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Argentina

A strategic discussion

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The advances made by the left in the Argentine elections of October 14, 2001, along with new successes in the university elections and the achievement of the first united demonstration with a common programme for the crisis, confirms that the left, in the form of a coalition, may be beginning to take shape as an alternative focus in the current crisis.

What is the significance of this new coalition? What is different from the past and what are the similarities with comparable processes in other countries? What strategies are being discussed in the Argentine left for the building of a broad popular movement?

Constructing a political identity

Generally speaking the terms "left and right" can be vague, but they are essential for us to clarify the political picture. The terms allow one, in each historical context, to differentiate among the various currents which are in opposition to an oppressive regime. Democrats who first struggled against the monarchy were on the left, as were the socialists who first organized the workers' movement and the communists who spread the Russian revolution and who defended it later from the Stalinist tyranny. In reality, all those who battle against the misery of capitalism's injustices and who struggle to overcome this system of exploitation, can be considered on the left.

Today in Argentina, "the left" encompasses all those sectors of society radicalized by their resistance: the trade unions, the pickets who blockade the roads, the students and democrats, and the various parties that embody the tradition and programme of socialism, organizations such as the communist Partido Comunista (PC), the Trotskyist Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores (MST), Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Partido Obrero (PO), Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas (OTS), Autonomia y Libertad (AL), from Maoism the Partido del Trabajo del Pueblo (PTP), and the various socialist currents of the Partido Socialista Argentino (PSA), as well as even the humanist Partido Humanista (PH) whose inclusion may be controversial for some people.

The opportunity that is now present for the left to become more defined as a pole of attraction in the working class, as a real option, and derives primarily from the loss of authority, after having led the country into the worst social degradation in its history, of the three large parties of the ruling class, the Peronists, the Radicals and the Centre Left. The Argentine daily newspapers, for some time now, have noted this advance of the left, by identifying and naming the various fighting organizations and socialist groups. This new alternative pole is in the process of birth, but it may be aborted if the left does not solve the problem of its lack of roots in the working class, obstacles that their opponents have overcome over decades. It is imperative to speed up the process of left unity which has begun to take shape, as the possibility now exists for a great leap forward for the left in terms of its size and influence but which will not last indefinitely in the present conjuncture.

Minimum agreements

There are some comrades on the left who stress the "uselessness", the "impossibility" or even the "inconvenience" of this kind of convergence, but the majority have begun to address the discussion about a strategy that would give direction to co-ordinated action by the left. On November 16, agreement was reached by the left on three basic points in a joint declaration:

- the need for a political programme to confront the government with the slogans "Cavallo-De la Rúa out! No to the IMF!";
- a proposal on economic expenditure by the government: "no payment of the debt";
- an orientation towards mass mobilization of the population: "support of all the struggles of working people".

The dissemination of popular slogans such as the demand for the repudiation of the debt will allow the left to extend its penetration into the mass movement.

The minimum agreement in the joint declaration by the left does not constitute a full response to the present crisis of course, but it does provide the basis upon which something can be built. Only the combination of united action by the left with the popular resistance will allow the left to define what is the adequate tactical response in the present political situation of the forthcoming elections, the constituent assembly and the recent phenomenon of the development of direct forms of popular power. To determine if these agreements are options that correspond to the evolution of popular conscience, it is necessary to support the construction of a force that will be capable of leading the process for emancipation. Unity on the left allows an abstract and doctrinaire debate about the "road to socialism", to be transformed into an actual political experience. It creates the most favourable setting for explaining concepts as they arise naturally, on what can become the road towards the workers' government. It is totally useless to reiterate the need for this kind of outcome or to imagine how it could become more defined, if one is not effective in advancing the formation of the "front" that would make this process viable.

It is obvious that the construction of a united instrument on the left does not imply unanimity, or the dissolution of the existing parties. There must be an awareness of the great opportunity for common work in the present crisis, an awareness that can help overcome the normal differences that can develop at a later stage. It would be ingenuous to imagine that the "unity of the left" signifies that all of the participants will have a consensus of agreement about all their joint actions, the demonstration or the meetings, which will involve the united left. Such disagreements should not harm the unitary process, but what will frustrate it would be any attempt to resolve differences in an ultimatum way.

To bring together the left, the entire Argentine left, to create a new political identity, is at the present moment the initiative most favourable to the development of the socialist project. It will be useful to propagandise the term "left" in order to establish a convincing differentiation with the "progressiveness" of the centre left and Peronist "nationalism". One must struggle so that this social identity, the workers, the ethical struggles or intellectual critiques of capitalism, express a leap in anti-capitalist consciousness.

A revolutionary alliance

The present day growth of the left had its beginnings in the second half of the 1990s with the decline of Menemism, the general loss of prestige in Argentina of the government's neo-liberal ideology and the healing by the left of its injuries suffered with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The left has yet to reach the penetration of the mass movement that was achieved in the middle 1980s, especially by the old MAS, nor has it yet aroused the enthusiasm that prevailed during the years of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the birth of the Brazilian PT. But nevertheless, the present day advances by the left take place within the perspective of its generalized electoral growth throughout Latin America, especially under the popular positive influence generated by the direct action of the landless movement of Brazil, the rise and success of the Zapatista movement of Mexico along with the actions of the Colombian FARC.

Moreover, as shown by the spectacular return of Zamora, the skills developed by the left a decade ago have not been totally erased from popular memory. Looking at it in terms of understanding the experiences of the left and not

just looking at its "failures", it is important to recognize this link of continuity with the 1980s and the present turn of the political tide, in order to draw a balance sheet of its achievements, which are principally of growth, although there have been difficulties, especially the cult of the media we have seen in the recent past. This criterion should also be even more pertinent to those who see the need to evaluate the outside processes but who omit their own limitations, or who take comfort from their own hypothetical reflections such as "if such a thing had not been done...something else would have occurred".

The uniqueness of the present day situation is the deepening gulf between the left and their historical adversaries: Peronism and the Centre left. Divergences in the left around the correct policy to develop towards these forces have been substantially reduced. No party on the left now proposes voting for the "fairness" programme, as happened in 1983 and in 1989, or proposes forming an alliance with the Frepaso, as happened in the 1990s. The disagreements that currently exist are about how to interpret the phenomena of large numbers of spoiled ballots in the recent elections and do not have nearly the significance of the insoluble differences of the earlier period.

A change in the axis of past disagreements

What has changed today from that earlier time is the axis of some of the strategic disagreements when what was primary for the left was the position that it had to adopt in opposition to the national bourgeoisie. Today the debate about the need or unsuitability of an alliance with native capitalists tends to lose its significance when we are faced with the evident political retreat of that social sector. No one on the left today now sees the present day privatised Union Industriala Argentina - which is quite adaptable to imperialism and promotes currency devaluation - as a potential ally similar to Gelbard in the 1970s. The justification for an Argentine national and capitalist project has remained explicitly and principally in the domain of the leadership of the Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA). Support for this view has been decreasing on the majority of the left, yet this problem endures as the background to numerous tactical controversies, such as who to call together for a meeting or an action, or what action to go to, but it now appears to be less of a point of discord on the left allowing a coalition such as IU to maintain its existence. Today it is possible to conceive of the construction of a more complete pole of attraction in the mass movement, which will have, at the same time, a sharper left wing profile.

Also giving a boost to this coalescing of a left front in Argentina are the important changes that have been reported from the international left. Obviously, and unlike in the past, the situation faced by the Soviet Union or Mao's China does not now determine who is and who is not the ally of each of the respective left currents. In general, the left will converge spontaneously and naturally around actions such as defending the Cuban revolution and repudiating North American imperialism. Recently there have been some polemics among some leftists about this or that characterization of Osama Bin Laden, but this would have had a much more important significance for the left if the discussion had been linked to the progress of the political projects for building a unified socialist force in Argentina.

Compared to other countries, the present day Argentine left resembles the "far left" in some European countries, that is to say, there are similar alignments here in Argentina as in Europe which confront social democracy. There are similarities to the Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, with the Socialist Alliance in England, with the united LCR-Lutte Ouvriere bloc in France and with the Left Bloc of Portugal. The Argentine left has not yet crossed the threshold of organization nor made its mark as these alliances have done, but already it has established a political influence in the country comparable to Europe or perhaps superior. Unlike the Frente Amplio of Uruguay or the PT of Brazil, that are under a kind of hegemony of social democracy and where the left must tactically opt to fight for their views from either inside or outside these formations, in Argentina the conditions are ripe to build left unity with a revolutionary perspective.

Four options

The proposal for unity on the left is often challenged with some conjunctural arguments such as "now is not the time", "the people don't believe in parties", or through criticism of the leadership of the respective organizations that "they are not representative" or that "they are always fighting amongst themselves" or "they are only thinking of the media" or over questions which are really about the legitimacy of the viewpoint of the existing organizations such as "unity is made from below", "the structures are pyramids". These objections tend to be purely negative because they do not indicate what would be a superior option.

In the more constructive polemics, on the other hand, three possible, but different strategies for the unity of the left appear. The first option that has been traditionally posed is the need to construct a revolutionary party, a task that is posed in opposition to the idea of the united front. Ultimately this orientation is only favourable to the solitary development of a single organization and is explained under the banner of "movementism". Firstly, it is proclaimed that "the party is the only revolutionary organization" and secondly, that the mass movement is "horizontal and heterogeneous" and therefore does not need to converge with the "old parties". Building the party internally is contrasted to regroupment and mergers, as if these objectives were mutually exclusive.

In the best of the cases, this policy conceives unification of the left as a small detour in the task of building their own organizations, and ignore the fact that this kind of party construction tends to suffer strong deformations when it takes place outside of the collective learning that occurs when engaged in united front work. Rather than weakening the "formation of the party" or the "movement", the struggle for unification of the left permits a common understanding to develop - through the interchange of experiences - about what kind of organization can be effectively built in the current situation. The adoption of a sectarian course leads, instead, to a strong loss of feeling about reality, and is reflected by the group in the magnification of its own successes and the failure to recognize the success of others.

The second strategic option for unification of the left that is advocated by some people is to place all bets on the trade union structures, with an orientation toward achieving the eventual radicalisation of the CTA, with the hope that this would result eventually in the formation of a kind of Argentine version of the Brazilian PT. This viewpoint has a long history in Argentina and pins its hopes on the eventual rupture of the relations the leadership currents in the CTA have with the rising leaders of Peronism. Even though this possibility should always be kept open, it is evident that today this strategic option has much less support now than it had in the past. Moreover, those forces in the CTA remain more closely bound to Peronism, the ARI or the Social Polo, than to the left. Because of this, whatever political alternatives they would eventually build would not be oriented towards socialism, but towards some kind of project in support of national capitalism. However, understanding this reality does not mean we should be blind or indifferent when confronted with the huge political differences in orientation that exist nowadays among the various trade unions. The CTA is not like the Daer bureaucracy or the Moyano gang. But in order to have a special influence on the CTA the left needs to act as a separate force.

A third alternative proposed by some on the left is that there should be a structure directly embedded in those resistance movements that have developed in recent years, such as the blockades of the roads movement, the land settlement movement or the human rights organizations. Without a doubt in this country there are many social sectors that are very combative and who continually challenge the government through direct action methods. A good index of the vitality of each of the left currents is the degree of their involvement in these struggles. This is why it is so wrong to measure the strength of the various organizations by only observing their electoral successes. But neither should one idealize these social movements, imagining they are evolving in a totally separate world, isolated from political influences that prevail in the rest of society. The same problems of political construction are present here as are predominant in other areas of society. It would be especially dangerous to be deceived with the illusion of an underlying radicalisation, when in actual fact clear signs exist of a depoliticisation among some of these movements. The spoiling of ballots instead of voting for the left, for example, is as negative in an impoverished region as it is in any other zone of the country, because if, in their anger, the social movements are not inclined towards the

left they will tend to favour the resurgence of the Peronist tyrants.

Sectarian cannibalism decreasing

The strategy of unity on the left constitutes a more progressive and realistic option for the socialist struggle than any of those we have discussed. But this option will only prosper if it recognises the existing possibilities and at the same time reinforces the change in the cultural climate on the left that can now be seen in the current change in relations between the different left organizations. The sectarian cannibalism that characterized these relations in the past is decreasing, although it has not disappeared. Some groups have finally understood that their true enemies are the capitalists and not the comrades who are closer to them in ideas and daily sufferings. The language in the discussion among the left has become more respectful. Sadly this maturity does not extend to those on the left who still use an insulting pedagogic style to criticize, even though they do not use this kind of language when they address the population at large on television.

Overcoming the tradition of powerful political chiefs, which has its origins in the Argentine Creole tradition, constitutes a subject for study in itself that should, at some point, be revisited by the left, along with the elimination of the organizational rigidities which are justified with the idea that "differences are only discussed inside". This mode of functioning became customary on the left during long years of sectarian practice. But by holding open, democratic and civilized debates, the left can now create an attractive space for those who are looking for models of "the new human being", solidarity and comradeship, radically opposed to the submissiveness and ego-centric rivalry that is predominant in the bourgeois parties. Building unity represents, moreover, a permanent political struggle, full of gaps yet to be defined. It is also necessary to get used to the idea of evaluating these difficulties with a certain humility, always comparing what is being criticized by recognising what has been achieved by those who are making the criticism.

Some think that to gamble on the success of left unity reveals an excessive optimism on the part of those who propose it. But if this strategy is correct and is adapted to the current possibilities, a little enthusiasm and some quota of happiness would not be so bothersome. After so many years of hearing that "we are ruined", that "socialism is dead" and that "the 70s generations has disappeared", it is as well to remember that revolutionaries always were inveterate dreamers of triumph.