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A crisis of legitimacy

1 October 2004, by **G Buster**



Few illusions about a citizen's Europe can remain when the citizens themselves turn their backs on the process, abstaining massively from voting or voting in protest against the economic and social counter-reforms of the Lisbon strategy. [1] Prodi was right when he said, "Many Europeans consider that the Union does not measure up to their hopes and do not see why they should bother to vote". But the president of the German construction trade union, Klaus Wiesenhügel, was also right when he pointed out that "those who lower taxes and at the same time reduce the social benefits of the weakest cannot expect the least approval from our quarter. The problem is that the SPD has abandoned its fundamental values".

The European social rebellion initiated by the public sector strike in France in 1995 - followed by demonstrations of the movement for global justice, general and sectoral strikes in numerous member states and huge mobilizations against the Iraq war - has become a contradictory combined and uneven political project. But it expresses the rejection of the neoliberal project and a clear identification of who "they" are. The serious problem that this movement faces is that it is still not capable of

identifying an "us".

The project of European construction began during the Cold War around a social pact between the European oligarchies and the trade unions under social democratic or Christian Democrat leadership and was founded on a myth of the "European social model" which procured it popular legitimacy set against the terrible memories of European wars and the political and social poverty of "actually existing socialism". This social pact was explicitly broken by the European oligarchy in the Maastricht Treaty in 1991 and replaced by a neoliberal project which has taken form at Amsterdam (1997), Nice (2000) and finally through the European Treaty which transforms it into law.

In exchange, the oligarchy has offered the European union leaderships of the ETUC - co-opted to a large extent inside the national state apparatuses and the Brussels bureaucracy itself - the perspective of a growing "communitization" of social policies once the necessary structural reforms to ensure the European economy a preponderant place on the world market and to restore competitiveness in relation to the USA and Japan have been introduced.

If we add that the political project of a neoliberal Europe breaks with the right of citizenship - which constitutes the kernel of bourgeois liberal

ideology - and installs an enlightened technocratic despotism, embodied by the Commission and the European Council, the crisis of popular legitimacy which has been expressed so forcefully in these European elections is easier to understand.

To use the old terminology of Lukács, the "[working] class in itself" of the second world economy - still united socially and politically - is beginning to doubt the dominant ideology, the coherence of the European neoliberal project, its compatibility with its own immediate interests. But it remains prisoner of its social imagination, forged in the post-war social contract, although for the new generations this is no longer a direct, lived experience, but a kind of institutional heritage.

To identify itself in relation to "them", to become a "class for itself", European workers need an alternative project of European construction at the political level. If they coordinate their resistance struggles, they could rein back temporarily or sectorally the neoliberal project. But to defeat it, they need to constitute alternative political instruments, with an electoral impact that can change the relationship of forces.

These European elections have shown that we are still far from that. The alternative left overall has not been capable of assembling a vote that would express in an independent

manner, in terms of a "class for itself", the long cycle of mobilizations started in 1995 but particularly intensified during the last three years. This vote was massively expressed through the old political instruments when they were in opposition, like the French Socialist Party or the Italian Olive Tree, or through support for minor partners in social liberal coalitions, like the German Greens, or above all through abstention. In other cases also - such as the UK, the Nordic states or central Europe - this was expressed through a significant "anti-European" vote, dominated in most cases by right populism.

Neoliberal EU at crossroads

We have analyzed elsewhere the strategic character of the crossroads where the project of neoliberal construction of the EU finds itself. [2] This is a crossroads marked by the necessity of a qualitative leap in terms of the institutional articulation of the interests of the various European oligarchies in order that the EU be able to compete on the world market, integrate the countries of central Europe, establish clearly its influence as a regional power in the bordering zones and establish an autonomous foreign and military policy. All this is essential in the framework of inter-imperialist competition. It requires establishing a basis of legitimacy, and this is what the neoliberal European Constitution was supposed to do. Nevertheless, things have not worked out according to plan.

First, the economic recession which began in 2001 is already in its fourth year, limiting the room for manoeuvre of the governments of member states. Budget deficits have accumulated in Germany, France, Italy, Portugal and Greece as well as the UK, and the governments are attempting the first wave of social counter reforms proposed by the Lisbon Strategy. The Commission, transformed into the guardian of a Stability Agreement that Prodi has denounced as "imbecilic", demands accelerated rhythms of restructuring and the reduction of deficits (with 21 million unemployed and rates of growth of around 1.5% of

GDP). An especially weak Commission, which was discredited when the majority of ECOFIN [the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, composed of the economics and finance ministers of the member states] rejected its possible sanctions and imposed a "flexible and cyclical" interpretation of the Agreement, a rejection that amounted to freezing its application. To complicate things further, the signs of economic upturn in the second quarter of 2004 now face the perspective of a sustained increase in energy prices, a progressive raising of interest rates in the US and a slowdown in growth of the Chinese economy - all things which reduce the margin of European exports on the world market, exports which had grown by 11.9% in the course of the last year. With much weaker internal demand the European economy could again go into recession, without having really emerged from the last one, and at the decisive phase of application of the Lisbon Strategy.

Secondly, the division between the "new" pro-Atlanticist Europe of the Letter of the Eight and the "old" Europe of the Franco-German axis, provoked by the Iraq war, far from having been attenuated after Zapatero's victory in the Spanish elections of May 14 and the joint vote on UN resolution 1546 on Iraq, has been reopened again in the last phase of the negotiations on the constitutional treaty, concerning its structural character. This division has for nearly a year blocked the taking of essential decisions inside the European Council. But when it seemed that the Franco-German axis had regained its hegemony, imposing on the G-8 its orientation in the Middle East, the division reappeared again with more force - and this despite the internal political crises in the UK, Italy and Poland - in the form of two different projects of European construction; that of a European power on the one hand and that of a Europe limited to the single market on the other.

Thirdly, the social and political protest movements reached probably the culminating point of the cycle opened in 1995 with the huge demonstrations against the Iraq war on February 15,

2003 and the strike wave in France in May-June of the same year, accompanied by important trade union mobilizations elsewhere in Europe (such as those of IG Metall and Verdi in Germany, or the recent strike at Fiat-Melfi in Italy, to cite only two cases in the key member states). The political impact of these mobilizations and their electoral effects is able to rapidly if not immediately reveal itself, as was seen in the spontaneous demonstrations on May 13 in Spain in front of the offices of the governing Popular Party, in the massive disaffiliation over a few months of German SPD members, and in the current demand for immediate general elections in Portugal.

The combination of these three factors has marked the limits of the European neoliberal project, putting it in crisis. It is in this light that we should interpret the European elections, the approval of the constitutional Treaty and the installation of the Barroso Commission.

The European elections

What was absent from the first European elections after enlargement was precisely any European debate. The electoral campaigns were marked by the internal political situation of the member states, even while they are ultimately determined by the three factors described above.

The lack of a European constitutional treaty did not exactly help. In the initial schemas of the Commission, the elections of 2004 should have shown explicit support from the citizens of the member states for those parties which supported the constitutional treaty, projecting the image of a convergence of European public opinion in a new legitimacy constitutive of European citizenship. The European Parliament thus constituted would express its ideological majority by the ratification of a President of the Commission designated by the European Council.

The hindering of the constitutional negotiations by the division between "new" and "old" Europe torpedoed the

development of a massive prior campaign in the media, to which both the Commission and the member states had envisaged assigning significant resources. That did not stop changes to electoral practice in numerous member states so as to guarantee the success of the conservative and social democratic parties and reduce to the minimum the representation of the smaller parties, especially those most critical of the current process of European construction.

Given the disappearance of the European context of the elections and the transformation of these into a way of expressing a protest vote against the governments currently in power, why should those governments promote participation? On the contrary, the majority of EU governments were most interested in as low a turnout as possible in order to delegitimize the protest vote. As for the opposition parties, they had every interest in centring their campaigns at their own states, not the European level, to render more explicit the vote against their particular governments.

The exceptions to this were the Greens, the anti-European parties and to a lesser degree the alternative left. In the case of the Greens, it was because of the hegemony exerted by the German party and Joschka Fischer. As a subordinate member of a coalition with the SPD, the Greens had every interest in differentiating themselves so as not to suffer the effects of the protest vote against Agenda 2010, while they developed a discourse as distanced as possible from German reality, speaking on the terrain of European construction as a counter-power to the US. The anti-European populist parties, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain, the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, the June List in Sweden, the June Movement in Denmark, the Czech ODS, the League of Families or Self-Defence in Poland, stressed the importance of EU enlargement so as to justify their criticism of and rejection of the EU.

The alternative left could base itself on the discourse of "another Europe is possible", a discourse emerging from the European Social forums, and

common criticism of the draft constitutional treaty. But it was incapable of articulating this common discourse in a positive sense and presenting an alternative model of European construction for workers and peoples. This was partly because of the existence in the same political space, to the left of the social liberal parties, of two strong "anti-European" components: the Communist parties of a more traditional ideology (the Portuguese, Greek or Czech, to take three key examples) and the majority of the Nordic radical left, who fight for their countries to leave the EU. And it was partly because the two European political instruments of the alternative left - the European Left Party (ELP) sponsored by the Italian PRC and the conferences of the European Anti-capitalist Left (EACL) - proved impotent: In the first case because the ELP was founded on a minimal agreement without sufficient scope to develop a credible European discourse beyond the national identities of its components; In the second case because the EACL did not succeed in accumulating a sufficient organizational critical mass, despite a more coherent ideological discourse to be found in its Manifesto. [3]

However, the level of abstention at these elections constitutes in itself an expression of the gravity of the crisis of legitimacy and the democratic deficit of the EU. Participation in these elections has fallen from 63% in 1979 to 58.5% in 1989 and, as the neoliberal project strengthened with the treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice, it has fallen from 56.8% in 1994 to 49.8% in 1999 and 44.6% in the current elections. The figures are impressive in the new member states of central Europe, where average participation was only 26%. In Poland, the biggest of the new member states, it was only 20.7% and in Slovakia it collapsed to 17%. The introduction of the euro, the Lisbon strategy, the enlargement of the Union and the effects of the Convention - the heritage of the Prodi Commission - have led to a fall of more than 5% in average participation across Europe at the very moment where the legitimating of the European neoliberal project is more necessary than ever.

The punishment inflicted on the EU governments for their neoliberal policies in applying the Lisbon strategy is also impressive. The German SPD registered the worst electoral result since 1945, with 21.4%, while the Christian Democratic opposition scored more than double that (44.6%). In France, the right is divided and was drubbed for the second time in three months by the Socialists. The Olive Tree in Italy was 10% clear of Forza Italia, which in order to stay in government, depends increasingly on Fini's National Alliance. In Britain, Blair lost 5% and the Conservatives nearly 8%, while the Liberal Democrats gained 5% and UKIP 9%. In Denmark, the social democratic opposition swept aside the parties of the ruling right wing coalition. In Sweden, the governing social democrats lost nearly 14% in relation to the parliamentary elections, equal to the amount scored by the June List. In Portugal, the PS beat the parties of the governing right wing coalition by more than 11%. In Poland the ruling Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) was beaten by three right wing formations. The same thing happened in the Czech Republic and Hungary with the social democrats the losers, while in Estonia it was the social democratic opposition which defeated the governmental right.

Finally the Eurosceptic, sovereignist or right populist vote, particularly important in the UK, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and the Czech Republic, won a representation of 10% in the European Parliament and its two parliamentary groups, the Union for a Europe of Nations Group (UEN) and the Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities (EDD) overtook overall in number of seats the Confederal Group of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GUE/NLG).

The new European Parliament, despite its lack of legitimacy, leans clearly to the right. The European Popular Party won 272 seats and the Liberals 66, which leaves them only 29 seats from an absolute majority in a chamber of 732 deputies. The social liberal left disposes of 201 social democratic seats and 42 Green, while the GUE/NLG for now only has 36 seats (while waiting to integrate some Euro-

deputies from the new member states). At the institutional level, despite the abstention, the protest vote against neoliberal policies and the Eurosceptic vote, the European Parliament has become a bastion of the neoliberal project. The slight increase of power conferred by the constitutional treaty on the Parliament will serve to strengthen this support, beginning with the appointment of a conservative like Durao Barroso at the head of the Commission.

Franco-German summit and European Council

Immediately after the European elections Chirac and Schröder met at Aix-la-Chapelle for a new Franco-German summit to agree their position at the European Council of Brussels from June 17-18, which was to end the negotiations on the Constitutional Treaty.

But the agenda of the meeting was dominated neither by the treaty - on which the two parties had already long reached agreement - nor foreign policy - because they had already expressed their common position on Iraq and the Middle East at the G-8 Summit at Sea Island five days previously.

Instead, the Franco-German summit discussed how to combine the maintenance of the policies of social counter reform (rejected by the electorate) with a new industrial policy of selection of "industrial champions" which, in an independent manner from the strategy of Lisbon, would accelerate the process of restructuring and the merging of big European multinationals and which would boost internal demand for production goods while the international market looked sombre.

The new strategy of restructuring from above of the European monopolies was conceived in recent months as a response to growing competition on the world market with US multinationals. The clearest precedents have been the big European aeronautics company EADS

and the Galileo project. But the French government was perturbed when Siemens tried to take over Alstom's turbines business and blocked the operation through new state aid approved by the Commission on May 17. On the other hand, France agreed a joint industrial policy with Germany, whose first result is to be the creation of a large European multinational in the sector of naval construction (with the merger of the Germans ThyssenKrupp and HDW with the French Thales and DCN).

The protests of the commissioner-in-charge of the internal market, the Dutchman Bolkestein, once the agreement of the commissar for competition Monti had been given, only served to focus the Franco-German summit on the second essential point of their agenda; how to ensure that in the new commission the economic policy of the Union and the policy of competition will stay in the hands of the Franco-German axis.

The European Council at Brussels under the Irish presidency began in a climate of emergency and pressure to approve the constitutional treaty after the European elections and to constitute a new Commission capable of dealing with the accumulation of strategic tasks. The electoral results had reduced to a large extent the room for manoeuvre of the main protagonists, in particular Tony Blair. Britain's "red lines" on taxes, foreign policy and defence, the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the British contribution to the community budget were irremovable. But the Franco-German axis has imposed "enhanced cooperation" as the motor of the process of European construction after enlargement, and this allowed it to continue the economic and political integration of the EU centre - Euroland - facing a periphery which is subject to the process of intergovernmental negotiation on the single market.

The "old" Europe is thus exerting its hegemony over the "new" Europe, with the aim of ensuring its competitiveness in relation to the United States on the European market itself [4] as well as institutional control of the EU - which had been in large part guaranteed with the

division of votes agreed with the Treaty of Nice, [5] but which will be further codified in the constitutional treaty. For this reason "old" Europe has demanded that blocking minorities are only possible through a coalition of four of the five biggest member states of the EU, through the formula of the double majority of 55% of member states and 65% of the population of the EU. While waiting for this formula to come into force, control of the key posts of the Commission is essential, as is depriving the UK of one of its two allies, Italy or Poland - now Spain has been reincorporated into the Franco-German axis thanks to Zapatero. Poland being particularly unstable politically and dependent on the US, Prodi's centre-left challenge to Berlusconi is thus transformed into a Franco-German tactical objective.

The non-ratification of the constitutional Treaty by the countries of the periphery - the UK is defined now as such with the rest of "new" Europe - could lead to the exclusion of the UK from the heart of the process of European construction, provided that the member states of the central nucleus adopt the new Treaty.

This underlines what is at stake in these referendums. The UK is the negative paradigm on this terrain, because Blair has been incapable of calling a referendum on joining the euro with any possibility of success and it seems unlikely that he can win another one on the constitutional Treaty after the results of the European elections. But France also has problems because of the critical position of vast sectors of the Socialist Party, not to mention Poland and other new member states. Schröder has already said that there will be no referendum in Germany and that ratification by Parliament will suffice.

The new Commission

If the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, managed to bring the negotiations on the constitutional Treaty to a conclusion, he could not broker an agreement on the new president of the Commission and the division of portfolios within it. With

the Treaty agreed, it now becomes crucial to know who will interpret it over the next five years, and to whose benefit.

In the European Council, old and new Europe mutually vetoed their respective candidates, the Belgian prime minister, Verhofstadt, and the British commissioner, Patten: Verhofstadt was accused of being a dangerous federalist and a sectarian partisan of "enhanced cooperation"; Patten was opposed, with some justification, for not speaking French and not belonging to a member state of the euro. The other candidates preferred to pull out rather than be vetoed. Only Solana found unanimous support as future minister of foreign affairs of the EU, capable of executing the requisite somersaults while "moderately" criticizing Bush's foreign policy with the prior and explicit agreement of Colin Powell.

Ahern found a solution by applying the formula of lowest common denominator and seeking a candidate sufficiently weak so that new and old Europe could continue their conflict. By presenting the candidacy of Portuguese Prime Minister Durao Barroso at the extraordinary European Council of June 29, Ahern limited himself to asking if anyone objected. Faced with silence, Barroso was designated as new President of the Commission, to be ratified by the European Parliament on July 22.

A Maoist militant in his youth, then a young Turk of the Portuguese right, negotiator of the peace agreements in Angola that enabled UNITA to survive, host of Bush, Blair and Aznar in the Azores before the Iraq war, Barroso is primarily responsible for the economic and political collapse of Portugal over the last two years.

His strict application of the Stability Agreement has increased the rate of unemployment in Portugal from 4% to 7% of the active population. He has imposed a savage policy of reduction of the budget deficit, a freeze on civil service wages, a 2% increase in VAT, a blockage of public investment leading to a reduction of GDP by 1.3% - the worst result of the entire OECD. And he promised the "Financial Times" that he would tie himself like a

modern Ulysses to the mast of his ship "to resist the sirens who wish to destroy us with their seductive song in favour of public expenditure and more bureaucracy".

Barroso has thus escaped economic, social and political crisis - leaving its management to the right wing PDS-PP coalition after a serious defeat in the European elections - to lead what he says will be a "strong" Commission. Blair rightly considers that Barroso's presence at the head of the Commission is a guarantee that the "Community method" is definitively blocked. For Chirac, Schröder or Zapatero, Portugal's dependence on structural funds, on the Common Agricultural Policy and Spanish investment is an anticipated guarantee of his submission and his understanding. It would not be possible to find a candidate who better symbolizes the crisis of the project of the neoliberal construction of the EU.

Perspectives for an alternative left

The electoral results for political forces situated to "the left of the left" varied a good deal between member states, another sign of the absence of any political projection of the movement for global justice.

The Communist parties, both the most traditional and anti-European parties - like the Portuguese and Greek parties - and those who have experience of participating in social liberal coalition governments - like the French CP - while seeing their representation reduced, generally scored between 5% and 7%. They kept the fidelity of a social base in those sectors of the working class eroded by demography and the restructuring of traditional industry. The CP of Bohemia and Moravia, based in the workers' bastions in the north of the Czech Republic that have suffered a rapid restructuring, scored 17% and became the second biggest party in number of votes, is an exceptional case.

Of the three big pluralist left formations in southern Europe - Rifondazione in Italy, Izquierda Unida (IU) in Spain and Synaspismos in

Greece - only the first increased its score (6.1%) and won more seats (four). The two others fell back, especially IU. The same was true for the ex-Communist and Green left in Sweden (but not in Finland or Denmark). The Portuguese Left Bloc won its first Euro deputy and Respect in England and Wales obtained some decent local results. In this panorama, the results of the LCR-LO coalition (2.6%) constitute a setback for the French anti-capitalist left.

For practical reasons the majority of these forces will be organized in the European Unitary Left (GUE). But despite the re-election of Francis Wurtz (PCF) as president of the group, internal tensions will make a common political projection very difficult. The German PDS - which in regional coalitions with the SPD applies social liberal policies - has proportionally increased its weight inside the group. The more traditional CPs are strengthened by the six Czech Euro deputies. With four deputies, Rifondazione, notwithstanding it counting on the support of two more deputies - from Spain and from Greece - loses weight proportionally, and this will reduce its room for manoeuvre as the European Left Party is launched. [6] Furthermore, the strategic differences between the organizations of the Nordic left, which are coordinated in a specific platform, and the rest of the alternative left increased throughout this campaign, rendering the development of a global perspective more difficult.

There are still points of support for such a perspective, despite the different strategic orientations, such as opposition to the constitutional Treaty and a "no" campaign in the referendums on ratification, support for the movement against the occupation of Iraq and in solidarity with the Palestinian people and the struggles of resistance against the Lisbon Strategy.

Despite results which are disappointing in relation to the work of the alternative left in the social movements since 1995, everything indicates that this movement will continue a long cycle of accumulation of forces and that ever more important trade union sectors will enter into

struggle against the policies of the Lisbon Strategy. So it is really urgent that we deepen the strategic debates on the "Left of the left", starting from specific cultural traditions and national situations and giving them a European context.

This debate must include analysis of the international situation and characterization of the current cycle of struggle; a balance sheet of the participation of a sector of the Communist and Green parties in social liberal governments under social democratic hegemony; the nature and the evolution of social democracy; the policy of the united front in the social movements, the construction of plural

coalitions to the left of social democracy and their relation to the social democratic and Green parties, especially when they are in opposition; and the problem of primitive accumulation of forces of the revolutionary left so as to be able to intervene in all these areas.

This is a debate that cannot be avoided and which runs through all the political forces to the left of social democracy, and even the left currents inside it, at different levels of evolution under the pressure of the social movements. The revolutionary left has every interest in pursuing this debate to the end, in a unitary manner, while seeking unity of action

at both the member-state level and at the European level.

The conferences of the European anti-capitalist left have been a humble but useful forum to begin this work, developing a more or less coordinated intervention in the European social movements, the Social Forums and the resistance struggles, as well as a programmatic convergence which has been taken up in a series of common Manifestos. This heritage could be fundamental in the coming years to prevent a sectarian division of the social movements, above all the social Forums, and continue to build step by step a European anti-capitalist alternative. Are we up to it?

Creating an alternative

1 October 2004, by **Hermann Dworczak**

Austria experienced a huge wave of struggles against the so-called pension reform of the black-blue government in May 2003. For the first time since 1950 (!) there were mass strikes, factory meetings, street blockades and a demonstration of 200,000 people. Altogether one million people were involved in the protests.

But neither the social democratic party nor the majority of the Austrian Trade Union Congress (Å-GB) went further. Important strikes by the railway workers remained isolated. On the international day of action against social cuts on April 2-3, 2004 the Å-GB "organized" a discussion in Vienna with 200 participants...

The social democratic leadership's only interest was gaining power - by any means. In Carinthia a coalition with right populist leader Haider was built. During the European elections Haider attacked the main social democratic candidate Hannes Swoboda - in openly fascist language - as "VaterlandsverrÄter" ("traitor to the country"). But even then the horrible coalition was not dissolved!

In such a context of setbacks it was

not easy for LINKE to gain ground (the two Austrian Social Forums held this year faced similar problems). There were other difficulties too: the decision to participate in the elections came very late; under big pressure we had to collect signatures to be on the voting paper, develop a political programme, select candidates and so on. So there was not enough time for discussions or to broaden the political project - though we got the support of the son of the former Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky and some representatives of the left wing of the Greens.

On July 3 LINKE held a meeting to draw its first balance sheet. The central conclusions were:

- it was correct to build a pluralistic left platform

- this platform was not - as in the past - "CP plus ..." but the start of the working together of the "open" part of the CP, the SOAL (Austrian section of the Fourth International) and people from the different movements. The "hardliners" within the CP made an active boycott of the LINKE. This will lead to further differentiations within

the CP, on the basis of common positive experiences and not only statements from outside.

- only the LINKE had a clear position to the so-called "constitution" of the EU, or questions like privatization or the entry of Turkey into the EU

- it was possible to create structures, which organized the campaign on a decentralized basis.

There was broad consensus that the LINKE should continue its activity and will have its first "working conference" in October where some decisions on how to proceed concretely will be made.

The SOAL played an important role in the campaign concerning the political content, candidates, meetings, activities and so on. In Graz and Innsbruck the comrades of the SOAL took the initiative to create local structures and were the backbone of the political activity.

LINKE is one of several attempts to create a left, anti-capitalist alternative to social democratic, Green or post-Communist "realpolitik" in Europe.

When I attended the conference of the “Wahlalternative” (“election

alternative”) in Berlin the atmosphere

there was very similar to our discussions and activities.

A new “Black Sunday”

1 October 2004, by **Ataulfo Riera**

Two striking facts which emerge from the vote are the increasing asymmetry between the political situation in the North and that in the South and the spectacular new progress of the far right, with the latter being by far the most worrying phenomenon. [7]

In Flanders, the neo-fascist Vlaams Blok [8] scored 24.1%, or 981,587 votes. Nearly one million! Thirteen years after the first “Black Sunday” of the 1991 elections which saw the Blok reach the threshold of 10%, the poll on June 13 marked the patent defeat of the policies of “containment” pursued by the traditional parties in relation to the far right. This policy is summed up in the formula of the “cordon sanitaire” which involves the “democratic” parties refusing to make any alliance or coalition with the Blok at any level of power. On paper that seems very honourable but in practice this strategy acts as a boost for the Blok.

In the name of this “sacred union” the same neoliberal policies with disastrous social consequences have been accepted and applied by all the traditional parties, including the ecologists. Thus, the Blok appears to many as the only real opposition. The exacerbation by the traditional parties of rightwing nationalism, latent or open racism and fears over “security” and finally the treatment of the Blok as a party “like the others” by the Flemish-speaking media did the rest.

The figures for the Bloc’s progress in Flanders are eloquent: They scored 15.5% in 1999 (the year the first Verhofstadt government came to power, promising to reduce by half the score of the far right!), They won 17.9% at the parliamentary elections of 2003 and 24.1% this June 13, taking 32 seats (+10) out of the 124 in the

Flemish regional Parliament. In fact, the Blok is now the biggest party in the North of the country given that the social-Christian party CD&V, which nominally came top of the poll, only did so through its electoral alliance with the N-VA, a small formation resulting from a split in the defunct nationalist party Volksunie. [9] It is in any event without question the biggest Flemish-speaking party in Brussels, the biggest party in Antwerp (Belgium’s second city) and it came first in many localities, which does not augur well for the communal (municipal) elections in 2006 when the “cordon sanitaire” will undoubtedly fall apart.

In the French-speaking part of the country, several commentators point out that the far right did not reach the same heights as in Flanders. There is however no reason to rejoice. While, unlike the Blok, it has no structure, no charismatic leader and no access to the media, the Front National scored 4.7% in Brussels (where it doubled its number of deputies in the city’s Parliament from one to four) and 8.1% in Wallonia (where it doubled its score compared to 1999 and saw its number of deputies in the Walloon Parliament quadruple from one to four, more than the Écolo party). In certain localities, like the canton of Charleroi, the FN reached 17 % and came in second position after the PS. Thus, by going from 3.9% in 1999 to 5.6% in 2003 and 8.1% (8.8% if the scores of rival far right splits from the FN are added) in 2004, the Francophone far right is experiencing the same rate of progress as the Vlaams Blok in Flanders.

Asymmetrical polarizations

This new progress for the far right is accompanied by an asymmetrical polarization between the various areas of the country, which is likely to complicate the possibility for the bourgeoisie of ensuring a stable federal government. Initially because the liberals, the motor force of this government, were left weakened by this poll, especially the VLD of Guy Verhofstadt which went from 24.2% in 2003 to 19.8% this time. Then because this federal government is a “violet” coalition between the socialist parties (the Francophone PS and the Flemish SPa, with their ally “Spirit” which emerged from Volksunie) and the liberal parties (the Francophone MR and the VLD). June 13 upset the regional majorities, until now more or less similar to the federal majority.

In the South, the PS scored 36.9% in Wallonia and 28.8% in Brussels where it overtook the MR, which also fell back slightly in Wallonia. The skilful double language of PS president, Elio Di Rupo, bore fruit. While flattering and reassuring employers, he also put a left spin on his discourse. The social-Christian CDH (ex-PSC, former “party of the state”, in opposition since 1999), made progress again, especially in Brussels, while the ecologists confirmed their decline with little more than 8% in Wallonia and in Brussels. Driven out of the federal government since their rout of 2003, the Greens have drawn no serious assessment of their disastrous participation in a neoliberal government.

In Wallonia, the PS, CDH and Écolo together accounted for 63 % of the

vote while in Flanders it was the right that dominated, with a total of 70% for the VLD, the CD&V and the Blok. Holding all the cards to form new majorities in the Walloon, Brussels and French Community of Belgium parliaments, the PS has chosen to form regional coalitions distinct from the federal one: in Wallonia with the CDH and in Brussels with the latter and Écolo.

In Flanders, the new majority has not yet been composed by the “victorious” Cd&V/N-VA party, but it is practically certain that it will choose a coalition with the VLD and the SPa/Spirit to counterbalance the Blok, the ecologists of Groen! (ex-Agalev) having refused to take part in the new regional government. It should be stressed that in exceeding by two points the threshold of 5% to maintain elected officials, they have avoided the pure and simple disappearance of their formation, which had been predicted after their rout in the 2003 parliamentary elections when they won 3.9%. In any case they are not essential for the CD&V. In short, this composition of asymmetrical governments will reinforce the centrifugal forces which make Flanders and Wallonia two increasingly distinct and demarcated

societies.

These elections have once more underlined the total absence in Belgium of an alternative “to the left of the left” and the parallel defeat of the “sectarian left”. Although both contested the election, neither the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB, Mao-Stalinist) nor the Mouvement pour une Alternative Socialiste (MAS, ex-Militant, Belgian section of the Committee for a Workers International) reached 1%. The PTB, which has “purged” its national secretary in the pure Stalinist tradition, gained some good scores in some localities around Liège, but it primarily owes this to the absence of any competitor list from the Francophone Communist Party, which has always been relatively well established electorally in these localities. The CP [10] is going through a significant internal crisis whose most visible sign is the indefinite postponement of its congress. The POS (Belgian section of the Fourth International) was absent from the poll, partly owing to the modesty of its forces (it underwent a significant crisis from which it is slowly but surely recovering) but especially because of the absence of

any credible unitary perspective.

It should be stressed that the social climate is not promising. Demoralization and fatalism are spreading, struggles are rare, the trade-union leaderships are inert and inept in the face of the repeated blows of the government (among others against the rights of the unemployed) and the employers (whose latest whim is to lengthen working time to 40 hours per week, without any wage increase of course). Hope cannot come either from a movement for global justice which does not have the massive forms of expression or the radicalism which exist in other European countries. Moreover, with the participation of social democracy and Christian democracy, either in the regional governments, or at the federal level, the principal trade unions, the FGTB [11] and the CSC [12] could, if not pressured by their rank and files, assume even more responsibility for keeping “social peace” to help their “political friends”. In this context, against neoliberalism, against the employers, the right and the far right, the need to build a strong unitary anti-capitalist political alternative is more pressing than ever. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

Nationalism on the rise

1 October 2004

The parties opposed to reunification - AKEL (Communist), DIKO (right nationalist, led by president Papadopoulos) and Alarm for Europe (dissidents against the reunification of the liberal party DISY) - won four of the six seats in the European Parliament. Although it came first, the big party of the traditional right, DISY, favourable to the Annan plan, lost 5% of its vote in relation to the last parliamentary elections in May 2001. Note that the abstention rate was 28.81% although voting is compulsory (however, president Papadopoulos has said that non-voters will not be

penalized), 20% more than in 2001.

Party	Parliamentary 2001 (%)	referendum on reunification	European 2004 (%)
DISY (right)	34.0	for	28.23
Alarm (dissident DISY)	-	against	10.80
AKEL (Communist)	34.7	against	27.89
DIKO (right)	14.8	against	17.09
EDEK (social democratic)	6.5	against	10.79
EDE/“European Cyprus” [13]	2.6	for	1.95
KOP (Greens)	2.0	for	0.86
Neo Orizontes (far right)	3.0	against	1.65

The attempt at a unitary list opposed

to Greek Cypriot nationalism, “European Cyprus” which involved the small liberal party “United Democrats” (EDE) and dissidents from the socialist party opposed to the nationalist course of EDEK - which missed winning a seat by 37 votes, with Alarm winning it instead - and some far left activists only gained 1.95% of the vote, less than EDE alone in 2001.

Finally the right wing parties benefited more than AKEL (the Communist Party) from the chauvinist tide. The latter lost its place as biggest

party and nearly 7% of its vote in comparison to 2001.

The Czech communists' road to Europe

1 October 2004, by **Mark Johnson**

As well as punishing the ruling Social Democratic party, Czech voters expressed their strong concerns with the current process of European integration. Over 60% of voters supported "Eurosceptic" parties, mainly the conservative ODS of President Vaclav Klaus (for whom the European Union has replaced Communism as the main "socializing" threat to individual liberties and national interests) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which is opposed both to the neoliberal reforms promoted from Brussels and the greater economic and political influence which Germany in particular will have over the Czech Republic within an integrated Europe.

After two years of weak and indecisive government, a clique within the social democrats used their electoral defeat as a pretext to force a leadership change, propelling the media-savvy Interior Minister Stanislav Gross into the leadership of the Party. He now has several weeks to form a majority government. The paradox of Czech politics since the mid-90s is that there is a clear left plurality of votes, but the Social Democrats have so far refused to consider an alliance with the Communists, who have a stable 15-20% of parliamentary seats. While Gross desperately courts the minority centre and Catholic parties, a growing part of his own party is urging him to break the "cordon sanitaire" that has prevented coalitions with the Communist Party ever since the 1989 "velvet revolution" ended 50 years of totalitarian rule.

Zdenek Jicinsky is one Social Democratic MP who believes that ignoring the Communist Party weakens the left as a whole. "Our party re-established itself in 1989 on an anti-Communist basis. But our

current attempts to rebuild credibility and increase our influence shouldn't be based on anti-Communism. Back in 1989, anti-Communism was a natural reaction of most of Czech society to the previous regime. The right wing currents, which formed very quickly, deliberately promoted anti-Communism to establish their ideological and political hegemony."

That hegemony enabled them to carry out otherwise unpopular reforms, which Jicinsky calls the "wild capitalist transformation".

During the 1990s, however, Jicinsky believes that Czechs have lost their illusions, and examine their political options more carefully. The anti-Communist hegemony is weakening. "There is a growing difference of opinion about the newly-forming political and socio-economic system" At a deeper level, Jicinsky believes that, with the passage of time, Czechs are now better able "to compare the positive and negative aspects of the new system with the previous system. We see that nothing is black-and-white. The old regime was not the "empire of evil" which the rightist fundamentalists portrayed it as. And the new regime is not the best of all possible societies."

During the anti-Communist consensus, the Czech media repeated ad nauseam that electoral support for the CP was sure to shrink to insignificance over time, as the only people who supported the party were former bureaucrats, secret police agents and a handful of nostalgic pensioners who could not adapt to freedom and free choice. In this hostile atmosphere, the party played into the hands of the anti-Communist ideologues, by refusing to drop the word "Communist" from its name, or to distance itself categorically from the crimes of the

totalitarian period.

But times change. According to former dissident Petr Uhl, voters are no longer so responsive to anti-communist messages. "Many people are more interested in the CP's critique of the anti-social policies of the British Labour Party and German social democrats, which the Czech social democrats are trying to import and support for Bush during the war against Iraq. Many people, including non-Communists, look at the CP, with its programme and its internal functioning and consider it as a more left wing, more social and even more democratic alternative to the Social Democrats."

Like other left-wing social democrats, Zdenek Jicinsky recognises that the CP has become "the main protest party." The pensioners who vote Communist are not just motivated by nostalgia for the "grey certainties" of the previous regime, but by the daily humiliation of living on an inadequate pension. The Roma minority, facing 90% unemployment, residential segregation and virulent racism from the majority population, vote Communist not just because "in the old days, everybody had a job and an apartment" but because, quite simply, the CP is the parliamentary party with the strongest record of voting against privatisations and social security cuts, and in favour of spending on health, education and poverty-reduction.

According to Uhl, who himself spent nine years in prison under the Communist dictatorship, "there is increasingly something ridiculous about attempts to use "Communism" to scare people". Society has evolved. "It is 15 years since the fall of the old regime. And the last 20 years of that regime were not the same bloody dictatorship as the 1950s, which

almost nobody can actually remember." In the 1980s, while dissidents like Uhl were persecuted, marginalized, imprisoned or forced to emigrate, "many people got by better than nowadays."

With 20% of the vote, a strong representation in municipal and national government, and now six of the country's 22 European MPs, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is one of the most stable anti-capitalist parties in the enlarged European Union. But while anti-Communism at home seems to be fading slowly away, the party will not find it easy to integrate with the West European left. The party's strong opposition to privatization, support for labour rights and social security, and defence of pensioners and the unemployed will strengthen the United European Left caucus in the European parliament.

But there will be an embarrassed silence (or, given the nature of the left, a fractious and accusatory debate) in the face of the Czech Communists' obsession with German revanchism, the decline in public security since 1989, and the crime and hygiene risks associated with immigration. In fact, a large part of Czech society is characterized by an uneasy combination of progressive views on social and economic issues, but an authoritarian outlook on personal liberties. Petr Uhl explains this as the legacy of the totalitarian period. "The last 15 years have seen a major evolution in our value system. People are gradually abandoning old schemata of personal, family and social life. We are gradually overcoming our previous acceptance of the submission of the individual to the state, the party or whatever collective group, the unequal position

of women, authoritarian and paternalist relationships, the obligation for the individual to accommodate himself/herself to the needs of the collective, the suppression of differences, unity at all costs, a generalised culture of secrecy, and an acceptance of collective responsibility and collective guilt."

This fundamental cultural change, which has parallels in other societies that have undergone totalitarian rule, has been embraced by the Social Democrats and some of the small centre parties, which take their inspiration from Western liberalism and the local dissident tradition of thinkers like former President Vaclav Havel. This sets the Social Democrats apart from both the conservative ODS of former prime minister, now President Vaclav Klaus, and the Communists.

According to Uhl, both the conservatives and the Communists have tried to consolidate their opposition image by an aggressive and populist defence of "traditional values". The ODS promotes neoliberal economics, but rejects liberalism in the broader sense. And the Communist Party has tried to build on its wartime resistance role by theorising an authoritarian, intolerant form of Czech nationalism. Always present in society, this nationalism became stronger after the division of the Czecho-Slovak Federation in 1992.

For Uhl, the real test for the Communist Party is "multiculturalism, based on the respect and acceptance of people of various ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. [Such] multiculturalism is naturally overcoming intolerant nationalism, and is of course completely compatible with local, national and European

patriotism. What worries Uhl is that while the Czech Communist leader, Milan Ransdorf admits that "we are not multicultural" he and his party don't necessarily see this as a problem.

As Uhl points out, "for fifty years, this society has faced a challenge of integrating Roma and other minorities... of assimilation or emancipation. If the Czech CP can embrace this challenge, it can free itself of intolerant nationalism - which is practically absent among west European Communists."

Otherwise, Uhl warns, the CP could follow the Russian Communists, who continued to stress nationalism, to the point where they adopted chauvinism and anti-Semitism. "Communists have followed both the Western and the Russian path. Which way will the Czech Party go?"

In any case, the decline of anti-Communism opens a new period for Czech Communism, and all those who would build a left alternative in the country. How long will it take? As Uhl comments, "the Communist Party is gradually freeing itself from its historical baggage, just as the Catholic Church has done. But let's hope that it doesn't take the Communists hundreds of years!"

Uhl sees a chance for the Party among its youth members. "Many young Communists have evolved from anti-globalists to alter-globalists. They remind me of the French youth of the late 1960s, offering Communist ideals in a modern formulation, as an alternative to capitalism and nationalism - and to globalization." The CP leadership should pay more attention to this current of the party, it could represent a stronger and more inclusive project for the Czech left.

Euro-political realignment?

1 October 2004, by Bjarke Friberg

Since the first elections for the European Parliament in 1979 the Danish results seem to have been

characterized by two constants. First of all - and in common with almost all other EU countries - the relatively low participation compared with national elections (varying between 46.2% and 52.9% versus normally around 70-80%). And secondly, the relatively low score for the dominant Labour party and the correspondingly high score for the "official" Eurosceptics, Folkebevægelsen and Junibevegelsen.

It is this second constant which has now been challenged after 25 years, with a record (32.7%) support for the Social Democrats and an all time low (14.3%) "Eurosceptic" score. At the same time it is this second constant which has traditionally singled out the special situation in Denmark, namely the existence of an established, well organized and mainly left wing opposition to Danish membership of the EU.

In the EU elections many social democrats usually vote for the "Movements", i.e. the "Popular Movement Against the EU" (Folkebevægelsen mod EU) and the "June Movement" or Junibevegelsen. Effectively four of the 16 Danish seats in the European Parliament have been reserved for these "Movements" in every election since 1979. In addition until the 1990's the opponents of the EU were represented by the one mandate belonging to the Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti or SF).

Apart from the facts that 1) many voters saw the EU elections of 2004 as an excellent occasion to protest against the Liberal-Conservative government and 2) the Labour list was headed by the popular ex-prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, there seem to be more deep-seated tendencies behind the present situation.

Realignment?

Already during the 1990's the "Eurosceptics" were challenged by certain political realignments. On the one hand, there was a split over

strategy within the Eurosceptics themselves. On the other hand there was the question of the left-right divide, accentuated by the rise of the nationalist and xenophobic Dansk Folkeparti (Danish Peoples' Party or DF) as well as by the increasingly "pro-European" tendency within the Socialist People's Party.

In the aftermath of the 1992 June 2nd referendum, where a majority of Danish voters said "no" to the Maastricht treaty, a split within the established "Popular Movement" came out into the open. For the new "June Movement" the referendum was a demonstration of the possibility that Denmark could continue as a member state and still profit from the perceived benefits, but at the same time halt the development of a centralized union. Folkebevægelsen rejected this, calling instead for the dissolution of the EU by way of the individual member states opting for independence and full national sovereignty.

Within the Danish political frame the "Popular Movement" and the "June Movement" have continued to cooperate on most issues after the split, but gradually they have developed differently. Under the leadership of former Communist Party (CP) member and MEP veteran Jens-Peter Bonde, the "June Movement" has been trying to position itself as a more liberal-minded political group and even allied itself with the far right United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the European Parliamentary group of EDD (Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities). In contrast the "Popular Movement" has for several years been a member of the more left wing GUE/NGL group together with the Socialist People's Party.

Left and right opposition

For many years the Danish opposition towards the EU was mainly represented by the left wing and some smaller social liberal parties. United under the banner of national

independence, anti-privatization and pro-democracy, most dominant "no"-parties were supporters of Folkebevægelsen during the 1980'es. Within this heavily CP-inspired political frame there was not much room to debate or develop a more systematic alternative, the debate having been limited to strictly EU-related questions. In 1991 SF left Folkebevægelsen and increasingly developed a "pro-European" stand, hoping to join a Labour-led government. After the 1992 referendum SF was instrumental in negotiating a new deal with the EU, the so-called "national compromise" where Denmark was formally allowed to have certain reservations towards the EU (for example not to join the Euro and to stand outside the Common Defence Policy). Gradually, SF has become more and more consolidated as a pro-EU reformist party (while they have still not gotten into any government). In effect, they have become left social democrats arguing for a European alternative to the USA, more green and peaceful, but with a strong military arm - prepared for "peacekeeping" and "humanitarian" interventions.

At the same time and as an opposite mirror image of the SF, the nationalist and xenophobic Dansk Folkeparti (DF) has positioned itself more and more squarely as staunch opponents of the EU, effectively switching places with SF as the main parliamentary "no"-party besides Folkebevægelsen and Junibevegelsen in the European Parliament and besides the Socialist Red-Green Alliance (RGA) in the Danish parliament.

In the elections of 2004, this meant that the RGA both ran its own independent campaign on a socialist and internationalist platform and campaigned openly for its eight prominent members standing as candidates for the "Movements". The setback for these organizations (and the record personal vote for MP Søren Søndergaard) means that the question of the RGA standing fully on its own and with an independent socialist line will now be brought forward again.

Breakthrough for MP Søren Søndergaard

1 October 2004, by **Thomas Eisler**

The two movements have chosen different partners in the European Parliament. While the Peoples Movement is part of the GUE/NGL group, the June Movement has been part of the EDD together with the French hunters and a very reactionary Dutch party. At the last elections the June Movement got three seats and the Peoples Movement one, altogether winning 25% of the vote. A former MP of the Red Green Alliance, Bent Hindrup, was alternate for the June Movement and became MEP during the period. An MEP for the Peoples Movement, Ole Krarup, is a member of the Red-Green Alliance but is not first of all known as a representative of the Peoples Movement.

For the recent election eight Red-Green Alliance members were present on the two slates - three on the June Movement slate and five on the

Peoples Movement list.

Party	Results 13th June 2004 (%)	Result 1999 (%)	Parliament elections 2001 (%)
Social Democrats	32.6	16.5	29.1
Social Liberal	6.4	9.1	5.2
Conservative	11.3	8.5	9.1
Socialist Peoples Party	7.9	7.1	6.4
June Movement	9.1	16.1	-
Christian Democrats	1.3	2.0	2.3
Peoples Movement	5.2	7.3	-
Danish Peoples Party	6.8	5.8	12
Liberal	19.4	23.3	31.3

The two movements got one seat each and 9 and 5% respectively. Ole Krarup got reelected with 34,719 votes compared to more than 60,000 at last election. Søren Søndergaard, who is also a member of the SAP (Danish section of the Fourth International), stood for the Peoples Movement against the EU and was in second place on its electoral list. Though he was ranked as number nine on the slate by the convention of the Peoples Movement, he got 18,000 personal votes at the election. This was due to his reputation as MP for the Red-Green Alliance and the campaigning of the Red Green Alliance. Though the Red Green Alliance decided to support all Alliance members running for the Peoples movement and the June Movement, it was the campaign for Søren Søndergaard that was most widespread in the local branches.

Anti-capitalist resistance to EU

1 October 2004, by **SAP (Denmark)**

Our first comment must be that the EU parliament still have a very limited legitimacy, reflected by the very low participation. In Denmark less than half voted and in the new member states the picture was even lower levels of participation down to 1/5. It is in this sense not a victory for the European Union. Another general trend was defeats for the governing parties. This can on one hand be interpreted as popular opposition to the policy on the national level, on the other hand an opposition to the Europe of the powers that be.

In Denmark the results of the 47% who did vote point in several

directions. The most remarkable is that Social Democrats won votes and likewise defeat for the governing Liberal party. This is basically a vote against the government.

The other big loser was the "no-to EU movements", the June Movement and the Peoples Movements against EU. Both movements lost votes, and went from 4 to 2 MEP.

For the resistance to EU and for the Red-Green Alliance, the election campaign and the results pose some questions that need to be answered. The defeat for the two movements underlines the political problems in the movements.

For the June Movement it is getting more and more obvious that it is no longer a movement against the core of the EU project. It is a movement that believes in reforming the EU. Democratization and opposition to militarization are some of the key words. It is in this harder and harder to see a difference between the June Movement and the Socialist Peoples Party.

For the Peoples Movement against the EU the biggest problem is that it is based on the principle of "no class". In other words it wants to cover the political spectrum from right to left of opposition to the EU. That is why the

Peoples Movement against the EU neither can nor will go to the core in the criticism against the EU as the Europe of capital.

The Peoples Movement has a perspective of Denmark leaving the EU followed by illusions about Nordic cooperation linked with association to the EU through the European Economic Cooperation like Norway. As if AP M ller [14] and Volvo's Gyldenhammer would be better than Berlusconi and Krupp.

In the Red-green alliance the opposition to the EU has been debated and this debate has obtained new nourishment after the election. It is obvious that opposition to the EU only got a very limited social expression, based on class positions, in the electoral campaign. That is why it is also clear that many sceptics and opponents of the EU are not attracted by the movements but instead vote for the Socialist Peoples Party and Social Democrats - or stay at home. This point is underlined indirectly by the fact, that one of the few candidates with a socialist profile, S ren S ndergaard, got remarkably many votes (18.500).

That is why it is important that the

election is followed by a debate without prejudice in the Red-green Alliance on the place of the party in the opposition to the EU. A debate which should be linked with a debate with and in the Peoples Movement on the future EU opposition.

If the opposition to the EU should be revitalized and be a progressive force there is a need to leave behind the depoliticization that characterizes the Peoples Movement today. The opposition to the EU must be based on the political groundings of the EU and be based without any doubt on the interest of the working class.

The coming discussion and referendum on the EU constitution gives the Peoples Movement a possibility to develop in that direction and show that the movement has an important role to play. This implies that the Peoples Movement organizes a NO-campaign, based on three elements:

1. A clear rejection of the EU constitution building the EU as a centralistic superpower.
2. A clear differentiation from the antisocial, anti-environment pro-

capitalist neoliberalism that will be established with the EU constitution.

3. That there is no reason to get frightened by the threat of getting kicked out of the EU as a result of a no-vote, because getting out of the EU is part of the perspective of the Peoples Movement.

This is in contradiction to a no-campaign focusing on special "Danish" interests or the question of small and big countries.

Whether the Peoples Movement is ready to develop a more progressive profile that can attract EU sceptics from the Social Democrats and Socialist Peoples Party, and make rejection of the EU integrated in the class struggle is up to the future to answer. If not, the Red Green Alliance has to consider whether the party should run independently at the next EU parliament election.

Political Bureau of the SAP, Danish section of the Fourth International, June 25, 2004

Meltdown for Labour

1 October 2004, by Alan Thornett

For the first time ever a majority of those who voted supported fringe parties, or parties other than the three main parties: the Labour Party, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats (traditionally the third party in British politics).

With the exception of the London mayor - which the ruling Labour Party retained with Ken Livingstone as its candidate (newly back in the Labour Party following his expulsion four years ago) - the results for Labour were a disaster. It was punished for the role it has played in Iraq along

with George Bush and its increasingly right-wing social policy - which has increasingly alienated its traditional base for a number of years.

In the local elections Labour was the first ruling party ever to be pushed into third place behind both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats - winning just 26% of the vote. In the European elections it polled its lowest share of the vote in a national election since 1918. In the London Assembly Labour lost two seats and even where they held seats they were with heavily reduced

majorities.

The Liberal Democrats failed to make significant gains because, while they presented themselves (falsely) as an anti-war party, they are also strongly pro-EU - a factor which kept their vote down in an election which saw a surge of anti-EU sentiment.

The elections were also a major problem for the Tories since they were split wide open by their historic divisions over Europe. This was reflected in the huge gains for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which

increased its vote from 7% in 1999 to 16% this time. This was on a right-wing racist platform which called for withdrawal from the EU and a drastic curb in immigration and asylum. It was led by Robert Kilroy Silk a Pym Fortun type figure who was previously a TV personality and before that a Labour MP.

The rise of UKIP is a dangerous development since it has a substantial political over-lap with the fascist British National Party (BNP) - which did not make the breakthrough it hoped for due to the swing to UKIP. They maintained their small base in local government but failed to win positions in the European Parliament or the London Assembly.

The Greens held their two MEPs, lost a member of the London Assembly, and made some gains in the local elections. Overall it was a modest improvement. They stood on a left anti-war platform - including opposition to the EU constitution - but since the election have entered into a coalition with the Tories and the Liberal Democrats on Leeds City Council.

The election results were very good for the newly created left coalition "Respect", given the short period of time it had to establish its identity and hostile media coverage. It did not win any positions, but it came close in

several instances. It scored 4.7% for the London Assembly narrowly missing a seat. The Respect candidate came fifth in the ballot for mayor - beating both the Greens and the BNP.

In the European elections Respect stood in all ten constituencies scoring an average of 1.7% - or 252,000 votes. This average figure, however, does not reflect the strength of the Respect vote in the working class inner-city areas with big immigrant populations.

George Galloway scored 4.8% in London for the European Parliament - 91,000 votes. In the London Assembly election Respect scored 15% in the City and East constituency. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Respect came top of the poll - beating all three establishment parties.

Nor was it just London. In Birmingham Respect scored 7.4% across the city and up to 18% in the highest scoring parts. Scores of up to 10% were won in a number of other cities including Leicester and Bradford. At the heart of these votes were the votes of a range of ethnic minority people, most significantly, but not only Muslim people.

Muslims, in the form of national minority communities, have been traditional Labour voters but this election saw the Muslim vote for Labour in meltdown over the war and

the way they have been demonized in the course of it. This is a unique development. The left has never won the support of sections of the ethnic minorities to this extent before, a development which came directly out of the stop the war movement, and the unity it forged. This could change the face of the left if it can be consolidated for the future.

What was new for the socialist left in England in these elections is that most of the old electoral divisions were absent. Respect was the only left party with a presence at the national level - something which has never happened before in England. Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party, which stood nationally in 1999 has broken up and was hardly involved. The Socialist Party (CWI) only stood in the local elections and one London constituency for the London Assembly. They did not do well in London and lost one of their three councillors in the West Midlands.

The challenge now for Respect is to translate the support it has generated in the course of the campaign into an organization on the ground. The need is to bring the many new members and supporters into an inclusive and democratic party structure which can both prepare for the general election, which is likely to be next year, and to establish itself as a campaigning and active organization.

Scandals and demagoguery

1 October 2004

Hence scandals (like that of the KESK interior minister who had to resign before the 2003 parliamentary elections, accused of having sent some adolescent nationalists to prison in 1985, under the Soviet regime) and ludicrous proposals (during the 2003 elections the Christian Democrats proposed giving mothers of families extra votes according to how many children they had aged less than 16!) characterize political life. The voters,

when they bother voting, do no more than punish the outgoing government and hope that change at the top will not worsen their everyday life. Governmental alliances are based more on a division of the spoils than on political agreement. Thus in 2003, a completely new party came into government and through an alliance against the KESK gained the post of prime minister. A year later, with only 6.66% of votes cast, it has been able

to gain a seat in the European Parliament!

The surprise of this election was the breakthrough of the Social Democratic Party (the new name of the former "Popular Party of Moderates!") which has been out of government since 1999. Led by a former foreign minister who had been a journalist for Radio Free Europe, this party gave the impression during the election campaign that joining the EU would

allow Estonians to enjoy living standards like those of Sweden. The disappointment will be all the harsher.

	European 2004		legislatives 2003	legislatives 1999
	%	seats	%	%

Participation	26.70		58.00	57.4
Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond (SDE) (social democratic)	36.79	3	7.04	15.92
Eesti Keskerakond (KESK) (centre/liberal - Eurosceptic)	17.53	1	25.40	23.41

Eesti Reformierakond (ER) (right/liberal)	12.22	1	17.69	15.92
Erakond Isamaaliit (IL) (Christian Democratic, conservative)	10.50	1	7.31	16.09
Eestimaa Rahvaliid (ERL) (agrarian, conservative)	8.05	0	13.03	7.27
Res Publica (RP)				

(right/cons

The exception

1 October 2004

The results of this election can be summed up in one word: stability. The parties of the ruling centre-left coalition, the KESK and SPD, were not punished and the SPD even slightly increased its 1999 vote. The Conservatives, although favourable to the end of Finnish neutrality and entry into NATO - unlike the great majority of the population - kept all their seats and their vote fell by only a little in relation to 1999. The only losers were

the Greens, down by 3% and losing one of their European deputies. While many parties of Communist origin are in decline, the Finnish VAS shows a remarkable stability - it's true that it's not the party it was in 1958, when it won 23% of the vote, but it has remained stable since 1991 when it won 10.1%

.	European 1999	parliamentary 2003	European 2004	.
.	%	%	%	seats

Participation	31.4	69.7	41.1	.
Social Democratic Party (SPD)	17.9	24.5	21.16	3
Centre Party (KESK)	21.3	24.7	23.37	4
Conservative Rally (KOK)	25.3	18.6	23.71	4
Alliance of Lefts (VAS)	9.1	9.9	9.13	1
Party of the Swedish People (SFP)	6.8	4.6	5.70	1
Greens (VIHR)	13.4	8.0	10.43	1
Christian				

Democrat

Rejection and passivity

1 October 2004, by Anne Leclerc , Pierre-François Grond

The 57% abstention rate was much higher than had been the case for the cantonal and regional elections of this March. Defeat for the ruling right, victory for the socialist opposition, lower scores than expected for the various lists stressing national sovereignty, a setback for the attempt by the LCR-LO lists to build a fourth pole in political life [15] - these are the main lessons of an election which took place in a very difficult context for mobilization and social resistance in the face of an unprecedented neoliberal offensive.

This is the first paradox of this political situation. The right wing

government was punished on two fronts. In spectacular fashion it lost nearly all the regions last spring with 20 regions out of 22 falling to the left. That defeat was confirmed at these European elections. The party of prime minister Raffarin, the UMP (Union pour une Majorité Populaire), only won 16% of votes cast or less than 7% of the electorate as a whole!

Created in 2002 in exceptional circumstances, the UMP had set as its objective overcoming division of the reactionary camp into two distinct families. The right in France is traditionally divided into two formations of variable size, one of

Gaullist tradition, the RPR, the other more liberal and European, the UDF. For a section of the French bourgeoisie, this division, artificial in political terms since the Gaullists were won to the project of European construction and economic liberalism, was seen as responsible for the electoral defeats of the right at the hands of the left. Profiting from a unique opportunity, the quasi-plebiscitary election of Jacques Chirac in May 2002 in opposition to the far right candidate Le Pen, the new party was created and won the parliamentary elections. Two years later, its defeat is patent. The unification of the right has not been

achieved; the UDF led by François Bayrou enjoyed an electoral success and the electoral reverse for the UMP was such that it undermines the legitimacy of the government.

President Jacques Chirac, elected in the context of an anti-Le Pen referendum, has pursued a very harsh neoliberal policy over the past two years, assisted by his Prime Minister Pierre Raffarin. This policy dictated by the MEDEF (the powerful employers' organization) has challenged pensions and health systems, privatized public companies like the EDF (Électricité de France), brutalized education, research and culture through a succession of deep cuts, and increased inequality still further through a particularly unjust tax policy. The arrogance and contempt for any form of social resistance adds to a particularly reactionary picture reinforced by a "law and order" discourse and practice affecting youth and immigrants in particular. It is this policy that was punished at these elections.

But for now, despite these setbacks and the announcement of a "plan of social cohesion", the government's roadmap remains the same. The particularly unpopular prime minister remains in place. And the counter-reforms relating to health insurance or the EDF are now redoubled by a new and very ambitious offensive by the economy minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, to challenge the 35-hour working week.

This upping of the ante in a context of unpopularity and great weakness of governmental legitimacy is a factor of political crisis exacerbated by the contradictory ambitions of the leaders of the right in the run up to the presidential elections of 2007. The main leader and founder of the UMP, Alain Juppé, has been implicated in a scandal concerning the illicit financing of the Chiracian formation. As former mayor of Paris, Chirac is largely implicated also but will escape justice thanks to his presidential immunity. The presidential ambitions of economy minister Sarkozy add to the confusion and represent another factor of crisis.

In the reactionary camp, the divided nationalist lists did not gain the scores expected of them, in contrast to the

tendency observed in other EU states. The Front National (FN), at 10%, was down in relation to its scores in March and in 2002. Lists critical of European construction, whether right or left wing did not do particularly well. It seems that abstention is the refuge of those who reject the policy and projects of the EU, as these sentiments have largely enjoyed majority support among the masses. Nearly 80% of youth from 18 to 25 did not vote! This disenchantment in relation to Europe is accompanied by a certain resignation in the face of the opacity of the European political system and the absence of an identifiable and clearly global alternative. Europe was moreover very little present in the debates and it was virtually impossible to put the European constituent treaty at the heart of the campaign.

A hegemonic PS

This rejection is undoubtedly what explains the victory of the socialists, who, with 30% of the votes, became the largest party with an electoral hegemony on the left. The Parti Socialiste capitalized on the rejection of the right but did not take a stance on the basics (it was, for example, divided on the European constitution) and it led a campaign around the slogan "tomorrow the social Europe" without precise commitments as to the practicalities or timetable for this. The PS leaders are extremely prudent and they know that this victory expresses more a vote "against" than a broad adhesion to a programme which is still largely inspired by neoliberal ideas. They are happy to wait for 2007, the year of the next presidential elections, counting on the problems of the right but also on the fact that a great part of the adaptation of society to the new necessities of capitalism will be accomplished by then. A cynical choice, but they will nonetheless have to take a position on some decisive questions: whether or not to commit themselves to undoing the work of social demolition carried out by the right; and deciding a position on the European constitution when the natural instinct of the main socialist leaders is to ratify it (even though this is in perfect contradiction with the

commitment to the construction of a social Europe).

The partners of the PS did not benefit much from the anti-right wave. The Greens, with 6.5% did not match their scores at the preceding elections although they still have six deputies. The spectacular and rather courageous initiative of one of their leaders, Noël Mamère, who, as mayor, presided over a gay marriage, didn't do the party much good and tended rather to highlight its divisions. The French Communist Party, which lost four European deputies out of six, reached the symbolic threshold of 5% and beat the far left, poor consolation for a party which continues its electoral decline; it won nearly 7% in 1999 at the preceding European election.

With 2.5%, the LCR-LO lists experienced a setback in relation to 1999 where the same alliance received more than 900,000 votes (double what it got this time) and, with 5.3%, elected five deputies. It was a setback also in relation to the regional elections, with half the score and a loss of 600,000 votes. This situation merits a profound discussion. Without exhausting the subject, it seems that abstention, which was particularly strong among workers, employees and youth, hit the far left especially hard. The difficulty experienced by struggles and social resistance as a whole and the defeat of the strike movement of 2003 over pensions provide another explanation. Then again the trauma of April 21, which saw Jospin, prime minister and socialist leader, eliminated from the second round of the presidential election by Le Pen, led to additional pressure for a "useful" vote.

A scattered resistance

In this context, we need to review the social situation and our tasks in the period after the elections. If the right is confronted with an internal crisis, it will nonetheless pursue its counter-reforms. And despite a result which reflects the opposition to this policy on the ground, mobilizations are not up to the level required. The reform of

social protection could be a defeat without a fight; numerous collectives against the reform of social security have been created but their unitary perspectives of mobilization have not been put forward by the trade union federations opposed to reform, notably the CGT and FO. On the privatization of EDF (the state-owned electricity provider), the main union organization involved, the CGT, has been late in making clear appeals for mobilization. Proposing days of action, it has ended up being overtaken by its rank and file and that has obliged it to harden its tone. The employees have shown their combativity by determined actions - interruptions of electricity supplies to symbolic places of power and reconnections for families who had been cut off.

That shows that it was and is possible - the combative potential exists - to create a real force to counter the neoliberal reforms. However, for several months there have been no slogans for a convergence of struggles. Entertainment artists and technicians, campaigners for the unemployed, research scholars, hospitals, EDF, education... - scattered days of action, mostly without

perspective, have been proposed by the union federations. The defeat of the mobilization around pensions weighs heavily on the consciousness of wage earners and underpins the caution of the unions.

Yet the objective of a new test of social force, which alone can defeat the policies of the right, remains. That requires the broadest unity of action on social objectives like maintaining public ownership in electricity and the postal service, and defending the social security system against any opening to the appetites of speculative capital.

Unitary appeals exist, like the appeal to solidarity with the employees of EDF by the Fondation Copernic, signed by political personalities including the PCF, the Greens and the LCR but also activists from the associative and social movements. This type of initiative could link up with the workers' movement and be a signal for a broadening of political confrontation.

The PS and its allies flee from all this and wait for 2007. The score at these elections can encourage the PS in this position but its contradictions will

increasingly come to light, whether on Europe or on the social questions. The new right wing offensive led by Sarkozy against the 35 hour week - the key reform of the preceding "plural left" government - should pose the question of an immediate riposte to the initiators of this law. But once again that enters into contradiction with their objective of doing nothing before 2007. On the European constitutional treaty, the LCR has approached all the organizations, associations and parties with a view to a unitary campaign for a referendum that will allow wage earners, youth, those involved in social struggles and the movement for global justice to build for a left "no" to a neoliberal Europe.

For the LCR, another objective remains, the construction of a new force, a radical and anti-capitalist left. To clarify our contribution to an alternative on the big questions (analyses of the way the world is developing, main contents of an anti-capitalist policy, the main strategic questions), the LCR has begun drawing up a manifesto which should be available as a public document at the beginning of next year.

The LCR-LO campaign

1 October 2004

More than a million votes were won at the regional elections, or 4.5% of the total vote, as against 450,000 at the European elections (or 2.5% of the total). The lists of the Parti des travailleurs (PT, "Lambertiste") were presented only at the European elections and won 0.5% of the vote. Other small lists registered some fairly weak scores. A "Europalestine" list scored 1.8% in the constituency of Île-de-France (the Parisian region), and received significant support in popular neighbourhoods with large populations of immigrants or those of immigrant origin.

The contrast between the dynamic campaign of the LCR and LO and the electoral results was striking. Many enthusiastic meetings, often the biggest of the electoral campaign, initiatives aimed at enterprises, workplaces, sectors in struggle led by the spokespersons of the lists, a fairly consistent media presence for Olivier Besancenot (LCR) or Arlette Laguiller (LO), in particular during the regional elections. Many positive elements, then, at the end of the campaign which, despite the disappointment in relation to the scores, will leave traces. In identifying ourselves with questions like the ban on layoffs, the defence of public services or culture,

we were able to intervene directly and make ourselves the voice of struggles that were going on, by workers at EDF, film and theatre technicians or the resistance at STM-Electronics against the closure of factories.

During the European campaign, the LCR developed demands emerging from the struggle for global justice around the slogan: "another Europe is possible" and pronounced itself against the European constitution, together with LO, and in favour of the democratic demand for a referendum so that the people can decide for themselves instead of the ruling elites.

Between rage and impotence

1 October 2004, by **Angela Klein**

Abstention dominated and given this fact, as well as the extremely low level of the campaign, it is not possible to deduce a precise political message from these elections. At best it can be seen as an expression, freed from any tactical preoccupation, of rage or resignation in the face of the neoliberal policies imposed in Germany over the past two years through Agenda 2010. The political climate has darkened considerably over this period.

The results of the European elections were confirmed by those of the regional elections in Thuringia and the municipal and cantonal elections in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Rhineland-Pfatz, Saarland and Baden-Wuerttemberger which also took place on June 13. In these elections the rate of participation was generally better than for the European elections but remained below that of the corresponding elections of 1999.

The polling institute Allensbach, which is of a conservative orientation, carried out a poll just before the elections of June 13. Asked whether the federal government had realized "the ideal of social justice" 73% of those polled answered in the negative (two years ago only 59% replied thus). 84% of the population pronounced themselves unhappy with governmental policy, against only 14% who were satisfied. While 81% expressed concern about the future, only 14% declared their confidence in an economic upturn. According to the poll, the great majority considered the state, the rich and the bosses as the main beneficiaries, while among the victims were the retired (71%), the poor (70%), those on low wages (69%) and the unemployed (58%).

Only 43% of voters participated in these European elections as against 45.2% in 1999, or nearly one million less. Spoiled votes nearly doubled

(2.8%). The small lists of the "others" won 6.3% in 1999. In 2004 this score rose to more than 9% and in absolute figures it more than doubled. In 2004 these "others" - amounting to 18 parties (against 12 in 1999) - totaled 2,532,988 votes, or more than the CSU and nearly half the SPD. Among these "others" the DKP [16] won only 37,231 votes. In Rostock, capital of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern region, the "List against social demolition" put forward by the SAV (German section of the Committee for a Workers International) won 2.5% and a seat on the municipal council. The PDS [17] share of the poll has gone up constantly (1994 - 4.1%, 1999 - 5.8%, 2004 - 6.1%). But in absolute figures, between 1999 and 2004, it only gained 11,948 votes.

The first lesson which we can draw is that it is not possible, on the basis of the PDS result, to really speak of a breakthrough for forces to the left of the SPD. What can be said is that the PDS benefited from a protest vote - to a modest degree, much more modest than the other "small parties" who were not on the far right, and much more modest than the Greens.

At the federal level, the various far right lists increased their vote from 2.1% to 3.6%; the Republikaner had the biggest vote with 1.9%, the NPD 0.9%. But in several eastern cities far right electoral alliances scored 10% and more. The vote for the NPD in the Saxony municipal elections was particularly worrying. It won 13.4% and 6 seats in the small tourist region Sächsisch Schweiz near the Czech frontier, and in other municipalities between 9% and 25%.

Results of German elections

	parliamentary 1998 %	European 1999 %	parliamentary 2002 %	European 2003 %
participation	82.2	45.2	79.1	43.0

PDS	5.1	5.8	4.0	6.1
SPD	40.9	30.7	38.5	21.5
Greens	6.7	6.4	8.6	11.9
CDU	28.4	39.3	29.5	36.5
CSU	6.7	9.4	9.0	8.0
FDP	6.2	3.0	7.4	6.1

Source: Bundeswahlleiter

These figures indicate two trends. The SPD and the Christian Democrats have lost votes both in absolute terms and in percentage terms, while the "small parties" - PDS, FDP [18] and Grünen (Greens) - have gained.

The Grünen made a great leap forward. They presented themselves as the only genuinely European party, open, cosmopolitan, modern, distinguishing themselves from "backward" forces, whether right wing "Eurosceptics" who demand more national sovereignty, or the left Eurosceptics who demand a higher level of social rights on the European scale. In a country historically fatigued by the quest for a national identity, the Grünen offer the idea of Europe as a force capable of exerting weight in the world, both as a "civilizing" force in relation to US imperialism and a bulwark against the resurgence of German imperialism. They do not discuss the crying contradictions between this ideal and the social brutality that neoliberal European integration offers. Their clientele suffers less, and the party is capable of formulating an alternative bourgeois strategy to that of the right, of which a section at least is decidedly not in synch with the rhythms of globalization. It is this aspect which makes them interesting for all kinds of milieus, from the anti-fascist left (an anti-fascism reduced to the denunciation of anti-Semitism), to the liberal professions to the supporters of globalization. In political coherence they generally outdo the liberal FDP, who are divided between the interests of big capital and a petty bourgeois support base they try to keep happy with populist promises - although the

FDP too made progress everywhere at these elections. In the public profile of the Grünen the political-cultural aspect prevails over their economic orientation (which is more neoliberal than that of the Blairites of the SPD!). Thus in Berlin, where the SPD and PDS govern, it was the Greens who reaped the protest vote; with 22.7% they became the second political force (the SPD only won 19.2%), simply because they are in opposition and less discredited than Christian Democracy.

On the day after June 13 the bourgeois press noted that the SPD had crossed "the brink of catastrophe". It remains around 5% below predictions, scoring 21.5% against 30.7% in 1999. It lost 2.75 million votes (against 1.2 million votes lost by the CDU), its worst score ever in a national election. An average of 21.5% means that there were places where things were much worse. The lowest score was in Köstritz, a small town in Brandenburg, where the SPD did not even reach the threshold of 5%, scoring only 4.8%. Its fall is still more dramatic if one compares these results with those of the general elections of 2002. At that time the SPD won 18.5 million votes. In June it won 5,549,243 million. According to exit polls, 13.9 million of those who had voted for the SPD in 2002 did not do so this time whereas 980,000 who didn't vote SPD in 2002 did so this time; 10.7 million former SPD voters abstained this time, 880,000 voted CDU/CSU and 270,000 voted PDS. There was not then any remarkable shift of SPD voters towards the PDS (no more than the shift to the right in any case).

The vote for the PDS was ambiguous. At the federal level it gained in votes and in percentage terms (11,948 votes or 0.3%). This is not enormous given the collapse of social democracy and if one considers that the PDS appears as the sole force to the left of the SPD. Comparing its European result with that at the federal elections of 2002, the ambiguity is manifest. In 2002 the PDS won 1.9 million votes. It lost 930,000 to abstention, but gained 790,000 new electors; 270,000 of them came from the SPD, 170,000 from the Greens, 130,000 from the CDU. Thus in June 2004 the stable electorate of the PDS was reduced to

780,000 votes! The share of protest voters in its total vote increased while the share of its political support diminished.

The PDS did not escape the logic of alternation which dominated these elections. In western Germany it gained in votes and in percentage, but it remains a party below 5% - the few exceptions confirm the rule. In Duisburg for example, where the PDS won 4.1% of the votes and three seats at the municipal elections of autumn 1999, in 2004 it won 2,000 votes more than in the European elections of 1999, but lost 2,000 votes in relation to the municipal elections of 1999.

In most of the eastern Lander the PDS is in opposition, although it is often the second political force. Where it is in governmental coalition with the SPD, in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and in Berlin, the PDS lost in votes and in percentage. In Mecklenburg-Vorpommern the rate of participation in the European vote was among the highest, at 45.4%. The PDS lost 35,000 votes and fell from 24.3% to 21.7%; the SPD lost 41,000 votes and fell to 16%, and the CDU remains the biggest party. In Berlin, the PDS fell from 16.7% to 14.4% and lost 28,199 votes, while the SPD declined from 26.7% to 19.2% and lost 79,000 votes; the CDU lost 93,000 votes while the Grünen won 90,000 and the Liberals 15,000. In Brandenburg, where a CDU/SPD coalition rules, participation was at its lowest, 26.9%. Here the PDS became the biggest party, relegating the CDU to second place. It won a total of 172,235 votes (30.9%) as against 156,313 (25.8%) in 1999. The Grünen and liberals doubled their votes and their percentage score. In Saxony the PDS won 2.5 %, while losing 23,930 votes.

All this means that the PDS was not seen as a programmatic alternative to social-liberalism. A little to the left, but not consistently so. The anti-capitalist left did not vote for it, above all because of its still ambiguous position on the draft European constitution. At its last electoral congress in January the PDS decided to oppose this constitution, because of the militarization it involved. But this "no" was sufficiently relative to allow Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann, at the head

of the PDS European list, to call on her party not to say "no" during the process of ratification of the constitutional treaty because, in her view, that would marginalize it "in the same way that the KPD was marginalized after the war when it came out against the Basic Law in 1948".

In Thuringia the PDS scored a major success. In opposition to a CDU government with an absolute majority, it became the second largest party. It improved its position still further, for the first time winning five constituencies on a first past the post ballot. [19] The proportional result gave the PDS an increase of 15,811 votes - it went from 21.3% to 26.1%. The SPD, already in third position, fell further from 18.5% to 14.5% (losing nearly 100,000 votes). Nonetheless, the most significant result was the loss of the Christian Democrats' absolute majority - their share of the vote fell from 51% to 43% and they lost 158,386 votes. If the success of the PDS was spectacular here, it should be relativized. The Greens, without any tradition or milieu in eastern Germany, benefited most from the decline of the CDU and SPD. With 45,649 votes they more than doubled their score of 1999 (24,032 votes extra) and only just missed their first entry into the regional parliament (Landtag), with 4.8% of the vote (a minimum of 5% is required). The FDP tripled their vote and entered the parliament with 51,000 votes. The "other" parties stabilized around 70,000 votes. Spoiled ballots nearly doubled (43,000 votes).

The municipal elections in Saxony present a still more sombre picture. Participation was 46.1%: the SPD fell by more than 320,000 votes to 11.4%; the CDU lost 545,235 votes and fell from 39.9% to 34.8%; the FDP gained 14,000 votes which allowed them to reach 5.2%, the Grünen gained 15,000 votes and scored 3.1%; the PDS went from 16.9% to 18.55 but lost 60,172 votes.

In Baden-Wuerttemberger the PDS, already present in four municipal councils (Stuttgart, Constance, Karlsruhe, Tübingen), can now add others: Mannheim, Heidelberg, Friburg with scores between 1.8%

(Stuttgart) and 8.6% (Tübingen).

The gap between SPD and PDS widened in eastern Germany and the PDS looks ready to take the place of the SPD there; here the SPD is losing its support among the workers and the PDS overtook it in most social categories. Thus in the European elections the SPD only won 24% (-12%) among workers, whereas the PDS went from 21 to 26%. Among employees and civil servants the SPD lost 3% (and scored 24%), the PDS went from 24% to 28%. Among the unemployed the SPD scored 21% (-11%), while the PDS rose from 28% to 37%. Among the small and medium employers the SPD lost 4% - it is the only category in which the PDS also lost 3% - but the SPD scored 13% and the PDS 33%.

All this indicates that the PDS is not in a position to fill the vacuum opening to the left of the SPD and the governmental left, in particular in the west. It is not then surprising that the process of the Electoral Alternative ("Wahlalternative") underway in western Germany, which should culminate in an electoral challenge at the general elections in 2006 [20] has not been halted by the PDS results -

even if the latter scored some remarkable results in some places in the West. The PDS leadership itself seems to have abandoned the project of building the party beyond the Elbe and envisages rather an electoral alliance with the Wahlalternative for 2006. This project is not yet approved by the Wahlalternative, because the latter is in full preparation for its founding congress in autumn and is in the midst of a depoliticizing organizational process.

As a general line we should note the following:

- the parallel existence of the Wahlalternative and the PDS reflects the division of the country and above all that of the workers' movement. It is a heritage of the 1920s which has still not been overcome.

- the two differ considerably in their social roots and their mode of birth. The PDS is a former state-party and those who call themselves "socialists" inside it were often part of the intellectual elite of a bureaucratized workers' state; they employ a socialist vocabulary but their conception remains that of a state "socialism". The Wahlalternative is the result of a real radicalization of the fringe of the

workers' movement, but a radicalization which is not primarily the fruit of the evolution to the left of their own positions but rather of the SPD's turn to the right. The PDS has a smooth running apparatus while the Wahlalternative has none.

- so far as the vital questions posed to a credible left alternative today - programme, conception of party, political culture, relationship to the bourgeois state and its institutions, Keynesian orientation - the two formations do not greatly differ at the end of the day, except that the Wahlalternative is more open to the anti-capitalist left.

So it would be wrong to consider the Wahlalternative immediately as an alternative to the PDS. There are reformist currents (which are in the majority) and currents opposed to a governmental line in the two organizations. The difference is that the process of the Wahlalternative, which is starting, is still much more open, while the development of the PDS has already led to an ossification, even if it cannot be considered as totally closed before the new challenge posed by the collapse of the SPD, in particular in eastern Germany.

All passion spent

1 October 2004, by **Andreas Sartzekis**

While voting is in theory obligatory, around 36% of registered voters abstained! It should be said that the European issues had not been prioritized, except in a negative sense by the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the far right. In this framework, the interest of these elections lies more in observations on eventual modifications of the political landscape after three months of right wing government. In fact, nothing decisive came out of the results, but it would be wrong to not pay attention to a certain number of contradictory signs, some months from a "post-Olympic" autumn which could see

Karamanlis moving sharply to introduce a right wing programme. The repressive arsenal which he is establishing during the Games is very worrying.

The issues

Until now the Karamanlis government has avoided taking measures which are too controversial. There is no question of a head-on confrontation with the workers two months before the Olympics. Of course, conflicts exist and the former right wing leader Mitsotakis is pressing Karamanlis to

take "necessary measures", but the government has so far not had too many difficulties and has benefited from the realization of some of the preceding government's measures (public works). The ND's objective for these elections was, then, simply to maintain its good score in the parliamentary elections (45.4%) and if possible increase its advantage over PASOK. [21]

It should be said that this was not difficult. Since its defeat in March (with 40.5%), PASOK, under its new leader George Papandreou, has seemed on the verge of a crisis. The

question remains whether the working class and peasant base of PASOK, whose score at the March election remained very high, will question an orientation synonymous with serious social regression. In this framework, the elections in June would reveal whether the gap would grow with the ND and if a true crisis existed (bearing in mind that in the Greek context of two-party politics, the rest of the Greek left accounted for only around 12% of the vote in March).

To the left of PASOK

To the left of PASOK, the traditional sectarianism of the KKE, Synaspismos (originating from the Eurocommunist left) and the far left has begun to evolve thanks to social phenomena like the Greek Social Forum (GSF). But at the political level, things advance much too slowly, and the “electoral tradition” of the European elections has played against possible progress on this level. Indeed, it has been evident for a long time that at the European elections, a small part of the PASOK electorate votes more to the left. Thus, while in 2000 PASOK received 44% of the votes in the parliamentary elections, it scored only 32.9% at the European elections of 1999, where the KKE got 8.7% and Synaspismos 5.2 % (a third reformist party, DIKKY, a split from PASOK, obtained 6.9%). This tradition explains the sectarian reflexes of the other organizations who squabble over the votes from PASOK.

The KKE campaign was marked above all by its nationalist character. Arguing that Greece should leave the European Union, the KKE has offered no perspective for the construction of a Europe of workers. Worse, its campaign played on fear and the irrational, associating mad cow disease and genetically modified plants with the EU. On this nationalist basis, the KKE waged an extremely aggressive campaign against Synaspismos, with the clear objective of reducing its score, which was not too different from that of the KKE in recent years (5.5% against 3.2% at the 2000 parliamentary elections, 5.9% against 3.26% for the Syriza

regroupment in March 2004).

At the March 2004 parliamentary elections an electoral regroupment, Syriza had attracted the interest of a part of the radical left. At the time we noted the limits of this alliance, marked above all by the absence of an equitable relationship of forces between Synaspismos, whose goals were above all electoralist (staying above 3%, the minimum threshold to have deputies elected), and the forces of the radical left. Syriza has not survived its congenital weaknesses and its poor electoral result (compared to the hopes raised, and on the basis of the weak working class support for the list) and Synaspismos then engaged in a well-worn reversal of position. It refused to put forward a Syriza list, and in this campaign opted for a very conscious personalized rapprochement with PASOK, its leader Konstantopoulos openly consorting with several PASOK leaders. It also launched some harsh attacks on the KKE. Konstantopoulos made only weak denials of rumours that he would eventually run for president of Greece with the consensual support of the right and PASOK! Was there a list symbolising the desire for regroupment of a radical and anti-capitalist left and the activity of the Social Forum? In fact, there was one list which in part responded to these expectations, that of “Women for Another Europe”, led by the excellent singer Nena Venetsanou.

This list was put together in two weeks and had its limitations, but given that and despite its social composition (of artists, liberal professions and teachers), this list was nonetheless seen as an attempt to give political expression to the social movement, as well as providing the satisfaction of thus condemning the manoeuvres of Synaspismos. In itself, then, this list sums up the difficulties, the hopes but also the limits to developing any kind of credible electoral reflection of the movement for global justice in Greece. In these conditions, and on the basis of several proposals, OKDE-Spartakos (Fourth International) called for a vote for the lists of the Anti-capitalist Alliance, a front for the SEK (Greek section of the IST, the International Socialist Tendency, of which the British SWP is

the best known organization), and for MERA, a front for the NAR (a split of KKE youth in the early 1990s), two far left groups. However, curiously, the debates about an anti-capitalist left continued during this period, and this was certainly because they were isolated from electoral pressures!

The results

As might be inferred from the above, there were no great surprises. The ND gained 43.3% and 11 seats, PASOK 34% and eight seats, the KKE 9.3% and three seats, Synaspismos 4% and one seat, the same score as LAOS (far right, one seat). In fifth position was the list of Women for Another Europe with 0.75%, and then innumerable other lists. Among them were the ML-KKE (Maoist) with 0.35%, the Anti-capitalist Alliance with 0.2% and MERA with 0.22%, while on the far right the National Front got 0.25% and the Patriotic Alliance 0.17%.

If the right clearly outdistanced PASOK, Georges Papandreou's party limited the damage, improving on its European score of 1999. Thus in the absence of a rank and file movement it is unlikely that a real crisis will break out. The question is, rather, how the party leadership will position itself before the social movements which could erupt in the autumn.

The KKE can be happy enough, improving on its 1999 score and clearly outstripping Synaspismos! However, it was also hit by abstention, losing 15,000 votes and an examination of its “fiefdoms” shows that while it improved its performance in the working class periphery of Athens (from 11.91% in 1999 to 13.16%) it lost 13,000 votes. In its bastion on the island of Lesbos it fell from 18.36% to 16.41%, the lost votes apparently going to PASOK and to the right! Also, while the KKE was counting on taking votes from those who had supported DIKKY in 1999, it seems that this 6.9% share of the vote was scattered in every direction, from the right to the radical left, not to mention to those who abstained. All this draws attention to the limits of the (relative) renaissance of the KKE.

The big loser at these elections was

undoubtedly Synaspismos. While its objective was to keep its two deputies and stay close to the score of the KKE, its total fell from 5.2% in 1999 to 4% and one deputy. After the elections, Konstantopoulos said he would not continue as president of the party.

A nice surprise was the vote of the Women For Another Europe list, whose score in the Athens region and a part of Thessaloniki was more than 1%. Given the conditions under which it was launched, it should be stressed that this was the best score ever achieved in Greece by a list identified with the radical left!

However, the far right leader Karatzaferis and his LAOS ("People") movement also achieved a disconcerting score and a pole is forming on the basis of a strong nationalism in Greece, shared between left and right, not to speak of a pronounced anti-Semitism.

Some perspectives

This progress of the far right could have a very rapid reflection, as the end of work for the Olympic Games could lead to 60,000 layoffs, with many of the workers threatened because they are immigrants. In a broader context, the end of the Games could lead to a harsher set of measures across the board. Placing the anti-racist struggle at the heart of social mobilization will then be a priority for the Greek anti-capitalist

left, and it will surely be necessary to go beyond anti-racist festivals (successful as they have been).

Parallel to a united front on the priority social questions, the construction of the anti-capitalist left should move to a higher speed, given the proclaimed will of the currents to advance. The debates should take the following into account:

- The instrumentalization of the social movements like the social Forum;

- the crisis of Synaspismos: can the rank and file assert themselves at the next congress so that the organization can begin to break with a politics built around the bureaucratic contacts and roles of its leaders and cadres.

- the crisis of a part of the far left. Two factors have been central here, the debate around the launch of Syriza and the debate on the vote around Cypriot reunification, where most of the far left advocated a "No" vote and OKDE-Spartakos was one of the few to defend a "Yes" vote. The nationalist sentiment whipped up by the Greek Cypriot president has led to some thought on the radical left as to the simple-mindedness of certain slogans of anti-imperialist appearance which could easily be taken up by the nationalist leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church!

Some tasks for the coming months, then, not so much Olympic in their nature as Titanic.

A hereditary bourgeois "democracy"

Democracy in Greece has become the preserve of a handful of big bourgeois families.

- the Karamanlis family: Konstantin, prime minister in 1974 then president; his nephew Kostas, prime minister; another nephew is a minister.

- the Mitsotakis family: Kostas, prime minister; his daughter Dora, mayor of Athens; a grandson is a deputy.

- the Papandreou family: George, the patriarch, was a centrist minister in the 1950s; Andreas, ex-Trotskyist, founder of PASOK and several times prime minister; "Georgakis", current leader of PASOK.

Not to forget the Mercouri family; Melina, the star of "Never on a Sunday" and PASOK minister of culture, was a granddaughter of a right wing mayor of Athens. The examples could be multiplied, and the same was indeed true in the nineteenth century, but our time would be better employed building a real democracy, where everyone can make their own dynamic contribution!

Government punished

1 October 2004

Amid record abstention rates the election saw a clear victory for the nationalist right of the Alliance of Young Democrats - Hungarian Civic Party (FIDESz-MPP) of former Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Resorting when necessary to naked populism, Orban waged a campaign against price rises and for an end to privatization, with an anti-European

tinge.

Inside the ruling coalition the dominant post-Stalinist Socialist Party (MSzP) was punished after presiding over a monetary crisis at the beginning of the year and imposing an austerity policy which reduced still further social expenditure, while its small liberal ally, the Alliance of Free

Democrats (SzDSz) increased its score. The small far left party, Munkáspárt (which emerged from a split in the MSzP) was unable to appear as a credible alternative to the social liberal government.

The far right Hungarian Party for Justice and Life (MIEP), which elected 14 deputies in 1998, continued its

decline, which was the good news of this election.

	parliamentary 2002	European 2004	seats in EP
abstention	29.57	61.53	

Munkáspárt (MP, far left)	2.16	1.83	0
MSzP (soc dem, government)	42.05	34.30	9
SzDSz (liberal, government)	5.54	7.74	2

FIDESz-MPP (nationalist right)	41.07	47.40	12
MDF and partners (Christian Democrat)	4.65	5.33	1
MIEP (far right)	4.37	2.35	0

MNSz (far

right)

Breakthrough for Sinn Fein

1 October 2004

The big loser was the governing Fianna Fail party led by prime minister Bertie Ahern, which won only 28.8% of the vote, nearly 10% less than in 1999. The municipal elections took place at the same time as the European poll, and the defeat for Fianna Fail was even more crushing at the local level. The setback opened speculation on the future of the government as the opposition Fine Gael maintained its vote (although it lost one seat in the European parliament) and the Labour Party won 11.50% and two seats as against 8.75% and one seat in 1999. Sinn Fein also performed well in the local elections, increasing its vote from

3.5% in 1999 to 8% in 2004 and adding 33 local council seats to the 21 it held already. The Green Party fell back to 4.5% as against 6.7% in 1999 and lost one of its two seats in the European Parliament.

On the left, there was a good result for Joe Higgins, the candidate of the Socialist Party (SP, the Irish organization of the Committee for a Workers International) which doubled its vote in the Dublin European constituency, going from 10,619 votes in 1999 (3.8%) to 23,218 votes (5.5%) this year. The SP won four local council seats (as against two in 1999). This success is largely attributable to its involvement in the campaign

against a controversial "bin tax". The other radical left organization, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP, Irish section of the International Socialist Tendency - IST) registered some good scores in some local elections (11.75%, or 1,094 votes in Ballyfermot/Dublin) but did not win any seats.

Both the European and local elections witness to the degree of popular rejection of the anti-working class attacks and privatizations of the Ahern government. However neither Fine Gael nor the Labour Party present any alternative to the policies currently being pursued by Fianna Fail.

Setback for Berlusconi, hope for left

1 October 2004, by Salvatore Cannavò

Before going into the details we should recall the context of defeat and loss of credibility of the European unification project shown in the June vote. The very low turnout (in Italy, limited only by the local elections which were held concurrently) and the success of populist and nationalist forces confirm that the European process is perceived as contrary to ordinary people's interests and no

answer to workers' needs. This failure also affects the European commission presided over by Prodi, an advocate of free trade policies and fiscal restraint. The losers are all governments that have overseen capitalist globalization policies, whether of the right or the "left", conservative or social-democratic. Following the European elections EU governments decided to push the European Constitution

project, further broadening the gap between the oligarchy governing Europe and its peoples. A gap that risks a crisis of democratic legitimacy. The forces of the so-called alternative left held their positions overall, with ups and downs, but remain hard-put to represent a credible alternative. From this standpoint, the alternative left and the European Left Party still have a long road to travel, and the outcome

depends on at least two factors. Firstly, to what extent they can build Europe-wide mobilizations, co-ordinated among themselves and with concrete aims, especially on the class struggle front. Secondly, a solid alternative in terms of programme to the current "consensus" between moderates and reformers guiding the destiny of the EU.

Berlusconi's defeat

In Italy, Berlusconi met with a stunning defeat: from 29 down to 21% (i.e., four million fewer votes) as compared to the 2001 political elections, and a fall from 25 to 21% compared to the last European elections. The government's allies come out the winners here, especially the Northern League, with 5% of the votes and the former Christian Democrats in the UDC, rising to 6% (from 3.9%). As for the ex-fascists in the National Alliance, they maintained a stable electoral share around 11%. Thus the defeat hit Berlusconi hardest. This means he must satisfy his allies' ambitions for greater powers and finds himself relatively isolated, especially with respect to the Italian bourgeoisie. This class seems to have suspended their trust in him, if not withdrawn it. The loss of Milan, stronghold of Berlusconi power and culture, is a striking example.

Yet this defeat does not yet represent a collapse of the majority's social representativeness. Of course, Berlusconi's legitimacy crisis is feeding contradictions and centrifugal pressures, very obvious these days. Confindustria [22] has taken its distances, reflecting the President of the Council's loss of credibility. However this does not yet mean a social defeat and a definitive break. Reformist Ulivo ("Olive Tree") policies also have an impact in this respect. They present themselves merely as an alternative to Berlusconi, especially in relation to Confindustria, (this seems to also have a negative influence on CGIL [23] policies) and not as an alternative front, above all in terms of social policies.

The Olive Tree's attitude has not paid

off in electoral terms, as evidenced by the scores of the "Prodi slate". With 31.1%, it did not equal the sum total of the parties that founded it (Ds, Margherita, Sdi) which added up to approximately 33% and a million and a half votes more in the 2001 elections. In terms of the European elections, it is nearly impossible to make a comparison, as Rutelli's Margherita party did not exist.

Rifondazione's success

The PRC increased its votes both as a percentage and in absolute numbers. These have risen from 4.3% in the 1999 European elections and 5% in the 2001 political elections to 6.1% and 1,926,000 votes. It is a gain of approximately 500,000 votes with respect to 1999 and 60,000 with respect to 2001. There is no doubt as to the reasons for this vote. Rifondazione is benefiting from the long wave of social movements that have begun to build political links and extend their trust to parties. After many years, a process of condensation is taking place on the electoral level. This is the outcome of a major cycle of struggles starting out with Genoa and the metalworker' strike in 2001 and continuing with the large-scale anti-Berlusconi demonstrations, the peace marches and the new workers' mobilisations over the last year (Terni, Genoa, Melfi, building sites and so on). These have called a new, militant and determined generation of workers into motion.

This is an outcome also visible in the good showing of other political forces (Cossutta's Pdc, the Greens, Occhetto and Di Pietro's new grouping) which have also backed social movements, in particular the anti-war movement, to a more limited extent. All of these forces make up an electoral force of 13% opposed to war and neoliberalism, an important new factor in politics. Rifondazione's role in this space is central. Three years after Genoa and four and a half after Seattle, we can finally say that the choice at the origin of our "New Rifondazione" - the break with the Prodi government and the centrality of social struggle - has borne its first electoral fruits.

Yet Rifondazione's unitary spirit is also recognised, as its usefulness in the fight against Berlusconi. The movements' practices have also expressed such a unitary spirit - and now these can be seen on the general political level as well. The PRC is seen as a useful instrument to change the outlook of the reformist forces and with an influence in intransigent opposition to Berlusconi. Rifondazione's leadership interprets this attitude towards it as the proof that it should swiftly reach a governing agreement with the Olive Tree. This is why Rifondazione Secretary Bertinotti has proposed a "programmatic constituent assembly" of all oppositions, to hammer out a common programme. This outlook has not won over those opposed to the "governmental" turn, giving rise to an internal debate in the party.

Within this overall positive judgement, we must bear in mind certain problems. The electoral campaign did show up the PRC's difficulties establishing a foothold in local situations, to form a broad leadership group with roots throughout the country, and to build a organisation with its own network, able to compete on the electoral front. In Italy, voters were also electing many local administrations. Overall, the PRC lost 140,00 votes between the European and local administrative elections, proof of its organizational fragility and shallow local roots. Moreover, the increase in absolute terms as compared to the 2001 political elections - elections during which Rifondazione stood alone, with no centre-left alliance, hence in a much more difficult situation - amounts to only 60,000 votes. This is not a very strong increase, and it amounts to an "opinion" vote, merely "lent" to Rifondazione - and dependent on choices made in the future.

Yet this unitary spirit is needed because the broad popular masses are calling for it; in particular workers in struggle. This means difficult discussions, perhaps the same ones facing other European forces. It calls for intelligence and tactical ability. There is no doubt that as it goes through this process, the PRC is playing the card of its political autonomy towards the centre-left and

its ability to relate to social movements.

Our proposals

At the National Political committee meeting held on July 3-4, 2004, the Bandiera Rossa comrades (supporters of the Fourth International in the PRC) proposed their own political document based on three levels of proposals.

The first concerns opposition to the Berlusconi government. To build a broad process that can inflict a social defeat on the Berlusconi government - not yet achieved - it will be essential to start out from struggles and movements, with a special orientation towards the "new workers' movement", which has started to turn the tide of defeats. Instead of a "Programmatic constituent assembly of oppositions", that is, an instrument in which social movements would sit at Prodi's table for common talks on a future government, start out from the movement's own decision-making bodies, from arenas of social conflict, to arrive at a common platform to establish the scope of unity possible against the government.

The second level, that of programme, poses the problem of an alternative society. In the European elections, the disapproval of neoliberal governments, on the right or the left, in the presence of a systemic crisis of neoliberal Europe expresses demands for change. It gives voice to a general need for content, ideas and proposals for a different society. There is a

demand for alternatives to right-wing policies, and we must take these into account. But if there is no disagreement among us on the need to beat the Berlusconi government, governing is another matter. Beyond favourable social conditions, it takes solid programmatic radicalism. This is not to be found in the Olive Tree's positions.

Without such coherence, without the capacity to make difficult choices or swim against the current, there is the risk of opening up the road to populist, reactionary anti-politics. This remains a factor on European soil as once again shown by the June 13 vote. In Italy and Europe alike, an alternative is needed to the reformist projects of social-democratic and centre-left governments. The issues are clear: a coherent stand against war, with or without the UN, the need to reduce military forces and spending, to say no to the European Constitution. Secondly, economic policies that promote the public sector, starting from outright nationalization and reversing the trend to precarious employment, and the concept of a welfare state against twenty years of neoliberal doctrine. They include institutional reforms re-establishing the primacy of proportional and participatory democracy, in the workplace as well. And a concept of universal citizenship without discrimination or humiliation of workers of different colour skin. The challenge facing an opposition to right-wing forces and for a societal alternative requires a radical programme, coherently against neoliberalism and clearly anti-war,

that does not give in or compromise. If not, we are merely discussing a pallid change of guard.

The third level concerns the alternative left. It would be an error for Rifondazione to see itself as the "left of the centre-left" within an unlikely Constituent Assembly of oppositions. It would be far more useful to continue along the alternative left road understood as a political and social coalition. This would continue to facilitate convergence among the political forces of the anti-capitalist left and the new generation in struggle. Beyond summits or endless conferences, it is important to identify the places and instruments to undertake discussions, of a programmatic nature but also linked to an immediate social initiatives and hence able to offer full status to the many social forces, associations and movements that must constitute an essential component of the alternative left. It means drawing upon movements' experience to establish the perimeters of an anti-neoliberal pole distinct from the reformist front, and able to follow up on decisions made by movements without trying to take their place, thus, respecting their autonomy. An anti-neoliberal pole that would test its capacity for initiatives directly in the heat of social confrontations, starting with an Autumn Campaign against Berlusconi. As an alternative to the Olive Tree's reformist project, it could lay the groundwork for a real societal alternative.

Article translated by Maria Gatti.

Chauvinism triumphs

1 October 2004

However, the demands of the Russian-speaking minority have awakened Latvian chauvinism. After the Diet had refused to ratify the Convention of the Council of Europe on the rights of national minorities in May, the June

elections saw a triumph for the most nationalist parties: the Union For Country and Liberty (LNNK, ultra-nationalist), trounced at the parliamentary elections in 2002, came back with nearly 30% and won four

out of nine European seats while the Party of the New Era won two seats. The two minor parties of the ruling coalition, the LPP and the ZZS (the latter participates in the European Green Party) did poorly.

	1998 %	2002 %	2004 %	seats EP
Participation	71.9	42.88	41.20	
Party of the people (TP)	20.9	16.68	6.70	1
Latvian Road (LC)	18.2	4.89	6.57	1
Union For Country and Liberty (LNNK)	14.2	5.39	29.80	4

National Party of Harmony (TSP, ex-CP)	14.2	-	4.82	0
Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP)	12.9	4.02	4.83	0

Party of the New Era (JL)	7.4	23.98	19.82	2
Party For Civic Rights (PCTVL)	-	19.09	10.70	1
Union of Greens and Farmers (ZZS)	-	9.47	4.29	0
First Party				

(LPP)

Setback for social democrats

1 October 2004

If the rate of participation was higher than in the neighbouring countries (49.15%) it was because this election coincided with the first round of the presidential election organized following the dismissal of the former president, Rolandas Paksas, accused of accepting illicit campaign financing from a Russian helicopter manufacturer. The presidential election was won by Valdas Adamkus, a former president (1998-2003) with 52.14% against Kazimiera D. Prunskiene, leader of the Peasant Party, supported by the ousted

president. Adamkus, a member of the US Republican Party before his return to Lithuania in 1997, favours neoliberal shock therapy. His success, like the failure of the Social Democrats, does not augur well for the future of the ruling coalition.

	European 2004		Parliamentary 2000
	%	seats	%
Labour Party (DP)	30.20	5	-
Liberal Democrats (LDP)	6.83	1	-

Social Democratic Party (LSDP)	14.40	2	31.08
New Union	7.41	1	19.64
Lithuanian Liberal Union (LLS)	-	-	17.25
Patriotic Union - Conservatives (TS)	12.58	2	8.62
Lithuanian Christian Democrat Party (LKDP)	2.75	0	3.07
Lithuanian Union of the Centre (LCS)	11.23	2	2.86
Electoral			

Action o

Christian Democrats as final hope?

1 October 2004, by **Tun Jost**

The elections saw a sweeping victory for the Christian Democratic Party (CSV) of the outgoing prime minister Jean-Claude Juncker, some gains for the Greens, a defeat for the Liberal coalition partner, losses for the right populist party the ADR, stagnation for the Socialists and a debacle for "La

Gauche" [24] which lost half its voters and its one seat in the Chamber of Deputies. The European deputies will be three Christian Democrats, one Socialist, one Liberal and one Green. As voting is obligatory for residents of Luxemburg nationality and non-Luzemburgers who are registered on

the electoral lists for the European Parliament, participation was over 90%.

The predominance of the bourgeois parties is explained by the fact that universal suffrage has for a long time been problematic in Luxemburg. Less than a third of wage earners have the

right to vote! The wage earning class in Luxemburg is made up of one third native Luxemburgers, one third resident non-Luxemburger workers without the right to vote and one third French, Belgian and German border dwellers who do not vote in Luxemburg.

Why was the Luxemburg government one of the few in Europe to escape punishment? In fact, the results for the two partners in the right wing government were diametrically opposite. Luxemburgers expressed in their voting a fear of neoliberal counter-reforms and social regression. That was shown by the punishment meted out to the Liberal wing of the government (which lost 5 seats in a parliament which has a total of 60 members) and the oppositional right populist party which supported an ultra-neoliberal economic programme, while the main party in government profited from a high-profile media campaign personalized around the emblematic figure of prime minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, who likes to present himself as a socialist inside a bourgeois party. "De séchere Wé" ("the safe road") was the theme that dominated the campaign. Juncker has for years enjoyed the barely concealed support of the leadership of the biggest trade union. The union leadership is very attached to tripartite negotiations involving government, unions and employers to avoid social conflict. The social

democratic opposition has not presented a credible alternative in terms of social policy and was adversely affected by the social-liberal policies of the Schröder government in Germany.

The distribution of seats in the Chamber of Deputies is, then, as follows: Christian Democrats 24 (+5), Socialists 14 (+1), Liberals 10 (-5), Greens 7 (+2), Populists 5 (-2), Déi Lénk-la Gauche 0 (-1).

Debate for the anti-capitalists

The electoral debacle of "déi Lénk - la Gauche" is all the more painful in that the pressure of the useful vote for the Socialists was actually less keen than had been thought. "La Gauche" was created five years ago as a formation to the left of the Socialists and Greens and included - on the basis of individual recruitment and an anti-capitalist programme - members of the Luxemburg Communist Party (PCL), dissidents and expelled members from the PCL, numerous independent leftists and supporters or allies of the Fourth International. It was not then a cartel. It is an experience unique of its kind with real successes including at the electoral level. A year ago, the members of the PCL left la Gauche to revert to a sectarian neo-Stalinist identity. "La Gauche" had decided to ignore this, which was a fatal error.

Left voters were completely disoriented by the split of the neo-Stalinists and the silence of "la Gauche" and reacted by voting for the Socialists and Greens. La Gauche got 1.90% of the vote against 0.92% for the PCL. Even in its bastions, like Esch-sur-Alzette, the country's second biggest town, "déi Lénk" hardly got more than 4%, while in the capital it scored 2.48%. In these two towns "la Gauche" is represented on the local councils.

It now needs to engage in a difficult self-critical balance sheet. It will have the chance to develop a profile during the referendum campaign on the European constitution. Only "la Gauche" and the PCL are calling for a "No" vote during the referendum, whose date has not yet been set.

During the negotiations for the formation of the new government, Juncker has posed the theoretical possibility of three coalitions (with the Liberals, Greens or the Socialist Party) to fix the bar as high as possible for the social democrats. A future black-red coalition (Christian Democrats and socialists) is a possibility. The stakes are the same as in other European countries (privatization of railways, counter-reforms in social security and so on) with the difference that there is no financial crisis for a state that continues to profit from the money markets protected by the tax system and banking secrecy.

Defeat for pro-European government

1 October 2004

The Labour Party (Partit Laburista), which opposed joining the EU at the referendum of March 2003, won three of Malta's five seats in the European Parliament, although its progress in terms of votes was not spectacular.

	Parliament 1998 (%)	Parliament 2003 (%)	referendum on EU	European (%)	seats
Alpha Party (far left)	-	-	against	0.31	0
Partit Laburista	47.0	47.51	against	48.42	3

Alternattiva Demokratika	2.0	0.68	for	9.33	0
Partit Nazzjonalista	51.0	51.79	for	39.76	2
Imperium Europa (far right)	-	-	for	0.65	0

The breakthrough of the ecological party, Alternattiva Demokratika, constitutes the real surprise of this election. Although it did not win a seat in the European Parliament it scored

five times more votes than in 1998 (in the parliamentary elections of 2003 the two big parties turned the vote into a second plebiscite on joining the EU and AD's pro-European electors voted massively for the nationalist party). The Maltese voters have thus confirmed the pro-European majority registered at the referendum of March 2003, while showing their aversion to neoliberal policies. The AD

breakthrough, if confirmed at the next national elections, could lead to a crisis of the Maltese two-party system.

Left progress, setback for government

1 October 2004

The rate of participation was higher than in 1999 (39.1% as against 29.9%) but much lower than the norm for elections to the Dutch parliament (79.0% in 2002 and 79.9% in 2003).

The “Transparent Europe” list led by a former European civil servant, Paul Van Buiten, which denounced corruption in the European

institutions, made a breakthrough and won two seats with 7.3% of the vote. In contrast to the reactionary list of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, this was not a right wing list and the two deputies elected had announced that they wish to join the European Green group.

The other notable event was the success of the Socialist Party, a radical left organization which has

been making progress at every election in recent years. With 7% of the vote they elected two deputies who will join the GUE/NLG group in the European parliament.

The Green Left, squeezed between these two phenomena, fell back (7.4% as against 11.8% in 1999) and lost two of its four European deputies.

The Socialistische Partij: A Dutch phenomenon?

1 October 2004, by Leo de Kleijn

The SP made its initial breakthrough at the parliamentary elections of 1994, electing its first two deputies. Today it claims 43,000 members, nine national deputies, hundreds of municipal councillors and even, since the last local elections, some deputy mayors. Of Maoist origin, the SP has chosen to build a more open and pluralist party of the socialist left. It has succeeded in occupying the political space which was freed up when the Communist Party, the Pacifist Socialist Party and the PPR (Progressive Christians) merged to form Groen Links (Green Left). Today it is a party which has all kinds of traditions and political references inside it: ex-Maoists, former Communists, former pacifist socialists and disappointed social democrats, activists in the social movements and revolutionary socialists. This plurality has allowed the party to develop over the last ten years, not only to grow on the electoral front but also to become,

more than Groen Links, the political reference point for militants in the social movements and critical trades unionists.

The public image of the SP is essentially that of a left party which struggles in a consistent fashion for the interests of wage earners and the unemployed against the kingdoms of the professional politicians. It is this image that has guaranteed its success in recent years during the most serious political crisis that Holland has known since the Second World War. The “Fortuyn Revolution” [25] was not only an explosion of xenophobia, but also the demonstration of a massive aversion towards the political establishment as a whole. While Fortuyn broke through electorally on the right, the SP has profited from the crisis on the left.

International relations

Although it is part of the European Parliament’s GUE/NLG (United European Left-Nordic Greens) group, the SP remains fundamentally a Dutch phenomenon. This is also one of its weakest points. Up until the first European Social Forum, the SP was indifferent to the global justice movement. This is, of course, linked to the slow development of this movement in Holland. But it also embodies characteristics of the SP. As a party: it feels itself to be a fish in the water in the struggle for immediate interests, against the demolition of the welfare state and public services. But the idea that this struggle has some relation to the neoliberal offensive on a world scale and that struggles limited to a national scale have little chance of being victorious is not

particularly current inside the party. That explains also the inclination of many leaders of the party, in particular its president Jan Marijnissen, to glide easily from criticism of the EU and its draft Constitution towards defence of national control and the national Parliament.

On the question of immigration, the SP also has quite a crude past. In the 1980s the party published a brochure, entitled "Immigrant and Capital", which claimed that Turkish and Moroccan workers had undermined the wages and social rights of Dutch workers by accepting inferior conditions! The SP thus supported the rapid return of these workers to their countries. In practice this viewpoint was abandoned during the 1990s. Now the SP is actively involved in the struggle for the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants without papers. And immigrant workers are increasingly numerous in the party. But the SP's parliamentary group has nonetheless voted in favour of the laws seeking to keep out workers coming from the new EU member countries (in particular the Poles).

Socialist

alternative?

The main references of the SP have been formulated in the programme "Preserving the Human" adopted in 1999. This programme gives a good impression of the SP's character as a social-democratic party which is also militant and on the left. Such a characterization leads to contradictory aspirations among its militants. If some of them have the ambition of constructing a new social-democratic workers' party, which would take the place of the declining PvdA, others dream of a genuinely socialist party based on a programme of structural transformation and social struggle.

These different ambitions do not at the moment provoke great divergences or the birth of internal currents. There are several reasons for this. First the huge growth of the party - which has gone in two years from 20,000 to 43,000 members - assures the legitimacy of its leadership. But what is still more important is the backward character of the social struggle in Holland. Since coming to power in 2002, the Balkenende government - a coalition of Christian Democracy (CDA) and the two liberal parties (the

big VVD and the small D66) - has led an unprecedented offensive against the vestiges of the welfare state, social rights, wages, pensions and the multicultural society. In the face of this offensive, the trade union movement has limited itself over these two years to signing agreements with the government, to "avoid the worst". The SP is thus, with sectors of the Groen Links, among the few who are attempting to form an active left opposition. This struggle against the right leads to the closure of ranks within the party. Moreover, inside the social-liberal PvdA there are some who envisage openly the possibility of inviting the SP to participate in a future government or to support one. Unlike Groen Links, the SP is not yet classed as "not to be associated with".

But despite all its weaknesses, it is now - with the small extra parliamentary radical left - the best point of departure to build a socialist alternative in the future. In this optic a greater engagement of this party in the movement for global justice and its cooperation with the European anti-capitalist left are essential. But the most important immediate task for the Dutch left is to use the electoral success of the SP to strengthen social resistance.

The elections that didn't take place

1 October 2004, by **Konrad Markowski**

The Citizens Platform (PO), the main neoliberal party in Poland, which is preparing to exercise power, won 24.1% of votes cast which, taking the abstention rate into account, amounts to only 6% of the total electorate!

It was again the low rate of participation which allowed the Union of Liberty (UW), the traditional party of the liberal layers in Poland, swept from the political scene after the right had lost the preceding parliamentary elections, to win seats in the European Parliament with 7.3% of votes cast.

The high score - 15.9% - obtained by

the League of Polish Families (LPR), a Catholic fundamentalist organization of the anti-European radical right, is generally considered as the surprise of these elections. But a closer examination reveals that the LPR won 50,000 votes less than at the parliamentary and senatorial elections of autumn 2001. It owes its good result to two phenomena - the high abstention rate and a disciplined electorate which turns out for the polls independently of the political situation. The Catholic fundamentalist radio station "Radio Maryja" ("Radio Mary") serves as its link to this

electorate.

The party of the authoritarian right, Law and Justice (PiS) won 12.52% of votes cast. Remember that the PiS mayor of Warsaw banned the Gay Pride event in the city. The main demand of the PiS remains the reintroduction of the death penalty in Poland.

The governmental coalition of the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the Union of Labour (UP) won 9.3% of votes cast, which has been seen as a success since some polls predicted it would fall below the threshold of 5%.

The post-Communists were able to rely on a faithful electorate which once again decided to give them a chance. In this coalition the UP plays the role of a "social democratic left", more open towards the global justice movement or trade union demands, but it is only the vassal of the SLD, incapable of independent activity (the best known politician of the current UP is Adam Gierek, son of the first secretary of the party-state from 1970-1980, who played the role of "electoral locomotive" of the coalition in Silesia).

The good result - 5.3% which allowed it to win 3 seats in the European parliament - of the Social Democracy of Poland (SdPl) was a surprise. It is already the third social democratic party in Poland, formed by a group of former members of the SLD and the UP, without any political programme, united by the will to stay on the political scene and hoping that its co-responsibility for the style and quality of the government led by Leszek Miller will be forgotten. Jozef Pinior, former leader of the clandestine Solidarnosc trade union who had been linked to the radical left is one of the European deputies elected for this party.

Another surprise was the low score obtained by Self-Defence (Samobrona), a populist formation zigzagging between left and right, which only obtained 10.7% of the vote. While advancing a social rhetoric, Samobrona sold places on its lists to local entrepreneurs (for example in Silesia the owner of a cheap air flights company was head of the party's list).

None of the parties that tried to occupy the space to the left of the SLD-UP and SdPl generated any surprises. The left populist Polish Labour Party (PPP), created by the "August '80" trade union, won 0.5% of the vote. The Democratic Left Party (a split from the SLD) only presented candidates in one constituency and

won 0.09% on a national scale. The anti-clerical party "Reason" (Racja), which ran in two constituencies, scored 0.3% while "Greens 2004", which ran in three constituencies, won 0.2% nationally. The lists announced some months ago by the "New Left" of Piotr Ikonowicz (former deputy of the Polish Socialist Party) and the ephemeral "Alliance of the Anti-capitalist Left" never materialized.

At the end of the day, the European elections only served to emphasize the defeat of the campaign in favour of the European Union by the government (post-Communist social democratic) and the liberal parties. Anti-EU attitudes stimulated by the rise in VAT and prices and the multiplication of bureaucratic regulations, are increasingly frequent including among the middle classes. It is also an overall defeat of the Polish political system, for even the big parties were incapable of mobilizing their traditional bases.

The policies of the SLD-UP government, which has capitulated on every front to the demands of the right - challenging the labour code, reducing the benefits of the poorest, involving itself in the war in Iraq, giving in to the Church on abortion - has led to the break up of post-Communist social democracy. But the divisions are not at the level of ideas, but on the question of the flight from responsibilities. The radical left, weak and splintered, has not been capable of occupying the ground abandoned.

The radical left in Poland faces the challenge of showing itself capable of addressing workers, who boycotted these elections to a disproportionate degree. Because if the contests for parliamentary seats in Warsaw and in Brussels are anything to go by, the class struggle continues.

A first in the streets

Despite the media hysteria and the omnipresence of the police, nearly 4,000 people demonstrated in Warsaw on April 29 against the European economic summit. Diverse groups from the movement for global justice and the radical left organized the demonstration, which was also supported by unemployed groups from Walbrzych and Pomerania, trades unionists from the OPZZ (the main trade union federation, led by the SLD) and "Solidarnosc'80" (a split from "Solidarnosc"). This was the biggest demonstration organized by the radical left in Poland.

Strike wave continues

The wave of employees' mobilizations in Poland has not peaked. After the campaign for a boycott of Danone in defence of a factory threatened with closure by this multinational in Jaroslaw, a boycott of Nestlé is planned to defend a similarly threatened factory in Poznan. Several hundred dismissed workers from the building company "Jedynka" in Wroclaw are fighting for reinstatement, supported by the Student Committee for the Defence of Workers. The workers at Unionteks, the biggest clothing manufacturer in Lodz, have set up a workers' cooperative, thus saving some jobs after the defeat of their strike. Workers in public transport in Kozienice have struck against the privatization of their company and rail workers in Kielce have launched a hunger strike against the closure of "secondary" lines.

Left Bloc elects first European deputy

1 October 2004, by **Jorge Costa**

	European elections 2004			Parliamentary elections 2002		
	votes	%	seats	votes	%	seats
PS	1,511,102	44.5	12	2,055,986	37.8	95
PSD	1,129,065	33.2	9	2,181,672	40.1	102
PP				475,515	8.7	14
PCP	308,858	9.1	2	378,640	6.9	12
BE	167,032	4.9	1	149,543	2.7	3
Abst		61.2%			37.7%	

A little more than two years ago the Social Democratic Party (PSD, right wing) and the Popular Party (PP, radical right) gained more than 2.6 million votes or 49% of the total vote. The results of June 13, 2004 thus reflect a great erosion of the social and electoral base of the government. Two years later two thirds of those who voted for the right in 2002 have either abstained or voted for the opposition parties.

The political meaning of this defeat is clear. It reflects the rejection of the anti-social and regressive policies of the right and a massive protest against them. This defeat also expresses the opposition of the great majority of people against those who are responsible for the current state of the country: half a million unemployed, a wages freeze in the civil service, a worsening of the situation of immigrants, privatization of public services like health and social security, the delivery of strategic sectors of the economy to finance capital in a framework of clientelism and corruption, strangling of public education, maintenance of prohibitionist legislation on abortion, support for the occupation of Iraq. The neoliberal strategy of two years of PSD/PP rule was rejected, while the right's attempt to associate itself with Portugal's hosting of the European soccer championship was not successful. [26]

The Socialist Party (PS) was the main beneficiary of the rebuff to the right. The socialists gained 7% in relation to the 2002 parliamentary elections, when they gained their worst ever score in history, despite the fact that

they lost a quarter of their 2002 voters (545,000 votes). The death, five days before the elections, of the head of the PS list, former finance minister Sousa Franco, did not seem to have any impact on the results.

An overall analysis of the results indicates that the PS victory is a direct product of the right's disaster. The PS wasted no time on celebrations, immediately plunging itself into internal power struggles. On the question of the occupation of Iraq, it zigzagged once again, giving its agreement to the prolongation of the presence of 120 Portuguese soldiers in Nassiria.

The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) was even more pleased with its result since it had feared the worst. However the facts do not justify any satisfaction. The PCP continues to decline from one election to another and its leaders can only celebrate when the downward curve is less steep. Compared with the 1999 European elections, the PCP lost 1.3% and 50,000 votes. In relation to the last parliamentary elections the loss in votes was smaller - 70,000 - even if the very high abstention rate allowed it to increase its percentage. A comparison of the PCP's results and those of the Left Bloc shows that in 73 communes, both rural and urban, the Bloc's vote was higher; the same was true in seven county towns of districts while in metropolitan sectors the PCP and the Bloc are now comparable in terms of electoral strength. Particularly in Lisbon and Porto, in numerous popular sectors the Bloc scored more than the PCP and became the third political force in the country.

There is no reason the PCP leadership should regard these results calmly. They prolong an uninterrupted tendency towards loss of influence in a context of a crisis of renewal of its cadres. The PCP's problem is not that posed by its "renewers" but a

leadership which is incapable of reversing or even delaying its process of political, cultural and social regression.

The Left Bloc scored its historic best result on June 13 with 167,000 votes. This is nearly triple - 105,000 votes more - its score at the 1999 European elections, the first election that it contested. In comparison to the last parliamentary elections, it was the only force to increase the number of votes it received - an increase of 15,000. This growth was nationwide and balanced. The Bloc continues to maintain its influence on the younger sectors of the electorate and the result indicates an ability to win new voters.

In other words, the Bloc has stabilized its electoral hard core while continuing to show a capacity for growth. This allows it to face the future with confidence although there is still a great distance between its electoral base and its organic base.

A campaign against the government

These European elections were largely "nationalized" under the pressure of the gravity of the economic and social crisis. It is impossible to regard these results as anything other than a heavy sanction against the government. Also the Left Bloc's results should be interpreted as a reward from the voters to a political force which over two years has pursued a policy of clear opposition to the government.

In this context the typical themes of a European campaign (the proposed Constitution, the referendum, community funds and so on) became peripheral. The Bloc's campaign was centred on two questions, summed up in its slogan "War? Only against

unemployment!" The campaign was also distinguished from that of the PCP by the rejection of a sectarian discourse that reduced the pro-employer offensive of the PSD/PP government to a simple continuity of the policy of the PS government. The Bloc criticized the PS for its strategy of integration into the neoliberal EU, its obsession with the public deficit and its ambiguities on the question of abortion (Sousa Franco was a Catholic opposed to free choice) or Iraq, but it never claimed a political equivalence with the breadth of the current government's offensive. The Bloc opposed the idea of a "useful vote" for the PS and the sectarianism of the PCP, with the argument that the best way to punish the government was the alternatives that it proposed. And the Bloc's interventions on the social and parliamentary terrains received popular recognition at these elections.

The opening of the Bloc's list to sectors of the independent left showed that those who involve others in their struggle are rewarded. Three of the most highly placed candidates - Violante Matos (former PS deputy from the island of Madeira), João Semedo (leader of the Communist "renewers") and Diana Andringa (former president of the journalists union) - were independents.

In its initial balance sheet of the European elections, the Bloc's national leadership put forward as its main priority the organizational development of the party, through initiatives of recruitment and organization, sectoral conferences, the education of new activists and so on.

Portugal's political crisis

The result of June 13 narrowed the possibilities of choice of the new president of the European Commission. A conservative from a small EU country was needed. The Prime Minister, Durão Barroso, thus thought he could make an honourable exit after his crushing electoral defeat. [27]

For two weeks, since the end of June, Portugal awaited a decision by the President. [28] on whether elections should be held or the right wing government should continue. The right argued for the second option and supported the candidacy to the post of Prime minister of Pedro Santana Lopes - the national paradigm of the telegenic ultra-populism of the right, former president of the Sporting Lisbon football club and currently mayor of Lisbon (his two years in office have been marked by total incompetence).

After the European result, the entire opposition - as well as the CGTP [29] - demanded elections. Fractures have appeared inside the right. Learning of the possibility of Santana's nomination, finance minister Manuela Ferreira Leite spoke of a "coup d'État" inside the PSD. Inspired by the example of the spontaneous mobilizations which overthrew Aznar in Spain, mobile phones were used to call a mobilization and a rally of 1,000 people, including many well-known intellectuals and artists, before the

Palace of Belém demanding that the President call elections. The CGTP called rallies in Lisbon and Porto, while polls showed that a majority of voters wanted elections. The employers' confederations, however, defended the continuity of the PSD/PP government in the name of "political stability".

On July 9 President Sampaio announced his decision and made Santana Lopes Prime Minister. The same night Ferro Rodrigues announced his resignation as secretary general of the PS. After two years of a weak opposition and media difficulties, [30] the PS leadership needed a perspective of power to maintain itself. [31]

This decision opens a new cycle in the Portuguese situation. In the socialist sector we can expect a shift to the right at the next PS congress in November 2004, if one takes into account the politics of the main candidates for its leadership. This will accentuate the disillusionment in the sectors mobilized by the PS in the European campaign.

For the alliance of the PP and PSD, a "Berlusconization" of the government is likely - it will be more demagogic and spectacular but even more predatory. Its weak legitimacy could be fatal to its offensive, especially if it leads to the development of broad social struggles, absent up until now. It is on this terrain that the Left Bloc must build, relying on the forces it has accumulated in the last two years through its high oppositional profile and its good result in the European elections.

Neither celebration nor despondency

1 October 2004, by Alan McCombes

Labour's representation was reduced from three to two. The SNP and Tories each retained two seats, while the Liberal Democrats held onto their single seat. For the SSP, these results are neither a cause for celebration nor

a reason for despondency. The 5.2 per cent vote for the SSP represented a slight decrease in our proportion of the vote compared to the Scottish election in 2003. But it also represented a significant increase

compared to the last UK-wide election we fought, the Westminster election in 2001, when the SSP took three per cent.

The SSP ran by far the strongest and

most visible campaign on the ground of all the parties. The feedback on the streets was of growing support for the party. But it is not always possible to convert sympathy into votes. On this occasion, the SSP suffered from the sharply contrasting levels of participation in the election based on social class.

In the plush, suburban Eastwood seat, almost 25,000 people voted. But in the run down Glasgow Shettleston constituency ("the poverty capital of the UK") fewer than 10,000 voted. In other Glasgow constituencies with high levels of poverty such as Baillieston, Maryhill and Springburn, the total turnout was just above 10,000. Yet in three affluent Edinburgh seats, the turnout soared above 21,000. In each of the rural constituencies of Inverness, Gordon, Perth, Strathkelvin and Tayside North, more than 20,000 votes were cast.

Much of the core vote of the SSP consists of low paid workers, council tenants, lone parents and people on disability and unemployment benefit. For a lone parent living in a damp council flat and battling against poverty and debt, the European parliament might as well be located on the planet Jupiter for all the relevance it has to their daily lives. Participating in an election to send an MEP to sit in a parliament 1,000 miles away in Strasbourg is never going to be a burning priority for people living on the breadline.

There is another important strand of

the core SSP vote. Over the past few years a large swathe of young, educated voters have swung to the SSP because of our hard-line opposition to war and imperialism. Many of these young people did turn out to vote SSP in protest against the occupation of Iraq. But the anti-war vote in Scotland was spread among four parties. The Liberal Democrats, in particular, benefited from the UK-wide focus of most of the media coverage of the European election.

Night after night, TV news bulletins reported on the election as though it consisted of a battle involving four parties: Labour, the Tories, the Liberal Democrats and the UK Independence Party. There was the occasional reference also to the Greens and the British National Party (BNP). Scottish coverage of the election was negligible. As a result, the SSP and even the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) were marginalized by much of the media. Day in, day out Scottish viewers were assailed with footage of Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy calling for a vote for his party to protest against the war, even though the Liberal Democrats in Scotland have played no role whatsoever in campaigning against the slaughter and torture in Iraq.

Many SNP activists appeared to have consciously abstained from activity in this election, hoping for a poor result in order to bring down party leader John Swinney. The party slumped below 20 per cent of the vote and Swinney subsequently resigned.

Despite the further erosion of SNP support, this election nonetheless provides a further glimpse of the political gulf that separates Scotland and England. South of the border, the combined right wing parties of Michael Howard's Tories, the UK Independence Party and the BNP took around half the total vote. In Scotland, these parties took barely a quarter of the vote. By subtly distancing itself from Tony Blair, Scottish Labour has managed to avert the collapse suffered by the party down south. Since the shock results for Holyrood last year, Scottish Labour leader Jack McConnell and his colleagues have gone to great lengths to avoid discussion of the war in Iraq. They have spurned the racist demagoguery of the likes of Home Secretary David Blunkett, and rejected the more contentious Blairite plans for education and the NHS. Yet the SSP and the Greens remain a force to be reckoned with, and the SNP could regain lost ground under a new leader.

For the SSP, this European election was always going to be a difficult contest. This was an artificial election, skewed in favour of middle class and rural Scotland. Yet the SSP has managed to stand its ground. Although there will be understandable disappointment that we were unable to break into the European Parliament this time round, the party remains in strong shape to face up to the more important battles that lie ahead over the next three years.

Apathy and confusion

1 October 2004, by Mark Johnson

Earlier this year the Christian-Democratic led coalition of PM Mikulas Dzurinda cut social spending by one third to finance massive tax cuts for the top 10% of taxpayers. There were food riots in Roma ("gypsy") villages and the army was deployed to bolster the police. Most of

the population suffer gradually declining living standards, unemployment is high, and retirement pensions have declined 20% in real terms in recent years. In normal conditions, left parties of all descriptions would be on the rise, as people search for alternatives to the

anti-social policies of corrupt and arrogant politicians.

The problem in Slovakia is that the left parties became so divided in the late 1990s that none of them could reach the 5% minimum vote to enter parliament. Not only did this hand power to a coalition of Christian

Democrat and neoliberal parties, but also it allowed a series of opportunists and populists to capture the "opposition" label.

Slovakia's leadership problem is nothing new. Ever since Czechoslovakia's "velvet revolution" of 1989, the political elite has manufactured a series of pseudo-crises to distract attention from the underlying problems. Former Premier Vladimir Meciar liked to claim that Hungary was massing its troops on the Slovak border, or the Czechs were spreading malicious gossip in Wall Street to drive down the value of the Slovak Crown. Prime Minister Dzurinda is a little more sophisticated. He claimed to have secret evidence of an Al Qaeda planned terrorist attack against Slovakia, and sent 20 Slovak mine-removal experts to joint American forces in Iraq (despite massive popular opposition to the war), organised a huge NATO enlargement conference (which none of the invited heads of state bothered to attend), toured the country with Jeffery Sachs to promote the 19% "flat tax" and profited from the Pope's visit to introduce compulsory religious education in primary schools.

But the harder the government tries, the more it alienates part of its own fragile support base. Many devout Catholics dislike the government's anti-poor rhetoric and did not particularly want to see the imposition of religious education for seven year olds. Many neoliberals are more worried about the government's corruption than happy about the flat tax, which only benefits the very richest businesspeople. The Entrepreneurs Alliance of Slovakia (PAS) is also concerned that the government is "striving for competitive advantage based on cheap

labour, and focused on sectors with low value added". EU structural funds are being allocated to prestige motorways and other infrastructure projects that raise the visibility of politicians, rather than the investment into education and training that entrepreneurs believe is holding Slovakia behind its Czech counterparts.

To make matters even more complicated, the government only has a majority thanks to support from the Hungarian-minority party, and this is unacceptable for hard-core Slovak nationalists.

These frustrations overflowed during the Presidential elections earlier this year, when the Christian Democrat candidate was overtaken by two nationalist-demagogic candidates, former premier Vladimir Meciar and his former deputy Ivan Gasparovic. Gasparovic took office on June 1, and has already begun to create a separate power base from the government. When the government announced a 2% increase in old age pensions, the first increase in three years, during which inflation has been over 20%, President Gasparovic insisted on the right to make a 25EUR one-off payment to each pensioner. A symbolic struggle between two - each ultimately inadequate - policies. In the Czech Republic, pensioners can at least express their frustration by voting for the Communist Party. In Slovakia, there is still no party that consistently defends the interests of the socially disadvantaged, workers and the self-employed.

There are some signs of non-party protest, such as recent actions by teachers and railway workers, or demonstrations by students to oppose

the introduction of university fees. But when it comes to vote, the choice is not inspiring.

The main leftish force in parliament is a centre-left, populist party Smer. Largely a media-marketing creation, its star leader Robert Fic has carefully avoided making detailed policy statements, in the hope that frustration with the current government will carry him to power. But according to Topol, the slick marketing and lack of substance leads many potential voters to classify Smer as just another group of "politicos" who only have their own interests at heart. The smaller left parties, outside parliament, are hardly active outside electoral campaigns. Neither the Communist Party, nor the Democratic Left (ex Communist, now social democrat) has more than 2% support in opinion polls.

No wonder that it is harder and harder to persuade most people to vote at all. As Jakub Topol, editor of the www.lavica.sk website comments, "the group of potential left voters continues to increase: people are suffering under government policies, but simply don't believe that "politicians" are willing or able to solve their problems. So they prefer to rely on their own resources. Instead of even a minimum political engagement (such as voting) they prefer to grow some vegetables, find a second or third part-time job, if possible for cash. In other words, to try to take care of themselves.

These are the people who, in opinion polls, say that "if there were elections tomorrow" they would vote for the left. But "tomorrow" is just another ordinary day, and when elections do come, most people just aren't interested in politics."

How low can you go?

1 October 2004

There is a core group of northern and western states with minimum wages above 1,070 EUR, followed by a

“southern” group (Greece, Spain, Portugal and Malta) where the minimum wage is 500-600 EUR. Slovenia, the east European country with the strongest trade unions and best labour legislation, is approaching this level, with a 2003 minimum wage of 471 EUR.

Everywhere else in the former Stalinist states, the minimum wage varies from 121 to 207 EUR. Conditions are even worse in the next wave of EU candidates, such as Rumania (69 EUR) and Bulgaria (61 EUR). The minimum wage in Turkey is 240 EUR.

The gap is somewhat narrower if we adjust for the different buying power (price of goods and services) in each country. Whereas in monetary terms a Luxemburger on the minimum wage receives 12 times more than a Latvian, the money received can “only” buy four times as much.

The percentage of full time workers who earn the minimum wage varies from 0.8% (Spain) to 15.4% (Latvia).

Everywhere except Hungary and Poland, there are more women than men earning the minimum wage.

Netherlands - 1,265 EUR	Greece - 605 EUR	Czech Republic - 207 EUR
Belgium - 1,186 EUR	Malta - 543 EUR	Hungary - 191 EUR
France - 1,173 EUR	Spain - 537 EUR	Poland - 177 EUR
Britain - 1,083 EUR	Portugal - 498 EUR	Estonia - 159 EUR
Ireland - 1,073 EUR	Slovenia - 471 EUR	Slovakia - 148 EUR
		Lithuania - 125 EUR
		Latvia - 121 EUR

Source: Eurostat survey of minimum wages on 1. January 2004. By comparison, the minimum in the USA is 725 EUR.

Structural Funds

At the end of June, the European Commission confirmed that 24bn EUR will be distributed to the ten new member states from EU structural and cohesion funds in 2004-06. Structural funds are for those regions where GDP per capita is less than 75% of the EU average, for stimulating investment, and human resources projects, for development and training initiatives that link the new member states with the “new neighbours” like Russia, Ukraine and Serbia, and for programmes to promote equal opportunities for women and ethnic-linguistic minorities. Cohesion funds are for large infrastructure and environmental projects. Slovakia should receive up to 1.76bn EUR. Everywhere outside the capital, Bratislava, GDP is less than 75% of the EU average.

Three surprises

1 October 2004, by Sacha Mlinar

Two other surprises marked this election:

- For the first time a right wing party, New Slovenia (NSi), emerged as the biggest party;
- Three women were elected as European deputies (out of a total of seven seats), which amounts to a victory for the women’s movement.

The low rate of participation has many different causes. For Slovenes their country’s participation in the EU ended with the referendum when some 60% of the electorate voted in favour of membership. Moreover, the public believe that Slovenia’s representation in the European Parliament - 7 seats - is insignificant.

The right wing parties, currently in opposition, are in a phase of pre-electoral offensive as parliamentary elections are scheduled for next October. It should be noted also that the electorate of the parties of the ruling coalition is weary of the meagre social and economic results of government policy. Growth has declined from 4.1% in 1995 to 2.3% in 2003. For the first time since 1990 the parties of the right overtook the parties of the centre and the left by more than 5% of votes cast, which raises the threat of a right wing government coming to power in autumn 2004. But the results of the parliamentary elections will undoubtedly be closer and a remobilization of an electorate fearful of the revanchist excesses of New

Slovenia is possible.

Results in % of elections

parliamentary (2000), presidential (2002, first and second round) and European (2004)

	2000	2002-I	2002-II	2004
Participation	70.1	71.2	65.2	28.3
LDS [32]	36.3	44.4	56.5	
DeSUS [33]	5.2	1.8	-	
LDS + DeSUS				21.9
ZLSD [34]	12.1	2.2	-	14.1
SLS [35]	9.6	7.6	-	8.4
SDSS [36]	15.8			17.6

NSi [37]	8.7			23.6
SDSS + NSi		30.8	43.5	
SNS [38]	4.4	8.5	-	5.0
SMS [39]	4.3	3.2	-	2.3

The low rate of participation and the weariness of the population explains the honourable score of the ex-Communist social democrats of the ZSLD. Its more motivated and more disciplined electorate mobilized effectively on June 13.

The election of three Slovene women to the European Parliament constitutes another event. Since 1990 Slovene democracy has suffered from the absence of women in political life. Activists for sexual equality have fought without results for ten years. It was only in 2004 that the Coalition for parity succeeded in convincing Parliament to change the Constitution so as to establish an obligatory quota of a minimum 40% to represent each of the two sexes. Even if all the parties who obtained at least one seat in the European Parliament had men at the head of their lists and women second, as three of those parties obtained two seats, three women would be elected,

or 42% of Slovenia's total representation (only 13% of member of the national parliament are women).

What now?

Slovenia has become a society that can be compared to other EU societies. Its GDP per inhabitant is at the level of that of Greece or Portugal. The structure and the defects of the political parties are very similar and it seems that there is no perspective of a modern alternative left. Yet the successes of the women's movement in particular show that the emergence of new forces is possible.

The electoral results reflect the tensions existing in Slovene society, including the frustrations of a people who observe the appropriation by a few families of the economic patrimony built up after 1945 by collective accumulation. We should add to this the veritable traumatism resulting from the growth of unemployment. Some traditional industries, like steel, engineering, and

textiles have seen employment collapse.

There are two reasons why this has not led to a violent explosion. The first is that Slovene industry is very decentralized and that hence there are no big urban working class concentrations. The second is that the existence of a rural subsistence economy softens the blow.

Nonetheless all these events, as well as low wages, have created a latent climate of discontent, which is expressed in numerous demonstrations organized by the trade unions. The government's submission to the military policy of the great powers, particularly the USA, has generated opposition from many young intellectuals and has led to the appearance of a significant anti-war movement.

These tensions, which undoubtedly are here to stay, have until now not found any political expression in party form, but the need for such an expression and the forces capable of creating it are crystallizing.

Serious setback for IU

1 October 2004, by Diosdado Toledano , Jaime Pastor , Josep María Antentas

The second relevant fact was that, in spite of its desire to turn these elections into a "second round" of the parliamentary elections of March 14, the right wing Partido Popular (PP) narrowed the difference (41.30% as opposed to 43.30%) but did not overtake the PSOE in the number of votes. But undoubtedly the main loser was Izquierda Unida, since, if we add the votes and percentages that it won in 1999 to those it obtained with its present ally, Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds, we see that its total has fallen from 6.51% to 4.16% (in absolute numbers, from 1,377,937 votes to 636,458). The nationalist forces did not register good results either (save

in the case of the Partido Nacionalista Vasco), while the banned Herriarren Zerrenda claimed that its calls for a spoilt ballot were supported by 12% in Euskadi and 7% in Navarre.

The general conclusion that it is possible to draw from all this, beyond the claim to attention that the abstention rate has for a coming referendum on the European Constitution, is that the Zapatero government has managed to pass this test and has avoided the PP being able to delegitimise the results of the general election. The PP, however, insists on its conservative identity and on reinforcing an exclusivist Spanish

nationalism before the debate that will open on the Ibarretxe Plan and the prospects of reform of the Statutes of Autonomy and the Spanish Constitution. Nonetheless, it should be said that the 'votos nulos' in Euskadi confirm, in the midst of an impasse in ETA activity, the capacity of resistance of a significant social sector which continues to identify with Batasuna.

In the case of IU-ICV we have gone from 4 to 2 Euro-deputies, of which one, of the ICV, happens to be a member of the European Green Group. It is an unambiguous failure, as its Coordinador General, Gaspar

Llamazares, had to acknowledge; the fall in votes was pretty well common in all the CCAA, although it was smaller in Catalonia. In Catalonia, in addition, the ICV were the beneficiaries of the result, obtaining a deputy, and not the EUiA (the Catalan organization linked to IU, in electoral coalition with the ICV). Also on this occasion one cannot appeal to the justification of the “useful vote” or to a difference in results between those places where the IU participates in autonomous governments and those where it does not. Obviously, the result cannot be attributed to a campaign of “low intensity” (which has not managed to mobilize a significant sector of militants) and, with the slogan “IU, ahora”, IU was not able to recover a part of those who voted for the PSOE on March 14, and they do not bear all the responsibility for what happened. Undoubtedly, the crisis of IU started a long time ago, but for that reason we should not underestimate the fact that of late the image that this formation offers to a

large sector of the electorate is that of being a left complement to the PSOE, rather than an anti-capitalist and alternative left with an autonomous project. Denying this evidence, the current temptation of the leadership is to attribute an important part of the failure to the media repercussions of internal divisions; it overvalues this factor and evades its own responsibility for the bureaucratic methods employed as much in the agreement with the ICV as with the approval of the electoral list.

In spite of all this, it should be recognised that the programme that was finally approved by the IU - though not by the ICV - introduced a more critical vision of the draft European Constitution and that in the final phase of the campaign there was a greater effort of differentiation from the PSOE. But the programme was not widely disseminated nor was sufficient distance taken from Zapatero government in relation to economic

policy and defence, and it did not have the credibility to bring out broad sectors of former voters and young people.

A period of reflection and debate has now opened up inside this formation that will culminate in a special Federal Assembly before the end of this year, according to the decision of the federal leadership. Throughout this process the critical sectors that in the last assembly presented a common list around the document “For the refoundation of a democratic, plural, federalist, anti-capitalist and alternative IU” will make an effort to offer a road that takes us out from the deep crisis and the despondency which afflicts most of its members, trying to avoid false polarizations between those who desire a “green refoundation” that would end up including them in the European green area and those who are tempted to fall back on a “Communist identity” associated with the PCE but without a common or clearly defined project.

Everybody but the bourgeoisie loses

1 October 2004, by **Anders Svensson**

The population as a whole and especially the working-class, followed up last years “No” to the Euro [40] with an act of defiance towards the neoliberal Swedish social-democratic government by abstaining from voting on a big scale. Only 37.8% of all voters participated in the elections. [41]

	European Election Results (%)		Last Swedish Parliament elections
	2004	1999	2002
Social Democrats (S, SAP)	24.56	25.99	39.8
Conservatives (M)	18.25	20.74	15.2
June-List (JL)	14.47	-	
Left Party (V)	12.79	15.81	8.3
Liberal Party (FP)	9.86	13.85	13.1

Center Party (CP)	6.26	5.98	6.1
Green Party (MP)	5.96	9.48	4.6
Christian Democrats (KD)	5.68	7.64	9.1
Sweden Democrats (SD, far right)	1.13	0.33	1.4

As a protest the elections can be considered a success, but in fact the high abstention rate is problematic. Participation in the elections was higher among upper class people and substantially lower in the working class. The working class, because of this, is very poorly represented in the European parliament. Instead nearly all those elected represent the bourgeoisie. This means that despite the intentions of the working-class to make the election an election of

protest by abstaining, they have instead strengthened the political influence of Swedish capitalists. It also creates a problem with the credibility of not only the elections to the European Parliament but also all elections. Over time this can create a situation in Sweden (and Europe) that is a copy of the situation in the USA. The working class gets alienated from the whole political process, a development that will cause working people great harm.

Generally the parties that are considered to be against the European Union get higher results in the European parliamentary elections than they get in elections to the Swedish parliament. This is why the Left Party and the Greens got a significantly higher percentage in the European elections. There is also a

tendency to punish the parties in government. Both these reasons account for the poor performance of the social democrats in European elections. The higher percentage for the Conservatives and Christian Democrats in the European elections is due to the lower abstention rate among the upper classes.

The party that traditionally represents the Swedish working class is the social-democratic party, the Social-Democratic Workers Party (SAP). The SAP was one of the main losers in an election where winners are hard to find. They got the lowest number of votes and the lowest percentage of votes in Swedish modern history. This election and last year's referendum show that there is a breach starting to emerge between the social-democrats and the working class, and even between the social-democratic leadership and some smaller unions, the Transport Workers Union (Transport) and Shop and Trade Employees Union (Handels). During the election campaign there have been problems for the social-democratic leadership in mobilizing their members in the working class to agitate and work for the election apparatus in the party. They have also had very big problems in getting their traditional supporters to vote. This has not been helped by the fact that the SAP party leadership removed critics of the European Union from all electable places on their ballot papers. This when most of their voters are against membership of the European Union. The two trade unions mentioned above decided to support a candidate, placed number 31 on the ballot paper, who is a known critic of the European Union. Despite outright sabotage of the young female candidate's campaign from the social-democratic leadership, she managed to get elected. This was of course a slap in the face to the social-democratic leadership and shows again how the SAP leadership have distanced themselves from their own traditional voters in the working class.

This obvious split between the social

democrats and the working class has not led to an increase in support for other parties on the left wing. The Left Party (Vänsterpartiet, ex-Communist) did not manage to benefit from the weakness of the social democrats. This despite the fact that the Left Party is not in favour of Swedish membership of the European Union. While it may look a bit strange that they could not manage to increase their number of votes, in reality it is not really strange at all. Apart from not having any ministerial posts the Left Party is in reality a part of the Swedish government. Thus, they are supporting the neoliberal policies of the Swedish social-democratic government, supporting privatizations and so on. Exactly the same reasoning goes for the Green Party (Miljöpartiet) in Sweden. So they could not benefit from the poor social-democratic result either.

Sad to say, the extreme left in Sweden could not benefit either. There are three anti-capitalist left groups in Sweden, the Socialist Party (SP), [42] Justice Party-Socialists (RS) [43] and the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist Revolutionaries (KPMLr). [44] Of these only RS ran in the elections and they had an extremely bad result with about 2,000 votes which is less than a tenth of a percent of all voters. The Socialist Party made a decision not to run. The reason for this decision was mainly that the elections were totally unimportant for the Swedish working class. The KPMLr had a campaign for abstention. This failure for the extreme left is probably due to the animosity among the Swedish working class towards the European Union, the low occurrence of social struggles among Swedish workers and the thin roots of the extreme left in the working class. The most radical workers in Sweden are often the ones that are most opposed to the European Union and as a result extremely prone to abstain from voting for a parliament of an institution they despise.

The traditional bourgeois parties also became losers when a new party

showed up on the scene and took many of their presumptive votes. This party, June-list (Junilistan, JL) was created only four months before the elections. They got most of their voters because they are considered to be a party of European Union critics. Thus they got a lot of votes from workers that traditionally vote for the social democrats and votes from other groups normally voting Conservative or for the Christian Democrats. In fact their voters are probably going to wake up with a severe trauma because the June-list is a party led by bankers and economists that are everything else but radical. It is a party that will support neoliberal policies and politics as long as the decisions are made in national parliaments instead of the European Parliament. One of the party leaders is a former social democrat and this is one explanation for the reason so many social-democratic voters switched to the June-list despite this party's support for conservative and nationalistic politics. JL is the only party that can be considered a winner in the elections. But their success is definitely also a triumph for the Swedish bourgeoisie.

Only one good thing can be said about the European elections in Sweden. The far right did not make a breakthrough. In fact their number of voters and their percentage of voters decreased. This is a different development than in the rest of Europe. Despite their decrease in votes compared to the last ordinary parliamentary elections they had pretty good results in the southernmost part of Sweden, in the city of Malmo and the farming areas around it as well as in certain areas around Stockholm and Gothenburg (Goteborg).

As a whole the European Parliament elections can be considered as a loss for most people and most parties in Sweden. Definitely a loss for the working-class, a loss for the anti-capitalist left wing parties, a loss for the social democrats. Only the Swedish capitalist class can be considered a winner.

European Left Party founded

1 October 2004, by **François Vercammen**

The Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC, also known as Rifondazione), which had organized the event, laid on a beautiful production which was intended to symbolize hope and harmony. An attempt to incorporate the parties of the radical left failed. Around 20 Communist and progressive parties from outside the ELP or the European Union (EU) were invited as guests to give an internationalist touch and emphasize the international links of the new European political formation. Overall, however, the profile of the ELP remains that of the Communist world and its multiple differentiations.

The Congress realized its three objectives, adopting statutes (with three abstentions and eleven votes against), a Manifesto (unanimous except for four abstentions) and an initial list of parties which will officially constitute the ELP, sufficient to obtain its recognition by the EU. [45]

After that, the ELP found itself facing the reality of the new formation, its contradictions, orientations, alliances, and organizational coherence. As PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti, freshly elected as president of the ELP, put it, "It's a difficult undertaking, but useful and necessary..."

What is the meaning of the ELP for the political landscape of the left?

A laborious birth

Two founding documents were adopted, the Statutes, whose preamble is important because it indicates the political nature of the party and the Manifesto, which - being longer and more concrete - develops explicitly the ELP's politics and tactics.

There are noticeable differences between the two, the Statutes being

clearly more moderate than the Manifesto. One of the reasons for this is certainly linked to their different destination - the Statutes are to be submitted to the presidency of the European Parliament so that the party can be recognized as "European party", whereas the Manifesto is addressed to activists and to the public. It is undoubtedly not by chance that the German PDS took responsibility for editing the Statutes, while Rifondazione produced the Manifesto. The PRC has left its mark on the tone and content of the Manifesto with more radical political formulae. In some of its formulations this text is reminiscent of the declarations of the European Anti-Capitalist Left (EACL). [46]

It should not be forgotten that the two founding texts of the ELP represent the lowest common denominator between parties. Each of the member parties has its own analyses and orientations which form the true basis of their politics. In their long post-Stalinist crisis, these parties have not ceased to diversify ideologically - between each other, and inside themselves. The texts adopted are not obligatory "resolutions". [47]

The interest of the documents adopted is not the extent to which they display the internal contradictions of the ELP but rather how the latter, having adopted these documents, will operate as a "European party".

Between neoliberal left and anti-capitalist left

Through these texts, the ELP situates itself to the left of neoliberal social democracy (and certainly the German Green Party). But it also distinguishes itself clearly from the anti-capitalist left. With this latter, the ELP has

convergences - at least with certain member parties - on the analysis of contemporary capitalism, the updating of the analyses and language in relation to society, the taking into account of new oppositions and movements, and a vast terrain of serious demands allowing united action and collaboration on the national and European levels. These agreements reveal themselves in a very unequal manner. There are also significant disagreements, particularly on the governmental question and that of the bourgeois state. The Stalinist tradition introduced - in the 1930s, during the "popular fronts" - the "exceptional" possibility of governmental collaboration with social democracy and the parties of big capital. Then Eurocommunism banalized this idea, from the early 1970s onwards. No principle prevents the CPs, above all the most open and de-Stalinized, from continuing along this road; even in relation to what is now a neoliberal social democracy. It is symptomatic that in the two texts there is only a single and utterly bizarre reference to the Second International: "The social democratic concept of the Third way in Europe has failed, because it did not resist this development [neoliberalism and war - ed.] and did not have any alternative, thus promoting it". That's all, whereas in the past 20 years we have seen the biggest programmatic, social and organizational changes in social-democracy since 1914, with multiple consequences - a social democracy which has insulted its own social base, its affiliated organizations and its activists, and which is not ready to abandon the neoliberal system.

Anti-capitalist?

The texts of the Rome Congress should be read reasonably, that is to say without ascribing to them the

ideological constraint of the Marxist-Communist tradition of the past century. These documents carry a solid dose of pragmatism. They have been put together to win over or exclude parties. This is the compromise which marks the beginning of the process of the ELP, rather than principles, openly discussed.

That doesn't mean they weren't fiercely negotiated - while the assembly of the Congress heard a juxtaposed series of declamations from the big names of the parties, in the cellars of the same building two "working groups" were meeting and this is where the real debate took place.

We should not then under-estimate the first phrase of the Preamble: "We unite democratic parties of the alternative and progressive Left on the European continent that strive for the consistent transformation of today's social relationships into a peaceful and socially just society on the basis of the diversity of our situations, our histories and our common values".

This paragraph seems to be written for a party which is preparing to plunge itself into clandestinity! Nobody likes wooden language, but there is something pathetic in this desire to hide and dilute concepts and theoretical formulae. And that has consequences for the content of analyses, more in the Statutes than in the Manifesto. Mention of "capitalism" or the "capitalist system" is scrupulously avoided, as is reference to socialism or any other expression which would indicate a post-capitalist society. When the text speaks of "internationalization and globalization" they are characterized as "liberal" and "the result of political developments and decisions". It is "forgotten" that globalization results above all from the intrinsic logic of capitalism today, the extraordinary expansion of the world market in trade and investment and thus the preponderant role of the big multinationals. The text wants a "world that is not a commodity" but one is dumbfounded by its concrete definition as "a new world of peace, democracy, sustainability and solidarity".

The "social question" is absent from the Statutes. This is not true of the Manifesto which broadly develops social and societal demands (ecology, health, patriarchy, education, sexual orientation and so on) relating to all the conditions of life and work. It insists, moreover, on social mobilizations and movements. But neither the Statutes nor the Manifesto draw the strategic consequences of imposing these demands and bringing about a "consistent transformation".

First the ELP ignores the existence of social classes, except for one, the "financial hegemonic groups". It avoids "naming" the exploited class, (whether one calls it the "working/labouring/wage-earning" class or the "exploited world of labour"), that is the majority social force, which by its place in society, its self-activity and self-organization can change the relations of force, intervene in the political process and impose another politics, indeed another society.

So the ELP approaches neither the social and political crisis, nor the rupture involved in "transformation" - all is gradual, amorphous, "from above", and parliamentary.

Yet reversing the dominant neoliberalism and cancelling out the enormous social regression of the last 20 years will meet fierce resistance from the employers and the governments, backed up by the state and the EU. Applying the social demands contained in the Manifesto is impossible without a revision of tax and economic policy, without the redistribution of wealth and a massive renewal of public services, in short without radical incursions on private property. Not to mention a "consistent transformation" which will generate upheavals leading to a change of society.

We do not doubt that the ELP wants "another world", but we have to note that it does not have an anti-capitalist strategy.

"Taking

responsibility"...

Nonetheless, the ELP does approach "politics", albeit indirectly, in a very summary fashion and from a very specific angle: "The Left is willing to take on responsibility in Europe and the world for the shaping of our societies, to work out political alternatives, to promote them among the public and to win the required majorities". [48]

This formula - "take on responsibility" - is not anodyne in such a text. Not only does it confirm the preponderance of parliamentarism; it also puts "the Party" in the position of command! It is the Party which "shapes", "works out", "promotes" and "wins" majorities. An extraordinary return of the party which leads the movement and the "public".

This phrase figures above all as a safeguard against the eventual abandonment of governmental participation, which can only amount to collaboration with a social democracy (and its assimilated parties) which remains neoliberal. Indeed, the minimum programme - if one does not wish to compromise oneself - is a commitment to implement a vast programme of social recuperation at the service of the working population, which will require a break with neoliberal policies and the main bodies of the EU.

With the EU/Europe (see below), we touch on one of the two central political questions which will weigh heavily on the trajectories of the parties of the ELP.

...with neoliberal social-democracy

None of the texts deal with this problem. It was also absent from the speeches of the participants in the Rome congress. Bertinotti (PRC) and Buffet (PCF) fiercely criticized social liberal policies. That does not rule out a governmental agreement. Bertinotti has worked for a year for a new centre-left government, led by Prodi, the symbol of the neoliberal EU. Buffet keeps quite on this subject,

before a Party which is deeply divided, attacking the PS. The PDS has its eyes fixed on a left coalition with the SPD (and the Greens), meanwhile, "proving" itself at the head of the Land of Berlin, through a ferocious austerity policy. In Spain, the United Left (IU) has (legitimately) used its parliamentary votes to kick out the right and allow the creation of a minority PSOE government. The IU has not entered the government, but that is undoubtedly more to do with Zapatero's wishes than theirs.

The left certainly faces a big tactical problem in relation to the Socialist Parties. By replacing its neo-Keynesian programme with neoliberalism, European social democracy has broken its links with the popular layers, lost its soul and disillusioned its activists. But, in the absence of a genuine and credible left political force, it has succeeded in bouncing back as electoral apparatus, supported by the media. The mass of people votes "socialist" very pragmatically to keep out the right. That does not mean that they support social-neoliberal policies.

This mechanism of recovery only works for social democracy; not at all or to a very limited extent for the CPs and Greens who have participated in such governments. As minority and subaltern parties, they pay much more dearly for their co-responsibility for social regression. The phenomena of disappointment, disarray and rejection are much more violent in the case of the electorate of the "left". That is linked to the somewhat different nature of the social democrats. The CPs (and the Greens) divide and split. The result is that their survival depends more and more on the good will of the social democrats. The latter get stronger electorally, while emptying themselves increasingly ideologically, politically, and organizationally. Then the bourgeois state comes to their aid (money, media, regulations) to rebuild political life on a neoliberal "left-right" bipolarization. The CPs and Greens (not to mention the revolutionary anti-capitalist left) do not enjoy these favours.

So long as the relationship of forces within society remains unfavourable

and disarray dominates among the broad popular masses, neoliberal governments of left and right will succeed each other mechanically.

The task of the "left of the left" is precisely to work towards a new broad political force on the left, radical and unitary, pluralist and European, capable of breaking this socially devastating dynamic.

The EU

The Communist and Green left's access to the governments of the social-liberal centre-left is conditioned by an acceptance of the EU (and its refounding text, the Constitution) and the neoliberal policies of social democracy.

The ELP has a big problem in clearly opposing the draft Constitution of the EU. It recoils before the necessity of presenting publicly a real analysis of the EU as a socio-political formation (which exists in all the member parties of the ELP). Without that, there is no strategy and no alternative. Thus, the protagonists of the ELP, officially against the Constitution, do not mention the fact, neither in the Statutes nor in the Manifesto. The EU increasingly dominates economic life, the living and working conditions of millions of people, the political regime, the question of nationalities, democratic liberties, supranationality and so on. It is a key tool at the service of the European bourgeoisies against the working population and the exploited and oppressed in Europe and the world.

In the Statutes, the term "EU" is not even mentioned. For a "European party" this is indeed bizarre. [49]

The parties forming the ELP admit in the Statutes that they are "not a force free of contradictions, having differing views on many issues". But this sincerity does not resolve this enormous political question. The Manifesto of the ELP raises the ambiguity between "Europe" and the "EU". It develops criticisms and proposes a series of demands and proposals which can be found in the Manifestos of the EACL. [50]

There is a strong and broad convergence with the European anti-capitalist left, including the comprehension of the new cycle of mobilizations which also means the beginning of the reconstruction of a movement of emancipation. It is a possible terrain for advance in struggles and debates.

But the Manifesto stops short of an analysis of the European institutions of the EU state.

The message seems promising: "Finally, what is at the heart of the crisis of the European Union is Democracy". The Manifesto says it very well, in a strong and short phrase. An excellent point of departure to open an analysis and draw from it the political and practical conclusions.

But instead of explaining the semi-despotic character (for example the preponderant role of the Council as executive and legislative body; a Parliament under the thumb of the Executive, an opaque and uncontrollable European Central Bank) necessary to impose an anti-social EU, the Manifesto chickens out. The "crisis of democracy" is reduced to the following: "For decades the European Union has been constructed from above, with disregard for its great diversity of cultures and languages - without its people and often against them".

The ELP does not dare to challenge the construction and the institutions of the current EU. That does not mean that certain member parties do not do so: the PCF in a very emphatic manner; the PRC, which prefers not to demand a referendum so as to avoid campaigning on the Constitution; the PDS which is "for" the Constitution, but tries to skirt round the problem (see its electoral Programme); the IU, divided and hesitant, has plumped for a "no".

The important question of "self-determination of peoples" is reduced to "cultural and linguistic diversity". Then, measures of democratization appear in the text: "We want to act so that the elected institutions, the European Parliament and the national parliaments as well as the

representative committees (the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions) have more powers of action and control. Today, whatever may be our overall opinion of the "Constitutional Treaty" being discussed, we are opposed to a Directorate of Great Powers." And then a sort of more general perspective: "In the EU various interests are in conflict with each other [which? FV]. For us this creates a new political space for class struggle and for the defence of the interests of workers and democracy, of the European society with its organizations and institutions and, among them, the European Parliament".

The same prudence that the ELP has shown in relation to strategic questions (neoliberal policies, collaboration with social liberalism), recurs in relation to the EU. The EU is the main political project of the (big) imperialist countries of Europe. You cannot avoid the fact; anyone who opposes this project risks being excluded from a return to government!

The ELP at work...

At least among the most politically aware and organized part of the population there is a growing interest "in Europe". The EU gives considerable financial support to the establishment of "European parties".

The ELP will probably succeed as a first step towards such a "party", beside the Greens, the Socialist Parties, and the bourgeois parties (which fight each other over the carve-up of their electorates).

The first practical test is the European elections. This will have greater political significance than in the past, despite the abstentions and the lack of interest among broad sectors of the population. But the simultaneous and broad nature of these elections in the 25 member countries of the EU - even if half the 338 million potential voters go fishing or to the cinema - make it an altogether more meaningful popular consultation than the opinion polls. Will the ELP be in a situation to form a parliamentary group, like the

GUE/NGL? [51] Will it be recognized by the European Parliament and then subsidized? That would give it a very important financial base to act publicly from the Atlantic to Russia.

Another question - can the ELP really function as a party - with campaigns, regular public positions, interventions and simultaneous mobilizations, a genuinely European internal functioning? The "party" is not really a party, as one usually understands it. This is not a federation or even a confederation. A strong odour of national autonomy floated in the room of Congress. And the Statutes consecrate this spirit by demanding unanimity.

That raises two big questions. First, there is the relationship between the (ex-) CPs of the countries of Eastern Europe and the brother parties of the West, which since the fall of the Berlin wall, have evolved in increasingly different contexts, despite the unifying factor of the EU. Some have painfully separated themselves from Stalinism and adapted to the restoration of a miserable capitalism, while others are under the contradictory pressure of social democracy, the movement for global justice and the anti-capitalist left.

The other difficulty relates to coherence at the level of the ELP's leadership.

At first sight, there are many differences between the PCF, the PRC and the PDS in the search for a new programme. The decomposition of Stalinism has been a slow and tortuous process, but above all very unequal in each country. In setting up the ELP, as a new functional framework on the European level, some transversal inter-personal links (leaders and activists) have been reactivated. Not to mention old rivalries between the CPs which resurge around the leadership of the ELP. To give only one example: when the PRC tried to push aside the most Stalinist parties (Portuguese and Greek CPs), the PCF came to the aid of the PCP. Without itself entering the ELP, the PCP was able to prevent Bertinotti recognizing the Left Bloc (a Portuguese participant in the EACL) as an observer at the ELP meeting.

Moreover, ancestral rivalries subsist between the PCF and the PRC, whose political profiles have not ceased to diverge for the last five years. It is significant that it is the PDS (notoriously the most moderate party, although it has Stalinist hangovers) which pushed Bertinotti (and thus the PRC) into the presidency of the ELP.

Where is the ELP going?

The multiple contradictions which run through the ELP will not necessarily paralyze it because there is another political dynamic at work, namely convergence between the main parties towards a new experience of the "plural" or "centre-left" left.

The PCF, traumatized and divided by its recent governmental participation, has not made a balance sheet of it, and probably a majority current is ready to re-offend. The PDS has already taken its first steps in the government of the Land of Berlin (imposing hair shirt austerity), envisaging a return to government by the SPD (very much weakened) and the Greens. The PRC hopes to contribute to kicking out Berlusconi and participate in a Prodi government. Izquierda Unida has not entered the PSOE government, but Zapatero took the decision behind its back. For Synaspismos the problem is not posed after the recent victory of the right in Greece. Over the next two or three years (which is a short time), a "centre-left" cycle could reopen.

It is not ritualistic to say that much will depend on the political and social situation in Europe and in the member countries.

Through their anti-social and reactionary brutality, the current right wing governments revalorize indirectly the idea of the "lesser evil", in the absence of a strong radical alternative. Social democracy will appear again as the only useful instrument to beat the right in the elections.

That will also pose a challenge to the anti-capitalist left. The latter will be involved in the mobilizations and the

struggles, in unity of action with all the forces of the social, political, and citizens' left for our demands and against the government of the employers. It will not escape the constraint (because of the increasingly anti-democratic electoral laws) of being as effective at the ballot box as in the streets. The pressure will mount on the anti-capitalist left - to the extent where it has social and political weight - to join a "left government". [52]

That would be a serious error to give in to, unless it was a government which broke effectively and radically with neoliberal policies. That could not take place only in the case of very big social mobilizations would shake up the relationship of forces between the classes, but also inside the trade union and social organizations.

The ELP is not our party. Its centre of gravity, such as it is, is more to the right than one would have predicted

18 months ago when the problem of the "European party" was on the agenda.

The PRC has changed strategy on the basis of a disappointment; enormous social radicalism has not been extended to the political terrain (at the electoral and party levels). From June 2003, the PRC has leant towards an alliance, including a governmental alliance, with the centre-left led by Prodi. It is a serious error, and a factor of great confusion, in Europe as well as Italy. The PRC had attracted, educated and motivated hundreds of political cadres in the other CPs. It has played a pilot role in a modern radicalism, in political and intellectual renewal, the idea of a radical "extra-parliamentary" party, and has been very close to the European anti-capitalist left. It remains marked by social radicalism (unlike other CPs in the ELP), but it has changed political perspective. The ELP situates itself between the social liberal left and the

anti-capitalist left.

If the ELP (or its main member parties) participate in a government with social democracy on a neoliberal programme, it will create a new situation inside the left and a different relationship with the anti-capitalist left.

We will be found in the struggles and in the mobilizations, we will be ready for unity in action for concrete demands and objectives. Debates and political struggles will take another turn, because of the policies of such a government.

From now until then, the debate continues, based on cumulative socio-political experiences around fundamental questions of living and working conditions. The activist and organizational contact between this Communist/alternative left and the anti-capitalist left is a favourable condition for this process of clarification.

Interview with Marwan Othman

1 October 2004, by Chris Den Hond

Can you talk about the situation of the Kurds in Syria?

For some years, the Syrian regime has been trying to Arabize Kurdish culture. The Kurds have no right to be taught in their own language. Our objective is that Syria should respect what it is, a mosaic of peoples. We demand that the Syrian state ends the banning of our language and our culture. We demand the kind of minority rights that exist in other countries. And, obviously, the liberation of all political prisoners. Out of a total of two million Kurds in Syria, around 250,000 have no papers and thus no Syrian nationality and no right to work in the public sector or buy land or a house. It is necessary then to give Syrian nationality to all these people. President Bashar al-Assad wants to stop the Kurds and the Arabs struggling together for the

democratization of the Syrian regime. The Syrian state is afraid of the Kurds. We are politically well organized and representative while the Arab parties do not have as much popular support. President Bashar al-Assad fears above all a strategic alliance between Kurds and left Arabs. So he does all he can to deepen the division between the two peoples. On December 10, 2003 for example, Kurds and Arabs organized a demonstration together for the first time in Syria.

Why were you imprisoned and how did you get out of prison?

I went to prison after a demonstration in front of the Syrian parliament in December 2002, on the international day of human rights. We wanted to demonstrate for human rights in Syria. Our political party Yekiti (United) had decided to organize this demonstration to open a window in a

country where fear reigns. But the government banned the demonstration and as usual me and my friends, who had organized the demonstration, were arrested and imprisoned. With these arrests the Syrian government wished to scare the Syrian people to stop them from doing what we did, but this didn't work, because when we appeared before the court, there were twice as many people there as during the demonstration. And everybody got up when we came in. After a year and two months we were released following international pressure, notably from Amnesty International and the Pen Club International.

What do you and your party think about an eventual US intervention in Syria as in Iraq?

We are opposed, because if you look at recent events in the Middle East it is very clear that the US wishes to

increase its domination. So we have organized demonstrations in front of the Syrian parliament to pressure the Syrian government to resolve the Kurdish problem and that of democracy in Syria. We told the president of the parliament that we did not want to be a Trojan horse for anybody. Syria is our country but the regime must consider us as Syrian citizens with the same rights as other citizens. We never want to serve as a tool for a foreign power. To prevent the Kurds or other oppressed Syrian citizens seeking a solution from the outside, the regime should grant us our legitimate rights. The US already has a special agenda for the Middle East, but this agenda can never coincide with the agenda of its peoples. One day the Americans must go. The Arabs and the Kurds are condemned to live together, like all peoples in the whole world, and thus our problems will not be settled by the Americans or other foreign forces.

What do you think of the embargo imposed by the US against Syria?

The embargo in the region always hurts the people, not the governments. For example, the embargo against Iraq made the Iraqi government stronger, while the Iraqi people became poorer. Instead of opening windows for the peoples, an embargo closes them and makes the regime still more inflexible. Life becomes more difficult and there are more obstacles to democratization because of the embargo. This becomes a pretext for the regime.

What is your strategy to bring about a democratization of the Syrian regime?

The peoples of Kurdistan (Assyrian, Syrian, Armenian, Kurd, Arab, Turkmen) in all parts of Kurdistan have suffered much oppression. There have been massacres. And there is a problem with the Syrian left. It has never said anything against the oppression of the Kurds. It is a problem because to prevent the US

from using the Kurdish problem to intervene, we need to overcome the division between the Kurds and the left, between the Kurds and the Arabs so that the left and the democratic parties build bases and bridges to resolve the Kurdish problem. The Kurds alone do not have the strength to democratize Syria. The left alone neither. So we need an alliance between the two. Before reproaching the Kurds for their links with foreign forces, the Syrian left should attempt to make links with us, precisely to cut the grass from under the feet of all those who are tempted to ally with foreign forces to resolve the Kurdish problem in Syria. Because it is necessary to understand that if you are in a ditch you grab any rope to get out of it.

When and why did you become a Trotskyist and what does this mean today?

Since my youth the left has attracted me. At the university of Syria, left ideas were dominant. In the 1970s, Marxism spread everywhere. After having read books on the Soviet Union, I understood that the regime was a Stalinist regime that did not represent Marxism. This led me to follow other trails, other non-Stalinist Marxist branches. I read many books by Mao and Trotsky. I noted that Trotsky's position was close to that of Marx. I saw also that Trotskyism could renew things and create novelties, more than the other Marxist currents. In 1983, I adopted "Marxism according to Trotsky". Immediately we created a Trotskyist group among the Syrian Kurds and this group met many difficulties with the government, but also with the other left groups among the Kurds and Arabs. We had relations with the Fourth International. In 1986, our small group organized a demonstration, the first in Syria that celebrated the Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, our national symbol. It was a great success. Thousands of Kurds came out to demonstrate. Then all eyes are fixed on us and most of our

Trotskyist group were arrested. That placed us in great difficulty. We could not continue all alone. We created links with the parties of the Kurdish left which accepted Trotskyists inside them. This was the case with the party of Kurdish peasants. This party accepted us inside it as a Trotskyist branch. After this, in 1992, with three other parties, we created the Yekiti (United) party. This party accepted all left currents. I am now one of the members of the leadership of Yekiti as a known Trotskyist.

How long were you in prison for and how did you keep your morale up?

I was arrested in 1981, I spent a month in prison because we celebrated Newroz at university and I was the organizer. In 1984, I was arrested again and I came out of prison after the presidential amnesty. In 1986, I went to prison again, because I had again organized a celebration of Newroz. In 1988, I spent three months in prison. They arrested me again in 1992 for some months and the last time was in 2002. Because of all these arrests, I never finished my studies. I was always on the run. When I wanted to return to university I was not accepted. In all I spent nearly four years in prison.

In a country like Syria, if you make the choice of becoming an oppositional political militant, you know in advance that you will be arrested. As my project was to change Syria, democratize it for all its citizens, Kurds and Arabs, I knew that I would be imprisoned. Syrian prisons are very tough, because there is an inhuman relationship between guards and prisoners. They want to kill our souls. The torture is not only physical, it is above all psychological. But as I knew that my people supported me, I could keep my morale high, I was able to preserve my ideas and continue my activities after being released. I know already that in going back I will again be imprisoned in Syria, but that doesn't bother me.

An interview with Gilbert Achcar

1 October 2004, by **Gilbert Achcar**

In early May 2003, President Bush organized a triumphal display on a US Navy aircraft carrier to announce the official end of combat in Iraq. One year later, how do you characterize the situation in this country?

What has happened confirms what we said right at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq: "The difficulties for Washington and London are only beginning".

It was obvious in advance that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the military occupation of the country would not pose problems for the US army, taking into account the enormous disproportion of forces. But controlling a country like Iraq would be another question. The crushing technological superiority of the US army is not then as determinant.

First, you need a much greater number of soldiers than what is necessary for a simple military victory. Indeed the Bush administration thought it could occupy Iraq with a very limited number of soldiers. It is an Achilles heel of US power - the human factor, too quickly considered outdated following a technological revolution which has transformed the "art of war".

Secondly, you need a controllable people, that is one which shows a certain degree of resignation to, indeed acquiescence with the occupation. This is far from being the case. The majority of Iraq's population has welcomed the US army with an attitude you could sum up thus: "You've overthrown Saddam Hussein, thanks. Now, get out, we don't want you as an occupying power".

This sentiment is at the root of the movement of opposition to the occupation, which is snowballing and which is reflected almost daily in armed operations. In my opinion, it is

not however this which is determinant. The most important factor is the massive character of the rejection of the occupation, shown, for example, by the huge demonstrations which took place during the struggle between proconsul Bremer and Grand Ayatollah Sistani on the question of the elections.

It is this which has dealt a blow to the Bush administration's project and has made Iraq into a "quagmire". The US army is bogged down there and the situation can only worsen, without any perspective of honourable exit. In this sense, there are points of comparison with Vietnam. Not at the military level - there is no common measure between the Iraqi guerrillas and what happened in the Vietnam War - but at the political level. Like Vietnam, Iraq became an enormous ball and chain for the US ruling class. The US has already spent \$130 billion on their presence in Iraq, intent on gaining control over the considerable oil wealth of the country. But now they are not certain of being able to stay there.

How do you characterize the main economic measures imposed by the US in Iraq over the past year?

We can note at this level also a first US defeat. Washington has not yet been able to change the terms of the exploitation of Iraqi oil, which had been its fundamental objective.

The US did not launch this war for the processing or servicing industries which exist in Iraq. In this area, the Bremer administration has applied its programme to the letter, through privatization and giving markets to US companies without invitations to tender, including to the detriment of other US companies - which has led to numerous scandals.

But the US keeps putting off decisions on oil, precisely because of the

hostility towards them in the country that they quickly had to take note of. Indeed, the more time passes, the greater the popular hostility which led them to put off the decisions increases.

The Bush administration's project was not, as is sometimes said, to purely and simply privatize Iraqi oil resources. That would be too difficult to carry off. Its objective was a privatization which would not openly speak its name, under the form of agreements allowing the US oil companies to "co-exploit" Iraqi oil along with the state company. But today the main concern of the US is knowing whether they can stay in the country and under what conditions.

What is the meaning of the Bush administration's "transfer of sovereignty" to Iraqis at the end of June?

It was last autumn that Bremer officially announced his project of so-called Iraqi government, comprising some people chosen by the occupier or by assemblies themselves designated by the occupier. What resulted was a showdown, with his main adversary being Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shiite dignitary in Iraq.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani is an utter reactionary on the social plane, a medievalist traditionalist. However, in this battle, he appeared as the one who challenged Bremer. An eminently reactionary man thus became the spokesperson of his community, and a majority of the Iraqi population, in opposition to the plans of the forces of occupation. Despite the important differences between Sistani and Khomeini, notably in their conception of relations between the political regime and the religious authorities, this situation is not totally dissimilar to the role that Khomeini played in Iran in the struggle against the Shah. Just as ultra-reactionary in terms of

social matters or women's rights, Khomeini became the main figure of opposition to the Shah at the end of the 1970s, initially by taking up on his own account the theme of democracy.

When Bremer wished to force the hand of the Iraqis in November 2003, Sistani took up the challenge and called for demonstrations which took on a considerable size and obliged Bremer to draw back.

The Bush administration then again turned towards the UN to mediate and to save face. This mediation has ended up in the so-called promise to organize elections in January 2005. I say "so-called" because I do not believe that the US - in any case the Bush administration - is really disposed to organize free elections in Iraq.

In this context, nobody is fooled on the subject of the date of June 30. The Iraqi government installed will remain in fact designated by the occupying powers; even if the formation of this government is done through the UN it is the US which in the final analysis will install it. Moreover, this government will not be sovereign and it will have no control over the forces of occupation, nor even full budgetary control.

In reality the passage of power will not be between Bremer and the new Iraqi "government", but between Bremer and the new US ambassador in Baghdad, John Negroponte. Negroponte served in Vietnam and was implicated in some of the murkiest episodes of the US intervention in Central America in the 1980s. He is currently US ambassador to the UN, and in Baghdad he will head the biggest US embassy in the world, with more than 3,000 functionaries.

What kind of political and social realignments are underway in Iraq?

The landscape is hard to decipher, with the social and political forces in part allied, in part competing or opposed: those who participate in the Interim Governing Council put there by the US and those who aren't involved; those who are defined on religious or ethnic bases; the divisions

inside the Shiite community; Baathist sectors reintegrated by the US army to control Falluja and so on.

The most important fracture is not between Shiites and Sunni, but between Arabs and Kurds.

Today the Kurds are the only part of the Iraqi population who approve of the occupation and who believe that it is in their interest to perpetuate it. It is true that Iraqi Kurdistan has benefited, since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991, from a real autonomy and a very privileged status in comparison with the rest of Iraq. It escaped the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. It was even able to prosper economically by serving as a lung for the rest of the country subjected to UN sanctions, which favoured the development of all kinds of trafficking. All this under the protection of the US and Britain.

For the rest, the political landscape is fractured. There is no hegemonic force, capable of governing the country.

So the perspectives for a certain form of democracy in Iraq are real, in my opinion, with the condition, of course, that the occupation is ended. I say that in the sense where, for example, one can say that Iran is today infinitely more "democratic" than the Saudi kingdom. In Iran, there are electoral contests, which are not a pure sham. There is a plurality of political forces, even if it is within certain well known limits. There is a genuinely conflicting Iranian political life, which has nothing to do with the totalitarian Islamic fundamentalism of the Saudi kingdom, nor the semi-fascist ex-dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The potential in Iraq for a certain democratic functioning is greater still than in Iran, for there is no hegemonic Iraqi political-clerical force. And among the people, the Shiite majority cohabits with a Sunni minority, not to mention other minorities, and of the rest, no community is homogeneous. All that contributes to the existence of objective conditions for a pluralist functioning, albeit within certain limits.

The US has, involuntarily, created the

conditions for this possible democratization. Indeed, they believed that they would more easily control the country by destroying its state apparatus, that of Saddam Hussein. In the US, nearly everybody agrees today that the dissolution of the army and of every other public service, as well as the "de-Baathification" - which excluded tens of thousands of civil servants, most members of the party through strict opportunism and who are not easily replaceable - represented a monumental error. The US is thus deprived of the sole force which would have been capable of maintaining control of the population, a repressive and smoothly running state apparatus.

This has created a situation which will be hard to turn around. It's not easy to rebuild a state apparatus which has been dissolved for more than a year. We have seen in Falluja that the attempt to draft in a general of the former Republican Guard to stabilize the situation has led to an outcry such that the US army had to partially withdraw.

In this context, the sole possibility of recomposing an Iraqi state is to do it in a pluralist framework, at least initially.

The UN Security Council has finally unanimously adopted a resolution which ratifies US policy in Iraq. How do you explain what seems to be a retreat by the French, German, Russian and Chinese leaders? Has the Bush administration made concessions to reach this agreement?

Certainly the Bush team has made concessions. The fact in itself of having to go to the UN is an admission of impotence and a "concession" on the part of an administration which, up until recently, had a much more arrogant attitude. Paris, Moscow and Peking are delighted to see the Security Council - where these three states each have a permanent seat and a right of veto - being again invested with official responsibility for the fate of Iraq. Still, nobody is fooled, and the fact that Paris and Berlin continue to refuse to participate in the occupation of the country, in the framework of NATO, indicates very well that the two

capitals know that the real power there is still held exclusively by Washington. What they want is a genuine part in the running of Iraq, and thus a share of the spoils, the oil and reconstruction market. The official pretext is that the government which has been installed, despite the UN's approval, is not yet legitimate enough to authorize a foreign military presence. In other words, Paris, Berlin and Moscow are waiting for an elected government in Iraq, which in theory should take place at the beginning of next year. They hope also for a change of team in Washington with the arrival in power of Kerry who will be better disposed to involve them and turn the page on the deterioration of relations because of US "unilateralism". Between one election and another, they expect that the situation will evolve in favour of their interests.

The new "Iraqi government" has announced the creation of an Iraqi armed force. Does this represent an "Iraqization" of the occupation, comparable to "Vietnamization" in the 1970s? Is it a belated attempt to involve elements of the old Saddamist state apparatus?

The attempt to set up an Iraqi armed force has been underway since the beginning of the occupation. Until now this has been a patent failure. A lot more is needed before "Iraqization" on the lines of "Vietnamization", that is the replacement of US troops by those of a local puppet government, becomes possible; moreover don't forget that "Vietnamization" itself was only a prelude to the final debacle.

That said, in the framework of the general revision of Washington's action in Iraq, there has also been a change of henchman, with the crook Chalabi replaced by the brute Allawi, who "Le Monde" has rightly qualified as "Saddam without the moustache". The latter emerged from the apparatus of the Baathist regime of which he was himself one of the barons. After having been deluded by the illusions of the "neocons", the US is returning to reality. They can find nothing better to control Iraq than Saddam's apparatus. Except that they have discovered this too late, and what might have been a cynical but efficacious strategy now seems

doomed to defeat.

What is the role of movements with a democratic and social dimension which are independent of the big religious or political forces?

Here there has been an enormous disappointment. One could be optimistic before the invasion. Iraq has historically had a massive Communist left, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. Although crushed in Iraq by Saddam Hussein, it continued to represent in exile - where four million Iraqis lived before the war - a real force.

One might have expected that this tradition, which maintained roots in the country, would be reborn from the ashes. Instead, the Iraqi Communist Party, after having had a relatively correct attitude before the war - it was opposed to Saddam Hussein, which goes without saying, but also to the war which was being prepared and the project of US domination - agreed to participate in the IGC set up by the occupier. The CP has thus gone from participation in the Baathist government, in the early 1970s, to participation in a council of collaborators set up by the US occupation. That has very largely discredited this party and the Communist tradition.

There are other forces more to the left, but they do not have weight compared with what is at stake. As in Palestine and the whole region, the Islamic fundamentalists with the most radical discourse against Western domination have taken the lead and captured the popular resentment. From this viewpoint, the consequences of the attitude of the CP are very heavy.

The CP has joined the IGC. During the confrontations at Falluja the Worker Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI) equated the "two terrorisms", namely the occupier and the militias of Moqtada Al Sadr. Is the Iraqi left condemned to a choice between these two options?

It is tragic that what is on offer on the left in Iraq today is essentially reduced

to these two organizations - on the one hand, a party which acts as a "collaborator" with the US occupation in the worst Stalinist tradition; on the other hand, an ultra-left and ultra-sectarian organization, which can only find an echo among the sectors predisposed to understand its discourse of violent denunciation of "Arab nationalism" and of "political Islam", that is to say among a small fraction of the Kurds (the WCPI emerged from the radicalization of a nationalist organization operating in Iranian Kurdistan). There is, of course, another road than alignment behind the Muslim fundamentalists or the Baathists and - what is, certainly, infinitely more serious - behind the occupier. It consists in "striking together but marching separately", not in the sense of military action against the occupier - which is legitimate, however it amounts to a question of relations of force and strategic efficacy - but in the sense of a campaign of political agitation and of demonstrations against the occupation, considering the latter as the main enemy. It is an indispensable condition for carrying out the necessary ideological combat against the fundamentalists and nationalists.

Do the recent uprisings and assassinations of US citizens in Saudi Arabia, followed by an impressive deployment of the Saudi repressive forces, indicate the appearance in this country of an opposition? What are the political lines of divide in this country?

They indicate not only the "appearance" but the growth of a violent opposition to the reigning family and to its US sponsor. It is an old fact that the semi-totalitarian and Muslim fundamentalist character of the Saudi regime has prevented any progressive opposition from emerging in this country. Suddenly, the virulent resentment towards the regime and its masters has found as channel of expression another variant of Islamic fundamentalism. In this respect, from the insurrection in Mecca in 1979 to Osama bin Laden - since the deployment of US troops on the kingdom's soil in 1990 led the latter to turn against the house of Saud - this is a constant which has been

established. The other potential oppositions - women, democrats and so on - are caught between these two poles. Unhappily the future of the region is everyday more sombre, and the modalities of US hegemony feed this terrible regression. The end of this hegemony appears as a necessary condition for the emergence of a new left opposition on a regional scale. In this sense, the setbacks for Washington are the only good news, all the more so in that they have a world importance and can only improve the conditions of progressive anti-imperialist combat in other regions of the planet.

Since the beginning of the second Intifada, in September 2000, Israeli repression against Palestinians has grown incessantly. The construction of the wall advances inexorably. The Bush administration has given a green light to the Sharon plan which closes the door to Palestinian refugees and involves the annexation of a significant part of the West Bank. The quartet (USA, UN, European Union and Russia) has backed up the US position. What is going on? Are we witnessing a new Nakba for the Palestinians?

The second Intifada has unhappily been an integral part of this regressive dynamic. It has been much less effective than the first in the struggle against Israeli occupation.

That stems from the fact that the Palestinians have in a way fallen into the trap of the militarization of the Intifada. I think that, in a fairly deliberate manner, the Israeli side has favoured this militarization of the confrontation. That allows recourse to heavy repression, under the pretext that it is no longer a matter of suppressing demonstrations, but of waging a war - the term is used endlessly on the Israeli side.

On the Palestinian side, this dynamic has brought a strong reduction in popular participation. The difference is striking between the mass character of the first Intifada and the second. The direct participation of women is an indication of this, it was remarkable in the first; it is

completely absent from the second.

That corresponds perfectly to what was desired by someone like Ariel Sharon, who played a decisive role in the initial provocation in September 2000, and who was then able to use this situation to win the elections of February 2001. Since then, he has kept throwing oil on the flames, for it is from this fire that he draws his own strength.

Today, the situation of the Palestinians is worse than it has ever been in the entire history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There has never been such distress. This people is in the process of being completely strangled and a policy of rampant expulsion is de facto underway. The policy of the Israeli government created a really unbearable situation that forces a growing number of Palestinians into exile. Those who remain prisoners of this vice will then be concentrated in a few enclaves placed under high surveillance.

This dynamic favours the extremes on either side. Sharon benefits on the Israeli side. On the Palestinian side, it is Hamas which comes out on top, for this movement is the most violent of all in its opposition to the occupation and to Zionism. That worsens the historic impasse in which this part of the world finds itself.

In this context, what is the significance of the Geneva initiative?

The criticisms that can be made of this initiative from the viewpoint of Palestinian rights are obvious. But I would not polarize myself around this because, in the current situation, it is a stillborn initiative. Those who are behind this initiative, on the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, are completely marginalized.

If the political context should change so that the space for such initiatives opened up, I would adopt the same attitude that I took about the Oslo agreement in 1993. On the one hand, to explain that this in no way satisfies the fundamental rights of Palestinians, and therefore will not resolve the conflict. But on the other hand, it seems to me obvious that a return to a

situation more or less similar to the period that followed the Oslo accords would be better than the current hell and asphyxia to which the Palestinians are condemned. In short, I would not support initiatives of this type, but neither will I support a policy of wishing for the worst. It will be necessary to continue the combat for the rights of the Palestinian people, starting from the meagre gains they have been able to acquire, rather than to reject those gains.

The Bush administration is confronted with great difficulties, on the ground and the diplomatic level, as illustrated by Spain's decision to withdraw from the occupying coalition. What types of responses are likely from the Bush administration and what debates will open up inside the US establishment, between Republicans and Democrats, on the occupation of Iraq and the future of the US imperial deployment?

The main difference on this front between Kerry and Bush resides in Kerry's greater willingness to share out the cake, with France and Russia in particular, so as to bring about a greater internationalization of the running of Iraq, via the UN. He thinks that that would allow him to defuse the violent opposition to the occupation of the country. That's what Kerry means when he says that he would be capable, unlike Bush, of rebuilding links with the allies.

The Bush administration persists for its part in wishing to modify the US presence without giving any ground on the control of Iraq. Taking account of the evolution of the situation, that seems to me virtually impossible.

But that does not mean that a solution À la Kerry has much more chance of squaring the circle either: to maintain US control over Iraq - including their military presence in the country - while pacifying it.

Indeed, if one enters into a process directly controlled by the UN Security Council, the pressure for free elections will be too strong to resist. And I don't see how the elections in Iraq could bring to power any

government reconciled to the presence of US troops.

That said, there are many imponderables. It's a very unstable region, where there can be very sudden changes. Nobody, for example, can bet on the survival of the Syrian or Iranian régimes. The situation is even becoming critical in the Saudi kingdom, until now relatively well preserved under an iron fist.

In reality, the policies practiced until now by the US in the Middle East, in what they have in common from one administration to the other, can only generate disorder and a form of descent into barbarism - I spoke after September 11 of the "clash of barbarisms".

On the one hand, the scandal of the tortures practiced by US soldiers in Iraq and in Afghanistan, the hundreds of prisoners deprived of all rights in Guantanamo, in violation of international agreements, illustrate the steps taken in this regressive

spiral on the US side.

On the other, in the Middle East, all the popular heroes today are Muslim fundamentalists: Bin Laden, the leaders of Hamas, of Lebanon's Hezbollah, Moqtada Al-Sadr and so on. This is a measure of the regressive dynamic which weighs heavily on the region and which renders the situation particularly sombre.

But there are not also opposed tendencies?

In this worrying picture, there are happily some small rays of hope. The world movement against neoliberal globalization and against the war is beginning to have an impact, albeit very modest for the moment, in countries like Morocco, Egypt or Syria, inspired by what has happened in Europe. The first Moroccan social forum involved some hundreds of people in 2003 and there will be a second edition this summer. A small movement against globalization is starting to develop in Syria. These rays of hope are thus essentially due

to exogenous factors; the endogenous factors rather tend to feed the radicalization on the ground of Islamic fundamentalism.

The new impact of the movement for global justice relates to important changes: information circulates infinitely more than in the past in the Middle East and the Arab world. The satellite TV chains in Arabic have broken the millstones imposed by the authoritarian regimes of the region, which cannot completely control access to the Internet either.

This new context can also favour the emergence of new left currents. To develop, the latter should privilege the areas where the fundamentalists are, by essence, incapable of competing: the social field, the rights of women, the denunciation of wildcat capitalism and its ravages on a planetary scale. Of course, any left worthy of the name must also oppose the occupation and the plans for Western domination; but here it must know how to beat the fundamentalists who largely occupy the scene.

Is the Empire being defeated?

1 October 2004, by Phil Hearse

A few days before this article was written, on 25 and 26 June, a massive battle broke out in the city of Ba'qubah, sixty miles northwest of Baghdad. Dozens of resistance fighters occupied buildings in the centre of the city, including the local police headquarters. US forces launched a furious counter-attack, dropping 500-lb bombs and then sending in tanks and armoured personnel carriers, which rampaged through the city firing indiscriminately.

At the same time another huge battle was taking place in Falluja, after US troops tried to invade the city once again and eliminate resistance fighters. According to the correspondent of Mafkarat al-Islam, 30 US soldiers were killed in the

initial assault and two Apache helicopters shot down. Resistance fighters ordered the evacuation of some popular neighbourhoods because of the scale of the civilian casualties. The battle in Ba'qubah was hardly reported in the US and British media, and the true scale of the fighting in Falluja minimised. Instead, while reporting bombings across the country, most of the news media concentrated on the Nato summit in Istanbul, and the fake hand-over of sovereignty to the interim Iraqi government. Older readers will remember this syndrome from the Vietnam War; news "management" by the military, media censorship and eventually media boredom with repetitious bad news, gives a fragmentary view of the reality on the ground.

Events this year have posed point-blank the ability of the US to win the guerrilla war, and in turn this puts in question the future scope of America's turn to unbridled militarism as the crucial mechanism for securing its world hegemony, as well as putting in question George Bush's re-election to the White House. In June, for the first time, opinion polls showed a majority of 53% either "somewhat dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with Bush's handling of Iraq.

A year ago the UK "Guardian" reported, "In a candid interview on the BBC's Breakfast with Frost, Mr Bremer said pockets of resistance in Iraq would be crushed. 'We are going to fight them and impose our will on them and we will capture or, if necessary, kill them until we have

imposed law and order upon this country,' he said." One year on the "pockets of resistance" are all-out war.

There have been two decisive turning points this year, which have ensured that the United States cannot win this war - the April Battle of Falluja and the revelations about torture in Abu Ghraib prison. The former fatally damaged the US ability to win any significant support in Iraq, and the latter was a shattering blow, worldwide and in the United States itself, to US claims of moral superiority.

Battle of Falluja

It is now known that around 800 Iraqis, most of them civilians died in Falluja in the early days of April. An eye-witness account written at the time gives an impression of the reality of the fighting:

"Falluja, Iraq, a low-rise, mostly Sunni city of about 200,000, has become this war's Sarajevo. I was there on Saturday and Sunday during what was supposed to be a cease-fire. Instead of calm, I found a city under siege from American artillery and snipers.

"At one of the city's clinics I saw dozens of freshly wounded women and children, victims of US Marine Corps munitions. Hospital officials report that more than 600 Iraqis have now been killed, most of them civilians. Two soccer fields in Falluja have been converted to graveyards. I went to Falluja with a small group of international journalists and NGO workers. We travelled in a large bus full of medical supplies; our plan was to unload our cargo, take a look around, then leave with as many wounded as we could take out with us.

"When we left Baghdad, the road was desolate and littered with the scorched and smouldering shells of vehicles. At the first US checkpoint, the soldiers said they'd been there for thirty hours straight. They looked exhausted and scared. After being searched, we continued along bumpy dirt roads, winding our way through parts of Abu Ghraib, steadily but slowly making our way toward

besieged Falluja. At one point we passed a supply truck that had been hit and was being looted by people from a nearby village. Men and boys were running from the wreck carrying boxes. A small child yelled at our bus, "We will be mujahedeen until we die!"

"At one overpass we rolled by an M-1 tank that resistance fighters had destroyed. Smoke and flames still billowed from its burning guts. Down the road were more fires - the whole thirty kilometres to Falluja was strewn with burned-out fuel tankers, trucks, armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and tanks. As we approached Falluja we started running into mujahedeen checkpoints. Seeing our supplies and hearing that we were headed for Falluja, the guerrillas let us pass.

"Entering the city we saw a huge cloud from a US bomb. To our horror we realized there was no cease-fire. Falluja itself was virtually empty, aside from groups of mujahedeen fighters positioned on every other street corner, their faces covered by kaffiyehs. Many were armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles; some had rocket propelled grenade launchers. In all, I saw hundreds of Iraqi fighters." (Sarajevo on the Euphrates, Dahr Jamail, "The Nation", 12/04/04).

The savagery of the attack on Falluja shocked and angered ordinary Iraqis, including those in the Shi'ite south of the country, who lined up to give blood. American actions created a deepened legitimacy to the disparate forces of the muj (mujahadeen) as a genuine force of national resistance. At the same time, the appearance of hundreds of local mujahadeen fighters blew away claims that the resistance was simply "al-Qaida" or "remnants of the old regime". The true figures for American deaths in Falluja have not been revealed, but many western newspapers said that more than 100 marines had been killed in this battle. Of course, as usual, the casualties were disproportionately Iraqi - civilians and resistance fighters. But the battle itself was eerily reminiscent of urban battles, which took place during the Tet offensive in Vietnam in 1968.

The battle in Falluja was part of

countrywide fighting, which took on the appearance of a national uprising. For sure, different factions were involved in the fighting, with different degrees of local support. While the resistance in Falluja and the Sunni triangle in general undoubtedly has widespread support, many reports say militia of the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr which fought US troops in Najaf in the Shi'a south of the country is unpopular and regarded as an authoritarian sect. But that is incidental to the central fact of mass support for the resistance; on April 9, after four days of fighting in Falluja, 200,000 people demonstrated in central Baghdad to protest US actions and show solidarity with the resistance fighters.

The outcome of the Falluja battle was a military and political defeat for US forces. Once the scale of civilian casualties became known, it was impossible for the marines to press home their attack. The generals wanted to of course, but Washington insisted that the troops be pulled back. Falluja more than anything else raised the issue of whether America can win the war.

Torture Unlimited

If Falluja was bad news for the White House, more was hard on its heels. The revelations of systematic torture in Abu Ghraib prison dealt American claims to moral superiority a fearful blow. The White House and Pentagon responded with a minutely choreographed public relations exercise, gradually releasing just some of the photos of prisoner mistreatment in their hands. Everybody has seen the photos of torture. Very few have seen the worst, which involve rape and violent beatings. Probably a number of US newspapers and TV stations have these photos; none are prepared to publish them.

Pentagon strategy in relation to these revelations is to basically to claim Abu Ghraib was an exception, that things are OK now, and to blame a few relatively junior soldiers for the failings - one of whom has already been court-martialled. The truth is very different, that at least some forms of torture were officially sanctioned in the wake of 9/11, and

are part and parcel of the 'war against terrorism'. In addition to Iraq, the US maintains a torture centre at Bagram air base in Afghanistan, and of course in Guantanamo Bay. Torture is supervised by special forces and the CIA, and also involves "civilian contractors" - mercenaries. In the wake of the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, torture was justified on the basis of the need to get "vital information" about al-Qaida. Although widely publicised as "torture lite", it has led to several deaths amongst prisoners, both in Afghanistan and Iraq - and these are just the ones that are known. But torture is not, and has never been anywhere, primarily about getting information. It is about humiliating and psychologically crushing the enemy, and spreading fear and demoralisation into the civilian population and political opponents. The inhuman and degrading conditions in Guantanamo Bay, for example, are nothing to do with gaining information. There is no more useful information to be gained. Torture, indefinite imprisonment and the upcoming military tribunals are all about demonstrating to opponents what they can expect if they take up arms against America. It remains to be seen what sentences are handed out by these tribunals, but the execution chamber has already been built.

These issues have proved embarrassing for the British government in particular, which has struggled hard to conceal Iraqi deaths in custody at the hands of British troops, and has been forced to publicly distance itself from the lack of due legal process in Guantanamo.

Same Donkey, Different Saddle

Does the US have an exit strategy from Iraq? In a certain sense, it doesn't want an exit strategy because it does not intend to exit. White House planning for Iraq envisages the retention of 14 huge military bases, which will become the centre of military operations in the Middle East. In addition the US will remain at the centre of the Iraqi economy for an indefinite time, richly rewarding US corporations with "reconstruction"

contracts, paid for by Iraqi oil. There is absolutely no prospect of the United States giving up effective control of the world's second largest supplies of oil. In these circumstances an "exit" strategy means simply the installation of an "Iraqi" government, the pacification of the country through military force, the handing over of day-to-day security operations to the Iraqi police and army and the possibility of elections, with of course "extremists" excluded and a pro-American government "elected".

The centre-piece of this strategy is the "hand-over of sovereignty", achieved on June 28th. This was a most peculiar event, formalised by a ceremony hidden away inside the Green Zone, the heavily-armed cantonment from which the US operates in Baghdad. No bands, no cheering masses, no popular political figure to rally the nation.

Everyone knows that the government has been hand-picked by the White House, that the new prime minister is a CIA agent, that it has almost no popular support, and has nothing like "sovereignty". As Haifa Sangana put it, "In Iraq, we have an expression: same donkey, different saddle. Iraq's long-heralded interim government has now formally assumed sovereignty. Official labels and tags have duly changed. The US administrator will now be an ambassador, while Sheikh Ghazi al Yawar and Iyad Allawi, US-appointed members of the former governing council, are to be known as president and prime minister."

But of course this is just show. "Prime minister" Iyad Allawi is a particularly unsavoury character, having been a loyal lieutenant of Saddam Hussein and an operative in his secret police, before falling out with Saddam, going into exile in the UK. Once in Britain he offered his services to MI6, and then to the CIA.

Every theorist of sovereignty, from Hobbes and Locke to the more cynical Conrad Schmitt, [53] have stressed that those who are sovereign have a monopoly of the legitimate use of military power. To emphasise the situation the Bush White House would not even agree to the British suggestion that the new interim government would have to be

consulted about major military initiatives. The interim "government" controls neither decisive military forces, nor vital decisions over the economy. US deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz realistically says that with the "hand-over" of power, the violence is set to get worse.

Another irony of the "hand over of power" is the situation of 5,000 detainees, held by American forces. Both Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have declared that this detention is now illegal, and that detainees must be released or charged by the Iraqi government. Naturally there is no chance of their release. The interim government doesn't even control its own jails.

The real question that faces the US, and its hope to move towards control of the country without daily war, is whether the insurgency can be defeated. That of course is a political and not primarily a military question. An opinion poll in June showed, unsurprisingly, a big majority of the Iraqis want the US out, and a clear majority who say they would be safer if the allied forces left. Thus the Bush administration is in a cleft stick, a vicious circle which is unsolvable. Since the US and its Iraqi allies have no popular legitimacy, the guerrilla war will continue, extracting a huge toll in deaths, injuries and all-round misery for the population. Naomi Klein [54] has shown how Bush's administration has failed utterly to make major steps in rebuilding the country and is appropriating reconstruction money for "security" and even building a huge new US embassy. And the appointment of John Negroponte, former US ambassador in Honduras and one of the chief architects of the Nicaraguan "contra" rebels who fought to bring down the Sandinista government, does not exactly signal an emphasis on reconstruction on building a viable civil society. It suggests an emphasis on war.

The seemingly endless character of the US commitment, with troops levels increased this year by 30,000, the spending of some \$150 billion in Iraq so far and not least the endless stream of US casualties, threatens Bush with

electoral defeat and poses major problems for the "defence intellectuals", the neoconservative theorists who have championed the US's increased reliance on military power.

Challenges for the Empire

America's leading theorist of "offensive realism", the academic John Mearsheimer, [55] famously and very controversially insists on the crucial role of ground forces in inflicting defeats on enemies, and minimises the role of air and sea power in winning military dominance. Critics of Mearsheimer point to the role air power played in defeating Japan in the Second World War. Whoever is right about this strategic debate, it is obvious that securing military control over a populated territory means having troops there. Lots of them. And this is where the difficulty for the Bush administration arises. Troops on the ground get into battles and get killed, even with the vastly superior firepower that US troops deploy against any other military forces in the world, regular or irregular. They are particularly vulnerable to urban guerrilla warfare. High tech weaponry comes into its own in conventional war, it has limitations in nuclear war (because no known technology can prevent some enemy missiles getting through - so far at least), and is largely neutralised in urban guerrilla war. Powerful night-sights for snipers may be useful for shooting down unsuspecting civilians in Falluja (dozens of civilians were killed this way), but they cannot guard against roadside bombs, and low tech weapons like Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades. This is the irony of Iraq. Weapons that routed Saddam Hussein's (appallingly led) army twice are useless in defeating urban guerrillas with mass support.

There is just one variable here which determines everything - the old question of whether the "Vietnam syndrome" (the refusal of the US public to accept military casualties) has been overcome. After two Iraq war, brilliant military triumphs at minimal cost, the neocons imagined it

has. In reality the jury is still out, but the signs are no so good. Several things shows that the Bush administration is still fearful on this front; its decision to ban any filming or photos of military funerals, its attempt to suppress photos of coffins being brought back to America, and its attempts to minimise the real size of US casualties.

So far the US losses are small. The public figure is about 800 dead, maybe the real figure is nearer 1,000. Compare that with 16,000 dead in Vietnam in 1967/8 alone. There is no comparison. Despite that, already opinion polls show a small majority against Bush's handling of Iraq. It is an open question how many casualties American public opinion can withstand.

What is clear however is that the resistance in Iraq has placed a massive obstacle in the way of further military adventures. In June 2004 the idea, seriously discussed a year ago by supporters and opponents of Bush alike, would go on to Iran or Syria or North Korea (never a serious prospect given the latter's nuclear weapons), is now totally off the agenda. Today there are 140,000 troops in Iraq, 20,000 in Afghanistan, another 5600 who are going to Iraq soon, and tens of thousands of first echelon reservists who have been put on notice they might be called up in the next year. Add to that the \$150 billion dollars spent in the last year, then the idea of further near-future military adventures is out of the question. Indeed, the removal of ultra-hawk Richard Perle from his part-time post in the Defence Advisory Board was a sure sign that the administration wants some restraint from neocons in the government's ambit.

Regional Disaster for US

Probably there were few in the administration (outside the Pentagon) who seriously contemplated going beyond Iraq. However the administration did see removing Saddam and imposing its own government as a step towards the fundamental transformation of the

Middle East, to bring about a more peaceful, orderly and pro-American region. In the thinking of State Department this involved trying to use American leverage to bring about a resolution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. But this would have meant pressurising the Israelis to make concessions on territory. However, the opposite has happened. Bush instead has backed up Ariel Sharon 100%. This combined with the Iraq guerrilla war has created a new dynamic in the region. As David Hirst puts it:

"For years it had been all but axiomatic that any western intervention to bring down Saddam needed to be matched by an essentially pro-Palestinian policy in the Arab-Israeli conflict too. The West had created Israel at the Palestinians' expense, and any realistic settlement had so far as possible to redress that historic injustice.

"Otherwise, all the war's official objectives would be dismissed out of court as just another blatant episode in the history of western conquest and exploitation.

"The neo-cons bought the axiom - but turned it on its head. Thanks to them the invasion of Iraq was really the supreme expression of US double standards in the region. In theory, the settlement was to come about through region-wide democratisation and other blessings of America's 'civilising mission'.

"In practice, it would come about through a far higher level of external coercion than ever applied before, and by a yet more extravagant bias in Israel's favour. Even now, as he slips further into the Iraqi quagmire, George Bush has put America openly behind prime minister Ariel Sharon's expansionist designs.

"So while the Palestinians have their own, American-created reasons for stepped-up resistance, they naturally view that of the Iraqis as an integral part of the same anti-imperialist struggle.

"More tellingly - and despite their widespread disillusionment with pan-Arabism, a Saddam legacy, from which the neo-cons had hoped to

profit - the Iraqis have adopted Palestine as part of their own. Now, in Falluja, Sunni Islamists do battle in the name of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin; in Najaf, the rebellious Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr calls himself the "striking Iraqi arm of Hizbullah and Hamas'.....

"Lebanon's Hizbullah is strictly local in origin and membership, but it enjoys greater region-wide prestige than al-Qaida, because it confined itself to fighting - and besting - Israel in a classical guerrilla war which few but Israelis and America classified as terrorist. It now regards Iraqi resistance as accessory to its own. Increasingly accused by the Israelis of aiding and abetting Palestinian

Islamists, and of accumulating a vast new firepower, it is ready and waiting for a cross-border conflagration; but it wants Israel to start it, so that its re-entry into the jihadist arena is legitimate as well as spectacular." ("Guardian" 4/6/04).

All this adds up to a regional disaster for the United States. A huge amount of fuel is being stored up for further explosions and conflicts. For millions of Arabs, the role of the United States as the enemy has been vividly reinforced.

One force that has not stood in the way of US aims is of course the European governments who opposed

the attack on Iraq, particularly the government of Chirac in France and Schröder in Germany. They were party to the shameful Security Council resolution, which gives UN legitimacy to the continued occupation and fraudulent new "government" - while at the same time banning the import of arms into Iraq "except to coalition forces".

The huge forces that made up the European anti-war movement will make no such capitulation. They must continue to demand the removal of Western troops from Iraq, as the first step - along with the removal of Israeli troops from Palestinian territory - towards real peace and freedom in the Middle East.

Victory at FIAT

1 October 2004, by **Franco Turigliatto**

Twenty-four years after the dramatic defeat of October 1980, which radically changed the social relations of force in the country, FIAT workers have scored a victory. If the victory of one factory is not yet a victory for all FIAT workers - whose situation remains precarious - this event is nonetheless the expression of a new phase in the class struggle which has been opened up in the last few months.

The FIAT-Sata (Società automobilistica tecnologia avanzata) factory at Melfi was built at the beginning of the 1990s - it started to function in September 1993 - with aid from the state and local government (of the 6,600 billion lira invested by FIAT in the South about half came from various forms of government aid). It currently employs 5,000 people, with 4,000 others working in subcontracting factories. It produces 1,200 cars per day. The productive site at Melfi is an illustration of the so-called objective of the "green field" - a factory in the countryside, created out of nothing, with a new working class, without

experience and trade-union traditions - young workers who were supposed to be moulded perfectly in the "company logic". The heavy defeat suffered by FIAT workers and the policy of "dialogue" practiced by the three big trade-union confederations in total subordination to the employers' demands, which caused substantial retreats on wages, norms, flexibility and precariousness of work, seemed to make this project "feasible".

Over a ten-year period, FIAT succeeded in imposing ferocious levels of exploitation. The workers at Melfi were paid 20% less than other FIAT employees. Imposed rhythms of work were inhuman, with 3 teams over 6 days and obligatory night work for two continuous weeks with only one day of rest, called the "ribattuta". The majority of workers had moreover to make long and dangerous journeys to get to the factory, sometimes as much as 150 km, because recruitment was carried out throughout an area which is heavily affected by unemployment. Internal organization of production recalled the traditional despotism of

FIAT - in the course of last year alone there were thousands of disciplinary actions

The FIAT management has devised work schedules and norms intended to guarantee maximum use of the machinery. Thus the factory functions day and night without interruption, with the sole exception of Sundays. The trade-union organizations also accepted the hiring of workers on long-term precarious contracts and in particular the use of "training contracts" which automatically excluded workers aged more than 32.

The most innovative element from the viewpoint of the exploitation of labour was the introduction of the Tmc 2 system which changed the index of individual output from 133 to 160. Thus, the average individual saturation of the workforce was at 94.3%, as against 86% previously.

Difficulties relating to the productive cycle are compensated for through speed-up of production on the lines. The sub-contracting factories function in perfect harmony with the requirements of the mother factory,

according to the "just in time" system, and thus their production system is even more flexible and levels of exploitation of the workforce are as intense.

Thus FIAT Melfi is the most productive car factory in Europe. Many young workers, in spite of the economic difficulties and the practical impossibility of finding another job, cannot tolerate these infernal rhythms, so "turn-over" has always been very high. During the struggle of FIAT workers in 2002 against yet another phase of restructuring involving the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, there was a lack of workers' mobilization at this factory, as the employers' powers of blackmail still weighed heavily.

But after a long period of incubation of workers' grievances, the lid unexpectedly blew off. Contradictions, dissatisfaction and fury at the bestial system of exploitation exploded. Workers blockaded the factory with their colleagues from the other sub-contracting companies. They chose to remain outside the factory so as to avoid the blackmail and pressure the bosses would employ against an internal strike. They decided to go further, through assemblies and democratic participation. The FIOM [56] remained at their sides throughout, with the entire trade-union left of the CGIL. The workers at Melfi demanded wage parity with other FIAT factories, the modification of the team system, an end to the police regime and the annulation of sanctions.

FIAT thought it could break this strike. The company had already succeeded in building a ferocious cage of exploitation, based on division of the workers, repression and blackmail not only of the employees, but entire peoples and regions at the margins of the country's economic and industrial development. FIAT believed it could exorcise the workers' movement but it has failed.

The struggle started from a specific event. A sub-contracting company was on strike, the parts did not arrive and the company appealed to the trade-union representatives to sign an agreement for the workers to be sent

home without pay. This kind of thing has already happened on several occasions. A workshop goes on strike and the workers downstream are sent home (to play off one group against the other). This time the representative of the FIM agreed, while that of the FIOM didn't. However, when the delegates left the management office to face the workers, they were told: "This time, it's enough. This time our heads will not be lowered! We will all block the doors!" And thus, for 21 days the workers at Sata and all the sub-contracting factories held off an employer who sought by all means to defeat their struggle.

First FIAT simply refused to negotiate. Then, it sought to sow division by a phony demonstration of workers "who wanted to work" with the reactionary mayor of Melfi at its head. It was a complete flop, with 100 people participating, mainly the bosses and some notable local sellouts. Then FIAT pretended to open negotiations by convening the trade unions and demanding they sign a document which condemned the workers' struggle. The FIM and UILM signed while the FIOM refused and walked out of the negotiations. At this point the employers turned to the government - who from the beginning had not even pretended to mediate and who had openly sided with FIAT - to try to break the struggle and to disperse the pickets with police charges one cold and rainy morning. The workers resisted as one and did not abandon the factory gates. Then the judiciary intervened with injunctions against the FIOM and the delegates to end picketing. At the same time FIAT declared itself ready to reopen negotiations. Expectations were high. How to maneuver and act in such a complex situation? A large assembly was convened in front of Sata to decide how to continue. The top FIOM leaders addressed the assembly with proposals for a change in the form of struggle, while saying that if the workers decided to continue to blockade the gates and the goods, they would respect their choice and would face them with the repressive consequences prepared by the judiciary and the government. The assembly was an extraordinary exercise in workers' democracy which

astonished everyone. After hours of dramatic discussions - where workers expressed the fear that, if they returned to the factory, the bosses could exert a stronger blackmail - the decision to lift the blockade, while continuing an indefinite strike of 8 hours per team, was made unanimously; with the workers' assemblies of the various teams confirming this indefinite strike. The pickets were lifted, the strikebreakers could enter... but only 100 workers crossed the threshold of the gates in the following days and the company was unable to resume production.

The unity of the workers had resisted and succeeded, but also important was the unity of the people of the area who came to their support, their sons and daughters. The feeling in the cities and villages where they lived was one of total solidarity and dissuasion towards those who would have liked to resume work and divide the struggle. A big demonstration in Rome in front of the FIAT head office, with the participation of delegations from every FIAT factory, confirmed the combative spirit of the Melfi workers. The FIM tried a provocative diversion to delay the settlement of the conflict but in the end, faced with a productive loss of 40,000 cars, FIAT had to yield. A productive system conceived in an ultra rigid form, without flexibility, completely centred on the reduction of costs and the maximization of profits, but with limited margins of maneuver, enters into crisis when workers' struggle comes to the surface. "Just in time" is a ferocious system of exploitation, but it is not a perfect machine if workers struggle together

The agreement obtained is a positive response to the demands advanced. It obliges the company to modify the teams, abandoning the obligation to work at night for two successive weeks with only one day of rest, introduces wage parity (although stretched over three tranches), and revises disciplinary measures. The feeling of victory was very strong; with workers showing great enthusiasm in the assemblies which discussed the agreement heckling those trade-union representatives who had sought to impede and divide the struggle.

The referendum which was held after the assemblies confirmed the positive opinion of the workers, with a very strong yes vote on a high turnout. But the fact that a significant minority voted against also testifies to the degree of participation in this decisive struggle. Most Italian workers and even a majority of the public supported this struggle. Thus, it will be a great stimulant to the resumption of mobilizations. Finally a victory has been won on a positive platform. Struggle pays once again.

The struggles of recent years

There has been a substantial modification of the dynamics and nature of social struggles. The struggles of recent years were mainly defensive, even if their breadth, starting from the big CGIL demonstration of 2002, has been often exceptional. In the area of results, the objectives obtained were modest. For example, we succeeded in blocking the attacks on article 18 of the labour code - which prohibits unfair dismissal - but not the introduction of law 30, which straightforwardly transforms labour power into a commodity. This law, through new forms of precariousness, circumvents the protections of article 18 and tends to individualize work contracts. From this point of view, struggles have not been able to stop the offensive of the employers and the government. And these struggles too often took the form of specific demonstrations during which the resolution of problems was delegated to the trade-union organizations and in particular to the CGIL, with a certain difficulty in transferring the conflict from everyday life towards the workplaces. However they were determinant in modifying the social climate as a whole, in line with the growth of the movement against capitalist globalization, thus creating the conditions to overcome the passivity and feeling of defeat in the workers' movement.

It should moreover be recalled that the mobilization against the war and for the withdrawal of the troops has remained very strong in our country. Thus, in the demonstration on March

20 it was rather obvious that if the common determinant and unifying element was the issue of peace, the participants, whether workers, young people, women, those in precarious employment, teachers or students, also took part in a mobilization around their own demands, social and work-related. This is not to mention the increasingly strong aversion, not to say hatred, of the Berlusconi government, which has constantly attacked workers' rights.

These mobilizations thus contributed a lot to creating better conditions for the reorganization of several sectors of wage earners and for a trade-union reorganization. From this point of view, the FIOM played a central role by its refusal to sign two one-sided agreements with Federmeccanica (the employers' association in engineering), which had been endorsed by two other trade-union organizations (FIM and UILM), thus opening the struggle to defend national contracts of employment. The FIOM has also proposed going beyond the policy of dialogue, the particularly subaltern form of class collaboration which lay at the base of the defeats of the 1990s. Finally, the FIOM has reintroduced full participation and workers' democracy in the operation of the trade union and in the struggles, by defending the principle that each platform of struggle and any trade-union agreement cannot be valid without a vote of the workers who are affected.

Thanks to this democratic relationship, we have succeeded in resisting both the employers' offensive and isolation, where the CISL and UIL but also the CGIL have left us. Even the CGIL was marked more by a "political" opposition to the Berlusconi government than by a real change of trade-union contractual policies.

A new phase of struggles

During the last few months we have thus seen a series of very fierce rank and file struggles which discovered or rediscovered very incisive forms of struggle. Struggles which can no

longer be characterized simply as defensive, but which much more than in the past have linked the element of defence against attacks with objectives as regards wages and working conditions.

The mobilizations of metalworkers in Genoa and especially in Terni have been very significant (in Terni, the factory was blockaded for 15 days, with an extraordinary participation of the entire population) and this obliged the owner - the German company Thissen-Krupp - to back down. Here again, this struggle was started by the reaction of the workers to negotiations which were being carried out in the most luxurious hotel in the city and which seemed likely to end in an unsatisfactory agreement. Workers tuned up en masse at the negotiations, obliging the Krupp directors to escape by the fire exits. A total blockade of the factory followed, lasting more than two weeks. Here again, a strong capacity to hit the company economically and to rebuild a new workers' hegemony in the region was shown. Once again, young workers were in the forefront, those who had thought they were about to get stable contracts of employment after years of work and who were faced with another retreat on this front.

The mobilization of rail workers has also been significant. With "wildcat strikes" (after many "normal" strikes had no effect on negotiations), they completely paralyzed the principal cities, from Milan to Naples, Rome to Florence. They did not succeed in obtaining what they demanded because of an agreement signed by the three trade-union organizations. On the other hand, they brought about a change in the relation of forces in this sector and obliged the trade-union organizations to immediately redefine a platform of demands for the new contract being negotiated. The struggle of Scanzano in Basilicata was equally significant. The government wanted to install an extremely dangerous slag dump there; a genuine popular insurrection broke out, with a complete blockade of the roads which lasted several weeks and obliged the government to back down. There was a rather similar event in a small city close to Melfi; a significant experience for the same workers who soon after

were involved in the FIAT struggle.

Then there was the mobilization by workers at Alitalia, faced with a dramatic crisis of the company and a government plan which envisaged its bankruptcy in order to carve it up and sell off the most desirable parts, with very serious repercussions for jobs. While the workers have succeeded for now in blocking this project, things remain open from the point of view of a final outcome.

The general strike by the trade unions on March 26 to defend what remains of the social security system were widely supported, much more than was forecast, both in terms of the strike and the street demonstrations. In the same way, on May 1 in Milan approximately 50,000 precarious and young workers rallied, a sign of a beginning of struggles even in the weakest sectors and those without experience of combat.

We can also point to the general strike in the public sector (three million workers), a great success with important demonstrations, as well as mobilizations in the schools sector against the reactionary counter-reforms of minister Moratti.

Finally, we should point to another exemplary struggle which lasted approximately 10 months, that of the workers at Fincantieri. Fincantieri is a public shipbuilding company with establishments in the principal Italian ports. In recent years, in spite of reorganization and significant reduction in the workforce, the workers had succeeded in keeping all the workplaces open, employing 9-10,000 workers. Fincantieri is the only big industrial group where the FIOM has succeeded in immediately obtaining pre-contractual negotiations. [57] The workers approved the platform of the draft collective agreement from June 2003 with a rate of participation approaching 60% (4,505 employees), with 86.63% expressing massive support.

In the following months, various initiatives and trade-union struggles took place. The support of the workers for the FIOM proposals was confirmed, still more in the definition

of the platform and the complementary contract which had meanwhile expired. The initiative of this trade-union federation thus developed by holding together the two levels, that of the complementary negotiation and the draft collective agreement, managing in January to block the launching of a big cruiser - the "Caribbean Princess" - and forcing the company to discuss all the platforms presented and to renounce separate agreements.

The confrontation continued in the following months with a succession of strikes, around 70 hours in total, until mid-May, when the negotiations seemed about to conclude with a positive result both on the contents of the draft understanding and the company contract. But the representatives of the UILM and then the FIM opposed the clauses on the contents of the draft collective agreement, thus giving the company the pretext to suspend negotiations. Influenced by the struggle at Melfi the workers blockaded all the construction sites, preventing the launch of a steamer in Marghera and occupying the offices of the management in Genoa. After one week of strikes, Fincantieri yielded, as did the moderate unions. A contract was signed which envisages non-recourse to law 30, the reduction of precariousness and the phasing out of the differences in regime between new employees and workers on open-ended contracts, new rules for the employees of the suppliers, new safety measures and an increase of 130 euros per month on average.

Government and employers' offensive

It would, however, be erroneous to conclude that the Italian situation has seen a total reversal in the relationship of forces. We started from the lowest point to which the workers' movement had fallen, but one swallow does not make a spring. Possibilities have opened up, but in a situation which remains difficult for the working class as a whole. For example, the majority of the national

contracts have been concluded with very negative agreements in terms of both wages and greater precariousness of employment, signed by all the trade-union organizations, including the representatives of the CGIL. The first partial victories have still to be consolidated and widened and there is still no global strategy to deal with the axes of the governmental and employers' offensive on all fronts, from pensions to the whole social state, from the regulations of law 30 to the fall in wages, which plunges increasingly broader sections of the population into poverty with dramatic consequences for the social and political cohesion of the working class, already subjected to 15 years of neoliberal policies.

There are other difficulties produced by the economic recession itself, the crisis of decisive sectors of Italian industry from FIAT to Alenia, from Siderurgia to Parmalat, not to mention Alitalia. We face a new and violent offensive against jobs without as yet an overall response to this new phase of capitalist reorganization inspired by increased international competition. Whether in terms of employment, wages, or the social state, the working class continues to face an offensive and until now the trade-union confederations have not developed an overall and unitary response.

The crisis at FIAT

Let's start with FIAT. The situation of FIAT auto remains very serious. The death of Umberto Agnelli, president of the group and the last representative of the dynasty, creates another element of uncertainty and opens the way to a larger role for the creditor banks. In September 2005, with the maturing of the loan, these banks could become owners of around 30% of FIAT's capital. The Agnelli family now controls around 30% of the capital. New models have allowed a growth in sales and shares of a very modest market in Europe and Italy, a level hardly higher than 2002, the worst year for FIAT. The relationship with the American partner, General Motors, has continued to worsen. Indeed, the head office in Detroit has not invested a penny to recapitalise FIAT and disavows the clauses for the

purchase of FIAT signed in 2000 while waiting, like a vulture, for the final crisis of the Italian house, so it can carve off the parts that interest it. The future of the Mirafiori factory in Turin is central here. This factory is at the heart of the productive process, if it goes, there will be no future for FIAT auto as an independent producer; the other factories will have a future only as factories of assembly, to sell to the highest bidder; the repercussions with regard to direct employment and that of the subcontractors would be very serious.

Mirafiori is a wounded giant - in only two years it lost half of its workforce and now has only 16,000 workers - but it remains the greatest industrial and working concentration in our country, a site for which the FIAT management sees no future, as was the case for the installation at Arese in Milan. It is a unit where production falls month by month, with thousands of workers temporarily laid off. FIAT's obvious objective is to render the factory economically useless.

During recent months the workers at Mirafiori have gone on strike frequently faced with FIAT's attempt to introduce the system of exploitation of Melfi, Tmc 2, having recourse at the same time to temporary lay offs, a shameless and provocative attempt to squeeze the lemon dry, before definitively throwing it away.

The game played by the largest company in the country is now arriving at its decisive point. It is the expression and the symbol of the global industrial and economic crisis of the country, the paradigm of the bankruptcy of a capitalist class which believed it could win by overcoming the working class, which certainly scored victories against the workers but without succeeding in breaking them definitively, and which has lost decisive ground in terms of international capitalist competition.

Nationalization necessary

Today FIAT ownership is an insurmountable obstacle to the future of the company; FIAT neither wants to

nor can it reverse a situation which has deteriorated so much; it does not have the resources necessary to do so. To keep it alive, to save all the factories for the future of the subcontracting companies, another path must be taken. Without public intervention we cannot save Italy's car industry. Only the nationalization of FIAT can release the resources necessary for a global revival, a productive future which will maintain employment in all the sectors, the needs of the company and the country, and the sub-contracting companies. In itself, the struggle at Melfi will not solve the global problems of FIAT workers, but on the other hand, it creates positive conditions for the revival of a generalized debate on FIAT in order to defend all the productive sites, jobs and working conditions.

Now it is necessary to work to support all forms of mobilization, to widen as much as possible all the breaches which have opened, to multiply the areas of struggle.

At the same time it is clear enough that the convergence and unity of these various mobilizations are necessary. We need a platform of unity on the struggles for jobs, for wages, against precariousness and law 30, for the defense of the social state (pensions, schools, health), a platform where each sector finds a reference, a point of support, the condition for a vast and durable unity able to resist articulated and long-term confrontation.

That is what is at stake here. And we will need to address the trade union Confederations, to build the various trade-union lefts, inside the CGIL, and the rank and file trade unions. The struggles of recent months make possible this step forward in the mobilization of workers.

debate

It would be useful to provide some elements of analysis on the politics of the three big trade-union organizations, the CGIL, CISL and UIL. After a long phase of division, during which the CGIL had displayed a strong political opposition to the center-right government (without this opposition really being translated into a new approach by its federations, with the sole exception of the FIOM) whereas the two other confederations have practiced a policy of separate agreements with the employers' organizations and dialogue with the Berlusconi government, we are now witnessing a rapprochement.

The objective of the confederations is to resume dialogue and agreement with the employers. They think this is possible due to the new turn of Confindustria (the Italian employers' organization) who have elected as president Cordero de Montezemolo, the president of Ferrari and now also of FIAT, thus marking the return of the representatives of large-scale industry to the top of the employers' organization, contrary to the preceding period marked by the primacy of small and medium-sized undertakings.

Confindustria has taken its distance from Berlusconi, is concerned with the terrible degradation of the Italian industrial system which is leading to the break-up of its industries, is aware that research has been abandoned, knows that cost-cutting in relation to labour does not in itself lead to market competitiveness, and wishes to build a new relationship with the trade-union organizations. However, its members want to build on their gains of the last ten years, including the laws passed by the center-right government.

The conditions are thus met to open a new discussion on trade-union strategy. By chance, at the same time as the victory at Melfi, there have been the struggles of the FIOM and the mobilizations in transport and the public sector.

The Confederations do not seek to give an overall answer, unitary in content, capable of defeating the

The trade-union

adversary, the reactionary projects of the right wing government and the aggression of the employers. Yes, the economic crisis has weakened the adversaries, but that will push them still more to squeeze the value of labour power.

The platform for the general strike was from this point of view very significant. It aimed at demanding a partial redistribution of income through taxation, perhaps by mutual agreement with the employers, who are also in search of new forms of assistance. The approach of the FIOM on the other hand sought a more radical redistribution of the national income through confrontation with the employers, demands for big wage rises which would hit their profit levels. On the other hand a new unity between the confederations and a renewed dialogue with Confindustria is not only one objective, but, from their point of view, a necessity, an essential means for the main forces of the center-left in their hypothetical alternative to the Berlusconi government.

According to them, one does not fight the right with a platform and a class mobilization, but with an alliance between the centre-left, the union apparatuses and the employers' forces which are moving away from the right. Naturally, all this presupposes that the dynamic of the movement is under control and that the pressure from below does not express itself with all its potential force. This also means that the approach of the FIOM should

not spread, even if the leaders of the CGIL have been forced to support the mobilizations of the FIOM by their own internal left forces.

Within this framework the FIOM congress takes on great significance. This federation is today the biggest Italian sectoral trade union, in spite of the significant reduction in the workforce which has taken place, especially in the big companies; with 367,000 members (out of a little more than a million and half employees in this industrial sector). In several enterprise level union elections, the FIOM has experienced growth.

In the congress two radically divergent political options were put forward on the role of the trade union:

- On the one hand the Nencini document. Although it does not renounce what the Federation has done up until now, it aims at restoring a more moderate line in "coherence" with that of the CGIL and thus, on the political level, another relationship with the forces of the centre-left.

- On the other, the text of the historic leading group combined with the internal left, which places back at the center (as independent and inalienable variable) the recomposition of labour and its unity. This poses a modification of the national distribution of income more favourable to the working class and democracy as a fundamental instrument of the participation of workers and the construction of the

platform and the struggles. The content of demands, the forms of unity with the other trade unions and the political perspectives derive from this fundamental axis. Consequently, any government will be judged according to its actions and the choices of the FIOM will be completely autonomous. If this line is developed to the end, it implies not only an end to dialogue, but also questioning of the policy worked out at the assembly of the universal Exposition in Rome, in 1978, when it was decided that wages were to depend on the requirements of the company, in other words profit. We know what happened subsequently, with an accelerated race downwards with the agreements of 1992 on the abolition of the sliding scale of wages and 1993 on dialogue.

The success of the FIOM congress can be measured by the level of participation of the rank and file in the preparation of the congress, with around 220,000 workers involved, and by the success of the left's document which obtained nearly 85% of votes. But this success can also be appreciated by the success of the workers at Melfi and Fincantieri.

If the FIOM succeeds in defending and renewing the national contract, opposing precarious work and reconquering the share of wages, it will be easier to have an impact on the dynamics of the internal debate in the CGIL. We are taking the first steps in a process of trade-union recomposition and reconstruction of a new labour movement. *F.T.*