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European Social Forum

Europe: a new phase

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Flavia d'Angeli is a member of the national leadership of the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista of Italy and Olivier Besancenot was candidate for the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR - French section of the Fourth International) at the French presidential elections in 2002. Shortly before the European Social Forum, they spoke about their hopes for the event.

It's been a long road from Seattle and Porto Alegre to Florence. What conclusions do you draw from it? In particular, do you see here the basis of a new internationalism?

Flavia - It seems clear to me that we are entering a new phase, where we are seeing an upturn in social struggle and also in the contesting of the established order and dominant, free-market capitalist thinking. Since Seattle, Porto Alegre, and all that came after them, the social movements of resistance to neo-liberal policies, which had been seen throughout the nineties, have taken on the necessary worldwide dimension imposed on us by the enemy, that is, by capitalist and warmongering globalization.

After more than ten years of the offensive of free market thinking, of the law of the market, we can now at last see a very real rise in social and political conflict. The movements naturally bear the weaknesses born from the defeats of the last century, but are also at last free from the hegemony of Stalinist or social-democratic thinking. I think that for the moment it is still a dynamic of resistance, rather than a strong offensive movement. But the fact that thousands of people, networks, trade unions, political parties and other organizations all around the planet are beginning to move into action and feel the need to unite their struggles across a continent or across the world, must give us hope that we are seeing the beginning of a new cycle of international struggle.

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Olivier Besancenot

Olivier - The growth of this many-headed movement against capitalist globalization is a fantastic development. Seattle was only three years ago. Of course, there were precursors. There were the NGOs, and the demonstrations against the Third World Debt. As well as the intergalactic conference which took place in Chiapas in 1996. All these prefigured today's movement, a movement in which different struggles against the globalization of exploitation and exclusion converge. Everybody remembers the declaration of Marcos: 'Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Isidro, anarchist in Spain, Palestinian in Israel ... Jewish in Germany, feminist in political parties, pacifist in Bosnia ...' He was absolutely right and very far-seeing.

Since Seattle, there hasn't been a single meeting of the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, the G7/8 or the inter-governmental conference of the EU without those who are excluded by the system, the workers, youth, women, environmental campaigners and small farmers turning up to tell the rulers of the world that they don't want their policies, and to demand a radical redistribution of wealth. There has also been the World March of Women, perhaps the biggest feminist demonstration in history, whose importance has been widely underestimated (I wonder why?) - which brought together women from more than 140 countries. The struggles of women in Afghanistan, Africa, North America and Europe are an integral part of the struggle against capitalist globalization and for a different world.

Women are the first victims of the crisis, the first to lose their jobs, the first to pay the price for the policies of economic austerity. They are also still victims of patriarchy whether in the form of fundamentalism or in the more subtle forms you find in the West where they continue to bear the brunt of domestic tasks, suffer from discrimination at work, receive lower salaries and are victims of violence in the home and the workplace.

Can you explain to us what has been happening in Italy since the huge demonstrations in Genoa in July of 2001?

Flavia - Genoa sent a real political and social shockwave around Italy. And it didn't only affect the Right wing government who had been the main people responsible for the conscious choice to repress and criminalize the protesters in the hope of stopping the movement.

Genoa was a shock too for the parliamentary Left, who had been responsible for ten years of neo-liberal policies, dismantling the welfare state and social rights. This Left is finding it more and more difficult to come to terms with the power and the radicalism of the movement.

What the demonstrations of July 2001 did was bring together a traditional-style protest of the 'anti-globalization' movement against the illegitimacy and the injustice of the G8, with the first protest against the Berlusconi government who had just won the elections on the 13th of May. But the protests were very different from those which had forced Berlusconi to resign in 1994.

Because of the cruel repression which rained down on thousands of demonstrators, the absence of the moderate Left, particularly of DS (Left Democrats) and the absence of the CGIL in Genoa, led to a sharp break between the movement and this Left. In this way there was no possibility of the movement being 'co-opted' and used in a 'moderate' way within the political institutions.

Lastly, I think that Genoa, and the ability of this movement to continue and to become more dynamic, have reinforced (not created of course) a greater willingness to fight in the biggest Union confederation, the CGIL. Today the CGIL, without fundamentally breaking with its line of 'getting round the negotiating table' at any price, has nevertheless been able, on its own, to mobilize a large section of the working class in two general strikes. Naturally we can't say that all that is because of Genoa, but I do think that the Social Forum movement has fertilized the ground for a wider upturn in workers' struggles.

What do you think is the importance of the European Social Forum?

Flavia - The European Social Forum in Florence is a 'historic' meeting-up. Perhaps for the first time this century, a huge number of movements, unions, parties, and individual citizens from all over the continent will get together to debate and confront their ideas, but also to coordinate present and future struggles.

And the fierce campaign of criminalization and societal 'alarm bells' run by the Italian government over the last few days just shows how important and powerful the forum is.

At the moment when the building of the European Union seems to be reaching a crucial phase of 'statification', with the drawing up of its constitution and its plans to bring in new member countries, the ESF wants to give a platform to the real owners of this construction, the citizens of Europe. It is they who suffer the most from its free-market and repressive orientations - women, workers, young people, unemployed and casual workers....

And the very idea that there might be a 'European Society' which can demand its rights and demand to be heard, throws the system into crisis. It's paradoxical that the Italian government is considering suspending the Schengen agreement on free circulation within Europe, in order to be able to stop the ESF from taking place. And in this idea, the other European governments support the Italian government. So one of the pillars of their propaganda about a unified Europe with no frontiers between member states, is negated. There is a Europe then which cannot tolerate any form of participation or of citizens' democracy. And that is why it's essential that Florence should be a time to

reinforce significantly the building of European networks of political and social struggle. In this way we can be ready for the key date in 2004, when the European Constitution will be approved, a constitution which completely ignores social rights and workers' rights.

Olivier - The programme of the European Social Forum is impressive. The 18 conferences, dialogues, windows on the world cover a wide field of subjects, all the aspects of neo-liberal policies. And when you add the 150 seminars which will take place in the afternoons ...: Nothing has been left out.

Of course, it's not an accident, it's because the Forum brings together all the social movements which exist in Europe. As Flavia said, it will make it possible to create and strengthen the networks and co-ordinating committees so we can begin to think on a European level (and not just within the EU) about the sort of fightback we need against the neo-liberal offensive of the European Union and all the governments of left and right. It can also help get over the problem of sectional and local movements, and avoid the risk of corporatism and nationalism.

Finally, one of the goals is to come out of these three days of debate with two declarations - one against the war planned in Iraq which could be the founding charter of a European anti-war movement. The second, coming out of the social movements, could be the first Europe-wide platform against the neo-liberal offensive. It is also important to make sure that these two questions are the central themes of the Saturday afternoon demonstration which everyone expects to be massive.

Flavia and Olivier, you'll both be taking part in a meeting entitled 'The Left of the Future - young people between the anti-capitalist Left and the social movements.' How do you analyze the radicalization of young people, particularly clear in their participation in the movement against capitalist globalisation?

Flavia - It seems to me that one of the characteristics of this new phase in global struggle is exactly that - the appearance of a new generation of activists. Young people all over the world are one of the sections of society the most under attack from the dogmas of the free market, pushed into precarious jobs and precarious lives. And for the first time, in the countries of the North, they are faced with a significant fall in their standard of life compared with that of their parents. These young people in revolt are therefore obviously massively present in the demonstrations of the movement, as we saw in Seattle, in Genoa, in the streets of Buenos Aires or in the 'Carlo Giuliani' camp at Porto Alegre.

But at the same time, this new generation is not 'leading' the movement, which is too often the preferred role of 'old' activist cadre. This kind of division between old and new is also present in the political parties, all the parties, and also in the trade unions and other large organizations. Naturally, every new generation looks for and finds its own ways of being radical, its own language and its own forms of political action. But it seems to me that now there is something more. We are seeing the first great wave of social movements after 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of so-called 'really existing socialism'. This new generation is both a child of the historic defeat of the nineteen nineties and also 'virgin' with respect to Stalinist discourse. It is a generation of which at least the most conscious section is not only seeking 'another world' but the very words to define it. It is a generation which is both very radical and 'illiterate' about strategy.

Of course, it won't be enough to give them lectures in socialism - that would be absurd. But it will be necessary, within and along with this new generation, to build the tools and the methods to look for this alternative: the ESF can be one of them. This alternative will necessarily call itself by a different name than it has in the past. It won't be enough to preach the difference between 'communism and Stalinism.' We will have to show proof, temporary but real proof, that socialism is possible: democratic, self-governing and self-determined, libertarian, participative, respecting both genders...

Then afterwards, we will give a name to the alternative!

Olivier - The arrival of a new generation on the social scene can be seen in different ways. In France, it's young people who have taken the first significant lead in the fight against precarity, especially in firms like McDonald's, Pizza Hut or in the telecom sector. And they have invented new forms of organization and struggle. We've seen a cohabitation - which hasn't always been easy - between mass meetings, strike committees, support committees and unions. Young people have also been present at all the anti-capitalist globalization demonstrations like Millau and Nice. And there was the huge and never-to-be-forgotten demo against the far right and the Front National between the two rounds of the presidential election. It was young people who were the detonator and the active part of the movement from the evening of the first round. The high point was the 1st May, when the different contingents taking part were the biggest since 1968. Those who say these demonstrations were a flash in the pan are wrong. They are the first signs of the inevitable emergence of young people on the political and social scene.

I don't usually make bets, but I'm ready to bet ten to one that the youth will be there to build an anti-war movement in opposition to the imperial policy of the United States and to prepare the mobilization for the Ascension weekend in 2003 when the G8 holds its summit in Evian.

In Europe, these last 20 years have seen free-market policies and attacks, produced sometimes by left wing parties and sometimes by right wing ones. How can we move forward in building a real anti-capitalist alternative capable of contesting the hegemony of social democracy in your country and across the whole of Europe and how do you see the relationship between this anti-capitalist left which we have to build and the workers' movement?

Flavia - I think it is in the social movement, and particularly in the movement against this globalization that there must be the space, which needs to be strengthened, to build an alternative anti-capitalist Left, nationally and at a European level. The movement is constantly pushed into occupying a political space because of the vertical crisis of the social democratic Left which has followed neo-liberal policies in almost every country in Europe. So we have to be able to keep the openness and the broad unity of the movement so as to be able to build opposition fronts such as the one against the war. At the same time we need to be absolutely determined to maintain the radical nature of our demands and programmes, by linking, for example, a broad 'moral' opposition to the war with a general contesting of the social economic and political system which breeds war, and needs war, as a response to its own crises.

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My opinion, at least based on the situation in Italy, is that this anti-capitalist Left must either be inside the movement and useful to the movement, to all the movements, or it won't exist at all. After the errors and defeats of the previous century, but also because of the inspiring attempts at emancipation and liberation which marked the twentieth century, the 'political' left is today very weak. Only the continuous proof of its social utility will be able to give it mass credibility again. This doesn't mean that parties and other specifically political forces no longer have a role to play, or that the only important thing is day to day participation in the movements. On the contrary, it means that the strong and organized involvement of these organizations, if they are visible and at the same time modest, capable of listening to people and working together with the movements without claiming to have the whole truth, should be able to be the way to the building of a new revolutionary anti-capitalist Left.

Olivier - The relations between the political organizations and what's usually called the social movement are complex and often related to the history of the working class movement in each country. The question can't be posed in the same terms in Italy, in Great Britain or in France. In France, ever since the beginning of the 20th century, the relations between the trade union movement, the social movement and the political organizations have always been complex and fraught with conflict. The hegemonic attitude of the Communist party and the CGT during several decades obviously didn't help. But today we're in a completely new situation and we have to be careful to avoid and to get rid of any sort of divide or mistrust between the social movement and the radical and anti-capitalist left.

We don't believe in a division of labour, with the social movement taking care of social questions and demands and political parties being interested in the question of political power. On the contrary, the social movement must debate and concern itself with all the political questions and take part actively in them but with a constant effort to maintain the unity of the movement and its pluralist organization. The role of a serious anti-capitalist left is to throw itself into the social movement while respecting its independence and unity, to help provide a political voice for the demands of the social movement and the big mobilizations, to give them coherent form through the elaboration of an emergency plan of anti-capitalist measures. It's also to show that we need to make a radical break with the system of capitalist exploitation and to defend a global project of social emancipation which takes into account the lessons of the failure of Stalinism and of social democracy. We don't claim to be that anti-capitalist left ourselves, now or in the future, but we do think we can participate, with others, in building it in the next few years.