



## IV289 - June 1997

### Garment workers revolt

3 June 1997, by **Ken Davis**

These factories are owned by investors from east Asia, using the opportunity of very low wages relative to other countries in the region, lack of any social protection, and eight-year tax holidays. Their home countries's quotas for garment exports to Europe are filled, so they take advantage of Cambodia's unfilled export quota.

Women make up 90% of the workforce in the garment factories. So it is no surprise that Ou Mary, a young woman garment worker was proposed as leader at the 15 December 1996 founding meeting of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, (FTUWKC). [1] The new union's initial objectives are a \$50 (US) per month wage, and a 44 hour, five and half day work week.

Two days later, a strike began at the Chinese-owned Cambodia Garments Limited factory on the road to the airport. Shots were fired against the rally of 3,000 workers. In a first for modern Cambodia, 4,000 workers marched to the National Assembly on 19 December. Workers returned to the factory on 22 December, following negotiations involving Rainsy which promised an increase of pay from \$35 to \$37 per month, and a decrease in hours from 72 to 47 per week, with up to \$1 extra pay for 4 hours overtime.

Strike leaders had been granted a

sympathetic audience with the King on 20 December, and on 26 December the government announced an agreement with 36 garment companies for \$40 per month pay, and paid sick leave.

The Gennon factory reached a similar agreement on 30 December, after a strike that began with a march on 24 December, with workers particularly angered at the regular strip searching of young women workers. The Wing Hwa and Integrity factories signed agreements on 4 January.

On 30 December, the Prime Minister declared that "in order to defend the national interest - and interests of both investors and workers - the government will continue to prevent illegal demonstrations incited by politicians who are against the government."

Days later, the Wing Hwa and Integrity factories signed agreements, but the (Hong Kong) owners of the Tack Fat factory threatened to move to Laos or Vietnam, when all 1,000 workers at their Cambodian sewing plant went on strike on 3 January. The factory makes garments for C&A in Britain, and Sears in Canada. Minister of Labour Suy Sem, accused the strikers of "destroying investment and the economy". On 9 January shots were fired at participants attending a rally at the factory. After 12 days of strike, an agreement was signed, but a

few days later, 13 women strike leaders were sacked.

In early February there were protests at the Chinese-owned Bluebird factory (demanding an increase in the \$10 per month basic pay). Soldiers locked 150 workers at Broadland factory into the plant to end a strike over unpaid wages. Several weeks later there were similar protests at the United Faith (Hong Kong owned) and Jin Chan factory.

### Unions revive under new labour law

Garment workers have not been the only ones to strike. Although public sector workers do not have the legal right to form unions or strike, associations and beneficial societies do exist among teachers, nurses and civil servants. In some areas, such as in Baktouk in January, teachers have taken strike action after long periods without receiving their \$20 per month salaries.

On 9 February workers at the Sanye tire factory locked up Chinese managers and Embassy officers, and began selling factory products. They had begun their strike on 11 January, in protest at the small amount of money paid to lease the factory and its

stocks; until 1993 the factory was a state enterprise partly owned by its 200 workers.

In the coastal province of Kampot, 400 young workers, without any prior union allegiance, occupied the Chakrey Ting Cement Factory for one month, beginning 19 March, defying surrounding police and military. They were protesting disciplinary action against eleven workers, by a new American boss from the Naga Cement consortium. They returned to work after winning their demands.

## Trade unions

Responding, a little too slowly, to the garment workers' struggle, the Cambodian Federation of Trade Unions began to reorganise itself. It was formed in 1979, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge regime, which had sought to eliminate all industry and all urban classes, including workers. Until its last congress in 1989, it was the instrument of the Communist Party and government among workers in the state owned sector. Through the reintroduction of capitalism in the early 1990s, it retained its staff and building, but was unable to recruit and build itself as a union federation that could represent workers in confrontation with the new, mainly foreign, private employers.

CFTU is represented on official bodies, such as the National Training Board. Its former links with the World Confederation of Trade Unions have atrophied, due to lack of finances, though it still manages a few exchange visits with the Lao and Vietnamese union federations.

The CFTU, which is led by Men Sam An, the most senior woman politician in the CPP, has begun to reissue membership cards, mainly to winery, port and transport workers. It is trying to recruit in some of the garment

factories, and plans to reorganise among workers in the moribund, (and about to be privatised) rubber plantations.

Worried about the prominence of Sam Rainsy among the garment strikers, Interior Minister, Sar Kheng, has lent his support to the new Cambodian Union Federation, led by Chuon Mom Thol, which claims 2,000 members in 30 factories.

An Independent Free Democratic Union of Cambodian Factory Workers has also been formed, rejecting the political allegiance of the FTUWKC to Sam Rainsy and his party. It is based in the Cambodia Garments Limited factory at Pochentong, where it claims to represent 1,800 of the 4,000-strong workforce. Another "non-aligned" union was formed on 19 January at the Ming Cheong factory, recruiting about a third of the 750 workers after the company demanded production increases without raising the \$1 per day pay. This union has gained support from the Asian-American Free Labor Institute. [2]

Also recently formed is the Cambodian Labour Organisation, an independent Cambodian NGO, led by Seng Pholly, and a group of refugees who returned from camps in Thailand in 1993. CLO has had some financial support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It provides Sunday training sessions, and research on industrial issues. Its activists were badly beaten by guards during the strike at the United Faith company on 26 February.

Under Cambodia's new labour law, passed on 10 January, workers will now vote for a single union to represent their workplace in negotiations with employers. It is unclear about how each union can legally register, and when these workplace elections might be held. While a "living wage" for Phnom Penh

is set at \$70 per month, legal wages in garment factories are to be raised only to \$40. Many workers are forced to work 84-105 hours per week, often for only \$25 per month. The new law mandates a 48 hour week, with no compulsory overtime, and paid annual leave. A second labour code, to cover workers in the public sector is being drafted.

Union fees are set at the equivalent of 20-40 cents per month, but very few "members" of any of the unions can afford even this. More often, workers "join" at launch rallies, where politicians and already designated union leaders distribute presents, such as radios.

In these difficult conditions, young women garment workers are leading a labour upsurge which is unprecedented in Cambodia. It is a revolt by the country's most oppressed workers against intolerable conditions, severe discipline, and extraordinarily long hours.

These young workers are increasingly frustrated at lack of change of their conditions, and are seeking new dynamic worker-leaders. Because of Cambodia's traumatic past, and present poverty, most of the militants have basic, but incomplete education. [3]

The militancy and leadership of so many young women is surprising, given the exclusion of women from political and administrative positions since the 1993 elections. [4]

One problematic aspect of the early days of this labour radicalisation has been the willingness of many ethnic Khmer workers, and Sam Rainsy, to echo traditional anti-Chinese rhetoric, while chanting slogans about workers' internationalism. Some of the new unions have excluded the super-exploited ethnic Vietnamese minority from their struggles.

## A Bitter Partnership is Breaking Down

## 3 June 1997, by **Ken Davis**

The Cambodian Peoples' Party, now led by one of the country's two Prime Ministers Hun Sen, lost the 1993 UN-organised elections (which cost \$2 bn.). But it refused to cede power, and joined a coalition with the winners, the royalist FUNCINPEC party, and the minority Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party.

Increasingly however both parties and both prime ministers present themselves as opponents. FUNCINPEC, led by first Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh, complains that the CCP has never really shared power. The royalists recently formed a National United Front, with smaller parties, including the Khmer Nation Party, led by Sam Rainsy, the most prominent of Cambodia's dissident politicians.

After invoking Cambodia's "eternal struggle" against the Vietnamese, even the ex-Khmer Rouges group led by Ieng Sary gave support to the front. Sary, once Pol Pot's number two, but now amnestied claims that only a few hundred people were killed during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-79), and that he knew nothing about it. Support in low and high places

Meanwhile, the Cambodian People's Party benefits from strong bases of support in several provinces, in the state administration, police and army, as an inheritance from their decade as governing Communist Party. Party leader Hun Sen is a talented orator, who travels the country addressing large gatherings of poor peasants, denouncing his foes, announcing the building of schools and clinics, and distributing gifts. The CPP has also formed an alliance with small parties and defectors from FUNCINPEC.

Hun Sen also has powerful backers in the Sino-Khmer bourgeoisie. Men like Theng Bun Ma, Cambodia's richest man, president of the Chamber of Commerce. On 7 April, shot out the tires of the Royal Air Cambodge plane after airport staff "lost" his \$5,000 excess baggage, to avoid an embarrassing drug search.

There was widespread fear of an armed confrontation on 14 April (Khmer new year), when Prince Sirivuddh, ex-Foreign Minister, attempted to return from exile in France. He was exiled a year ago after being accused of conspiring to kill Hun Sen (who says he will shoot down any plane trying to bring the Prince home).

Two days later, troops loyal to FUNCINPEC surrounded the airport, guarding First Prime Minister Ranariddh against a rumoured coup by Hun Sen.

### **Grenades signal death of coalition**

The March 30th grenade attack on protesters outside the Silver Pagoda and National Assembly buildings drew world attention to the worsening confrontation between the two main parties in the Coalition government.

The 200-strong protest for independence of the judiciary was organised by Sam Rainsy, head of the Kmer Nation Party, and FUNCINPEC finance minister until his expulsion in 1994. Four hand grenades, thrown by people on foot and on motorcycles, killed 19 people and wounded over 100 others, many very seriously. Several were young women garment worker activists. That evening, just metres down the road from the blood stains, Queen Monineath hosted a party at the palace for international guests at the South East Asian Biennial Film Festival.

Rainsy blamed co-Prime Minister Hun Sen, saying that unidentified soldiers, presumably the Prime Minister's guards, allowed the grenade throwers to leave in the direction of the CPP leadership compound, but prevented those trying to pursue them.

Hun Sen, while "vehemently condemning" the attack, threatened to arrest Rainsy for "provoking" the violence. Police even prevented

mourners laying wreaths at the site of the attack.

### **Who will be King?**

Adding to this instability has been the increasing tension about who will succeed the ailing King Sihanouk. Any prince of any of the three royal lines can be selected by the six member Throne Council. The most likely candidates are FUNCINPEC leader Prince Ranariddh (Sihanouk's son), and the exiled Prince Sirivuddh (Sihanouk's half-brother). But in mid-February, Sihanouk, from his home in Beijing, announced he might abdicate (again), ending the monarchy.

Suspecting that Sihanouk might revive his own political party and run for office, Hun Sen then threatened to cancel the elections, or at least prevent members of the royal family from taking part in politics.

Prince Sirivuddh's attempt to return to Cambodia provoked a split in FUNCINPEC with two governors and twelve parliamentarians joining the CCP alliance, giving Hun Sen majority support in the 120-member Assembly for the first time. Rumor has it that the defectors were given \$10,000 each, cars and other gifts.

The CCP has been able to strengthen the apparatus, and exacerbate the disarray of ten right-wing parties, but it offers no programme for Cambodia's development, other than that of the free market and foreign investment.

From his Beijing home, King Sihanouk has called for a "hardline Revolution" to overcome the "division, corruption, governmental, administrative and military disorganisation, permanent deforestation, trafficking of all kinds, wild capitalism, the systematic destruction of national resources, the irreversible 'de facto' partition of the State, the decline of moral values at the heart of society, [and] the irresistible advance of AIDS".

## Rainsy capitalises on workers' struggle

The King is not the only politician willing to rail against corruption and exploitation. In his war against "the Communists" (CCP) Sam Rainsy also demands an end to foreign aid, which

provides \$500 million each year, matching the national budget of \$580 million. He also called for the regional co-operation group ASEAN to delay the admission of Cambodia, which is planned to coincide with that of Laos and Burma in July, when the ASEAN foreign ministers gather in Kuala Lumpur.

Sam Rainsy calls for an end to corruption capture deep levels of

popular urban frustration. In an effort to establish a firmer electoral base, Sam Rainsy and his wife, Tioulong Saumura, have thrown themselves into organising and speaking for the garment workers. Rainsy, a former right-wing Finance Minister, and champion of the free market and Western interests, now pledges loyalty to downtrodden workers, and is attempting to re-position his Khmer Nation Party as social-democratic.

## Another day in Castlereagh

### 3 June 1997

Key witness, Manfred Schmidt, owner of the holiday cottage which it is claimed was rented out to the IRA unit, has "unambiguously asserted that he had never identified her (Roisin) as the woman 'Beth'."

The warrant claims that fingerprints, allegedly Roisin's, were found in the holiday cottage. The German authorities now claim however that the fingerprints were actually found 90 km. away at the site of the IRA attack in Osnabruck.

The warrant states that some of the IRA unit returned to Ireland aboard the Roscoff-Cork ferry arriving on July 1 1996. But as Solomon points out, "a check with the ferry company... reveals that there was no ferry which made the Roscoff-Cork crossing on the June 30. There was no ferry which could have arrived at Cork from

Roscoff on July 1."

Woman Detective Constable, Douris, is said to have told Roisin that the problem with the cease-fires and the release of prisoners was that "republicans are breeding like rats, breeding like shit". This RUC officer is alleged to have told Roisin which parts of her body were most vulnerable to blows which would induce a miscarriage without any evidence showing afterwards. She is also said to have given a vivid description of the haemorrhage suffered by the another female detainee from Belfast.

Detective McRoberts allegedly told Roisin on the fourth or fifth day that Derek Martindale, the head of RUC Special Branch, had gone "on a wee holiday" and would be bringing back "a package deal". It is thought that Martindale travelled to Germany at

this time knowing that the German authorities wanted a woman suspect in the Osnabruck case and hoping to put Roisin 'in the frame'. In other words, the German interest in Roisin was aroused by the RUC Special Branch having failed to pin anything else on the daughter of that "republican bitch".

Roisin's abusive treatment is no accident. Louis Blom Cooper QC, appointed by the British Government to oversee conditions in the interrogation centres, recently found that "complaints continue to be received alleging psychological abuse, personal threats and threats concerning the detainee's relatives. Not infrequently, detainees have complained of the demeaning, degrading and insulting remarks made about them, their spouses, partners or relatives."

## The Congo challenge

### 3 June 1997, by Denise Comanne, Éric Toussaint

The reconstruction of Congo-Zaire is a huge task. The country ranks 141 out of 174 in the United Nations Development Programme index of

human development for 1996.





Over 26 million of the country's 40 m. inhabitants have no access to health care; and 27 m. lack access to clean water. Life expectancy is 51.6 years and falling (down from 53 in 1990). Most of these statistics are probably outdated: the decline of the state apparatus in recent years was so severe that statistical series were no longer published.

At the same time, Alliance leaders are right when they say that Congo-Zaire has colossal material and human resources. This gives the new regime the possibility to impose some conditions on international capital, which is desperate to "come back and do business." A series of progressive measures could be implemented, benefiting from the legitimacy earned by overthrowing former president Mobutu Sese Seko.

First could come a monetary reform, with the aim of reducing the country's catastrophic inflation rate, so as to protect the buying power of the population and encourage the re-launching of economic activities.

Monetary reform is never socially neutral, since it almost inevitably redistributes wealth. A progressive reform would involve exchanging old Zaire bank notes for a new currency at a fair exchange rate for a sum reflecting reasonable personal savings. Those with more cash than this would have to deposit their Zaires in a blocked bank account, until they explained where the money came from. Wealth that cannot be justified could simply be confiscated. The rest could be exchanged for the new currency, but at a lower exchange rate

The Sandinistas introduced a reform of this type in 1985. Belgium did so after the Second World War. For obvious reasons, this kind of reform is a harsh blow to speculators, who will find it very difficult to exchange their mountains of Zaire bank notes for new money, or anything else of value. Such a bank note exchange would represent an extraordinary tax on personal fortunes, and the confiscation of part of the most illegitimate private wealth. It would favour those with little or medium wealth, at the expense of those who enriched themselves during the Mobutu regime. By reducing the

amount of money in circulation, the regime would reduce inflation.

## **Cancel the debt!**

Congo's foreign debt is about US\$12 billion: \$275 for every man woman and child, or rather more than the average yearly per capita income, \$242. About 1/3 of the debt represents overdue interest payments. Three quarters of the total is owed to foreign governments, mainly the USA, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium and Japan.

The new authorities could simply suspend debt repayments, and begin negotiating with the country's creditors to establish what part of the debt should be cancelled as illegitimate ("odious," in banking and diplomatic terminology). This would allow the regime to use some of the country's export earnings in a vast programme to improve the living conditions of the majority of the population, rather than continuing to see these revenues diverted into the pockets of the country's first world creditors.

Congo-Zaire has enormous resources. Its main exports are copper, diamonds, cobalt, oil and coffee. The country also has important deposits of other strategic minerals, of particular interest to the aerospace industries. Re-starting these export-oriented sectors will generate significant income. Part of the surplus could be used to improve the country's dilapidated mining and processing equipment.

The new regime should demand that the country's commercial partners and creditors confiscate the Mobutu clan's wealth and property abroad, and return these resources to the country's new authorities, as contributions to a national social development fund, under the supervision of the new authorities and popular groups.

When dictators are overthrown, there is usually a need for massive literacy and vaccination projects, and the development of a basic health care system covering the whole country. Congo is no exception. The adult illiteracy rate is 74%. At least 6.2 m.

children do not go to school. The infant mortality rate is 93 per 1,000 (ten times higher than in Cuba). Every year, about 350,000 children aged under five die. The country has one doctor for 14,300 inhabitants and one nurse for every 1,350. Under Mobutu, health spending represented only 0.8% of GDP.

## **No privatisation of land or mining**

The state is still the main shareholder in the country's huge mining companies. This leading role should be preserved. The state should negotiate with foreign capital to guarantee a flow of investments for the modernisation of industry and infrastructure.

Seventy percent of the population is rural, and agriculture represents 38% of the country's GDP (the total value of goods and services). Over 25 million rural Congolese live below the poverty threshold. The new regime should guarantee those who work the land continued, or improved access to it.

Land should not be privatised, as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are urging. South African agribusiness has clear plans to expand northwards, and the richer members of Congo's emigre communities may also be tempted to buy up tracts of land.

## **A democratic and pluralist Congo**

The new regime should guarantee complete liberty of expression and association, except for "Mobutu nostalgic." The country is fortunate, in that it already has a variety of independent publications, and a very rich tissue of community and civic groups (trade unions, district associations, Christian base communities, and so on.)

A multi-party system should also be guaranteed. The effervescence of political life a few years ago, in the opposition-dominated Sovereign National Conference, has declined,

but has not been forgotten. Political debate at the national level requires the comparison of opposing political programmes, generated by parties which are truly different from each other.

If fundamental liberties are guaranteed without restriction or delay, the new regime will be able to take the necessary time to prepare the first elections.

There are worrying rumours that all or part of the Mobutu regime's armed forces are to be integrated into the Alliance's rebel army. It is very important that all sections of the former regime's repressive apparatus should be completely dissolved. Key Mobutu supporters should be purged from the civil service. Once the country is pacified, the armed forces should be used for a massive public

works programme.

Those thought responsible for crimes against the population should be tried. But the death penalty should be abolished, and measures taken to avoid summary executions, corporal punishment, and local terror campaigns.

The tragic Rwandan refugee crisis was not created by the Alliance. But allegations of attacks against refugees by Alliance troops should be investigated, and those responsible should be tried. The remaining refugees should be returned to Rwanda in the best possible conditions. Those among the refugees who are suspected of participation in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda should be arrested and handed over to the Rwandan authorities for judgement.

The international community does not just have a responsibility to come to the aid of the refugees. It has an equal responsibility towards the local population.

The anti-imperialist left in the North must defend the sovereignty of the new Congo. It should campaign for the immediate and unconditional cancellation of ex-Zaire's foreign debt, and the confiscation of the Mobutu clan's wealth abroad. The foreign troops which the Northern powers have gathered just outside Congo's frontiers should be withdrawn immediately.

Our solidarity with the people of Congo-Zaire did not start yesterday. Nor will it end tomorrow. It will continue as long as there is a struggle to rebuild a democratic and sovereign Congo.

## The People are Ready for Change

**3 June 1997, by Jean Baptiste Sondji**

*In the early 1990s, Zaire, like many other African countries, entered a phase of "democratisation." Seven years later, we have a civil war. Is this a consequence of "democratisation," or something else?*

The civil war was a consequence of the particular "democratisation" which was introduced. This country had lived under a dictatorship for many years. When the regime felt the wind of change in the air, it organised a mechanism to resist change. Mobutu's whole "democratisation" programme prevented a real democratic development. The regime's constant, bitter resistance to change exacerbated the contradictions in society, creating the conditions for a civil war.

A few years ago, Mobutu organised a "popular consultation," because he needed to know what the people really thought. The majority expressed a desire for profound changes. Convinced that he could control

events, Mobutu began planning a custom-made democratisation authorising just two opposition parties. But popular resistance imposed a multi-party situation. Then Mobutu proposed a "constitutional conference," rather than the "sovereign national conference" demanded by the opposition. Finally, the "sovereign national conference" did take place, but the regime blocked so much of its work that its recommendations were never implemented. Neither were the proposed "hearings" on the people's needs held.

*The "sovereign national conference" elected Etienne Tshisekedi as Prime Minister. Mobutu quickly sacked him. But with Kabila half-way to the capital, the dictator invited the opposition leader to side with him against the armed rebels. Why?*

This shows the contradictions of the whole "sovereign national conference" scheme. That body recognised the

overwhelming responsibility of Mobutu and his system for the disintegration of the state in Zaire. Most of those present wanted to remove Mobutu from his positions. But the US stressed that the dictator must be offered an honourable exit, because of services rendered to them [during the cold war]. US envoys proposed to the Kinshasa opposition that Mobutu surrender real power, but remain as symbolic head of state. The "radical" opposition around Etienne Tshisekedi lapped up this idea, and began repeating it like parrots from the tribune of the "sovereign national conference." Our party disagreed, saying that Mobutu should be removed completely, and should stand trial.

Everyone agreed that Mobutu must go, sooner or later. The "sovereign national conference" wanted to reach this objective by gentle means. This didn't work. As everyone now realises, Mobutu did not become a symbolic head of state. He continued to rule,

with an iron fist. He prevented the continuing democratisation of the country.

This blockage is at the root of the emergence of the armed struggle towards the end of 1996. All patriots should support this action, to reach the goals which we have supposedly proclaimed. But strangely, Tshisekedi wanted to throw Mobutu a life-belt, by imposing himself between the dictator and Kabila. He even invited Kabila and the Alliance to join a government, with himself as Prime Minister. The rebels accepting posts in another Mobutu government! Grotesque!

*French media say Kabila is a puppet of US interests against France in the region.*

When the civil war started, the media talked about the rebellion of "Banyamulenge" Tutsis, and warned against the implosion of Zaire in ethnic conflicts. The conflict in Rwanda, and tension between residents of Eastern Zaire, some of distant or recent Rwandan origin, certainly contributed to the rebellion in the East of Zaire. But the conflict cannot be reduced to an ethnic conflict.

As the rebellion progressed, the ethnic thesis was forgotten, and replaced with warnings against the struggle of anglophone interests against France. Everyone knows that this country's enormous resources have always made it an object of desire for the great powers. But when the USA decided that their old ally Mobutu was a bad thing for the country, and that it was time to get rid of him, what were we to do? The new US position coincided with that of the majority of the people of Zaire. We could only welcome the change in US strategy. Mobutu only stayed in power for so long because of the support of the great powers. So if some of them now wanted to offer military or other aid to get rid of him, fine.

To deduce from this that Kabila is the puppet of the US and other powers is to ignore the level of political consciousness among the people of Zaire. We have been deeply traumatised by 37 years of Mobutu, and similar neo-colonial regimes. We

have become well aware of the negative role of the foreign powers. The people of Zaire will never again accept to be ruled by puppets. I am convinced that Laurent Kabila is aware of this reality.

As for the conflict between the USA and France, it doesn't concern us. We aren't French, and we aren't going to become Americans. Independently of whether we use French, English or both to communicate among ourselves.

Where Zaire is concerned, the western powers are navigating without a map. They haven't been very good at managing the situation in Zaire. The US, France and Belgium made an enormous effort to impose Kengo wa Dongo as Prime Minister instead of Tshisekedi, ignoring the clear wishes of the "sovereign national conference." But although he had all the resources at his disposition, Prime Minister Kengo wa Dongo failed miserably. If the western powers can't ensure their rule through a perfect agent of neo-colonialism like him, why should they be able to rule through Laurent Kabila?

Kabila's success depends on his ability to commune with the aspirations of our people: better living conditions, in a context of liberty and true democracy. A context in which the common interest is more important than individual interests. These aspirations could take the form of better education for all, full employment, access to quality health care, better housing, and so on.

*Does the Alliance have a plan which can satisfy these social aspirations?*

If the Alliance wants to succeed, if it wants to enter into communion with our people, it has no alternative but to put into place a policy which aims above all to satisfy these aspirations. If it does not, then the civil war will have been for nothing. This might sound idealist. But the central question is precisely this.

The Alliance is a young organisation, formed in autumn 1996. As such, it is not easy to develop a coherent project. But it could orient itself by analysing our country's recent past, and

identifying the factors which led to the current collapse. Our economy is completely outward-turned. It meets the needs of the west for raw materials much more than the needs of the people of Zaire. This is what has led to the current situation. So the first thing we must do is reverse this economic situation. To build up an economy which has as its central goal the satisfaction of the needs of the population.

Nowadays, humanity is shocked by the neo-liberal currents which, in this part of the world, are imposing the privatisation of public sector enterprises, on the grounds that they are badly managed. As far as Zaire is concerned, we have plenty of badly managed private companies too. Plenty of bankrupt private sector companies too. The solution to bad management is not privatisation, but good management.

In the industrialised countries, the second World War was followed by three decades of constant growth, and practically full employment. These sustained levels of growth and employment were only possible because the state controlled whole sectors of the economy, and was able to orient these sectors in a direction which benefited the community.

What do we see today? The state is totally withdrawing from sectors which it once controlled. Not because they are badly managed, but just because neo-liberal ideology says so. We see social crises, growing unemployment, and poverty.

Surely, an economy which is not at the service of the community can only be a source of troubles.

All this means that our country, and the Alliance in particular, should draw these lessons, and firmly reject the structural adjustment policy being imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This is a fundamental choice. It will determine the direction events in our country will take.

*How widespread are your views within the Kinshasa opposition?*

You have to distinguish the leaders of

the political parties from the ordinary people. 95% of the politicians in Zaire are agents of neo-colonialism. For these people, Zaire's problems are a simple problem of bad management. They think we just need to improve the management of the country, and inject a dose of morality, and the splendour of the good old days will return. This is quite obviously false. But it is this type of analysis which leads Zairian politicians to opt for reformism. Many even envisaged some kind of harmonious cohabitation with Mobutu. They considered the armed struggle against the Mobutu regime as something opposed to good behaviour, even anti-democratic.

All of these politicians are frightened of the real changes which our country needs. Because they know that if those kind of policies are implemented, they and those like them will disappear from the political scene.

The political blockage in Zaire [in the months before Kabila took power, Ed.] is largely the fault of this political class.

*What other types of political activism are there?*

The "parliament on its feet" is a phenomenon of the 1990s. Its name stresses its difference from a regular parliament, where the deputies are comfortably seated, and therefore less alert. During the Sovereign National Conference period, the population followed the debates with great interest.

Whenever a participant said something which was against the interest of the population, the sanction was immediate. The politician's house was identified, and totally destroyed by the crowd. The luxury villa of one

of Mobutu's Ministers of Health was destroyed in four hours. Even the walls were dismantled, by hundreds of angry people.

Later, "parliaments on their feet" began to meet at newspaper stands. Political activists were invited to come and discuss with them. The movement had a semi-clandestine organisational structure. But it was efficient enough to be able to survey any state representative or politician, anywhere in the country. I remember once, when Tshisekedi was prime minister, he received a European Union delegation, mainly German-speakers. When they emerged from Tshisekedi's house, the "parliament on its feet" was waiting, with a message in German which they passed to the delegation. As you can see, the eyes and ears of the people are organised!

There are almost as many trade unions as political parties. Some were only created so that their leaders could participate in the Sovereign National Congress. There is not, in these groups, a sense of struggle in defence of workers' interests.

Of course, given the extreme poverty of Zairian workers, you can imagine the enormous difficulties which those few unions which do try to organise themselves face. Among those which have managed to organise the workforce, and oblige the authorities to renounce certain practices are the union at ONATRA, the company which controls Matadi, Kinshasa and some other ports, and the Matadi-Kinshasa railway. This union forced the Kengo government to abandon its plans to privatise ONATRA, through a strike which almost suffocated the country, particularly the capital, Kinshasa.

The civil servants' union has also

managed to organise strikes, though it is a weaker organisation than the ONATRA union. Another serious union exists at Gecamines, which has a monopoly on the exploitation and sale of Zaire's copper and cobalt. Workers there went on strike recently, to reclaim several months unpaid wages, which Mobutu wanted to allocate to the "war effort."

*Is there any kind of revolutionary left in Zaire?*

This is a country with enormous human and natural potential, but characterised by extreme poverty. The situation is explosive, and the contradictions are so sharp that a radical change is overdue. And yet, there are no well structured, well implanted revolutionary political organisations, which could respond to this situation. This is for historic reasons. Zaire's intellectual elite was mainly trained by the Mobutu regime, and most of the education system is controlled by the Catholic church. All this has limited the penetration of revolutionary theories and ideas into the country. But, in our opinion, the current situation, which is obliging a growing number of Zairians to adopt a revolutionary praxis, can only facilitate the rapid assimilation of revolutionary theories by the masses.

*Jean Baptiste Sondji was interviewed in Kinshasa by our equatorial Africa correspondent Jean Nanga. This interview was first published in the May 1997 issue of our French sister publication Inprecor. In the coming days we will interview Mr. Sondji again, concentrating on the situation since Laurent Kabila's troops entered Kinshasa. That interview will be printed in the July issue of International Viewpoint (see ["Congo-Zaire's first reforms"](#)).*

## More Than Blair Will Give

3 June 1997, by **Roland Rance**

The huge Tory defeat, far greater than anyone had expected, has left the

party demoralised and directionless. More than half of the Conservative

MPs were defeated, while those remaining are fighting bitterly over



leadership of the rump that is left. Seven members of John Major's cabinet lost their seats, including Michael Portillo, a potential right-wing contender for the party leadership. The Tories now have no MPs in Scotland or Wales, and very few in urban England. The divisions and recriminations in the party are likely to leave it unable to bid effectively for a return to power for many years.

Although the Labour party was the main benefactor of this crushing defeat, winning an unprecedented 419 seats, other parties also benefited from the Tory collapse. The Liberal Democrats doubled their parliamentary representation to 46, the Scottish Nationalists doubled theirs from three to six, Sinn Fein won two seats in Northern Ireland, and journalist Martin Bell, standing as an independent with backing from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, defeated corrupt Tory incumbent Neil Hamilton in an archetypal Conservative seat in suburban Manchester.

## Left of Labour

The parties to the left of Labour had mixed results. In Glasgow, community activist Tommy Sheridan, a member of the Socialist Party (formerly Militant), standing for the Scottish Socialist Alliance (SSA), received 11.1%. Other SSA candidates fared less well, with an average vote just over 1%. Former Labour MP Dave Nellist, standing for the Socialist Party in Coventry, received 6.5%.

Miners leader Arthur Scargill, standing for the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in Newport, Wales, received 5.2%. A handful of SLP candidates did even better. [5] In Cardiff Central, Terry Burns won 5.3%, with an explicitly revolutionary platform.,

In East Ham (East London), lawyer Imran Khan recorded the party's best result, winning 6.8% in a constituency where the Labour party was accused of not paying attention to the demands of a large Asian population. Khan is a well known local activist, and ran a very active campaign in opposition to the far-right British Nationalist Party (BNP), which received 3.2% in that

constituency. The combined vote of left-of-Labour candidates was about 70,000.

## Right wing extremists

The fascist National Front polled over 1,000 votes in a number of London seats. In the East London area of Bethnal Green, where all three main parties stood black candidates, they took 7.5% of the votes.

Anglo-French businessman James Goldsmith's anti-Maastricht Referendum Party gained over 80,000 votes. Since he is believed to have spent £20 million of his vast fortune on the campaign, this works out at about £25 (US\$40) per vote.

Anti-abortion candidates did badly, and as is traditional neither the Natural Law Party nor the Monster Raving Loony Party gained high votes.

## Labour's first steps in government

Following the results, Blair stated: "We ran for office as New Labour, and we will govern as New Labour." He lost no time in making his intentions clear. Labour right-winger Frank Field, who has for many years attacked the benefits system, was appointed minister for welfare reform. The head of BP, who is not an elected member of parliament, was appointed as a trade minister. Another wealthy businessman is to head a commission enquiring into a minimum wage. The government has repeated its intention not to raise income tax, not to repeal anti-union legislation, and not to take back into public ownership the utilities sold for peanuts by the Tories.

But there have been a few welcome reforms. Some of the more vicious aspects of immigration policy have been relaxed. The government has promised to end the sale of land mines, and local government will be restored in London.

## Constitutional changes

In constitutional matters, there will be major changes, with the near-certainty of a Scottish Assembly, with tax-raising powers, within two years, and the likelihood of a Welsh Assembly. It is also likely that there will be a change in the electoral system in Britain, with a move to a more proportional system.

The Tory wipe-out in Scotland and Wales followed an election in which they attempted to play up fears of the future of the United Kingdom; they therefore have little legitimacy for strenuous opposition to these assemblies.

A further welcome result of the election is the large increase in women members of parliament. This is largely the result of a Labour policy (later banned by the courts) of reserving certain seats for women candidates. There are now more than 100 women on the Labour benches. This is still only a quarter of the party's MPs, but it represents a significant, positive change.

## What do the rich and famous expect from Blair?

On the whole, Labour offers more a change of style than of policy. Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) Gordon Brown chose to wear a normal grey suit, rather than formal evening wear, when he addressed a meeting of bankers in the City of London.

Tony Blair has been welcomed across Europe as a less abrasive leader than his Tory predecessors. But many must have been alarmed to learn that he was briefed by Margaret Thatcher before the recent EU leaders' summit.

## ...and the rest of us?

Blair is mistaken if he believes that this massive rejection of the Tory party can be seen as positive support for his "New Labour" project. Exit

polls at the polling booths showed that 60% of first-time Labour voters favoured redistribution of wealth, while 75% opposed any further privatisation. And yet, these are precisely the policies which the Labour leadership has spent months promising "not" to follow. Millions of workers voted Labour despite, rather than because of, Blair's promise not to increase spending on education, the health service, pensions, welfare benefits, housing and public sector wages. The demand for change is strong, and it will not be long before this leads to a confrontation with the new government. Any attempt by the government to further cut welfare spending, or to impose a public sector pay freeze, in order to meet the convergence criteria for a single currency, will be strenuously opposed by a working class which has gained in confidence with the massive defeat of the Tories.

## **Abdication to the bankers**

The decision by Chancellor Brown to surrender control over interest rates to the Bank of England - in effect

establishing an independent central bank - can be seen as a first step towards acceptance of a European central bank. It indicates that this government, like the Tories, is more concerned with combating the threat of inflation than controlling the bankers and creating jobs. Under the new system, the banks will find it much easier to sabotage any economic policies not in their interests.

Although their massive parliamentary majority of 179 seats should enable Labour to disregard attacks from the right, it is more likely to be used as a threat against any left wing MPs who break ranks and demand increased public spending.

## **Left-wing MPs must start to work**

Before the election, many left Labour MPs argued that it would be a mistake to rock the boat, and be accused of threatening the election strategy. This excuse no longer holds water. They must be challenged to fight Blair's programme, even if this leads to expulsion from the party.

If Blair acts against them, their strongest defence will be though linking up with party members and trade unionists in building a strong and campaigning left.

Activists have already planned a series of conferences over the next few months in order to discuss the way forward for the left. The first of these will be the conference of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups, in London on 31 May, which will be attended by party and union activists and several left MPs. As well as discussing the way to fight in the wake of the election victory, this meeting will focus on the way to oppose proposed changes in the Labour Party constitution, which would virtually eliminate its democratic structures. Further conferences are planned by the Network of Socialist Alliances in Coventry in June, and the Welfare State Network in Liverpool in July.

Together with the successful Euromarches in Britain, and the forthcoming annual conferences of many trade unions, this will ensure that the real issues will not be ignored in the euphoria of the massive Tory defeat.

# **Fourth International declaration**

## **3 June 1997, by Fourth International**

In just a few days, a powerful popular movement swept away this myth, exposing the perverse mechanisms, the savage exploitation, and the financial fraud by which these alleged results were obtained. And against which wide sections of the Albanian population had revolted. They also rose up against the political regime symbolised by President Sali Berisha. A regime which hid its profoundly anti-democratic, police-state nature behind the facade of largely fraudulent elections victories.

Spokesmen for the imperialist countries and the media at their service presented the protagonists of

the Albanian mass movement as (at best) inspired by clan allegiance, or (at worst) criminal or mafia gangs.

In fact, the insurrection covered the whole country, thanks to massive, active popular participation. The criminal gangs, which exist in Albania like in all other countries, only exploited the conditions created by the rotting Berisha regime: consolidating their links with the mass of international traffickers, and shamelessly exploiting all those who saw a passage across the Adriatic sea to Italy as their (illusory) salvation. By crude mystification, these bandits have been falsely presented as the

main actors of the Albanian drama.

In fact, the mass movement put forward completely legitimate demands: the restitution of the money stolen through "pyramid" financial operations authorised by the government, Berisha's resignation, the dissolution of the secret police, and fair elections. The democratic revolutionary character of this movement was expressed in the formation of popular committees, in open session, co-ordinated in a national public salvation committee.

These committees did not become organs of a real dual power,

challenging the regime. They demanded Berisha's departure, but limited themselves to playing the role of pressure-group on the new Fino government. The committees also accepted the deployment of the "Alba" multinational armed force. This is largely due to their lack of experience, the widespread illusions in the existing political parties, and the absence of political kernels with a general overview of the situation.

The Fourth International expresses its militant solidarity with the insurrectional movement which has shaken Albania. It calls for mobilisations in support of the following demands, particularly in those countries which have launched the military intervention.

- Immediate and unconditional resignation of President Berisha.
- Dissolution of the secret police.

- Reimbursement of the money stolen in the financial scandals.
- Recognition of the popular committees.
- Withdrawal of the "Alba" multinational force, the main goal of which is the reconstruction of a repressive, anti-democratic state structure, and the maintenance of Albania's "market economy".

*Fourth International United Secretariat, 13 May 1997*

## The Lima embassy massacre

3 June 1997, by **Fourth International**

The guerrilla commando had killed no-one, injured no-one, and made no ultimatum. But President Fujimori decided on a massacre, using the combined forces of the army, air force and marines, with the aid of the USA, Britain and Israel, and with the complicity of the Japanese government.. He wanted no prisoners. His goal was to exterminate all the militants inside the embassy.

The bourgeois media all over the world didn't hesitate to express their satisfaction, and join in with the congratulations which their governments addressed to Alberto Fujimori. This sinister individual has succeeded in polishing his tyrant's badge — which the MRTA action had tarnished.

Fujimori and his gang have sent the

Peruvian people a clear message: the state has a monopoly on force of what ever kind, and the "state interest" has priority, at any price. Those who challenge these "principles" will be punished mercilessly.

The framework of the capitalist system must be respected. Particularly in Latin America, those who are not disposed to accept this should know that they are not protected by any law or democratic guarantee. The "low intensity war" against them, which has already caused so much damage in Central America and elsewhere will continue. This is the other message which Fujimori and his imperialist allies wanted to send to the oppressed and exploited of the continent.

Each revolutionary organisation has the right to choose whether or not it adopts the same choices as the MRTA.

To ask itself whether or not the methods used by its militants are useful. Whether they contribute effectively to the legitimate combat against "national" and foreign oppressors.

But at a moment when the dominant classes in Latin America and their imperialist patrons are crying "victory!", it is our duty to express our full solidarity with the MRTA in their mourning.

At the same time, we demand an end to the scandalous detention of political prisoners in Peru in unacceptable and inhuman conditions. International solidarity with all these prisoners is a must.

*Fourth International United Secretariat, 13 May 1997*

## Imperialist contradictions

3 June 1997, by **Denise Comanne, Éric Toussaint**

Throughout the 1990s, France has repeatedly intervened in its African "backyard." Presidents Mitterand and

Chirac supported Rwandan leader General Habyarimana, despite knowing that his regime was planing

this century's third major genocide. The French army trained the Rwandan army and the interahamwe militia.

When the FPR rebellion started, Paris repeatedly intervened to save Habyarimana.

The summit of this shameful interventionist policy was Operation Turquoise in July 1994. The French army interposed itself to allow the orderly withdrawal of the defeated regime's army and the genocidal militias, which set up a state-within-a-state inside the refugee camps of eastern Zaire. From July 1994 until November 1996, France hoped to use these refugees as a tool for the creation of a new pro-French regime in Rwanda. The spinal column of this new regime could only be Habyarimana's defeated genocidal army. With French support, this rump regime used one million hutu refugees as a human shield, and a source of new recruits. Those media crying so bitterly about the fate of the remaining Hutu refugees in Zaire seem to have forgotten the grand "humanitarian operation" which created that exodus.

Paris supported Zairian dictator Mobutu Sese Seko until the last minute. France helped Mobutu recruit Bosnian Serb mercenaries, apparently through the "good offices" of the National Front of Jean Marie le Pen. Hundreds of French soldiers were disguised as mercenaries, and thrown in to the regime's last desperate counter-attack. Switzerland and Belgium finally decided to deny Mobutu entry. France let him enter, and run his affairs, from his luxury home on the Mediterranean Cote d'Azur.

## Who's counting on

## Kabila?

With the regional "gendarme" backing Mobutu, where did Kabila get sufficient international support for his lightning offensive across the heart of Africa? Mainly from Congo-Zaire's neighbours: Angola, Uganda, and the new regime in Rwanda. The Mobutu dictatorship had been a constant menace to the security of all three countries. Jonas Savimbi of Unita was threatening to bring his rebel troops out of their Zairian bases, and resume hostilities against the government in Luanda. In the East of Zaire, Mobutu provided bases for guerrillas fighting the Museveni government in Uganda, and, of course, the remnants of the genocidal Rwandan regime.

The early victories of Laurent Kabila's Alliance forces in the Goma and Bukavu region were partly due to direct and indirect support from the Ugandan and new Rwandan governments. We can only approve of their aid.

Once the Alliance had taken the initiative, and started making quick headway against a Mobutist army that disintegrated and fled, the United States decided that they were more likely to benefit from supporting the Alliance and Zaire's neighbouring countries, than a dictator whose days of were clearly numbered. Uganda and Rwanda were already priority states for American diplomacy in the region.

## The South African connection

South African capital found a common interest in supporting the American initiative. South African mining companies and banks have long had their eye on the copper belt to the north, and Congo-Zaire's Shaba province in particular. South African capital was more than ready to invest in Congo-Zaire, as soon as stability could be guaranteed.

President Nelson Mandela, whose rule is based on a historic compromise with the white capitalist class, was also determined to see Mobutu fall. Partly because of the dictator's previous co-operation with the Apartheid regime in supporting Angola's Unita rebels, and partly because the corrupt, sclerotic Kinshasa regime contradicts the new image of Africa which Mandela wants to promote, so that the continent can reduce its isolation from the global economy, and benefit from it.

Thanks to the compromise between Mandela and South Africa's white capitalist class, the United States now has the possibility of exercising considerable influence over a large part of southern and central Africa.

The Alliance is by no means a puppet of the United States. But Washington will clearly have considerable weight in Laurent Kabila's deliberations in the coming months. Unlike France, the US recognised, and declared, that Mobutu should retire, at a sufficiently early point in the conflict to be (almost) credible. Kabila also knows that it was Washington which blocked France's plan to deploy a multi-national military force in Zaire in November 1996, to prop up the dictatorship.