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France

For a vote of censure in the streets

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In a European context of recession and even deflation, war in the East of the continent and the rise of the forces of the right and extreme right, France has a singularity: the country combines the rise of an extreme right of fascistic origin and acute political crisis at governmental and institutional levels.

The resignation of the first Valls government, only four months after its formation, and the nomination of a second [1], is a new demonstration of this political crisis, which the institutions of the Fifth Republic are increasingly incapable of containing. And the answer of the ruling team to these convulsions is the deepening of the neoliberal course and the preparation of an authoritarian policy. An unprecedented austerity policy and the composition of a clearly neoliberal Cabinet, with in particular the choice as minister of the economy of a partner-manager of the business bank Rothschild, Emmanuel Macron, who affirms loudly that the “traditional left is a dead star” and that it is necessary to destroy “the statutory economy” – including all the social and public statutory rights that still protect employees. Many observers and even PS deputies spoke of the appointment of this banker to the government as provocation.

A neoliberal government

The choice of this second Valls government represents a headlong rush forward in the application of the current policy known as “the offer”, a policy at the service of capitalist profits, ever more aid to employers, and ever more austerity, with the prospect of voting for a budget built on aid of 40 billion Euros to industry and drastic reductions in welfare expenditure and public services investment. These measures result from the pressure of the financial markets and the requirements of repayment of the debt and its interest, to which Hollande and the leadership of the Socialist Party have committed themselves. This policy was warmly applauded by the bosses following a speech by Valls at the summer school of Medef, the French employers’ organisation. This government is the political expression of a direct alliance with the employers within the framework of the “pact of responsibility”. [2] An unprecedented austerity plan since, unlike the austerity policies of the late 1970s or the 1980s, the current neoliberal offensive aims at destroying what remains of the social gains of 1944-45 and later.

In the world competition between the United States, the so-called emergent countries like China, and the “hard core” of Europe, the European ruling classes and the French bourgeoisie have decided to break the “European social model” or what it remains of it: the aim is to lower wages by between 20 and 30% as in Greece, Spain or in Portugal. This involves not only freezing or cutting wages, but also lengthening working hours. Macron has already declared – in an interview with the weekly magazine *Le Point*, one day before his official nomination – that company agreements could undermine the 35-hour week. [3] The agenda of the employers and government is to continue dismantling social security, collective agreements and employment legislation, giving primacy to enterprise level agreements and reducing public services.

Up to now, the reality of the economy and French society – the sixth biggest world power - deadened the shock of the counter-reformation, if one compares the French situation with that of the countries of southern Europe, but the requirements of the employers and the current choices of the government indicate that they will move into higher gear.

An open political crisis

The source of the political crisis is this historical change carried out by successive governments which have brutally destroyed the living and working conditions of millions of people. These policies are largely rejected, and deepen a crisis of representation in which institutions like the traditional parties are nothing than relays for the financial markets and capitalist transnationals.

Because, while the institutions of the Fifth Republic still make it possible for François Hollande to govern, they no longer mask the real relationship of forces in the country. The policy of Hollande and Valls enjoys minority support in the country, on the left and in the Socialist Party. How long can the president and the government hold on?

Remember that Valls scored only 5.63% at the time of the Socialist presidential primary election in October 2011! Including Hollande supporters that could go up to 15 to 20% of the PS. The government can discipline its parliamentary majority through article 49.3 of the Constitution, by requiring a vote of confidence in its policies. But will that be enough? We can no longer dismiss the possibility of a minority government in the National Assembly. From there, two hypotheses are possible: a new Socialist government or the dissolution of the National Assembly. The threat of dissolution could force the Socialist deputies to fall into line, especially in the current situation where new elections would doubtless bring a sweeping victory of the right and far right and a process of dislocation of the PS. But the Socialist deputies also know that Holland and Valls are leading them into the abyss.

Divisions of the right and pressure of the far right

Because what faces the country today is a collapse of the PS leading to a rise of the right and the Front National, based on a mounting tide of racism and all kinds of reactionary ideas. How many votes can the FN expect to gain, either in early elections or at the normal expiry of the presidential term in 2017? This is the question which is posed and which will over-determine the situation on the right. Which will be the situation of a UMP ((Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) on the verge of an implosion as a result of corruption scandals and leadership rivalries? From these questions a reorganization of the right could emerge which could centre around the FN and an authoritarian line described as populist but also around “the centres”, taking its cue from the European Union and the German coalition government – between the CDU and the SPD – to form a coalition of national unity going from the PS and Greens to the centre right.

We are not yet there, in particular because the institutions and the mode of representation prevent the formation of a coalition of national unity. Lastly, all the polls indicate that the PS would be swept aside by the right and far right. Consequently, the presence of a candidate of the PS is not assured in the second round of the presidential election, [4] only an open division of the right could leave it a certain space.

The spectrum of fragmentation and collapse for the PS

The “social liberal” trajectory of the Socialist Party is not new. Its integration at the heights of the state and finance capital has been evident for several years. Even the “social” adjective in “social-liberal” is too much. Its process of transformation from social democratic party into a type of “US Democratic Party” is quite advanced. Even Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, first secretary of the PS, recognizes, in his manner, that “the identity of the PS has dissolved in management”. But the cost of these structural transformations in this situation of historic crisis causes tensions, confrontations, fissures and fractures.

Who can say what will be the situation of the PS in the weeks or the months to come? Until now a process comparable with that of PASOK seemed remote, but the choices of the Holland-Valls team could cause a collapse of this PS. Two hundred socialist deputies signed a call to support the government, but there are 300 socialist deputies. What will the others do? At this stage, these fragmentations have not led to leftwing currents emerging. One of the alternatives to be considered, vis-a-vis the failure of Holland-Valls, would be a reorganization of the Socialist apparatus with Martine Aubry – who opposed the recent removal of rent controls – or others who are profiled as being more “on the left” than the current leadership. But all of them, so far, have accepted the austerity policies.

Nevertheless “too much is too much”. The PS, according to Cambadélis, has lost more than 25,000 members in two years. The weakening of the party is a given of the present situation: what will be the extent of internal divisions? How far will this situation open up, in the ranks of the PS members and beyond, a space for questioning, debates and possibilities of actions against the austerity policies?

And the Front de gauche?

This governmental political crisis is also likely to accelerate the tensions and the fractures within the Front de gauche. The initial formula of the Front is “null and void”. A terrible blow was dealt to it by the choice of the leaders of the PCF to ally with the PS in the main cities at the local elections of March 2014. The Communist Party is continuing its discussions with the PS for alliances in the next senatorial elections in September 2014. As for Jean Luc Mélenchon, he has just resigned from the co-presidency of the Parti de gauche to build a movement for the Sixth Republic around his candidacy for the 2017 presidential election.

How can you claim to fight for democracy and take as a starting point methods “of a Bonapartist type” which circumvent parties and reject real rank and file democracy? The political crisis of representation can hold surprises, but, if Chavez had a progressive role against US imperialism under the specific historical conditions of Latin America, can a project of this type constitute a response to crisis in Europe of this early 21st century?

Elements of an anti-capitalist response

In this gap between the reality of the government and that of the real relationship of social forces social, the social and political strains can only be exacerbated and the social or democratic explosion can emerge at any time and on any question. When the dominant classes and the traditional apparatuses can no longer regulate the extreme problems of the situation by parliamentary methods, the eruption of the youth and popular classes is on the agenda. Social and political polarizations between an ultra right of the US “Tea Party” type and radical social movements can also constitute one of the givens of the situation. What, then, is the outline of a democratic, radical anti-capitalist response to the crisis?

1. The social question remains at the centre of the political situation. All the economic and social policies of the government must be rejected, starting with the “pact of responsibility” and the budget which give gifts to employers and the attacks against the public services and social security.

The crisis is such – with unemployment over 5 million and exploding poverty – that what is on the agenda it is not a remoulding of the pact of solidarity with Medef, but an emergency programme at the service of the workers and masses: prohibition of layoffs, an increase in the minimum wage and wages generally, massive creation of public jobs, defence of the 35 hours and reduction of working time, defence of social security, nationalization of the key

sectors of the economy under control of the employees, socio-ecological planning, cancellation of the illegitimate debt, rejection of the European treaties.

The crisis is so deep that half-measures cannot constitute credible answers. The requirements of the dominant classes are so strong that the satisfaction of elementary social needs cannot avoid confrontation with the financial markets, the big employers, their political representation, and the European Union, which implies the need for an anti-capitalist reorganization of the economy.

2. The political crisis also requires radical democratic answers. Once again, the institutions of the Fifth Republic show their antidemocratic character: while the government's policies have minority support in the country, Hollande and the government, concentrating all powers, force them through. To emerge from this political crisis, the people must speak, but it is not about replacing one majority by another in the context of these same institutions and these same austerity policies undertaken by the right or the so-called traditional left.

And what meaning does the demand for a Sixth Republic have if one maintains, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the leaders of the Front de gauche, the cornerstone of the institutions of the Fifth Republic, namely the election of the president of the Republic by universal suffrage? A huge institutional upheaval is needed, a dismantling of the institutions of the Fifth Republic, an end to the election of the President and the current mode of two round majority voting. More broadly, the current crisis of political representation demands a break with the current institutions and the opening of a constituent process centred on "real democracy": assemblies elected by universal suffrage at the national level which decide on all the political, social and economic questions. The capitalist markets should not negate democracy. The people and their representatives should decide, not the bankers and captains of industry!

That is what anti-capitalists argue for in such a process. This new democracy should also involve proportional representation of all currents and political positions. A process of de-professionalization of politics must be undertaken. The income of elected representatives should not be more than the average wage of the country. Multiple office holding should be abolished. Citizens should be consulted regularly, at the level where decisions should be taken, by assemblies or referendums. In short, "a democracy by the people and for the people".

The current political blockage demands that the workers and popular classes erupt on the social and political scene. Of course, the social and democratic objectives which anti-capitalists defend demand a different social and political relationship of forces, but sharp turnarounds are to be expected. The vote of "censure" of this government should not be left to the various parliamentary manoeuvres of the right and far right. It should be expressed in the street.

New generations like that we saw during the SNCF strikes show that employees, when the conditions of struggle are present, resist the attacks of government and bosses, even if there is a substantial gap between combativeness and an anti-capitalist political consciousness. The demonstrations against Israeli aggression in Gaza also witness to the mobilization of a sector of the population in the popular neighbourhoods. On April 12, 2014 tens of thousands demonstrated against austerity behind a coalition of trade unions, associations and parties. It should be stressed that in these mobilisations the NPA, with others, had a positive role. We must now continue down this unitary road and rally all those who wish to oppose the government policy from the left, around concrete demands and objective, like the rejection of the Hollande-Valls budget. Every step forward for popular mobilization should be supported.

But we should avoid once again falling back into "left" combinations that stay in the context of current austerity policies and institutions. Faced with a political crisis which disorients and demobilises those on the left, action and common discussion are needed, but not with ex-ministers who supported the pact of responsibility just a little while ago. Fighting the employers, right and far right effectively requires a break with all austerity policies and independence from the PS and all the forces allied with it. It is in this context that the elements of an anti-capitalist alternative and movement can be built.

[1] Manuel Valls former Minister of the Interior was named Prime Minister by President François Hollande on 31 March 2014, after the disastrous results of the Socialist Party in the local elections. The government resigned en bloc on 24 August, Valls was again invited to form a government and did so changing only three ministers, three who were generally considered to be on the "left" of the Socialist Party.

[2] On 31 December 2013, in his New Year speech, François Hollande proposed "a pact of responsibility" to the bosses. It was founded on a simple principle: lower charges for employers, fewer constraints on their activities and, on the other hand, more jobs and more social dialogue. It was a direct answer to the demands formulated by MEDEF, main organization of French employers and its president Pierre Gattaz. In a press conference, a few days later, Holland specified the contents of this pact : each year, 30 billion euro of social contribution exemption (2) for the bosses guaranteed by 50 billion euros cuts in public spending in 3 years.

[3] Legislation introducing the 35-hour working was adopted in February 2000, under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's Plural Left government proposed by the then Minister of Labour Martine Aubry. The previous legal duration of the working week was 39 hours.

[4] Presidential elections take place in two rounds. The second round is a run off between the two candidates coming top in the first round. In 2002 the presence of Front National leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round (Lionel Jospin of the Socialist Party came third) against Jacques Chirac of the UMP provoked a shock wave and a massive vote for Chirac, even from traditional left voters.