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Europe

# Seville: the anatomy of melancholy

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV342 - July/August 2002 -

Publication date: Monday 22 July 2002

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**'Useless efforts produce melancholy and I am not prepared for Seville to be a summit of melancholy'. José Maria Aznar, June 3, 2002.**

Despite the new political climate that has been created in the European Union (EU) with the victory of the right in Portugal, Holland and France, the European Council meeting in Seville on June 21-22 was unable to find a conservative 'positive agenda'. The plans for institutional reform, the rigid defence of the Stability and Growth Pact and even the policy of sanctions against the countries of origin of illegal immigrants proposed by Aznar were blocked by the absence of consensus among member states.

The original programme of the Spanish Presidency - the second wave of neoliberal economic and social reforms summed up in the 'spirit of Lisbon' - was replaced in the course of the last two months prior to Seville by an authentic obsession with building fortress Europe and thus depriving the far right of its themes of security and emigration. Even the 'war against terrorism' has been reinterpreted in this climate and converted into an internal xenophobic war against illegal immigrants, threatening them with pogroms and expulsion in the coming months.

## The hesitations of neo-liberal strategy

The meeting of European ministers of the economy and finance - held in Madrid on the very day of the general strike called by the Spanish unions - only served to expose the economic and social difficulties in imposing the second wave of neo-liberal restructuring decided on by the European Council at its Barcelona meeting. The fundamentalist interpretation of the Stability and Growth Pact, already denounced by Chirac (after the French presidential election) and by the two candidates at the German elections, Schröder and Stoiber, has been abandoned.

The new formula of consensus retains the goal of budgetary equilibrium, but the unilateral declaration by France, making it conditional on a growth rate of 3% in the course of the two coming years, will be a lifeline for those member states experiencing difficulties, starting with Germany. Faced with this crude reality and the situation of the stock markets, the pious sentiments expressed - 'the recent decline of economic activity is reaching its end' - have little weight.

Reform of the labour market, the main agreement coming out of the Barcelona meeting, was kept prudently on the back boiler after the success of the general strikes called by the Italian CGIL and the CCOO and UGT in Spain. The same goes for the project of a 'single European sky', opposed by the strike of air traffic controllers in half the member states on June 19, which highlighted the danger involved in the privatisation of this public service. This new capacity for resistance by sectors of the European workers' movement (to which it is necessary to add the strikes in engineering and building in Germany) oblige the right wing governments to more prudence in the introduction of neoliberal reforms, particularly in the area of public services and pensions. The trial balloons floated by Berlusconi and Aznar concerning confrontation with the unions have already led to a pause in 'social dialogue' and dangerously increased social tension in Italy and Spain. Chirac and the rest of the European right seem to prefer a more traditional strategy of cooption of the trade union bureaucracy and of division of the workers to impose their policies.

## Rejection of 'More Europe!'

The two complementary elements of the programme of the Spanish Presidency, summed up in the slogan 'More Europe!' - the advance of negotiations for the enlargement of the Union and the reform of the functioning of the Council before the entry of new members - did not meet with the necessary consensus.

The negotiations on EU enlargement are blocked by the absence of internal agreement inside the EU on reform of agricultural aid in the enlarged Union and on the future of the community budget. What's more, the social consequences of the neo-liberal restructuring implicit in the conditions imposed on the candidate states of central Europe has already led to tensions. Thus Poland faces an agricultural crisis which threatens to be very serious from next autumn and, like the other countries of central and eastern Europe, will have to dismantle its iron and steel industry, as a consequence of the imposed end of state subsidies.

To this panorama it is necessary to add the political situation in Cyprus. Greece has already said it will block the enlargement if Cyprus is not among the new members admitted to the Union, on the pretext that there is still no solution to the division of the island. And Turkey has no interest in precipitating an agreement in Cyprus as long as the horizons relating to its own adhesion are not cleared. Thus the negotiations have entered an impasse whose resolution exceeds the diplomatic capacities of the Spanish Presidency.

The Solana Plan for the reform of the Council's functioning - based on the division into two of the current General Affairs Council (GAC) to create the nucleus of an EU government and on the replacement of the current voting regime, where unanimity is required for the adoption of decisions, by a system of qualified majority voting - has been pushed back by the seven 'small' member states. Aznar and Blair, who had defended this project, must satisfy themselves with specific meetings of the GAC to prepare the European Councils.

Prodi's parallel project to reform the functioning of the Commission by creating Commissioners of the first level (Vice-presidents and sector coordinators) and of the second level (who will henceforth only attend some sporadic plenary meetings of the college of Commissioners), has met the same resistance. The 'small' member states are not ready to lose their direct political representation inside the Commission, which allows them the right to examine and veto on all questions dealt with by the Union, even if the maintenance of the current system could render the EU ungovernable after enlargement.

The key elements of community governability, whether the regulation of the single market or institutional functioning, have then still not been resolved, only 18 months away from enlargement; this could lead to a potentially serious crisis of the Union.

In this situation, the support given to the Irish government - so that it can put pressure on its citizens at the second referendum on the Treaty of Nice, declaring Irish constitutional neutrality fully compatible with the CFSP (Common Foreign and Security Policy) - is pathetic, as much from the point of view of the aspirations of the European dominant classes to a 'European Power' as from that of the democratic legitimacy of the Union.

## 'Fortress Europe' as consolation

The policies on emigration and asylum, the concern for internal security and control of the Union's external frontiers, which have been presented as the 'results' of the Seville meeting, resemble then more of a consolation prize in relation to the danger of community melancholy that Aznar wanted to avoid.

The neo-liberal economic policies of the EU depend on the exploitation of 11 million immigrant workers who are

already living on its territory (nearly 10% of the working class) and on an annual flux of around 600,000 to 900,000 new immigrant workers to support the current demographic equilibrium on the labour market. The discourse on the 'illegals' hides the planned creation of an under-class of workers deprived of civic rights and the right to work, defined in racial terms, subjected to a degree of exploitation incompatible with any idea of the 'European social model', living in constant fear of expulsion towards their countries of origin if they do not 'assimilate'. It is for them that the new status of 'long term resident' is being created.

If we needed an example of what they are talking about, we need only look at the imprisonment of 400 immigrant workers without documents in the University of Seville. North Africans and sub-Saharan, mostly men, they have been deprived of work picking strawberries because they had dared to revolt the previous season. With the help of the government, the employers have replaced them by workers imported from central Europe. The government has already announced - if solidarity does not prevent them - that it will apply its new policy against illegal immigration and expel them all.

This is despite the warnings by Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, that the EU's new common policy on emigration criminalizes the flight from Third World poverty. It hardens the current legislation on asylum rights and refugees, violating the Geneva Convention of 1951 and prepares the collective and coordinated expulsion of immigrants without documents from EU territory in the course of a veritable pogrom next autumn.

Although in the recent Cotonou agreement (2000) with the former colonies of Africa the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP), the latter rejected any clause of readmission of their citizens, the EU has now unilaterally imposed the negotiation of agreements of readmission which affect not only the inhabitants of the country but also the immigrants from a third country arriving on EU territory after having passed through these countries. Chirac - more conscious of France's relations with its former colonies than Aznar is of those between Spain and Latin America - blocked the proposal of the Spanish Presidency to impose economic sanctions on those developing countries who do not collaborate.

Blair, who has also supported the project, had to face the open protest of his minister for aid and development, Claire Short, who termed it 'morally repugnant'.

The control of external frontiers, the creation of the first elements of a European body of frontier guards and the other initiatives of Commissioner Vitorino reveal the true nature and situation of this European project. The next advance relates to the internal and external control of the EU's population. While capital circulates freely under the single market, the free circulation of people will be subject to police control, an essential element of any capitalist state. It is not surprising that questions of 'justice and internal affairs' already occupy more than 30% of the activity of the Council and the Commission.

## Warning to navigators

The project of a European Union which is 'neo-liberal with a human face', founded on consultation with the trade unions on the subject of restructuring, impelled by the social-democratic and Green coalition governments, has collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. The defeat of Jospin and the very likely defeat of Schröder are the proof of it.

The political turn to the right on the basis of the growth of social polarization throughout the EU is paralleled by a growing capacity for autonomous resistance on the part of the movement against globalisation and also the trade union movement. The European dominant class must increase their rates of profit to compete with the USA and Japan and they have a clear programme of neo-liberal restructuring, attacks against the public services and

reduction of wages (combining the reduction of indirect wages and pensions for workers in fixed employment and an increase of direct exploitation of seasonal and immigrant workers). However, it is the relation of forces which at the end of the day will be decisive. For now division reigns between the partisans of direct confrontation, defended by the Blair-Berlusconi-Aznar 'axis of evil', and those who opt for the partial maintenance of social dialogue to divide the working class and avoid the dangers of the growth of social tension.

As a result of the abandonment of the welfare state and competition for access to subsidies between the traditional workers sectors pauperised by restructuring and immigrant workers, the far right is growing. The right exploits this social and political situation as a complementary element of division of the working class.

The relative autonomy of the EU faced with the national frameworks of class struggle and the absence of a 'European policy' on the part of the trade unions has led the Commission and the European Council to play an essential role in pushing forward neo-liberal restructuring and facilitating the turn to the right. That has been the great merit of Aznar and the Spanish Presidency and its main political capital for the future.

However, the EU is accumulating massive internal contradictions: lack of democratic legitimacy; the absence of a clearly defined project of institutional reform for the future governability of the Union; national internal rivalries, economic and political; dependence and different degrees of autonomy in relations with the United States; different margins of manoeuvre faced with recession and its social consequences; and above all difficulties in relation to assimilation in the single market of the candidates from central Europe, while maintaining the pretence to a 'European social model'.

Without a clearly established leadership of the Union, which today does not exist, these contradictions can culminate in serious crisis.

The anti-capitalist and alternative left must prepare consciously, developing the social movements in a European perspective and elaborating a programme of *résistance* as well as alternative elements for a different and possible Europe of the workers and the peoples.

That demands a conscious and coordinated effort in the 'anti-globalisation' movement, in the unions and in the sphere of political representation. The first step, with its inevitable differences, will be taken with the European Social Forum and in the Conferences of the European anti-capitalist left.

In the six coming months three tasks will be central: the struggle in solidarity with immigrant workers, the denunciation of the social consequences of EU enlargement and *résistance* to them, and finally the organization of the opposition to the pseudo-convention of a democratic and solidarity-based model of Europe at the service of the workers and the peoples.