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Milosevic's Manoeuvres

1 March 1997, by Catherine Samary

The population sees Milosevic as their best defender in a context they perceive as characterised by "anti-Yugoslav" and "anti-Serb" conspiracies. The crisis of the explosion of the Yugoslav federation is intimately linked in peoples' minds and in practice with the mechanics of the "transition" from one system to another. The war for territory and property was carried out in the name of a redefinition of the ethnic frontiers. The socio-economic transformations underway across central and Eastern Europe have been slowed down in Serbia, partly as a result of the economic sanctions imposed on the country, and partly through the conscious choice of the regime.

The moment for taking stock, and making changes is fast approaching. There is a huge gap between the old promises of a state that would gather in all the Serbs, and the policies which have been followed. Hundreds of thousands of frustrated Serbian refugees and a miserable host population have witnessed the obscene enrichment of war profiteers.

The Serbian regime is not exhausted. Milosevic's political savvy creates a certain room for manoeuvre, particularly faced with heterogeneous and rather unattractive opposition proposals. This reality explains the apparently contradictory results of the federal and municipal elections held at

the beginning of November.

Municipal problems

On 3 November 1996 the ruling Socialist Party and its allies in the "Left Alliance" won two thirds of seats in the Yugoslav federal elections (Yugoslavia now comprises only Serbia and Montenegro). The centre-right opposition coalition Zajedno ("Together") [1] received a much lower vote than it had hoped. Surprisingly, several days later, Zajedno won municipal elections in fifteen cities, including the Serbian and federal capital Belgrade.

The annulling of these results provoked daily demonstrations of 10-100,000 people. A heterogeneous crowd united in the demand for a state that respects the rule of law, including the results of elections. Blocs of student marchers not only demonstrated their vitality at these daily demonstrations, but were keen to distinguish themselves from the opposition parties, which range from liberal democrats to nationalist and royalist currents (supported by the Orthodox Church, which would like to play a larger role in state affairs) to the extreme right..

Although they have mainly taken their distance from Serb nationalism,

younger people are still unable to face, and evaluate Serbia's past. Their preference for "apolitical" demonstrations expresses this weakness. A weakness which, however, is a great force in the short term. After all, the struggle for the creation and recognition of independent organisations and for democracy is the main struggle at the moment. This is the struggle which makes it possible to boost and generalise the mobilisation. And this is a struggle where victories are possible.

As for the development of a credible, alternative left force, that is more difficult to imagine in Serbia than elsewhere. The ruling parties are in open crisis, which is taking its effects on all the currents: Stalinist and social-democratic neo-Communists, old and new apparatchiks. This differentiation would be accelerated if they lost power.

Sophisticated voters...

Faced with such imponderable dynamics, the population votes to express a range of aspirations which are not met by any coherent political project. In the federal elections, people voted for internal and external stability. In the municipal elections, people voted against the corrupt

incumbents.

There is a town/country difference in voting behaviour. The pauperised urban middle classes voted for the opposition, while the regime's main social base was in the countryside, and among blue collar workers in the state enterprises. Peasants and workers, many of whom grow vegetables on a small patch of land, are worried about losing the meagre advantages offered by the social security system, and the goods and services which the official trade unions still distribute. As a result, the independent trade unions which support the opposition (and often support privatisation proposals) have remained marginal and divided. Their appeals inviting workers to join the opposition demonstrations went unanswered.

The liberal opposition accepts International Monetary Fund thinking about how to reform the Serbian economy. So, despite the ruling parties responsibility for the disastrous socio-economic situation (more than 60% of the population live below the poverty line), the "devil you know" seems to offer ordinary Serbs more protection than the opposition.

Many Serbs credit Slobodan Milosevic with the signing and implementation of the Dayton Accords. In other words, with stopping the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and achieving the end of sanctions against Serbia-Montenegro.

As for the Zajedno opposition, leader Zoran Djindjic had appeared in public alongside the ultra-nationalist Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. The Bosnian Serb SDS party openly supports the opposition to Milosevic in Serbia.

... and a pragmatic leader

Slobodan Milosevic is a pragmatist, capable of pulling various strings, one at a time, or all simultaneously. In the late 1980s, he rose to power by appearing more reassuring to the population than the nationalist opposition, which was turned towards the royalist past. Milosevic made his

first steps up the power ladder by supporting purges against the corrupt party-state apparatus. He had a pro-Yugoslav discourse, but spoke of the necessity of redefining the federation to the benefit of the Serb majority. When Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence in 1991 Milosevic still hoped to keep Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina inside the Yugoslav federation.

Meanwhile, Serb Renaissance Movement leader Vuk Draskovic was calling for "a Greater Serbia wherever there are Serbian graves" and making strongly anti-Muslim and warlike speeches. The nationalist and anti-communist right began to form their militias. Beginning in 1989, Milosevic began to steal part of the nationalists' thunder, re-imposing central control on the mainly Albanian province of Kosovo (cradle of the first Serb state in the middle ages), and presenting himself as a defender of Serbian minorities everywhere; from Kosovo to Croatia and Bosnia.

In 1991 the Yugoslav army withdrew from Slovenia (after a 10-day confrontation) and that republic became independent. After the subsequent purges, the Yugoslav Army became a vast reserve force for the various far-right militias who used ethnic cleansing strategies to try to build Serb states in Croatia and Bosnia. During this period, Milosevic consolidated his power in Belgrade through an alliance with the extreme right Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj.

Milosevic quickly realised that the sorcerer's apprentice threatened to de-stabilise his regime. The president's partner, Mirjana Markovic, created the Union of the Yugoslav Left (JUL), which pushed the Socialist Party to break its alliance with the far right allies. It did so in 1993. The JUL denounced the crimes of Radovan Karadzic's Bosnian Serb nationalists, and proclaimed its attachment to the multi-cultural tradition of Titoist Yugoslav Communism.

The JUL consciously sought to stabilise the Socialist Party regime, by shifting responsibility for war crimes to the far right, and by exploiting the traditional methods of clientelism and

corruption among the managers and ministries. The JUL also addressed itself to the most socially disadvantaged sections of the population, in the countryside and the state enterprises. JUL propaganda increasingly included denunciation of IMF pressure, and attacks on the liberal opposition as "serving the west, and paid by the west". Unfortunately, this is largely true.

Slobodan the statesman

From 1993, Milosevic shelved any plans for a Greater Serbia, and supported the international peace plans against his former ally, the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. The evolution of Milosevic's politics have divided and disturbed the opposition on more than one occasion. When Milosevic broke with the far right, the left opposition current New Democracy (pro-self management, anti-war) joined his coalition. The regime's new pacifist line disoriented the liberal democratic Civic Alliance, and the Serbian Renaissance Movement, which had switched to an anti-war position when Milosevic had been in favour of war.

The opposition bitterly regretted that they were no longer the favoured interlocutors of the western powers. They decided to make a coalition with the Serbian supporters of Radovan Karadzic, in a front against Milosevic. In Spring 1996, this provoked a split in the Civic Alliance, with half of the leadership and most of the youth forming a small social democratic current which is hostile to any further unprincipled opposition coalitions, with opposition to Milosevic as their sole unifying feature. This new current accused the Civic Alliance of wanting to eliminate the social measures introduced by the Yugoslav regime, and to privatise social property. They are the eighth such small group to articulate such a position.

After the Dayton Accords and the end of the war the major powers have relied on Serbia and Croatia, the strongest regimes, to try to stabilise the region. This meant dealing with the regime in place. To what extent do

the massive anti-Milosevic demonstrations of recent months threaten to change this scenario?

The beginning of the end

The crisis is already provoking the decomposition of the majority power block. The Socialist Party of Montenegro looks more like Poland's ex-Communist Social Democrats than their "big brother" party in Serbia, which, in turn, is much more enthusiastic about the idea of a "Chinese model" combined with limited political pluralism. Montenegro's privatisation law is much more liberal than Serbia's. The smaller republic's rulers have already provoked concern in Belgrade with their desire to control Montenegro's foreign currency income (the Montenegrin coast is Yugoslavia's main tourist centre). The Montenegrin leadership is exploiting the current crisis to expand their own room for manoeuvre and their own autonomy. They even threatened to "re-examine" the Yugoslav federal arrangement if the municipal election victories of the Serbian opposition were not respected.

In Serbia itself, the social democrats of New Democracy threatened to leave the government coalition if these opposition victories were not recognised. Even the Socialist Party is polarising: the mayor of Belgrade resigned in protest and was then expelled from the Socialist Party. The most inflexible neo-Communist part of the coalition, led by Milosevic's spouse Mirjana Markovic is playing an active role in the purges which are now beginning.

In short, the Socialist Party is in transition. The army has stressed its neutrality, and the general staff seems to be playing a conciliatory role. No repressive measures have been taken against those units which declared their support for the opposition, and

the general staff has promised Belgrade's students that the army will not intervene. In 1991 Milosevic sent tanks to break up demonstrations.

All is not sweetness and light. Most of the low blows of the Milosevic regime have come from the paramilitary groups and the police, rather than the army. Nothing excludes such "incidents" in the future. Faced with growing public protests, Milosevic for a while seemed to have adopted a strategy combining concessions and threats. He refused to admit that the regime had played any role in annulling the municipal election results. Regional leaders of the Socialist Party in Belgrade, and the far-right Radical Party have continued to support the electoral commission's decision to annul the Zajedno victory in the Belgrade municipal elections. But the regime has proposed that Belgrade be placed, provisionally, under central administration, so that the electoral law can be changed, and new elections organised. In other words,

Milosevic is pretending that the law was respected, but that it was a bad law, and it will be changed. At the same time, the ruling party is "tightening discipline in the ranks" - a purge of "bad apples" including the Socialist Party boss in Nis, Serbia's second largest city. Wherever Zajedno's victory is to be recognised, local Socialist Party leaders are blamed for the electoral mess. As well as these "hard-liners", the purge is also striking some Socialist Party bosses considered "too soft", including the Mayor of Belgrade, who dared to condemn the initial decision of the electoral commission.

Endgame?

The United States sees Milosevic as, if not too socialist, then certainly too independent. Will Clinton increase support for the opposition? Zajedno is doing everything it can to prove itself to the western powers as an alternative government. The coalition

recently came out in favour of the Dayton Accords. Zajedno may even adopt a more flexible position over Kosovo, the Serbian province where the Albanian-speaking majority continues a massive civil disobedience campaign in defence of their civic and national rights.

Milosevic is not under immediate threat, but he is hesitating in the face of a double risk which will not go away. Admitting opposition victories in fifteen large towns, including Belgrade, is admitting that there was massive electoral fraud. Reversing that fraud gives the opposition considerable power, especially since much of Serbia's media is controlled by local government. This would weaken Milosevic's position in next year's parliamentary and (Yugoslav) presidential elections.

One alternative would be to admit only a few partial "errors" by the electoral commission. But this would mean another loss of international credibility. The solution Milosevic chose was to ask the Serbian parliament to approve a law which recognised the validity of the OSCE commissions which, formally speaking, Milosevic had invited to Serbia to examine the election results. The Serbian leader evidently decided that this was the lesser of two evils.

He will presumably proceed with piecemeal concessions (including a compromise over the speed and extent of privatisation in Montenegro). His goal is to consolidate the majority coalition at the federal level, and increase the (currently symbolic) powers of the Yugoslav Federal President a post which becomes vacant in 1998, and which he would like to fill himself. The questions to watch in Serbian politics in the months to come include the redefinition of the federation, attempts to deal with the Kosovo problem, and clarification of the socio-economic choices of the regime, including privatisation, and the management of the foreign debt.

Trade union "Broad Lefts" increase co-ordination

1 March 1997, by **Fred Leplat**



On Saturday 1st February, almost 200 delegates and visitors attended a conference called by a steering committee of various trade union "broad lefts". Most came from the teachers unions, the Communication Workers Union, Unison (the union for health and local government workers), the Civil and Public Services Association, the printers GMPU and the union for technicians, the MSF.

Many had a long experience in the unions as shop stewards, branch secretaries, regional union leaders and some as national executive members. The aim of the conference was to set up a co-ordination between the broad lefts to push for specific demands such as the re-introduction of a minimum wage.

For far too long, the left in each union has been, through necessity, concerned with the affairs of their own union. The unrelenting attack from employers and the Tories combined with the union bureaucracy's total inaction has placed the unions in crisis and forced the left into retreat. Membership of unions affiliated to Britain's Trade Union Congress (TUC) has dropped from 9.8 million in 1985 to 6.9 million today. The number of strike days has decreased even more sharply from 6.4 million in 1985 to 415,000 in 1995 - the lowest level in over a century. Youth have little interest or possibility in joining unions. Membership for the under 20s is just 6%. Union membership is now concentrated amongst older workers in the privatised utilities such as telecommunications or rail and in the remaining public sector.

On the defensive

Over the last two decades, the unions have faced a triple challenge; from the economic crisis, from employer offensives and restrictive legislation. To raise productivity, employers have reduced the work force. There is now mass unemployment in Britain, with 3.1 million people out of work yet defining themselves as "ready to start a job." Those new jobs created are without security and often part-time. There has been extensive privatisation of whole industries such as the railways and telecommunications, while other industries, such as mining, have virtually disappeared (it is expected that there will only be 12 coal-mines open by the year 2000). Where there is still no outright privatisation in the health service, an "internal market" has been created to allow "market forces" to determine "value for money".

The employers' offensive has brought about dramatic changes in working conditions through flexibility, team-working, performance related pay and temporary contracts. To maintain recognition, some unions have agreed to single-union deals at the expense of any control over working conditions, even renouncing strike action in favour of compulsory arbitration.

One reason why the employers have been largely successful in these offensives has been the support business has received from government through successive anti-union laws passed since 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came to power. Picketing and solidarity action is now criminalised. Postal secret balloting for any form of industrial action is a legal requirement. The calling of official strike action is such a lengthy and complicated process that unions

are easily victim to injunctions from employers over technical breaches of balloting procedures.

The removal of other legal rights such as wage councils that set pay levels in certain industries, and the lengthening qualifying period for unfair dismissal claims, have strengthened the employers' hand. But most extraordinary is that it is no longer possible, in Britain today, to have a legal strike for union recognition.

Responsibility for the defeats of the last two decades lies firmly with the leaders of the unions and the TUC. This is not to minimise the problems that the unions face but to assert that there is another way forward. The current trade union leadership has failed to organise any effective resistance. It has allowed individual groups of workers to remain isolated when they have taken action and refused to generalise struggles or organise effective solidarity. The long running strikes by the Hillingdon Hospital workers and the Liverpool dockers, both out for over 18 months, unfortunately confirm this.

National attacks by the employers have not been countered by campaigns of national industrial action. With the threat of the anti-union laws, union leaders and unelected officials are more likely to consult a lawyer than union members.

Unity in action

The broad lefts have different traditions, experience and political outlook. Some, like in the TGWU, are by invitation only and organise only to secure elections. Others like the Socialist Teachers Alliance are open and have given as much priority to

campaigning activity as to gaining elected positions. The STA takes up both issues of immediate concerns to members as to the broader political issues raised by government attacks. As a result it may soon be in a position to win a majority on the teachers union national executive.

Despite these differences, the union lefts generally agree that it is through action that the union is built. Experience shows that workers join the union when industrial action is organised to oppose a management attack. Yet the majority of union leaders and the TUC are turning the unions into welfare organisations providing cheap travel or credit cards, and rely on the law or the European Union Social Chapter protection.

Another common thread through the "broad lefts" is the fight for democracy in the unions. This means supporting the right for branches and members to take industrial action when necessary, for officials to be elected and accountable, and for the decisions of national union conferences to be respected and implemented.

Here we go

Prosperity? No thanks!

1 March 1997, by **Ufak Uras**

International Viewpoint asked Ufak Uras, president of the Freedom and Solidarity Party (Ozgurluk ve Dayanisma Partisi - ODP), how the left is responding to this unstable situation.

What is the result of the first year of Prosperity Party rule?

The Prosperity Party (Refah partisi) came to power with the tacit support of the army and capital. Their behaviour in power has embarrassed their militants: the Refah government has implemented pro-capital projects for economic restructuring. As a result, Refah has lost its fresh, new

Finally the union lefts believe that it is necessary to prepare the ground now for a fight with a New Labour government on some key issues such as against wage controls and for a minimum wage set at a decent level, or for taking back into public ownership the privatised utilities and providing the funds necessary for a welfare state that actually meets the needs of the working class.

Recent New Labour statements have made it clear that it will keep to the Tories' economic framework for the next two years, that there will be no repeal of the anti-union laws, and that the spirit of privatisation will remain. A recent five-year agreement at Blue Circle Cement has been hailed by New Labour as the way forward. In exchange for a no-compulsory-redundancy agreement, the union agreed to total flexibility and pay rises determined by arbitration. A few weeks later, Peter Hain, Labour's employment spokesperson, stated that a Labour government would bring back employment security where it could, such as in the civil service, in exchange for flexibility.

image. Nevertheless, the party is different in some respects from the other parties, with its strong rank-and-file base, its network of economic relationships, and the community identity which it has developed.

Refah presents itself as the ideological umbrella protecting all those who are rejected and marginalised by neo-liberalism and privatisations. Meanwhile, they reach for the whip in order to strike discipline into the working class.

The only real ideological challenge to Refah at the moment is from rather marginalised Islamic radicals and

With the forthcoming general election and the possibility of a Labour government after 18 years of Tory rule, a new political situation will arise. A Labour government may well enjoy a honeymoon period while workers breathe a sigh of relief after 18 years of the Tories. But there are already expectations that a Labour government should mean a change, however small in particular over pay and a minimum wage, and proper funding of health and other welfare services.

After years of seeing pay eroded, an ever increasing gap between the rich and poor, and obscene pay rises to the directors of the privatised utilities, a two-year pay freeze managed by a Labour government coinciding with continued cuts to meet the convergence criteria of the Maastricht Agreement could lead to a collision between union members and a Labour government. It is in such a context that this co-ordination of the union lefts, although small now, could develop into a real alternative leadership at the head of a wave of industrial action pressing for some minor concessions from a Labour government.

intellectuals within the party. The poorer sections of Turkish society have not yet reacted against Refah's anti-social policies. They have not yet realised that Refah can neither transform relations of power at the local level, nor implement any significant transformation of daily life. The party has neither the intellectual capacity nor the force to do so.

The Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP) links a libertarian, non-confessional perspective with an orientation towards social struggles, particularly the labour struggle, in opposition to political Islam and neo-liberal orthodoxy.

Refah may be a fundamentalist party, but do they follow the same foreign policy as their pro-western predecessors?

As part of the opposition, Refah said relations with the Muslim countries of the middle east were more important than those with the European Union. But once they came to power, Refah declared their allegiance to the traditional foreign policy objectives. Refah didn't even hesitate before implementing a military co-operation agreement with Israel. A decision which alarmed many ordinary members of the party.

The lowest common denominator politics of "we are all Muslims, we can solve all our problems by talking to each other" no longer hides the truth about Refah: they came to power without having done their homework. Their opposition to the West is a cultural opposition, which doesn't question the capitalist system which links us with Europe.

Turkey's relations with the European Union are limited to a customs union. Turkey cannot enter the European Union, but its economic ties, and position in the middle east oblige Europe to take the country into account. But the West European countries have distanced themselves from Turkey over the state of emergency, the human rights issue, democratic problems, and the chronic economic crisis which has caused massive unemployment and a very high rate of inflation.

Is there a possibility of democratic openings?

We try to express the libertarian, democratic alternative. The current ODP slogan is "either they become accountable, or the people will sweep them away!" We seek to nurture, and accelerate, the massive protests which have been developing. To oppose the establishment parties, we need the widest possible union of left forces. The ODP is building its own solidarity networks at a district and provincial level.

Why are Greek-Turkish relations so bad?

The initiative in Greek-Turkish relations has always come from the warmongers on both sides. The previous Ciller government was yet another example of the strategy of political masturbation on the international scene whenever the domestic crisis deepened.

What does the ODP suggest to reduce the tension?

At our own level, we are preparing for a joint conference [of anti-militarist forces] to improve international solidarity. We hope to work together with AKEL (Greek Cypriot Communists), the Turkish Republican Party of Cyprus, the Greek Communist Party and the Sinasmissions (left). Our contacts with these partners during last year's 29th Congress of the French Communist Party were very encouraging.

What about the Kurdish question?

The state of emergency continues. We still call for a mutual cease-fire and a general amnesty. We recognise the HADEP party as our partner [in the Kurdish regions]. Together we celebrated World Peace Day on 1 September 1996, launching a campaign to gather one million signatures on a petition for peace. We demanded a society where the guns would be at least be silent, where everyone can express themselves, and live as they choose. We realise that the struggle with the parties of war will be difficult. But there is no alternative to the construction of a multi-lingual, libertarian, egalitarian society, which respects a plurality of identities. Despite the challenges, we are gaining ground with these ideas.

How is the ODP developing?

For 16 years in Turkey, fascism, political Islam and neo-liberalism all found a tribune for their ideas. But not the world of labour, socialism and revolutionary thought. Hence the interest which accompanied the foundation of the ODP one year ago. A range of groups recognised the importance of uniting the revolutionary left, socialists, rank-and-file social democrats, feminists, greens, anti-militarists, anarchists and others in a pluralist party, with

multiple voices, and a rainbow perspective.

The second important step was to unite the masses. Today, 85% of our 30,000 members were not previously members of left political groups! One million people have responded to our dialogue. In one way or another, we strive to organise about 450,000 people.

We have three main campaigns: for peace; for democratisation; and for the defence of labour against the New World Order, globalisation and privatisation.

A few months after the ODP was founded, we faced the challenge of local elections in many regions. Despite the risks, we decided to participate in five districts where the right was particularly strong. Unlike all the other parties, the ODP selected its candidates locally, rather than from national headquarters.

We received about 2% of the vote. Given the conditions, this has to be considered a success. Recent polls put our electoral support at about 5%. We will be much better organised during the Autumn 1997 parliamentary elections, where we will campaign with the call for a real force to rebuild. The restructuring of Turkey should be conceived around a solution to the labour crisis.

We are building up our district and provincial organisation, with a layer of experienced members. The party is now present in 62 prefectures, 300 sub-prefectures and 1,000 municipalities. We can hold our head up among the workers-labour parties of the world.

We have to restructure the left too. No more arbitrary behaviour by the leaders! No more hierarchical models, with obedience to orders from above. No to the excessive professionalisation of politics, where decisions are made a hundred levels away from the place they are implemented. Enough of the situation where people don't participate in politics, but consume it, passively!

As ODP President, I support the principle of rotation of party posts. I

have kept my job at the University. We have also implemented a 30% minimum quota for women in the leading bodies of the party. And indeed, the number of women and young people represented in the leadership is increasing.

Many people outside the ODP were sceptical when the former Stalinists, Maoists and Trotskyists came together in a new party. People expected to see internal disputes. Instead, there has been active co-operation, as we have prioritised head-to-shoulder work against the system rather than sterile argument.

Our foreign relations are still below the level which our position in the country calls for. Though we shared our experiences with others at last year's Zapatista Conference for Humanity and against Neo-Liberalism. We will do the same later this year at the Sao Paulo Forum.

Inside Turkey, we refuse any temptation to manipulate the trade unions, associations and professional groups where we have a real influence. Similarly, wherever we have an influence in the Turkish immigrant communities of western Europe, we refuse to portray ourselves as

speaking in their name and on their behalf. Those who try to use emigrants in this way, in the hope of building a political lobby in Europe are doomed to failure. On the contrary, an honest, just approach should quickly bear fruit. Hundreds of thousands of Turks live in Europe. We encourage them to turn not only towards the ODP, but towards the left groups and mass movements of the countries they live in. This is how we can build solidarity networks against multinationals like Shell, Mobil et Carrefour (supermarkets), who are sacking their Turkish workers, and preventing us from forming trade unions.

Abortion Still Restricted

1 March 1997, by Sergio, PSR

Once again, Portuguese progressive movements have been defeated by their pseudo-left "representatives." And Portuguese women have lost a real possibility to change the most repressive abortion law in continental Europe. At least 16,000 women are forced into illegal abortions every year, in the conditions and with the consequences this implies.

The parliamentary discussions started at the end of last year, when a member of parliament elected on the (ruling) Socialist Party list admitted that, as a doctor, he had performed abortions beyond the strict limits permitted by Portuguese law. He proposed an amendment to existing legislation, saying that the legal limits on abortion of malformed fetuses were too conservative. This purely medical argument did win parliamentary support.

The proposal to permit abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy was originally presented to parliament by the youth organisations of the Socialist and Communist Parties. Despite their extreme moderation, these proposals were a step forward; recognising women's right to choose. They provoked a new wave of public discussion about the abortion question.

The Catholic church immediately launched a counter-campaign, including television advertisements, opposing abortion. The main opposition to the pro-life counter-attack came from the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR) Portuguese section of the Fourth International. While the Communist and Socialist Party youth organisations confined themselves to parliamentary lobbying,

the PSR ran the only visible campaign on the street; reaching thousands of people.

Many unorganised women did join the campaign to support the liberalisation of the abortion law. But attempts to use this campaign to rebuild the women's movement have failed. Still, the response to the PSR campaign suggests that there has been a change in Portuguese society since abortion was last discussed, in the 1970s, when the country had a flourishing women's movement.

This time round, younger people understood the issues, and mostly condemned the Church's reactionary campaign. Attendance at the main PSR-sponsored rally outside the Parliament was very high (not counting the "pro-life" counter-demonstration!).

"It seems surrealistic to talk about human

rights"

1 March 1997, by Houssin Zahouan

Can you describe your working conditions?

Houssin Zahouan: The situation of human rights in Algeria is grave, and it could not be otherwise. It seems surrealistic to talk about human rights today in a country where the number of dead can be counted in the tens of thousands, where a state of emergency has been in existence for years, where the violence is explosive and where everything is closed off.

Nevertheless, the League for the Defence of Human Rights has not given up. The situation we face is quite difficult for the sole reason that from the beginning the government has targeted our organisation as a primary enemy, and prevented us from opening an office. Our telephones are cut off and our post office box is monitored. Add to this a boycott by the media and the vilification of our league by portraying it as a pro-Islamic organisation.

Algerians continue to die in silence and with the almost total indifference of international public opinion. Why?

For almost a dozen years, Amnesty International (AI) has been the only organisation on an international scale which took a systematic interest in Algeria. That said, the group's latest report [2] severely underestimates reality. Other foreign NGOs and governments, are rather indifferent. In Europe the reaction is severe if injury is done to an animal or a dog. But human rights are covered by a different set of rules when it comes to developing countries, such as Algeria, where economic and strategic interests are at stake.

In June 1994 the president of the Algerian League for Human Rights (LADH) was assassinated. Why?

In 1984, Youcef Fathallah joined me in the defence of political prisoners before the State Security Court. We became estranged when the state, having decided to create a government group to oppose the LADDH in 1987, publicised his name as becoming part of the leadership of the new league. The goal was to lure him in, to integrate him into this league precisely because he was someone who defended political prisoners.

He began to change the nature of the "official" league. But, given his profound honesty he did not understand that this was beginning to derail it from the goals that his sponsors wanted it to pursue. Toward the end of his life he decided to simply close down this LADH through a unification of the two leagues. He did not appreciate the seriousness of this undertaking.

What are the repercussions of the recent referendum which approved greater powers for the president?

The referendum signified, for those who understand, the closing of the circle begun in 1988-89. After the coup against the elections Algeria entered into an emergency situation. Up until the time when Zeroual became president, people simply waited for an end to the emergency—that is the re-establishment of a secure situation and a normal life. Needless to say, their expectations have not been met.

The goal of Zeroual today is to secure his position by this referendum which shows that things are coming to a conclusion and we have entered into the final phase. This final phase represents the closing off of Algerian political and institutional life. Even the results of the referendum are indicative. One can estimate that there was a 15-20% participation rate while the government announced that it was 75%. This shows how far a closed system can go in its falsifications.

Was the university strike launched on October 15 the start of the rebirth of the social movements?

This is neither a beginning nor an awakening. There is today a considerable social unrest in Algeria, which is ignored because it takes place in the context of a media blackout on both sides of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, things are stymied because the leadership of the central trade union (General Union of Algerian Workers, UGTA) is completely under the control of the government, a prisoner of the "Club des pins" (a residential neighbourhood where the notables of the regime live). It does not allow this social unrest to come to a head in a co-ordinated national movement.

The strike of teachers and of the universities is a creeping strike which has lasted for weeks despite the repression and pressures. But there are other strikes which are equally important, if not more important, in whole sectors (oil, etc.). These movements continue and will continue. The situation and the tension is such that we do not know what will make everything explode.