a longer pattern and stagnation and decline. And whereas membership of GroenLinks has increased, that of the SP has been on the decline for roughly a decade. The SP's approach of "social conservative and economic progressive" does not appear to be an electoral success formula. The SP lost voters to D66, GroenLinks, and part of its most radical left wing went to

the anti-capitalist BIJ1 (Dutch pronunciation: Together) On the other side of the spectrum, no less than eight per cent of votes for the far-right Forum voor Democracy (FvD) of Thierry Baudet came from former SP supporters. Ignoring "cultural" issues like anti-racism and the legacy of the Netherlands' colonial past (and imperialist present) in combination with insisting on a willingness to compromise (even with the VVD) is often defended as a means of keeping "angry working people" away from the far right. It does not appear to work.

What it does have an effect on is driving young leftists away. Recently, the SP broke with its youth-wing ROOD - mainly because of the latter's opposition to SP rhetoric about willingness to join coalitions with the right, including VVD. While ROOD is still demanding to be allowed back in the SP, and campaigned for the party, the SP's voter base is now one of the oldest in the country.

The real shift has taken place on the right. The extreme right has never been so big. Its flagship is still Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV). The PVV's priority is an ever radicalizing Islamophobia. This year, the PVV campaigned on a platform that include banning the Koran, closing all mosques, a complete stop of immigration from "Islamic countries", denying voting rights to hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens with double nationality (often Turkish or Moroccan), and establishing a branch of government dedicated to "deislamizing" Dutch society. The PVV lost slightly, going from 20 to seventeen seats, making it the third biggest party. The rise of the far right was especially visible in the north of the country. The far right was already strong in the south, but the North and East were still strongholds of the PvdA. Now these provinces, too, follow the national pattern.

Far-right newcomer Ja21 (a split from Fvd) won three seats. Ja21 in particular profited from benevolent attention in the media, using the same trick that initially made FvD successful by presenting itself as the "decent" far right alternative: without conspiracy theorists and without the "social" demagoguery of the PVV.

The steady growth of the extreme right remains an international phenomenon. Partly because there is so little fundamental opposition from the left, not even in response to the failed corona policy of the past year. The FvD quadrupled its seats, growing to eight. The FvD is at least as far on the right as the PVV. And compared to Wilders, the FvD presents a more coherent far-right ideology, based around white supremacy and social-darwinism. Unlike the PVV, which has no membership organization and is highly dependent on Geert Wilders and his Twitter-account, the FvD is building a party apparatus that quickly gathered tens of thousands of members. The party seemed nearing collapse only a few months when internal messages were leaked that showed cadre-members making explicit anti-Semitic and racist statements. Its recovery and now growth has been remarkable.

FvD leader Thierry Baudet has taken a good look at Geert Wilders' earlier success; it can be electorally rewarding to doggedly defend so-called "unpopular" positions, such as trivialising the epidemic. A large majority of the Dutch population supports measures such as lock-downs and even the curfew. The FvD however successfully rallied a minority that is radically opposed to such measures, often motivated by different combinations of far-right conspiracy theories. The Netherlands has not had so much outright racism and anti-Semitism in its parliament since the war.

According to professional political commentators, the radicalism of PVV and FvD means the two parties have "sidelined themselves" because they will not easily qualify as partners for a new government coalition. For people who do not suffer from a professional narrowing of vision, it is clear that the far right, from the opposition, will continue to put pressure on the VVD, narrow the margins for what is seen as a viable alternative, and thus to influence society as a whole - not just for a cabinet period but for the long term.

The weakness of the left (its worst result in a century) clearly goes deeper than an unfortunate campaign

or misjudgements by individual leaders. The left as a frame of reference for a political identity has lost much of its power. Again, the experts talk of a declining appeal of ideologies as part of the explanation but this is not very convincing. An ideology such as nationalism reigns supreme. And what is the intense attachment, and false hope for, "Europe" (meaning: the European Union) of D66 and now Volt if not ideological? The grand narratives have clearly returned. One of the great mistakes of the Dutch Left in the period leading up to this election was that, while it was already at an all-time low in the polls, it did not prioritize its own narrative, but rather stressed its eagerness to get into government.

In Dutch media there was much to read about how, under pressure from the epidemic and the coming economic crisis, the mood had become more "left-wing" in socio-economic terms. The idea that this time the

right-wing parties, too, were taking "left-wing" positions shows, above all, how little this word means in the Netherlands. A more active role for the state is not necessarily left-wing, and there is little left-wing about doing something about poverty after years of growing inequality, while, for example, KLM and the like are still being prioritized. Hardly any party says anything positive about neoliberalism, but the basic elements of neoliberal policy are still taken for granted. But apart from BIJ1, there is not a parliamentary party in the Netherlands that takes an anti-capitalist position. Even from the SP we hear only vague calls for a "more social policy" and a "fair government". The left should not let centrist liberals like D66 and Volt get away with declaring themselves the social, internationalist, even anti-racist alternative.

The ray of hope is the entry into parliament of BIJ1 with one seat. This party, founded in 2016, combines a commitment to anti-racism with an

anti-capitalism platform. Its leader, Sylvana Simmons, is one the very few Black women in Dutch national politics and will now represent a self-avowed radicalism on the national stage. BIJ1 audience is modest but real, mainly based in the larger cities of the country. In the capital Amsterdam, the only city where was already been present in the city council, its vote doubled. Here BIJ1 was the left-wing opposition to an executive that is a coalition of the three major left-wing parties and D66. The big challenge now is to consolidate the party as a nationally visible opposition force. Such a BIJ1, with an active role in different social movements, will benefit the whole left. For this we need to work together with people who remain in GroenLinks and SP. Unity, especially with the social movements that will have to take a central place in the left-wing resistance in the coming period, will be desperately needed.

*19 March 2021*

## **Bolivia's coup plotters in jail as elections loom**

21 March 2021, by [Patrick Guillaudat](#)

The sentence expected by the Minister of Justice is 30 years in prison because, in addition to these accusations about the organisation of the coup, there is also a demand for justice for the victims of the Senkata and Sacaba massacres perpetrated by the forces of repression with impunity in the first weeks of the coup.

### **Contestation within the MAS**

This judicial firmness was accompanied by a political reorientation defined by the new president as "moderate socialism". The main social measure implemented as soon as he took office was the announcement of the new hunger voucher, aimed at the four million

poorest people in the country. At the same time, in the context of the economic crisis aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be no pause in the exploitation of the subsoil. On the contrary, the exploitation of lithium has been largely relaunched, while investments in the fossil fuel sectors remain the cornerstone of the development model in Bolivia.

In his first speech on the evening of his victory, Luis Arce clearly announced a policy of national reconciliation, which never bodes well. A first indication of this is that he has certainly explained that he will not make any outright cuts in public spending, while acknowledging that he will have to implement austerity measures.

Also, when Luis Arce declares he does "not want to repeat the mistakes of the past", it is not just a simple formula. It corresponds mainly to the emergence of debates within the MAS, debates that were stifled under the presidency of Evo Morales. However, since the latter's exile and despite his aura, the struggle against the Añez government has been led by new MAS figures. In addition to this question of individuals, a twofold debate has really begun over the past year. Firstly, on the place of social movements within the MAS, which raises the question of internal democracy; and also on the political orientation. Back from exile, Morales took over the leadership of the MAS, but things have changed for him.

## The Bolivian people still mobilized

It was in this context that the “sub-national” elections (the name given to the elections of governors, mayors of municipalities and departmental and local authorities) took place on 7 March 2021. As a sign of internal conflicts, the nomination of MAS candidates was sometimes problematic. Eva Copa, a MAS senator who was president of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly during the Añez government, and one of the new MAS personalities to emerge during the putschist interlude, was a candidate for mayor of El Alto, supported by local MAS activists. Morales refused this candidacy, which provoked an

outcry among MAS militants. Excluded from the party, Eva Copa was forced to run under a different name. She was elected in the first round with 68.7% of the votes, with the MAS candidate dropping to 18%. There were similar movements challenging Evo Morales’ leadership in the nomination of candidates in Potosi, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, etc.

Thus, whereas in 2015, in the last similar elections, MAS won hands down, winning six out of nine governors, on the evening of the first round on 7 March 2021, MAS won three departments and is not in a particularly favourable position in three others for the second round on 11 April. It is also worth noting the very high score of the far-right candidate, Luis Fernando Camacho, in the department of Santa Cruz, Bolivia’s economic heartland, who was elected governor with 55.6% of the

vote.

In such a context, the Bolivian people, who have been able to mobilize despite the repression against the Añez government, show that they do not give a blank cheque to anyone. If Arce was elected, it was because he rejected the policies of the Añez government. The MAS therefore has many challenges to face and with the social and health crisis under Covid-19, it is not certain that the population will be satisfied with a policy of renovation and openness that subjects it even more to the world market, whose political representatives have supported the 2019 putsch without any qualms, notably the European Union, the USA and the Organisation of American States (OAS).

15 March 2021

## Violence Against Women in Indonesia Is Systemic and the Government Is Not Doing Enough to Unravel It: Rights Activists

20 March 2021, by [Tara Marchelin](#)

The National Commission for Women’s annual report in 2019 recorded a 14 percent increase in cases of violence against women to a total of 406,178 cases.

“Violence against women is systemic because it occurs repeatedly in a never-ending circle. The government has been neglecting the marginalization and repression of women,” Mutiara Ika, the coordinator of women’s group Perempuan Mahardika, said at the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation headquarters in Jakarta on Thursday.

Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) director Asfinawati said violence against women is a very complex issue in Indonesia because women experience it not only in public but also inside the home.

In the National Commission for

Women’s report, domestic violence is the most reported case at 71 percent.

Asfinawati said violence against women comes in many forms, including physical abuse, psychological violence and sexual violence. The perpetrators, aside from individuals, can also be governmental or non-governmental institutions – cultural, religious and educational.

“It’s systemic violence because it happens multiple times in all sectors and spaces,” Asfinawati said.

Asfinawati also pointed out that violence against women leads to violence against human rights, often in the form of stereotyping and discrimination against women.

“For instance, a patriarchal job market refuses to hire skilled women for high-paying jobs because

employers think women are not capable. In the end, women are segregated into low-paying, menial jobs,” she said.

### Domesticating Bills

Gerak Perempuan also criticizes recent bills that potentially domesticate women even more.

“The job creation omnibus bill and family resilience bill contain clauses that will further domesticate women. If these bills are passed into laws, the government will effectively legitimize violence and discrimination against women. We demand the government abolish these bills,” said Nining Elitos, the chairwoman of the Indonesian Trade Unions Alliance (Kasbi).

Nining said instead of deliberating on the job creation and family resilience bills, lawmakers should use their time to pass the long-awaited elimination of sexual violence bill.

The alliance also demands the government resolve longstanding mass-rape and murder cases from the May 1998 riot [1], when at least 52 Chinese-Indonesian women became

victims of gang rape.

“Those were also the results of systemic violence against women. We have the data on the cases, but the government has never gone ahead with the trial,” Mutiara said.

The alliance also pointed out that the LGBTQ community in recent years is

increasingly becoming the subject of discrimination.

“To commemorate International Women’s Day on March 8, we will march to the Presidential Palace to remind the government they have been neglecting this issue of systemic violence against women,” Mutiara said

Source *Jakarta Globe*.

## Clapham Bandstand: the birth of a new women’s movement?

19 March 2021, by [Collective](#)

They could have stayed away. If the police had done that, it would have been a quiet, dignified, open-air vigil for a murdered woman, allegedly killed by a policeman. It would have been a time to grieve and remember not only Sarah Everard but the many, many more women who die as a result of male violence - and the even greater numbers whose lives are destroyed by physical violence and by coercive control

Across the globe, especially in Latin America, violence against women has been the catalyst over the last few years for a new birth of feminist protests. *Ni una menos* (not one more) has also been echoed in many other parts of the world,

Yesterday thousands of women and some men came to Clapham to pay tribute to Sarah and to reflect.

The police could have remained in the background. If they had done that, the gathering would have taken its course, then slowly dispersed in the cold and darkness of a March evening. But they didn’t.

Clapham Common, especially near the tube station, is packed with people around 6 o’clock. Early on, from a distance, it was hard to tell the vigil from the general crowd in the park. Only later, as numbers built up, reaching several thousand, was it obviously a political protest. But it was an open-air protest, everyone was wearing masks, and people were

taking the trouble to keep their distance.

The bandstand was surrounded by flowers. People had been coming all day to lay them and continued to do so as the vigil gathered. For a long time, it was very quiet, except for the rhythmic beating of an Afro-Caribbean drum.

Then there were some speeches from the bandstand and some chanting, but most couldn’t hear because there was no sound system. Sisters Uncut had stepped in to lead the vigil when the original [#ReclaimTheseStreets](#) organisers had called off this and other events because the police had refused to engage as they easily could have done to authorise a covid safe event. The irony that the trigger for the vigil in the first place was the kidnap and murder of a woman (allegedly) by a police officer seems to be completely lost on them - and they hope in vain that the rest of us somehow missed this important point.

Sisters Uncut were right to call for people to go to Clapham. Collective action is needed - strength from coming together not just being isolated at home - especially for those for whom this is absolutely not a place of safety. So too were women in Nottingham who made it clear their protest would continue and those in many other places who turned out.

### Police snatch squads on the prowl

The police attack on the vigil in Clapham started around 6.30 after the Duchess of Cambridge had her photo op and after the dark had fallen. Let us be clear about what happened. Police first barged their way through the crowd onto the bandstand to stop the speeches and start making arrests. When the crowd hemmed them in and tried to prevent people from being taken away, they sent in more cops. And when there were scuffles, they started using snatch-squads to carry out arrests.

By the end, in addition to dozens of regular police vans, they had blue Tactical Support Group vans on the scene. The police started the confrontation, escalated the confrontation, and eventually deployed hundreds of cops to attack a women’s vigil for a woman (allegedly) murdered by one of their own.

The purpose was clear. They wanted a handful of arrestees for a show trial. The aim will be heavy fines, perhaps even prison sentences, as a way of intimidating women, intimidating everyone, into complying with state bans and giving up their right to protest; as a way of crippling radical movements by threatening to take out leading activists.

The entire movement should now get behind Sisters Uncut in demanding that all charges be dropped. And we should fill the streets with rage if they are not. We should make the Tories pay a massive price if they do not order the police to back down.

It is good to see David Lammy and Labour rethinking their position on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. It is an outrage that they were ever considering abstaining on a piece of legislation that would criminalise any form of collective protest over any injustice. It's also an important step forward that Lammy does talk about violence against women in the family - where the majority of these crimes take place - but this merits a much wider debate about the structures that reinforce and promote this violence in every sphere of women's lives from cradle to grave.

Back in Clapham, by the end, the police attack had transformed a vigil for a murdered woman into a militant protest against state violence. For that is what it was: heavily armed thugs, operating as a paramilitary force, manoeuvring in phalanxes, to attack an embryonic radical movement of young women.

By the end, there were thousands of women chanting anti-police slogans

and giving clenched fist salutes: 'Police stand down', 'You do not protect us', 'This is a vigil: we do not need your services', 'Arrest your own', 'You are the problem' 'Shame on you'

Calls rang out on the common and subsequently for the resignation of Cressida Dick - and to a lesser extent Priti Patel. [1] For those of us already mobilising, that Dick and Patel have acted in this way is no surprise. It was Cressida Dick that ordered the execution of Jean Charles de Menezes in Stockwell in 2005 - only a minute's walk away. [2] Priti Patel has said that her intention is to give the police greater powers to prevent and shut down non-violent protests.

Black communities have a long and bitter experience of brutal, murderous policing which is why the calls to defund the police rang out on this side of the Atlantic as well as in the USA during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. There is no question that the police behaviour on Clapham Common last night is a preview of greater state violence to come.

There will be a debate over the weeks and months ahead about how we should respond to male violence against women. It should be and must be a space to open up discussion and exchange about why it is systemic and corrosive - and why increased police

powers will criminalise women - especially the most marginalised - rather than 'protect' them.

Let us hope that this is indeed the birth of a new women's movement - angry, militant, radical, led by women, fighting not just male violence and misogyny, but the system that devalues women - literally and figuratively from the moment of birth until the day of death. We echo the calls of rage from women across the globe -and the demands to empower women and to educate men. Until we do not have to hold another vigil for a murdered woman, until we do not have to mourn another sister whose life has been restricted and subjected to violence, both from our patriarchal and capitalist society and from the state that supports it. Not one more.

15 March 2021

Source : [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#).

## Footnotes

[1] Cressida Dick is Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Priti Patel is Home Secretary.

[2] *The Conversation*, 21 July 2015 "The catalogue of errors that killed Jean Charles de Menezes".

# The Paris Commune of 1871

18 March 2021, by [Michael Löwy](#)

## 1. The tradition of the oppressed

There is a wall at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, known as "Le Mur des Fédérés". It was there that the last fighters of the Paris Commune were shot in May 1871, by Versailles troops. Every year, thousands - and sometimes, as in 1971, tens of thousands - of French people, but also people from all over the world, visit this exalted place of memory of the labour movement. They come alone or in demonstrations, with red flags or flowers, and sometimes sing an old love song, which became the song of the Communards: "Le Temps des

Cerises". We do not pay homage to a man, a hero or a great thinker, but to a crowd of anonymous people who we refuse to forget.

As Walter Benjamin said in his theses "On the Concept of History" (1940), the struggle for emancipation is waged not only in the name of the future but also in the name of the defeated generations; the memory of enslaved ancestors and their struggles is one of the great sources of moral and political inspiration for revolutionary thought and action. The Paris Commune is therefore part of what Benjamin calls "the tradition of

the oppressed", that is to say, of those privileged ("messianic") moments in history when the lower classes have succeeded, for a while, in breaking the continuity of history, the continuity of oppression; short - too short - periods of freedom, emancipation and justice which will, each time, serve as benchmarks and examples for new battles. Since 1871 it has continued to nourish the reflection and practice of revolutionaries, starting with Marx himself - as well as Bakunin - and then, in the twentieth century, Trotsky and Lenin.

## 2/ Marx and the 1871 Commune

Despite their disagreements within the First International, Marxists and libertarians worked together fraternally in support of the Paris Commune, that first great attempt at "proletarian power" in modern history. Certainly, the respective analyses of Marx and Bakunin on this revolutionary event were poles apart. We can summarize the theses of the first in the following terms: "The small group of convinced socialists who participated in the Commune were in a very difficult position.... They had to set up a revolutionary government and army against the government and army of Versailles." Faced with this reading of the civil war in France, which opposes two governments and two armies, the anti-state point of view of the second was quite explicit: "The Paris Commune was a revolution against the **state** itself, this supernatural runt of society."

Attentive and informed readers will have made the correction for themselves: the first opinion is that of ... Bakunin in his essay "The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State". While the second is a quote from ... Marx, in his first version of "The Civil War in France, 1871". We have purposely muddied the waters, to show that the differences - admittedly very real - between Marx and Bakunin, Marxists and libertarians, are not as simple and obvious as is thought.

Moreover, Marx rejoiced in the fact that, during the events of the Commune, the Proudhonians forgot their master's theses, while certain libertarians observed with pleasure that Marx's writings on the Commune abandoned centralism in favour of federalism.

Marx had proposed, as the central political slogan of the International Workingmen's Association - the First International - this formula which he inscribed in the Inaugural Address of the IWA in 1864: "The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". If the Commune of 1871 was so important in his eyes, it is precisely because it was the first revolutionary manifestation of this founding principle of the modern working class and socialist movement.

The Commune, Marx wrote in the Address in the name of the First International in 1871, "The Civil War in France" (and in the preparatory notices), was not the regime of a party or of a group, but "essentially the *government of the working class*", a "government of the people by the people", that is to say, "the taking back by the people and for the people of their own social vocation". For that, it was not enough to "conquer" the existing state apparatus: it was necessary to "break" it and replace it by another form of political power, as the Communards did, from their first decree - the abolition of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people. Here is what Marx wrote in a letter to his friend Kugelmann on 17 April, 1871, thus during the first weeks of the Commune: "If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it, and this is essential for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting" [1]

What seemed to Marx to be decisive was not only the social legislation of the Commune - certain measures of which, such as the transformation of factories abandoned by their owners into workers' cooperatives, had a socialist dynamic - but above all its political significance as *workers' power*. As he wrote in the Address of 1871, "this new Commune, which breaks the power of the modern state" was the work of "plain working men" who "for the first time dared to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their 'natural superiors'". [2]

The Commune was neither a conspiracy nor a sudden surprise attack, it was "the people acting for themselves and by themselves". The correspondent of the *Daily News* newspaper found there was no leader exercising "supreme authority", which calls for an ironic comment from Marx: "It shocks the bourgeois who has an immense need for political idols and 'great men'".

While activists from the First International played an important role in the events, the Commune cannot be explained by the intervention of a vanguard group. In response to the calumnies of reaction, which presented the uprising as a conspiracy hatched by the IWA, Marx wrote: "The police-tinged bourgeois mind naturally figures to itself the International Working Men's Association as acting in the manner of a secret conspiracy, its central body ordering, from time to time, explosions in different countries. Our Association is, in fact, nothing but the international bond between the most advanced working men in the various countries of the civilized world. Wherever, in whatever shape, and under whatever conditions the class struggle obtains any consistency, it is but natural that members of our Association, should stand in the foreground." [3]

If Marx speaks sometimes of workers and sometimes of "people", it is because he was aware that the Commune was not only the work of the proletarian class in the strict sense, but also of sectors of the impoverished middle classes, intellectuals, women from various social strata, students and soldiers, all united around the red flag and the dream of a social republic. Not to mention the peasants, absent from the movement, but without whose support the uprising in Paris could only fail.

Another aspect of the Commune that Marx insists on is its internationalist character. Certainly, the people of Paris rose up in 1871 against the capitulating bourgeois politicians who reconciled with Bismarck and the Prussian army. But this national leap in no way took a nationalist form; not only because of the role of the militants of the French section of the First International, but also because the Commune appealed to combatants from all nations. The solidarity of the International Workingmen's Association, and the meetings in support of the Commune held in Breslau and other German cities, at the initiative of socialist workers, are the expression of this internationalist significance of the uprising of the Parisian people. As Marx wrote in a resolution adopted by a meeting to celebrate the anniversary of the

Commune in March 1872, the Communards were "the heroic vanguard ... of the menacing army of the universal proletariat".

There exists, according to Walter Benjamin in his Theses of 1940, a unique constellation between a present moment in the struggle of the oppressed, and a precise event of the past, a unique image of this past which risks disappearing if it is not recognized. This is what happened during the Russian Revolution of 1905. Only Leon Trotsky saw the constellation between the Commune of 1871 and the struggle of the Russian Soviets in 1905: in his preface, written in December 1905, to the Russian edition of Marx's writings on the Commune, he observes that the example of 1871 shows that "it is possible for the workers to come to power in an economically backward country sooner than in an advanced country". However, once in power, Russian workers will be led, like those in the Commune, to take measures which combine the liquidation of absolutism with the socialist revolution.

In 1905-1906, Trotsky was quite isolated in the defence of the 1871 model for the Russian revolution. Even Lenin, despite his criticisms of the Menshevik tactics of supporting the anti-Tsarist bourgeoisie, refused to regard the Commune as an example for the workers' movement in Russia. In his 1905 work, "Two Tactics of Social Democracy", he criticized the Paris Commune for having confused the aims of the struggle for the republic with those of the struggle for socialism; for this reason, it was a form of government which would not resemble that of the future Russian revolutionary democratic government.

Things would turn out quite differently in 1917. From the April Theses, Lenin took the Paris Commune as a model for the Republic of Soviets which he proposed as a goal for the Russian revolutionaries, *precisely because it had effected the dialectical fusion* between the struggle for a democratic republic and the struggle for socialism. This idea would also be broadly developed in State and Revolution and all Lenin's other writings during the year 1917. The

identification with the Communards was so strong that, according to contemporary accounts, Lenin had proudly celebrated the day when - just a few months after October 1917 - the power of the Soviets had succeeded in holding out one day more than the Commune of 1871.

The October revolution is therefore a striking example of this idea proposed by Walter Benjamin in his Theses: any genuine revolution is not only a leap towards the future, but also "a tiger leap into the past", a dialectical leap towards a moment in the past laden with "present time" (*Jetztzeit*). Like Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky criticized certain political or strategic errors of the Commune: for example, not taking the money from the Bank of France, not attacking Versailles, waiting for the enemy in the barricades of each neighbourhood. Nonetheless, they recognized in this event an unprecedented moment in modern history, the first attempt to "storm the heavens", the first experience of social and political emancipation of the oppressed classes.

### **3/ The relevance of the Paris Commune in the 21st century**

Each generation has its own reading, its own interpretation of the Commune of 1871, according to its historical experience, the needs of its present struggle, the aspirations and utopias which motivate it. What would its relevance be today, from the point of view of the radical left and the social and political movements of the early 21st century, from the Zapatistas of Chiapas to the "movement of movements", the global justice movement?

Of course, the vast majority of militants and activists today know little about the Commune. There are nonetheless some affinities and resonances between the experience of the Parisian spring of 1871 and the struggles of today that deserve to be highlighted:

a) The Commune was a movement of **self-emancipation, self-organization and initiative from below**. No party tried to take the place of the popular classes, no vanguard wanted to "take power" in

place of the workers. The militants of the French section of the First International were among the most active supporters of the popular uprising, but they never wanted to set themselves up as the self-proclaimed "leadership" of the movement, they never attempted to monopolize power, or marginalize other political currents. The representatives of the Commune were democratically elected in the neighbourhoods and subjected to the permanent control of their popular base.

b) In other words: the Commune of 1871 was a **pluralist and unitary movement**, in which the partisans of Proudhon or (more rarely) of Marx, libertarians and Jacobins, Blanquists and "social republicans" all participated. Of course, there were debates and differences, sometimes even political clashes in the democratically elected bodies of the Commune. But in practice they acted in common, respected each other, focused their fire on the enemy and not on the comrade in struggle with whom they may have had disagreements. The ideological dogmas of each mattered less than the common objectives: social emancipation, the abolition of class privileges. As Marx himself acknowledged, the Jacobins forgot their authoritarian centralism, and the Proudhonians their "anti-political" principles.

c) As we saw above, it was an **authentically internationalist movement**, with the participation of fighters from several countries. The Commune elected a Polish revolutionary (Dombrowicz) to the leadership of its militia; a Hungarian-German worker (Leo Frankel) was commissar of labour. Of course, resistance to the Prussian occupation played a decisive role in triggering the Commune, but the appeal of the French insurgents to the people and to German social democracy, inspired by the utopia of the "United States of Europe" testifies to this internationalist consciousness.

d) Despite the weight of patriarchy in popular culture, the Commune was distinguished by the active and combative participation of women. The libertarian activist Louise Michel

and the Russian revolutionary Elisabeth Dmitrieff are among the best known, but thousands of other women - designated with rage and hatred as "pétroléuses" by the Versailles reactionaries - took part in the fighting of April-May 1871. On 13 April, the citizens' delegates sent to the Executive Committee of the Commune an address which stated the will of many women to participate in the defence of Paris, considering that: "The Commune, representative of the great principle proclaiming the annihilation of all privileges, of all inequalities, at the same time is committed to take into account the just demands of the entire population, without distinction of sex - a distinction created and maintained by the need for antagonism on which the privileges of the dominant classes rests". The appeal was signed by the delegates, members of the Central

Committee of Women Citizens: Adélaïde Valentin, Noémie Colleville, Marcand, Sophie Graix, Joséphine Pratt, Céline Delvainquier, Aimée Delvainquier, Elisabeth Dmitrieff.

e) Without having a precise socialist programme, the social measures of the Commune - for example, the handing over to the workers of factories abandoned by their bosses - had a radical anti-capitalist dynamic.

It is evident that the characteristics of the popular uprisings of our time - for example, the Zapatista uprising of 1994, that of the people of Buenos Aires in 2001, that which defeated the anti-Chavez coup attempt in Venezuela in 2002, or that against the villainous President Pinera in Chile in 2019 - to mention just a few recent examples from Latin America, are very different from those of the insurgent

Paris of 1871. But many aspects of this first attempt at social emancipation of the oppressed retain an astonishing relevance and should be reflected on by the new generations. Without the memory of the past and its struggles there will be no fight for the utopia of the future.

## Footnotes

[1] [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_04\\_12.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_04_12.htm)

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>

[3] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch06.htm>

# Lula's convictions quashed,- a bolt in Brazil's not-so-blue sky

17 March 2021, by João Machado, Tárzia Medeiros

Lula was not declared innocent; Fachin ruled that the cases be restarted in the Brasilia Circuit Court (Federal District). On the other hand, Lula recovered his political rights and, if Fachin's decision is not reversed by the full STF, and if there are no new convictions from the Federal District court (there would hardly be time for this), he could be a candidate for President of the Republic in 2022.

The decision by Fachin, one of the members of the Supreme Court most identified with *Operation Lava Jato*, caused general surprise, although the argument that the cases should not have been tried in Curitiba is undoubtedly correct, and hardly questionable from a legal point of view. [1] Lula's lawyers had already argued this point several times. The group of Operation Lava Jato prosecutors and former judge Moro had manoeuvred to expand the scope of their "crusade against corruption", at a time when they enjoyed great support from the media and "public

opinion".

Once the initial surprise at Fachin's decision had passed, it was soon understood that it had not been directed against *Operation Lava Jato*. In fact, it aimed to preserve as much as possible the convictions obtained by it and its supposed legacy. With Sergio Moro's actions annulled, the judge ruled that another lawsuit brought by lawyers of the former president would not proceed; this argued that the former judge himself was suspect, that is, that Sergio Moro had acted deliberately to condemn Lula, without the impartiality that judges are supposed to have. The annulment due to the court's lack of jurisdiction was judged to be much less demoralizing for *Operation Lava Jato* than an annulment due to the judge's suspect behaviour.

For critics, the bias in the cases against Lula has always seemed clear, and it became evident to more people when, in late 2018, Moro resigned

from his career as a judge to take over the Ministry of Justice in the Bolsonaro government.

To make matters worse for Moro and the Lava Jato prosecutors, starting in June 2019 hacked messages from their conversations on the Telegram app began to be leaked in the press (by the website "The Intercept Brasil"). Since December more messages have been leaked. Moro and the prosecutors never claimed that the messages were fake, but said they had no way to prove their veracity, and insisted that they had been obtained illegally. However, they are not only true, they also show Moro's extreme partiality and even the criminal nature of his and the prosecutors' actions.

In the end, the rupture between Bolsonaro and Moro and the latter's departure from the ministry in April 2020 split the "Lava Jato" right wing. The Attorney General (appointed by the president) began to act against the Lava Jato. Moro, while still

maintaining significant popular prestige, was greatly weakened. All this made it likely that his "suspect" status would be endorsed by the STF.

Fachin tried to "relinquish the rings in order not to lose the fingers", but was unsuccessful. Other Supreme Court justices decided to restart the judgement on Moro's suspect status the very next day, 9 March. Two of them read their vote in favour of the suspect status, and went further: they stated that there was collusion between the former judge and the prosecution, a criminal act on their part, and that Operation Lava Jato had been "the biggest judicial scandal in the country's history". This trial is not over, and has no date yet set for its conclusion.

## **The political impact of the quashing of Lula's convictions**

Whatever Fachin's motives, from a legal point of view he was correct to overturn Lula's convictions. And the political impact has been huge.

It is important to remember that Lula was a candidate for President of the Republic when he was convicted and imprisoned, and was leading the polls. Without him being prevented from contesting the elections, it is unlikely that Bolsonaro would have been elected. Now, everything indicates that Lula will run for president in 2022. Although he did not say as much, it was in this role, as a likely candidate, that Lula made his speech and answered questions from journalists on 10 March, with massive media coverage.

Lula was able to make it seem that his innocence had been recognised by the courts, even though the quashing of his convictions does not imply that, and not even the Justices of the STF who voted for the suspect status of former judge Sergio Moro dealt with this question. They simply said that Lula has the right to a fair trial.

All the media reported that Lula gave an inspired speech and, above all, that

he showed he was in a different league to Bolsonaro, especially on the ever more important issue of the fight against the pandemic, with the great worsening of Covid 19 in recent weeks in the country. Lula paid tribute to the victims, defended the need for physical distancing measures, the use of masks and the acceleration of vaccination. He criticised Bolsonaro for being wrong on all these issues. Besides this, he said that Bolsonaro does not have a vision for the country, nor a government programme, and expressed in general lines his own project - he defended his governments (he did not mention Dilma Rousseff), criticised total submission to the market (and at the same time said that the "market" does not need to be afraid of him) and repeated things that had characterised his government, in his view: defending workers, but talking to all sectors in the country and seeking an understanding between them, promoting the alliance of capital with labour etc., and seeking economic "development". He criticised Bolsonaro for encouraging people to carry guns, and emphasised it was the police and the Armed Forces that needed to be better armed.

The contrast with Bolsonaro and his genocidal, ultraliberal and anti-people policies was enormous. But Lula also retained all the limitations of his previous positions: he showed no understanding of the environmental collapse and the ongoing socio-environmental conflicts, he showed confidence in the development of a peripheral capitalism like Brazil's, and he did not mention the incarceration and massacre of the poor, black population that has intensified in recent years but already existed under his governments. Although he was very critical of Bolsonaro, he implied that the only way to remove him from government is to wait for the 2022 elections, inviting the left to wait passively in the face of the economic and health disaster that has become entrenched in the country in 2021. These shortcomings merely add to the reassertion of his class conciliation approach mentioned above.

All the media have emphasised that Lula has emerged as the candidate best placed to face Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections. What's more,

Bolsonaro has once again been losing popularity since the end of 2020 - he is "at the worst moment of his government" - although he retains the support of almost 30% of the population. Despite being rejected by the majority, he still looks like someone who will get into the second round of the elections.

The fact that Lula could be a candidate weakens the government further, and represents a positive change in the balance of forces, against the extreme right and in favour of the popular sectors. Some bourgeois representatives are beginning to take positions saying they may support Lula, and allies of the government are putting pressure on Bolsonaro to make changes, especially in his disastrous management of the pandemic. Bolsonaro himself has shown many signs that he has felt the blow.

The repositioning of Lula also has an impact on the left as a whole, including those who, like the PSOL, were in opposition to his government.

Everything indicates that the trend of recent years - the decline of the PT (while remaining in a broad sense the largest party of the left) and the relative strengthening of the PSOL - will be reversed, at least in the short term. The PT has gained a new vigour. In addition to this, the PSOL is now under pressure to join a front with the PT from the first round of the 2022 elections. Although this question is not yet being openly debated in the PSOL, it is certain that support for Lula already has its advocates there (even with declarations to the press in this sense).

A front around Lula's candidacy would not be a "left front" - Lula is clearly seeking support amongst the bourgeois parties least linked to Bolsonaro - and certainly not a front among the working class and oppressed sectors of society. That is why it would be a very bad mistake for the PSOL to embrace this perspective. It would imply losing much of what the party has gained as a left-wing force critical of class conciliation, and which it has developed, despite many difficulties, since its foundation.

Certainly the defeat of Bolsonaro is a paramount objective in the next elections (if it is not possible to end his government before then, which is a struggle that should not be abandoned). In spite of all the well-known problems, a new Lula government, even if it would not be a coherent alternative to the right-wing offensive and the attacks that the popular sectors have suffered, would be a huge relief after the horrors of Bolsonaro. But the election is in two rounds, and Lula, barring some major turnaround, will surely get through to the second. Therefore, it is important and decisive for the PSOL, as a party project of the Brazilian socialist left, to present its own candidacy in the first round of the 2022 presidential elections, and to discuss support for an anti-Bolsonaro candidate if the party does not reach the second round. This could also be essential to ensure the survival and maintenance of the PSOL's institutional spaces in the Brazilian national parliament.

The situation in Brazil has changed a lot with the quashing of Lula's convictions. The right has been

weakened, while the PT has become much stronger. The judicial coup that was crucial for the election of Bolsonaro is being defeated. Obviously, this is to be welcomed by the socialist left. On the other hand, this left is also coming under increased pressure; it needs even more political coherence to uphold its socialist project.

15 March 2021

## Footnotes

[1] Operation Lava Jato was a vast, sprawling corruption investigation carried out by the Federal Police, that rocked Brazil's political establishment between 2014 and 2018, although it was only formally wound up in February 2021. It saw over a thousand search and arrest warrants issued and led to over a hundred convictions, of senior politicians from all the main parties, former presidents, ministers, governors and some of

the country's richest businessmen. The investigation first centred on the embezzlement of funds from the state-controlled oil company, Petrobras, to pay bribes to politicians and other businessmen. It later spread to implicate Brazil's biggest construction companies, the 2016 Olympics and a dozen other countries. It was led by investigating judge, Sergio Moro and his team based in the city of Curitiba. It drew its name from a car wash ("lava jato") used to channel some of the funds. Former president, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, of the Workers Party (PT) was convicted in two cases that had only an indirect connection with the main Lava Jato investigation. He was accused of receiving favours from construction companies in exchange for helping them with contracts. The evidence was flimsy. He flatly denied the charges and argued, as did his supporters, that the Lava Jato investigation was being manipulated to prevent him running again for president.

# The Belarusian Revolution: Lessons, Perspectives and Tactics of the Radical Left

16 March 2021, by [Pavel Katarzheuski](#)

In 1994, the social class contradictions between the bureaucracy, the nascent bourgeoisie and the working class resulted in the arrival in power of the populist politician Alexander Lukashenko. The bureaucracy did not want to part with its privileges, the bourgeoisie was not strong enough at the time, and both the old and the new masters of life feared that the working class would be disappointed not only by Stalinism, but also by capitalism, and that it would demand the restoration of the social guarantees that had existed during the Soviet period.

## Emergence of authoritarianism

These fears were well founded, as the workers had built their independent mass organizations and had considerable experience in the fight against the Soviet bureaucracy. As a result, the bureaucracy and the bourgeoisie were forced to make an agreement and call on the dictator to protect their money and power. The regime established in Belarus can be described as a "post-Soviet Bonapartism", which attempts to manoeuvre between all social groups and to remain outside the framework of a defined ideology.

The first thing Lukashenko did was extend his presidential powers through what he called a referendum. As a result, the democratically elected unicameral parliament was destroyed, the judiciary and legislative powers were subordinated to the executive, the most massive trade union organizations were subjugated by repression and political opposition was ousted from the public space.

The bureaucracy retained its influence, the bourgeoisie was forced to tolerate its protector, and the working class was pacified thanks to generous Russian loans. To some extent, this has maintained some stability, and some Stalinist and post-Stalinist parties in Russia, Ukraine and even Europe have considered and

continue to consider this regime as “socialist”.

## The causes of the political revolution

In May 2020, a huge protest mobilization began in Belarus. The country, which seemed to be in perpetual political winter, was emerging from its latent political life. The majority of liberal analysts and “left-wing” reformers predicted that the elections would take place without significant demonstrations. However, from the time of the collection of signatures for the nomination of candidates, people began turning the pickets into protests; queues of several kilometres formed in Minsk and other cities to give signatures in favour of independent candidates. The specificity of these elections lay also in the fact that the “old” opposition was not ready to face them and that new faces appeared on the political scene, some of whom were previously close to the establishment (former banker Viktor Babariko and ex-diplomat Valery Tsepkalo). The regime, seeing that the masses were joining the protest, did not accept the most popular candidates and imprisoned some of them. Lukashenko’s patriarchal stupidity played a cruel trick on him. The Central Election Commission was ordered tacitly not to prevent the registration of presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the wife of an opposition blogger himself imprisoned because of his intention to become a candidate.

Protest actions in Belarus have traditionally taken place on election day or over a few days afterwards. This time, almost any statement or action by Lukashenko against the opposition became a catalyst for street actions.

In August, at the end of election day, people took to the streets and demanded a fair count of the votes. The police used violence and torture, the first deaths took place. On August 15, as the working class joined the fight and a national strike was called, the regime was forced to release those detained during the protests.

All these events bear witness to the profound contradictions that have accumulated during the existence of the dictatorship in Belarus. But what caused the uprising of the masses?

Most Liberal analysts and reformers predicted that the election would go smoothly. When the political revolution moved from the state of being a spectre to become a reality, they cited the regime’s position concerning Covid, the odious violations of electoral law and repression as causes of the uprising. The only problem is that repression and the increase in electoral falsifications are a consequence, not a cause. Of course, many Belarusians sided with the protesters when they saw the torture, the blood and the murders committed by the police. However, these factors were the last to transform quantitative changes into qualitative changes; the revolutionary explosion was prepared by the entire history of Belarus during Lukashenko’s years of power.

The dictatorship claimed to be “socially oriented” and used the rhetoric of Soviet nostalgia, but it combined an authoritarian political regime with a neoliberal economic policy. Under Lukashenko’s tenure, allowances for students, pensioners, liquidators of the Chernobyl accident and other socially vulnerable groups were destroyed. In addition, most workers have had their employment contracts converted to limited-time contracts, which prevent a worker from leaving his or her job without the employer’s consent for the duration of the contract and allow the employer to get rid of the worker at any time. The progressive tax scale has also been abolished and, in 2017, the regime attempted to introduce a tax on the unemployed in order to force people to tolerate even the lowest paid jobs and appalling working conditions. In the meantime, democratic rights have been completely destroyed and independent trade unions have been ousted from workplaces. In place of independent workers’ organizations, “unions” entirely controlled by the government were set up to monitor workers, reminiscent of the “Workers’ Front” of Nazi Germany. All these factors have ended up causing what we call a political revolution.

## Has the wave of protest subsided?

Unfortunately, the national strike announced for 18 August failed, and the rallies in Minsk and other cities, which brought together hundreds of thousands of people, had no visible result.

The left guardians of the regime and the “constructive critics” of the left claim that the national strike failed because the working class did not support the “bad” protest. But this approach is totally abusive. If we followed this logic, then at the very top of the revolutionary wave, whose potential was sufficient for the following several months, the workers realized in one day that the protest was not in their interest. The main reason for the defeat of the strikes was the absence of independent unions in workplaces for two and a half decades. In fact, over the years of the dictatorship, independent trade unions have become political clubs for veterans of the trade union movement and for activists. Thus, when the August uprising opened a window of opportunity, unions had to relearn the functions they were supposed to perform. It should be noted that for a long time workers were also deprived of political representation and the school of political struggle, because all the left-wing parties, from the oppositional communists to the social democrats, were ousted from the public space and worked in a mode of survival and maintenance of their own existence.

The tactics of the liberals, who did not let the people win when they were ready to do so, were not a negligible factor. Their first mistake was that at the height of the proletariat’s protest, there was not a single worker on the coordinating council! Then, when it was too late, a union activist was included as a decoration. The second problem was that mediatized opposition leaders, even before election day, declared that there was a possibility of compromise with the dictator, giving Lukashenko the opportunity to participate in new democratic elections and maintaining the bureaucratic clique in power for a

transitional period in the event of the fall of the regime. Now imagine a revolutionary worker who is willing to sacrifice his job, the safety of his family, his life and his health, who hears about a possible compromise with those who killed and maimed the protesters.

Due to the lack of a clear plan, the negligence of the strike committees and the monstrous repression, the actions mobilized fewer and fewer people. In November, there was the barbaric murder of Raman Bandarenko, one of the protesters, who had simply asked the police not to destroy the symbols of the protest in the courtyard of his building. But even this terrible incident did not change much as to the number and radicalism of the demonstrators, exhausted by prison, searches, arrests and torture for several months.

Today, street actions are very local and carried out by people in their own backyards, and are sometimes reduced to the distribution of protest symbols in dormitory neighbourhoods. Every day, there are searches and arrests of trade unionists, human rights activists, journalists, and even a simple passer-by can end up in jail for wearing the "wrong" colour or a photo taken from posters on social media.

However, this temporary defeat was not in vain. It gave people the experience of the struggle, without which victory would simply be impossible in the future. The general mood among opponents of the regime is one of waiting for a "hot spring". It is based on facts, since the structures created by the protesters during the months of struggle - the "neighbourhood committees", the strike teams in factories, the cells of independent trade unions in factories

and universities - have been preserved. Even the head of the Belarusian KGB had to admit that the authorities were preparing to suppress the spring protests. The very fact of the escalation of repression shows that Lukashenko's throne is not as solid as it used to be.

## The demands of the left-wing forces

Our left-wing Belarusian party "A Just World" assesses what is happening in the country as a democratic revolution, which is in line with the party's programme. The party also considers that it is necessary to supplement democratic demands with transitional social demands: the restoration of the progressive tax scale, the reduction of the working day to 7 hours without a reduction in wages, total freedom to create independent trade unions, the abolition of all anti-worker laws and the restoration of the social benefits and guarantees that have been destroyed by the regime. The party also believes that the democratic revolution in Belarus not only can, but must, be transformed into a social revolution.

Unfortunately, an important point is missing from our party's programme, namely the convening of a transitional body made up of representatives of the various working-class groups, because that is the demand that should open the road from the present democratic demands to socialist demands. However, I am convinced that it is only a matter of time and that the development of the political process will push the entire left-wing opposition to adopt this demand if the

mobilization of the protesters reaches the previous level.

The Democratic Left Forum, held on 7 February 2021, was also positive. In this forum participated: the largest of the three social democratic parties (Gromada - Assembly), the Green Party, the "A Just World" party and the free trade union of metalworkers, whose leadership defends socialist positions. This is entirely consistent with the position of building a united front of the left instead of a "united front of all democrats." Following Trotsky, I want to reiterate that temporary alliances with bourgeois organizations can only be made for practical purposes, such as organizing demonstrations or generating protest agitation, but without common programmes and without refusing to criticize temporary allies.

After all, there is only one sure path for the radical left: to prepare for a new protest mobilization and to fight to preserve its parties, trade unions and the self-organizing bodies of popular power. The radical left must lead the democratic programme to a victorious end on its own. Those who rely on the dichotomy - Tihanovsky (or any other liberal who could take her place) or Lukashenko - take a fundamentally erroneous position and deny the political subjectivity of the working class and other oppressed groups. The answer can only be participation in the democratic movement - without becoming involved in a monolithic merger with the leadership of the liberal opposition - and the defence of the demands of the demonstrators which lead to the dismantling of the dictatorship and which at the same time go beyond bourgeois democracy.

*Minsk, 9 March 2021*

## The shipwreck of the Central African Republic...

15 March 2021, by [Paul Martial](#)

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a Central African state without access

to the sea, with an estimated population of 4,500,000 inhabitants .

It is surrounded by Cameroon to the west, Chad to the northwest, Sudan to

the northeast, South Sudan to the east, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the southeast and the Republic of the Congo to the south. Agriculture represents 50% of GDP: the CAR also has many natural resources, in particular uranium, gold, diamonds and oil, which are coveted by foreign capital.

## French interference

The country has become the playground for armed militias and President Touadera has difficulty in establishing his authority over the capital, Bangui. His contested re-election to the presidency of the Republic last January pushed him towards an authoritarian policy. At the same time, he is forging new diplomatic and military alliances .

Perhaps more than elsewhere, the presence of France has been, until recently, one of the most important. In fact, French military and diplomatic authorities have sometimes directly managed the country, which has been supposed to be independent since 1960. Thus, in the 1980s, it was Colonel Jean-Claude Manton , of the DGSE (French overseas intelligence service) who welcomed African presidents on the tarmac of Bangui airport, in place of the Central African president [1].

The unwavering support of French governments for dictators has never been lacking. The French authorities spent their time installing them and sometimes dismissing them, as they did with Bokassa. As long as the latter remained within the framework circumscribed by French diplomacy, all his escapades were permitted. The Quai d'Orsay closed its eyes to the massacres, imprisonment and torture of opponents. But when he tried to initiate a rapprochement with Gaddafi by offering him the Bouar military base, he was kicked out (in 1979). [2]

## Political instability

Recurrent instability has marked the political life of the CAR. In 2012, a motley alliance made up of Central

Africans, Chadians and Sudanese, unofficially supported by the Chadian authorities, formed the Seleka coalition, headed by Michel Djotodia . In March 2013 it seized power after fierce battles.

François Bozizé , President of the Central African Republic, who had himself seized power in a coup in 2003, tried to resist with the help of a detachment of the South African army. Its presence may seem surprising. but it is easily explained. The Central African Republic is a leading diamond producer and South Africa has a significant diamond industry, including in particular the De Beers conglomerate. In exchange for military support, Bozizé reportedly promised then South African leader Jacob Zuma mining concessions. In addition, Zuma was keen to portray South Africa as a regional power. Occupying land traditionally within the remit of France's backyard allowed him to display an anti-imperialist policy at low cost.

But this detachment of the South African army was surprised and quickly overwhelmed by the violence and the relentlessness of the fighters of the Seleka, composed largely of mercenaries with years of war behind them, especially in Sudan.

Bozizé's mistake was to oppose Chadian President Idriss Déby over the management of oil fields in the Vakaga region, on the border between the two countries. By giving a Chinese company the operating license on the Gordil and Boromata sites , he triggered reprisals from the Chadian government.

Once in power, members of the Seleka ransacked the capital. Looting, accompanied by violence. lasted for weeks, relatively sparing the Muslim shopping district of PK5 - most of whose traders were members of the Muslim Seleka .

In response, self-defence groups called the anti-balaka organized themselves in Bangui and then across the country. On both sides, militias attacked populations, identifying Christians with anti-balaka militias, and Muslims with Seleka. The meritorious efforts of religious leaders

to try to defuse this outbreak of civil war were in vain.

The French army intervened in December 2013 under a UN mandate with, at the beginning, a most questionable strategy. It consisted of unilateral disarmament of the militias, promoting violence on the other side. The African Union deployed troops from several countries, which came under UN mandate with the establishment of the MINUSCA.

Faced with international pressure, Michel Djotodia resigned in January 2014 and an interim government was set up to organize elections, which were won by Faustin-Archange Touadera , a former Prime Minister under Bozizé. Although the Seleka dissolved itself, its factions dispersed across the country and controlled entire regions.

It was during Touadera's first term that a peace agreement was signed between the authorities and fourteen armed groups. A peace agreement which turned out to be entirely theoretical and in no way prevented violence from raging throughout the Central African Republic.

## A country in the hands of militias

Although the various militias use terms such as "democratic", "revolutionary", "popular front", etc. in the names of their organizations, it would be quite pointless to try and find any ideology, a political programme, or even a few demands. The sole purpose of these militias is to be able to control portions of the territory of the Central African Republic in order to derive income from them. This war economy is materialized by the racketeering exercised on the main and secondary roads against travellers, as well as by smuggling, for those who control the border regions. Finally, the most profitable activity remains the extraction of diamonds or gold. To this end, the militias enslave the civilian population, making them work in extreme conditions.

Since Touadera's first term of office ,

armed groups have fragmented, both on the Seleka side and on the anti-balaka side. In this chaos, other groups were created. Versatile alliances are formed between groups to expel a competing militia from a territory. Alliances are forged with yesterday's enemies. Thus, Seleka and anti-balaka fighters allied to exercise control over entire regions.

This fragmentation has also been accompanied by the empowerment of groups. Seleka having dissolved, the groups which formed it have very distant relations with the Chadian authorities.

This phenomenon of fragmentation is accompanied by a worrying trend, the ethnicization of militias. This can lead to a widening and accentuation of violence, transforming the conflicts of armed groups into conflicts between communities.

One example among others is the Vakaga region in the north of the country where the International Crisis Group think tank notes: "Rivalries between armed groups take on a community dimension, and the consequences extend beyond the borders of the Vakaga. Faced with the initial superiority of the FPRC, the MLCJ and its allies played the ethnic card, mobilizing the Kara and Goula communities respectively. This transformed the rivalries between these armed groups into strong community tensions; the FPRC itself split into two factions, one Rounga, the other Goula. The repercussions have been felt in other prefectures, such as Bamingui-Bangoran (Ndele) and Haute Kotto (Bria), where clashes between the FPRC and its rivals or between the Rounga and Goula factions of the FPRC total around 100 dead, including civilians, since the start of 2020. [3]"

The violence that occurs pushes the civilian populations to flee their villages. According to official figures, the Central African Republic had, at the end of 2020, 659,000 internally displaced people and 623,909 refugees in neighbouring countries. [4]

## An isolated presidency

When he was first elected in March 2016, Touadera did not have a party. He had to forge alliances and compose a government comprising a large part of the political leaders. Over time they resigned from the government and went into opposition. One of the central political questions revolved around the peace agreement between the government and the fourteen rebel groups.

This agreement opened up the possibility for representatives of armed groups to enter government. It also provided for the establishment of a mixed army between the Central African Armed Forces and part of the rebels of the different groups, and also a demobilization process with offers of professional retraining.

For part of the opposition, this agreement was seen as an alliance of Touadera with the armed groups. Successive government resignations have weakened the presidency. Touadera reacted by launching his own political organization, the "United Hearts Movement".

Domestic policy in the Central African Republic is largely carried out abroad. Two countries traditionally play a major role: Chad, whose authorities consider the Central African Republic to be part of its backyard, and Congo-Brazzaville. Its leader, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, exerts his influence through numerous intermediaries. Thus, during the transitional period he succeeded in placing at the head of the country his candidate, Catherine Samba-Panza, former mayor of the capital, Bangui.

Touadera has gradually distanced himself from these neighbours, considered too intrusive. He has forged other alliances, in Africa but also internationally.

## A new configuration

This distancing from Chad and Congo-Brazzaville allows him to have free

rein in the management of the country's security problems. He therefore frees himself from diplomatic manoeuvres and peace initiatives taken unilaterally by these countries.

The distance from France is also notable. The subject of contention is linked to the embargo on arms to the Central African Republic, which can be imposed on everyone, including the Central African Armed Forces (FACA). This disagreement continues. Although France argued for and obtained a relaxation of the embargo during the vote in the UN Security Council in July 2020, the Central African authorities want a complete lifting of it. Their position is supported by the Russians: "Although the arms embargo played a positive role at the start of the conflict, it is now undermining the ability to act of the Central African security forces, while during this time the troublemakers arm themselves through smuggling, argued the Russian Federation. Sanctions are not a goal in themselves. [5]"

When the embargo was first loosened in 2017, the Russians took the opportunity to establish themselves in the country. At the same time, Touadera has forged alliances with Angola and Rwanda. The latter country is opposed to the military role that France has played in Africa since its complicity in the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994.

The presence of the Russians in the Central African Republic marks a remarkable return to the continent. It is also a means to dispute at a low cost the military hegemony of France in its traditional precinct.

Officially it is not the Russian army which intervenes, but a private company named Wagner, which dispatched its mercenaries in exchange for mining concessions for diamonds and gold. This company, very close to the Kremlin, supervises the presidential security forces and takes care of the close protection of Faustin-Archange Touadera. These mercenaries, for the most part former veterans of the Russian army, do not hesitate to fight against the rebels. The operations are opaque and three

Russian journalists mandated by the opposition were assassinated during their investigation into the actions of the company.

## A chaotic second term

Exiled in Cameroon during the seizure of power by the Seleka, ousted President Bozizé returned to the country with the firm intention of competing in the presidential election of December 2020. The Constitutional Council invalidated his candidacy on two grounds. He is the subject of UN sanctions and of an international mandate for "assassinations, arbitrary detentions and torture".

At the start of the presidential campaign, the main armed factions observed neutrality and let the campaign take place. Then things suddenly changed.

Under Bozizé's impetus, armed groups from the Seleka and the anti-balaka began a process of unification. This new organization, the Coalition of Patriots for Change, marched on Bangui to seize power. The rebels were stopped in extremis on the outskirts of Bangui by presidential troops, Rwandans, Russian mercenaries and the MINUSCA.

Having suffered a defeat, the rebel troops employed a new strategy, the asphyxiation of the capital, with the blocking of the RN1 a main road. This axis is strategic for the movement of goods between Bangui and the port of Douala in Cameroon. On January 21 of this year, the Central African army and the MINUSCA, along with the Russians and Rwandans, loosened their grip by seizing the town of Boda.

But these victories remain fleeting. The rebels avoid frontal battles, take refuge in the bush and wait for the departure of government troops to recapture the towns lost. The armed groups know full well that the Central

African armed forces, even with their allies, cannot control a country as large as France. A tactic that plunges the already very poor populations into a food crisis due to the drastic increase in prices.

With his military aid, Touadera is pursuing an increasingly authoritarian policy. He is trying to muzzle the political opposition as well as civil society organizations. Protests are mostly banned and opponents are arrested.

In the Central African Republic, there is a continuity of the political violence initiated during the colonial period. These abuses resulted in the reduction of the population by half during the first twenty years of colonization. [6] The fictitious independence allowed France to put in place presidents who all carried out policies of repression and predation, leaving the country drained. The population continues to pay a heavy price for it.

## Some chronological markers

- 1889: start of colonization, which became one of the most violent in French colonial history
- 1960: independence and a succession of dictators, all supported by France, causing coups d'état, civil war and ethnicist policies
- 1979: intervention of France with Operation Barracuda: Bokassa dismissed
- 1996: French operation Furet/Almandin 1 then Almandin 2
- 1997: Operation Almandin 3 in retaliation against Central African fighters, following the death of two French soldiers
- 2003: Operation Boali to support President Bozizé
- 2006: French army intervention against UFDR rebels in the town of Birao
- 2007: new intervention against the UFDR
- 2013: the Seleka coalition,

supported by Chad, overthrows Bozizé and takes power, sacking the capital; self-defence militias are created, the anti-balaka

- 2013: in December, intervention of France with Operation Sangaris
- 2014: Michel Djotodia, at the head of the Seleka, resigns, a temporary government is ensured by Catherine Samba-Panza, former mayor of Bangui
- 2016: election of Faustin-Archange Touadera
- 2019: peace agreements between the government and 14 armed groups
- 2020: re-election of Faustin-Archange Touadera, contested by the opposition

## Footnotes

[1] Denis Sassou - Nguesso, "Africa is attacked because it is weak", interview in *Paris-Match*, December 17, 2013.

[2] Paul Martial, "Central African Republic: France's hidden responsibility", *afriquesenlutte.org*, 7 October 2014.

[3] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Reducing electoral tensions in the Central African Republic", *Africa Report n° 296*, December 10, 2020.

[4] MINUSCA, Report of the Secretary General on the Central African Republic, S / 2020/994, October 12, 2020.

[5] UN, "RCA: Security Council renews arms embargo for one year while creating an exemption for rocket launchers", July 28, 2020, *news.un.org*.

[6] Marc Lavergne, "Resolving a conflict without looking for its causes? The CAR between sham and amnesia", 2014.

# International Women's Day is celebrated on the initiative of 12 organizations

14 March 2021, by [Badrul Alam](#)

Today, Monday, March 8, 2021, at 11 am in front of the National Press Club, Bangladesh Kishani Sabha, Readymade Garments Workers Federation, Bangladesh Floating Women Workers Union, Bangladesh Krishok Federation, Bangladesh Bhumihin Samiti, Bangladesh Sramik Federation, Bangladesh United Building and Wood Workers Federation, Democratic Garment Workers and employees Federation, Migrant Women Workers Forum, Building Construction Workers Union-Bangladesh, Bangladesh National Workers Federation and Bangladesh Adivasi Samiti celebrated jointly International Women's Day. After the human chain ceremony with the slogan "Women Leadership in Corona, Build a New World of Equality", a procession marched around various streets of the city.

Presided over Garment Workers Leader Lovely Yasmin the function was addressed, among others, Farmers Leader Comrade ASM Badrul Alam, Zayed Iqbal Khan, Landless

Leader Subal Sarkar, Labor Leader Engineer Osman Gani, AAM Fayez Hossain, AKM Shahidul Alam Faruk, Labor Leader Shamim Ara, Bachchu Miah, tribal leader Omoli Kisku, women leader Rehena Begum, Mahenur Akhter Brishti.

The speakers at the human chain highlighted the historical significance of Women's Day and said that the self-dignity and equal rights of women, especially working women, have not been established in the society even today. Even today they are victims of extreme discrimination and violence in the society. They do not acknowledge the social and economic contribution of women in the patriarchal system. Moreover, social and religious prejudices have always stood in the way of women's progress as obstacles. They stressed on building a strong movement of women to overcome this obstacle and move forward.

The speakers also said that despite so many setbacks, Bangladesh has had tremendous success in realizing the

rights of women since independence. But a force of darkness has come down to the ground tooth and nail to thwart this achievement. They do not consider women as human beings. They throw ugly words at women. "Women don't need to come out of the house to earn money", "Women don't need higher education", "Women earn money by committing adultery" and so on.

The speakers appealed to all to stand up against all the evil forces against women's rights and freedoms. The leaders sharply criticized the injustice done to the working women in the garment factory with Covid 19 and called for reinstatement of the laid off women, payment of their salaries, overtime, arrears and reopening of the factory. Highlighting the huge contribution of women farmers in agricultural production during the Corona period, the leaders said that women farmers should be given fair wages and equal pay for equal work.

*8 March 2021*

# A new stage in the fight against the military order - the resistance calls for solidarity!

12 March 2021, by [Pierre Rousset](#)

From 1 February, the junta carried out increasingly massive arrests: some 2,000 people were imprisoned (temporarily or permanently). The killings began in mid-February, then became systematic from the end of the month; to date, the online daily Irrawaddy counts more than 60 people killed and the number continues to rise. The spectre of the 1988 massacres and their 3,000 dead haunts the country, although the situation has changed. The country was at the time isolated from the world by the ruling junta, and it took a

year for the full extent of the bloodshed to become fully known. We are now informed of the day-to-day situation and the army has not yet succeeded, despite its best efforts, in ensuring effective censorship. A collective of photojournalists, The Myanmar Project, has been set up and many newspapers are still covering the events as I write this article.

## Preventing "internal normalization"

The civil disobedience movement has won a first and decisive victory: through its massive size, it prevented the putschists from imposing their fait accompli. No one can be unaware that this is an illegitimate regime; the military have lost the battle for communication. Domestically, they are

struggling to normalize the situation. The functioning of the administration is hampered by the civil servants' strike. The public and private banking system is at a standstill, businesses (including those owned by the military) are paralyzed. Rail transport is severely disrupted, as well as gas production and oil refining according to the CTUM union. Magnates worry about the economic consequences of the coup and quietly support the resistance. Personalities organize fundraisers to help strikers who have lost all income. Some 600 police have defected, some finding refuge in India. A large number of diplomats and embassies have refused to recognize the putschists, which restricted the junta's international contacts.

In this Buddhist country where the monastic order has 500,000 members divided into 9 sects, the clergy has until now remained on the side-lines, unlike what happened in 2017. Groups of bhikkus (monks) did rally to the demonstrations, waving placards, but this remained anecdotal - they were fewer in number than the pro-army monks who publicly supported the putsch a few days before it happened. The official religious authorities (the Sangha) are not supposed to engage in politics, but this is not observed in practice. Movements with Buddhist reference points cover the entire political spectrum, down to the fascist far right, as was the case with the Organization for the Defence of Race and Nation (Ma Ba Tha) which played a very significant role at the time of the Rohingya genocide in 2014.

The Sangha is usually close to the government, without making its dictatorial character a bone of contention. Since the coup, the military leadership has taken care to court the hierarchy of orders more than ever. There are pro-democracy monks, probably more numerous than they appear today, but they do not identify with the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK, a highly authoritarian figure) with whom they have had a very tense relationship. A monk from Rangoon told Bruno Philip, a journalist at Le Monde: "It is a pity that the highly respected General Aug San Mrs. Suu Kyi's father, leader of the anti-colonial movement] gave birth to

such a woman!". [1] One of the most influential Buddhist leaders, Sitagu Sayada, who is said to enjoy the high life and is very close to the General-in-Chief, has suffered a flurry of criticism on social media. His sect, the Shwe Kyin, finally called on the military to be more restrained in repression. [2]

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) continues to organize day long general strikes and one of its components, the Confederation of Trade Unions, Myanmar (CTUM) has launched an urgent appeal for solidarity with the particular objective of obtaining a "a harsh comprehensive sanction that can finish off the regime and its structure" so as "to rebuild Burma from scratch — without any interference from the military". [3] The stakes are clear. It is about putting an end once and for all to the military order imposed almost continuously on Burma since 1962. The peoples of the Union of Burma need strong international action to do so.

## Isolate, sanction the junta

The junta probably thought that the foreseeable international condemnations of the putsch would not have great consequences. A mistake. The civil disobedience movement has changed the rules of the game. Many established powers cannot simply turn a blind eye or be content with formal protests. Indeed, sanctions have been taken which carry some weight.

"How to break the deadlock?" asks Mediapart journalist Laure Siegel. She responds in a remarkable article calling for "International support, embargo, boycott, internal resistance, cross-border citizen alliances". A good summary! [4]

The military is seeking to exhaust the civic movement, terrorize the population and divide the opposition. The democratic resistance has a vital need for solidarity, it is a question of survival - but today it is possible to deal the junta some very hard blows if political pressure is maintained, just as it is possible to bring concrete support for popular struggles. The

following examples show this.

Myanmar's representative at the United Nations denounced the coup, which made de facto recognition of the junta more difficult. Embassies are seceding, maintaining their allegiance to the (now underground) government of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The junta has not been recognized by international bodies, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). US President Joe Biden has blocked a \$1 billion transfer from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to the Central Bank of Myanmar. Freezing Burmese assets abroad is therefore possible. It must be generalized and the travel abroad of dignitaries of the putschist regime forbidden!

The European Union is officially suspending aid that could benefit the military. We must move from declarations to actions. A platform has been set up which tracks down Western firms supplying "sensitive" material. The responsibility of foreign companies equipping the junta's repressive forces is denounced. An Italian firm sells it light weapons (which escape the controls of the heavy weaponry trade, but which are suitable for repression). [5] Swedish companies offer smartphones while US enterprises sell hacking software. Israel sends surveillance drones or drones capable of dumping tear gas on the population. In terms of investment and trade, the integration of the Burmese economy is above all regional: Singapore, China, Thailand, India... countries not very inclined to interfere in the "internal affairs" of their neighbour. However, some foreign firms have stopped dealing with the junta. This is the case, for example, with Kirin, the Japanese brewing giant, ending a six-year joint venture with an army holding company. The Australian company Woodside has decided to cease its activities in the oil and gas fields, which were worth 920 million euros per year. [6]

The call for an international boycott of "khaki economy" products is being organized, again through Internet platforms. The Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM) has appealed to garment brands to protect

their strikers from retaliatory measures by employers or the military for their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement - "refusing to do so will equate with being silent against the crimes of the Myanmar military junta". LaborNotes provides a list of brands using Burmese production. [7]

Among the multinationals on which maximum pressure must be exerted are obviously, in the oil sector, Chevron (United States) and Total (France) who paid nearly 230 million euros in 2019 in taxes and shares to the government. Burmese. Today Total is accountable to the people of Burma. "Doctor Sasa", a figure in the NLD, said in an interview with *Le Monde*: "I beg President Emmanuel Macron to grant us his help, including, in the future, military support for our future federal army. I also ask the company Total, present in Burma, to cease collaborating economically with the regime". [8]

The resistance is reorganizing itself to face up to the qualitative leap in repression. It is testing unarmed self-defence measures in neighbourhoods and villages to stop military movement. Known activists are going into hiding. Contacts are being strengthened with Burmese emigration and solidarity movements in neighbouring countries (mainly Thailand). Millions of kyats (the local currency) have been sent from Thailand, where 70% of Burmese immigrant workers are located. There is a strong sense of proximity between activists on both sides of the border, where youth have led the regional Milk Tea Alliance against authoritarianism. In Burma, the Civil Disobedience Movement constitutes the first framework for cooperation between, in particular, Generation Z (young people in education), the CTUM trade union federation which called on 8 February for a general strike, and local popular committees. For its part, the National League for Democracy has reconstituted a government that is demanding to be

recognized by the UN. Finally, a "General Strike Committee of Nationalities", representing more than 24 groups, was founded on 11 February. Half of the ethnic armed organizations threatened the junta with retaliation in the event of an army or police attack on CDM protesters in their territory, without however supporting Suu Kyi and the NLD. Karen State in particular, in the east of the country, is committed to protecting and supporting any member of the armed forces who sides with the CDM.

On the side of the regime, no defection has been reported from the army, unlike the police. It forms a very homogeneous body where the families of soldiers live in a closed circuit. It constitutes a power that parallels the civil administration from top to bottom and at each level uses its capacity to influence society. Controlling two large conglomerates as well as the traffic in precious stones or wood, the "khaki economy" is a clientele capitalism, able to co-opt even figures from the Bamar opposition (the majority ethnic group living in the delta of the Irrawaddy). A trial of strength is underway to rally the representatives of ethnic minorities. The military have the means to implement a universal "divide and rule" policy.

Military camps are being set up in schools (to monitor Gen Z), universities and hospitals (whose staff have been at the forefront of the resistance and treating the wounded). More than 20,000 common law detainees have been released to make room for political prisoners and wreak havoc on the demonstrators. Obsessive surveillance is exercised on the population. The military boasts of being able to kill and pillage as they wish. The junta could even organize a famine to blame the resistance. By combining terror, corruption and impoverishment of a population already hard hit by Covid, they hope to exhaust it.

The democratic revolution in Myanmar knows that it is engaged in a struggle which can last a long time. It faces a formidable enemy that should not be underestimated. It offers a great lesson in courage and commitment. It is not alone. The democratic demand has taken on a deep resonance at a time when the authoritarianism of regimes is increasing from Asia to Europe, to the Americas ... causing in turn civic uprisings capable of achieving significant victories. Myanmar, with its diverse populations, has become one of the new "warm fronts" in a universal struggle.

10 March 2021

## Footnotes

[1] Bruno Philip, *Le Monde*, 24 February 2021.

[2] *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2021.

[3] *Labor Notes*, 5 March 2021 "Burmese Union Federations Call for International Support Against Coup".

[4] Mediapart, 7 March 2021 "Birmanie: comment sortir de l'impasse", available on [ESSF](#).

[5] Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 March 2021 "Immediate halt in all arms transfers: ! Italian Ammunition Used in Myanmar Police Assault on Ambulance Raises Questions".

[6] Laure Siegel, Mediapart, 7 March 2021, op. cit.

[7] *Labor Notes*, 5 March 2021 "Burmese Union Federations Call for International Support Against Coup".

[8] Interview with Bruno Philip, *Le Monde*, 9 March 2021.

# Women farmers are at Delhi borders as equal stakeholders, demanding a voice

11 March 2021, by [Meenakshi Gopinath](#)

Coming against the backdrop of the Supreme Court observation that women and children should not be protesting at the borders, the Women's Farmers Day events in January led by the contingent from Punjab triggered similar rallies in several districts of the country.

In their somewhat "unorthodox" modes of protest, women drew upon the symbolic and performative lexicon that legions of "disobedient" women have employed for decades, both globally and nationally, in "voicing democracy and reclaiming citizenship".

From carrying portraits of their sons and husbands who have died by suicide on account of agrarian distress; to holding tractor rallies; reciting poetry; performing skits; "manning" and guarding the public stages; singing, picketing and "cooking" up a storm at the langars that supplied food to protesters camped in the cold, they invoked shared traditions of women's political activism. Their mobilisation over the last several months, especially in Punjab, also involved raising consciousness through villages, markets and gurdwaras, to "sit-ins" at sites of corporate power, raising the crescendo with pit siyappa (songs of mourning).

Their attempts to build solidarities across fault lines of caste, class and calling, have drawn into their fold members of Dalit landless labour unions, women students from farming backgrounds and others who share a deep anguish about a precarious future and the loss of land and

livelihood. Not imprisoned by the mantle of purely "women's issues", they are here as equal stakeholders — as cultivators, tillers, seed keepers and reapers, managers of livestock, poultry and some forest produce, demanding a voice in the unfolding denouement.

Women have historically crafted innovative idioms of engagement against "muscular" politics. Rejecting the artificial separation between the "private" and "public", they symbolically bring women's bodies and artefacts of the domestic sphere and care-giving into public spaces, as Gandhi had effectively done, to flip the association of valour with masculinity.

From the 1970s on, in several non-violent struggles like the Chipko Andolan, protests at the Baliapal Missile sites, Koodankulam, the Koel Karo dam, through the Bhopal Gas Peedith Mahila Andolan, and the Sardar Sarovar Dam Satyagraha, women expanded their canvas to include issues of livelihood, development dislocation, access to resources, calling out state protection of powerful vested interests.

The female body became a site of protest and a "weapon of the weak" in Irom Sharmila's indefinite fast to protest the wanton killing of innocent civilians and to demand the repeal of AFSPA in Manipur. Similarly, the nude protest of 15 women outside the headquarters of the Assam Rifles in Imphal in 2004, following the alleged rape and custodial death of a young activist had evoked stunned attention.

Shaheen Bagh was an inflection point in the current possibilities and limits of women's non-violent struggles. In

asserting citizenship beyond minority identities and making common cause to recover the "living" Constitution of the republic, women shone the light on the limits of representative politics to speak to the power of the participatory public.

In India, while 85 per cent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, only about 13 per cent own land. The agricultural sector employs 80 per cent of all economically engaged women — with 33 per cent in the labour force and 48 per cent as self-employed farmers. How much does their current struggle draw on their own quotidian experience of exclusion from ownership and decision-making? While this does make them natural allies in mobilisations for justice, equity and dignity, they have not been in leadership roles. There is not a single woman in the 35-member farmer delegation chosen to negotiate with the government.

They are disappointed by the unfortunate events in Delhi on Republic Day that have tarnished the non-violent credentials of their movement. It is difficult to gauge whether a substantive reconfiguration of gender relations will inform its future trajectory, or be cognisant of the overwhelming turnout at the Kisan Mukti March in 2018 to push for the resurrection of the Women Farmers' Entitlement Bill proposed by M S Swaminathan in 2011. Yet their resolve to stay the course and garner greater support continues unabated.

*16 February 2021*

Source [Indian Express](#).

# Against the neoliberal, authoritarian and racist policies of this government: take to the streets!

10 March 2021, by [Joséphine Simplon](#)

After the masks scandal and the tests scandal, there is now the vaccines scandal, and all this against the backdrop of an unprecedented social crisis for the majority of the population and incessant attacks against workers and their freedoms. It is more than ever time to build a truly unitary campaign against this government and its policies and put forward the perspective of another world without waiting for the 2022 presidential elections.

Since the onset of the health crisis, Macron has only been concerned about two things. On the one hand, the occupancy rate of intensive care beds, which has become his only gauge for taking “measures” that in no way prevent the infection of greater numbers but do prevent any social life. On the other hand, as a good “president of the ultra-rich”, he is also obsessed with the profits of his friends, which must continue to grow at all costs. And on this point, we can say that Macron’s policy has been effective since, according to Oxfam, despite the crisis, CAC 40 companies will have paid 37 billion in dividends to their shareholders and the accumulated assets of the 500 largest fortunes in France grew by 3% in 2020, breaking a new record.

During the entire past year this government has never implemented a health policy worthy of the name, that would reduce infections and deaths as much as possible. On the contrary, the management of the health crisis has highlighted the shortcomings of a health system destroyed by the policies implemented for decades. Even today, while the “variant” strains, in particular the British one, are becoming the majority in France, Macron has once again chosen repressive and liberticidal measures with weekend lockdown and the 6 p.m. curfew. However, the deprivation

of freedoms and a life reduced to the metro-work-sleep triptych are more and more unwelcome to most. Moreover, a large part of the population has understood that the economy’s wellbeing takes precedence over our health. We have all understood that this government’s “stop and go” strategy does not show any prospect of an end to the pandemic. Especially when the fight against the virus only takes place during leisure hours while little is done in the workplaces where protocols cannot be implemented, public transport remains crowded and no resources are available in schools to fight against infection. However, there is an alternative to this strategy. It would consist, among other things, in giving effective priority and the corresponding resources to health and social policies making it possible to reduce the epidemic and to accelerate the acquisition of collective immunity through safe, transparent and effective vaccination.

## A third social wave

The continuing health crisis is also causing an unprecedented social and economic crisis. The results for the world of work and the majority of the population are already catastrophic: according to INSEE, in 2020 there were around 700,000 job losses, in particular the most precarious jobs, temporary workers, fixed-term contracts, self-employed people, but also an increase in restructuring plans and layoffs, business closures and competitiveness plans. Not to mention the explosion of poverty which will undoubtedly be a lasting symptom of the health crisis. According to campaigning groups, the health crisis and the lockdown of March 2020 have put 1 million more people in poverty.

And in early 2021, the situation is far

from improving. Keeping a large number of companies alive thanks to short time working paid for by the state, loans guaranteed by the state and the Solidarity Fund will not prevent the foreseeable bankruptcies. Short time working is already decreasing, having fallen from 8.4 million employees in April 2020 to 2.1 million in January 2021, according to the employment situation barometer of the governmental statistics and employment agencies Dares, DGEFP, Acoess and Pôle emploi. At the same time, the number of PSE (Employment Protection Plans) and layoffs outside the PSE for economic reasons are increasing. The situation is already serious for a large number of employees and will be explosive when the partial unemployment schemes and the various forms of aid are cancelled, especially since according to the OFCE economic monitoring centre “business bankruptcies will occur during 2021 and could cause up to 200,000 job losses”.

## They want to make us pay for the crisis

The Covid-19 crisis has caused a global crisis. In all countries, the economic recession and stimulus packages are causing public deficits and debts to explode. In France, in 2020, the Covid debt is estimated at almost 235 billion euros. Faced with this, in December 2020 the government set up a commission on the “future of public finances” chaired by Jean Arthuis, former finance minister under Chirac. Its mandate is to make proposals on how to repay the Covid debt, without raising taxes, through “more rigorous management of public expenditure” and “structural reforms”. The tone is therefore set, for

the government, it is the workers who will pay the bill through a historic and massive drop in public spending, especially social spending. And for the past few weeks, the government has been preparing us for devastating budgetary austerity for the majority of the population. Olivier Dussopt, the deputy minister for Public Accounts, was clear in an interview in *Les Echos*, that “2021 marks the end of the ‘whatever it costs’ policy” announced in March 2020 by Macron. Not surprisingly, their plan is to reduce social benefits to a minimum, dismantle public services, make us work longer. Without even waiting for the end of the pandemic, the government has just announced, after refusing the RSA in-work benefit to 18-25-year-olds, that part of the unemployment insurance reform will come into force on 1 July 2021.

It is indeed the reduction in benefits which the government is targeting since it will be the method of calculating the daily reference salary which will be the first measure to come into force. In other words, from 1 July 2021, for some who have lost employment, their benefits could be almost halved in the worst case. But be reassured, with regard to the proposal to tax companies having “abusive” recourse to precarious contracts, its implementation would be postponed until 1 July 2022 (therefore post presidential election...)! Among its other regressive projects, the government plans to reform the priority given to the AGS, the insurance which guarantees the payment of wages in the event of default by the employer (during bankruptcy proceedings). While the payment of salaries has so far been considered as a priority over any other debt, the Ministry of Justice is considering that this priority be assigned to the remuneration of court administrators and agents rather than to the AGS and therefore to employees. The Medef employers’ federation considers this explosive and is opposed to this proposal, so perhaps the government will abandon it. These are the first concrete examples of what awaits us, if we do not stop them, in the months to come.

## **Despite everything, resistance**

In this difficult context, mobilizations, although modest, exist in various sectors (health, energy, education, against job cuts and so on) but also more generally against the global security law, against police violence and against racism. In the end, these struggles can lead to small victories. Thus, that of the Sainte Barbe Library which made it possible after 3 months of determined strike action to obtain maintenance of wages in the event of closure, sick leave and guarantees on future contracts. These victories, even partial, are important because they demonstrate that the most precarious employee can mobilize and win; generalizing them is therefore important in this period. They remain isolated and the sluggishness of the labour movement as a whole obviously does not encourage optimism.

The fact remains that we have not managed, despite the blows and the anger expressed at the policies of this government, to mobilize massively and to bring together fightbacks and struggles even if attempts exist, as was the case, for example, with the appeal of the CGT TUI on job cuts. [1] The main reason is obviously the health situation, the fear it entails, but also the law-and-order context: police violence, repression and freedom-killing laws which perfectly serve the interests of employers and the government.

## **Let’s not wait for 2022**

The context is also marked by the next presidential election which is fast approaching. Mistrust of the political class as a whole remains very significant and abstention is likely to be very high. This is why, 416 days before the first round, for many people on the left, right, and far right - and Macron himself - this dominates the horizon. The latter seems to be preoccupied with the sole question of how to save his candidacy. Indeed, he

knows full well that, he will have difficulty in taking advantage of the political vacuum caused by the erosion of the left-right alternation as in 2017 and will not be able to play on the chords of renewal and “neither left nor right” again.

Hence for several weeks there have been very discreet discussions with the parliamentary “left” and “right” but also for the last few days ministers who remind us in the media that they are “left” like Schiappa, Borne or Attal. In short, the puppets are still there. And the cherry on the cake, before all this has even started, is that we are already promised a Macron - Le Pen second round.

We reject this agenda, in which the solutions would come from the ballot box to impose an alternative and different choices. In view of the social, health and ecological emergencies, the urgent necessity is to build a unitary response to end the neoliberal, liberticidal and racist policies of this government. The priority of the workers’ movement is to work to convert the anger and radicalism that have been expressed in recent years through the *Gilets Jaunes*, the pensions’ movement, the struggles against racism and police violence, the struggles for the climate, feminist struggles ... into experiences of concrete solidarity and victorious struggles.

## **A comprehensive unitary anti-government campaign, an anti-capitalist emergency plan, now!**

Faced with this government, it is imperative to build a unitary, massive, anti-government campaign. In recent months, many thematic unitary campaigns have emerged such as that against global security, against the “separatism” law, against job cuts and more recently around the call for “Patents on anti-Covid vaccines, stop.

Requisition!". These initiatives are very good news, but faced with this government, we must go further and bring together all the anger, resistance and mobilization to create a global campaign against this government around an emergency plan. It would combine different dimensions.

First, the health dimensions: for massive job creation in the health and education sector, the re-quisitioning of pharmaceutical companies, producers of tests, vaccines and masks, the establishment of a transparent and massive vaccination policy which puts an end to patents in the pharmaceutical industry and so on.

Second, the employment plan: for the defence of employment, it is necessary to impose a ban on layoffs and job cuts, sharing of working time without loss of salary, the creation of a million public service jobs.

Third, the economic and ecological dimensions: we must impose debt cancellation; ecological planning with the phasing out of fossil fuels, a production transition to abandon production deemed unnecessary, and an end to the race for profits in the

food industry, which facilitates the circulation of viruses.

Finally, we must respond to the emergency situation experienced by the most oppressed populations, in particular in the context of repressive responses to the health crisis, as illustrated by the catastrophic situation of young people today: with the establishment of a pre-salary for young people, a fight against all oppressions with the regularization of undocumented migrants and the opening of borders, an end to police impunity, gender equality in particular in the economic field, and the repeal of liberticidal and racist laws.

Beyond that, to respond to this unprecedented and global crisis of capitalism, there is an urgent need to build an alternative. Especially since the failures of the government are preparing a new rise of the far right which will only have to seize the legal tools put in place to amplify repression and racist and anti-social policies. Now is the time to regroup, between all the organizations, the cross-sectoral collectives (in particular those built against the pension reform or the liberticidal laws), to discuss

how to stop this crisis and unify our social camp, to rebuild a balance of power favourable to the world of work. We cannot accept the alternative Macron or Le Pen, because it will lead to more and more exploitation and oppression, in a world where the alternative "socialism or barbarism" is emerging increasingly clearly. There is no simple solution, it is not enough to proclaim that we have the best programme or that we are the best organization to open up a road for the labour movement and the social movement. What is certain is that our struggles today will have a strong impact on the context in which the presidential election will be held, on the possibility of an anti-capitalist and revolutionary alternative in the face of the global crisis of system and the growing threat of the far right and barbarism. There is, then, a genuine emergency!

## Footnotes

[1] The CGT union in the TUI multinational travel agency which launched a national campaign against job cuts.

# March 8, 2021 - Manifesto by fAKTIV

9 March 2021, by fAKTIV

The collective started out in 2016 in opposition to ubiquitous social and economic inequalities, fascism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, with the aim to organize extra-institutional actions and create feminist practices as part of a broader anti-capitalist movement.

In 2016, fAKTIV organized the first Night March on International Women's Day (March 8) in Zagreb - a protest that keeps on bringing together several thousand protesters each year. On March 8th we celebrate past feminist struggles and victories, we point out the main problems women face today, and work on connecting the feminist movement with other movements.

This year we will not organize the Night March because of the pandemic, but we raise awareness about the consequences of the pandemic for the labor and lives of women. We also highlight our concerns about sexual violence, advocate for sexual education, and address the constant threat to the right to abortion. Finally, with the same regard and urgency, we point out the problems that transgender people face in our society and draw attention to the horrific treatment of refugees and migrants at the borders of the European Union.

Also, we are running a social media campaign that points out the value of women's usually invisible, unappreciated, and underpaid work. We are inviting women to take a rest

for an hour or a day and send us their photos on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. The photos are shared with the hashtag #odmor8mart (#rest8march).  
March 8 Manifesto

It seems like overnight the most important people in our lives became the women working in retail, the cleaners who disinfect the shops, hospitals, and clinics, the caretakers, the nurses who calm down frightened patients with ease and tell them everything will be fine, while they are the ones who didn't hug their loved ones for a year, trying not to infect them.

All of these workers have always been essential, we have only now begun to

name them as such collectively. A multitude of underpaid jobs that were considered infamous and secondary have become of extreme importance around the world - and those jobs are mostly done by women. This year we ask of you to think about the great burden women carried throughout this pandemic. Our resistance this year is an invitation to rest. A one-hour rest, a one-day rest - as a pledge for the future when all the burden of care will not be placed on the backs of women.

We also ask of you to think about the brave and loud women who have shared their experiences of sexual violence in the street, in the workplace, in the educational system, in maternity hospitals and gynecology offices.

We don't want to hear the questions "Why didn't you report it sooner?", "Why did you keep quiet?", "Why didn't you leave that job, relationship, marriage, college?" anymore. We don't want women to blame themselves, and we don't want others to blame women. The women were not silent. The women are silenced! But we will not be silenced anymore!

We also won't be silent about the attacks and discrimination against transgender people, most often trans women, that end up thrown to the very margins of society. The lives of trans women and trans people in general, their access to health care or employment, must not depend on those who would be at peace only if

trans people did not exist at all.

This year we also think about the violence at our borders. Refugees and migrants are called illegal, their right to exist is questioned on a daily basis in our society. No one questions the wars from which they escaped. Poverty is accepted, but the poor are persecuted. We will continue to stand in solidarity with refugees and migrants. No one is illegal, and no one deserves violence and death just because they are trying to survive.

Rosa Luxemburg's last words were: "I was, I am, I will be!". This International Women's Day we stand together in hope, resistance, and rebellion and say: "We were, we are, we will be!"

## In Honour of International Women's Day

8 March 2021, by [Susan Pashkoff](#)

One would think that in this day and age the struggle over women's reproductive rights would have stopped being a struggle; alas that is not true. While both Ireland and North Ireland now allow for legal (and hence safe) abortion, that is not the case throughout Europe as abortion is illegal in Malta, Andorra, Vatican City, San Marino and Lichtenstein. In Latin America, abortion is legal in Uruguay, Cuba, Guyana and now Argentina. Many countries around the world still ban abortion, some only allow it if the mother's life or physical or mental health is endangered by the pregnancy.

The victory in Argentina for the right to abortion was a hard fought struggle over more than a decade and the struggle itself was part of a broader struggle for women's rights across many issues such as violence against women, femicide, LGBT+ struggles, and women workers' rights.

Understanding and celebrating both the victories and bitter losses in the history of our struggles can provide not only pride at what was done, but also clarification of how to move forward the struggles for the elimination of racism, sexism and

misogyny and economic exploitation that had divided and oppressed the vast majority of people living on this planet.

As Terry Conway states in "[Solidarity Across Continents for Women's Reproductive Justice](#)"

The National Campaign for Safe and Free Legal Abortion (Campaña Nacional por el Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito) was set up in 2005 to campaign on these issues and has seeded a whole number of supporting groups. The network of teachers for the right to abortion (Red de Docentes por el Derecho al Aborto -RDDA) campaign for every child to have access to comprehensive sex education while the Network of Health Professionals for the Right to Decide (Red de Profesionales de la Salud por el Derecho a Decidir) argue that access to legal abortion is a matter of public health. Perhaps the most important network is the socorristas, feminist 'lifeguards' who provided practical and emotional support to women needing abortions.

And the campaign itself is the child of a wider feminist movement - a Green Tide as it is known - of which Ni Una Menos (Not One Less)- the movement against femicide- is by far the best known outside the country.

The bill which passed in the Argentine upper house on the 29th of December 2020 legalised abortion until the 14th week of pregnancy. The first Argentine President to support the legalisation of abortion, President Alberto Fernandez introduced the bill to the Congress in November 2020. On Friday morning, 10th of December 2020, the bill passed the Lower House by a vote of 131-117.

Martina Rodriguez ends her article "[The Green Tide in Argentina Fighting for Abortion Rights](#)" by saying:

Countries in Latin America are fighting for reproductive rights and feminist movements have their own agency (so ditch the white saviour complex, please). Nevertheless, the demand must be

as an international force. We need to put on pressure, not only in our countries where there's a lack of substantial rights, but we must also defend them in every corner of the world and ensure that the laws meet our demands and are implemented justly.

After all, it really is about our autonomies, our sexual freedom and our rights to choose something other than the destiny they want to box us in as human vessels.

We won't stop until we have the law and a cultural change. It will be legal #SeraLey.

## The History of International Women's Day

International Women's Day (8 March, IWD) was originally called International Working Women's Day. It was a socialist holiday established in 1911 by the Socialist International and is celebrated by women's groups around the world. In many countries, it is a national holiday and has recently been officially recognized by the United Nations. However, up until the 1970's, with the advent of a new women's movement, the radical working class roots of IWD had been practically forgotten. Due to its socialist leaning, it was excised from the United States memory, much as Labor Day replaced May Day, except in small immigrant enclaves or radical union groups. In Europe and the rest of the world, it continued to be widely celebrated, but tended to honour women in name only, mostly with flowers or by simply putting a woman's face on a male agenda. IWD, in fact, was the culmination of a century of women working in the labour, feminist, socialist, and anti-slavery and segregation movements to bring together the common interests of the working class and women's rights advocates.

There were several major trends that led to the establishment of IWD:

The first was a revolutionary fervour

in Europe and the United States toward socialism, democratization and the vote. In Europe it was exemplified by a movement for working class men without property seeking the vote to further a socialist government, paralleled by a movement for middle class women to get the vote. This situation was mirrored in the United States by the struggle to gain the vote for black men and white women. The contradictions between these two types of suffrage movements were evident (should we fight for the non-propertyed or black men to get the vote, even if women were excluded?). The solution, of course, was to get the vote for both groups.

Clara Zetkin was among the early socialists to see working class women as the driving force towards universal suffrage (everyone gets the vote independent of property qualifications to which it had been historically tied) since they bridged the divide, yet retain the principle of a revolutionary socialist agenda. It was Clara Zetkin who advocated for the merging of the working class socialist movement and the women's movement through the establishment of International Women's Day as a way to forward the goals of both labour and women. Zetkin opposed the stagist approach by the mainstream Women's Movement in Britain which advocated first getting women over a certain age with property the vote (the centenary of the Representation of the People Act of 1918 which gave all British men over 21 the vote and women of property and over 30 getting the vote in Britain) and then later that women without property be granted suffrage. It took another decade, 1928, for women without property to gain the franchise.

In 1906, Zetkin addresses why socialists should support Women's suffrage and Universal suffrage:

We must always press on the question of Woman Suffrage when we are agitating about the Suffrage. We have always argued in the Suffrage agitation that it was a question of equal rights for men and women, and we must continue to do so till we succeed.

We must be united. We know that we shall not attain the victory of Woman Suffrage in a short time, but we know; too, that in our struggles for this measure we shall revolutionise hundreds of thousands of minds. We carry on our war, not as a fight between the sexes, but as a battle against the political might of the possessing classes; as a fight which we carry on with all our might and main, without hatred of the other sex; a fight whose final aim and whose glory will be that in the broadest masses of the proletariat the knowledge shall arise that when the day of the historical development shall have made sufficient progress then the proletariat, in its entirety, without distinction of sex, shall be able to call out to the capitalist order of society: "You rest on us, you oppress us, and, see, now the building which you have erected is tottering to the ground (Social Democracy and Women's Suffrage, 1906).

The first clear victory in which the leadership of working class women following the establishment of IWD was the organization of the textile workers and women's suffrage in the United States and the second victory was Russian Revolution in 1917 which began with a massive strike by women textile workers in Petrograde (St. Petersburg) on International Women's Day. This strike was called against the orders of the Unions and left-wing political parties. The strikes lit the match of a country on the verge; they doubled in size to 200,000 workers and over the next few days, 66,000 men of the local army garrison joined forces with the strikers. The February Russian revolution began and the Tsar was forced to abdicate.

The second important factor was the increased numbers of women in the labour movement, particularly in the textile industry, as more and more women were pulled into factories and out of homes with the rise of industrial capitalism. Their struggle to free themselves from the patriarchal home and obtain decent work conditions in the marketplace instead of being

viewed as cheap labour is exemplified in the call for both "bread and roses." The textile strikes beginning in 1857 and the massive strikes between 1908 and 1915 were the activist expression of women's struggle for power. This was especially true after the horror of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory strike where mostly women workers, but also children and a few men were killed in a horrific sweatshop fire soon after a strike of textile workers (The Uprising of the 20,000) in New York city demanding trade union recognition, better wages, working conditions and health and safety measures.

While initially the feminist movement focused on human rights issues for women such as suffrage, many of the women felt allied to working class struggles for decent wages and rights and took up the call that freedom and equality for one group meant freedom and equality for all. While the anti-slavery movement seems distinct, the end of slavery pushed all workers, black and white into the same labour struggle as wage labourers. Once this occurred, it was up to anti-racist groups to fight for equality within the labour movement. This, of course, always raised the question of equality for the other major group excluded from equality in the labour force — women.

These movements, occurring in a

short period between the end of the civil war and the end of WW1, provided the activist and theoretical base to try to unite diverse groups into the revolutionary struggle. The formation of IWD was an explicit effort to unite the interests and theories of women and male labour (including workers of colour that was implied in the socialist agenda) under a Revolutionary Socialist agenda in support of universal suffrage and economic equality. The following excerpts (which we hope you will read, view, sing-along- with, explore and enjoy) are just a sampling of some of the actions and words of some prominent working women and movements.

We need to go back to the rise of the post-Civil War labour movement and the first wave of feminism to see the inevitable class contradictions that arose between women of the bourgeoisie and women of the working class. The differences in approach are obvious when we look at the issues. Bourgeois women advocating women's suffrage linked it to property qualifications and argued that women as a group should be enfranchised without looking at how this left blacks and many non-propertied workers without the vote. The birth control movement also wound up linking to eugenics groups that were aligned to repugnant issues targeting the poor, the disabled and people of colour.

To win equality for all people, women of the left argued that the economic and social exploitation endemic to the capitalist system be eliminated by the triumph of socialism. While suffrage and access to birth control were clearly important reform issues, they would not in and of itself enable all women's, or for that matter, all people's equality. However when reformist men chose to limit their call for the vote to blacks and non-propertied working men - forgetting that this still excluded women - the dynamics shifted and the call for socialists to specifically include women in their demand for the vote was born.

*This is an extract from an article on the **Daily Kos** "ACM: In Honour of International Women's Day - In the Words of our Founding Mothers". The authors said: "What we decided we wanted to do was to allow women to speak for themselves, so we reproduced some quotes from these women. We wanted to discuss not only women that were known as leaders or that were heralded during their times; we also want to remind people of the voices of those who fought on the shop-floors, those that became "leaders" due to circumstance. Their actions and speeches inspired and moved others and they are still relevant." For those quotes please go to the original article.*

## Statement Women's March Tokyo 2021 Organizing Committee

7 March 2021

The sudden school closure followed by the declaration of the state of emergency had a devastating economic impact on the women who were already earning less, have fewer savings, and in unstable employment such as "irregular" positions. On top of that, school closures, working from home, and adopting new hygiene measures have created more unpaid labor at home and women are exhausted from taking most of the care and housework responsibilities.

Due to the increased economic and social tensions and stay-at-home measures, the cases of women experiencing domestic violence have increased dramatically. Women make up a high percentage of medical and care professionals as well as vendors of daily necessities, yet their treatment and work environment are left without any improvement. UN Women has stated that Japan should take urgent measures to protect the sexual and reproductive health and

rights of women, yet these issues have not been addressed.

Despite the stay-at-home orders, there are no supportive measures for women who feel unsafe at home, or those without homes. In October 2020, the number of women who committed suicide surged over 80 % compared to the same month last year.

On December 25, 2020, the 5th Basic Plan for Gender Equality was

approved by the Cabinet. Many of the goals set in the 4th Plan have been left unachieved as a result of those in power not addressing the issues of gender-based discrimination and violence. We also acknowledge that some of the contents of the statement to realize a gender-equal society, such as the introduction of the system to allow married couples to choose separate surnames, have been ignored due to the opposition of some members of the Diet.

In the statement of Women's March Tokyo 2019, we demanded the followings: (1) Stop the detrimental revision of the Constitution, (2) Fix the gender pay gap, (3) Stop forcing married couples to use the same surname, (4) Eliminate the period of prohibition of remarriage for women, (5) Take a victim-centered approach to address the damage caused by the forced sterilization carried out under the Eugenic Protection Law, (6) Ratify the Optional Protocol to the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, (7) Take a victim-centered approach to address the "comfort women" issue, (8) Stop the discriminatory treatment of Korean schools, (9) Guarantee the rights of foreign workers, (10) Guarantee the rights of sexual minorities, and (11) Stop the construction of new U.S. military bases. However, none of these issues have been addressed at this point.

The pandemic has revealed that the structural discrimination and violence existing in society increase in times of crisis. Steps should be taken to correct unequal institutions and practices, to accept gender equality and diversity, and to not tolerate discrimination and violence.

The transgender community faces severe discrimination and violence. While preparing for the Women's March Tokyo 2019, we learned about

some internet posts mentioning the Women's March Tokyo and fueling discrimination against transgendered people. We disagree with the exclusion of transgendered people to safety and security. The Women's March Tokyo 2021 Organizing Committee will not tolerate discriminatory or violent signs or behaviors against the transgender community.

In the wake of this tragic pandemic, the Women's March Tokyo would like to ask everyone forming this society to think about the kind of society you want to live in and what systems need to be challenged. We call all of you to draw a new vision of society and express them.

**Let's believe in ourselves and move forward.**

*February 3rd, 2021*

Women's March Tokyo 2021 Organizing Committee

## 8 March: all on strike!

7 March 2021, by [NPA-l'Anticapitaliste \(NPA-A\)](#)

At the same time, the strengthening of the family structure (encouraged by the health crisis) is accompanied by a reactionary offensive which had already been underway for several years. The retreat around MAP [1], to maintain moral order and the traditional family, is the latest proof of this. It is difficult to build collective structures because of the pandemic, but above all because of the authoritarian state. The law on separatism further accentuates the attacks against Muslims, but also, as we have seen in recent days, against the university and in particular against progressive currents of research. [2] Meanwhile, the extreme right is rising in the polls.

Since the 2010s we have seen the rebirth of a extremely combative mass feminist movement, which puts the question of structural violence at the heart of its struggle, but also the question of the capitalist system as a

whole. Starting in Latin America, relayed in Poland, in the Spanish state... this movement puts the question of the feminist strike at the centre and advances the need for a feminist struggle on an international scale. This summer, Zapatista activists will come from Chiapas - a region of Mexico - as part of an international tour to meet "all the people who are struggling on the five continents". Their delegation is mainly composed of women and their concerns are also ours: "The survival of humanity depends on the destruction of capitalism".

As has been the case for several years now, the call for a women's strike is being built internationally, to show that without women the world would not turn. With the Covid-19 crisis, it is even more visible today that it is women who overwhelmingly occupy the jobs and functions necessary for social reproduction. There is a challenge to keep alive a massive and

popular feminist movement, but also a movement that is able to make the link with anti-racist, antifascist and LGBTI movements. The date of 8 March must be the beginning of a response that is equal to what is at stake: everyone in the street and everyone on strike on 8 March!

*National Feminist Commission of the NPA*

## Footnotes

[1] The rejection by the French parliament of a proposal to open access to medically-assisted procreation to all.

[2] The law on separatism claims to crack down on online hate speech and foreign funding of religious groups but is seen as an attack on Islam in particular.

# On COVID and the Plague of Capital

6 March 2021, by [Graham Christensen](#), [Meleiza Figueroa](#), [Rob Wallace](#), [Suzi Weissman](#)

**Rob, we begin with you. In your *Monthly Review* article called “COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital,” you are talking about the systemic roots of COVID-19 and how it is situated within the context of the globalized capitalist economy.**

Industrial agriculture, habitat destruction, global commodity chains and the travel network have set up this perfect storm of conditions, not just for COVID, but also for future pandemics.

How can we get a wider systemic perspective on the current crisis? How vulnerable will we continue to be when we hopefully vanquish COVID-19?

**Rob Wallace:** Every outbreak that comes out just about annually, whether it's Zika or Ebola or some of the influenzas, tends to have us scramble to figure out what's going on. How is it spread, what is its clinical course? That is important because we need to know what they are doing; we need as a society to be able to respond.

Emergencies do happen, and we are obligated to intervene and make sure that any one outbreak doesn't spread so far as to kill so many people because of the capacities of these pathogens to do so. But in focusing on a particular virus or pathogen, we lose sight of the context in which many of these strains are spilling over and evolving across the rural-urban continuum.

The COVID-19 virus and these other pathogens are emerging out what we call a circuit of production. Some are at the point of contact in which industrial agriculture is cutting into the forest, increasing the interface between wildlife that is the pathogens' natural reservoir and spilling over into local livestock or laborers.

Despite how very different these viruses and pathogens are from each other in terms of their virology and

subsequent development, all are emerging out of this expanding circle of production beginning in the forests and expanding around the world.

**SW: You've made the connection between this emerging novel coronavirus and the globalized industrialized agriculture system, especially factory farming of livestock. Trump has made meatpacking an “essential” industry, which has increased the danger these workers are facing during the pandemic. Perhaps this is true for consumers as well. As we are facing economic catastrophe, how can we make substantial reforms to our food system, helping us weather the crisis and preventing future pandemics?**

RW: Our group Pandemic Research for the People, in which Graham and Meleiza participate, are putting out a call for action around exactly this topic. There are two levels: at the level of the farm, and at the level of the consumer.

Much industrial production produces essentially very genetically similar livestock, hog, poultry and game by the thousands. You might have a turkey barn with 15,000 turkeys that are pretty much genetically the same. If pathogens arrive, they don't really have to do much work to burn right through the whole group. There's no immunological firebreaks built into the system.

If you're a dangerous pathogen, you can get away with killing your host fast and the next host is right there. If you have 15,000 hosts with a similar genetic makeup, it pretty much selects the most virulent pathogens imaginable.

To protect your crop, you have to abandon the business model on which much industrial agriculture is being produced. You need to go back to treating agriculture as a natural economy.

You would reintroduce diversity of breeds into the rural landscape and in essence, reintroduce firebreaks. If some livestock survive an outbreak, those who have the genetic quirk that allows them to survive a pathogen would, in essence, act as the progenitors of the next generation.

Farmers around the world know this. But we've moved away from that knowledge by attempting to turn animals into widgets. And by turning farming into an industrial system, we have built a road that pathogens can travel.

## Agribusiness vs. Public Health

**SW: You talked about how agribusiness is at war with public health and that the public health system is losing. So maybe you could just talk a little bit about the politics at work. It seems that agribusiness, much like other industrial sectors, has considerable political power, but its ability to dominate stems less from the efficiencies they introduce and more their control of market access.**

RW: That means basically buying up politicians and state capitals around the country and around the world, and locking out alternatives that we very much need.

We can do agriculture so we don't actually produce all this pollution, we don't produce these pathogens, we don't force the meatpackers back into the factory during a pandemic. When we start to treat agriculture as a part and parcel of communities, both rural and urban, then we can get back on our feet.

This is very much a political problem. It's not merely the logistics of agriculture - it requires that we understand the process of food production and why we have chosen

this method. We all need to understand that what happens in one part of the globe very much impacts elsewhere.

**SW: Graham Christensen is a fifth-generation family northeastern Nebraska farmer. He is also the president and founder of G.S. Resolve. So what are those connections, Graham?**

GC: We have a fragile food system. I serve as a kind of messenger, being 40 years old and having witnessed firsthand a complete 180-degree shift from when I was a young person in the way food is being produced in our area.

What you've seen here is just a dismantling of regulations that were in place to check agribusiness from getting rampantly out of control, heavily concentrated and dominating the market, which has now become completely uncompetitive.

COVID-19 brought out a clear picture of where the disparities lie. In Nebraska, we have had a whole set of legislation that has further weakened our ability to make better decisions for ourselves. And that is combined with big-time federal policy issues like NAFTA, the neglect of antitrust enforcement and the debasement of country of origin labeling.

Consumers don't have access to transparency to decide where they want to get their food. It makes it tricky to support farmers that are doing things ethically in Nebraska right now.

With COVID, you've seen the meatpacking plants become hot spots for the transmittal of the virus. The University of Nebraska Medical Center recently showed us how this is impacting people from more diverse backgrounds. It's primarily impacting Hispanic workers and some of the communities that are newer to our area. This has revealed the disparities.

Over the past five to ten years everybody in Nebraska connected around the food issue is in unison around the demand for food sovereignty. This creates an opportunity for unification - whether

it's tribal lands, the inner city of north or south Omaha or in farmland USA — so that we can work together to come up with solutions that will create a superior system from what we have now.

Look, \$13 an hour are the wages that Costco tried to implement in Fremont, on the poultry production line for the largest poultry operation west of the Missouri River. We did get it raised to \$15 an hour after quite some debate, but put this in context. When I was born in 1979 in the same town, on the processing line, except for Hormel, those wages then were thirteen dollars an hour.

This is also the sixth year in a row that the average independent farmer has been in the red. This system of production is not working. People are hurting. When people are hurting and people's health is declining, then something is wrong.

It's the consumers who will ultimately drive the market. They're going to dictate the policy, so we've assembled about 80 different groups of folks and entities from different backgrounds so that we can come together with a more unified message.

We want to paint a picture and then show the solutions on how we get in front of this issue. Those solutions are regenerative agriculture and using more biodiverse applications, as Rob was describing. With a more local and regional food security focus we can have that transparency from consumer to the farmer, as it was at one time.

## Six Steps Toward Solutions

We have identified six initial actions to help move us forward.

Number one, we need to take care of the people working in the meatpacking plants. These people are unfairly being put into situations without proper protective equipment, sometimes being asked to even purchase the equipment themselves, even though they're on low-income wages.

We're asking for increased worker

protections, with pay and safety standards as the priority. We have to be able to restore human rights within the meatpacking industry.

Second, we need antitrust legislation to be enforced and updated so that we can restore the competitive mechanism in agriculture that can help independent farmers.

Number three, we need state inspection of meat processing. The USDA put a stranglehold against enabling small farmers to produce high-quality foods that can be funneled into our local area or regional trading. As we've seen with what's happened in the centralized meatpacking plants there is a real food security risk.

Four, we need to create a pathway to ownership for young and diverse people. If companies own the majority of land, it is probably game over for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and family farming as we know it. And that means that nutritional issues and health issues arising from lack of nutrition will increase.

As the baby boomer generation holds most of the farmland, the turnover in land over the next 15 years is crucial. Young people need a pathway to owning farmland so that they can be part of the solution.

Fifth, there needs to be a state-level ban on corporate farming in order to allow more independent operations to thrive.

Six, we need to implement strategic grain reserves. If the COVID-19 virus resurges or the next pandemic hits, we need to have an adequate food supply both for people and animals. This also creates another market for farmers that helps keep them afloat.

**SW I grew up in Montana, where of course those silos of grain reserves were everywhere. To underscore the connection between agriculture and capitalism, we see the rise of the pandemic and how rapidly it spread throughout the world. No corner is untouched but here in the United States, it's raging far more than should be the case because of the lack of**

## Leadership.

RW: It was accepted across both political parties that meatpacking plants needed to reopen. The governors across the Midwest, whether Democrat and Republican, rubber-stamped that decision because large agricultural concerns are the economic engine for many states. Governors were willing to cut off unemployment insurance as a way of forcing workers back into the plants.

Some basic questions were moved off the table in a way that requires everyday people to step up and intervene. What are our priorities? What do we need?

There is a sense that the political class has abandoned us. This requires everyday people to step up and push back and make sure that its demands are met. Just in terms of vaccines and antivirals, there is a long history of progressive demands that the latest in medical innovations be made available.

In Pandemic Research for the People (PREP) we've outline six different working groups. The first is rural, two of them have already been launched and we're on our way. The other ones we launched are prep neighborhoods to deal with some of the outbreaks occurring in urban areas. Criminal Negligence and Mutual Aid

**SW: Meleiza Figueroa, Rob talked about meatpackers being forced back to work. We've heard over and over again that we should sacrifice ourselves for the economy instead of having the economy serve the community. Could you comment on other ways in which the leadership has been not just absent, but has made things worse?**

MF: Absolutely, I would probably use the term "criminally negligent." Globalization has really set us up for this perfect storm. This is true not just in the food system, but in many other essential goods and services.

What this pandemic is really bringing home is the social vulnerability we have from having dismantled a lot of local systems of support in favor of monopoly-owned capital. Four to six

companies own almost 90% of the food chain. Local governments have been retooled to be value producers for real estate instead of guardians and protectors of the public interest.

I'm part of PREP Neighborhoods Working Group. Our objective is to consolidate and systematize knowledge from the ad hoc efforts of communities all over the country.

We're not reinventing the wheel from scratch. Communities of color and poor communities have survived through mutual aid, especially in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Mutual aid and disaster relief was an organizational response that came out of Katrina as well as Occupy Sandy.

Over many natural disasters, communities have developed a loose model where network of neighborhoods have organized for our own survival. This is in contrast to the government model of waiting for the government to organize a rescue, which is not going to happen, certainly not on the scale and timeline required.

So we've been talking about how we can help to amplify these efforts and make them available to community organizers who have been geared towards more pressure-type politics. What are government responses that could help us build the structures that we need to maintain ourselves and fight for more of what we actually need?

Demands come out of movements, so our first dispatch highlighted Southern Solidarity, which was based in New Orleans' Black community. This form of organizing is solidarity, not charity.

Let's build a model of what's necessary for our basic needs and make a political impact beginning at the local level. Local governments still have a lot of power, which has largely been relinquished in the last 40 years. So it's a matter of training city council people how to govern, to be accountable to public needs.

In the first wave of the pandemic people were making grocery deliveries and prescription pickups. How can we go beyond that? How can we create

new structures, working with local producers and also engaging local governments to addressing these issues?

Mutual aid for me gives a lot of hope because it is in many ways a moment for the knitting together of interconnected problems that have just been forced into plain view by this pandemic.

In my town in Chico, California we started a people's assembly as a result of the George Floyd protests to defund the police. We started asking questions: If we're going to defund the police, where should we put these public resources?

Almost immediately, a majority of people we've been talking to say we need to grow food again. These responses are coming from the vulnerabilities we're experiencing because of the pandemic. Same thing with labor — with teachers being forced to go back to schools.

In this way the pandemic is bringing those networks back together for, dare I say it, some kind of dual power type of a structure. Again, that's aspirational, but mutual aid is the core. And I hope that this perfect storm will lead to a solution.

## Capitalism: Solution or Problem?

**SW: You have been dancing around the obvious point of how capitalism has made all of this much worse. The conventional wisdom is that capitalism frees up human creativity — that's how we get scientific and other innovation because people aren't hobbled by structures. Yet each of you has been talking about how gutted these structures are, given the profit motive.**

One of the stories this week is how in Los Angeles a factory producing masks had to be shut down. Many of its employees tested positive for the virus. Throughout this pandemic something so basic as just producing

and distributing protective equipment is unable to be done. Hospital workers were wearing trash bags.

We have the most expensive health care system in the world yet there's not enough beds. How many of the solutions to the problem have been handcuffed by capitalism?

RW: I certainly have my personal stance about capitalism, but around the world you've had a variety of countries that have been able to respond to this in a way that the United States and Europe, for the most part, have not. I think profit can get in the way of delivering on many of the services that are necessary to keep society running.

In terms of how the outbreak was handled, different countries were able to respond because they see governance as something helping the people with which you rule or rule with or rule over however you want to put it. The notion that governance is supposed to help people in their time of need is a really weird, wild concept here in the United States.

Capitalism has much to do with it, but particularly in the United States example, we're turning capital back into money. That's a way of saying

that the Apple class is cashing out and that they can only see public services as the means of their getting rich. This is a different cycle of accumulation than that during World War II.

China is a case where they built a public health system as a means of being able to project imperial might. And what's remarkable is that in the matter of months in the United States we seemed to signal not only the world, but to people here, that we are no longer in the business of maintaining that infrastructure.

We see our country where the political class is almost on strike against the notion of running a government for our people, even if the objective is to accumulate profit. This is where efforts are required that Meleiza described of mutual aid.

There's also a long history of progressive forces organizing in the neighborhoods as well as in the factories. And in fact, these two things are tied together. If a factory went on strike, it's important that the neighborhood support it. Chambers of Commerce emerged in part because they were very much disturbed by the chambers of labor that came out in their neighborhoods in support of workers and their strikes.

There were decades of organizing in rural areas to push back against what was, in essence, East Coast-backed agribusiness. They wanted to preserve the rights of rural communities to defend their town economies from being gutted.

So in order to find our solutions, they have to be embedded in more local, regional-based ways of actually exercising political power. That doesn't mean that we don't keep track about what's going on elsewhere - in fact it is how we learn. When we speak about local and regional, we're not closing ourselves off from learning and working with people elsewhere.

Already we've learned a lot across neighborhoods and rural areas together. In fact it speaks to what could be a future politics going forward and healing the gap that the political class has taken advantage of, in dividing the rural from urban — both Republicans and Democrats have made a lot of political hay out of that — and it must come down to everyday people reaching across and organizing in such a way that ends this division.

*This interview is excerpted and edited from the Suzi Weissman's Jacobin Radio program on KPFF in Los Angeles. [Against the Current](#).*

## Don't let Dimitris Koufodinas die!

5 March 2021, by [Andreas Sartzekis](#)

### Unfounded legal justifications

The latest example is the refusal to accede to the request of Dimitris Koufodinas, a member of the 17 November group sentenced to life imprisonment for murder, to be returned to the prison of Korydallos, in the Athenian suburbs, as required by law. Koufodinas began a hunger strike on 8 January in pursuance of this demand.

The weak team around Mitsotakis is burying in baseless legal justifications for this refusal, and keeping him in a

high-security prison far from Athens. This raises the real question: why this murderous relentlessness on the part of the authorities? It is put presented as a desire for family revenge, one of the victims of the terrorist group having been the Prime Minister's brother-in-law.

But this explanation, which could be used by Mitsotakis in the context of "ancient traditions of revenge", does not hold. On the one hand Dora Bakoyannis, the widow of the victim and former foreign minister, is demanding that the law be respected. And above all, because what is becoming increasingly clear that this is to divert attention from the fact that

this extreme right - despite all the gifts it has made to the big media bosses - can no longer hide that it is incapable of dealing with the situation, especially on the health front, where its refusal to recruit care workers and open beds has led to a very serious situation: only 12 free resuscitation beds left in the Athens region today!

The polls show a sharp fall in positive opinions, the right is starting to tear itself apart, and what Mitsotakis and his extreme right-wing ministers (in particular the Minister of the Interior, a former leader of fascist organisations) are looking for is to revive themselves by closing the ranks

of conservatives and extreme right-wing extremists. Koufoudinas could well be an ideal victim of this cynical strategy.

## Preventing this foreseeable crime

What the great strategist (seriously nicknamed Moses by part of his fan club!) Mitsotakis certainly did not expect was that the just claim of the prisoner Koufoudinas would be supported not only by the radical left, the libertarians and the whole anarchist movement, but also by Syriza, the KKE and even the PASOK (under its new name of Kinal). And above all, there is also a good part of the social movement which demands respect for human rights, and in this case prisoners' rights. The student movement, the national federation of the public sector ADEDY, the national union of sailors, the unions of lawyers (that of Piraeus in particular), and even the union of judges and magistrates, without forgetting members of the right in power, who

refuse to be associated with such a denial of human rights, are mobilizing to prevent the death of Koufoudinas, who has now started a thirst strike.

The first gatherings, which took place quite early on, were immediately gassed and beaten by the police. But in recent days, the indignation has become such that thousands of demonstrators have been marching in Athens since Sunday, without the police being able to stop them. As a result, the authorities are trying to silence the protest by "shutting down" the Facebook pages (through the French multinational Teleperformance). Among the targets is the website of the organisation Synantissi (see their press release below).

To prevent what could be the first death on European soil of a prisoner on hunger strike since Bobby Sands and his comrades condemned by Thatcher, international solidarity is urgent. Doctors are very pessimistic for the coming days. In order to prevent this foreseeable crime,

everywhere let our voice be heard for the respect of human rights, the respect of prisoners' rights!

1 March 2021

**This emergency motion was adopted by the International Committee of the Fourth International on 23 February 2021.**

The International Committee of the Fourth International urgently demands the fulfilment of the just demands of the political prisoner Dimitris Koufoudinas, who has been on a hunger-strike since January 8, 2021. If the Greek government does not take immediate action, the loss of his life or irreversible damage to his health is imminent.

We demand:

- that he be transferred to Korydallos prison;
- a stop to all arbitrary legal and factual interventions against him;
- a stop to all discriminatory treatment against him.

## Transition, Trauma, and Troubled Times

4 March 2021, by [Against the Current Editors](#)

It will take quite a while to assess the lasting impact of these events and their likely aftershocks. The second impeachment trial of Donald Trump ended as everyone knew it would: with overwhelming proof of his guilt, and his acquittal with Republican Senators refusing to convict. But multiple ironies and contradictions remain, as the continuous criminal enterprise of the Trump administration finally gives way to the "normal" workings of the U.S. capitalist state under the centrist neoliberalism of Biden, Harris, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer.

Consider the striking contrast between progressive uprisings in so many countries against anti-democratic repression and corruption, which we plan to discuss in their own right — in presidents-for-life Putin's Russia and Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus, in Hong Kong, in Peru, in

Poland and Argentina with women mobilizing for abortion rights, in India with farmers mobilizing against the regime's attack on their survival, in the revival of the Arab uprising in Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria, and now in Burma protesting the military coup — versus the spectacle of the Trump-and-QAnon-fuelled white-supremacist riot of January 6.

Most dramatic as we go to press, the resistance to the coup of the generals in Myanmar (Burma) has become a potentially world-shaking event — a mass strike, including walkouts and road blockades as well as daily street mobilizations by an outraged population. Although the movement is unarmed in the face of the coup regime's tanks, the military is vulnerable: Its mafia-like control of the country's economy can be crippled if the internal revolt wins support

from international sanctions. Most important of all are signs that the popular movement is overcoming its devastating weakness — its long silence on the military's brutal war against the Rohingya people and other oppressed ethnic minorities.

Another contrast is Biden's headline-making executive orders undoing some (not all) of Trump's most cynical and vicious moves, despite his almost entirely conventional roster of top Cabinet appointments. The picture of a fast-moving "first 100 days" of the new presidency reflects partly its sheer contrast with Trump — but also Biden's relatively large-scale relief and economic stimulus and vaccination proposals.

These moves are forced by the monstrous scale of the objective crisis: The U.S. economy shrank by 3.5% in

2020, with recovery still far off — especially for African-American and Latina women whose jobs and income have been devastated. The normal slow, cautious “bipartisan” approach would be a guaranteed failure.

Another irony lies in the contradictions besetting the Republican Party in Trump’s wake. The big tweet-now-without-tweet expanded the size and enthusiasm of its voter base, building his personality cult and energizing the ugliest nativist and white-supremacist elements in U.S. society, and tens of millions now living in a reality-free alternative universe where Trump’s “landslide reelection” was “stolen.”

This now renders the party hostage to a far-right and conspiracy-sotted cohort that makes up about half its voting base — as shown in polls by the 45% of Trump voters who approved the Capitol invasion, and 50% of Republicans favoring a large continuing role for him in the party — making it a somewhat less reliable and useful instrument for capital. The “Grand Old Party” is in the early stage of a vicious internal war.

The infighting among Republican politicians, operatives and donors reflects this interesting dilemma of a party trying to hold together two visions of American greatness. One is a degraded form of so-called “traditional conservatism” — mainly upholding austerity and service cuts for the populace, tax cuts and gilded opulence for corporate elites, U.S. military might to rule the world, and reverence for the “institutions” that both administer and disguise those policies. Against this so-called traditional conservatism has arisen is an undisguised cultish white nationalism that regards those very institutions with contempt, along with whatever democratic substance exists in political life.

## Left’s Difficulties

Most important for those of us on the socialist left, however, is the problem of our own situation, on which we’ll focus in most of the remainder of this statement.

Like most of the country and the rest of the world, we were relieved by the end of the disgraced Trump reign, and inspired by the African American and Latinx organizing that overcame voter suppression in critically important states. But we have no illusions that the Biden-Harris election brings anything like “unity” or overcomes the racist polarization that’s poisoning the U.S. working class.

The roots of the toxic politics in this country are aptly summarized by Jackson Lears (New York Review of Books, January 14, 2021, in a sharply critical review of Anne Applebaum’s *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*): “The Democratic Party’s turn toward market-driven policies, the bipartisan dismantling of the public sphere, the in-flight marriage of Wall Street and Silicon Valley in the cockpit of globalization — these interventions constituted the long con of neoliberal governance, which enriched a small minority of Americans while ravaging most of the rest.”

The electoral consequences of those dynamics are discussed in considerable detail in Kim Moody’s essay on the 2020 election in this issue of *Against the Current*. And if the initial energy of Biden’s initiatives goes somewhat beyond what might have been expected from this background, that reflects the gravity of the crisis much more than any pressure from the Bernie Sanders and “the squad” wing of the Democratic Party.

Certainly, the farther the Biden-Harris administration can be pushed — on stimulus and relief, on immigration and the catastrophe of detention and family separation, on the environment and mass incarceration and so much more — the better. But the capacity of the left to meaningfully intervene in today’s crises is sharply limited, not only by the small size and fragmentation of our organizations but even more by the grim fact that a sizable fraction of white working-class people have been attracted to the nativist, racist rightwing authoritarianism of “Trumpism.”

By no means is it appropriate to paint all working-class Trump voters with

the same broad brush, as hardened racists or “deplorables” or anything else. Nor are workers the majority of Trump’s hardcore supporters. But while people vote the way they do for many diverse reasons, it’s still true that some of the ugliest politics in this society have sunk deeper roots in the working class than the United States has seen in a long time — and at this moment, considerably stronger than the socialist left can claim.

Any notion that today’s U.S. left can be the leading force in mass working-class and social movement “united fronts” to confront and physically defeat far-right forces on the ground is, in most places, rhetorical delusion. That doesn’t mean that we can or should be silent or retreat — far from it. It does mean beginning with a sober appreciation of where we are.

## Moving Forward

We offer the following observations and suggestions to contribute to the vital discussions unfolding in various organizations and online platforms.

First: Social movements are the key forces in combating the right and pressuring, and ultimately resisting, the Biden/Harris administration, as they were in resisting the atrocities of the Trump regime and responding to serial police murders of unnamed Black and brown civilians. The most successful protest actions have been resolutely militant and tactically disciplined, with clear demands and democratic decision-making.

In these movements as well as in some of the promising resurgent labor struggles, left activists have a significant presence and make important organizing contributions. For example, in multiple cities these activists are at the core of housing rights and anti-eviction movements.

Second: The eruption of rightwing violence, which now directly targets political figures and government institutions, has compelled the FBI and Justice Department to openly recognize “far-right and white-supremacist domestic terrorism” as the “greatest security threat we face.” The drive to find and arrest

perpetrators of the January violence, and perhaps shut down some of the white-supremacist nexus, is underway.

There's no doubt that these ultra-reactionary forces pose a clear and present danger. It remains true nonetheless that the institutions of this capitalist, imperialist state are the greatest threat to civil liberties and democratic rights. The "domestic terror" legislation to be introduced in Congress will aim not only at the violent ultra-right, but also — probably sooner than later — against Black Lives Matter protesters, Indigenous and environmentalist water protectors, and others including the BDS (Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions) movement for Palestinian freedom.

A great many Democratic liberals and centrists have demonstrated an astounding ability to learn nothing from history and experience — as shown by the "unity" of response to the September 11, 2001 attacks that brought about the PATRIOT Act, Guantanamo, the Department of Homeland Security, and going further back into the 1980s and 1990s, the "war on drugs" and "tough on crime" legislation leading directly to racialized mass incarceration.

The necessity to fully investigate and dismantle the white-nationalist armed and dangerous network must absolutely not be allowed, in the name of achieving bipartisan consensus, into an even more dangerous expansion of

police and FBI surveillance and infiltration powers when existing laws are already more than sufficient.

Third: Even amidst the raging coronavirus pandemic that not only exposes but widens the brutal race and class stratifications in this society — and powerfully contributed to the growth of irrationalism, climate change denial, QAnon, the radicalization of Trumpism and widespread economic despair — a number of promising labor struggles have emerged.

These include actions by teachers and nurses on the pandemic front lines, organizing by Amazon and grocery workers, the victorious Hunts Point produce market Teamsters strike, and others. There's also a movement in the United Auto Workers, in the context of the jaw-dropping corruption within the top union leadership, seeking direct member election of top officers. In the current climate, that would be an enormous advance.

Working-class struggles, whether they're on the rise or retreat at a given moment, must always lie at the center of socialist attention and organizing. That's not because they substitute for other crucial movements — and certainly not because they put instant revolution on the agenda — but rather it's because the workers' movement ultimately makes it possible to win and keep serious democratic

and social changes.

That is especially true now in this pivotal time of upheaval and crisis. Even though the capacity of the socialist movement is constrained, there are sites of struggle where it makes a material difference. It's of enormous importance that for a large percentage of young people, "socialism" is no longer a forbidden word and, in fact, represents an increasingly attractive notion, even if in imprecisely defined forms.

Today's socialist U.S. left, however, is by no means a mass organization or capable of acting like one. The key to moving forward isn't by overestimating the left's strength, and certainly not by illusions in progressives permeating the Democratic Party to "push Biden to the left." The first-100-days flurry of executive actions will likely give way soon enough to the restoration of centrist ideology and sordid "bipartisan" compromise in conditions of political gridlock.

The most important place for activists is on the ground, building movements and grassroots forces that can force "the institutions" to address the mammoth crises facing us, and in the process fight to expand a democracy based not on ritual form, but substance.

*March-April 2021, [Against The Current 211](#).*

## The Historical Significance of the 2019 Hong Kong Resistance Movement

3 March 2021, by [Au Loong-Yu](#)

THANKS LAUSAN FOR organizing this exchange. I will like to give a seven-point presentation on the topic of "the historical significance of the 2019 Hong Kong resistance movement," which my book attempted to cover. But first let me share with you my experiences in relation to my writings on the 2019 Revolt.

From the very beginning I already planned to write both English and

Chinese editions. Soon I realized that this required different approaches for different editions as the readers are so different in perspective. How could I please both sides? Western readers are likely to be troubled by the fact that, for instance, Hong Kong protesters copying Pepe the frog icons for their own use. So they asked: "aren't they far right"? Then I have to spend some time to explain that most

young people just thought the frog funny; they were not far right. Actually most were just new to the social movement and in the Hong Kong case most had no idea about right and left oppositional binary.

On the other hand, I have to respond to those Hong Kong young protesters who felt offended by being seen as far right. And then I have to explain that, yes, you just thought that the frog was

funny, but you cannot simply ignore the universal differentiation of right and left or what the rest of the world think about the frog. If you send the wrong message to the world you will mislead yourself in finding the right allies. So in certain sense my book, both in English and Chinese editions, attempt to bridge the gap of understanding between Hong Kong protesters and English-speaking readers. It is up to you to decide how successful I have been.

Now for the seven points:

**1. First about the characterization of last year's revolt.** It was basically a popular democratic movement, not one manipulated by the United States or the United Kingdom. This movement was not even about Hong Kong independence. It does not mean that the U.S. empire did not intervene, or that no one demanded HK independence. But they were far from significant enough to really influence the movement's momentum or direction. What unified the two million protesters were the five demands, which were about opposing the Extradition Bill, police violence, and universal suffrage. These are all legitimate demands.

With last year's revolt we can say that for the first time in Hong Kong history the idea of democracy has taken root among the majority of the people. The 2014 Umbrella movement only received 40% of the public's support. In contrast, the 2019 Revolt consistently got 60-70% support. On top of this, a big section of the "1997 generation" now grasps the idea that direct actions are always required for a democratic struggle to succeed. This in itself is a spectacular success. And this is in a historical context where Hong Kong was the only city in China daring enough to rise up against Beijing as the rest of the country has been under harsh repression since 1989.

**2. About foreign forces.** Surely there were pro-Trump parties and pro-independence parties, but they were all very small. In general party politics are very weak and fragmented in Hong Kong. However, this weakness is compensated by a big pro-Trump tabloid. It was influential yet it did not

have any mechanism to make the movement accept its position. Do not forget that as a whole the movement was leaderless. Such a huge movement definitely included a whole range of contradictory tendencies.

We must not be fooled by the highly selective reports made by the mainstream Western media that often focused on protesters waving U.S. flags. There was a mass rally in support of the Catalanian struggle, and there were protesters waving Catalan flags during demonstrations, but these were under-reported. There was also a rally in solidarity with Catalonia which 3000 joined, not as big as the pro-Trump rally, still big enough not to be ignored. Before the rally right-wing localists tried to persuade the organizers not to hold it as this would piss off their American ally, but the rally went ahead regardless.

One must also be aware of the fact that the foreign forces in Hong Kong have always been localized, something which certain leftists chose to neglect when they decided not to stand with the HK revolt. It is none other than Beijing itself which has helped the UK and the U.S. to continue to have some political and economic influence. Its Basic Law for Hong Kong officially allows it, including allowing British judges to be employed in our courts. Yes, this is a colonial legacy that should be done away with. But it should be replaced by something better, not worse. Replacing British common laws with the Chinese legal system is definitely making things worse for Hong Kong Chinese.

**3. We also have to take note of a special feature of this great movement.** It was simultaneously a politically radical, but also socially conservative, movement. It was politically radical in the sense of having the guts to target Beijing and demand democracy, but also in the sense of its size and the means it adopted. For forty years, Hong Kong's democratic movement had been exceedingly peaceful. It did not even tolerate civil disobedience. The first time this taboo was broken was with the 2014 Umbrella Movement. And then in 2019 it was elevated to an entirely new plane.

On the other hand, it was also a movement which exhibits a social conservatism, which never questions anything about the free market alongside the huge economic inequalities it sustains. The movement was guided by the perspective of "Beijing versus Hong Kong," which implied that anyone who is against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is our friend, including Trump. Whenever there were suggestions that we should also be concerned about the huge wealth inequality and the dire situation of the poor, this was seen as irrelevant to the current struggle and hence totally ignored. Most of the protesters gave no thought to this because they saw Beijing as the main enemy, and the revolt must prioritize an all-people alliance against Beijing. But there was also a very strong conservative voice, which would oppose in principle bringing the issue of redistributive justice into the democratic movement at all.

I argue that this is because of the deep-rooted social conservatism here. Hong Kong was, and to a certain remains, a free port colony but a very successful one. After a long period of economic prosperity, half of the population live in government subsidized housing etc, and all of these make any leftist critique of the free market ideology obsolete. The laboring class would not oppose the idea of a welfare state, but most do not feel urgent or confident to demand it either.

**4. This brings us to a fourth feature of the revolt, namely the influence of localism.** For many, localism only means their Hong Kong identity, that the people here deserve the right to determine their future. But there has been a hard-core right-wing localism that is in practical alliance with the U.S. conservative establishment. They were organisationally weak, but the absence of organized leftists allowed right-wing localists to have a much bigger voice than its actual organisational strength. It was not strong enough to steer the whole movement to its agenda of aligning with the U.S. government or of racist physical attacks on Mainland Chinese, but it was still able to hold actions involving thousands. These appealed

to Trump and made racist verbal attacks on Mainland immigrants.

Although these actions did not have any grave consequence for the Hong Kong revolt per se, it gave Beijing a good excuse to describe the movement as anti-Chinese. Under the party's censorship, many Mainland Chinese did believe its propaganda, and some of them did not feel safe about visiting Hong Kong. This was, and is, detrimental to HK's democratic movement as well, because the long-term success of Hong Kong depends on the success of the Chinese democratic movement. Revolution in one city is a pipe dream. The young activists are more or less aware of this, yet most seek allies in the West, not in the Chinese democratic movement. While most of them are not racists against the Chinese, neither do they have any faith in China's democratic future. The inability of Hong Kong people to think strategically, especially in relation to China, may continuously steer people in the right-wing localist's direction.

#### **5. One of the most interesting things about last year's revolt was the new trade union movement.**

The revolt started as a movement which was hostile to leaders and organizations, yet at the end of the day it also gave birth to a new trade union movement, led by young worker activists. The revolt also started as a movement whose perspective about democracy never extended beyond the political realm. Yet the revolt triggered off this new union movement which has the potential to extend the movement beyond the political realm and shake up industrial relations here. Most were small unions but there are also big unions. For instance, the Hospital Authority Employee Alliance (HAEA) has a membership of 20,000 out of 80,000 employees. It launched a successful five-day strike in February 2020 to demand the government close

the border with mainland China to stop the Covid-19 virus from spreading. Anyone who is serious about building an international labour movement will doubtless support the building of this new trade union movement while arguing for a leftist course.

**6. The rise of localism in Hong Kong could be progressive as long as it also consciously rejects the right-wing discourse of racism and Sinophobia.** I argue for the demand of Hong Kong self-determination but linked to the demand for democratization of China as well, including the self-determination for ethnic minorities in all China. If there is strong separatism among minorities in Tibet and Xijiang and Taiwan and Hong Kong, it is the Beijing regime which is to be blamed.

Nearly a century ago, both the Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) and the CCP pursued the re-unification of the Chinese nation as a response to the colonization and occupation by imperial powers. But the CCP's course of actions was different from the KMT. The CCP was to achieve the same ends by the means of recognition of self-determination for all minorities. And this was what helped the CCP to win over the progressive elements of the minorities at that time and finally helped it to come to power. The party's eventual abandonment of its program of self-determination, among many other broken promises, has determined its own degeneration until it reached a point that the party today has evolved into a party of bureaucratic capitalists.

While a democratic alliance of Han Chinese and other ethnic minorities, on the basis of self-determination, remains a progressive agenda, this could only be achieved by the absence of the CCP dictatorship or any one-

party dictatorship. The campist's argument of supporting the CCP regime so as to promote a "national re-unification" is like squaring a circle.

#### **7. It was the young generation, or what I called the "1997 generation," which was the vanguard of last year's revolt.**

However, within a year Beijing retaliated by imposing its National Security law on us. From the perspective of the direct result of these two years of struggle, one could say that we have lost the battle.

In view of the ongoing harsh repression, it will take a long time for the movement to rise up again. In essence, the great contribution of the "1997 generation" was that they were able to throw away the old liberal's illusion of convincing Beijing to give us democracy and based on this they launched a great revolt. That was what they were capable of. But they had no hope of success as well, given the relationship of forces and their own inadequacy.

It reminds me of the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes," where the boy yelled "the Emperor is naked!" Hence the boy created a political crisis for the emperor, but obviously he was not in a position to solve it. Similarly, the young people had been brave enough to trigger off a great revolt against Beijing, but they were not politically equipped to lead it to victory for this time. They thought the 2019 revolt was the end game. They were wrong. It was just the beginning of a long-term struggle. Nevertheless, the 2019 Revolt does constitute a new departure point for this long march and for this we must thank the youth for their selfless sacrifices.

**Read a review of [Hong Kong in Revolt](#).**

Source [Against the Current](#).

## **Myanmar Workers and Unions on the Front**

# Lines in Fight Against Coup

2 March 2021, by [Kevin Lin](#)

On February 1, the Myanmar military staged a coup and seized power from the elected civilian government under the pretext of alleged election fraud. The coup leaders detained top government leaders and activists, shut off the internet, and suspended flights. This marks a dark and uncertain turn in the country's decade-long, fraught experiment with partial democratization.

The coup threatens to reverse gains in Myanmar in democratic rights. A strong labor movement has been building for a decade through militant struggle by factory workers, preparing them for a strong showing in the current uprising. Building on the growing walkouts by public and private sector workers over the last three weeks, the general strikes since February 22 are now offering the best hope to resist the coup and to build a stronger labor movement beyond.

## Workers' revolt

Soon after the coup was declared, a massive, civil disobedience movement emerged, with workers and trade unions front and center. In one of the earliest mobilizations, medical workers from over 110 hospitals and health departments in 50 townships across Myanmar were among the first who rose up and went on strike, two days after the coup. In one government hospital, 38 out of 40 doctors and 50 out of 70 nurses struck.

"There is no way we can work under a dictatorship," said Dr. Kyaw Zin, a surgeon who led one of the first strikes. "I am pretty sure we can bring down the regime. We will never go back to work until [Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader] steps down. He has no right to tell us to come to work, because no one recognizes him as the leader."

The trade union federations were quick to mobilize. The Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM),

the largest trade union federation in Myanmar, called for the first general strike on February 8. Despite threats of arrest and growing repressive tactics from the government, workers in a wide range of sectors, including garbage collectors, firefighters, electricity workers, private bank employees, and garment workers initiated waves of strikes, and many joined street demonstrations.

Teachers were quick to join the movement with their students. Seven teachers' unions, including the 100,000-strong Myanmar Teachers' Federation that covers primary and higher education and monastery schools, announced work stoppages.

Journalists, too, have been walking off of the job. In response to the coup and threats to media freedom, members of the Myanmar Press Council and more than a dozen journalists at The Myanmar Times have resigned.

Importantly, employees from municipal governments and the ministries of Commerce, Electricity and Energy, Transport and Communications, and Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation have joined the strike actions, leaving many departments deserted in the past week. The labor actions hit particularly hard in the transportation sector. According to an official from the Myanmar Railways (MR), 99 percent of railway employees are on strike, leading to a shutdown of train services.

Striking workers managed to shut down the military-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, Myanmar National Airlines, mines, construction sites, garment factories, and schools, creating economic costs for the military rulers. The workers were joined by consumers boycotting the military's extensive business interests in food and beverage products, cigarettes, the entertainment industry, internet service providers, banks, financial enterprises, hospitals, oil companies, and wholesale markets

and retail businesses.

The military has responded with repression. Workers and students have been arrested for participating in the peaceful protests, and the military has started to use deadly force, already killing three.

## Garment workers paved the way

Myanmar workers' militancy has been building over several years. As the country opened itself up for foreign direct investment nearly a decade ago, the government agreed to major labor law reforms, legalizing trade unions and codifying labor rights in the 2011 Labor Organization Law. It also incorporated labor dispute resolution mechanisms in its 2012 Labour Disputes Settlement Law.

However, Myanmar labor activists have argued that the laws seek to channel workers into legal avenues that are far less powerful than their militant, mass actions to demand real improvements to harsh working conditions and the low minimum wage, which currently stands at 4,800 kyats (U.S.\$3.26 per day).

A wave of militant strikes swept the garment sector in 2019 to demand higher wages and safer working conditions. The \$6 billion industry, which employs 700,000 mostly female workers, supplies global brands such as H&M, Zara, C&A, among others. It accounted for 30 percent of Myanmar's exports that year—up from 7 percent in 2011, when the country's democratic reforms began.

"When one strike happens, other workers see that the strike works," said Daw Moe Sandar Myint, a leader of the Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar and herself a former garment worker, describing the strike wave in the garment sector. "They come to know the taste of the strike, and it is a good taste. The strike also gives them the union."

But the onset of Covid was a setback for militant union struggles, interrupting the strike wave and the growing unionization in the sector. Employers took advantage of the business disruptions wrought by the pandemic to bust unions by laying off their members.

Factory workers' demands for a minimum wage increase and safer conditions were also ignored, and they suffered wage cuts or delayed wage payment. Many fought back despite the more difficult organizing conditions; workers at multiple factories went on strike early in the pandemic to receive their unpaid salaries and compensation for their dismissal.

For example, in March 2020, the Myan Mode garment factory permanently fired all 520 union members and withheld their wages, citing Covid, while keeping its 700 non-union workers. The union organized protests and was able to secure withheld wages for the dismissed workers.

Despite the setbacks during the pandemic, when the Myanmar military moved to undermine democracy, many garment workers felt they had had enough and were ready for a fight. "Workers were already angry, they were already activated", said Daw Moe Sandar Myint, who has been on the frontlines of the movement against the coup. "A familiar feeling of suffering had returned and they could not stay silent." This anger pushed her and many others to lead factory workers into the movement.

Garment workers were among the first to call for street protests and mobilize in the street despite the coup leaders' stern warning. This helped boost the confidence of the civil disobedience movement. As Andrew Tillett-Saks, a labor organizer based in Myanmar, emphasizes, "The sight of industrial workers, largely young, women garment workers, seems to have deeply inspired the general public, broken down some of the fear, and catalyzed the massive protests and general strike we are seeing now."

"Workers and unions are the main force of the movement in Yangon [the

country's largest city]," labor and human rights activist Thet Swe Win agreed. "Because there are many thousands of workers from the factories, their gatherings in the street are going to get a lot of attention from the people.

"They are taking a lot of risks to take this kind of action," she said. "Many of the labor leaders have been fired before. They have been oppressed by the government and factory owners. They are very vulnerable but they are very dedicated."

For her role in mobilizing and leading garment workers in the civil disobedience movement, Daw Moe Sandar Myint's home was raided on February 6. She was able to avoid arrest, and miraculously continues to lead protests by day. But by night, she has to hide from the authorities looking for her.

The organized participation of workers and their unions in both the public and private sectors is one of the most crucial factors pushing the civil disobedience movement forward and determining the future of Myanmar.

Tillett-Saks pointed out that the civil disobedience movement has been led primarily by government employees and garment workers in the private sector. He believes that they are the last line of defense against the military dictatorship. The more recent general strikes since February 22 have seen participation from workers across a greater spectrum of Myanmar society. The challenge remains to further expand worker militancy and increase strike actions among more private sector and non-unionized workers.

## Why international solidarity matters

In the face of increasing repression by the military—including the issuance of arrest warrants for eight CTUM leaders earlier this week—international pressure is more urgent than ever to protect the democratic rights of workers and their unions.

"International support means a lot to

us," said Thet Swe Win. "It helps us feel we are not alone, and to know there are people out there supporting our freedom and liberty."

Labor and human rights groups have organized protests outside of Myanmar embassies and issued solidarity statements condemning the coup in Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Cambodia, and the Philippines, among other places.

## Strike fund

Workers and unions can contribute to a strike fund that has been set up to support Myanmar labor unions. Now is the moment to apply the direct pressure that is needed to force the military to back down.

It is not difficult to understand why the movement has found resonance and sparked such an outpouring of support in the region. Protesters in other countries express solidarity given the common challenge of undemocratic rule and ongoing repression against unionists and civil society groups. Places like Hong Kong and Thailand have recently seen their own mass democratic protest movements.

Kamz Deligente at the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights in the Philippines, which has been campaigning against violent attacks on unionists in the country, said: "The Filipino people can also identify with the struggle of Myanmar, as our current government, specifically the Executive branch, is dominated by retired military men and is running the country under a de facto martial law. This greatly contributed to the intensified attacks against activists and critics of Duterte and his administration."

MIGRANT WORKERS

Many countries in the region are also connected through migrant workers from Myanmar who work in factories, construction, fishing, and other sectors. In Thailand, a few dozen of the estimated three to four million migrant workers from Myanmar protested in front of the Myanmar embassy in the days immediately after the coup. In Japan, hundreds of

Myanmar workers also held a protest outside of the United Nations office.

In Taiwan, around 400 Myanmar immigrants rallied to condemn the military coup in New Taipei City, where many of them live. Lennon Ying-Dah Wong of Serve the People Association, which works with immigrant workers, warned, “A dictatorship ruled by the notorious junta might embrace a migrant-export policy to squeeze fees and remittances from its citizens who are forced to go abroad to work, but also totally neglect their rights. If this happens, it will endanger the rights and welfare of not only Burmese migrant workers, but all migrant workers and Taiwanese workers as well.”

## Pressure the

## brands

The Industrial Workers’ Federation of Myanmar, the country’s largest garment worker union, has called on global unions to pressure brands doing business in Myanmar to condemn the coup and cut ties to businesses that benefit the military’s interests (see box below for a list). It has also called for workers to be protected from dismissal for protesting.

Ten international unions representing 200 million workers have called on unions globally to ramp up pressure on governments and corporations to target the commercial interests of the Myanmar military.

For unions and rank-and-file workers in the U.S. and elsewhere, building concrete solidarity with Myanmar

workers means actively responding to such calls by issuing statements to condemn the coup, pressuring companies that do business in Myanmar to do the same, and calling for employers to sever any ties in their supply chains with the business interests of the military.

Workers in Myanmar have demonstrated that direct actions are powerful and they work. Whether by organizing and engaging in militant strikes in their workplace, or by walking off their jobs and joining street demonstrations, they are fighting to defend their democratic rights and win a better life for workers in the country and around the world. They need—and deserve—our support.

26 February 2021

Source [Labor Notes](#)

# Corporate giants censor the internet and control the news

1 March 2021, by [Daniel Taylor](#)

This development is scary, but not because any heroic local media corporations are being bullied by Yankee tech giants. It’s a disturbing demonstration of how the commercialisation of the internet can lead to sweeping censorship. And while that dark trend accelerates, Australia’s political class isn’t worried about defending free speech or democracy—they’re only worried about propping up the profit margins of their allies in the corporate media. If we want to defend our right to communicate freely, we’ll have to do it ourselves.

For those of us involved in publishing independent media, it was a pretty unpleasant way to be woken up. Red Flag’s Facebook page is still its most popular social media account—or it was, until it was disappeared at dawn, along with a swathe of non-profit advocacy groups and information outlets, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Bureau of Meteorology. (Most of the

non-profits have been restored, but the independent journalism outfits are still mostly offline, including Red Flag.)

Any Australian Facebook user who tries to post a link to a news story gets an error message, even if you’re posting in, say, a private Facebook group devoted to refugee rights activism, and you try posting a news story about a development in an important legal case. So one of the most important, widely used, and universally accessible platforms for political discussion has banned an entire continent from using it to access, distribute or discuss journalism. In this case, it’s not because of a political crackdown. It’s because of a dispute between two sets of reprehensible corporate behemoths: the tech giants like Google and Facebook, and the vile Australian corporate media, who are used to being cosseted by Australian governments.

Australia’s media has been deregulated over and over again in the interest of a few bloated conglomerates, leading to one of the world’s most notoriously concentrated, low-quality, and right-wing media landscapes, of which Rupert Murdoch is only the most globally infamous spawn. Here in Australia, we also have to deal with specimens like Kerry Stokes, the billionaire boss of the Channel 7 empire; he’s also a big mining and construction-equipment capitalist, and he’s recently taken up a side-gig in defending, promoting and hiring alleged child-killing war criminals.

Australia’s media barons have spent decades promoting climate denial, racism, and right-wing politics generally, while expecting all of Australia’s media regulations to be tailored to their commercial interests—which they mostly are. Now that their own business models are failing, they want the government to force America’s equally evil, but

arguably more terrifying, tech giants to pay Australian news companies a fee. It's a pretty self-evidently absurd rent-seeking proposal: Australia's media corporations demand access to the social media platforms and Google's search engines, but then insist that the platforms pay them for the privilege of displaying the content.

But Facebook's response—shutting down Australian news completely and with no course of appeal—reveals the terrible reality of the contemporary internet: it's a space more and more dominated by corporate interests, where communication happens only to the extent that it satisfies shareholders and advertisers.

The early internet had something of the air of an academic conference, partly because most of its users were, indeed, academics. E-mail lists, usenet groups, IRC and other platforms were non-commercial. They weren't designed to display embedded ads based on algorithmic consumer analysis. They were just ways to communicate. But as the profit-generating potential of instantaneous global communication has been mined for decades, the online ecosystem has been transformed. Now the most widely used platforms are dominated by massive corporations, each trying to wall off its own section of the internet and shape the content to its own commercial needs.

The tech giants' recent campaign

against "fake news" led a few hypocritical right-wingers to make a legitimate point. After Twitter began censoring articles about Joe Biden's son, Ted Cruz interrogated Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey in a congressional hearing: "Who the hell elected you and put you in charge of what the media are allowed to report and what the American people are allowed to hear?" It's a good question. The social media corporations are unelected and unaccountable except to their capitalist owners. But there's another problem: the mainstream media outlets are equally undemocratic and unaccountable, and so is every other corporation in modern global capitalism. And between them, they now dominate an indispensable communications technology with enormous democratic potential.

As part of its commercial fight in Australia, Facebook has banned the news for now. But before that, it was already restricting the reach of political content, throttling the output of "extremist" publishers, introducing politically biased algorithms, and summarily banning anarchists and socialists—in part, because it was trying to ingratiate itself with the US political establishment. There was no way for users to democratically resist or overturn these decisions. And before social media came along, the traditional media outlets were well known to be corporate propaganda outfits. Some hoped that the development of the internet would disintegrate the corporate control of

ideas and information, but the censorious, commercialised nature of today's social media shows that that dream will never come true as long as capitalist decision-making governs the use of the technology.

And in that context, demanding the capitalist state take over the social media outfits isn't enough. After all, Australia's capitalist state has nurtured Murdoch and Stokes, while the US capitalist state is pressuring Facebook to censor radical politics. It's hard to imagine that a version of Facebook run by the US and Australian governments, with the technology supplied by the NSA and ASIO, would be a great improvement on what we have now.

Radicals are going to have to take seriously the challenges of organising to disseminate and discuss information using diverse technological platforms. (And make sure you're subscribed to our print edition and our email list, and follow our Instagram and our Twitter.) But we're also going to have to fight like hell against every act of censorship we face. And we're going to keep facing them, as long as the demands of profit-making, capitalist competition and authoritarian right-wing politics decide who can say what, and who's allowed to hear it.

*18 February 2021*

Source *Red Flag*.