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Socialist Revolution and Latin American Unity

30 April 2005, by Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski

Somebody once said that the historic legend, fabricated by scribblers in the service of the Latin American oligarchies and the colonial or imperialist powers, presents the Libertadores (Liberators) as partisans of the creation of a couple of dozen distinct states, and not one. And that this truly monstrous falsification of "official history" resides in the fact that, whereas in western Europe and the United States nations were constituted as the result of the victories of bourgeois democratic revolutions, in Latin America the states that appeared following the defeat of the bourgeois democratic revolution are considered as distinct nations.

Whoever the author was, it was very well said.
Latin America has an extraordinary particularity on the world scale, which it shares with the Arab world, also divided. In his History of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky said in relation to the national question, "language is the most important instrument of human communication, and consequently of industry. It becomes national together with the triumph of commodity exchange which integrates nations. Upon this foundation the national state is erected as the most convenient, profitable and normal arena for the play of capitalist relations". [1].

It is true that many national states do not cover the totality of territories on which their national language is spoken and that - albeit in fairly exceptional circumstances - two neighbouring states sometimes have the same national language.

But what happened in Latin America is very specific. In a continuous territory where the state language is the same or similar, in the classic epoch of the formation of national states, not one state but around 20 were formed. The anomaly is undeniable and its scale is enormous. In it the condition of Latin America as a dependent, exploited and underdeveloped periphery of the world capitalist system is materialized. So it is natural than in Latin America the idea periodically resurges that the homeland is America, as happens also in the Arab world, with the existence of pan-Arab nationalism.

"The junker road was possible in Germany because the road of Münzer had failed", said René Zavaleta Mercado, referring to the defeat in this country of the peasant war and to the subsequent development of German capitalism by the so-called Prussian, that is oligarchic, road. In the dominant centres of world capitalism all roads, whether democratic, involving the development of capitalism as the consequence of an active bourgeois revolution, led from below and complete, or oligarchic, taken following a passive bourgeois semi-revolution imposed from above, have led to an independent development.

However, in the periphery the oligarchic road could only be a dependent road of under-development of capitalism. As shown by Zavaleta Mercado, if it is precisely this road that has been imposed in Latin America, it is because the road of Túpac Amaru y Túpac Catari has not been taken. [2]

In 1780-81, parallel to the first North American revolution, namely the war of independence of the thirteen British colonies in North America, on the territory of the Inca civilization, a great insurrection for independence combined with a radical uprising of the indigenous peasantry, broke out under the leadership of Túpac Amaru y Túpac Catari. To a much greater extent than the north American revolution, which was fundamentally political, the Andean insurrection was a real and profound bourgeois democratic revolution.

In its class composition and on the basis of its own civilization, it had a much greater potential than any subsequent movement for independence to lay the bases for the unification of Latin America and a democratic and independent development of capitalism.

Its savage suppression and the destruction of the Inca civilization by the Spanish colonial power sounded the death knell of a revolution which could have changed the course of history of the Spanish or Iberian-American part of the hemisphere.

In North America the war of independence in the British colonies was victorious and led to the unification - concretely, to a federation - of the latter. But the maintenance and expansion of slavery in the southern states of the new union prevented the road of development of capitalism - democratic and independent or oligarchic and dependent - from being definitively taken for the next 80 years.

In Latin America the wars of independence waged in the first half of the 19th century, although victorious, were defeated as bourgeois revolutions: they did not succeed in transforming themselves into a Latin American national revolution and building a Latin American union or at least a solid base of support for its formation. Instead of forming a federation or, at least, a confederation, America freed of the Spanish yoke was fragmented into a constellation of states.

Simon Bolivar

In close articulation with the defeat at this level, the wars of independence did not lead either to the suppression of the colony inside the new republics. On the contrary, after the wars of independence, through numerous civil wars, the dominant classes and the colonial modes of exploitation were preserved. Simon Bolivar had a bad, but brilliant, premonition that the union of the old British colonies in north America and the fragmentation of the former Spanish empire would determine their mutual relations, namely that the United States would dominate Latin America. For this reason he aspired to the unification of the former Spanish colonies in a single nation.

In the United States, 80 years after the first American revolution, the civil war between the states of the north, where capitalism had developed on the basis of the exploitation of wage labour, and the southern secessionist states, where capitalism was based on the exploitation of slave labour, became transformed into a revolutionary war for national reunification and the abolition of slavery. It was thanks to this terrible war that the United States definitively won its national unity. It also allowed the democratic and independent road of the development of capitalism to triumph over the oligarchic and dependent road. If the southern secessionist states had won, which was neither impossible nor improbable, the latter would have triumphed, the US would be divided and would have remained in the dependent periphery of world capitalism.
Events a little after the defeat of the South are very revealing of the different and even opposed courses of history in the two parts of America.

In Latin America, a terrible genocidal war led by the triple Alliance of the oligarchies of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay with the support of Britain, the hegemonic world power, against Paraguay led to the complete and irreversible destruction of the sole attempt emerging from the wars of independence to ensure an independent development of capitalism.

The tragic end of this attempt, as audacious as it was disastrously provincial, shows us two things. First, that in this epoch, an independent capitalist development in the dependent Latin American periphery of the world capitalist system was not possible without a prolonged rupture with this system - a rupture as radical as that led by the founder and first governor of independent Paraguay, José Gaspar de Francia. Secondly, that already at this time a durable independent development was not possible in a single country in the Latin American periphery of the world system.

Against any fatalistic conception which suggests that the United States and Latin America were destined to follow the roads that they have effectively followed, it should be recalled that this attitude reflects the fact that history is written by the victors, that “history is not a teleological movement, with a road traced in advance, but a scenario in which classes confront each other”, as Agustín Cueva observed. “As this fatalism is only the other side of elitism, knowledge of the history of the revolutionary movements and the democratic alternatives of Latin America in the 19th century remains still “the bastard of history”. [3]

The big European powers of the time were very conscious that - as French prime minister François Guizot put it - it was the final result of the struggles between the “European party” and the “American party “ which would decide the destiny of Latin America.

Was the victory of the “American party” over the “European party” inevitable in the US, while the opposite was true in Latin America? No, in the two cases nothing was predestined or predetermined. It was in the class struggle and the battlefields of civil wars that the winning party was decided.

Were the big victorious combats waged under the leadership of the head of the “American party” in Mexico, Benito Juárez - the Reform, the civil war and the war of national resistance - destined to end in the super-oligarchic and super-dependent modernization of Mexican capitalism which happened under the regime of Porfirio Diaz? No, they could have ended in a radically different manner.

The calculus of probabilities included the effects of the almost simultaneous victories of the “American parties” in the wars in the US and in Mexico being rapidly extended, with the joint support of their governments, towards the south of the hemisphere, provoking a decisive clash of the continental “American party” with the bastion of the “European party”: the triple Alliance which would crush Paraguay. But this is not what happened, “the defeat of the bourgeois democratic alternative during the period of the Reform”, says Cueva, “consolidates, in any case, the channeling of the whole of Latin America along the reactionary - “oligarchic” - road of development of

capitalism, which coincides perfectly with the imperialist phase which the world system had entered, defining a new period of our history" [4]

Two things should be very clear. First, we are talking about the historic epoch of the bourgeois democratic revolutions. Secondly this epoch was closed once and for all on a world scale, only a few years after the defeat of the "European party" of the slaveholders in the US, after the enormous blow administered by the Mexican people to the European bourgeoisie with the execution of the usurper Habsburg in Mexico and after the destruction of Paraguay by the "European party" of the triple Alliance. It ended with the Paris Commune: the first proletarian revolution to seize power, although only in a transitory manner.

At the end of the epoch mentioned, we thus have two series of logical and historical correlations distributed between the two parts of the hemisphere: north American national unity, the democratic and independent development of capitalism and the promotion of the country to a central position in the world capitalist system; Latin American national fragmentation, oligarchic and dependent underdevelopment of capitalism and a durable peripheral positioning of Latin America in the world capitalist system.

With the transition of capitalism to its imperialist phase, these two series of correlations could produce nothing other than what Bolivar had anticipated: the polarization of the hemisphere between the developed capitalism of the US and the underdeveloped capitalism of Latin America, united inseparably by a relationship of domination and dependence. As Trotsky would say later, Latin America has been subjected by the US to "national exploitation which completes and reinforces class exploitation".

In the framework of world capitalism and on the basis of capitalist relations of production there is an unshakable union between these two series of correlations.

Although the historic epoch of the bourgeois democratic revolutions definitively ended in 1871, in every country in the world where the historic tasks of these revolutions have not been completed, they remain still unfulfilled. The contradiction between the irreversible end of this epoch and the delay in the full realization of these tasks means that they can no longer be resolved by the bourgeoisie or by any of its sectors or factions.

The entire subsequent course of history in Latin America and in other parts of the world has fully confirmed this. Now, faced with the bankruptcy of the Latin American bourgeoisie in the accomplishment of its historic tasks it is the revolutionary class whose ineluctable rise had been announced by the Paris Commune, which should accomplish once it had established its own power.

All the same, the idea of the great Latin American homeland survived among revolutionary Latin American nationalists. The most remarkable revolutionary to emerge in Latin America and indeed the whole colonial and dependent periphery during the transition of capitalism to the imperialist stage, José Martí, activated it as a revolutionary strategy.

Pedro Pablo Rodriguez a has described thus this strategy as applied to Cuba: "The war would be for independence, but would include other goals: this would be no more than a landmark in a very long term political strategy which, beginning in Cuba, would continue through the independence of Puerto Rico and the progressive unification of Latin America, in the face of the expansionist attempts of the US, where the West Indies were the first barrage.

This strategy would guarantee the elimination of all vestiges of Spanish colonialism in Latin American societies avoiding the creation of new colonialist forms. In the language of our times, one would call this a continental strategy of national liberation against imperialism (…) It is indubitable that on this road alone Bolivar preceded Marti, when he demanded a Latin American union as powerful as that which had been formed in the north of America.

Nonetheless, the epochs of the two men were very different; Bolivar led the war for the independence of South America when the US began their territorial expansion to the Pacific coast, seizing the lands of the Indians, and Great Britain was dominant in the developed capitalist world. Martí lived through the decisive years of the transition from pre-monopolist capitalism to imperialism in the US, which had ensured its hegemony in the countries of the Caribbean and threw it into competition with the Europeans in the south of the continent. What was a more or less distant possibility in the time of Bolivar was a reality in the time of Martí." [5]

The references made throughout Martí's work indicate that for him Latin American unity would imply also the formation of a single "new republic" on the Latin American scale, that is, as defined by Martí himself, a republic that would distinguish itself radically from the traditional Latin American republics because it would combat the colony that survived inside it.

Contrary to what might have been logically expected, the development of the Latin American workers' movement and its Marxist parties was in no way translated by an appropriation of Bolivar's and by Martí's ideas of the great homeland. The first Latin American socialist parties, linked to the Second International, ignored them. It might be supposed that the Communist movement would break radically with this social-democratic legacy.

This was confidently expected by those revolutionary militants influenced by Bolivar and Martí who joined the movement, like Julio Antonio Mella, drawn irresistibly by the October Revolution. But they were quickly disillusioned.

The question was first posed in 1928, at the 5th congress of the Communist International. The Comintern's main person responsible for Latin American affairs, the Swiss Communist Jules Humbert-Droz, proposed that the Communist movement recognize as

one of its major revolutionary tasks the formation of the Union of Federated Workers and Peasants Republics of Latin America. His proposal, while obvious and indispensable, provoked a hostile reaction and he was accused of following a "petit bourgeois nationalist Latin Americanism" in a clear allusion to a movement like APRA. At the same congress, the Comintern eliminated from its programme the struggle for the Socialist United States of Europe.

This was one of the innumerable disastrous consequences of the rise to power of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the subordination to its strategy of the construction of socialism in one country that it imposed on the international Communist movement. It followed a sharp break by the Communist parties with the policy, adopted under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, of the united anti-imperialist front and alliance with revolutionary nationalists - a rupture which enormously affected the development of Latin American revolutionary movements.
Recall the radical distinction made by Mella between bourgeois and revolutionary nationalism, a political current which is very important in the history of Latin America, in which Mella said that he "wanted a free nation to put an end to the internal parasites and the imperialist invaders, recognizing that the principal citizens in any society are those who contribute to elevating it with their everyday work, without exploiting their fellow human beings." [6] It is precisely in this sense that we use this term.

Faced with the Stalinization of the Comintern, it was the clearest thinkers and activists of revolutionary nationalism who would preserve the idea of Latin American unity as one of the essential tasks in the fight for liberation from imperialist domination. But, in the direct tradition of the October Revolution, whose original programme Stalin abandoned and betrayed, the main leader, besides Lenin, of this revolution, took up the idea rejected by the Comintern at his initiative. Trotsky not only took it up but also based it on his decisive contribution to Marxist thought, the theory of permanent revolution.

In Russia, not only up until the taking of power by the proletariat in October 1917, but for almost a year after, until autumn 1918, the revolution was proletarian through its leading social force, but bourgeois democratic rather than socialist in its immediate tasks. In taking power, the proletariat first carried out the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution still unfulfilled in this country, including one of the most important, the liberation of nationalities oppressed by the Russian empire, passing immediately, in an uninterrupted or permanent way, from the latter to the first socialist tasks.

Trotsky extended the theory of the permanent revolution, elaborated initially for the revolution in Russia, to all the underdeveloped, colonial and dependent countries. According to him, the possibility of the proletariat taking power in these countries is, naturally, largely determined by the role of this class in the economy of the country, and consequently by the level of its capitalist development. But this was not the sole criterion.

For Trotsky, a no less important question was whether there existed in the country a vast and incandescent "popular" problem, whose resolution would interest the majority of the nation and which demanded the most audacious revolutionary measures. Among the questions of this order he stressed the national question.

Given the insupportable national oppression exerted by the imperialist powers, the young and relatively small proletariat could come to power, in Trotsky's view, on the basis of the national democratic revolution, before the proletariat of a highly developed country dominant in the world capitalist system could come to power on a purely socialist basis. If the proletariat did take the leadership of an oppressed nation and seize power, no national democratic revolution, even one as great as the Mexican Revolution led by leaders as radical and exceptional as Lázaro Cárdenas, could fulfill its task of freeing the nation from imperialist domination.

Whereas the Stalinized Comintern rejected the idea of Latin American unity in attributing to it the reformist petty bourgeois nationalism of APRA, Trotsky posed the question in a fundamentally different manner. In commenting on the positions of the chief Aprist, he wrote, "Haya de la Torre insists on the necessity of the union of the Latin American countries and ends his letter with this formula: 'We, the representatives of the United Provinces of South America'. In itself, the idea is completely correct. The struggle for the United States of Latin America is inseparable from the struggle for national independence of each of the Latin American countries. Nonetheless it is necessary to respond clearly and precisely to the question of what road can lead to this unification Some extremely vague formulations by Haya de la Torre can lead one to conclude that he hopes to convince the current governments of Latin America to unite voluntarily… under the tutelage of the United States. In reality, one can only attain this objective with the revolutionary movement of the popular masses against imperialism, including "democratic" imperialism and its internal agents. It is a difficult road, we admit it, but there is no other." [7]

In indicating the belated and already decadent character of a Latin American capitalism based on the semi-servile conditions of life in the countryside, Trotsky explained: "The American bourgeoisie, which has been capable, during its historic rise, of uniting in a single federation the northern half of the continent, now uses all the power that it has drawn from it to divide, weaken, reduce to slavery the southern half. Central America and South America can only uproot themselves from backwardness and slavery by uniting their states in one powerful federation.

But it is not the backward South American bourgeoisie, venal agency of foreign imperialism, which will be called to resolve this task, but the young South American proletariat, the leader chosen by the oppressed masses. The slogan in the struggle against the violence and intrigues of world imperialism and against the blood-soaked domination of the indigenous comprador cliques, is, then, the Soviet United States of Central and Southern America." [8]

After having taken up this thesis, the Manifesto of the Fourth International on imperialist war and the world proletarian revolution, drawn up by Trotsky in May 1940, continued, “It is only under its own revolutionary leadership that the proletariat of the colonies and semi-colonies can realize an invincible collaboration with the proletariat of the metropolis and the working class as a whole.

"It is only this collaboration which can lead the oppressed peoples to their complete and definitive emancipation, through the overthrow of imperialism in the entire world. A victory of the international proletariat would deliver the colonial countries from the long and painful stage of capitalist development in opening to them the possibility of arriving at socialism hand in hand with the proletariat of the advanced countries. The perspective of permanent revolution does not mean in any case that the backward countries should await the signal from the advanced countries, or that the colonial peoples should wait patiently for the proletariat of the metropolis to free them. God helps those who help themselves. The workers should develop the revolutionary struggle in all countries, colonial or imperialist, where favourable conditions exist so as to set an example for the workers of other countries. Only initiative and activity, resolution and courage can really materialize the slogan ‘Workers of the word unite!’” [9]

The Cuban Revolution was the first revolution in Latin America which freed the nation from the imperialist yoke and carried out the other democratic tasks historically unfulfilled. It was capable of doing so for a fundamental reason: because in a similar manner to what happened in the Russian Revolution in 1917, it brought to power a consistently revolutionary force which identified itself with the immediate and historic interests of the proletariat and the popular masses and in a permanent and uninterrupted manner passed from the accomplishment of the tasks of the national democratic revolution to the accomplishment of the tasks of the socialist revolution.

Anyone familiar with the so-called stages theory of revolution, then adhered to by the absolute majority of forces on the Latin American and world left as constituting, since the coming to power of Stalin in the Soviet Union, a fundamental principle of the Communist movement, will know what an enormous rupture the Cuban Revolution brought about. The result of the application of the stageist theory has always been the same, where it was applied: not only was the socialist revolution always relegated to the Greek calends, but even the tasks of the first stage were not fulfilled. They could not be fulfilled, because the only possible way of ensuring the conquests of the national democratic revolution is to realize the tasks of the socialist revolution. It is the essence of the theory of permanent revolution. Julio Antonio Mella has summed it up thus: “To speak concretely, absolute national liberation can be won only by the proletariat through the means of the workers; revolution.” [10]

Moved by a powerful Latin American vocation, the Cuban Revolution brought together the programmatic aspirations of the most revolutionary currents of Latin American nationalism with the socialist revolution. For the first time since the death of Martí and inspired by his example, this revolution elaborated during the 1960s a strategy of continental revolution whose audacious implementation was assumed in Latin America by comandante Che Guevara at the head of an internationalist guerilla force. We know today that in Che’s strategic plans, the Army of National Liberation under his command was to unite on the basis of a single strategy all the Latin American revolutionary movements and would one day be integrated into the International Proletarian Army whose formation was announced in his Message to the Tricontinental. After having taken part in the Congolese revolution and witnessed its defeat, Che wrote: “The initiative of the International Proletarian Army should not die before the first setback.” [11]

When Che and his Cuban, Bolivian and Peruvian comrades fought in Bolivia, a historic event happened in Havana. The great majority of revolutionary currents and left organizations from all the countries of Latin America met at the conference of the Latin American Solidarity Organization (OLAS). “The organizations here represented” said Armando Hart, president of the Cuban delegation, “have met to elaborate a common strategy of struggle against Yankee imperialism and the bourgeois oligarchies and landowners, which are bent to the interests of the US government. The Cuban delegation represents a revolutionary party. Our theses are based on the ideology of Marx and Lenin. We are heirs to a fine revolutionary tradition of solidarity between the peoples of this continent. We should be faithful to this tradition. Karl Marx said at the time of the Paris Commune, that the objective of the popular revolution consisted in destroying the military bureaucratic machine of the state and replacing it by the armed people. Lenin said later that in this thought resided the fundamental lesson of Marx in relation to the tasks of the proletariat in the revolution, concerning the state. Our delegation considers that historical experience has confirmed these affirmations of Marx and Lenin. We consider that it is necessary to analyze these approaches of Marx and Lenin in terms of both the theory and their practical consequences.” [12]

In its report on the strategy of the continental revolution, the Cuban delegation recalled that “the value and the profundity of Martí’s conceptions can be measured bywhat follows: [Marti] deepened the Bolivarian ideal consisting in the conception of LatinAmerica as a single great country [and] posed the struggle for the independence of Cuba as part of the Latin American Revolution “. At the same time, the Cuban delegation stated that “today, the revolutionary solidarity of the peoples of Latin America has a greater depth than the antecedents which served as its basis, because the continental conception of a single Latin American people has been strengthened.” [13]

One year later Inti Peredo, a survivor of the Bolivian guerilla force, confirming his faith in “the triumph of the revolutionary forces which will establish socialism in Latin America” and his fidelity to “the dream of

Bolivar and Che of politically and economically uniting Latin America", said: "Our single and final objective is the liberation of Latin America, which is not only our continent, but also our country, currently divided into 20 republics." [14]

Nearly 40 years later, it is urgent that we reclaim "the continental conception of a single Latin American people" and the idea, with which Che went to fight in Bolivia, that "Latin America will be a single country", as it is urgent to inscribe Latin American socialist unity in the programmes of the popular movements and revolutionary currents. I believe that, without further delay, we must begin to prepare the conditions for the elaboration, once more, in a future which will probably prove much closer than it appears, of a strategy of continental revolution. A strategy which would correspond to Latin American and world conditions of neoliberal capitalist globalization and a unipolar world dominated by US imperialism, more than ever powerful, aggressive and mortally dangerous but at the same time more than ever decadent and rotten with explosive and insoluble contradictions.

Only the proletariat and its broad popular allies can win that which was not won by the wars of independence and what was irreversibly lost by the Latin American bourgeoisies, making the goal of the great struggles of the exploited and oppressed masses which approach inexorably the unification of Latin America as a single nation. Today, continental unity is posed in a vaster still framework which should be capable of attracting the diverse nationalities of the Caribbean.

In the report, already quoted, of the Cuban delegation to the conference of the OLAS in 1967, we read that there was "an obvious fact which has not been evaluated in all its dimensions: there has never been a group of peoples so numerous, with such a big population and so extended a territory, which nonetheless preserve very similar cultures and interests, and identical anti-imperialist goals. Each of us feels ourselves part of our America. Thus we have learnt from historic tradition, thus we have inherited from our ancestors, thus we have learnt from our predecessors! None of these ideas is new for the representatives of the revolutionary organizations of Latin America.

But have we sufficiently evaluated what these facts represent? Have we analyzed in depth the meaning of the fact that, since the distant epoch of the first years of the 19th century, we have a continental idea of struggle which has developed across Latin America? Have we analyzed with sufficient clarity the irrefutable fact that Latin America constitutes a single and great people?" [15] All these questions are today as pertinent as they were then.

To be a single nation, Latin America should be socialist. To be socialist, Latin America should be a single nation. For Latin America will achieve its second, true and definitive independence, announced more than 100 years ago by Marti and more than 40 years ago by Fidel Castro, when the Latin American revolution again goes on the march until it builds a single Latin American socialist nation. It seems that it is already on the march again with the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela.

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Footnotes

[1] Leon Trotsky, "History of the Russian Revolution", volume 3, chapter 39, www.marxists.org

[2] R. Zavaleta Mercado, "Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia", Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico, 1986, p. 84-95.

[3] Agustín Cueva, "El desarrollo del capitalismo en America Latina: Ensayo de interpretacion historica", Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico, p. 49-59.

[4] A. Cueva, op. cit., p. 59-60.

[5] Pedro Pablo Rodriguez, "La idea de liberacion nacional en José Martí", Pensamiento Critico no. 49, 1971, p. 144, 156.

[6] Julio Antonio Mella, "Documentos y articulos", Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1975, p. 190.

[7] L. Trotsky, "Oeuvres", Institut Leon Trotsky, Paris 1985, vol. 19, pp. 160-161.

[8] L. Trotsky, "Oeuvres", Publication de l'Institut Leon Trotsky, Paris 1979, vol. 4, pp. 56-57.

[9] L. Trotsky, "Oeuvres", Institut Leon Trotsky, Paris 1987, vol. 24, pp. 55-56.

[10] L. Trotsky, "Oeuvres", Institut Leon Trotsky, Paris 1987, vol. 24, pp. 55-56.

[11] Ernesto Che Guevara, "Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria: Congo", Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires, 1999, p. 32.

[12] "Informe de la delegacion cubana a la Primera Conferencia de la OLAS", La Habana, 1967, p. 5-6.

[13] Ibid., p. 30, 38-39.

[14] Guido "Inti" Peredo, "à La guerrilla boliviana no ha muerto! Acaba apenas de comenzar", Tricontinental - Suplemento Especial, 1968, p. 6.

[15] "Informe de la delegacion cubana"., op. cit., p. 26.

How the Sri Lankan government has used the tsunami...

30 April 2005, by Vickramabahu Karunarathne

NSSP and TU demo (30 March) demanding relief acceleration and withdrawal of "100 metre" law.

As soon as the Tsunami struck, people came out to help the victims. Rescue and relief work was done by the people, organized by community leaders and the local political leaders. Later they were supported by NGOs and community organizations. State help came much later.

Both President Chandrika and opposition leader Ranil accepted this. Chandrika, in her famous speech on 17th January 2005 said "ordinary people in an extraordinary manner organized and helped the victims in many ways. After two days, though we took measures to face up to this, there was no ability to respond in an organized manner. No, not ability but there was no preparation." (18/01/05 - Lankadeepa)

Ranil, the leader of opposition was more forthright. He pointed out, as he had told the visiting dignitaries and ambassadors that it was "the village system the Vihara, the Churches, the local community leaders, who were first at the scene during the tragedy, not the government." (16/1/05 Sunday Times)

After the first stage of relief and medical care, came the stage of rehabilitation. It was necessary to resettle the displaced people as soon as possible and to restart normal life. Here the government could provide them with new technology, new equipment and new systems. But basic need is to normalize the lives of the people. However, the government did the very opposite.

The majority of displaced people are fisher folk, maybe more than 70 per cent. Then come handicraft workers and tourist service workers. Their lives were tied to the sea and to the coastal belt.

But the government announced that the fisher communities, who are completely displaced almost across the whole island, would not be allowed to resettle near the coast. They will be moved at least 300 metres away from the sea.

"No new building structures will be permitted within 100 metres of the Western coast of the island. In the Eastern coast the distance where the construction will be permitted has been extended to 200 metres. New towns will have to be built one kilometre from the coast."

This report further pointed out that "The only buildings which will be permitted within 100 metere of coastline are commercial and fisheries harbours and religious structures." (16/1/05 Sunday Observer)

The Director General of the Urban Development Authority, Prasanna Silva, confirmed this but added "The second strip of 200 metres would consist of trees, crops and constructions of hotels and restaurants. The balance would be used to relocate activities removed from other areas."

So is clear that even fishermen have to operate from a distance of more than 300 metres from the coast. In addition to environmental arguments, we are told that this is done for the safety of the fisher community. It is also argued that these people are now suffering from a pathological fear of sea and that they need to be kept a distance away from the coast!

However the only fear that engulfs these people now is of losing their traditional habitat because of these policies. Many of them do not have clear titles to the land that they inhabited. Whatever documents they had were washed away by the tsunami.

In the Sunday Times on January 16, a news item says, "Tourism authorities are proposing that unaffected hotels in the 100 metre zone be allowed to remain while partially damaged properties must reconstruct under UDA guide lines if they are to remain. Completely damaged properties should moved out and already approved investments be allowed in the restricted zone."

This clearly indicates that the move is to clear poor and small-scale fishermen from the beaches and the costal areas so that big tourist and fishing industries can take over marine resources and beaches.

On the other hand, the strategy of the government collaboration with the World Bank and the donor powers such as USA and Japan is to use this opportunity provided by Tsunami disaster to get back to the "Regaining Sri Lanka" programme that was rejected by the people.

Another news item in the same issue of the Sunday Times says, "Existing urban development plans are being modified and accelerated to make use of the opportunity provided by the disaster to replace damaged infrastructure with more modern amenities and radical changes are planned for damaged coastal towns."

According to the news item, this information has come from BOI Chairman and Director General Saliya Wickramasuriya. On the other hand the report submitted to the foreign governments considered 10 districts - Trinco, Batti, Ampara, Hambantota, Matara, Galle, Kalutara, Colombo, Gampaha, and Puttalam as the coastal districts with relevant development project proposals. These proposals were prepared before the Tsunami disaster.

Thus the attempt of the government is to use the Tsunami to go back to Mega projects that do not bring any benefits to the ordinary people of this country, rather displacement, poverty and the burden of debt repayment.

While the fear of permanent displacement is growing among the poor victims of the tsunami in the coastal regions, government displacement policy also shows clear discrimination against Tamil speaking people.

In the first place the 100 meters rule is applicable only for the areas affected by the tsunami. For Western and NW regions the rule does not apply. Constructions that have encroached even on the sea could continue for this relatively unaffected region.

So for the South Western region, which is predominantly Sinhala speaking it is 100 metres. There after, for the North East it is 200 metres. We are told that this division is based on 1-metre latitude contour.

If this is so why not state that instead of making an obvious discrimination? As it is, it is a rule with double discrimination.

This government came to power promising to break from the policies of the previous governments and to make a radical change to the economy. Even in the first budget speech the Finance Minister said, "The previous government chose a policy of relying on the private sector and initiated a process of opening the economy, hurried privatization of state enterprises, phasing out the role of the public sector and deregulation of economic activities...

"Under the 'Regaining Sri Lanka' strategy the villager gets reduced to becoming a shanty dweller, in an urban environment with all his income being spent on food, lodging, and transport costs with little or no savings. This lopsided strategy of an urban economy propelling the nation forward has to be reversed. Instead a rural economy that is anchored on local area resources and natural raw materials should be pulling the national economy."

That was the populist philosophy of the government at that time. However even then, Mega projects silently continued. But now after the tsunami, the populist paint of Dr. Amunugama has evaporated.

There are plans ahead to privatize water management, electricity production and distribution, and oil processing and distribution. The JVP have so far behaved as if they are running the show. But now they can see that without any consultation with them Chandrika is taking decisions with her "specialist" friends.

The new word for "Regaining Sri Lanka" is "Rebuilding of Sri Lanka". The task force appointed for this purpose comprises top business leaders with hardly any one with a background in science, technology and engineering. But the major opposition party claims that it will help this rebuilding plan. This leads us to the political structure that could develop to protect and take forward this rebuilding programme.

With the support of global capital if Ranil and Chandrika get together, they could challenge the oppositional forces for a while. Ranil claims that a national plan for 15 years should be formulated.

There is a proposal to postpone elections. Chandrika indicated on January 17 that there are no elections due for five years forgetting the coming presidential elections. She has to get an agreement from Ranil for the postponement of presidential elections.

She also said that mass actions would not be allowed in the coming period. The National Resources in the country such as the phosphate deposit at Eppawala should be made use of as planned, that is by selling it to the multinationals. Those who protest will not be imprisoned but, "kept in hotels and fed".

Already a state of emergency has been declared in 14 Districts, with military coordinators appointed to supervise all activities. Foreign armed forces including Americans are working in coordination with these military leaders.

The presence of Yankee forces, have alarmed all sectors of society. American military leaders knew about the Tsunami at least two hours before it hit us. But they never bothered to inform us. They did not come at the time of disaster. At that time they could have saved some lives. They only came when the damage was done.

First they said it is for rescue, then for rehabilitation, now for reconstruction and rebuilding. In fact they are here to protect investments and businesses.

Both Chandrika and Ranil must be happy to have foreign armed forces, which could contain any mass unrest against the system. The LTTE (Tamil Tigers) have said that they would not want American forces in the Tamil Homeland. Beyond that they could not go, as they except the Yankee forces to counter balance the Sinhala army.

The Chandrika regime has become a top heavy centralized political setup that undermines the principle of devolution. Decisions are taken at the top without consultation of the cabinet, let alone the parliament.

Provincial Councils, which are in charge of health social service, education, land etc., are not given any task in rehabilitation or in rebuilding. The CNO and its committees are not required to consult provincial or local councils. If ISGA was there then all communities and political views in NE could represent in some form through ISGA council, with its 3- component nomination. Government has not attempted to have a dialogue with the elected MPs in NE as an ad hoc committee representing the NE nor it has started formal consultation with the LTTE. Muslims who are the most affected are not represented anywhere. If this situation continues then conflicts will be in evitable.

It is necessary for the left and progressive forces to get together to fight back. It is futile to expect a powerful resistance to grow within the Alliance. JVP is taking a racist and communal opposition, which indirectly assumes that Yankee forces could be useful against the LTTE. However working masses have started protesting. They started to question

the programme of the government. Professional classes have started making critical statements. We must protest against the

- Eviction of fishermen and other small producers from their traditional habitats in the coast.

- Rebuilding Sri Lanka programme formulated without consultation and against working masses.

- Undemocratic, centralist, dictatorial political tendency within the government.

- Emergency regulation, militarisation and the induction of foreign armed forces. In particular the presence of the American army.

- Lack of consultation with Tamil and Muslim communities in the formulation and implementation of rehabilitation and reconstruction.

This is an edited version of a talk given by Dr. Vickramabahu on at the Symposium on National Integration & Economic Reconstruction on January 22, 2005.

The challenge of the anti-capitalist Left

28 April 2005, by Salvatore Cannavò

That a cycle has ended is all the more obvious when we look at the regional elections of the 3rd and 4th April. The polarization between the two blocs of the Centre-right and the Centre-left, with the total absorption of Rifondazione by the latter, has consecrated the victory of bipolarisation in Italy and the logic of a system of alternating governments. With the PRC firmly within the Union (of the Left) and with its ambition to win, as it were, the leadership of it, Rifondazione, in line with the choices made at its congress, has modified its strategic project.

Fausto Bertinotti

This project is no longer to constitute a force alternative to both Centre-Right and Centre-left, but full insertion within the centre-left alliance in order to shift the balance of forces within it and modify its overall profile. What is involved is a substantial change, which prefigures the end of a political anomaly that had nevertheless marked the whole of the 1990s.

The disappointing vote for the PRC

Over and above our opposition to it in the congress, the project has already encountered, only a month after the end of the congress, obvious limits, as shown precisely by the elections. In the recent regional elections, it wasn't just that the moderate project of the Olive Tree was affirmed, with a structural reinforcing of the two parties that are the pivots of the alliance, DS and Margherita (a reinforcing that will not fail to produce its effects in the very structures of the movement, starting with the CGIL). [1] This alliance was portrayed as Prodi being subordinated to the alliance with Rifondazione, but in reality it is the opposite that has happened.

But the lack of growth of Rifondazione is a sign of a more important problem, which cannot be reduced to its relations with the rest of the Union. It poses in fact the question of the party's role and its social implantation, its roots in the masses, its capacity for innovation - very much aspired to but never really practised - its choice of its leading groups, the degree of unitarism and of democratic life within it. That is the big question of "communist refounding" which was set aside at the congress, giving place to a neo-identity debate that was useful for approving the governmental turn. But this is the big question that gave birth to Rifondazione and against which a modern communist force has to be measured. The missing votes for the PRC, especially in the "local" elections where it was essential to be present on the ground, speaks eloquently about the party's real capacity to be present in the social movements and to exist as a party.

It reveals, for example, to what extent the irritating accent that was put on the "broad democratic participation" at the congress was in no way adequate to produce a qualitative leap from an electoral point of view. It tells us, in substance, that the question of the "party" form must again become a central theme of discussions, going beyond the mechanical declarations about the need to innovate. It tells us about the limits that could lead to such an impasse that they would produce an irreversible short-circuit if they were not resolved.

And it also says something more about the real state of the social movements which, certainly, give greater strength and propulsive force to the political presence of the Union - which is in reality regaining a large part of the votes it had lost from 2000 onwards - but which do not succeed in winning concrete results and which at election time, turn towards the parties that are the strongest and the most moderate of the alliance.

This is the main contradiction of the present phase - and it is no accident that we strongly insisted on it at the congress. It greatly complicates relations between the PRC and the other forces of the Left who show themselves willing to build united action on the social level - since they are in any case conscious of being the beneficiaries of popular expectations which will not only find an answer through struggles and conflicts.

Unfortunately the congress completely put off evaluating the relationship of forces between the classes, of making a cool-headed analysis and a balance sheet of the action of the social

movements and of the party's role within them, and contented itself with a renewal of its identity, which was, among other things, contradictory as far as party structures were concerned. The elections on the other hand, if we look at them more closely, present a more realistic framework, which we will have to take account of in the coming period, and in which we will have to verify things in real life.

The end of Berlusconi

Above all, the elections showed, and that is something we are very pleased with, the extent of the defeat of the right-wing forces and of Berlusconi in particular. We are profoundly satisfied: the meaning of the fight we conducted at the congress of Rifondazione should create no illusions as to our determination to conduct a merciless struggle against the Right and its policies.

That being the case, we were fully committed to the election campaign and we succeeded in obtaining important results with candidates of our current. The defeat of Berlusconi was decisive, because it was related to the actions of local administrations where the Right had been in power, and to the parliamentary majority as such. The core social base of the Centre-right was undermined by the government's own policies, by a liberalism that didn't succeed in keeping its promises. The problem is not the commitments that Berlusconi didn't respect. It was the "contract with the Italian people", disappointing in its very substance, which let down people's expectations.

The problem is that the promises were kept - with the laws reinforcing insecurity of employment, privatization of services, public assistance instead of the Welfare State, etc. - these laws were rejected because of their effects. The defeat of the Centre-right was above all the sign of the loss of a consensus around neoliberalism, which dominates the whole of international politics, including the politics of centre-left governments.

The popular layers, but also the middle classes and businesses that are victims of the global crisis of neoliberalism - a crisis that the United States has chosen to confront by means of permanent war - are in revolt, and they are turning away from the siren songs of Berlusconism. We should not overestimate this rupture (this taking of distance). In fact, the core social base of the Centre-right is disintegrating, but not collapsing. The right-wing currents maintain an important reservoir of support, as is shown by the results of the Northern League; and the difference between the regional and European elections shows a loss of 372,000 votes, whereas the loss between the European elections and the previous Italian elections was 3 million votes.

It is an inexorable and wrenching crisis, but not yet a defeat. And it manifests itself above all as disaffection towards its own leader, towards his policies, but also towards his strategy of polarization and confrontation with the Centre-left. The epoch of Berlusconi is in part closed and that explains the eagerness to reorganiser the Pole 3) [2]and probably a new leadership, although its is obvious that this solution is not yet on the agenda.

The return of Prodi

But the elections enable us to take a much more realistic look at what the first commentaries had shown about the reality of the Centre-left, of the Union. Prodi is in the process of winning his battle; he is asserting himself as leader of the coalition, basing this supremacy on the success of the core of the alliance that is represented by the axis DS-Margherita. With Rifondazione firmly inside the alliance, the unitary mechanism is being reinforced and structured - and Professor Prodi is the only one in sight who can guarantee it.

Prodi (left)and Rutelli

What is being reaffirmed is the project of the Olive Tree. While changing its name it keeps the same faces - Prodi and Parisi - and the same ambitions: to give Italy a moderate liberal government, where there is room for a minimal dose of social solidarity, linked to a pacifism that is dictated by the multipolar view of foreign policy, capable of guaranteeing the interests of European capital in relation to the United States.

The two main leaders of the coalition, Fassino and Rutelli, quickly took note of this profile, and not by chance. The former by fully assuming the "reformist" character of the Union, exalting "good flexibility" and the merits of the enterprise. The latter by pointing out, in relation to the ambition of Rifondazione to be hegemonic within the alliance, the reality of the strength of the so-called radical Left - PRC, Greens, PDCI - which does not exceed 10 per cent of the electorate. Next, Prodi himself exerted his influence. Looking at the demands of the Confindustria [3]and the employers, he announced to the government his intention of "collaborating" if the priority on the next phase was to "clean up public finances". This willingness to cooperate was expressed by the Centre-left in chorus, by abandoning the call for new elections.

This attitude speaks volumes about their inclination (or lack of it) to kick out Berlusconi and his government under the impact of struggles, which remains essentially what needs to be done. The vote in the regional elections in fact leaves a government that is different, weakened but not defeated. The need to drive it from power remains unchanged, and is even more urgent because a weakened right-wing government can do even more damage.

We think that it is an urgent demand that cannot be put off and it is also an aim of new elections, as an instrument of democratic and social protection. We need to re-launch a united front of mobilisations around this slogan, starting with the renewal of collective bargaining agreements, the fight against insecurity of employment, against the education reforms, the fight for peace and for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the struggle to re-

establish a decent Welfare State, against privatization and speculation.

We can use the extraordinary victory of the 3rd-4th April in this sense by immediately sending out some clear signals: that the regions where the Union is in the majority, and there are now fifteen of them, implement, for example, a boycott of Law 30 which encourages insecurity of employment, but also of the measures of "devolution" that the government want to apply, starting with the management of spending on health. The abolition of health tickets, where they have been introduced, could be the most immediate measure.

The "example" of Vendola

Against our arguments, the centrality of the victory of Nichi Vendola [4] in the Apulia region is presented as decisive proof of the correctness of the line and as an "example" for the future of the PRC. Certainly, Nichi's victory is important and deserves our support, especially now that he has to prove himself. From the results in Apulia, Rifondazione has to demonstrate that it is possible to modify the "law of the pendulum" and therefore to make significant changes in the life of the broad masses.

It goes without saying that, over and above internal objections and criticisms, we are going to commit ourselves to that, starting by building movements and struggles that contribute to this objective. But in reality, the underlying reasons for putting the accent on this result are the same ones that led us into opposition at the national congress and that maintain our differences.

Nichi Vendola

In fact, the "Vendola example" is nothing but the determination to follow the road of reinforcing the political and cultural hegemony of the PRC and of the social movements, within the Union, starting from the rules and the rigid framework of this alliance. What is involved here is a profound change from the previous schema, which on the contrary made the alternative Left a hypothesis that was "external" to the actors of bipolarisation in Italy. In short, for a whole period, and in particular the period that was opened up by Genoa, Rifondazione did not conceal its aim of building a third force.

This project is being run down, while the forces that were accumulated by years of hard, unrelenting work and isolation, but also years that brought satisfaction from the point of view of our relations with social struggles, will now be entrusted to a higher authority, the Union.

Nichi is no longer the expression of opposition to the Centre-left and the Centre-right. He has become a possible and desirable face of the Centre-left itself. To make an example of him for the future means choosing to build up this alliance, putting it more in harmony with the expectations for radical change.

This is a gigantic illusion, whose results won't take long to show. In fact, with the missing votes of Rifondazione in the regional elections, they have already been shown. Can we really believe that Vendola is stronger after a vote that left Rifondazione with 5 per cent and the rest of the alliance with 45 per cent? Or do we think that we can bridge the gap by having recourse to primaries?

In reality, the question of primaries is also likely to be equivocal and contradictory. Their "sanctification" introduces a deformation of our conception of democracy and its intimate relationship with struggle. The primaries don't stand comparison with the mechanisms of council and/or participatory democracy, because the latter require the actual presence of social conflict and therefore of self-organisation, around a declared objective. Whereas the primaries represent rather a post facto confirmation of decisions that have already been taken, a kind of popular approval (which risks reinforcing populism) that does not contribute to developing participation, any more than it does in the United States.

So the case of Vendola comprises a highly contradictory reality: while on the one hand it shows the considerable possibilities that lie before the PRC - correctly seen as a party that is "different", combative and anti-capitalist - it reveals at the same time the road by which the moderate forces of the Union aim to absorb Rifondazione and to dilute the subversive potential of Nichi in the responsibilities of government.

The majority party

The negative opinion that we expressed at the congress of Rifondazione, confirmed by the results of the regional elections, comes up again in the analysis that has to be made of the internal functioning of the party and the proposed organization of the cohabitation between the different souls of the party. On this question, the congress marked an obvious break with the previous situation, by the approval by the majority of the Statutes, and the definition of an organizational framework that makes empty shells of the political leadership bodies and transfers power to executives constituted around the positions of the majority.

You could say jokingly that the 59 per cent of the vote obtained by the majority at the congress - the lowest percentage obtained by the secretariat of any party in Italy today - was transformed into 95 per cent of responsible positions in the party. This break with the past is very negative, because it offers the minorities the role of spectators within their own party.

On the negative effects of this change, we must quote what Rossana Rossanda wrote in a long article that appeared in the daily Il Manifesto (it can be consulted on the site: www.erre.info): "How can we support the idea that the residue of Stalinism should be liquidated with the same articles that the late Stalin and all the CPs of the world used against their oppositions? A party has to be able to act without hindrance, a party is not a discussion circle, we don't have any time to lose - former members of the PCI know this music by heart. But it is

astonishing that Rina Gagliardi should write to me saying what Armando Cossutta 6 [5] used to say to me in his time, and which perhaps he would no longer say".

And again: "A majority can always decide, even when there are bodies where the whole base of the party is represented. But where it isn't represented, you can't (debate) with the part that isn't there. There aren't a hundred ways of running a political collective - which is furthermore isolated from the struggle - by also allowing the others, those who feel uncomfortable where they are, to adhere to it without suspicion. Gramsci was right to remark that a party represents in embryo a model of the future state."

Perspectives for the future

In spite of the negative judgments and opinions that we have expressed up to now - concerning, for example, the discriminations experienced by several minority candidates or the organizational solutions for running local federations and even branches - the battle to change course, to change the orientation of the party, continues. And it is being filled out by the tests that we will have to confront and that are waiting for us on the horizon.

In fact, we have already been through the first of these tests with the regional elections. We think that it confirms our positions. In the near future there are at least three events in the life of the party where the choices the congress made will have to prove their validity: the conference of the Communist Youth, the congress of the CGIL, the coming elections (which may be called early) and in the event of victory, the decisive test of government. We intend to be fully involved in all these tests, as well as the most important test: the pursuit of our activity within the social movements, working to strengthen them and reinforce their autonomy.

For that, the supporters of the fourth motion at the congress, "Another Rifondazione is possible" (the "Sinistra Critica" current) will continue to be active both in the life of the party - by taking on those responsibilities where the blinkered attitude of the majority does not prevent us from doing so - and in social struggles.

What interests us is not the self-proclamation of a "party within the party", the crystallisation as a current of a faction that would enter into relations with the rest of the party in a way that was separated off and conflictual. What interests us is rather to overcome the present crystallisations, to produce a qualitative leap in the present debate where the project of an anti-capitalist Rifondazione is being affirmed with greater strength and greater substance, autonomous from the Union, firmly engaged in the activity of the social movements and much more democratic and participatory than was seen in the choices made at the congress.

So we will work with objectives in mind, aiming for results, as we did in the highly successful anti-war demonstration on March 19th, which was in practice boycotted by the majority of the party. We are going to work towards objectives by seeking to overcome the obstacles of the congress and by concentrating on what needs to be done, what results need to be achieved.

In the coming phase we can identify at least four priorities: winning the referendum on the repeal of Law 40 on medically aided procreation, giving fresh impetus to the anti-war movement in order to achieve the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, even by taking advantage of the government's fragility, inaugurating a real "season against insecurity of employment" that would culminate in the repeal of Law 30, without however going back to the Treu Law [6] (From this point of view we need a concrete initiative on the regional level, given the number of regions where Rifondazione will be part of the government). Furthermore, we have to begin thinking carefully about the state of the party, in order to overcome its most obvious limits and develop an implantation, at least partial, capable of rebuilding the "sentimental connection" with the people. For this link to be a reality, there have to be direct relations and not only via the media. That is the aim of the assembly of the Critical Left ("Sinistra Critica") on 23rd-24th April.

These ambitions are intertwined with those of the editors of our journal and with the political project that lies behind it, which has more distant origins. At the crossroads marked by the end of one cycle by the tests that await us, the time has come for us to take a few risks, to get rid of labels that are ideological, and indeed caricatural, and to measure up to those who support us by adhering to a strategic vision of change and of social revolution. The time has come to make a qualitative leap; besides, our attachment to an international project has always been marked by that. Make a qualitative leap; that is what we propose to do on the road that awaits us, in order to strengthen an anti-capitalist Left, a critical Left, a communist Left.

Appendix

Voting at the Congress and changes to internal democracy

The congress ended with PRC leader Bertinotti having a majority of 59.7 of the delegates. The current "Essere comunisti" of Claudio Grassi (Leninist-Togliattist) had 26 per cent, the current "Progetto Comunista" (Marco Ferrando and Franco Grisolia) and our own current, "Sinistra Critica" each got 6.5 per cent and the "Falce e Martello" (linked to the Grant-Woods international current) got 1.6 per cent. So together all the oppositions to the line on the government received 41 per cent and that was expressed in an alliance on all the controversial questions concerning internal democracy.

The congress approved, voted only by the majority of the party, profound change sin the party statutes with the introduction of a new body, the executive, which in fact replaces the leadership (which remains an empty shell, without the National Secretary, without the leaders of the parliamentary groups, etc.) and which is constituted on the basis of responsibility for different tasks, and therefore has a strongly majority composition.

At the last National Political Committee, in any case, the oppositions voted against this body but they were represented with the "right of expression". So the Sinistra Critica current is represented proportionally in the leadership with two members (Salvatore Cannavo and Franco Turigliatto) and on the executive by Gigi Malabarba (leader of the parliamentary group in the Senate) and Flavia D'Angeli (who will take charge of the "Insecurity of employment" department).

Footnotes

[1] The Olive Tree was the previous centre-left alliance headed by Romano Prodi, which held power before Berlusconi. The new alliance is known as the Union.]

The PRC is left as the only party of the Union that didn't increase its vote, which went down in comparison with the European elections. It actually fell, in particular in the South, which had seemed to represent the great novelty of recent years, to its percentages of the year 2000, that is, before the great season of the social movements, before Genoa. This was an obvious sign that the rapprochement with the alliance and its leader - the "Prodinotti" - had been excessive. [[DS (Left Democrats) is the continuation of the majority of the Italian Communist Party. Margherita ("Daisy") is a Christian Democratic current. The CGIL is the main union confederation, which was historically linked to the CP.

[2] A play on the names of Prodi and of PRC leader Fausto Bertinotti.

[3] The Confindustria is the Italian employers' organization.

[4] Nichi Vendola is the PRC candidate who won the presidency of the Apulia region.

[5] Armando Cossutta is the leader of the Party of Italian Communists (PDCI), which split from the PRC in the 1990s when the PRC abandoned its support for the previous centre-left government. At the time when he was a leader of the PCI, Cossutta had a reputation as a diehard Stalinist.

[6] The Treu Law was a labour law promulgated by the previous centre-left government.

¡Cochabamba! - Story of the Water Wars

24 April 2005, by Phil Hearse

Every socialist, every global justice campaigner, should read this book. Not just because it is an inspiring story of mass struggle and resilience, but because within that story many of the fundamental questions of strategy which face the global justice movement are concentrated. Oscar Olivera, one of the key leaders of the struggle, and Tom Lewis, a member of the editorial board of International Socialist Review (US), have done a tremendous service in writing this book. Although some basics of the Cochabamba story and considerations on strategy are recounted here, you can only get the Full Monty by reading the book.

First the water war story. In 1999, at the 'suggestion' of the World Bank, the Bolivian government came forward with the proposal (Law 2029')' to privatise Cochabamba's water supply, and to sell it to a new company, Aguas del Tunari, a consortium of local and international capital, including Bechtel of the US (massive profiteers from the Iraq occupation) and Abengoa of Spain.

This was an almost pristine-pure example of David Harvey's description of neoliberalism as 'accumulation by dispossession'. E(For this was not just the privatisation of a nationalised or municipal company; 80% of the one million people in the greater Cochabamba area had their water supply provided by local non-profit associations whose charges just covered electricity and other basics. These local associations were just robbed. And not just that.

Local peasants, incredibly, were forbidden by law from collecting rainwater which henceforth became the property of Aguas del Tunari. Water bills shot upwards as the new company recorded massive (and impossible) water usage by households. People in Britain know about sharp increases in utility charges through privatisation, but this was in a poor country where a worker might make $80 a month, and thus where water became impossible to pay for.

The first group of crucial actors we come across in this story is the Fabriles (the Cochabamba Federation of Factory Workers), a broad trade union co-ordination which had tried to act as a centre for local struggles, and

address contemporary problems of trade unionism in Bolivia, about which below. Oscar Olivera was a key leader of this co-ordination. At the end of 1999 peasants and workers urged the Fabriles to broaden their scope and take on the water struggle.

Insurrection

The Fabriles became a central component in the Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua and de la Vida (Coalition to Defend Water and Life) formed in November 1999. The struggle began with a series of very militant actions, including roadblocks, marches and rallies. These were met with brutal repression, including brining in riot police from La Paz, and the army, to put down the protests. Between February and April 2000 the situation swung between rebellion, repression and open insurrection.

The book contains moving accounts of the 'February Days' and the 'April days', in which the entire plebeian population organised itself through neighbourhood assemblies, sectoral assemblies and meetings of the Coordinadora, to build barricades, fight the cops and the police and - especially during the Last Battle of April 4 to effectively seize the city.

"As we walked, however, we realised the entire city was blockaded. The citizens had armed themselves with bricks and stones, and television cameras were broadcasting everything live..." (p.35)

Rebellions like these reveal new levels of social (and inter-generational) solidarity; young people and old people all had a role, from barricades built by children to older people filling pots with water to fight the tear gas. What had been built, on the basis of the popular assemblies and mass mobilisation, was virtually dual power at the level of the city. For a time, the populace held the city.

Faced with this rebellion, the government eventually caved in - not without having tried to trick the rebels with fake agreements, eventually unmasked. Not only did the government cave in, but it was forced to concede that of the seven directors of the now de-privatised water company, SEMAPA, three would be elected from the population as a whole and one would represent the water workers union. Law 2029 was kaput. In the space of five months, using the methods of popular assembly and decision making, mass participation and mass mobilisation, the Coordinadora, led effectively by militants from the Fabriles, had forced an embarrassing and spectacular retreat by the government and its foreign backers. "For one week the state had been demolished. In its place stood the self-government of the poor led by their local and regional organizational structures." (p125)

Organisation and Strategy

Here I am going to quote what I think is a key passage from the book, not because in itself it crystallises all the problems faced by the global justice movement, but because it is a legitimate starting point for a reflection on these problems:

According to Oscar Olivera ,"As the April blockades were winding down, one family stopped me on their way home. 'Compañero, now the water is going to be ours, what have we really gained?' a woman asked me. 'My husband will still have to look for work. As a mother and a wife, I will still have to go out into the street to sell things, and my children will have to drop out of school because there's just not enough money. Even if they give us the water for free, out situation still won't have gotten any better. We want Banzer to leave, his ministers to go with him and all the corrupt politicians to leave. We want social justice. We want our lives to change."

This of course is the dilemma of all struggles for limited in which the masses begin to exercise their power; the results - in this case the winning of a municipal water company - seem terribly limited compared with the mobilisation and sacrifices made. But the comments of this peasant woman confirm that only by a massive change of the government and the state, and of fundamental social relations, will justice for the poor be achieved.

In fact the Cochabamba struggle then led into other giant struggles, those of the cocaleros (coca growers) and against the theft of the nation's gas and petroleum reserves, struggles which eventually brought down the Sanchez de Lozada government, and which are still continuing today. Among the leaders of these struggles the idea of convening a Constituent Assembly - a classic demand from the arsenal of the workers and popular movements - began to take hold. It also led in 2003 to the formation of the Estado Mayor del Pueblo (Joint Chiefs of Staff of the People), and an attempt to create a national leadership structure for the anti-neoliberal struggles.

A large part of this book is taken up with reflection on the Cochabamba struggle, and what its organisational and strategic lessons might be. A basic problem for popular struggles in Bolivia is that since the introduction of the ironically named New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1985, the organised workers movement has suffered decisive defeats and its vanguard has been all-but destroyed. In particular of course most of the tin mines have been closed and the miners, historic vanguard of the class, have become a very small section of the workforce. What then is the 'new world of labour', how can global justice fighters construct the necessary forces for progressive social change, and through what organisational methods?

A fundamental factor of the Cochabamba struggle is that it was based on the mobilisation of what one of the book's contributors, à lvaro García Linera, calls (after Negri) 'the multitude' - masses of the people, including informal workers, unemployed, peasants, retired people, children and students - not just the ranks of the 'industrial' working class.

Oscar Olivera and Tom Lewis comment : "If it is true that a reduction occurred in the number of workers organized in unions and concentrated in large workplaces, it is

also true that over the 1990s an inverse process of 're-proletarianisation' unfolded within the economic and social structures of the country." (pp105-6)

In fact the number of workers has gone up, but they are less organised in large manufacturing plants and the mines, and now located across a swathe of manufacturing and service industries:

"…the number of wage workers who sell their labour power is much higher than it was ten years ago. Yet popular perception would have us believe just the opposite: that there are no wage laborers, there is no wage labor, and industrial production is irrelevant.

"How can we explain this kind of historical delirium, one that affects not only a certain gang of intellectuals but also experienced trade unionists?

"Almost invisibly, Bolivia has been converted into a semi-industrial workshop in which workers themselves do not realize their social power and economic importance. Neoliberal reforms have changed the world of work but they have not shrunk it. Neoliberalism has rather fragmented and transformed the conditions of work." (p106)

This is a familiar pattern, aspects of which can be seen in advanced capitalist countries as well. But it leads to a very difficult conclusion:

"The new working class has, so far, found it extremely difficult to project itself as an active social subject with sufficient personality to launch convincing mobilisations, to generate demands that motivate large numbers, or with even less success, to put forward practical proposals that incorporate the demands of other social sectors."

Anyone who can put forward a global, internationally-applicable, solution to this problem that the authors raise in relation to Bolivia gets my Lenin prize for revolutionary genius of the new century. In some ways it is the strategic problem of the whole socialist, workers and global justice movements.

However Oscar Olivera and Tom Lewis explain attempts to use the Fabriles to 'reach out' to the new world of work, to act as an 'organising centre' for the struggles of the informal sector, of un-unionised workers and especially oppressed sectors of the workforce, in the first place women. I will not recount this in detail, but it suggests new forms of organisation and solidarity, the imagining and construction of which are crucial experiments as the socialist and workers movements search for a path forward.

Lessons from the Water Struggle

In this the Cochabamba struggle itself provides lots of clues, but also lots of problems and imponderables. In the first place the leadership role of the Fabriles, the organising centre of the factory workers, is striking. Only they had the experience and the organisation to provide the leadership - and indeed the infrastructure in terms of offices, phones etc - that was need to get the Coordinadora going. But note of course that the Fabriles was not the local arm of a bureaucratised national leadership structure which could have intervened and demobilised the struggles. This autonomy from the bureaucratic structures, anathema to those who repeat the old slogans about the sacrosanct nature of 'trade union unity', gave the Coordinadora the flexibility and the mobility to dynamise the leadership of a whole city.

If we want to conceptualise what forms of organisation can reach out to the informal and non-unionised sectors, then in many countries it cannot be the traditional trade union form. In sectors with small workplaces, with a high turnover of the workers, and in which the relationship of forces is so overwhelmingly in favour of the employers, traditional unions are almost impossible to stabilise. The very attempt to construct them can expose the militants to immediate repression and dismissal. More politicised trade union and social mobilisation centres have to be constructed, which can provide mobilisations beyond one single or group of workplaces.

This is just one side of the coin; in many places in the 'third world', where huge factories of the transnational corporations have been constructed (Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam), the 'old' union form is exactly what is needed. But in most of those places the huge new factories in the 'special economic zones' are literally a relatively small island in a sea of informal, unemployed or underemployed workers, who themselves need to be linked to broader mobilisation structures.

Addressing the 'new world of work' means constant experiments to imagine and construct the type of fighting organisations capable of articulating overarching demands and struggles. Autonomy from every aspect of state corruption and clientalism, and de facto autonomy from the bureaucratic apparatuses are vital preconditions.

The second lesson of Cochabamba (the first in terms of importance) is the impressive type of self-organised structures constructed around the Coordinadora, at local and regional level. Such structures, however much they grope towards raising the question of power and self-government, are by nature temporary - unless of course the political content of the struggle which they lead is of a sufficiently 'high' (explicit) level to propel them to actually attempt to conquer power. This of course cannot be done by a local or regional structure such as the Coordinadora. If a Coordinadora-type organisation existed on a national basis, that would in itself pose the question of social transition.

Finally the question of political parties. This is basically not addressed by the authors, but probably is outside of the self-defined scope of the book, and there is no need to assume that all the book's contributors agree on this point. It is a vital question nonetheless from the viewpoint of overall strategy.

In a country like Bolivia, the term 'revolutionary' in their name is nearly obligatory for corrupt, right wing and pro-neoliberal parties 2. Mass popular disillusionment with all kinds of

political professionals - including revolutionary and marxist ones - is not surprising; Oscar Olivera talks of the distance between the masses and 'discourse professionals'. A less sympathetic reviewer than myself might argue that a long-time trade union leader, and former member of a Marxist-Leninist organisation, is also in his own way a 'discourse professional', as is the regular activist in any type of organisation.

Similar moods can be found for example within the rebellious masses in Venezuela, including people who don't like the Bolivarian committees in the barrios because they spend too much time discussing 'politics' as opposed to 'real problems'.

When you read this book, you start out with the Cochabamba struggle, and follow its course, almost entirely from within the perspective of the city itself. Only later in the book does the reader try to fit that very complex reality in the framework of an amazing panorama of social sectors and struggles throughout the country.

How can an organisation representing (and involving) the popular masses be put together which can construct a political map of this reality, can foresee, imagine and construct the decisive crossroads and turning points on the map, and know how to approach them? A body which is capable of inserting this complex picture into an historical discourse - in other words being 'the historic memory of the class'. And linking the day-to-day struggles with the question of government and power? Any membership structure which attempts these tasks will become a political party, whether it calls itself a 'movement', a 'front' or anything else.

Read ¡Cochabamba!. It is a window on the liberatory potential, and the strategic challenges, of our times.

The Center Left, Nationalism and Socialism

24 April 2005, by Claudio Katz

The new governments of South America share a critique of neoliberalism, questioning unrestrained privatization, the excessive opening to the world market and social inequality. In addition, they propose to build more productive and independent capitalisms with greater state regulation. But their ascension to power has raised two questions: Do they form a common bloc? And will they enable ordinary people to gain power?

Neoliberalism's troubles

Brazilian President Luis Ignacio da Silva (Lula) and Argentine President Nestor Kirchner rose to power because neoliberalism did not succeed in reversing Latin America's decline on the world market. This loss of position is confirmed in the stagnation of investment and per capita income, and it stands out in comparison to China or Southeast Asia.

Cycles of prosperity continue to be subject to financial flows and export prices. Therefore the benefits that capitalists received during the 1990s proved unsustainable. Besides, reductions in labor costs did not compensate for the contraction of the internal market. The decline in purchasing power affected accumulation.

The opening to the world market increased the competitive disadvantage of Latin American businesses on the world market. Many capitalists profited from public debt, but deregulation has reduced political, fiscal and monetary autonomy required to counteract periods of recession.

Neoliberalism did not force surrender on the social struggles. Ruling classes did not win victories comparable to the ones they won in previous decades. On the contrary, they have faced revolts that overthrew several presidents in the Andean area and in the Southern Cone.

Direct action by peasants(Perú), the indigenous upheaval (Ecuador), street protests (Argentina), a climate of insurrection (Bolivia), land occupations (Brazil), political awakening (Uruguay), antiimperialist mobilizations (Chile) and battles against coup plotters (Venezuela) marked the new cycle of rebellion in the region.

Ruling classes have lost the confidence they showed in the 1990s and their chief representatives have left the scene (Menem, Fujimori, Salinas, C.A. Perez, Lozada). At the same time, the neoliberal identification of corruption with a state-controlled economy has crumbled. The continued embezzlement of public funds during the last decade showed that corruption is a feature of all regimes that are entwined with big business.

Neoliberalism in Latin America has lost the momentum that it seems to be regaining in Europe. In both regions, first Thatcherism, and then social liberalism, attacked. But the effects of business deregulation and labor flexibility have been different in a core zone of the world economy than in a peripheral zone. The same confrontations with the working class that in Europe provoked a loss of historic working class gains, in Latin America precipitated widespread catastrophe. Therefore the intensity of popular reaction has been higher in a region with very vulnerable economies and very unstable political systems.

The character of

the center-left regimes

Lula and Kirchner change the political framework that the ruling classes have known for decades. Big business and bankers that profited from deregulation now accept the turn to state intervention. The sectors most affected by the shocks of the 1990s look to soak up state subsidies and stop foreign competition.

The dominant alliance of financiers, industrial capital and agroexport industries that holds the reigns of power do not conform to the classic 'national bourgeoisie' of the 1960s. They reinforced their integration into international financial circuits (as borrowers and state creditors) and they consolidated their export-oriented profiles at the expense of internal markets. They maintain substantial investments outside of their countries.

Nevertheless, this major transnationalization has not removed their local roots. To preserve their principal activities in the region, the Latin American ruling classes present themselves as a distinct and rival sector of business against corporations from outside the region. They provide the principal foundation to the new governments and influence the increasingly conservative behavior of these governments' functionaries.

Lula and Kirchner avoid populist demogogery and conflicts with the U.S. State Department because they are on the same wavelength as the big regional capitalists. This cautiousness explains why they negotiate World Trade Organization rules and 'lite' versions of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, rather than forming a real customs bloc. They implement fiscal adjustment, comply with the IMF and reject the formation of a "debtors front."

The new presidents have refused to participate in the imperialist occupation of Iraq, but few heads of state are accompanying Bush in this crusade. On the other hand, in sending troops to Haiti, they have helped the Pentagon free up troops for the war in the Arab world. Lula, Kirchner and newly elected Uruguayan President Tabaré Vazquez collaborate with a puppet government that seals the coup against Aristide, regulates drug traffic and controls massive emigration to Miami. That Latin American troops act under the figleaf of the UN doesn't change the service they are rendering to the U.S. A humanitarian effort did not require police, but rather solidarity campaigns and initiatives to cancel the debt of this impoverished country.

The center-left governments do the job of pacifying the rebellious movements in the region. Lula's and Kirchner's emissaries fulfilled this task during the Bolivian crisis of 2003. They intervened in the midst of the popular upheaval to support formation of a caretaker government that will assure the privatization of hydrocarbons. Other presidents with progressive origins have done this reactionary work without needing external help. This is the case with Ecuador's Luis Gutierrez, who promised sovereignty and governs with repression and privatization.

Brazil and Argentina

The new presidents emerged from different conditions. Lula took power in the final phase of an economic crisis that accentuated Brazil's urban inequality and rural misery. Kirchner took over the reins of government at the culmination of the worst depression in Argentine history. This collapse included the unraveling of the financial system, the confiscation of savings and a level of poverty, hunger and unemployment never seen before.

Lula has earned the plaudits of Wall Street because he preserved F.H. Cardoso's neoliberal model. He repeated the same arguments of his predecessor ("to earn the markets' confidence to attract investment") to reinforce the authority of the financiers who run the Central Bank. Moreover, he underwrote bankers' profits by running an unprecedented budget surplus of 4.5 percent of GDP and the highest interest rates in two decades. With these mechanisms, he guarantees payments to creditors that are twice the level of social spending.

Kirchner avoided this straightforward continuation of his predecessor's polices because he had to rebuild broken circuits of accumulation. He adopted more heterodox policies in order to rebuild earnings for all capitalists, redirecting the distribution of losses. He used the economic recovery to combine fiscal adjustment with multiple subsidies and reestablished equilibrium between winners (banks and privatizers) and losers (exporters, industrialists) from the 1990s currency peg to the U.S. dollar.

Because he confronted a more serious economic collapse than that of Brazil, Kirchner had to privilege certain creditors over others, disbursing payments and financial penalties. Now he negotiates rates and regulations with privatized companies. Lula could avoid this process of reconstitution of capital. Nevertheless, both governments defend corporate profits at the expense of workers.

Already, the Brazilian president has pushed through a regressive pension reform, frozen agrarian reform and accentuated the deterioration of real wages. His party holds back union struggles and has succeed in reducing the level of popular mobilization. In contrast, Kirchner faced a more complex social situation, because he took power in a climate of popular rebellion. He has sought to dampen social protest through cooptation (by turning protesters into functionaries), exhaustion (media attacks and isolating the most militant sectors) and criminalization (dozens of imprisoned fighters, thousands more charged).

Kirchner managed to diffuse the pot-banging protesters and piqueteros, but he hasn't eliminated the mobilizations as a backdrop of Argentine politics. He is governing like a conservative, but he obscures his continuity with the neoliberal past much more than his Brazilian counterpart.

While Lula's ascension was accomplished without ruptures in the system of government, Kirchner came into office at the end of a stormy sequence of resignations and temporary governments. What in Brazil was a regular transition of governments, in Argentina had been a delicate operation of restoring the state's credibility in the face of massive questioning of the regime ("que se vayan todos"-"they all must go").

Lula completed the transformation of the PT into a classic political party in the bourgeois system. He tossed aside his leftist past and and brought the PT into a two-party system. With government money he finances an army of functionaries that supported the PT's expulsion of deputies who opposed the pension reforms.

This same transformation of a popular movement into an arm of capitalist domination affected Peronism for a long time. Therefore Kirchner renews for the umpteenth time a party that guarantees governmental stablility for the ruling class. But he duplicitously covers these clientelistic relationships with well-received gestures on human rights, for independence of the courts and opposition to corruption.

Uruguay and Bolivia

By reason of the magnitude of its economic troubles, Uruguary is similar to Argentina. But the lower intensity of social struggle and its higher degree of political stability made its transition more like Brazil's.

Although the GDP and investment collapsed, the crisis did not reach Argentinian proportions in the Eastern Republic (Uruguay). The Broad Front party managed to assure institutional continuity, avoiding lurches and a political vacuum. Now the future Broad Front government ministers are preparing themselves to introduce Lula's orthodox economic program. They promise to keep paying the foreign debt, to keep the regressive tax system, off-shore banking privileges and an enormous government surplus to prevent any defaults on debt payments.

This transition is explained in part by the weakness of social resistence owing to unemployment, emigration and the aging of the population. But it also reflects the historic traditions of a country that has known neither popular insurrections, nor significant institutional ruptures, under a deeply rooted political party system.

The Broad Front (FA) is taking office after making strong commitments to maintain the status quo and putting forth a program empty of any transformational content. The official message it spreads is that "a small country can't do it on its own" as if progressive changes were the province only of big and powerful nations. This discourse justifies impotence and will clash with the expectations raised by the coalition's election victory. The FA's social base will not easily swallow the leadership's 'crackpot realism'.

In Bolivia, the center left (represented by Evo Morales's Movement to Socialism party [MAS]) doesn't exercise power directly, but props up the wobbly President Carlos Mesa and works to defeat him in the 2007 elections. But this political calculation doesn't mesh with regional instability, nor with the fragile control of a ruling class that lacks economic resources, and the political and institutional means to get itself out of the crisis.

The shifting of Bolivia's productive core from the tin-mining East to the petroleum-producing West makes the economic disaster worse. Mine closures greatly increased unemployment, while the attempt to eradicate coca devasted the peasantry. This mass impoverishment also accelerates a tendency to national disintegration, as when big business in the Santa Cruz region demands independence so that it can pocket profits from oil development. This demand for independence rose immediately against the popular demand that brought down Sánchez de Lozada in 2003: nationalizing gas and oil to process them in the country.

There exists today in Bolivia an extraordinary tradition of popular uprisings. For this reason, Mesa has pushed a deceitful referendum that attempted to disguise continued energy privatization with promises of nationalization. Mesa's support from Evo Morales permitted him to suggest that the country was moving toward nationalizing hydrocarbons, when in reality, Mesa has every intention of maintaining private hydrocarbon contacts for decades.

To try to govern like Lula, the center-left has to demobilize the rebellion and win back the confidence of the ruling class. MAS's moderate proposals and the politicians that promote them have this goal. But the territorial integrity of Bolivia is threatened by balkanization that exists side-by-side with the potential for a new popular insurrection. In conditions like this, it's unlikely that the recipes for demobilization that work in the rest of the Southern Cone will work in Bolivia.

The Bolivarian "process"

Is Venezuela's Chávez part of this center-left wave in Latin America? The international press consistently contrasts the "populism" of Chávez with the "modernizing" paths that the rest of the Latin American governments are taking, because there are significant differences that separate Chávez from Lula and Kirchner.

Chávez didn't preserve the institutional continuity that predominated in Brazil and Uruguay, and he didn't rebuild the traditional parties as happened in Argentina. He emerged from a popular uprising (the "caracazo" of 1989) and from a military revolt (1992) that propelled him to a landslide election victory in 1998. He began by offering social reforms and by approving a very progressive national constitution. His government radicalized along with the popular mobilzations that confronted right-wing conspiracies. This dynamic distinguishes Venezuela from the rest of the center-left governments, because it reacted against big business (December, 2001), coup plotters (April, 2002), the oil bosses (December, 2002) and the challenge of

an attempt to remove him from office by means of a plebiscite (August, 2004). One could tally up many more differences between the Venezuelan process and the rest of South America.

Chávez concretized the displacement of the old ruling class parties that lost their traditional control over the state. Popular sectors support him and he is not seen as an ally of any sector of capital. He hasn't dampened down his promises of change, but rather he has initiated true reforms in land distribution, credit to agricultural cooperatives, and the broadening of education and health services to the population.

Chávez recalls the nationalist tradition of Cárdenas, Perón, Torrijos or Velasco Alvarado. This course is an exception in today's context of a center-left that accommodates to imperialism. It's likely that the pecularities of the army (with few relations with the Pentagon and the influence from left-wing guerrillas) and the weight of the state-run petroleum company (strengthening the bureaucracy, dampening conflicts with its North American customer, diminishing the influence of the private sector) explain this reappearance of populist nationalism. His antiimperialist profile places him opposite other Latin American dictatorships. Chávez has many similarities with Perón, but none with Videla.

Similarities with 1950s Peronism also are shown in the social gains and the use of national income for social welfare. Chavéz receives the same popular support and bourgeois disdain that Perón received in Argentina. But whereas Perón relied for his support on the unionized working class, Chávez is sustained by neighborhood organizations of informal sector workers.

Chavéz's confrontation with the right also sets him apart from his South American colleagues. He dealt several defeats to the right-wing opposition, but it will not stop conspiring against him while it perceives a threat to its privileges. They want to get rid of Chavéz or to force him to reverse his program (as the PRI in Mexico did) in order to reinstate the country's socio-racial hierarchy.

The U.S. pulls the strings of whatever coups and terrorist provocations are prepared in Colombia. But the State Department lacks a Pinochet. So it set up the "friends of the Organization of American States" to undermine Chávez. While White House doves circle around Chávez, the hawks prepare a new assault.

Bush cannot act more boldly while his military is tied up in the Middle East. He does not dare put Chávez in the same category as Saddam, but he would rather try to housebreak him like Khadafi. The U.S. needs Venezuelan oil and it must oppose Chávez strategy of intervening actively in OPEC and of redirecting crude oil sales towards China and Latin America.

What's more, tensions with imperialism are aggravated because Chávez has established very strong ties with Cuba, challenging the U.S. embargo and helping the island with petroleum exports and diplomatic support. Venezuela didn't send troops to Haiti, nor does it bow to Washington's commercial demands. Besides, the country is sensitized by the presence of numerous Cuban doctors and teachers. This relationship with Cuba distinguishes Chávez from Perón, because he doesn't breathe new life into a reactionary ideology like that of the Argentine strongman, but rather he offers an interpretation of Bolivarianism that is favorable to the left and open to socialism.

Venezuela is politically divided into two sides separated by income, culture and skin color. The oligarchy seeks to stop the demands of the poor and excluded by manipulating the middle class. The struggle is settled every day in the streets in a battle over which side can mobilize more supporters, something that is not seen in any other country in the region.

Chávez has shown great ability to win support and to awaken militants' energy against right-wing control of the media. The political climate in the country shares some elements of that of Nicaragua in the 1980s or with the miltary/popular ferment that surrounded "the carnation revolution" that marked the early part of the Portuguese revolution of the 1970s.

Certainly state control of the large income from oil sales gives Venezuela a space for social reforms that doesn't exist in other countries. Using this resource, the government acts boldly, pushing up public spending from 24 percent of GDP (1999) to 34 percent in 2004 and having little trouble servicing the foreign debt.

The Venezuelan process's exceptional circumstances explain its vitality in comparison with the center-left governments. But these same unique qualities create serious questions about the Bolivarian project's ability to spread to the rest of the continent.

A regional bloc?

The regional conferences that Chávez has called haven't had a great response among his center-left colleagues. None of them accept Chávez's secondary goal of resisting the FTAA by constructing a "Bolivarian Area of the Americas." They can share his Latin Americanist rhetoric, but not a decision to advance projects for antiimperialist integregation.

Chávez has proposed three iniciatives: joining oil companies into a common entity (Petrosur), a reserve bank for all of the continents' funds (Bansur) and strengthening trade agreements to create continental common markets (from Can-Mercorsur to Comersur).

To a certain degree, these initiatives provide a common framework to those businesses that already tie together various groups of capitalists. But these structures don't bring about the autonomous integration that Chávez envisions. That objective would require more far reaching transformation to which no center-left government is committed.

For Petrosur to reverse the region's energy dependence, it would require a renationalization of the oil industry in Argentina and Bolivia, because it wouldn't make sense for private foreign-owned oil companies to join it. But it's clear that Kirchner and Mesa

maintain strategic alliances with Repsol to preserve the sector's privatization. The creation of ENARSA, without resources nor oil wells, wouldn't contribute to real regional integration. And neither would it facilitate this process of integration if Petrobras bought the assets of an Argentinian corporation (Perez Companc) or if the Venezuelan state oil company joined with ENARSA to acquire service stations. These businesses don't change the predatory and rentier nature of the oil bosses that reigns in the south of the continent. If Petrosur is assembled within this framework, perhaps it would serve to prop up the profits of some contractors and providers. But it will not provide the energy base the region needs to be able to embark on a type of industrialization that benefits the popular majority.

The reserves to form a regional bank are available but the stranglehold of the IMF prevents its autonomous functioning. There are more than enough reserves, but a reserve bank lacks sovereignty. To create a true Bansur it would have to organize a "debtors' club" to reverse the flow of funds to IMF. This proposal-so often debated in the 1980s-doesn't appear on the agenda of any government today.

The attempts to negotiate major trade agreements face the counterpressure of bilateral accords the U.S. is pursuing. These proposals significantly influence the ruling classes, which conduct more business with the U.S. and Europe than they do with their South American neighbors. MERCOSUR's difficulties reflect this contradiction.

Customs differences persist within MERCOSUR and a common tariff is riddled with more than 800 exceptions. In the European Union exports among member countries exceed 50 percent of total sales, while in MERCOSUR they don't reach 11 percent. Brazil doesn't play the economic role that Germany plays in the EU and Argentina doesn't play the political role France plays in the old continent.

Economic integration is vital to stop the tendency toward territorial breakup that faces several countries (e.g. the West of Bolivia, or the south of Ecuador). But capitalist classes have other priorities. It's not clear that "the national bourgeosies that survived 1990s neoliberalism are creating a regional trading bloc." [1] The increased transnationalization of this sector has reduced its integrationist inclination and so they resist Chávez's regionalism. Presidential summits, continuing to issue calls for the forging of a South American Community, lack a practical application.

What prospers in the region is the business of transnational enterprises that operate in several countries and seek capital mobility to lower wage costs, cut subsidies and maximize the benefits of cuts in tariffs. This type of economic integration doesn't benefit any ordinary people.

Chávez's hope of spreading the Bolivarian spirit to the center-left governments runs up against a structural obstacle: the region's ruling classes promote centripetal tendencies that historically have prevented their association. No official argument, nor popular pressure, outweighs this posture. The dream of Bolívar and San Martín will not be fulfilled while these groups of capitalists hold power.

The right, contradictions and Fronts

At times it is said, "a defeat of Lula would boost the right." But it is better to analyze what is happening rather than what could happen. No one can say that the right is destabilizing Lula, because, unlike in Venezuela, the right is quite satisfied with the PT's leader.

Other analysts argue that "complying with the IMF and allying with the right" is the price that must be paid for gradual social reforms. But as Lula adopted the program of his adversaries, these gains simply don't exist. Those who still think that it is not possible "to defeat Lula and the right simultaneosly" don't realize that the president has gone over to the other side and that workers need their own alternative.

The specter of the right is used as a club in Argentina too, without any proof that the establishment opposes Kirchner's government. The capitalists are grateful to the president who has helped them regain money and power. It must not be forgotten that the same conspiratorial thesis was used years ago to justify the regressive policies of Alfonsín or De la Rúa. But what is worse is to ignore that Kirchner belongs to the same party as Menem and Duhalde and therefore maintains alliances with provincial bosses against the social protest movements and makes agreements with the church heirarchy against the agitation of the unemployed.

Some authors argue for the necessity of a front with the government against the right, starting from the distinction that Mao made between "principal" and "secondary" contradictions. However, using these concepts only makes sense if one assumes a socialist strategy. Outside of this framework, these concepts can be used to justify anything. Crucially, it must be remembered that Kirchner doesn't embody a national bourgeosie confronting imperialism, nor does he take part in a struggle that can sharpen irreconcilable contradictions under capitalism. This Maoist schema makes no sense in today's Argentina.

However, it would be wrong to discount any proposals, including one like this, to assemble a front against the main enemy. When popular demands are relegated to the back burner to curry favor with the ruling classes, unity among the oppressed is broken and this disunity ends up smothering revolutionary projects. Putting off addressing the "main contradiction" to attend only to "secondary contradictions" weakens the bridges that connect the minimum and maximum demands for the oppressed. And this break tends to frustrate the development of a meaningful struggle from below.

Identities, bosses

and commitments

Some others argue that the PT's original identity remains in spite of Lula's politics. They don't take account of the fact that a party at the service of the banks has already erased its origin in the working class and its initial political profile. Although it conserves a popular electoral base, it is finished as an organization of the left.

The PT prioritizes business, prizes personalized campaigns, destroys militancy and exhibited its fealty to capital by expelling legislators who opposed the pension reforms. The retreat began with neoliberal commitments at the municipal level and is manifested today in the promotion of regressive labor legislation. The programatic references to socialism have remained completely submerged in order to grease alliances with the right-wing parties. The exercise of power has totally diluted the original combativitity of the PT, repeating what happened with Peronism many years ago.

Those who advocate "closing ranks with Kirchner" ignore this last issue. They expect from today's president what workers expected from Peron in the 1950s. But significant differences separate both leaders. Kirchner is not a popular leader overthrown, chased and exiled by the military. He has been a disciplined Peronist functionary who proved himself loyal to the establishment when he was governor.

Many center-left theorists in Brazil and Argentina resort to the argument of "lesser evilism" to support Lula against Cardoso or Kirchner against Menem. But this reasoning follows a series of capitulations, because the size of the "evil" increases with the passage time. It is as if the only other response to two bad choices is surrender.

Some activists recognize their own distaste for this,butshrug their shoulders, saying, "Our project is more complex than we imagined." In Lula's case, it's hard so accept this excuse, because of his open adaptation to the ruling class. Kirchner's actions have been more unexpected, because he became president before he was sized up. But from his position of power he has also sought to reinforce capitalist domination with popular demobilization.

However one exactly characterizes the PT of Kirchner's Peronism, what is undeniable is the participation of militant activists in both governments. [2] Neither the history of the party, nor what "the people think" or what popular organizations demand justifies this compromise with the application of anti-worker and anti-popular measures. Accepting positions in these governments implies assuming direct responsibility for carrying out these policies. When one acts like a government official, there are no more "gray areas."

The expectation of acting as a voice of the people in a cabinet dominated by agents of capital doesn't make sense, because the experience of the 20th century refuted that social democratic myth. Progressive ministers were always unable to implement their proposals and simply used their prestige to cover for those who shamelessly attacked workers. Lula and Kirchner have known how make use of these contradictions, promoting well-respected figures in the areas of culture, justice and human rights while leaving politics and economics in the hands of the establishment.

Venezuela's dilemmas

In contrast with Brazil and Argentina, in Venezuela there is a "government in conflict." In the first conflicts that Chávez faces, what is in play are not only the preferences of one or another capitalist sector, but the interests of the popular majority as well.

The struggles between different business groups to win favors from the government are settled within the framework of the confrontation between the dominant classes and the Bolivarian process. This clash has generated until now a certain antiimperialist dynamic of radicalization that pits the dominant classes against the oppressed.

Venezuela is not structurally different from the rest of South America. It suffers the same level of social inequality, rural underdevelopment and industrial weakness. Poverty affects 80 percent of the population and three quarters of the workforce works in the informal sector. It is impossible to eradicate this situation without removing obstacles that block Latin American development. But advancing means breaking through the limitations that frustrated other nacionalist projects.

Social programs, the redistribution of unproductive lands and credit given to producers' cooperatives are only the beginning of a progressive redistribution of income. But reversing social regression and structural unemployment (results of incomplete and misdirected industrialization) requires huge government investments. It's not possible to achieve "endogenous development" in the cities and the elimination of unproductive lands in the countryside. A program of industrial planning that eliminates the privileges of big business and their associates in the official bureaucracy is needed. Those who embezzled revenue from oil sales will never become authors of economic and social development.

A big step was taken with the removal of the pro-transnational management that ran the government oil firm, PDVESA. The boosting of industry fees and the decision to reduce dependence on the U.S. oil market (50 percent of exports and eight refineries are in the U.S.) widened Venezuela's energy autonomy. At the same time, however, there are new indications of technocratic manuevers, ill-advised deals for oil exploration and dubious investments.

The ambitious social reforms that Chávez proposes require a major political radicalization. Lula, Kirchner (or Spain's Zapatero) aim to neutralize this process and consequently advise Chávez to build bridges to the opposition and the rebuild the old regime. The Organization of American States, Jimmy Carter and Human Rights Watch play the same role.

But the main obstacle to the Bolivarian process is found within Chávez's administration itself. There a self-seeking and inefficient bureaucracy will offer its services to the opposition if it feels the wind blowing in that direction. To prepare for that eventuality, one sector of the old establishment (Comando Ayacucho) organized a presidential recall referendum through a fraudulent collection of signatures. After Chávez's victory in the referendum, the opposition has continued to pressure him to negotiate with the big business conspirators.

Experience shows that if a popular movement doesn't move forward, it goes backward. If the Bolivarian process is stopped, it will repeat what happened to the PRI in Mexico or with Peronism, which were twisted into instruments of the ruling classes. The opposite path is that of the Cuban Revolution. Chávez has many times declared his admiration for this second path, but he has not implemented any of the anti-capitalist measures that Cuba adopted in the 1960s.

In Venezuela, a radical democratic transformation of state institutions is taking place. The structures of the state didn't collapse as they did in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and the possibility of a revolutionary turn still exists. Those who think that "nothing is happening in Venezuela" or that Chávez is rehashing the "populist script" by not leading a social revolution are mistaken. The Latin American volcano is bubbling in the country that represents antiimperialist resistance in the region. Newly formed unions and popular self-organization in "the missions" and the Bolivarian circles show that the constituents of radical change are in motion now.

Globalization and U.S. predominance

The advance of nationalism and the center-left has changed the intellectual climate of South America. No longer is discussion focused on how far neoliberalism has advanced, but on how it can be confronted and defeated. In this debate, many recognized that Lula and Kirchner are taking the wrong road. But from this realization another question arises: Can something else be done? Doesn't globalization mean that the left has to retreat? Doesn't capital's international reach keep all possible transformations within the neoliberal framework? [3] Frequently it is argued that the changes in contemporary capitalism have completely altered the Latin American scene. The impacts of the information revolution, the globalization of finance and the internationalization of production and capital are obvious. But the key question is how these changes affect the region. Do they lessen or worsen historic problems? Do they increase or decrease industrial underdevelopment, the dominance of finance or economic dependency?

The acute nature of the crises suffered in the last decade shows where globalization has left Latin America. The same process that enabled the partial recovery in the rate of profit in several developed countries brought about a brutal social polarization of income and a great divide between prosperous economies and devastated ones. Today it is evident that Latin America suffers from the triple impact of impoverishment, disinvestment and increasing dependence on raw materials exports. Could the region regain a certain amount of autonomy to reverse this process?

Center-left and nationalist theorists say yes and propose to encourage the development of a model of productive, inclusive and regionally integrated capitalism. This project only takes into account existing niches in which to start new businesses, without recognizing the imbalances that this kind of development creates in the periphery of the world economy. Neither do they recognize that the development of Latin America is insufficient to compete with the imperialist center, nor to follow in the footsteps of the great powers.

It becomes very difficult to determine just what space exists for the center-left economic model, because its implementation would require determined antiimperialist initiatives and a sharp break with neoliberal capital. And because none of these governments seems likely to follow such a course, the riddle about how to create "another capitalism" remains unsolved. The new presidents simply issue anti-neoliberal proclamations and perpetuate the status quo. Therefore anticapitalist radicalization and a socialist perspective remain the only sure way of attaining progress and welfare. But will the frightening power of the U.S. rule out this option?

U.S. dominance is nothing new in the region that has born the weight of being the great power's "backyard." All attempts at national and social transformation in the 20th century clashed with this power. And on more than one occasion, these attempts could have given in to an enemy that seemed invincible. The staying power of the Cuban Revolution after 40 years of invasion, embargo and conspiracies stands out.

It's true that in the last decade the U.S. strengthened its military predominance and recovered its economic and political primacy. But its domination remains unstable because its rivals challenge it and peoples resist its domination. What happened in Iraq reveals the limits of U.S. power. The marines have not been able to reduce the country to a colony, nor have they managed to loot the country's oil resources. It remains to be seen if Bush will up the ante militarily or bring in a help from Europe to negotiate some compromise in the region.

The scope of the preemptive wars that Bush threatens is terrifying. But one doesn't have to accept the triumphant image of themselves the neoconservatives promote. This picture hides the great socio-cultural divide that underpins the right-wing shift inside the U.S. The combination of several economic imbalances (overseas financing of the U.S. budget and trade deficit) and political troubles (national struggles against imperialist aggression) challenges U.S. dominance.

External and

internal challenges

Those who note the unfavorable balance of international power believe that it would be very difficult to sustain a victory against imperialism in a Latin American country. It's certainly true that international isolation is a recurring problem in every revolution. But Cuba has shown how long it has been able to sustain its social transformation in the face of imperialist harassment. Globalization doesn't add difficulties that are qualitatively different to those that already exist.

Besides, it must be remembered that all revolutions break out under unfavorable conditions and survive without a large amount of outside help. They always erupted on a national scale and changed the regional scene by virtue of their example. At certain times, they swept up more than one country (Central America in the 1980s), but they never developed at the same rate. Although this lack of synchronization is a negative feature, what frequently frustrated these processes were internal obstacles and disagreements.

The Sandinista experience shows that the obstacle isn't external. However well they confronted imperialist aggression, their project was undermined by the conversion of a new elite of the rich who allied with the right to divide up power. Twenty-five years after this revolution, nothing remains of agrarian reform or literacy programs, in a country tormented by levels of poverty and inequality only outdone by the Haitian tragedy.

But do we have to deduce from the frustrations of the 1980s that the socialist project is buried? Must we conclude that it is not possible to go beyond the efforts of the center-left or the proposals of nationalism? The continuing popular rebellion contradicts this idea. The series of uprisings that shook several countries (Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina) in the last few years shows that there exists the will and necessity to consider radical antiimperialist transformations to reverse the increased immiseration that Latin American suffers. The obstacles to developing this project are not found in the international context, but in the errors (or betrayals) found on the side of working-class fighters.

What persists is difficulty in elaborating an alternative politics for the region's exploited. The popular classes take to the streets during strikes, confrontations and mobilizations, but they hand over their destiny to the enemy when they must define their countries' political courses. The best example today of this paradox is the center-left's ascension to government on the back of grassroots protests only to demobilize these protests once it reached power.

Scenarios and disjunctures

When their honeymoons are over, Lula and Kirchner will face the unrest of a region marked by social inequality, imperialist bullying and economic vulnerability.

These tensions can be aggravated if pressure from U.S. business leads to lower tariffs and new privatizations. The loss of resources that generate payment of the external debt adds another complicating factor to this picture, because any international financial instability tends to provoke capital flight and exchange rate volatility.

But the most explosive ingredient that threatens the region is Bush's militarization, multiplying the number of military bases and transferring to regional commands the decision for military intervention. That Bush chose to launch his second term by embracing Colombian President Alvaro Uribe will foreshadow the Pentagon's active intervention in South America. The new presidents try to moderate the corrosive impact of imperialist pressure with declarations and manuevers. But the shift to the right in the U.S. government touches them as well.

In broad sections of the population, Kirchner keeps alive hopes like those that Lula raised. Fighting these illusions requires the left to devise the right tactics for very different circumstances. But relating to these popular aspirations is not the same as promoting illusions in these governments. Telling the truth-however much it hurts-is a duty for all socialists, even while Chávez and Castro express support for the center-left presidents.

These praises fall on death ears, because Kirchner and Lula do not applaud the Cuban revolution nor salute the mobilization against the right in Venezuela. Neither of these two wants to find themselves in the crosshairs of the State Department. In contrast, Fidel and Chávez praise the new governments so as to avoid isolation and to derail U.S. imperialist designs. But they confuse diplomatic action with an unnecessary and counterproductive political support for the organizations of Brazil and Argentina. The left must not repeat the errors of the past, subordinating its action to foreign policy deals between states. Many capitulations were justified by "defense of the Soviet Union."

The South American left faces serious challenges. What is central is to reaffirm its place on the side of the oppressed without taking account of big business's preoccupations. The challenge is to renew the socialist project and not to discuss the type of capitalism that corresponds with each country. Pursuing this second agenda, several leaders propose "to democratize capital" "to seriously increase national income" and to make "the bourgeoisie do its job." This same course is announced with more vague formulas ("to nurture something new" "to develop different policies/politics", "to create a society for everyone"). But in either case, the left abandons its identity and hauls down its flags of equality and emancipation. By taking this road the left buries its future.

One mustn't lose sight of the goal from the vantage point of the current stage of the struggle. Many young people enter political life admiring the revolucionary legacy of the preceding generation. But they also see how part of this generation joined the

establishment and resigns itself to the rule of the powerful. The course to recover the legacy of the 1970s is more commitment, conviction and courage.

Translation by Lance Selfa

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Footnotes

[1] Mermet Rolando. "Bolivarismo revolucionario y unidad suramericana" Questión, septiembre 2004, Caracas suggests this.

[2] As has been the case with the Democratic Socialist current in Brazil y with "Barrios de Pié" (Neighborhoods in Struggle) in Argentina.

[3] These issues are discussed in, among other texts, these: Harnecker Marta. "La izquierda latinoamericana y la construcción de alternativas". Laberinto n 6, junio 2001, Harnecker Marta. "Sobre la estrategia de la izquierda en América Latina". Venezuela. Una revolución sui generis, Conac, Caracas, 2004, Petras James. "Imperialismo y resistencia en Latinoamérica". "La situación actual en América Latina"Los intelectuales y la globalización. Abya-Yala, Quito, 2004, Ellner Steve. "Leftist goals and debate in Latin America!. Science and society, vol 68, n 1, spring 2004.

Approaching a political turning point

20 April 2005, by François Sabado

2) The situation has changed abruptly in the last few weeks. Several months ago - in November-December 2004 - a "Yes" vote was largely taken for granted. All the media and the principal parties of the government supported a "Yes" vote. The Socialist Party, which had organized an internal referendum, had decided by a 60% majority to vote yes along with the rest of European social democracy.

Packed meeting in Grenoble for 'No' campaign....

The pressure of the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation) was exerted on the European trade union movement. The question that was being discussed was that of the integration or otherwise of Turkey in Europe. The reactionary right and the nationalists raised this question in order to unleash a racist and reactionary movement among the public, with the right rejecting Turkey's entry for cultural and religious reasons. Turkey is a Moslem country and thus has no place in Europe!

3) Today, there is a new situation. The "No" camp leads in the polls, with 52-55% rejecting the Constitution! What's more, support for a "No" vote increased after the televised intervention of Jacques Chirac. There is a majority for the "No" camp among workers and employees, as well as among young people. In spite of the internal ballot in the Socialist Party which was favourable to a "Yes" vote, the "No" camp is now in the majority among the socialist electorate. There is no more talk about Turkey and France's main trade union confederation, the CGT, supports a "No" vote.

...and in Brest.

The rise in support for rejection of the Constitution represents a social, anti-neoliberal "No", a left "No", because the "No" of the nationalist right has reached its limits. If support for a "No" vote is increasing, it is in direct connection with the conjuncture of social remobilization which the country is experiencing. After the social defeats in 2003, in particular against the neoliberal counter-reform of pensions by the Chirac-Raffarin government, there is today a social dissatisfaction that is reflected in days of action and national strikes and by partial workers' struggles, in particular on the question of wages as in the Citroen car factories.

On March 10 there was a one day strike of the public and private sectors on the question of wages, jobs and in particular against the challenge to the 35 hour working week. And since February, a great movement of high-school pupils against neoliberal reforms in education has developed.

All these strikes give a social colouring to the "No" vote. And it is true that this movement of public opinion towards the "No" camp goes back a long way. It goes back to the great anti-neoliberal revolt of 1995, marked by strikes of civil servants and railway workers across the country and especially demonstrations of millions of employees. Such a movement was reproduced, with its own specificities, in 2003.

But the cumulative character of these experiences of struggle combined with electoral defeats for right and left wing governments which had implemented neoliberal policies reflects a deep rejection of neoliberalism in the country. And this referendum appears in the eyes of the broad masses as the opportunity to say "No", to oppose neoliberal policies and the possibility of inflicting a defeat on the dominant classes and the parties that support

neoliberalism

4) For this constitution is not one more European treaty like the others, it is a shackle to lock the people into neoliberalism. It is an anti-democratic process aimed at building an authoritarian European proto-state. In general, constitutions are worked out and decided within the framework of constituent assemblies elected by the people. This is nothing of the sort.

It was a group of 110 experts, deputies and members designated by the governments to a convention which adopted this constitution; in the tradition of the entire process of European construction, a process carried out on the back of the people. But the basis of this constitution is neoliberalism. It is a treaty which "constitutionalizes" neoliberalism and the primacy of profit. In the name of "free and undistorted competition" this constitution subordinates the public services to capitalist profitability and legitimates the processes of privatization of transport, energy and the postal service. It reduces a series of social rights to the simplest expression. Thus the right to work becomes the right "to seek a job" and so on.

5) And this social mobilization has also resulted in a united-front political mobilization of the social and political left: the PCF, the LCR, the left oppositionists among the Socialists and ecologists, the PT, Lutte Ouvrière - even if the latter rejects any united campaign - but above all thousands of trade unionists, campaign activists, non-party people of the left are mobilized in this battle.

Francois Sabado

A left anti-neoliberal foundation involving trade unionists, academics and political leaders has launched an appeal by personalities for an anti-neoliberal left "No". [1] There are now more than 600 "No" committees in the country, holding thousands of meetings in every town, village and neighbourhood.

It is a formidable united-front battle around the objective of a left "No" vote to the constitution.
But we supplement this united-front battle with agitation and propaganda for a "No" to the constitution with explanations of the need for an alternative anti-capitalist policy, both at the level of European construction and at the national level. The unitary dynamic for a "No" vote must be deepened at the political level by the possibility of another policy. These explanations on the need for an anti-capitalist emergency plan should be developed as of now at the heart of the campaign, because the rejection of the constitution on the questions of jobs, the public services, social security, and democratic rights forms the basis for the formulation of a programme in terms of needs, demands and social rights

6) This battle will be all the more significant if the "No" camp wins. In this case, the first demand will be the departure of the Chirac-Raffarin government. It will be deepened by the defence of emergency measures which constitute the content of an alternative anti-capitalist policy which rests on the social struggles and movements. If there is a "No" vote, there will be two consequences at the European level and the national level.

- At the European level, we must demand a series of measure: a moratorium on public services, an end to redundancies, harmonization of social rights, an initiative of all European social movements and processes on the democratic and institutional questions.
- At the national level, if the "No" camp is victorious, we will demand the departure of Chirac and the government and we will develop the axes of an anti-capitalist policy which takes 10 emergency anti-capitalist measures, like a ban on lay-offs by profit-making companies, rejection of privatizations and the revival of the public services, a wage increase of 300 euros, the defence of social security, and demolishes everything the right has done by organizing a new distribution of wealth. This is the content of our proposals and we call on the population and the workers to mobilize so as to impose them and control their application. This is also the content of a battle for an alternative and anti-capitalist government at the service of the workers. It is the policy of a government that would be as faithful to the workers as the right is to the employers. Also, the dynamic of a left and internationalist anti-neoliberal "No" could not be reconciled with social liberal governmental solutions within the framework of the European constitution or an amended "light" version thereof.

7) Thus, we will impel a debate across this "No" left of on the content of an anti-capitalist policy and on governmental perspectives, a debate in particular with Communist militants. After such a victory, if the "No" is won, everyone should face their responsibilities: to fall back into the rut of the politics of management of the economy and the neoliberal institutions as all the parties of the plural left have done in the past or to orient towards a perspective of a break with neoliberalism and capitalism, a policy of satisfaction of needs and social rights. Convergence on these questions would be a first decisive stage in the emergence of a new political force.

Footnotes

[1] L'Appel des 200 (Appeal of the 200) launched by the Copernic Foundation.
www.appeldes200.net.

The Breakthrough for the Left Bloc

20 April 2005, by Pedro Sales

The Bloc is also the only party to come out of the elections with a parliamentary group where there is parity between men and women, four men and four women. [1]

The rejection of the Right attained catastrophic proportions: the Social Democratic Party (PSD) got no more than 28.7 per cent and the Popular Party (PP), an ultra-conservative party that supported the preceding government, went down to 7.3 per cent. Three years of policies that violently attacked workers' rights and the right to a job, leading to a sharp rise in poverty and a regression towards retrograde values, all this being reinforced by the mistake of nominating Santana Lopes to head the government, explain these results. Public opinion provoked the collapse of the coalition and also the collapse of the leaderships of the parties involved in it.

It was the policies of austerity, of creating job insecurity and of undermining public services, of criminalizing abortion and of war that were routed. It was the policy of indifference in the face of unemployment that lost. On February 20th, 2005, the Portuguese people demanded change.

Collapse of the Right

The legislative elections of 20th February 2005 did not take place in a context of political normality. When the Right only won 33 per cent of the votes in the 2004 European elections [2] , the then Prime Minister, Durao Barroso, who claimed at the time to have understood the significance of the vote of the Portuguese people, decided to flee his responsibilities and took off in the direction of the presidency of the European Commission. As he left, he sought to avoid the legislative elections being brought forward, and he obtained guarantees to that effect from the President of the Republic, the Socialist Jorge Sampaio. In spite of the opinion of the majority of the population, the President then refused to call elections and allowed Barroso to hand over to his party's number two, the Mayor of Lisbon, Pedro Santana Lopes. This "monarchic" method, which the people disapproved of, and the populist profile, as well as the lack of political consistency, of the new Prime Minister were enough to reinforce the demand for new elections.

The left Bloc's best known leader, Francisco Louca

The six months of Santana Lopes's government were punctuated by a succession of gaffes and incidents. Believing that exposure to the media would guarantee him a legitimacy that no one accorded him, the new Prime Minister presented on a daily basis on television proposals that were followed - without exception - by denials from the ministry concerned. Sullied by the scandal of the reopening of the schools after the summer holidays (which took place, for the first time ever, a month late) and characterised by an absolute necessity for editorial control of communication (going so far as to deny a short news item claiming that the Prime Minister had taken a siesta after a debate), this government plunged in the opinion polls and even lost the support of the elite of Lopes's own party, which began to criticise him in the press.

The control of communication, exercised in a way that was clumsily obvious, became a target for relentless criticism. The government underwent some changes: the Prime Minister kept some of his "old friends" away from the corridors of power and one of them, feeling offended, resigned. The government's lack of credibility had become so great that faced with this "downfall" the PP tried to avoid the demise that was being predicted by all the polls last year. Faced with this obvious incapacity of the right-wing coalition to conduct government business, the President of the Republic judged that fresh elections could be called.

However, in the conflict around the calling or not of new elections, the PS also lost its leader, Ferro Rodrigues, who resigned when his friend Sampaio nominated Santana Lopes after Durao Barroso's departure. The congress of the PS then chose José Socrates to be General secretary. Socrates chose to position his party in the centre. Furthermore, the new Socialist leader and now Prime Minister abandoned the Socialist Party's promise to repeal the Labour Code that had been adopted by the Right.

"Say something left, say something civic"

This celebrated challenge by the Italian filmmaker Nanni Moretti to Massimo d'Alema (leader of the Democratic Left in Italy) best sums up the centrist positioning adopted by the Socialists in order to win an absolute majority. While avoiding, as far as humanly possible, all the questions that were asked during the election campaign, the PS's strategy was to use popular discontent and the government's insensitivity to social questions to win over right-wing electors disappointed by the lack of credibility of Santana Lopes. Without committing themselves, in order not to risk losing a single potential elector, the Socialists were happy to wait for power to be served up to them on a plate. The Socialist Party abandoned the main political preoccupations of the Left and appealed for a "useful vote", without even engaging a real

political discussion.

The Bloc decided to confront this appeal by centring its campaign around two fundamental arguments. The first argument - "a Left you can trust" - concerned the Left Bloc and its concrete experience as a parliamentary group that had fought unrelentingly against the policies of privatization and destruction of public services that the Right was conducting. Because while the PS was spending its time opposing its own leaders, it was the Bloc's parliamentary group that showed itself to be capable, by a real resistance to neo-liberal aggressiveness, of best representing the social movements that were fighting back. It earned trust thanks to a struggle that was respected by the social Left.

The second argument consisted of putting forward political proposals that were contradictory with those of the PS; left-wing voters could then choose between two distinct policies, all the more so as the Bloc has always provided clear answers as far as its programme is concerned. The presentation of 10 priorities for the first 100 days made it possible to centre the electoral campaign on precise questions [3] for the first 100 days of a government committed to breaking from neo-liberal policies.

That was the case concerning jobs, professional training and qualifications, the revision of the Stability Pact, the reconstruction of the National Health Service, the legalisation of abortion, the legalisation of immigrants, measures against concentration in the media and reform of the judicial system. During the 40 days that the campaign lasted, these proposals were able to be discussed. More than 300 national union leaders and members of workers' commissions approved the measures proposed, demonstrating by so doing a change in the relationship of forces within the workers' movement.

These two reasons explain why the Right chose the Bloc as one of its main political opponents. In the first place, being accustomed to the weakness of the traditional opposition, it has never forgiven the Bloc for the role that it has played in the social movement against the war. In particular, the Right hasn't forgotten a poster of the Bloc that became one of the icons of this resistance. This poster showed a "family photo" of Bush, Blair, Aznar and Barroso, during the summit of the Azores that decided on the war, with the phrase "They are lying, they are losing". For the first time, the party in power devoted its television time and even its posters to denouncing a party that only had three MPs. In meetings and in the televised debates, the central argument of Santana Lopes's discourse consisted of denouncing a possible secret agreement between the Bloc and the Socialist Party, accusing the PS of handing the country over to "the radical Left that is against the European Union".

The Right at a Loss

This strategic disorientation was the dominant feature of the campaign of the PSD, which chose to centre on the personalisation of its leader, something that had never happened before in Portuguese politics. The PSD was convinced that its leader, one of the main personalities in the columns of the women's magazines, was invincible. So the whole campaign was conducted around this "warrior child"! In the first stages of the electoral campaign, the PSD chose to "play the victim" faced with the decision of the President of the Republic; later, having become conscious of its threatening defeat, the party began to spread rumours and sordid insinuations about the supposed homosexuality of José Socrates. The PSD tried to exploit conservative family values, imitating in an uncritical way the Bush recipe and applying it to a country that wanted more than anything else to know what were the answers of the political parties to the grave social crisis. Finally, Santana changed direction by trying to take advantage of the emotion provoked among Catholic electors by the death of Sister Lucia, one of "those who saw" the vision at Fatima.

Faced with the debacle of the PSD's campaign, the Popular Party tried to distance itself from the dead weight of the government, by presenting itself as the guarantee of the stability of the Right. It believed that it could take advantage of the fall of the PSD to increase its vote to 10 per cent or even more. The drop in its electoral representation showed that it has no future.

The "Little Paulo of the fairgrounds" (that is how its leader Paulo Portas was known in the past) who devoted his electoral campaigns to saying that the Guaranteed Minimum Income was an "encouragement to laziness", while at the same time playing on xenophobic attitudes towards Gypsy citizens, used to get more votes than the "Little Paulo" of today, who used his position in the state (he was Minister of Defence) to assert himself. The PP has no future and Paulo Portas resigned the day after the election saying that "in a democratic country we cannot accept that the Christian Democracy is overtaken by a Trotskyist party".

The PCP: sectarian and opportunist at the same time

Having begun the electoral campaign with a new leader whose Stalinist ideas were not known to the Portuguese people, the Communist Party (PCP) got a good reception from the people and from the press. His working-class past and the fact that he had to abandon the only televised debate where all the leaders of the political parties were present, because of an acute loss of voice, enabled him to win a kind of popular sympathy that the PCP hadn't experienced for a long time.

During the campaign, the press spoke every day of the "dangers" that could materialize if the policies of a minority Socialist government depended on the vote of the MPs of the Bloc. So it did everything possible to stop the growth of the Bloc, considering it to be the main danger in these elections. That did not stop the hostility of the PCP towards the Bloc, which it designated,

along with the Right, as the main enemy.

Although the Bloc had always stated that it didn't want a coalition with a minority PS government, being ready to vote only for proposals that accorded with its own, the PCP used the election campaign to say that the Bloc was going to give the Socialist Party a blank cheque. But at the same time the PCP announced that it was ready to form a government with the Socialist Party. In the last days of the campaign, the PCP even disqualified the Bloc's electors. This sectarianism provoked fragmentation on the left and clashed with the feelings of the PCP's electors.

The Bloc, a movement that is socially established

Although the whole of the Left made an electoral leap forward, the Bloc's leap was bigger than that of any other party, going from 150,000 to 365,000 votes. In most of the 22 electoral constituencies, the Bloc became the fourth political force: it came ahead of the Communist Party in Madeira, the Azores, Aveiro, Braganza, Guarda, Lenia, Oporto, Viana do Castelo and Viseu; and ahead of the Popular Party in Beja, Evora, Lisbon, Portalegre and Setubal. In Faro and Coimbra, it is the third party, just after the PS and the PSD. In 70 per cent of the towns and cities in the country, the Bloc is in fourth position and in more than 10 per cent of them it is the third political force. It obtained its best results in Entroncamento (12.8 per cent), Marinha Grande (11.5 per cent) and Setubal (11.5 per cent), towns that occupy a symbolic place in the Portuguese workers' movement, and where the industrial labour force still has a certain weight in the social composition of the electorate.

The electoral results illustrate for us the development of a tendency that was already foreshadowed in the last European elections, and confirm that the vote for the Bloc is no longer limited to certain towns of the big metropolitan zones, but is more evenly spread out across the whole country. In the zones with less than 5,000 electors, the Bloc won nearly 230,000 votes and an average of 8.5 per cent, whereas for the zones of more than 5,000 electors, the result was nearly 140,000 votes and an average of 5.7 per cent. This represents a radical change in comparison to the 2002 elections, when 60 per cent of the votes won by the Bloc came from zones of more than 5,000 electors.

On top of the vote in the big urban centres, the Bloc won many votes in towns in the majority of districts and autonomous regions, not to mention the rise in its vote in the rural and semi-rural zones. In every district there are towns where the vote for the Bloc doubled or tripled, not only in places where the service sector predominates, but also in those where industry still has an important weight.

The vote for the Bloc was characterized by the diversity of its popular audience, giving the lie to the systematic denigration of it by certain political journalists who have presented it, ever since it was founded, as a passing fashion of young urban elites, without social roots. The analysis of the results in the different constituencies indicates in any case the youthful profile of its voters. The percentage is often higher than 20 per cent among the youngest electors. However, given the increase in the number of the Bloc's electors, we can note a certain disparity between the oldest and the youngest voters. This new capacity to attract different sectors of the electorate is enabling the Bloc to develop a broader socio-cultural representativity.

Apparently, one idea seems to be being confirmed: no party owns the votes of its electors. The Bloc, with its popular profile, is today in a stronger position to confront the blackmail of the "useful vote" that has traditionally been used by the PS.

Build a socialist alternative

The PS benefited from the appeal for stability that it made and from the position in the centre that it took up. That is why it received the support of both many important economic groups, supporters of privatisations, and of vast popular sectors who want to preserve social conquests. So its electoral base is heterogeneous and contradictory. The policy of its government will not represent a break with the model of liberal economy. The elections have created a mood of expectation. The PS is occupying the centre all on its own.

But the electoral results confirm that there is an enormous hope for change. The PS won an absolute majority, but the Left had a historic result, winning nearly two thirds of the seats in Parliament. The Left Bloc interprets these results as the expression of a desire for a break with the right-wing neo-liberal government, which was a partisan of privatisation and of the dismantling of the quality of public services.

The composition of the new Socialist government confirmed the worst expectations, in particular concerning the continuity of liberal policies. In several domains the government's decisions are still unknown, because there are no electoral commitments. The Ministers of the Economy and of Finances are liberal technocrats. We will have to closely examine the government's actions in order to know what its political orientations are.

Loyal to its electoral commitments, the Bloc will present to the Assembly of the Republic the main proposals that it made during the electoral campaign:

First of all, those which concern the revision of the Labour Code, by proposing new laws (without opposing the appointment of a working commission to establish a systematisation of labour legislation as a whole, so as to obtain the repeal of the code imposed by the former minister Bagao Felix).
The question of the decriminalisation of abortion represents for the Bloc the touchstone, because of its importance for democracy, of respect for human rights, and indeed of its symbolic character in Portuguese society. The hesitations of the new majority and the tendency to adjourn this question

are giving the Right a new lease of life and represent an inadmissible punishment for woman. It's a waste of time!

Time is also being lost when measures are not brought forward against unemployment and against the poor quality of public services. Everything indicates that this government's "honeymoon" period will be time lost for urgent social questions.

The Left Bloc must also assert itself and increase its strength outside Parliament. As one of the forces of the modern socialist Left, it has to reconsider again its characteristics as a party/movement, with more roots, more representative from a social point of view, attentive to what is happening in public life. That is why the central theme chosen for the debates of the Fourth National Convention of the Bloc, which will be held in May, is: "The Bloc as a socialist alternative for the country". The trust that the electors have shown us subjects us t a much more demanding scrutiny, and forces us to respond more effectively to the social implantation of our party.

The results of the last elections have modified the party's profile: now the Bloc is a national party, young but also having penetrated older age groups, popular and no longer confined to the urban middle classes. The new forms of organization of the Bloc will have to reflect this new reality. The Bloc must link up with all the non-capitalist Lefts, and in the first place with those on the European scene. The network type of functioning of the parties of the alternative Left that belong to told and new social movements is a condition for the emergence of new modalities of action that are original and attractive; it also represents a way of exchanging emancipatory experiences where collective objectives intersect with personal and subjective fulfilment.

In Europe, in particular, we have to fight with renewed energy against the European constitutional treaty, but also against the directives that are proposing crippling 65-hour working weeks and that present flexibility in the deregulation of workplace relations as the only road to competitiveness.

The new political context is stimulating, and is allowing a new movement of participation in social life on the part of all the networks of social intervention. All the potential to put forward demands, in particular concerning unemployment and poverty, which was stifled by the power of the right, can now be expressed. Our commitment is exclusively to social struggle: social struggle is the only way to win victories against a government that has an absolute majority.

A PS government does not have a tranquillising effect on social struggles. On the contrary, the fight against this government gives a democratic dimension to the conflict. Faced with the present conjuncture, the fight to defend and widen the intervention of the state in social security, in health and in education will be the expression of antagonism to Socrates's rhetoric. The task of the Bloc in the coming years will be demanding, but also exciting. It will have to be capable of giving a voice to this discontent and of building the socialist opposition which will be able to refound the space to the left of the government Left.

Footnotes

[1] International Viewpoint n° 364, February 2005, published a dossier on the Left Bloc's electoral campaign - see 'The meaning of our electoral success'.

[2] See International Viewpoint 360/61, Autumn, 2004 'Left Bloc elects first European deputy'.

[3] IVP 364 published the 10 priorities of the Left Bloc - see 'Socialist Party Set for Election Comeback?'.

Vietnam: 30 Years After

2 April 2005, by Tuan

Tuan: I went back to Vietnam after a year's absence and I saw the emergence of a "middle class". Of course, this is only in the cities. There are now lots of new companies, industrial and commercial enterprises whose capital comes from party members who use front people because, according to the old statutes, they don't have the right to engage in business. There are a lot of new buildings, 20- storey buildings, real skyscrapers.

Inprecor: Can a party member be the owner?

In principle, no. But he can use the name of a cousin or a friend.

If I understand correctly, the big difference with the former USSR is that there it is former party leaders who are becoming openly rich, whereas here they are becoming rich behind the cover of other people.

That's it: the majority of cadres, who had a certain level of education, have become big entrepreneurs. They send their children to study abroad so that they can become managers and take over from them. They are following the Chinese example, but they are many years behind. However, they are acting more quickly, because if you compare the two populations, the percentage of cadres who have become entrepreneurs is greater here.

Having said that, they don't have "kingdoms " here like in China, where

they can reach the size of a large province, with the risk of secession. In China certain big entrepreneurs don't hide their membership of the party, because they have brought money to the party and then to the state.

In Vietnam a party member doesn't have the right to engage in trade or industry, but I met people, military men, who have businesses and who have the use of a military bank. I put the question to them: "If you are at the head of a business, you must be making profits. Where do they go? To the army or to the party, since at the end of the day the army is controlled by the party? They replied: "No, no! We have a very special system that it would take too long to explain. Part of the profits go to the army (for the renovation of barracks, for pay rises), the other part constitutes a kind of kitty to be reinvested.

But then who controls this kitty?

Quite obviously the entrepreneur, who takes his cut along the way…

Really the big difference with the East European countries is that the party is still there and still controls everything?

Absolutely, it is still there and it still controls everything, but especially in the countryside and among the ethnic minorities. There people still trust it. If you go to the Central Highlands and start criticizing the district authorities, you won't get a very good reception. Uncle Ho is still their idol. Many among the ethnic minorities take the name Ho and when you ask them why they don't give their children a name with more "local colour" they reply: it's a sign of gratitude towards Uncle Ho who liberated us, who gave us food, who helped us evolve, etc. In the towns it's different because there is a real crisis of the party.

There has been for five years. And it is coming to the surface now in different ways: in the newspapers, in letters addressed to the Political Bureau, by using the Internet, that formidable source of information with which you can obtain all the documents you want…So therefore on the economic level there is big progress; but it's always the same, it's not for ordinary people. But for the middle classes and the "cream" of the proletariat there is massive consumption. I was astonished by it compared to a year ago.

So, for several years there have been Cora supermarkets in Hanoi and in Ho Chi Minh City. At present the huge American company Metro has established itself. And its slogan is: "You choose, you pay and you take it away". They have bought big plots of land and are copying the USA, building big car parks for the cars of the new class (not for bicycles…) and since they have established themselves nearer to Ho Chi Minh City than Cora, they are in the process of stealing its customers.

Nike factory, Ho Chi Minh City

To get into Metro you need a card because, they say, we sell at wholesale prices, only to businesses, artisans, associations. They buy agricultural produce (water bindweed, lemons, etc.) from the peasants of the region and pay less than the market price. But that is beginning to damage the business of the peasant women who sell at the market: a bunch of bindweed costs less at Metro than at the Saigon market.

Is this part of the population that can buy more a minority, or is it in fact the whole of the population whose standard of living has risen?

The standard of living has risen for everybody, that's sure, but to different degrees. The workers find ways of getting a Metro card, but that has consequences for small-scale agriculture, peasant smallholdings. Vietnam, especially the South, is characterised by family commerce. The family brings fruit from its village, which is 15 km from Ho Chi Minh City, but they don't manage to sell it any more because the price is too high.

What's new on the political level? There was talk of a certain "opening".

Things are in fact opening up a little politically, insofar as at present, and for some time now, the role of intellectuals is appreciated. Before they all had to "follow the line", now they are allowed to stray from it. This is linked to Vietnam's integration into the international community.

Overseas Vietnamese can buy plots of land and houses in Vietnam, even if they don't go and live there. Moreover the Vietnamese who fled after 1975 can recover their house and their property; if the house is occupied the authorities tell the former owner to sort it out with the tenants, either by housing them elsewhere or by giving them a sum of money to leave. At present what is known as the "property fever" is raging, houses are very expensive because big enterprises and rich individuals have bought everything. Prices have risen by at least 80 per cent over the last year. Everything is more expensive than in Paris or New York.

But to get back to politics. For some time now many Vietnamese have been going abroad to pursue their studies, including at their own expense. Before it was the USSR, Eastern Europe and China. Now you can go everywhere, to Australia, to the USA, to France, etc. Either the family pays for all that, or you are a state employee who needs to be trained in modern administrative techniques and the authorities send you. A lot of people have already gone abroad and seen different things. When they come back they say: why don't we do this or that? So there is now, I wouldn't say democracy, but a certain freedom.

Can this freedom be seen in the press, on the radio or TV?

For the moment there aren't yet contradictory opinions. And many people only dream of going abroad. Before they only sent abroad students who could directly enter University, now you can send children from the age of 12, if you have the money. I've seen a lot of them in Montpellier, without their parents, because they have an organisation that takes charge of them (for which they pay through the nose) and finds them a place to stay and so on.

I imagine that the history that they

are taught in Vietnam still follows the party line?

That doesn't change. There is still the history of "Marxism", if I can call it that. But increasingly "Marxism-Leninism" is being replace by "Ho Chi Minh Thought".

On the other hand there is a definite opening concerning the person of Nguyen An Ninh, who was very well known in Vietnam in the 1930s. He was a friend of the Trotskyist leader Ta Thu Thau and together they published the paper "La Lutte". He wasn't a Trotskyist, because he didn't want to join a party. In fact he described himself as a "non-party Communist". From my point of view he was a genuine Communist: it was he who provided nearly 75 per cent of the members of the party in Vietnam before Ho Chi Minh returned in 1941. He died in the prison of Poulo Condor in 1943.

Up until now he was spoken of in a limited way and only as a good man, a great patriot. Ho Chi Minh appears to have thought a lot of him. Before, under Diem, there were two streets opposite each other leading to the big Saigon market, Nguyen An Ninh Street and a Ta Thu Thau Street. Their names were only changed in 1985.

And now once again a big street has been after Nguyen An Ninh. As far as Ta Thu Thau is concerned, now they speak about him. Books have been published, in particular those by Pham Van Hûm, a Trotskyist assassinated by the Stalinists in 1945, like Ta Thu Thau. The publishers "Culture and Information" have just brought out, last year, one of his major works. I have a copy at home.

I said to the bookseller, "You are selling a book by a Trotskyist?" He looked at me and replied: "A Trotskyist, yes, yes! But he was a patriot". It has sold like hot cakes. You can't find it any more because they only published it in 600 copies. As far as Nguyen An Ninh is concerned, we can't call it a rehabilitation, because he was never condemned, but he was completely forgotten. A "house of remembrance" for him has been built near Ho Chi Minh City, where you can find all the documents about him, including photos of Ta Thu Thau. It opened in 2003. At present this period of the 1930s is being referred to in quite a few "Memoirs" by very different sorts of people. They have even translated part of Daniel Hémery's book, "From Nationalism to Communism".

So I'm quite optimistic, but on the other hand there is a sharp power struggle in the party. Within it there is an organisation whose code name is T2 (that stands for Espionage Bureau n° 2). And in this bureau there is an agent that they call T4, who writes very critical reports on (legendary Communist general) Giap and all the "old-timers". I have the impression that they are in the process if rewriting the history of the party and eliminating all the "old ones". They say the worst sort of things about them to demolish them. It is Stalin's principle: Slander! Slander! Something will always stick. But there is already a movement that is beginning to rebel against that.

Giap has written a letter of protest, which I have in Vietnamese. Having said that, the present leading group has no leader of any calibre. The General Secretary, Nong Duc Manh, is only the result of a compromise between different factions. There is a rumour that he is the natural son of Hoi Chi Minh. Journalists asked him if he was, and he replied with a smile: "You now very well that Ho Chi Minh is the father of all Vietnamese!..."

So it's clear that capitalism is gradually taking over in Vietnam, but when will they admit it? Will there have to be the kind of events that happened in Russia?

I don't think so because they stood aside from the events of 1989: they were "open" from 1987, then they put the brakes on, denouncing the events in Hungary, with its dozens of parties creating "disorder". It's been 15 years now since they carried out the Dôi Moi (Renovation). There is a new class that has needs for consumption, for display, for cars: a Mercedes that costs 40,000 euros here is worth nearly 100,000 over there. Furthermore, the price a bowl of Phö (traditional soup) has doubled in a year. Only the taxi fares haven't increased because of the tourists and the cutthroat competition.

What do the Vietnamese think of the Americans now? After having fought to the death against them it seems they are adopting many of their habits.

There's no question about it, it's the dollar that rules. They are "aping" the Americans. The young people aren't interested in this war that ended in 1975, that is, 30 years ago already. Those who fought in the war are either frustrated or fatalistic. Many people are waiting for the Tenth Congress of the party, which is due to be held next year and which is likely to do no more than throw them a few bones to gnaw.

In this rather contradictory situation, with the re-establishment of capitalism and the beginnings of a democratic opening, what can we do?

We have to at least restore to their rightful place the revolutionaries of yesterday, and through Nguyen An Ninh obtain the rehabilitation of all the Trotskyists who were massacred. We have to talk again about the 1930s, which the young people don't know about and the old ones tend to no longer want to remember. The publication of Pham Van Hûn's book is an encouraging sign. It should be followed by publishing all the writings of the members of the "La Lutte" group, which appeared at a time when Ho was still unknown...Besides that, what we can do is to continue to translate Trotsky's works and then the writings of Trotskyists on the Vietnamese Revolution, so as to make known our positions during the Resistance and at present.

The assassination of Hariri and the Sorcerer's Apprentice

1 April 2005, by Camile Dagher

These repercussions not only hit Beirut, Damascus and other capitals in the Arab region, they went round the world - not necessarily because Hariri was an international figure (as his supporters and other profiteers abusing his terrible death want to show), but because his death - based on the accusation that he was assassinated by Syria - became an opportunity to launch a process of huge political change, serving the current imperial politics of the United States.

What about "Freedom Square"?

Among the places that were chosen to be part in this process, we should mention "Martyrs' Square". It is probably not a coincidence that this square is in the middle of Solidère, an area whose buildings were mainly owned by Hariri. It was certainly not a coincidence to have Hariri buried next to the square. With that, the whole theatre was ready with the convenient sound equipment as well.

In the square, thousands of young Lebanese have been gathering daily for more than a month, waving the Lebanese flag. Their main demand has been the end of what they call the "Syrian occupation".

For left-wing and progressive Lebanese, the square is full of contradictions, and not a little shame and sadness. We do share with those innocent and enthusiastic young people their complete condemnation of the control exercised over the Lebanese situation (as well as the Syrian situation) by the Syrian regime's corrupt intelligence services - and we condemn this regime's products and partners too.

However, we also reject utterly, and feel terrible disgust at, the hatred towards the Syrian people that was shown by many in the square - as if they are completely incapable of distinguishing between the executioner and the victim, or between a regime and the people. The Syrian people suffer even more than the Lebanese from the oppression of his regime. The simplest human feelings call for solidarity with the Syrians instead of chauvinistic slogans, full of hatred, against them. These feelings have also led to physical violence against Syrian immigrant workers in Lebanon, already abused and humiliated in living conditions similar to slavery.

It's also a shameful fact that most of the people in Martyr's Square who call for the complete withdrawal of Syria's troops were not much bothered by Israel's occupation of the south of our country and never once cried out against it. Moreover, the Martyr's Square majority completely agree with UN Resolution 1559 that includes the disarmament of the Resistance - namely Hizbollah, a party now considered as part of the support for the current Syrian authority.

Despite its sectarian character and its political agenda closely related to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hizbollah is the only real force inspiring authentic respect in the political life - not only because of its important role in liberating South Lebanon, but also because it did not get involved in the internal corruption in the local political system. Moreover, Hizbollah remains one of the major forces in the Arab region facing continuous American-Israeli political attack, and indeed is the main target of Resolution 1559.

Several Israeli spokespeople, including the Foreign Minister and the Army chief, openly talked about Israel's major role in drawing up this resolution. It is important to note here that this resolution - the disarmament of Hizbollah - could not possibly be effected without rivers of blood flowing on the same land liberated from Israeli occupation.

It would entail a real massacre among the Lebanese people, a massacre that the Zionists and American neoconservatives would doubtless be delighted to see. The prospect of such an event shows how fragile and hypocritical are the loudly screamed slogans of "the Unity of the Lebanese" in the Martyrs' Square! What a fake "Lebanese Unity", that could be the entry to a huge division among the Lebanese in the near future!

A Tragic Death and the Making of a Myth

There is no doubt that the explosion of February 14th was a tragic event and calls for complete condemnation. There is also no doubt that the victim, Hariri, played a very important role in the lives of the Lebanese in the last two decades. He remained Prime Minister for 10 years, at a very critical stage in this country's life.

Rafic Hariri

Hariri was a businessman as well as a politician, and had been accused of many things in his career. Among the most important of these accusations is the unjust - though apparently legal - seizure of a vital and highly profitable piece of real estate in Beirut, - the city centre!

Another is his participation in the creation of one of the worst violations

of the requisites of democracy and the rule of law, i.e. the sharing out [1] of the government posts between leaders of the different confessional groups. This led directly to the looting of national treasury by these self-same groups, and the allocation of important posts to incompetent appointees of these self-same confessional overlords, all in collaboration with the Syrian security services.

A further stain on Hariri's reputation is the breaking of the General Union of Workers and the whole trade union movement - again with the direct participation of the Syrian intelligence services and Lebanese political forces close to Damascus. Yet another was the decision prohibiting public assemblies which led to a massacre in 1993 during a demonstration against Oslo Agreement. He was also instrumental in defeating the proposed law allowing civil marriage, an obvious step towards equality between citizens.

The reconstruction process under Hariri was based on reckless borrowing, which saw the external debt leap from $1.5 bn to more than $40bn. And under Hariri the loyalty of businessmen, politicians and intellectuals was universally bought, in a corruption process without precedent.

It seems obvious that the process of constructing a myth around Hariri and turning him into a 'saint' is part of another operation - to make Syria the only possible suspect in his assassination. But it is not just Damascus that would pay the price for such an outcome. It would be paid by the Lebanese and Syrian people, in addition to others in the region, namely Iraq, Palestine, and Iran.

We raise this question, while at the same time we are keen on the necessity of convening an honest investigation to uncover the real responsibility for this crime. Here, we do not neglect the full responsibility of the Syrian regime that led things to become as bad as they are, due to the dictatorship of the system, the corruption, and the hegemony of the security services in the political, economic, and social life - not only in Syria, but in Lebanon as well.

The Syrian regime's practices in the balance

One of the things which led to the collapse of the unification process between Egypt and Syria in the early 'sixties - the short lived 'United Arab Republic' - was the attempt by Egypt to be absolutely hegemonic in this process, particularly through the use of its security services inside Syria. The vital process of Arab unity was dealt a big blow by these Egyptian methods.

Although the presence of the Syrian Army in Lebanon was not within the same framework, a process of unity between the two countries, the practices of the Syrian army and intelligence services repeated - in a worse manner - what was practiced on the Syrian people between 1958 and 1961 by the Egyptian regime, instead of deepening the understanding and harmony between the two countries. This cannot but leave heavy shadows for years to come on the relation between the Lebanese and Syrian people.

On the other hand, it is simplistic and misleading to deny any positive aspect of the Syrian role in Lebanon, for example their contribution to the end of the civil war, in addition to the process of liberation from the May 17th 1983 Lebanese-Israeli agreement that was imposed by Israel and later from the Israeli occupation itself. However, this does certainly not justify the hegemony practiced by the Syrian regime in Lebanon or the hateful practices of the Syrian security services against the Lebanese people, the institutions, and the political life in Lebanon.

Another factor is the major role played in the production of a local political authority collaborating with the Syrian security services on the basis of self-interest and corruption. This authority completely faked the political life in Lebanon, corrupted the relations in our society, and cooperated with those services in looting the economy of the country and hitting its vital interests. There are also the Economic Conferences that have been convened since 1991, and that led most of the time to agreements to the advantage of the Syrians, at the expense of the Lebanese

Syria's Lebanese counterpart is the government headed for the moment by the previous Chief of Army, Emile Lahoud, who came to power in 1998 through pressure by Damascus and the Syrian security services on the Lebanese Parliament. His mandate was extended for 3 years last autumn through the same pressures.

The Opposition and the "Independence Intifada"

Before analysing the opposition, it is important to stress the fact that it is part of the same political layer that composes the government. Before the recent international and regional changes, a major part of the "opposition" had shared with the current authority benefits from the military and political Syrian presence in Lebanon, and they had participated in the making of the series of decisions and practices that led to the total decline of the country and its institutions.

The main forces, with a real popular base, in the opposition, which are leading what it is wrongly called "the Intifada of the Independence", are divided in fact into two major parts:

– One part includes the most sectarian forces most directly related to imperialist external forces and even close to Israel - all within the Christian reactionary framework. These are namely the Lebanese Forces, the opposition within the Phalangist Party, and the "Free Patriotic Movement" (supporters of General Aoun who led a disastrous "liberation war" against the Syrians in 1990 and took refuge in France).

– The other part includes forces that had been until recently part of the current system. Of its major

components is the political bloc related to Hariri and which represents his line, interests, and tendencies. Another component is Walid Joumblat, his party, and his parliamentary bloc - knowing that before his disagreement with the current Lebanese authority related to Damascus, this leader considered himself, few years ago, as one of the "whales" of the current regime and its relation with Syria and one of the principle profiteers from the corruption reigning (these are his own expressions). He has recently mentioned in a lecture at Saint Joseph University that he did not dare take this "new" anti-Syrian position previously because Henry Kissinger, the previous America Secretary of State, had completely "endorsed" full power of Syria in Lebanon in 1974. Now, Joumblat adds, he was encouraged by the recent change in Washington's position towards Syria. Moreover, his "revolt" has reached a stage of demanding an international protection for Lebanon, or even a kind of 'mandate'. He has recently even expressed through the media positive attitudes toward US occupation of Iraq and the "coming democracy" achieved through American artillery, according to his analysis.

Obviously, although the movement mobilized by the opposition - which is certainly contradictory, tied to its religious sects and especially its class interests, and mainly belonging to the local bourgeoisie and the electoral feudal layer - does represent popular demands like the end of the hegemony of the security services and the Syrian regime on Lebanon, it is at the same time involved - at least in its major parts - in projects that we cannot separate from the current American Israeli attack in the region.

The American Israeli attack and its objectives

It is clear that the main project of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration concerning the Arab region and its surroundings (namely Iran), is - in the context of what they call the Greater Middle East since the last war on Iraq - the complete control of the resources of this region, which are quite strategic to the Imperialist American interests. For this, all means are justified, namely dividing the countries in this region and tearing them apart through ethnic, religious, sectarian, and national discrimination. This includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and maybe others. Iran is now being threatened now on the pretext of its nuclear programme.

Within this whole general context, we can look at UN Resolution 1559 noting that President Bush, the American administration, and the Israelis have been almost daily stressing in their speeches the importance of its application, even with the possibility of military intervention as an ultimate means of implementing the resolution, according to Bush.

In the same context, we find that the attack at the local level not only targets the Syrian military presence, but also the Palestinian arms in the camps and Hizbollah's weapons as well. This fits in well with the vision that the American administration has to the "solution" of the Palestinian matter, a "solution" that conflicts with the rights of the Palestinian people. The right of the Palestinians to return to Palestine is to be replaced by their settling wherever they are, including Lebanon.

Can we take a stand?

It is important that the Lebanese communists and the local left in general do not remain at the margins of the popular mobilization, taking place within a national crisis that might be the most critical in Lebanon's history. Within this very complex situation open to all possibilities, they must be capable of producing their own agenda, an agenda that secures the unity of the people, beats the attack currently faced, and unites sections of the masses from the two opposed "camps" - on the basis of the national and class interests of the people and at the same time against Resolution 1559 and against the corrupted ruling political layer found in both camps.

It is also important to note here that the Syrian president has recently declared in his speech at the Damascus parliament his readiness to deal positively with Resolution 1559; hence the immediate retreat of the Syrian troops to the Bekaa and then to the Lebanese-Syrian borders, in line with the Taef Agreement.

On the other side, the Lebanese opposition - in their "common" declarations (for a part of it keeps its own version that is completely coherent with the American- Israeli vision [2]) - is demanding the application of Taef - especially regarding the Syrian presence and pretends being keen on the protection of the Islamic Resistance.

The whole country is at a very critical stage - a crossroad that might lead to positive outcomes or towards disaster. In order to prevent the latter outcome, the position of progressive and national forces should include the following:

1) To form a juridical committee of investigation by honest and independent judges. This committee should be elected by the whole juridical body and should uncover the crime and must be able to get assistance from any homicide experts - local or international in order to identify responsibilities.

2) To reject Resolution 1559

3) To protect the Resistance and refuse its disarmament.

4) To fully apply the Taef Agreement, including the withdrawal of the Syrian army and security services, combating political sectarianism, in addition to establishing relations with Syria based on brotherhood and solidarity - at all levels including the military facing Israel and the imperialist attack.

5) To establish an Election Law on the basis of one single constituency and proportional non-sectarian representation. This elected Parliament would become a constituent assembly that reviews and reconsiders the Constitution in order to lead the road for complete secularism.

6) To establish laws giving

Palestinians living in Lebanon their full civil rights including ownership, work, and social security - in the context of supporting the Palestinian people struggles for their Right to Return to their homeland - Palestine.

7) To give convenient solutions to the social life crisis of the local working population by raising the salaries, re-establishing the independence and vitality of the Trade-Union Movement, and ensuring social security and social services that terribly declined in the last 2 decades - especially at the health and education levels in addition to work opportunities.

Footnotes

[1] “Share out” (Mohassassa) is a particular phenomenon in the Lebanese sectarian system consisting of the repartition of the main public functions on sectarian basis and by consensus between the 3 Presidencies (of the Republic, the Parliament, and the Government)

[2] The Israeli newspaper Haaretz, according to the Al-Safir local newspaper on March 5, pointed out that Lebanese personalities have recently sent letters to Israeli officials in charge, namely Yuri Lubrani, the assistant of the Minister of Defense, to ask them “to encourage USA not to decrease the pressure it is practicing on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon.”

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