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Fourth International

Report on the international situation

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We reproduce here the report introducing the debate on the international situation, presented at the meeting of the Executive Bureau of the Fourth International in June 2013.

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Report on the international situation

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The last few days have been marked by the tremendous uprisings of the Turkish and Brazilian youth. We must also add the movement in Bosnia, started around the defence of the right of babies to have an identity. These social and political mobilizations are part of a movement of social and political resistance against austerity, inequality, attacks on democratic freedoms. Whether it is the defence of a park, the reaction to the rising cost of transport or the defence of democratic rights, these movements also have their specificity. They are movements that are springing up, in any case for Turkey and Brazil, in emerging countries that previously were not affected by the crisis. This gives these movements a whiff of May 68, with a strong mobilization of youth relayed by the mobilization of sectors of the labour movement.

In Brazil the austerity measures indicate perhaps the premises of the exhaustion of the "Brazilian model". But the mainspring of these movements is precisely the contradiction between some growth - although it has slowed in Brazil - and glaring inequalities. In Brazil, it is the tension between the amounts spent on the next "Mundial" and budget cuts that affect health, education and housing.

In Turkey it is the opposition between socio-economic growth and the oppressive regime that the Erdogan government wants to impose. It is too early to draw any lessons from these events, but new political generations are moving into action and that is of capital importance for the situation in these countries.

We will highlight five questions: the economic conjuncture; new tensions in Europe; the elements of political crisis in Europe; the latest information on social movements; and the latest information on the possibilities of political regroupment.

1. The economic conjuncture

a) The recession or quasi-recession in Europe is confirmed: -0.2 per cent on average, 0.1 per cent in Germany, 0.2 per cent in France.

b) This is the sixth consecutive quarter of contraction in economic activity in Europe, the longest recessionary period in the history of Economic and Monetary Union in Europe. Industrial overcapacity, particularly in sectors such as automobiles, is reaching alarming proportions, leading to new plans for the liquidation of factories and jobs.

c) The easing of tensions on the financial markets does not mean that the European economies are immune to new banking crises. Some large international banks have even reconstructed the mechanics that led to "toxic" financial products; the Cyprus crisis shows that rebounds of these banking and financial crises are always possible.

d) As a result the double pressure of tendencies to overproduction in key industrial sectors and in the financial markets is leading the ruling classes and governments to make the austerity policies harsher: mass unemployment, blocking or reducing wages, further reducing social budgets, attacks against social security and the labour code (see the agreement in Italy between the employers' organization Confindustria and the CGIL, against collective bargaining agreements), postponing the retirement age and longer duration of pension contributions. Gradually plans for the liquidation of pension systems are being put in place. In the last few years and the last few months the outlines of a reconfiguration of social relations in Europe are taking shape: The "social model" really is being liquidated. This austerity is endless.

2. New tensions in Europe

The effects of the economic crisis combined with the type of European construction have changed intra-European relations over the past five years. The different zones of Europe, Germany and its satellites in the North, Southern Europe (Greece, Spain, Portugal) - and occupying an intermediate position, France and Italy - have crystallized even further. As for Eastern Europe and the Balkans, some of these countries which are part of the EU - Poland, the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia - are part of a "second circle" of satellites of Germany (in the sense of submission/integration and not, like Sweden and Denmark, only integration); but probably not Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, whose economies are also in the orbit of France and Italy and therefore closer to the "South" or to a "second circle" of the South. Beyond public pronouncements on the need for unity and cooperation, for a European economic government, a new balance of power has been established, dominated by the German bourgeoisie. The strong capacity for productivity, technological innovation, research, development, the density of a network of internationally successful small and medium-sized companies have consolidated the place of Germany in this competition.

But it is especially the neoliberal restructuring of its labour market and of its productive organization that has given it a certain advantage. The Hartz-Schröder reforms have impoverished 20 to 25 per cent of the active population and the movements of relocation eastward, with a policy of social dumping, have amplified the differences between Germany and the other countries. This is what led Oskar Lafontaine, former chairman of the SPD (German Social Democracy) and founder of Die Linke (left party in Germany), a supporter of capitalist Europe, to declare on April 30, 2013 that "the Germans have not yet realized that driven by the economic crisis, the Southern Europeans - including France - are likely to be forced eventually to revolt against German hegemony", and to advocate an "exit from the euro."

These policies of "austerity without end" are not only defended by German capitalism - supported by the Christian Democracy of Angela Merkel and the SPD - they basically meet the demands of profitability of capital dominated by the financialisation of the global economy. The different European capitalisms, the different European ruling classes, the different European governments which are in the service of the globalized system, can only respond to the internal logic of this system: to achieve the maximum rate of profit. And François Hollande, "the boss of the Republic," fits completely into this logic: to deviate from it would involve a confrontation with capital that is totally foreign to the genes of social liberalism.

The problem is the social and political risks of such a historical regression and of internal cracks in the European Union, but the ruling classes continue in the same way as long as they are accumulating profits and earnings and they dominate the relationship of social forces. Until when?

These changes in the internal relations in Europe lead us to clarify our orientation towards capitalist Europe, combining anti-austerity emergency plans on the national level and a social and democratic European perspective, breaking with the European Union, initiating the construction of new relations in Europe, at the service of the workers and the peoples. But as soon as a government engaged in the serious implementation of such a programme, it would clash with the ruling classes, it would be faced with the demands of financial markets and the dictates of the European Union. There is an interconnection, but the rhythms are uneven, the crises and the changes in the relationships of forces are non-simultaneous, the histories and trajectories of each country are specific. In this case, every people and every government that begins to break with the logic of capitalist Europe must "protect its experience," every revolutionary process must protect its achievements.

It is with this method that we must treat the question of exit from the euro, which is being raised by a part of the radical Left. As the crisis deepens, and as social regression is identified with the EU and the euro, we understand the growing popular feeling to reject the euro and Europe. However this is to pose the problem upside down, especially if the exit from the euro takes place in an economy that remains capitalist, and is therefore tantamount to a massive devaluation which would be another form of austerity against the peoples. It is no accident that the National Front in France (and other reactionary formations in Europe) have come out against the euro.

Far from choosing to fall back on the national framework, anti-capitalist forces must stay the course: a Europe at the service of the people and workers. But we must not close our eyes to the fact that there is an insurmountable contradiction between the type of construction of the EU and the euro, and the implementation of an anti-austerity programme. That is why we have never shared the conceptions of "reform" or "reorientation" of the EU. When the Troika launches an ultimatum to the Greek people, "either you accept the memorandum (austerity policies) and you stay in the euro, or you reject the memorandum and you get out of the euro," it is necessary to get out of this trap, and we fully understand the slogan launched by SYRIZA in Greece "no sacrifices for the euro!" And so, prepare for conflict, for confrontation.

It is not for an anti-austerity government to opt to leave the euro, which is its responsibility, what is necessary is to go right to the end in refusing austerity and thus prepare the population to break with the logic of capitalism. It is for the European Union to decide to expel any country - which in legal terms is not so easy - that does not apply its plans. And if the EU goes as far as that, it is the responsibility of a workers' government to face up to the crisis, to draw all the consequences of the break (and of course, to be prepared).

3. The elements of political crisis

a) The present moment is a combination of all the crises, economic, social, and political. Neoliberal capitalism in crisis tends to undermine democracy and to develop authoritarian measures at the institutional level. The closure of the Greek public television is a good example of the attacks against democracy: people even talked of a "coup." Already the subordination of the governments of Southern Europe to the regime of the Troika (EU, IMF, ECB), and to the power of the financial markets and the big banks has marked the change. The ruling classes are showing that they are willing to question democratic rights and freedoms in order to impose their "austerity diktats."

b) The crisis is also aggravating the crisis of political representation. The social, political and electoral bases of the traditional parties are being destabilized and eroded. Italy is obliged to establish a grand coalition bringing together Bersani, Letta and Berlusconi in order to address the great instability caused by the 8 million votes won by Beppe Grillo and the millions of votes lost by the Right, the centre-right and the centre-left. The inconsistency of the movement of Beppe Grillo after only a few months in parliament clearly shows the depth of the crisis. In Germany, the polls are also for the moment predicting election results that will lead to a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats.

c) In this situation of crisis, the ruling parties are regularly rejected, but in a movement that reinforces the Right and the parties of the extreme Right. Thus, we had demonstrations in France of hundreds of thousands of people against same-sex marriage. This issue has awakened an old Catholic France, reactionary, anti-Dreyfusard, which has existed for decades in the country, but has reappeared on this theme, encouraged by a general climate where the Left is demobilized and demoralized by the policies of the Socialists. It should also be noted that in the wake of the mass mobilization of a radical Right, which also partially escapes from control by the parties of the traditional Right, we are seeing the activism of extreme right-wing groups which attack leftists and antifascist activists.

d) In France, the political and moral crisis is enormous. The policies of the Socialist Party are overwhelmingly rejected. We thought that the fate of the Greek PASOK - a total collapse - was a Greek singularity and social democracy could weaken but not collapse to that point. When we analyze the recent by-elections in France, we cannot rule out this type of collapse for the PS. The PS lost thousands of voters in these elections. It even failed to get into the second round of the elections. If current trends continue, the situation may be catastrophic for the PS in the upcoming municipal and European elections in 2014. But what is more worrying in terms of the political and electoral relationships of forces is that this collapse of the PS benefits the Right, but especially the National Front, which has now become the centre of gravity of French political life. Even though there is not, at this stage, a significant fraction of the ruling classes behind the FN - they are with globalized capitalism - we cannot rule out a political recomposition on the right, with a traditional Right that is broken: sectors that make deals with the National Front and others that turn towards a broad reconstruction of the Left with the centre. The relative autonomy of the factors of the political crisis may at some point lead the country into a critical situation.

4. New movements in emerging and limits of social mobilizations in the countries in crisis

We have to distinguish between the new mobilizations that have arisen in so-called emerging countries and the countries in crisis. We must follow precisely the dynamic forms and content of the mobilizations in Turkey and Brazil. These mobilizations start from attacks on the social and democratic levels which give these movements a whiff of May 68. The emerging countries are in their own way affected by the crisis, but in a unique way and with a material position (relative to the state of these societies) that is more favourable than in the countries of crisis. In Europe, we should note the days of action and demonstrations in Spain and Portugal. On June 27, Portugal is preparing for another one-day general strike. Note also the rebound of social and democratic mobilizations in Greece after the closure of ERT (public television). Despite a difficult situation for social mobilization in Greece, after 29 days of nationwide strikes, the popular movement is still capable of resisting another attack. In terms of democratic resistance partial victories can be won, but on the socio-economic level, the struggles are not able to block the layoffs, the freezing or reduction of wages, the loss of thousands of jobs in the public sector, the cuts in social spending [1]. In short, austerity is continuing and getting worse. The days of coordinated mobilization on a European scale have marked the situation on their level, but they do not constitute references for workers and young people in each country. New attacks are being developed, including a new reform of the Socialist government, which is continuing and accentuating the policies of the Right, and also a draft European directive, which imposes competition in the service sector, including health, social security, pensions, social protection ... We must follow and intervene as actively as possible in these social movements, pending a partial upturn in the economic conjuncture.

5. News of the radical and revolutionary Left

The relationships of political forces are unfavorable to the revolutionary Left.

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Syriza remains the reference for a good part of the radical Left in Europe. Its convention in July will be a test for measuring its ability to relaunch an anti-austerity programme and to withstand the enormous pressures of the ruling classes and the European Union.

In Spain, the United Left, dominated by the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), maintains an audience that the polls confer on it, by combining actions against austerity and institutional realism, such as in Andalusia, where it confirms its participation in government with the PSOE. In the Spanish state, in Catalonia as also in the Basque Country and Galicia, it is the radical nationalism of the CUP, Sortu and ANOVA which is central to building a political alternative on the left of the Left. The comrades of Izquierda anticapitalista have recently taken part in meetings to build an "anti-capitalist alternative from below." These meetings have involved activists of the radical sectors of the United Left, trade unionists, activists in various associations and militants of the revolutionary Left. These meetings, in cities across the country, are opening up new areas of debate among activists. They are confronted, to turn these meetings into a sustainable framework for anti-capitalist alternative, with the policy of the United Left, which remains dominated by institutional issues.

In France, the recent elections have not benefited the Left Front. It is the National Front that is gaining from the collapse of the PS. The Left Front called a demonstration of tens of thousands of people against the austerity policies, which the NPA supported, but the mobilization on the side of the radical Left is not at present strong enough to change the balance of forces. We will have to wait until the next municipal and European elections to see if, faced with the rise of the FN, the radical Left can also make its mark on the situation.

Finally, it should be noted that there are some interesting initiatives concerning regroupment of revolutionaries in Britain, involving activists of Socialist Resistance, the Anticapitalist Initiative and forces coming from the crisis of the SWP. These activists are also involved in initiatives around the appeal of Ken Loach for a new anticapitalist party.

In Germany, a meeting of anticapitalist regroupment was held on the initiative of a series of currents, including the members of the Fourth International in the country, with Olivier Besancenot and Charles André Udry.

We should also note the initiatives in Belgium, more precisely in Wallonia, to discuss the possibility of bringing together anti-austerity trade unionists to assess the possibilities for a new party based on these groups of trade-union activists.

[1] Since this report was written, there has been a victorious strike in the EPSM (public psychiatric establishment) in Caen... with payment for strike days! The brutal austerity and restructuring plan of the EPSM (closure or restructuring of departments, reduction in days off and a half-hour cut in meal times, deskilling of jobs ...), suddenly announced via the press and by letters to staff, has been swept away by an unprecedented mobilization of all categories of staff, who for several days blocked admissions to the hospital, and expressed their anger and refusal to pay for the alleged deficit the hospital, summed up in the slogan: "For us the answer is no! The staff will not pay for the deficit!"