



## IV288 - May 1997

### En Route to Amsterdam

1 May 1997, by **François Vercammen**



In June, European leaders will meet in Amsterdam to amend the Maastricht Treaty, reform the institutions of the European Union, fix the details of East European membership in the Union, and approve steps towards common domestic and foreign policy. In theory, at least. This will be the last in a series of Inter-Governmental Conferences designed to fix the strategy for the next wave of European integration, including the creation of a common currency between a number of core states before the end of the century.

The December 1995 Euro-summit meeting in Madrid coincided with the first major social movement against the neo-liberal logic of the Maastricht Treaty for monetary union: a massive public sector strike in France.

While the events in France opened the first cracks in the triumphalist neo-liberal consensus, the West European labour movement has remained perplexed, and largely silent about "Europe". The European Trade Union Confederation is dominated by conformism and apathy concerning the capitalist integration product. Many union leaders are part of the "one truth" consensus about Europe, which characterises the great and the good across the continent. The ETUC has striven to mobilise concerned

workers, but without challenging the Maastricht criteria which underpin and "justify" cuts and attacks across Europe.

With the top of the labour movement still trying to square the circle, a modest collection of trade union representatives, unemployed groups, social movements and radical left currents, including the Fourth International, met in Turin to try and provoke some kind of reaction in the labour movement. We met again in Florence in June 1996, where we launched a brief appeal and a proposal: co-ordinated marches across Europe, converging in Amsterdam at the same time as the Inter-Governmental conference.

At the time, this was a risky proposition. Not everyone on the left was convinced that the project could work, or merited the considerable effort involved. Fortunately, the project went ahead.

March organisers knew that behind the official discourse, European unification was beset by monetary and political contradictions. The process of capitalist integration would not, could not be painless and straightforward.

We also realised that Europe's persistent, mass unemployment had created a "new" social question in the "rich" countries. A more and more explosive question. Official figures

report 18 million unemployed EU residents. A further 18 million work part time, but would rather work full time.

The challenge, of course, was to find the lever that would shift this enormous question into the centre-ground of European societies. Something the official structures of the labour and social movements were not doing. Participants in the Florence meeting wanted action, not more words. To provoke a reaction that corresponded to the size of the problem.

### An uncommon collective

The collective which formed around the "Marches against Unemployment, Exclusion and Precarity" project was exceptional, for three reasons.

- A strong moral commitment, on an issue around which we could legitimately demand a radical change in the priorities of the labour and social movement as far as the European Union is concerned. To concentrate on the social aspects of integration, rather than the single currency.

- The marginalised and excluded were at the centre of this coalition. Together with all those who were

ready to act: young and old, immigrant and Europe-born, in work and out of work. Supported by activists from a wide range of trade unions, and from the ecological, feminist and anti-racist movements. The existence of such a grouping incarnated our radical critique of neo-liberal policies, and the desire for a better more egalitarian world.

- This was a an all-European coalition, with organised groups (some larger, some smaller) in each of the EU states and several other European countries.

In February 1997, more than 600 people participated in the Brussels assembly which launched the marches. Just 12 months after the Turin meeting, we had a committee or collective in each of the 15 member states, as well as Norway and Switzerland. The representativity of these groups varied enormously, as did their political weight and militant force. But the assembly confirmed that the weaker had consolidated themselves since the Turin meeting, while the stronger were making headway.

## New voices

More than half the participants in the Brussels assembly were from groups that almost never dominate public meetings: homeless people, immigrants without legal documents, unemployed people, including many whose benefits had expired. The tone of the meeting was set by representatives of the striking Liverpool dockers, workers from the Belgian steelworks Forges de Clabecq (threatened with closure) and a representative of the French "paperless immigrants' movement.

After discussing the participants various forms of struggle and demands, the assembly began to elaborate common demands: a tax on top fortunes, equality for women workers, shortening the working week, special measures for young people, and so on.

Participants agreed on the general structure of the campaign: 18 main marches, converging on Amsterdam, with local welcome committees along

the route, activities targeting job centres, schools, universities and town halls, public meetings and debates, and festivals.

To challenge the Euro-centrist consensus, the first marches would start in Tangiers, Morocco, and Sarajevo, Bosnia. On 14 April, simultaneous actions were held across the European Union.

It was not easy to establish a common programme, because of the very varied he social contexts, militant background, political values and priorities of the participants. There was disagreement about the details, and even about the basic aims of the campaign. Slowly but surely, consensus was reached on three points. The Florence Appeal would be the basic text of the marches. Participants in the Brussels meeting argued that mention should also be made of our rejection of the neo-liberal monetarist convergence criteria within the Maastricht Treaty. They also stressed that the march committees should launch a debate, within the march movement and in the wider labour movement, about what alternative we could propose to replace current EU policies.

Participants did not adopt the draft appeal proposed by the European secretariat (made up of the French, Belgian and Dutch march committees). Perhaps it was too early to propose a text. Perhaps it was too late. Either way, participants were divided in their views on key passages, and some objected that the document had been prepared without wider consultation.

As a result, the Appeal was only recognised as a "contribution" to the debate, to which many of the concerns raised during the Brussels assembly were added.

## Not to be missed

Some currents and individuals saw the marches mainly as a chance to transmit radical opinions to a wider audience. At march meetings, these currents stressed the need to be "as autonomous as possible", and to reserve a large space for "testimony."

They often confused the right way to work within the march movement, and the political objectives of the movement, towards the outside world. Other participants reflected the desire of a new generation of militants for clear socialist goals. These participants demanded greater precision in the platform of the movement. Not all were convinced that the marches did indeed represent a radically different social perspective, of rupture with the governments of the EU states, and the traditional leadership of the labour movement.

The stakes were high. The goal was to defeat, or damage, the Maastricht process and the EU integration plans. There was a chance that the marches would provoke an echo among more important currents in the labour movement, as more and more people became critical of the EU's neo-liberal policies. To do so meant understanding why there had to be a contradiction with the EuroMarch collectives: the forces actively involved in the project were almost all from the most radical part of the social movement, broadly defined. But the amended "platform" documents were very broad and open. Indeed, these texts were aimed at all those who had previously supported or accepted the supposed necessity of the Maastricht process, while struggling to oppose the anti-social consequences of the treaty, and the policies it generated.

The leadership of the political and labour wings of social democracy face a terrible dilemma. If they continue to support the EU and monetary union, they will have to confront a growing sector of their rank-and file. More and more people are realising that the Maastricht convergence criteria mean neo-liberalism, and that the "stability pact" agreed at the December 1996 Dublin summit means neo-liberalism for ever. As European integration intensifies, it provokes more synchronised labour and social struggles than ever before. Particularly for the more active sectors of the labour movement, and particularly in the core countries: France, Germany, Belgium and Holland.

Alternatively, trade union bosses and

social democratic politicians can try to take charge of the "rumblings from below." But they can't do so without challenging elements of their previous support for integration, Maastricht and the Euro. The longer they hesitate, the more discredited they will be.

## The EuroMarch strategy

In the final weeks of the pre-march preparations, organisers adopted a double strategy to boost the campaign. Firstly, they created a synergy with labour struggles, like the

closure of the Clabecq forge and a Renault car plant in Belgium. At the same time, the EuroMarch collectives maintained an open-spirited attitude towards the broader labour movement. More and more sectors of workers are recognising the disastrous effects of the Maastricht process, and beginning to draw conclusions about the consequences for labour strategy and demands. It is important to win these sectors over, not alienate them.

The Florence appeal is certainly inadequate as an ideological alternative to the European Union. But it is a perfect document for this kind of political campaign. The spearhead of this movement is, of course, the

rejection of the Maastricht convergence criteria, and the demand that unemployment, and a cut in the working week without loss of salary, take centre place in European policy debates. These demands can be the basis for a wide unity, a convergence of dissatisfied sectors of the labour and socialist movements. Wider sections of the labour movement will be watching the marches, but hesitating about committing themselves. That is the struggle to watch!

*Source: "Le soulèvement de l'espoir," Inprecor #402, April 1997 pp.29-30, with additional material by Jean Dupont.*

## The new face of Eastern Europe

### 1 May 1997, by Nicos Yannopoulos

Since 10 March, the insurrection has been waiting. Unfortunately, this is probably not a "war of position," following the "war of movement" of early March, but a significant decline in the movement. This is partly due to fatigue, and the inability of the movement to propose a credible plan for continuing the confrontation with President Berisha. Another factor is the absence of structures and organisations which can unite the insurgents, and boost their morale again.

Thousands of people refuse to surrender their weapons until Berisha goes. But while a few lose their temper, or revolt against some decision or other of the interim government under Bashko Fino, the general climate is not one of deepening social polarisation, or a sharpening political confrontation. On the contrary, most people are saying that "we need to overcome our differences."

There are people, including among the insurgents, who say that the restoration of order is the top priority, or at least a major concern.

Meanwhile, the demand that President Berisha depart is slowly fading away from the front of the insurgents' minds, and increasingly seen as a "parliamentary" question.

Significantly, no-one has dared denounce the repressive nature of the "Multinational Force." On 7 April, the Popular Committees demanded that the Force's commanders did not meet with President Berisha. But they were careful not to make any comment about the deployment of the foreign troops in Albania. In fact, many rebel leaders had indicated their support for "international protection of humanitarian aid" as early as mid-March. Which is curious when everyone knows that humanitarian aid is threatened by corrupt officials much more than the insurgents, or even armed bandits.

### Democratic, but confused

In the Albanian context, the Popular Committees are extremely democratic bodies which organise and administer

the insurgent zones. They are not really a form of direct democracy, since delegates are neither directly elected, nor replaceable. They do not really reflect the politicisation of the population, and the resulting decline in the hierarchical structure of society. Nevertheless, they clearly represent the "average view," and the feelings of the majority of the insurgent population.

They are certainly not part of a project to reconstitute the state apparatus in the insurgent towns. But they are contradictory collectives, which one the one hand maintain the instability, and express the demands of the insurgents, and on the other hand legitimise, though collaboration, the political parties of the Government of National Reconciliation, and the Tirana-recognised prefects and regional authorities, in the aim of restoring order. Most Committees are attempting to rebuild the police force, rather than develop popular militias or local social self-defence committees.

Committee members are mainly people with military or administrative experience, who had some kind of

social prestige, and who played an important role when the insurrection began. Most were not previously "activists," nor are they the natural leaders which all insurrections generate. Most are older men, from more conservative sectors of the population. They are less "enlightened" and less disinterested" than most of the insurgents they represent.

The military men in the committees play a very contradictory role. Everybody recognises their essential role in helping the insurgents confront and defeat the repressive forces of the Berisha regime. But these men are hardly likely to encourage the development of self-defence structures within the insurrection. Their tradition and their mentality tend to block this.

The nature and work of the committees is also influenced by the lack of "activist" experience, of any subversive or counter-culture, and, of course, the absence of networks of deliberate revolutionaries.

The other big problem is fatigue. Thousands of people who participated in the insurrection have left, or are trying to leave the country. As a group, the insurrectionaries are confused, ideologically speaking. And this confusion fixes the limits and the contradictions of the Albanian insurrection. This is a mass armed insurrection. But once the Tirana elite formed its "Government of National Reconciliation," the insurrectionaries found themselves without a political project for extending their confrontation with President Berisha, and for extending their own power base. As a result, the insurrection seems to be unable to impose its own solutions, or to make a dramatic change in the social and political balance of forces. And yet, the rebels represent an important dynamic in society. If Berisha tries any rapid move to regain control, the insurrection could re-ignite. And, once Berisha goes, parts of the rebel movement may mutate into a new social opposition.

## What kind of violence?

The European media stress the violence of Albania today. Most of the time these media fail to separate the violence of the insurrection (execution of secret police agents), the political violence of the regime (its retaliations, and its "anonymous" terrorism designed to divide and weaken the insurrection), and, of course, the common violence which accompanies every insurrection, revolution or riot. From the capitalist mass-media, and from Berisha's Public Relations team, the message is the same; "Albania is suffering from a vicious circle of chaos and anarchy, which began with the insurrection."

Let's be clear. Every insurrection is accompanied by an increase of political and social violence. There is always, inevitably, an increase in transgressions of the previous legal code. Wherever a power structure is collapsing, a number of individuals attempt to appropriate the roles and the property which they consider to be theirs by right.

These individuals may be partially motivated by a spirit of solidarity, but their behaviour is also the result of years of material privation and manipulation of their personality. Inevitably, part of what they appropriate would be more useful if it was made available to other individuals or groups. But not necessarily the legal owners of said property under the previous regime.

Until an insurrection of the oppressed can transform its natural "just cause" into a new legal framework, based on liberty, equality and solidarity, there is bound to be a generalisation of low-level transgressions of the previously-existing legal code. In all previous revolutions and insurrections, this has eventually been used as a pretext for the re-imposition of authoritarian, hierarchical regulatory systems.

Generalised transgression is certainly a major problem for the Albanian insurrection. Among other things, it disorients large sectors of the movement, and makes many people

more conservative. It provides arguments for those nostalgic about "order" and a strong state.

This generalised transgression is not provoked by the insurrection. Rather, insurrection allows it to appear. The true cause of the transgression is the same set of social conditions as led to the insurrection: the material privation and feeling of being abandoned by those in power which affect most Albanians.

"Criminal" behaviour in the rebel areas obviously incorporates the traditions of transgression within Albanian society. A large part of the population, particularly in the rebel-held south, already had a very marginal relationship to legality. The Berisha regime tolerated, even encouraged this behaviour, since there were few other viable strategies for survival for many people. People were also strongly influenced by the incredible corruption of the Berisha regime, down to the lowest officials. This itself rendered the "rule of law" and respect for the law inoperable in the areas now under rebel control. In such a context, we can hardly be surprised that the south of the country suffered so much "criminal" behaviour since the insurrection began.

## What to do about it?

The Popular Committees have not been able to control even the most anti-social and reprehensible elements of this generalised transgression. Where they have tried to do so, they have usually failed. And, in trying to prevent such behaviour, they have used "old-style" methods. Because they do not fully trust the Berisha regime's police force, they appoint former policemen from the previous, Stalinist regime to "keep an eye on them." As in the old days, public meetings have been organised, to exhort the population to trust and support the police.

What has not been done is to develop the self-managed structures of the insurrection, creating and generalising a system of local self-defence units, and popular tribunals.

We still do not know to what extent such structures functioned in the early part of the rebellion. But since 15 March, most insurgents have been virtually passive in the face of growing transgression. The rebels don't know what to do about it, any more than they know what to do about the initiatives of the imperialist powers, and the risk of a counter-attack by the surviving nucleus of the Berisha regime.

## Berisha's terrorism

To re-establish his role at the centre of the country's political life, the President seems to be operating a "strategy of tension." For this, and other obvious reasons, it is important to make a distinction between socially-motivated and small-scale transgression, and the criminal behaviour of Mafia groups and the criminal-terrorist action of Berisha's agents. It is obviously impossible to draw a precise distinction between social transgression and organised crime. But, unless the insurgents can do something about it, the omnipresent, small scale transgression will become structured and organised and, one way or another, exploited by the regime to weaken the insurrection.

It is also important to expose the "white terror" which Berisha's general staff is co-ordinating in the rebel areas, and even in Tirana. This terror is a key tool in Berisha's diplomatic negotiations. He is presenting himself to the foreign powers as the only man who can re-establish order in the "chaos" which, he claims, dominates Albania.

Inside Albania, Berisha uses violence in two directions: to discredit and weaken the insurrection, and to maintain his confrontation with the Socialist (ex-Communist) Party of Bashko Fino. The Socialists, who represent the only real parliamentary alternative to Berisha, dominate the Government of National

Reconciliation. Berisha hopes that his "strategy of tension" will push the Socialist Party towards more conservative positions, and boost the morale of his own, dissipated supporters.

There is a growing trend of assassination of Berisha's political opponents. There are clear acts of sabotage, like the burning of Socialist Party offices. And there are "blind" terrorist attacks, the aim of which is to weaken the insurrection, and increase demands for, or at least tolerance of, a return to a "strong state." The next step in this strategy will probably be the delaying of the elections planned for June, and resistance from Berisha to the creation of the promised Constituent Assembly.

## Albania's enemies

Despite their differences, the foreign powers all agree on a short term strategy in Albania. The insurrection must be by-passed, and "stability" re-imposed. The "western democracies" want to liquidate the insurrection which threatens to provoke the total dissolution of a state bordering on the European Union.

None of these powers is really interested in Albanian human suffering. After all, the number of deaths during this insurrection is insignificant compared to the mountains of bodies in Rwanda, in Bosnia and in Chechnya.

The Albanian insurrection is a threat to the stability of the Balkans, but not in the way western media usually imply. No serious analysts expect this rebellion to provoke ethnic wars between Albanian minority and Slav majority in Yugoslavia and Macedonia. But the phenomenon of popular insurrection following financial collapse certainly could be repeated in those countries, in Bulgaria, or in some parts of the former USSR.

In other words, this isn't about the Albanians, about peace, or about

democracy. This is about the challenge, by some Albanians, to the cohesion and credibility of the "new world order." This is why 79,000 tonnes of military hardware have been sent to Albania, to protect a few dozen tonnes of rice and milk powder.

## Albania's friends

The Albanian insurrection is not an echo of the past. It is not the last vestige of some heroic past. It was not provoked by a few "nostalgics." On the contrary, the revolt of the Albanian people comes from the future. It is a first sign of the resistance of the "fourth world" to the new capitalist barbarism which is spreading across the planet.

This is not the dawn of global socialist revolution. But it is a nightmare for the forces of reaction and counter-revolution. It is subversion of the existing order in the "new Europe." It suggests that bourgeois hegemony is not the only possibility.

The radical left should not just express its sympathy with the Albanian insurrection, or regret the fact that more detailed information about life in the rebel zones is not available. It should protest vigorously against the indifference of western rulers to this human suffering, and expose the selfish and cynical manoeuvres of the European powers in Albania. There is a need for international resistance to the international plans to repress this insurrection.

*Nicos Yannopoulos organises the Greek "Network for the defence of political and social rights." Two weeks after the Albanian insurrection started he spent ten days in the South of the country, where he held long discussions with the leaders of the National Committee of Public Salvation, and the leaders of the Popular Committees in a number of towns, including Saranda, Vlore, Tepelene and Gjirocastre.*

*This report has been re-edited for an international audience by Georges Mitralias and Mark Johnson.*



# The limits of flexibility

1 May 1997, by Ilyas Altinoglu

Greece has suffered ten years of austerity policies, and most people have seen no improvements in their situation. On the contrary, unemployment is rising and the standard of living falling.

True, Greece is every day more "European" But only in the sense that misery, violence and begging are increasingly visible in the streets. A social fracture is widening, just like in the main European nations.

Most Greeks comfort themselves with illusions. Conversations are dominated by a strange mixture of aggressive nationalism and a cosmopolitanism reinforced by emigration, links with the diaspora, and the internationalism of Greek capital. Everyone agrees that economic backwardness is the cause of our misery. Some say we must tighten our belts to catch up with the rest of Europe. Others say our underdevelopment condemns us to domination by the mandarins of the European Union. [1]

Contradictory, of course. But hardly surprising, given the country's very limited weight within the European Union, and the determination of the Euro-capitalist elite to unravel all the social advances made by the workers over the last 100 years.

Reality is beginning to shake Greece's curious ideological consensus. The country now has one million, mainly "illegal" foreign workers (Albanians, Kurds and Poles), in a total population of 10.3 million. Meanwhile, wages fell 20% in real terms between 1985 and 1996, and sharp cuts were made in social spending.

More is to follow. The OECD says Greece has "one of the most generous retirement pension systems in the European Union." And unemployment benefits (less than 50% of the minimum wage, paid for 5-12 months) are, apparently, a barrier to "labour

market flexibility. [2]

In the old days, Greece has a dense social tissue. Family and village solidarity helped absorb private sector "rationalisations" and the resulting unemployment. But after 10 years of "modernisation," these mechanisms are less and less responsive. Rather than finding a job in a family business or through kinship contacts, young people stay unemployed. Nor can people move back to their village of origin so easily. [3]

The "underground" economy, and the mass of small companies which characterise the Greek economy are booming, on paper. One in three members of the workforce are "self-employed", compared to one in seven in the EU as a whole. But in reality, most of these "self-employed" workers are paid on a piece-work or daily basis. With 30-50% of economic activity in Greece undeclared for tax, social security and workplace safety purposes, these marginalised workers, Greek and immigrant, experience "labour market flexibility" in its most modern, infernal forms.

The unemployment rate now fluctuates around 10%, depending on the contraction or expansion of the European Union heartlands. As in the rest of the European Union, most of the pain is concentrated among young workers, women, immigrants, and the long term under-employed.

## Vulnerable consensus

Greece is the only EU country which \*no-one\* expects to meet the Maastricht convergence criteria, and adopt the new common European currency. Inflation is 6.5%, the public sector debt is 113.4% of GDP, and the government predicts a 1997 budget deficit of 4.2% (assuming GDP growth of 3.3%).

The impossibility of meeting the Maastricht criteria has not prevented the government from trying its best. The combination of domestic cuts, and the knock-on effects of the slowdown in the larger European states, stifled the signs of economic upturn in 1994, and will probably do the same this year.

Already handicapped in the race towards Maastricht convergence, the Greek bourgeoisie must implement even harsher cuts than in the dominant member states. The Maastricht Treaty was signed by a conservative government, but even the Socialist Party (PASOK) which dominates Greek politics has been won over to the values of neo-liberalism. A "modernist" and "European" leadership has superseded the "nationalist" PASOK bosses of the Papandreou period. [5] The Synaspismos coalition (Left and Progressive Regroupment) has reinforced the pole of trade union and communist militants who are convinced that "there is no salvation outside Europe." The other left party, the Democratic Social Movement (DIKKI, formerly part of PASOK) criticises the Maastricht Treaty, but does not suggest that Greece renounce its signature!

Greece is probably the only European Union where the bourgeoisie as such is marginalised in public political life. PASOK wins most of the elections and, in September 1996, the Communist Party, DIKKI and Synaspismos each won about 5% of the national vote. The conservative New Democracy Party has been out of power for nearly 20 years, apart from a brief taste of power in 1990-93, when the party tried to run parliament with a majority of one vote.

People only voted for PASOK because they knew the right would attack even harder. During the campaign it was virtually impossible to find a party

worker who agreed with PASOK leaders.

## Waves of protest

Nevertheless, last year's election results were perceived by the working population as a victory for left currents in society. And there was a bitter response when the "socialist" government began to cut spending and increase revenue. The first to demonstrate against the PASOK government were mothers of large families, threatened with a reduction in their benefits. Retired people were told that they would have to pay more tax.

Next to protest were sailors. Greek shipping companies control half the European Union's fleet: and are areal supranational force. Not surprisingly, their all-powerful "Committee" is based in London, rather than the Greek port of Piraeus. Their power and mobility has given these capitalists the confidence to demand the complete liberalisation of the sector. Why should Greek ships have Greek crews and captains, earning

Greek wages? After all, Holland only requires that captains of Dutch ships have that nationality. Britain doesn't even demand that. [6]

While sailors faced a powerful sector of the European bourgeoisie, protesting peasants confronted a government which, in agricultural matters, is a transmission belt for decisions made in Brussels, and within the World Trade Organisation. As well as discouraging "overproduction", the European Commission is now trying to prevent subsidies and grants to the large number of Greek peasants who have been obliged, over the years, to work their land on a part-time basis, and spend the rest of their time in salaried work, or a small service business (particularly along the coast). The bureaucrats' goal is to eliminate two thirds of the agricultural workforce. To do so, they are willing to empty the countryside of its inhabitants, and tolerate a collapse in the quality of agricultural produce. [7] The country's 60,000 secondary school teachers started industrial action on 20 January 1997. Few, if any, suspected that they would be on strike for eight long weeks. The teachers were determined, and there was

organised solidarity from both pupils and parents. But they were unable to provoke an extension of the strike to other parts of the public sector: probably the only thing which could have forced the government to back down.

Their demands were hardly extraordinary, and the trade union current leading the campaign was the closest to PASOK, the ruling party. But because of the government's obsession with the Maastricht convergence criteria, and the continuing programme of public sector cutbacks, the government refused even the slightest concession, and seemed rather happy to have "saved" two months of salary, despite the disruption and suffering. [8]

These successive waves of protest have not brought an improvement in living conditions. But they have re-centred public debate in Greece along class terms. By thrusting the question of human need to the centre of discussion, the labour movement has knocked a few holes in the wall of consensus which protects the "necessity" of budget cuts and restrictive monetary policies. [9]

## Paramilitarisation

### 1 May 1997, by Pablo Restrepo



Between 1970 and 1979 there were 59,378 homicides in Colombia, of which 1.4% were political assassinations. Between 1980 and 1989 the number of murders rose by 134% to 141,232. Of these 11,043 (7.8%) were political. In other words, there were more than ten times as many political assassinations in the 1980s, compared to the previous decade. In the first half of the 1990s there were 11,471 political assassinations, slightly more than the total for the preceding ten years.

In February 1995, the European

Conference on Human Rights in Colombia calculated that "since 1988, on average, seven people are assassinated on a daily basis for political reasons and a further three are killed in combat as part of the internal armed conflict. Every second day a person is 'disappeared' and another is killed through 'social cleansing'. Arbitrary detentions are frequent and torture is endemic. Since 1986, approximately 20,000 people have been killed for political reasons or presumed political reasons, and 600,000 have been forced to flee from their homes in order to protect their lives. These statistics outdo by far the 17 years of military dictatorship in Chile". [10]

Seventy percent of these violations can be attributed to the armed forces, organisms of state security and the paramilitaries, and 30% can be attributed to the insurgent groups and the militia.

## Deteriorating situation

An openly militarist mentality is abroad in the Colombian state and society, to such a degree that we can talk of the resurrection of a constitutional dictatorship. The space won for democratic ideas, such as controlling the state's ability to

declare states of emergency and repress social conflicts or our ability to subordinate the military to civilian control or institutionalise measures to protect our rights which have been threatened, is increasingly reduced.

This is certainly the conclusion to be drawn from the government's proposals for the reform of the 1991 Constitution in respect of human rights. On the one hand there are a series of proposals about the character and use of states of emergency, which taken together go against the Commission of Human Rights and what has been stipulated by the American Convention on Human Rights. In general, they want the state of emergency to have a more permanent character and to remove the constitutional controls on its declaration and they also wish to give the military unlimited rights to judicially investigate civilians.

In the period covered by the last state of emergency, November 1995 to November 1996, Special Zones of Public Order were created. Amongst other things this now permits the military and the police to restrict the right of free movement and residency as well as allowing them to make arrests and house searches without a warrant. [11] The crushing effect of these measures in the east of the country can be clearly seen:

"The demonstrators were treated as wartime enemies, which manifested itself in acts of vandalism by the army, such as the dynamiting of a road, the mass arbitrary detention of more than 400 people, the restriction of food supplies, the subordination of mayors and governors to the authority of the military commanders and the intimidation and destitution of a judge who dared to defend the rights of the people who were being subjected to a military siege." [12]

Also there have been proposals made by the military which have been blessed by certain sectors in parliament, in an attempt to strengthen the military. Amongst the proposals are the abolition of the power of the public prosecutors and the Attorney General to investigate members of the armed forces, as well as trying to institutionalise the power

of the forces of the state to detain anyone suspected of disturbing public order for seven days without an arrest warrant. Meanwhile, there is the creation of "National Militias" (civilian support groups for the army).

## The paramilitary strategy

We are not just dealing with a simple attempt to promote death squads as just another mode of repressive operations. In Colombia "paramilitarism" is a series of factors which taken together form a \*strategy\* promoted by the military to carry out a counter insurgent war against any form of opposition with the aim of protecting and encouraging the expansion of the latifundias (plantations).

Paramilitarism takes shape from the moment that the military assumes a determining role, expressed by a certain politicisation, in favour of a particular social group; and when the participation of civilians in repressive tasks supposedly reserved for a specialised institution is encouraged.

In other words, paramilitarism constitutes a deformation of the rule of law. It is a hidden, underground strategy. Starting from a "legal" position (state power) the powers-that-be resort to illegal actions, in such a manner that there is no proof or public record, on the basis of which their activity can be monitored, evaluated or challenged. Their techniques of covering up can be so good that the puppet appears to be a totally autonomous being. But this charade is only possible thanks to the perverse skills of the "ventriloquist".

The November 1996 Human Rights Watch report sums up the Colombian experience of paramilitarism, and places it in a clearer perspective:

"The military-paramilitary association forms part of the current Colombian reality. Human Rights Watch has been able to prove that the collaboration between military intelligence, military commanders at division, brigade, battalion level and the paramilitaries continues as envisaged by Order

200-05/91 (Secret plan for the reorganisation of Colombian military intelligence). Basing ourselves on our interviews with witnesses and ex-members of the network, investigations by the Government and the abundant material compiled by human rights groups and journalists; we believe that the staff of the Colombian armed forces continues to organise, encourage and mobilise the paramilitaries in a hidden war against those suspected of supporting the guerrillas." [13]

In 1978 the paramilitary group Triple A (Anti-Communist American Action) emerged. In reality, Triple A was directly associated with the Military's Charri Solano Intelligence and Counter Intelligence Battalion BINCI. At the beginning of the 1980's the paramilitary group MAS was integrated into the process of repression and counter insurgency, in the area of Magdalena Medio.

According to the office of the High Commissioner for Peace there is now a paramilitary presence in 450 municipalities. In the North West of Colombia, the paramilitaries are the dominant armed force. And they no longer act in a dispersed manner. At their head is the ACCU (Self Defence Groups of Cordoba and Uraba) led by Carlos Castano.

In the middle of 1996, the paramilitary "Self Defence Movement of Colombia" held its third National Summit. Apart from refining its criteria for capturing suspected guerrillas and kidnapping their relatives, delegates reaffirmed their identity.

"The guerrillas know that the paramilitary phenomenon is irreversible. They know well how hard we have hit them. But our movement continues to be outside the law and politics, despite the fact that many of our collaborators, administrators, helpers, financiers and orientators take part in political activity. The discrediting of the Samper administration presents us with a magnificent opportunity to increase our work as combatants of the anti-subversive struggle. One could say that the operational incapacity of the armed forces due to the pressure of human rights organisations and other



institutions such as the Attorney General's Office and the Public Prosecutors places us in the vanguard of the struggle." [14]

The explosion of violence in 1996 carries three lessons. There is an "almost perfect" correlation between

the reduction of abuses directly attributable to the forces of the State and the increase in abuses directly imputable to paramilitaries. The paramilitaries' political statements in recent months confirm their aim of establishing themselves as the third

force in the Colombian conflict, alongside the regime and the leftist guerrillas. There are also signs of asustained offensive to pressure the population in many areas to elect mayors sympathetic to the paramilitaries in the forthcoming (October 1997) municipal elections.

# Free trade on the heels of genocide

**1 May 1997, by Cindy Forster**

Peace in Guatemala may open the door to an era of limited rights for labour activists, whereas before they faced death or exile. However management is mounting more sophisticated union-busting techniques than ever before. And despite a few lone voices, the political elite has closed ranks in support of the neo-liberal policies of President Alvaro Arzu. And the military remains a significant power. As the prospect of a less violent society glimmers on the horizon, channels of protest by the poor are being criminalised.

Ever since the military attempted to refurbish its image by turning over the presidency to civilians in 1985, the Guatemalan state has promoted a neo-liberal agenda. The current policies are different only in scale. In May 1996 the newly installed administration of Alvaro Arzu repealed the right to strike of all public employees. This "anti-strike law" contradicts the Constitution. By June 1996, Arzu's National Action Party (PAN) which controls the National Assembly, moved into high gear with mass layoffs of state workers who had already suffered the loss of thousands of jobs. (looking for exact number) In the countryside, a new law dramatically increased the penalty for land occupations, one of the few tactics available to thousands of campesinos (peasants) who have been sacked from the plantations.

Neo-liberals are also moving forward with the privatisation of the telephone company and electricity services.

Meanwhile they have derailed attempts to reform the income tax scale — one of the most unequal in the Americas according to the US Agency for International Development (AID) — and raised the sales tax from 7% to 10% to soak more from the poor majority.

"The government is trying to make us collapse from sheer exhaustion, and they're doing it with the help of the army and the business people," said Carlos Diaz of the independent labour federation Unsitragua. "They've shut down every legal avenue, leaving us no choice but to defy the law and take to the streets."

As head of the sugar growers association and a member of the joint chambers of commerce, agriculture, finance and industry (CACIF), Arzu has for years been promoting structural adjustment and privatisation. Business owners recognised his effectiveness by investing some 100 million quetzales (about US \$17 million) to install him in the National Palace, according to Adolfo Lacs, a union leader who works at the Bank of Guatemala.

Arzu rode to victory on a wave of anti-government rhetoric. But the rich are not leaving the political scene. Instead, they are amputating the state and severing its ties to the poor. In Guatemala as elsewhere, politicians share ever-closer links with the economic elites who benefit from neo-liberalism. At the end of the 20th century, 17 families control the lion's share of the nation's wealth.

The tight knit agro-industrial and financial-military elite includes people who have made fortunes in drug trafficking, the civil war, and the Bomba Monetaria or "monetary bomb" of the 1980s. This "bomb" was the brainchild of the generals then in power, who paid exporters two-and-one-half to four times the value of every dollar that they earned in foreign exchange with the idea of boosting the value of Guatemalan currency. By this the generals hoped to keep the quetzal on a par with the dollar. The attempt not only failed, but substantially contributed to the nation's current financial woes.

The government's loss was the private sector's gain. It was a gift, a "pinata" for the rich, in and out of uniform. Different sectors of the elite — industrial, agricultural, commercial, military — formed a range of new banks (including the Bank of the Army) to invest the bonanza, and to offer low-interest loans to themselves in their various corporate guises. Today many of these banks manage or co-manage agro-export plantations serving the US and European markets. They stand at the forefront of applying neo-liberal strategies — downsizing, work speed-ups, and replacing permanent with temporary labourers.

"When we speak of this [neo-liberalism] as a sin, we do so in the double sense of the socially immoral, and the stupidity of crashing so many times against the same rock," says economist Jorge Gonzalez del Valle, a former World Bank official, who ran

for election as vice president on the "Frente" (Democratic Front for a New Guatemala) ticket in the elections that brought Arzu to power. "Guatemala must not return (for the fourth time in its history) to the perverse cycle of governments that privatise what does not belong to them," he lamented. The "Frente," a new left coalition, won third place in the presidential elections, their first electoral challenge, despite scant funds and several assassinations of militants.

In Washington free trade has replaced the Cold War as the force driving US policy in Latin America. Their chief aim is to deregulate national economies in preparation for free trade agreements, which inherently advantage stronger over weaker economies. According to the US agency AID, Guatemala's entry into the club of free traders is "essential for Guatemala's sustainable development, and a major US foreign policy objective." Both the United States and the European Union are using their General System of Preferences to pave the way for free trade by widening the number of tariff-free products.

Many observers argue that it was the international lending agencies that forced the Guatemalan military to make peace with the guerrillas. Central America is slated to sign a free trade agreement in the year 2005. Before then, Guatemala and El Salvador plan to eliminate all customs duties and create a single market that incorporates half the Central American population. The technocrats of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala are holding rounds of talks to form a "northern triangle" of Central American nations, and hence a stronger unit to negotiate free trade with Mexico, the nearest northern giant. Mexico and Guatemala have also created a joint program for their border economy, an area that happens to embrace the heartland of the Zapatista rebellion which erupted in part to protest the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Ominously, the Guatemalan military and its murderous elite troops, the Kaibiles, have directly engaged in counter-insurgency against the Mexican rebels.

## Silent scourge in the countryside

The most well-hidden story of the neo-liberal onslaught in Guatemala is taking place in the countryside. The agro-export elite are gutting job security and calling it "modernisation." The same happened in Chile at the start of the Pinochet dictatorship. In Guatemala, plantation workers are being sacked and driven out of their plantation housing by the tens of thousands. They are forced to beg for work, often on the same plantations where their parents grew old and their grandparents are buried. Sugar workers are cutting up to eight tons of cane a day where in 1980, they were cutting one or two tons according to doctoral student Liz Oglesby of the University of California in Berkeley.

Guatemala remains an overwhelmingly agricultural economy. And across the plantation belt, landowners are replacing a labour force of year-round workers who enjoy traditional rights to housing and a corn plot, with a labour force of temporary workers, usually contracted for two-week stints, and employed for a maximum of five months in every 12.

Plantation owners have created a vast, chronically under-employed and migrant pool of workers. In the process they have systematically degraded labour conditions in the agro-export sector, the main "motor" of the national economy. With the connivance of the courts, they have done all this without scrutiny or protest, outside the shattered world of plantation workers.

In cases where it is possible to track falling wage rates, workers forced from permanent into temporary status are working longer hours, at heavier task rates, for the same daily pay.

Mass layoffs represent a new dynamic — a new war — alongside the extreme levels of labour abuse that planters have always felt entitled to practice. The ensuing battles enter the news as land occupations, because the planters take their former tenants to court on charges of criminal trespassing. Some

evictions are taking place because the landowners have abandoned agriculture altogether. In June 1996 one Spanish landowner drove 897 campesinos off his land in Iztapa, Escuintla to make way for a tourist complex.

The state overwhelmingly supports the landowners. Congress recently increased the penalty for occupying plantations to six years in jail. In effect this law renders illegal a critical weapon in the organising arsenal of rural labour. A few embattled rural unions have held the line against layoffs while thousands of other workers have succumbed.

Across the south coast, tractors are bulldozing the old plantation housing, burying an era that began in the 1870s with indentured servants, and that was softened in the 1940s with legal obligations and labour protections that are now being demolished.

The mainstream press is uninterested in this devastation in the countryside. It is, however, reporting the consequences: a flood of some 200,000 Guatemalans who have gone north in search of work on the Mexican side. In July 1997 alone, an estimated 3,000 Guatemalans crossed illegally into Mexico. "The abusiveness [of Guatemalan planters] forces people to cross the border illegally in search of work," says CONIC, a national campesino group. "Many workers say they can't even get medical assistance for their children in the first aid centres on the fincas." Other migrants to Mexico cite the widespread planter practice of refusing to pay back wages, which the owners usually admit they owe their workers.

Some attacks on rural labour rights are linked to strategies of modernisation. Others are merely gratuitous. Some of the richest individuals in Guatemala are locked in battle with campesino unions over payment of the minimum wage. Increasingly, finca and plantation owners have constructed facades of corporate ownership to avoid labour law. This summer US trade unionists were told that Finca La Torre's banker-owners have "no idea" who, in fact, owns the plantation. At the same

time, the banker-planters were telling their employees that they would be fired should they continue to sell corn to local trade unionists. In the words of the finca administration, "Let them die of starvation."

## Neo-liberal union busting

In the countryside, bosses are more ready than urban managers to resort to violence because they consider the blood of campesinos to be cheap, without political cost or economic consequence. Urban management strategies are not so straightforward. The owners of the Rayo-Vac battery factory employ psychologists to persuade workers to compete against each other. Maquilas often hire human relations personnel, sensitive to the workers' feelings, to balance out the line supervisors who yell insults and slap people.

Banks for their part are signing up droves of temporary workers. They frequently limit new hires to one-year contracts, in order to starve out existing unions. In the new private companies that repair all the nation's paved roads, now that state road maintenance utilities have been privatised, management only hires temporary workers, which means that unions are a virtual impossibility. Elsewhere, total quality management circles promote individual competition, and when these fail, workers are urged to join solidarista associations, a version of company unionism, imported from Costa Rica in the 1980s.

Solidarista associations are as ubiquitous in the countryside as in the capital. They offer interesting evidence of the unified strategies of urban and rural employers. The associations operate on the old patronage model, parcelling out cheap appliances and mountain bikes to workers willing to quit their unions. Last year the bankers who manage Finca La Torre even formed a soccer team for non-union workers and bought the players smart new uniforms.

The concept of exercise for coffee

workers is a curious one; adult males carry 200-pound loads, by choice, since the more they haul, the more they earn. In the neo-liberal economy, the presence of cheap and abundant labour in Guatemala's rural hinterland plays the same role as rock bottom wages in places like Haiti. The fact is not lost on maquila owners, many of whom have shut down city operations and opened up in Mayan villages.

Unfortunately, rural and urban workers often conceive of their struggles as a world apart. Much of the distance is due to the apartheid of race. Most rural Guatemalans are indigenous communities, with their own language and traditions. Most city dwellers aspire to a Spanish-speaking, mestizo (mixed race) identity.

Poverty is so profound on the plantations that many of the poor in the cities view the agro-export zone as their worst competition, a kind of inferno that drags down labour standards. The opposite is closer to the truth. Farm worker strikes since the late 1970s have mobilised the largest workforce in the nation and, indirectly, slowly driven up the minimum wage for city jobs. This is a chain reaction not lost on Guatemalan managers, who hammer at the wedge of cultural and ideological differences to fracture the strength of labour.

## State workers and the guillotine

"Our heads are already on the guillotine," says Raul Cerezo of the union of road workers, referring to the announcement of 2,400 layoffs. The layoffs are illegal (finding out their legal recourse), since the state ignored the correct judicial procedures and the union's embargoed status. Arzu shrank a workforce of road workers that had stood at 12,000 strong and 97% union to just 600 workers. Then the government urged the laid-off workers to apply for their old jobs under new, private employers, at a wage that was cut almost in half, from Q28 to Q15 a day. Most refused the offer. "The government argues the necessity for decentralisation but we say it's all a

ruse to carry out a very well-structured plan to crush state workers," said Cerezo. Adding insult to injury, union workers have been called in to redo the shoddy road building of the new companies.

The state is doing its best to undercut the effectiveness of public workers. A smear campaign in the media calls state workers "bureaucrats" and "incompetents." Meanwhile the cost of newspaper and radio adverts has doubled and quadrupled, so that trade unions must resort to leaflets as their only medium for informing the public.

Despite this assault, a number of public sector unions have crafted imaginative strategies against downsizing. In place of privatisation they advocate decentralisation to open up the field to private competitors while maintaining the state firms as well. The union of telephone workers crafted a de-monopolisation plan that would insist on trained workers, protect a proportion of the union positions, and keep some measure of public ownership in order to safeguard the public interest in affordable phone service. At the agricultural development bank, the union has advocated the bank's transformation into a user co-operative for thousands of small farmers, an idea which delighted customers but angered the state. In another example, the union at the state bank that funded low-cost housing managed to salvage some of its social justice principles before its dismemberment, and to force them into the mandate of the new neo-liberal housing fund.

Some public sector unions view their demise as inevitable while others are persuaded they can save the patient even if they lose limbs. Mario Antonio Cristales of the electrical workers union, for example, questions the validity of the anti-strike law, saying, "We've had a strike every year although there was always some kind of law prohibiting us from exercising this right. We should see this new law as reason to charge up our batteries and confront privatisation head-on."

Occasionally the privatising mania has sown new militancy among workers. For instance when the state fired 1,500 forestry workers, including half

the union's executive committee (which is illegal), the remaining non-union workers were furious and organised a far more powerful union than the one that had been busted. For them at least, adversity has built union loyalties among the rank and file that have allowed for broader strategies and weathered heavier attacks from management.

## **The not-so-quiet war on trade unionists**

Fewer trade unionists are being killed or tortured than in the past when thousands, if not tens of thousands, gave their lives in the struggle that numbered some 150,000 political assassinations since the 1960s. Today, instead of outright murder, plantation and factory owners are using different methods. Thousands of workers are being laid off, phased out, and categorically denied access to unions by the juggernaut of neo-liberal reforms. "As trade unionists we need to become far more agile and astute since the repression is not happening with bullets so much as through technical strategies," says Carlos Diaz of the union federation Unsitragua.

Free trade initiatives have forced the business sector to clean up Guatemala's reputation as one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a trade unionist. Under the General System of Preferences with the US, a clause promising that labour rights shall be honoured has led to repeated warnings against the Guatemalan government, owing to gross violations of child labour, pay and safety laws documented by the Chicago-based Guatemala Labour and Education Project (GLEP).

The US has refused to lift the probation this year, until the Guatemalan government shows that unions have been given the chance to evaluate the new labour code being steamrolled through the National Assembly. Further conditions include action by the Labour Ministry on the Phillips Van Heusen case, and the assignment of a special prosecutor to investigate Finca La Exacta.

GLEP has moved mountains working together with the union in the factory that sews Phillips Van Heusen garments. This is one of the few unions that has survived in the maquila industry. In March 1997, after years of struggle, the union won an agreement from the company to negotiate in good faith. Once signed, this will be the only union contract in the industry, achieved through the difficult chemistry of union strength inside the factory, grassroots pressure in the US, and pressure from the international human rights community.

As with human rights violations more generally, the people committing the abuses are being forced to act with greater subtlety. Maquila workers report that supervisors still hit workers, but with less frequency. Managers fire potential troublemakers more quickly, to avoid any possibility of union formation. "Fear of management retaliation has grown so strong that it's become extremely difficult to even say the word "union" in most factories and maquilas," according to Unsitragua's Carlos Diaz.

## **Victory of a sort**

International attention has achieved a very odd but important victory: the management and military types who plot attacks on labour seem to work harder to cover their trail, or else try to disguise their attacks as common crime. Union leaders are experiencing a tidal wave of assaults and car thefts. These attacks are suspicious because most of the stolen cars were ready for the junk heap, while the assaults have occurred without robberies. The victims request anonymity, because they fear that public denunciations will escalate the attacks, and eventually force them into exile.

Less has changed than the Arzu administration would have the world believe. In 1995 two trade union leaders were murdered — including Yovany Gomez of the RCA maquila factory — while in June of 1996, a leader of the union of shantytown dwellers was shot twice in the neck but miraculously survived. In 1996 a leader of the now-defunct union of the Ministry of Urban and Rural

Development was kidnapped during the union's struggle against privatisation, but released alive.

Trade unionists believe that military intelligence continues to work in tandem with individual business or plantation owners. The Campesino Unity Committee says that the plantations are crawling with G-2, are government spies who often moonlight as death squad members. Death threats are routine, according to workers on the plantations. The same is true for trade unionists in maquila factories and at banks, as well as state workers in construction, gas and electric companies. All members of the co-ordinating committee of IUTE, the federation of public sector workers have received personalised threats. In 1996 a union leader at Public Works was told to leave the country within 24 hours or else be disappeared. Among road workers, a local union leader was warned to cease his activities within a week if he wished to protect the lives of his wife and children. "Our rank and file suffers the same" according to Raul Cerezo, who added, "threats occur daily - it's a reign of terror."

For business owners this kinder, gentler terror - as opposed to the physical mutilation and constant deaths of the recent past - yields very real rewards. Threats have driven a number of union officers out of their workplaces to save their lives. When the threats fail to achieve their purpose, employers resort to the old tactics. For example the bank workers' leader, Reynaldo Gonzalez, gambled on publicity, but in 1996 escalating threats against his life, and his sister's abduction, rape and torture forced him into temporary exile. Carlos Salguero, General Secretary of the Union of Public Works, is another who denounced the threats against him; last December he fought off attackers and briefly went into exile. In early 1997, union leaders at the Mi-Kwan maquila factory were seized by armed men who entered the factory, then took them at gun point to a police station where they were beaten.

Human rights violations are growing less vicious and less numerous. But few Guatemalans are being fooled, because the violence bears all the

traditional trademarks. Labour organisers have survived the worst of

the death-squad terror, only to face

neo-liberalism. Justice remains a distant vision.

# Election violence in Sri Lanka

**1 May 1997, by B. Skanthakumar**

These long overdue local elections came half way into the centre-left Peoples Alliance [15] five year term in office, and were widely perceived as a referendum on the Government. The result appeared a foregone conclusion: a stinging rebuff of the PA, to the benefit of the right wing United National Party, and the smaller nationalist and radical left parties.

Instead, the Peoples Alliance (PA) won the same proportion of votes as in 1994 (48 per cent), when it won the parliamentary elections. [16]

Back then, the PA was riding high on a tide of popular anger and revulsion against the United National Party (UNP), which had been in power for 17 years. The UNP government had directed communal riots against the Tamil minority, made war against them; broken the back of the workers movement in the 1980 General Strike; and opened the economy to trans-nationals and the World Bank.

These policies created great disparities in wealth, and increased youth disaffection in the north and south. The terror and violence in the south peaked during the 1987-89 southern youth insurgency led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, in which 60,000 people were killed. In the 1994 election campaign the Peoples Alliance promised to restore human rights and democratic freedoms. They acknowledged the historic injustices committed against the Tamil nation and assured a speedy end to an unpopular war which had devastated society and destroyed tens of thousands of lives.

While economic liberalisation would not be reversed, they promised that it would be given "a human face". The poor and the marginal would not be

neglected.

It didn't take long for the PA government to back-track. The cost of living spiralled upwards. Bread, kerosene and gas prices rose, and energy supply and agriculture are threatened by drought. Press freedoms came under assault. [17] Workers protesting the accelerating privatisation programme were attacked by the police and threatened by the authorities.

Meanwhile, the anti-Tamil war in the north-east raged more ferociously than ever. [18] Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were displaced from their homes in a military offensive on the northern Jaffna Peninsula. [19] The behaviour and atrocities committed by the armed forces in the region have not differed from the pattern during the UNP regime. [20]

Even President Chandrika Kumaratunga (PA) recognised the disillusionment of PA supporters: "the war does harm to us in no small measure .... the problems of employment, housing, cost of living, threat of poverty, other basic requirements and slow progress are still with us" she said. [21]

The PA was delivered from a humiliating defeat in these latest elections by an outbreak of violence which reminded voters of the "bad old days" of UNP rule. While violence has been a feature of political life in Sri Lanka since 1956, these elections were marred by almost 2,000 reported incidents and nine deaths.

The PA leadership turned a blind eye to violence provoked by its faithful, prompting Vasudeva Nanayakkara, a critical LSSP MP to publicly denounce his Governments' failure to act

decisively in preventing rigging, intimidation and harassment of election monitors as well as its reluctance to rein in its own supporters.

The most dramatic moment was when PA Member of Parliament (MP), Nalanda Ellawala, was murdered by a UNP MP. Ellawala was a member of the "Mulberry Group", a progressive back-bench caucus within the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, committed to keeping the PA to its manifesto promises and rooting out corruption. His assassin was his political rival in the area and thought to have killed three students in 1988, among other murders.

The next day angry pro-Government mobs set fire to buildings and homes owned by UNP supporters in Ratnapura town, scene of the killing. A few days later two people died and a hundred were injured in clashes between PA and UNP supporters at Ellawala's funeral.

The Government was quick to make political capital out of these incidents, reminding people of the terror during the UNP regime and warned that the UNP hadn't fundamentally changed.

## Voting against the past

A new PA poster campaign incorporated a 1988 photograph of a naked man tied to a lamp-post and burned to death. This was a common enough sight in 1988 and 1989, when partly burned bodies were floated down rivers and waterways and the air was filled with the acrid stench of burning flesh. The poster caption read "Remember the lessons of the 17



years of brutal and murderous rule" - referring to the UNP period. [22] The people did and cast their votes accordingly.

Public opinion was outraged by the flagrant possession and illegal use of fire-arms by politicians. Guns were distributed to all political parties between 1987 and 1989 when the JVP and its military wing the Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparaya (Patriotic Peoples Movement) were killing UNPers, SLFPers and Leftists. Most of these arms had not been surrendered after the suppression of the JVP, and some have been used in robberies and in political thugery.

The Government was stung into action decreeing that all weapons were to be surrendered before the end of March. Only a few have to date and the police have shown no enthusiasm to disarm members of the Government.

Such violence surprised many Sri Lankans. After all, the elections were to the lowest tier of government, responsible for "repairing broken roads and drains, clearing the garbage and catching the stray dogs" as one newspaper editorialised. [23] Local government continues to be regulated by an Ordinance of colonial vintage, reflecting the paternalism and biases of that era and many of those elected view it simply as a stepping stone to higher office. There is little patronage to be distributed here and it doesn't have the status and perks associated even with Provincial legislatures.

Curiously, in a country where political debate has been dominated by schemes to decentralise and devolve power, there was little discussion about making local government more participatory and accountable to the community, even from the Left.

## Left campaigns

The Nava Sama Samaja Party [24] contested 14 councils in working class and poor areas polling under 8,000 votes. Vickramabahu Karunaratne, a

leading member of the Party, was elected to the Colombo Municipality with 2,911 votes and 1,810 preferences.

In the trade union sector, the NSSP has been gaining support and leading well received initiatives against privatisation; as well as being identified as a fearless opponent of the war in the north-east. But with the Left still unable to propose a credible alternative to the bourgeois parties, the working class overwhelmingly preferred to vote for the PA, signalling their opposition to a return to UNP rule and a new cycle of violence.

"In general, working class voters did not select the NSSP as a radical alternative," Karunaratne admits. "Though the response to our campaign was good. Tamil working people in particular went out of their way to show their sympathy to our party. Most, however, then followed the advice of Tamil leaders and voted for the TULF and other pro-PA Tamil parties."

"The masses have voted for the lesser evil, in a context where they are not too sure about the radical alternative Karunaratne said. Nevertheless, "around 5% nation-wide, and as many as 10% of urban voters, did choose a third force. Clearly an advanced layer is breaking away from both capitalist parties to search for a radical way out. This is a sign that a radical period could dawn in the near future." According to a 14 April NSSP press statement, "the UNP was rejected even in urban areas. The party is now broken and disorganised, without a combative leadership. Also, to a great extent the major capitalists have rallied around President Chandrika, supporting both her economic and military policies. Some Tamils did, however, vote for the UNP out of disgust with the current government's militaristic and oppressive policies.

"Radical parties polled 5% nation-wide. Among those who did reject the two main capitalist parties, there was a slight swing to the JVP, which

contested 200 seats, polled 260,000 seats nation-wide, but only received two council places under the country's complicated voting system. [on the basis of 8,000 votes in two specific localities]. According to NSSP leader Vickramabahu Karunaratne, "the JVP has emerged as the left party benefiting most from this election. In spite of some broken illusions, they have managed to attract the majority of the left-moving masses. They even gained votes in urban areas, demonstrating a presence within the working class."

## An early general election?

Boosted by its strong performance the PA is considering calling an early general election. It needs a two-thirds majority, which it doesn't have, to approve a draft Constitution, which includes measures aimed at persuading Tamil separatists to lay down their arms. These are greater powers for regional councils which will replace the existing provincial council system. But the proposals have been diluted in the face of Sinhala chauvinist reaction and do not offer any greater sovereignty to the mainly Tamil north-east where the clamour for self-government is loudest, over other regions. Peace campaigners believe that these proposals, the most radical to have been offered so far to Tamils could break the 'logic of war'.

Even if the new Constitution with its devolution package intact passes the Parliamentary hurdle and then wins popular acclaim in a referendum, neither the Government nor the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam show any willingness to stop the fighting.

The recent bout of political violence and the Government's response is a sign that, as under the UNP, war in the north may be accompanied by state repression against the Left and workers movement in the rest of the island.

# Under New Management

1 May 1997, by **Anke Hintjens**

I felt the difference immediately. When I visited Goma in 1993 we didn't dare move around. There were roadblocks everywhere, with soldiers demanding payment. All that has stopped. The massive corruption has gone. There has also been a shift in public thinking about the day-to-day "little corruption." The result is a noticeable improvement in the standard of living for ordinary people.

People no longer live in fear. Mobutu is no longer invincible, because the people have mobilised themselves.

The local population in the Goma region was not active in the rebellion in the early days. The great success of Laurent Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces of the Congo was to unite the Banyamulenge resistance against ethnic cleansing, the Rwandan army determination to break the genocidal regime-in-exile's control over the refugee camps in Eastern Zaire, and Kabila's own coalition of parties and guerrilla groups.

The Zairian army didn't want to fight, and the regime was already rotting. Not surprisingly, the regime had a number of successes, and new people began to flock towards it.

Alliance branches are being created in many districts. They try to educate people about the "culture of corruption" which developed during the 30 year Mobutu regime.

We observed several training sessions for new members of the Alliance. They studied the unsuccessful 1964-65 rebellion, the heritage of Patrice Lumumba and his movement, and the Alliance's own programme. [25] The political ideas within the Alliance are varied, including elements of Maoist, Third-Worldist ideas from the 1960s. They identify seven social classes in Zaire, with two fundamental groups: exploiters and exploited.

When we asked how the Alliance would finance its programmes for health, education, and public services, we were confidently told that "Zaire is

rich enough. Even paying the foreign debt will not be a problem." And the debt must be paid, since "we have to co-operate with all countries in the world."

Many of the Alliance representatives at a lower level are unaware of the political and economic problems which they will face when they take power. And there has been some influx of opportunists: former Mobutu supporters who converted "just in time." Only a handful of cadre from the 1964-65 rebellion are left. After 30 years of isolation, they are trying to transmit their principles of their long struggle against Mobutism to a new generation.

"Third-world" oriented people in Europe often think that Africa is a marginal part of the world, without great strategic significance. But when you see what the imperialists have been capable of in Rwanda and Zaire, collaborating in genocide, then you say to yourself, Africa matters a great deal to them.

# Privatising the privatisation debate

1 May 1997, by **Rajni Lallah**

The whole debate on privatisation and development strategy was itself privatised when Coopers and Lybrand organised a seminar on privatisation where several top Ministers, private sector organisations, heads of the public sector and the trade union movement were invited to find a consensus on how to privatise. The Finance Minister was to make the opening speech, but the whole event was to be chaired by the head of the Coopers and Lybrand Privatisation

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Through the All Workers Conference, all trade union confederations boycotted the seminar, and demonstrators at the hotel distributed an open letter explaining why the All Workers Conference was not participating. Government had promised national debate on privatisation, it read, and now it is "privatising the debate."

"No consensus for privatisation exists in Mauritius. The All Workers Conference strongly opposes the process. Therefore we cannot participate in a seminar which aims at finding a consensus on how to privatise."

This intervention disrupted the consultants' high profile media campaign. In the end, the All Workers Conference probably got more media coverage than the Coopers and Lybrand seminar.

Two days later, the national public television station organised a prime-time debate with two representatives of the All Workers Conference, a ultra-liberal economist, and two representatives of Coopers and Lybrand. The pro-privatisation speakers kept scoring own-goals, the "independent" economist even saying that, if selling the country to multinationals would make money for the "nation", then it was better to do so. With no representative of government invited, the debate itself was effectively privatised, with labour representatives opposing paid consultants.

This TV debate transformed the All

Workers Conference campaign on the necessity to oppose privatisation into a truly national debate. The "independent" commercial press was livid. Most editorials the next morning effectively said that "government should stop looking for democratic consensus on privatisation, and get on with it."

After all this unexpected publicity, the 4th All Workers Conference against privatisation on 10 March (Independence Day) was a great success. Organisers presented the government with a letter demanding that the government freeze the whole privatisation process until there has been real debate on what is wrong with the public sector, and what can be done to make it work better and more democratically; that the government sign an historic pact with the All Workers Conference and the trade unions promising that it will not dismantle universal, public and free services within the Welfare State; and that it stop trying to force privatisation through the sale or distribution of shares in privatised sectors.

The government has not yet replied.

But someone at Coopers and Lybrand is burning the midnight oil to produce a slick, dishonest response.

## Taxation

A second All Workers Conference White Paper was published in April, discussing taxation (the movement's first White Paper discussed privatisation). The new document is very timely, as the debate is shifting from privatisation towards how to finance the public sector, as the government launches a illusory "pre-budget consultation" process that will culminate in May/June with a new budget.

## Sugar

An All Workers Commission on the Sugar Industry met in mid April for the first time. Sugar Industry workers are the most experienced and still the most influential section of the working class in Mauritius. They were in the forefront of the big general strike in 1979. Now they are threatened with factory closures, as part of the centralisation of the sugar industry, and attacks on work conditions.