USA- How could this monster win?

No one expected Donald Trump to become the Republican nominee, and his election victory is a bigger shock—but the first step is to understand why and face it squarely.

AN ENDLESS, miserable presidential campaign is over—with the most miserable result imaginable.

Several readers of Socialist Worker with young children commented late last night on social media that they put their kids to bed with assurances that the monster wouldn’t win—and they dreaded explaining how "It" could happen. We all know how they feel.

Donald Trump’s victory exposes how decrepit the U.S. political system has become after decades of two-party oligarchical rule. This is a man with ties to the racist far right, a pathological narcissist who entered the race intending to boost his media brand, and who horrifies and disgusts not just millions of working people, but a majority of the American ruling class.

And still he won the election for president of the United States. What a testimonial for the "world’s greatest democracy."

It will take days and weeks to process the full implications of Donald Trump being elected the next president of the United States. No one expected Trump to win the Republican nomination, and the same is true about the presidency. For sure, his victory will upend politics in the U.S. and internationally in ways we can’t predict.

There will be a lot of talk in the next weeks about how the election proves the U.S. is irretrievably right wing and backward. Trump’s victory is certainly due in part to his appeals to nationalism, immigrant-bashing and Islamophobia. The far right has been emboldened by Trump’s campaign, and the left will have to figure out how to confront it.

But if we’re going to succeed in that challenge and build a stronger left, we have to have some clarity about what led to this terrible result. Socialist Worker will try to take up these questions with all the depth they require in the coming days—but some initial conclusions are clear.

HAVING ABANDONED even rhetorical appeals to give confidence to the Democratic Party’s more liberal base so she could chase the votes of moderates and even dyed-in-the-wool, conservatives, Clinton left the field open to Trump to claim that his reactionary program would benefit the majority of people who have seen their living standards stagnate and decline, even in the period of "recovery” from the Great Recession.

The liberal base of the Democratic Party came through for Clinton. According to exit poll data, she won 88 percent of the Black vote and 65 percent from Latinos. It was the swing voters who Clinton courted that stuck with Trump.

Trump may well end up losing the popular vote—his victory was assured by the undemocratic Electoral College, enshrined in the Constitution by slave owners, that gives outsized influence to traditionally conservative rural states.

Still, with everything we know about him after this campaign, how could so many people vote for Trump?

His promises to stand up for the "little guy" are blatant lies to camouflage an agenda that will help the 1 Percent with gigantic tax giveaways and the like. But Clinton’s promise of continuing an intolerable status quo didn’t sound like a real alternative to people at the end of their rope.

Bernie Sanders’ left-wing campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination nearly upset Clinton by making an appeal to workers to challenge what he called the "billionaire class." Clinton, who has spent her political career ingratiating herself to that class, managed to bury Sanders’ message—and rather than continue his "political revolution," Sanders abandoned his opposition to whip up support for Clinton.

Clinton and Sanders and much of the rest of the political establishment, some Republicans included, criticized Trump’s ugly outrages. But because they never acknowledged the real economic grievances that he built his campaign around, they left the way clear for Trump to channel legitimate bitterness into scapegoating and scaremongering.

Even when Clinton did counter Trump’s racism, woman-hating, immigrant-bashing and Islamophobia, it rang hollow. As a personification
of the insider Washington political establishment, Clinton bears responsibility—often directly—for policies that led to the mass incarceration of African American men, the sweeping deportation of immigrants and endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have fueled anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry.

RACISM HAS been central to the Trump campaign since his speech announcing his candidacy, when he referred to Mexican immigrants as rapists. But while the open bigots of the so-called alt-right have been a notable element of Trump’s supporters, racism alone can’t explain why states and counties that voted for Barack Obama in both 2008 and 2012 turned away from the Democrats this time.

Some of those voters were in states that Hillary Clinton was expected to win, like Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, where Trump scored points with his argument that U.S. workers lost jobs due to free trade deals and rising immigration. It was another grotesque lie. But the truth—that growing economic hardship is due to rising inequality that benefits the 1 Percent—wasn’t something that Hillary Clinton wanted to talk about.

The stomach-turning irony of this outcome is that Hillary Clinton and the rest of the Democratic establishment figured Trump would be their ideal opponent. He’s a buffoon and too extreme to be elected, they told themselves. All Clinton would have to do to beat Trump is “appear presidential” and tout her “preparedness” and “experience.”

But the Democratic Party brain trust didn’t understand what happened during the eight years of the Obama presidency, when they responded to the Great Recession by bailing out the banksters while doubling down on their commitment to neoliberalism and austerity cutbacks that balanced budgets on workers’ backs.

The living conditions of many millions of everyday people in the U.S. have deteriorated or stagnated. So when Trump decried the loss of decent-paying jobs and accused Clinton and the Democratic Party of throwing people to the wolves, some segment of the population believed—wrongly in fact, but with a feeling of urgency—that someone understood their pain.

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton’s response to Trump’s pledge to make America great again was: "But wait, America is already great."

When it came time to cast their ballots, enough people in the right states begged to differ. They decided to punish the establishment politician in favor of the outsider.

THE CONVENTIONAL media wisdom was stunned by this outcome, and so there will be a scramble for simple answers to explain away Election 2016: a fundamentally conservative population; the irretrievable racism of all white workers; even the impact of the Green Party’s Jill Stein, whose "crime"

was to rightly insist that the greater evil can’t be stopped by championing the lesser evil.

We should refuse to accept those simple answers. One of the first challenges for the left will be to explain what happened in all its complexity. But there are many more challenges to come.

As the radical left warned, in defiance of calls for moderation from liberals, the right wing has been emboldened by Trumpism and needs to be confronted. But we can’t let the people most responsible for this mess point the finger at the most reactionary bigots. Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and the Democratic Party need to answer for why they had nothing to offer as an alternative to Trump’s scapegoating.

We have a lot of work to do, starting today, to build a real left alternative that recognizes the misery and suffering so many people endure; that confronts these conditions politically and practically; and that builds organization capable of turning the tide.

Large numbers of people are already horrified by Trump and will be determined to take action to show their opposition. More will be spurred to act by the inevitable outrages of an arrogant right wing that oversteps—’that’s a lesson from all of the right’s victories in recent elections. In the end, at least some of those who voted for Trump will come to understand that they abhor what he stands for.

But for now, we need to start building that resistance from the ground up. The first step is to understand the lessons and implications of this election and face them squarely—and then we move on from there.

November 9, 2016

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USA- Don’t mourn, organize

Just about everybody is using the slogan “Don’t mourn, organize”—good solidarity with the Swedish martyr for the working class, Joe Hill. But it seems particularly apposite after the Trump election. We spoke to Joanna Misnik, leading activist in Solidarity, about the election, the reaction and prospects for long-term organizing.

What are your first thoughts on the election outcome?

The U.S. just elected a new “leader of the free world.” Both he and his opponent Clinton ran their entire campaigns with persistently high rates on disapproval from the public. Fully 12 million people who voted for Trump stated they had an unfavorable attitude toward him. But the South Carolina Klu Klux Klan held a gala celebration and Marine Le Pen, leader of the right-wing National Front in France, jumped for joy. The Republican Party that Trump overwhelmed when he got the nomination despite his egomania and racist, anti-immigrant, misogynistic utterances will now realign to become much more of an undiluted white nationalist, xenophobic, fundamentalist Christian bastion. The Democratic Party appears to have collapsed, at least temporarily.
A new breed of carpetbaggers are consolidating their grip on the government – racists of all stripes, right to life zealots, climate deniers, Muslim haters, anti-LGBTQ crusaders, trade union busters, anti-immigrant wall builders, creationists, and defenders of the European white race. Unexpected though it was, from the morning of November 9 we live in a vastly different and dangerous political world.

**How do you explain the result?**

By now hundreds of analytical articles are available about why Hillary Clinton lost the election when all the pollsters and the mainstream U.S. media had already pronounced her the winner. The discussion turns in part around to what degree and why the U.S. white working class (called white no-college by the media) was the culprit in bringing her down. The discussion is correctly littered with comparisons to Brexit. A strange piece of the answer can be found in the battle between artificial intelligence and industrial workers thrown on the neoliberal scrap heap. The Clinton campaign relied heavily on an algorithm named Ada, after Ada, Countess of Lovelace, a pioneering 19th Century female mathematician. Ada spat out some 400,000 simulations per day that determined where the Clinton campaign would spend time and deploy resources. But Ada cannot calculate feelings and emotions, so she never calculated anything that would question the safety of the Blue Maginot Line, the assumption that the Rust Belt states of Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin were secure for Democrats. Besides, Democrats needed to go after new, middle class constituencies that traditionally voted Republican; who cared if a few white workers slipped away through the cracks. Clinton’s loss in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin gave Trump the electoral vote, though not the popular vote. Many of these white workers had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012, challenging the notion that racism was the sole or main impetus.

Yes, backward and nativist attitudes toward race, gender, sexuality, immigrants and Muslims played a role in capturing votes for Trump despite the negative attitudes toward him and his personal character. But in the main this white working class vote, particularly where Trump triumphed in the Rust Belt, was a clear rejection of the Democrats and the damage that neoliberal policies had brought to these industrial communities. It was a rejection of a party and a candidate that did not offer any relief, but supported NAFTA and trade agreements that steal “our” jobs and didn’t care about them. Since the election, a number of reporters have gone back to the streets were in part a post-Bernie generation, coming once again, through social media, were the main organizers of these actions. Thousands of high school and college students in city after city walked out of their classrooms to march against Trump’s agenda. The very young people who were so numerous on the streets were in part a post-Bernie generation, coming into political action for the first time. Demonstrators included the whole gamut of social movement activists, particularly Black Lives Matter, Latin@s tensions between the new President and the working class victims of neoliberalism who gave him their grudging support.

**Can you explain the Electoral College?**

This is a peculiar institution. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by more than 1.5 million, yet Trump is the winner via the Electoral College system, scoring 290 electoral votes to Clinton’s 232. The U.S. president is not directly elected by whomever gets more individual votes, as Hillary Clinton has just done. Many explain it by saying the Founding Fathers were fearful that, in the period before the establishment of political parties, the unwashed and poorly educated voters would make unwise decisions. However, the Electoral College is an undemocratic vestige of slavery and the influence of the Southern slaveholders on national government in the foundational period of the U.S. Direct election of the President by white property-owning men eligible to vote in that era would have greatly advantaged the North with its larger population of eligible voters and reduced influence of the Southern ruling class. So the Electoral College was written into the Constitution. Each state is allocated a number of electors based on the number of representatives it has in Congress. Congressional representation is based on the total population of a given state. And in 1787 Southern planters had already won the right to count each slave as three-fifths of a person in order to attain greater representation in the Congress.

This is the archaic system, birthed by slavery and institutional racism, that remains in place today. African-Americans’ right to be fully counted came as a result of the civil rights movement, which won the 1965 Voting Rights Act aimed at protecting their right to vote. In this recent election, with many of the protections of that Act removed by the Supreme Court, the right of Black people to vote came under threat through identification requirements’, removal from the voting rolls, and the shutting down of 800 polling places in order to make voting inaccessible to poor voters with little to no transportation. Out on the streets in the anti-Trump protests, signs demanding an end to the Electoral College system in favor of direct election are cropping up.

**It’s new to see demonstrations throughout the country the day after a presidential election. How did they come about, who called them, are they mainly youth or also workers, can they help bring together different protest movements?**

The spontaneous anti-Trump outpouring of tens of thousands just after the elections was inspiring, and protests are still being organized. Young people once again, through social media, were the main organizers of these actions. Thousands of high school and college students in city after city walked out of their classrooms to march against Trump’s agenda. The very young people who were so numerous on the streets were in part a post-Bernie generation, coming into political action for the first time. Demonstrators included the whole gamut of social movement activists, particularly Black Lives Matter, Latin@s...
demanding immigration justice against Trump’s plan for an initial 3 million deportations, and women taking the first steps to defend abortion rights against renewed Republican assault.

The demonstrations make the immediate statement that Trump and his right-wing cronies will face resistance, that the left is not hiding or cowed, let alone defeated. As has been the case since Occupy, these actions were not led by any particular organization or coalition. Despite efforts by some revolutionary groups to claim them, they are again the product of social media outreach by all kinds of individuals and groups. Already Facebook is being loaded with different actions for January 20, the day Trump is sworn in as President.

The Brooklyn, NY Chapter of the National Women's Liberation movement has monthly meetings usually attended by a couple dozen women. Just after Trump’s victory, so many people said they were going on Facebook that they booked into a nearby stadium. Thousands of women flooded this meeting, overflowing even the stadium. The January 21st Million Women March in Washington also typifies how things move along. Facebook pages are being launched state by state by “organizers.” The March will be a success, but no actual named and ongoing organization or coalition is bringing it about.

**What’s the attitude of the trade-union movement?**

Most of organized labor is missing in action from the early efforts to build resistance. For decades the labor movement has seen itself as a loyal junior partner of the Democratic Party, even as the Party’s neoliberalism has landed severe blows on working people. With only 11% of workers organized into unions, the labor movement is increasingly vulnerable to the inevitable attacks from a right-wing Trump regime. And the movement is not at all prepared to meet this very serious challenge.

Republican administrations in 26 states have managed to pass anti-union-“right to work” legislation. With a Republican majority in both houses of Congress and a Trump presidency, it is likely that a Republican bill to rid the private sector of effective unions – the National Right to Work Act – will pass through. New appointments to government bodies dealing with labor rights will yield similar steps backward. When a right-wing voting majority is secured on the Supreme Court, an avalanche of cases challenging the right to unionize may well appear. Escalating privatization of public services on the state and federal levels could gut the public sector union movement.

A far-reaching political transformation is needed if the union movement is to survive the coming storm. Only 51% of union households voted for Clinton, the lowest percentage for a Democrat since 1980, the year of the Reagan Democrat. Tens of thousands of union workers who voted for Obama in the past went over to Trump in this election. The popularity of Bernie Sanders’ anti-corporate, social democratic program among working people, including the unions that formed Labor for Bernie, point the way forward to the political renewal labor needs to mobilize for the fights ahead. Another attempt to influence or renew a neoliberal Democratic Party that has already shoved unions to the side of the road will only make a dead strategy more deadly. Hope lies in contestation with the 1% by the 99% and solidarity in action with the social movements under attack – an injury to one is an injury to all.

**How have the turnabouts of Sanders been seen? What is the evolution of those that were in his campaign? Can we imagine a convergence of youth movements like BLm, a sector on the labour movement posing the question of a new party, a labour party as was discussed in the 1930s?**

The response demonstrations have modeled solidarity and defiance. But the fight against Trump and the right wing in government is a longer-term process that requires something beyond Facebook networking. That would be the role of a third, left political party or pre-party formation in the US, or even a reinvigorated trade union movement. The power of the social movements, which are not presently bastions of strength, would be enhanced by a unified left front.

Bernie Sanders’ army of supporters, many young, was basically dispersed when he honored his pledge to work for Clinton’s election. But the Bernie revolt was and remains the real “revolution” in U.S. politics. The blocked social mobility of youth, especially from working class and immigrant backgrounds, is a volatile socio-political reality that won’t go away. Many are out in the streets right now. Far fewer millenials voted for Clinton than voted for Obama. Millenial disaffection from the two capitalist parties helped boost the tally for Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein to over one million votes. In just a few days after the Trump victory, the Democratic Socialists of America, (that’s what google brings up when asked to find democratic socialism in order to connect with Bernie Sanders’ ideas) reportedly received nearly 2,000 applications for membership.

The prospects for a third national political party emerging in the US in the near or medium term are not great. Class for itself consciousness is really very low and millenial distrust of parties and other institutions is high. This idea has more traction after the dismal defeat of Clinton and the neoliberal Democratic Party, but the small and splintered revolutionary left cannot bring this party into being by patiently explaining it. Real social forces must converge in action to create such a party. Moreover, so-called progressives and liberals are putting a new twist on the argument for remaining in the Democratic Party. They agree that a brand new political party is needed, that the Democrats as they are now are finished so let’s turn the Democratic Party into that new party. This is the same old cynical game. U.S. progressives know full well that the Democratic Party is not a party in any real sense, but a wholly owned subsidiary of U.S. capital interests. Unlike the British Labour Party, for example, it has no
real chapters, no rank and file membership decision-making structures in which to stage a revolt.

On the municipal level, however, local independent political campaigns and candidates can be initiated by the small revolutionary left in combination with social movements, unions, Green Party activists and local leaders. Pioneering models for this type of local independent politics include the Richmond Progressive Alliance, which has wrested control of the city council of this California town from the domination of the Chevron Oil Company, 8th largest corporation in the world. A national network of scattered municipal efforts at new politics outside the two parties would help legitimate the building of a new political voice for working people. LeftElect is that network of the rebels against the duopoly. The second LeftElect national conference will be held in Chicago in March 2017. National collaboration to grow independent political efforts is more of a start than we’ve had in decades.

Joanna Misnik is a leading activist of Solidarity in the USA and member of the Continuations Committee of LeftElect, a national coalition of independent political campaigns.

USA- Politics Is the Solution

We can’t move to Canada or hide under the bed. This is a moment to embrace democratic politics, not repudiate them.

We have no illusions about the impact of Donald Trump’s victory. It is a disaster. The prospect of a unified right-wing government, led by an authoritarian populist, represents a catastrophe for working people.

There are two ways to respond to this situation. One is to blame the people of the United States. The other is to blame the elite of the country.

In the coming days and weeks, many pundits will be doing the former. Frightened liberals have already written explainers on how to move to Canada; last night, the Canadian immigration website went down after a surge of traffic. The people who brought us to this precipice are now planning their escape.

But blaming the American public for Trump’s victory only deepens the elitism that rallied his voters in the first place. It’s unquestionable that racism and sexism played a crucial role in Trump’s rise. And it’s horrifying to contemplate the ways that his triumph will serve to strengthen the cruelest and most bigoted forces in American society.

Still, a response to Trump that begins and ends with horror is not a political response — it is a form of paralysis, a politics of hiding under the bed. And a response to American bigotry that begins and ends with moral denunciation is not a politics at all — it is the opposite of politics. It is surrender.

To believe that Trump’s appeal was entirely based on ethnic nationalism is to believe that a near majority of Americans are driven only by hate and a shared desire for a white supremacist political program. We don’t believe that. And the facts don’t bear it out.

This election, in the words of New York Times analyst Nate Cohn, was decided by people who voted for Barack Obama in 2012. Not all of them can be bigots.

Clinton won only 65 percent of Latino voters, compared to Obama’s 71 percent four years ago. She performed this poorly against a candidate who ran on a program of building a wall along America’s southern border, a candidate who kicked off his campaign by calling Mexicans rapists.

Clinton won 34 percent of white women without college degrees. And she won just 54 percent of women overall, compared to Obama’s 55 percent in 2012. [1] Clinton, of course, was running against a candidate who has gloated on film about grabbing women “by the pussy.”

This was Clinton’s election to lose. And she lost. A lot of the blame will fall on Clinton the candidate, but she only embodied the consensus of this generation of Democratic Party leaders. Under President Obama, Democrats have lost almost a thousand state-legislature seats, a dozen gubernatorial races, sixty-nine House seats and thirteen in the Senate. Last night didn’t come out of nowhere.

The problem with Clinton wasn’t her peculiarity but her typicality. It was characteristic of this Democratic Party that the power players in Washington decided on the nominee — with overwhelming endorsements — many months before a single ballot was cast.

They made a fateful choice for all of us by stacking the deck, decisively, against the kind of politics that could win: a working-class politics. Seventy-two percent of Americans who voted last night believed that “the economy is rigged to the advantage of the rich and powerful.” Sixty-eight percent agreed that “traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me.”

Almost alone among Democratic politicians, Bernie Sanders spoke to this simmering sense of alienation and class anger. Sanders had a basic message for the American people: you deserve more and you are right to believe you do. Health care, college education, a living wage. It’s a message that has made him by far the most popular politician in the country.

Hillary Clinton’s formal platform approached some of Sanders’s concrete ideas, but repudiated its core message. For those in charge of the Democratic Party, it made no sense to rail against America. For them, America never stopped being great. And things have only been getting better.

Party leaders asked voters to hand politics over to them. They thought they had it under control. They were wrong. Now we all have to deal with the consequences. And we will.

This is a new era that requires a new type of politics — one that speaks to people’s pressing needs and hopes, rather than to their fears. Elite liberalism, it turns out, cannot defeat right-wing populism. We can’t move to Canada or hide under the bed. This
is a moment to embrace democratic politics, not repudiate them.

USA- Build the Left to Defeat the Right

We publish below a further article on the US Presidential election from the Steering Committee of Solidarity. Solidarity is a sympathising organisation of the Fourth International in the USA.

Like millions of people here and around the world, we woke up this morning dismayed and frightened that Donald Trump has been elected President. Whatever we each thought of the Democratic Party and of Hillary Clinton, none of us wanted to believe that a plurality of voters could bring themselves to vote for Trump. His victory is part of a global pattern of an ascendant, populist right, following in the wake of the similarly unexpected vote in favor of Brexit in the UK, and, like Brexit, it is being celebrated by right wing nationalist leaders in Europe like Marine Le Pen.

The outcome of the election is, no doubt, in part an expression of white supremacy. But it’s more than that: many commenters have already pointed out that the rustbelt battleground states that arguably cost Clinton the election were areas where Obama performed significantly better among white voters in 2008 and 2012 than Clinton did in 2016, complicating any suggestion that the results are simply about the racism of white voters. The fact is that the neoliberal politics of the ruling class have been devastating the lives and communities of working people all over the country and the world for decades, and Hillary Clinton is justifiably seen by many as the embodiment of that ruling class establishment. For many white people, the resentment this generates takes the form of racist and xenophobic anger, but its root causes are broader, and to overcome the racist backlash the left has to legitimacy address those root causes.

Tragically, as the Republican establishment have lost control of their party to Donald Trump’s right-wing populism, the Democrats have doubled down on the neoliberal center. The DNC used every tool they had to ensure that Bernie Sanders—a populist candidate who in almost every match up poll performed much better against Trump than did Clinton, and who addressed many of the same economic insecurities that Trump has fed on—was unable to gain the nomination. Having undemocratically paved the way for a candidate that almost nobody actually felt good about, the Democratic Party proceeded to campaign to their right, taking the votes of the left and of people of color for granted and instead seeking to win over conservative voters. There’s some evidence that the DNC even encouraged a Trump primary victory on the assumption it would make for an easier general election victory by allowing the Democrats to capture less racially motivated conservative votes.

Meanwhile, the Green Party—the most visible alternative to the left of the Democrats—seems to have won less than 1% of the vote in the Presidential race; a result both disappointing to those seeking to build the Greens as a party of the left, many of whom named 5% of the vote as a goal, and totally insignificant compared to the numbers of Democrats and independents who either stayed home or, worse, jumped ship to vote for Trump.

Simply put: there is a vacuum on the left of US politics. No serious analysis could conclude that the presidential wing of the Democratic Party represents anything more than, at best, a calculated neoliberalism with a human face. It is precisely these politics which have generated the mass popular discontent we see among all demographics and all parts of the political spectrum. To promote “more of the same” and diminished expectations as a solution is to provide no solution at all, and the absence of any left alternative has ensured that discontent has instead been channeled to the right, at least in electoral terms.

We have to defeat the far right agenda of white supremacy and nationalism that Trump represents. Our lives literally depend on it. But the only way to defeat the right is by building the left. We can’t win this fight by building greater unity behind the ruling class’s chosen candidates and their neoliberal agenda; even if the fear of something worse had mobilized enough people to deliver a victory to Clinton in this election, or even if it does so for someone like her in 2020, that would merely kick the can down the road while the right continues to grow stronger. It would not build the power we need to win and to build a better world.

To do that, we need to organize. We need to build truly independent political power that can give the left a means to meaningfully intervene in electoral politics, beginning at the local level; the Richmond Progressive Alliance—which yesterday won three local races to gain a supermajority in the city government of Richmond, CA—is one example of what this grassroots electoral power might look like. (One way to get involved in this work is to attend the Left Elect conference in Chicago, March 3-5, 2017.) The defeat by a teacher union led coalition of a massively funded ballot initiative seeking to expand charter schools in Massachusetts is also an encouraging example of what we can do when we organize against the neoliberal privatization agenda.
We need to support and build the Movement for Black Lives, the efforts fighting in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux against the Dakota Access Pipeline, immigrant rights groups, and other organizations that can build the power of the people most vulnerable to Trump’s agenda and to violence from his far right supporters. It’s also vital that we build renewed working class organization, such as rank and file led social justice unionism but also including new and innovative forms of organization, that can unite workers through class solidarity and break the influence of racist right wing narratives on the white working class.

Finally, we need to build revolutionary organization. The ultimate solution to the terrifying array of forces we face in the world today can be nothing less than the overthrow of capitalism and the systems of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy that prop it up and shape its impacts. We won’t win a socialist world without socialist organization. We strongly encourage everyone committed to fighting for a just world to find, join, and help build a revolutionary organization, whether that’s Solidarity or another group.

Today, we are all afraid of what comes next, and we all need to check in with our friends, family, and comrades to ensure our emotional and physical wellbeing. But we can’t afford to wait until tomorrow to rebuild a vibrant, anti-capitalist left capable of fighting and winning. We wholeheartedly agree with the words on so many lips today: don’t mourn, organize.

November 9 2016

USA- A vote for Jill Stein is not a wasted vote!


"Only the privileged can afford to vote for Jill Stein" is one refrain. But only the privileged can afford the status quo represented by Hillary Clinton, from growing inequality and persistent poverty to the climate crisis and endless wars. The liberals shout that we must vote for Clinton to stop Trump. But the history of Clintonism is triangulation, accommodation to the right. She may stop Trump for president. But she is not going to stop Trumpism. Not only have the Clintons and Trump socialized together in the precincts of the higher circles before this election, the Clintons have often echoed the dog whistles of the racist Republican “southern strategy” that Trump has centered his campaign around.

We’ve seen this all the way from Bill’s 1992 presidential campaign, with his execution of Ricky Ray Rector just in time for the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary and then his pre-Super Tuesday tough-on-crime event at the symbolic capital of white supremacists at Stone Mountain, Georgia, on down to Bill’s condescending defense of that crime bill, and Hillary’s “super-predator” remarks in support of it, to the faces of Black critics at a campaign event in Philadelphia in April of this year.

As bad as the signals to white racists are, the center of gravity of Clintonite triangulation is its commitment the domestic austerity and global militarism favored by the corporate elites who have funded their political ambitions. Since Sanders endorsed her, Clinton has campaigned to her right, running ads with endorsements from outspoken militarists and besting Trump by far in campaign donations from the high rollers of every corporate sector, from Wall Street, real estate, and corporate media to Big Pharma, Big Energy, and the military contractors.

When she does make a gesture to the inequality issues that Sanders raised, she highlights the same trickle-down corporate welfare policies that have made inequality worse since the mid 1970s. For example, in her Sept. 22 NY Times op-ed, “My Plan for Helping America’s Poor,” Clinton says she will make economic growth a priority with public investments (i.e., corporate contracts and subsidies) that will create good jobs for the poor. That’s the same approach we’ve seen since Carter and Reagan that targets “anti-poverty” spending to businesses, not poor and working people.

To create more affordable housing, Clinton says in her op-ed that she wants to expand the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), another program where the money goes to businesses, not poor people. This tax credit was enacted in conjunction with the regressive tax reform of 1986, which, though often called the Reagan tax reform, was thoroughly bipartisan with sponsorship by leading Democrats Richard Gephardt of Missouri in the House and Bill Bradley of New Jersey in the Senate. It cut the top income tax bracket from 50% to 25% and increased the bottom tax bracket from 11% to 15%. The LIHTC has since expanded while public housing and Section 8 vouchers have been cut back, even though public housing and vouchers provide far more affordable housing for the same expenditure. The LIHTC is now 90 percent of federal affordable housing support. But rents in LIHTC units are more than 30% of income (the federal definition of affordability) for the people with incomes below 50% of the Area Median Income. Looking beneath the stated goal of affordability, Clinton’s housing policy expands a program that helps developers (and her campaign donations from real estate interests), but does little to solve the growing crisis of housing affordability.

Joshua Holland writing in The Nation justifies his support for Clinton by touting the 2016 Democratic platform [1], “which Bernie Sanders, among others, hailed as the most progressive in the party’s history.” Oh, really? The 1972 Democratic platform had these progressive planks:
• Single-payer National Health Insurance.
• Repeal of section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, which allows state anti-union right-to-work laws.
• Extend Fair Labor Standards Act coverage to farmworkers.
• “Substantial” cuts in military spending.
• Cut is overseas military bases and forces.
• Public campaign financing.

None of these planks are in the Democrat’s 2016 platform. Meanwhile, the pro-Clinton majority on the platform committee voted down these progressive planks for the 2016 Democratic platform:
• Single-payer National Health Insurance.
• Oppose TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership).
• A carbon tax.
• A ban on fracking.
• A ban of fossil fuel drilling on federal lands and waters.
• $15 minimum wage indexed to inflation.
• Oppose Israeli occupation and settlements on the West Bank.
• Reconstruction aid for Gaza.

When the conventional wisdom blandly accepts claims that the 2016 Democratic platform is the party’s most progressive in the history, it just shows how thoroughly today’s corporate New Democrats have marginalized the progressive remnants of the New Deal Democrats. A vote for Jill Stein is not a wasted vote. It is a vote to build an independent political movement that can contest the two-corporate-party cartel for power. Stein won’t win the presidency. But the movement can win several gains in this election.

The first is what third parties have historically contributed in American politics: to force demands into public debate that the two major parties have ignored. In this election, those demands include single-payer, defeat TPP, serious climate action, a WPA-style public jobs for the unemployed, and military spending cuts with the savings devoted to uplifting struggling poor and working people. The bigger the Stein vote, the more leverage the independent political movement will have on these issues going forward.

The second is ballot lines. A Green ballot line for the next two or four years is up for grabs in 37 states, for 1% to 3% of the vote in most of them. Those ballot lines will enable the independent left to run competitive and winnable races at the local level, which is how an independent political movement will develop into a national force.

Third, 5% of the vote will qualify the Green Party for public funding for the 2020 presidential general election. This is a second presidential public campaign financing fund, in addition to the primary matching fund for which Stein qualified in this election, that starts at about $10 million at 5% and goes up with higher percentages. With Stein polling between 3% and 6% in most polls, this goal is within reach.

Fourth, the lists of supporters that Stein/Baraka campaigners develop canvassing voters during this election can be the base for post-election organizing, from stopping TPP in the lame duck session of conference to local independent Green and left campaigns for public office in the next election.

A vote for Clinton is not only a wasted vote for the status quo, it is a vote against the Green Party’s challenge to the two-party system of corporate rule.

**USA- We Fight for Socialism over Barbarism**

On November 8, voters in the United States narrowly elected an openly racist, misogynist and nativist candidate for president. Donald Trump succeeded in defining himself as an anti-establishment candidate who will end dynastic rule in Washington, D.C., by elites who care little for “forgotten Americans.” The grain of truth in this rhetoric masked an ideological appeal to a “white identity” that Republicans have long cultivated — in this instance, focusing on fear of immigrants, Muslims and people of color. The facts go against the liberal media’s narrative that “poor white people” were the primary force behind Trump’s rise. We must understand “Trumpism” as a cross-class white nativist alliance; the median family income of the 62 percent of white voters who supported Trump was higher than that of Hillary Clinton voters and wealthier than Bernie Sanders’ primary base.

**How Trump Won: Seizing the Anti-Establishment Ground through Racial and Economic Nationalism**

Governing elites have long used racism to divide working people. The Left must understand the centrality of racism to capitalism and speak directly to how racism has hurt the interests of the white working class. The far Right in Europe and the United States has succeeded in speaking to the anger of people long abandoned by the bipartisan conservative and center-left consensus in favor of unbridled corporate globalization. Trump’s victory should show once and for all the dire consequences of leaving the Left’s response to economic insecurity in the hands of corporate-aligned centrists like the Clintons.

If Sanders had been the Democratic nominee, he certainly could have mobilized stronger working-class support against Trump, and his coattails could have put both houses of Congress in play. Clinton failed to gain the support of many working- and middle-class whites by running a campaign overly focused on Trump’s character flaws rather than hammering home the Sanders-inspired platform proposals that would improve the lives of working people of all races. She failed to highlight raising the minimum wage, opposing “free trade” agreements and creating good jobs through public investment in infrastructure and alternative energy. The Democratic Party chose the wrong candidate and
the wrong strategy, and now the United States is left with the most dangerous government in recent history.

The Pressing Urgency of Now: Defend the Targets of Nativist Racism

Given Trump’s and Pence’s vilification of communities of color, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, women and LGBTQ people, Democratic Socialists of America’s and the broader Left’s first priority must be to defend the civil and political rights — and very physical security — of those groups targeted by Trumpism. The appointment of the open bigot and anti-Semite Stephen Bannon of Breitbart News as senior White House counselor demonstrates that Trump’s hateful rhetoric is not just talk. DSA and YDS chapters should be militant supporters of these groups in their immediate struggles to establish sanctuary cities for the undocumented, to defend Muslims and their mosques and to protect women seeking reproductive services. We must also proactively train ourselves to intervene effectively when we witness harassment of and violence against those targeted by the white nativist politics legitimated by the Trump victory. Finally, we should reach out to these communities immediately to express our solidarity and ask what work they would wish us to do.

Much of this work will involve DSA deepening our engagement with the Movement for Black Lives, the immigrant rights movement, Fight for 15, the reproductive justice movement and other movements on the frontlines against Trumpism. Under Reagan, similar acts of resistance eventually created a powerful rainbow coalition that advanced a multiracial politics of economic and racial justice. If we fully commit ourselves to these struggles over the next four years there is no reason why a new, even more powerful multiracial coalition for social and economic justice cannot emerge.

The Left will be faced with tremendous struggles on a variety of fronts starting on January 20.

Upon assuming office, Trump may use executive orders to reverse Obama’s environmental regulations (particularly those concerning coal-fueled power plants). The Left should connect Trump’s hostility to climate justice policies with mass action in support of the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline and for indigenous sovereignty. The climate justice movement, particularly if it puts environmental racism issues front and center, could be a major focus of resistance to Republican rule.

Trump is also likely to immediately end DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which currently protects from deportation over 4 million undocumented individuals who came to the US as minors. This could be the first step in the mass deportation of undocumented immigrants from the United States. The Left should build strong relationships with movements on the forefront of opposing these policies, and fight to build a majoritarian coalition in support of citizenship for the millions of Americans who contribute to our economy and society through their work and taxes, but do not even enjoy the most basic civil and political rights.

Republicans may press to repeal all of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), but they can be stopped. By organizing mass demonstrations, the Left could well save the eight million working-class family members who have gained Medicaid coverage and could also force the remaining 19 states that have refused to expand coverage to accept the federally funded program. We must organize the other 12 million people who currently receive health insurance through the ACA to demand that their coverage be continued, but at more affordable rates. Whether all or part of the ACA is abolished, the Left must campaign for state single-payer systems as the best alternative for expanding equitable and affordable health care coverage.

The Trans Pacific Partnership may well be a dead letter under Trump’s presidency, but we must not see Trump’s alleged opposition to it as a sign that he is in any way committed to a global trade policy that serves the interests of workers at home or abroad — far from it! In response to Trump’s savagely anti-worker policy prescriptions the Left must advance an alternative vision of global economic policy that raises global living, labor and environmental standards as an alternative to a nativist protectionism that blames foreign workers and immigrants for declining working-class living standards at home.

Further, Trump will move quickly to destroy organized labor in the United States, particularly in the public sector. We must resist, though our efforts will be complicated by the AFL-CIO’s self-defeating conciliatory stance toward the President-elect. Unions are the most powerful tool we have for building inter-racial solidarity among working class people around a shared economic interest. The questionable strategic and tactical choices made by much of their leadership both to support Clinton in the Democratic primaries and to commit themselves to working with Trump show the absolute necessity of a bottom-up left insurgency within the house of labor.

The Left must also press Democrats in the Senate to use the power of the filibuster to prevent the passage of disastrous legislation and extreme conservative appointments to the Supreme Court, and urge Democratic state and local governments to resist disastrous changes in Federal policy in whatever ways they can.

A Longer-Run Strategy for Progressive Power: Building a Multiracial Post-Sanders Movement

These are our immediate tasks. But we must also assess the Trump victory and what it means for future left and DSA strategy and seek opportunities to move from defense to offense. Though Clinton won the popular vote, she underperformed among white voters in the rust-belt states in part because many older voters suffered from the Clinton dynasty’s support of neoliberal policies that failed to address the economic suffering caused by deindustrialization,
mechanization and corporate outsourcing. Clinton even narrowly lost the vote of white women, in part because Trump set himself up as the anti-establishment candidate who would “drain the swamp” of Washington “special interests” (despite the Koch brothers funding much of the Republican ground campaign). Combined with racist and sexist diatribes blaming the end of America’s supposedly golden era on women, immigrants and people of color, this rhetoric resonated deeply with over-45 white voters (both men and women) facing stagnant living standards, downward mobility and a soon-to-be majority-minority status in the United States.

While Trump offers no viable plan to actually address these voters’ economic anxieties either by increasing employment, transforming U.S. trade policy or any other means, his call to “make America great again” by rebuilding infrastructure and creating “jobs, jobs, jobs” was powerful among many white voters who associate the memory of better economic conditions with a past of white privilege and a politics of “law and order.”

The Republicans will not address the needs of working-class people in the United States. Instead we can expect them to propose massive tax cuts for the rich and corporations, running up huge budget deficits and exacerbating our already staggering level of income and wealth inequality. They will only maintain or expand those parts of the federal budget that really should be shrunk — for example, the military and prison systems. Many Trump voters will resent tax giveaways to the rich, and most Americans today are wary of military interventions overseas, so the Left has a real opportunity to mobilize against such national priorities and advance an alternative vision.

As the 2016 election has shown, however, changing demographics alone will not automatically threaten the success of white nativist politics. In this election (as in 2000), the undemocratic nature of the Electoral College prevented the winner of the popular vote from taking office. Further, voter suppression drove down the turnout of working-class citizens of all races as well as the elderly and students, a problem particularly severe in North Carolina, Wisconsin and Ohio. Beyond this, the progressive, black and Latino electorates are heavily concentrated in strongly Democratic states (and mostly in urban and inner suburban areas), which means that millions of their votes are effectively not counted in the outcome of the presidential election. (For instance, 100,000 additional votes beyond those needed to reach 50 percent in California do nothing to change the number of votes California receives in the electoral college).

To address this problem, the Left must build a stronger base among white working-class voters in small towns throughout the rural United States and in states in the former industrial heartland, the South and the plains states. There can be no progressive majoritarian politics in the United States without a politics that appeals to working-class voters of all races. Reapportionment in 2020 will heavily affect prospects for progressive electoral victories for the next decade. Thus, the Left has to sink deep roots in a wide range of communities across the nation, and DSA’s rapid growth in the South should be nurtured and sustained.

Strong political headwinds blow against us over the coming years. If we hope to move U.S. politics in a progressive direction, we must continue down the trail blazed by Bernie Sanders. The many successful insurgent “Sanderistas” elected at the local and state level, as well as the emerging anti-corporate wing of the Democratic Party’s congressional delegation and above all Sanders’ own presidential primary run, demonstrated that multiracial working-class constituencies will support a social democratic program of progressive tax reform, universal access to high-quality health and childcare and public investment in infrastructure and alternative energy.

We must continue to press this agenda even more assertively, both by electing more insurgents at all levels of government and by also building working-class and socialist power in our trade union, social movement and electoral work.

None of these programs can be won without a radical shift in power relations. In the absence of mass pressure from democratic social movements — movements willing to disrupt the everyday workings of undemocratic institutions — and the development of independent electoral capacity of activists of color, feminists, LGBTQ activists and trade unionists, corporate interests will continue to dominate the policy agenda. The campaigns of DSA-endorsed candidates at the local and state level, such as victorious State Representative Mike Sylvester (D-Maine) and the impressive second-place finish of Baltimore City Council Green candidate Ian Schlakman, demonstrate that building a multiracial base for explicitly socialist candidates (who, depending on local circumstances, may run as Democrats, independents, Greens or in nonpartisan races) is both possible and necessary.

The more than 9,000 members of DSA (nearly 2,000 of whom joined this week) believe that the surest way to resist and defeat Trumpism is if we build a strong, organized democratic socialist movement in U.S. politics, a movement that must become as diverse as the working class itself. The Sanders revolution moved us one step closer toward a stronger and more assertive Left that can push for the many long-overdue reforms working people in this country desperately need, such as raising the minimum wage to $15 an hour and making publicly-funded university education a basic human right. Clinton’s neoliberal centrist proved incapable of warding off the nativist far Right. The way forward lies in the movement for democratic socialism.

Thus, we invite veterans of the Sanders campaign and others to join the organization that works to bring his democratic socialist politics into the mainstream of U.S. political life.

November 13, 2016
Standing Rock, the largest uprising of indigenous people that our generation has seen, is what the future looks like. Tribes who have had centuries-long divisions have entered into a space of forgiveness and love with their shared mission: saving mother planet, saving her water. The people at Standing Rock are incredibly welcoming. Seven massive kitchens serve three hot meals a day to any and everyone living at the encampment. Standing Rock is a role model of the future. These incredible indigenous leaders are putting their lives and bodies literally on the line in the fight for a better world. One message was very clear: they are not going anywhere.

After we toured around the first day, we met some organizers who were meeting with the parents of children at Standing Rock. They were organizing a parent meeting to make sure that every child at Standing Rock would receive a quality education. They were collecting school supplies and by the time this article is published school will be fully in session.

There is no currency at Standing Rock. The community is supporting each other. It is a land without corporations. They are feeding each other, clothing each other, and educating each other. They are fighting with and for each other, and for all of us. Standing rock is an example of what the world without corporations can look like. The center of the activity at Standing Rock is on the front lines, where the community is fighting against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The day that I was there we joined in a ceremony proclaiming that “Water is life,” and that “There are other forms of energy, not water.”

The community of warriors were surrounding their comrade who was being locked onto one of the machines. This machine had just dug up a sacred burial ground during a sneak attack in the middle of the night. DAPL workers dug up the exact coordinates that were reported to them, and requested to be respected. This is a major human rights violation, especially considering the mass genocide that the indigenous people in this land that we call America have endured for centuries.

Jill Stein and Ajamu Baraka, the Green Party presidential and vice-presidential candidates, were invited by some of the leaders to chain themselves to one of the machines. This request is not to be taken lightly. When people engage in this kind of direct action they risk being beaten, pepper sprayed, or worse.

When asked to spray paint a message on one of the machines, Jill and Ajamu stepped up to stand in solidarity with the people. Ajamu spray-painted “We must decolonize.” He spoke not as a candidate for Vice President but as a human rights activist from an oppressed community, with the full personal and global understanding of the generational impact of colonization of people of African descent. Jill, when asked to spray paint a message, took the opportunity to center the struggle of Standing Rock by making the statement of the “presidential seal.” She sprayed “I approve this message,” as a sign of solidarity.

Jill constantly speaks about the limitations of one single person and even the highest office of this land we call America. Real transformative change happens in the frontline communities like at Standing Rock. Jill and Ajamu have been visiting and working with frontline communities such as Standing Rock, Black Lives Matter Los Angeles (who camped out in front of City Hall demanding that the chief of police Charlie Beck be fired), and the homeless in Baltimore. They are using their platform as the presidential and vice presidential candidates for the Green party as a way to not just uplift but to help unite these struggles.

There are powerful forces working to divide the left and when we unite, organize and work together, we becoming exponentially more powerful. What do we have to lose? The electoral process continues to frame the individual and there is a “celebrity” factor that comes into play that we must fight against. For example, many people heard about Standing Rock from the mainstream media for the first time when Jill and Ajamu visited, and still the reporting has been all about her spray painting on the machine, not the leadership and bravery of the indigenous people leading the struggle.

The mainstream media are holding tight to their control of the story. They did not share that Black Lives Matter and Palestinian rights activists were also fighting at Standing Rock. The mainstream media have missed the main point: that there is larger struggle going on. People are developing a larger understanding of intersectionality of our struggles and standing up together and unified.

I firmly believe that we are living in a very historic moment, as the people are starting to understand the complex intersectionality of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, and gender identity in the fight for freedom. Standing Rock is what the future looks like if we are willing to stand together, to organize and to fight for it.

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USA- Testing Trumponomics

Before Donald Trump was elected, stock markets went down every time he improved in the public opinion polls. Finance capital did not want him to win. But since his surprise election, stock markets have not slumped. On the contrary, they have risen substantially along with a strengthening dollar. It seems that ‘the Donal’ could be a good thing for Capital after all.

Much of this optimism will turn out to be wishful thinking. But wishful thinking can work the markets for a while. The thinking is based on the policies that
Trump is proposing: in particular, tax cuts for the corporate sector and personal income tax cuts that will benefit the top 1% of income earners the most. Also, he claims that he will spend up to $1tn on new infrastructure and investment projects around the country and deregulate the banks and reduce labour rights (what's left of them).

The stimulus measures are music to the ears of Keynesian economics, despite the general distaste that the top Keynesian gurus have had for the attitudes and rants of ‘the Donald’. Indeed, if these policies are implemented over the next year or so, Trumponomics will be the next test of the Keynesian solution for the world economy to get out of this Long Depression. Abenomics in Japan, following similar policies of public spending, tax cuts and quantitative easing, has miserably failed. Japan's GDP growth has hardly moved, while wage incomes and prices remain transfixed.

But now some Keynesians are applauding Trump's approach as 'a break from neoliberalism'. The great historian and biographer of Keynes, Robert Skidelsky tells us that “Trump has also promised an $800bn-$1tn programme of infrastructure investment, to be financed by bonds, as well as a massive corporation tax cut, both aimed at creating 25m new jobs and boosting growth. This, together with a pledge to maintain welfare entitlements, amounts to a modern form of Keynesian fiscal policy”. So Skidelsky goes on: “As Trump moves from populism to policy, liberals should not turn away in disgust and despair, but rather engage with Trumpism's positive potential. His proposals need to be interrogated and refined, not dismissed as ignorant ravings.” Well, liberals of the Keynesian persuasion may want to ‘engage’ with Trump and adopt Trumponomics, but those who want to improve the lot of Labour, the majority not the top 1%, will take a different view.

Indeed, let's look at Trumponomics. Apparently, Skidelksy thinks that cutting corporation tax will create new jobs and raise growth. Well, there is no evidence that previous cuts in corporation tax have done so anywhere in the major economies. Corporate tax rates were slashed during the neoliberal period and yet economic growth has floundered. What has happened is a rise in the share going to the profits of capital at labour’s expense and a rise in unproductive financial speculation. Officially, the US has a 35% marginal tax rate on corporations but after various exemptions, it is effectively only 23%, among the lowest in the world.

Trump's infrastructure plan is badly needed. In my blog, I have often shown the terrible state of the public services and communications in the US. The average age of America’s fixed assets is 22.8 years — the oldest in data back to 1925. Infrastructure spending is at 30-year lows and bridges, roads and railways are crumbling before our eyes. According to the 2013 report card by the American Society of Civil Engineers, the US has serious infrastructure needs of more than $3.4 trillion through 2020, including $1.7 trillion for roads, bridges and transit; $736 billion for electricity and power grids; $391 billion for schools; $134 billion for airports; and $131 billion for waterways and related projects. But federal investment in infrastructure has dropped by half during the past three decades, from 1% to 0.5% of GDP.

Undoubtedly, public investment in infrastructure would help the US economy and raise growth a little — Goldman Sachs reckons by 0.2% pts a year. But Trump’s proposal of $1tn spending over four years is a fake. Most of this would not be public investment at all. The funds would come from private sources which would get incentives to provide money: the big construction companies and developers (like Trump Inc itself) will be offered tax breaks and also the right to own the bridges, roads, etc built with toll charges to the users of these. Direct public spending and construction will be limited.

Moreover, as I have argued in many posts, there is little evidence that Keynesian stimulus programmes work to deliver jobs and growth. Skidelsky talks about the Roosevelt era of the 1930s. Actually, very few permanent or new jobs were created under Roosevelt. The unemployment rate stayed right up to the start of the war. As Paul Krugman, the American Keynesian guru, pointed out in his book, End Depression now, it took the war to deliver full employment and economic recovery.

During the period of 'austerity', from 2009, when governments tried to run budget surpluses and wants to cut public debt after the Great Recession – a period we are still in – we were told by Keynesians that the 'multiplier' of austerity was huge (i.e. growth was being reduced drastically by more than one-to-one by cutting budget deficits or government spending). Well, again in previous posts, I have shown that this 'strong multiplier' is seriously open to question. Indeed, there is little correlation between reducing or raising government deficits or spending and growth since 2009. The best correlation with growth is with profits, not government spending.
Recently, Nora Traum of North Carolina State University presented a paper titled Clearing Up the Fiscal Multiplier Morass. She found that “different assumptions create different multipliers”. She asked nine modelers, using three different kinds of models, to predict the effect on growth of three different tax reform proposals. For one reform, predictions on growth varied from –4.2 percent to 16.4 percent in the short run, and from 1.7 percent to 7.5 percent in the long run.

Recent research has shown that the best news for capital is cutting government spending rather than raising taxes to apply austerity. Reducing government spending gives more room for private capital than raising taxes like corporate taxes, which is much more damaging to capital and thus to growth. If we are now to expect fiscal expansion not austerity from Trump (we shall see), then capital will like the tax cut but will not want government spending (except for those developers which get the contracts) especially if it directly interferes or replaces private investment. Such was the point against Keynesian stimulus made by post-Keynesian Michal Kalecki himself.

Marxist economics explains why. What really drives investment and in modern capitalist economies, where private capital investment dominates, is the profitability of projects. Private investment has failed to deliver because the profitability is too low, but even so the public sector must not interfere. So the likelihood that Trumponomics will work and take economic growth up to 4% a year, as Trump claims, is very low. It is ironic that when Bernie Sanders’ advisers suggested that a program similar to Trump’s be adopted and would achieve 4% or more real GDP growth, mainstream economists (romer-and-romer-evaluation-of-friedman1), jumped all over them, saying it was a pipe dream – correctly, in my view. But now Trump advocates it, financial markets and Keynesians find it attractive and even possible.

Like Abenomics, Trumponomics is really a combination of Keynesianism and neoliberalism. The new spending and tax cuts are to be paid for, apparently, by more deregulation of markets and labour conditions to boost profits. This is supposed to boost the growth rate in a ‘dynamic model’, or what used to be called ‘trickle-down economics’, where the rich get tax cuts and spend it on the goods and services so that the rest of us get some more income and jobs. The main incentive according to Trump’s own economic expert is not from reductions in the personal or corporate tax rate, but from allowing businesses to write off their investments immediately instead of over time.

What Skidelsky ignores in his paean of praise for Trump’s policies is the hallmark of Trumponomics: trade protectionism and restrictions on immigration. These policies are much more likely to be imposed than his Keynesian-style stimulus. Trump plans to drop TTP (the regional trade deal with Japan and Asia) and TTIP (with Europe) and ‘renegotiate’ NAFTA, the regional trade pact with Mexico and Canada. The aim is to ‘protect’ American jobs and end cheap Mexican labour.

As the Donald said last March: “I’m going to get Apple to start making their computers and their iPhones on our land, not in China.” And he wants to impose a 45% tariff on Chinese imports. It’s been estimated this could drag down China’s GDP by 4.8% and Chinese exports to the US by 87% in three years, according to Daiwa Capital Markets. Even if Apple finds enough workers to assemble in the US, the cost of making an Apple iPhone 7 could increase $30-40, estimates Jason Dedrick, a professor at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. Since labour accounts for only a small part of an electronic device’s overall costs, most of these higher expenses would come from shipping parts to the US. If the iPhone components were also made in the US, the device’s costs could climb up to $90. That means that, if Apple chose to pass along all these costs to

That’s the difference between Trump’s plan and that of the Chinese government in its massive infrastructure and urbanisation investment since 2009. China has spent about $11 trillion on infrastructure in the last decade — more than 10 times what Trump is proposing. This public investment, bankrolled by state banks and carried out by state companies, has weakened the private sector’s growth in China. But as the Chinese state controls the economy, not domestic or foreign big business (much to the chagrin of the World Bank), such investment can go ahead and deliver 6-7% annual real growth during this Long Depression.
consumers, the device’s retail price could climb about 14%. So Trump’s trade policies would mean a sharp rise in prices of goods in the US for a start, even assuming there is no retaliation by China.

As John Smith has shown in his powerful book, *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism’s Final Crisis*: “about 80 percent of global trade (in terms of gross exports) is linked to the international production networks of TNCs.” UNCTAD estimates that “about 60 percent of global trade . . . consists of trade in intermediate goods and services that are incorporated at various stages in the production process of goods and services for final consumption.”. A striking feature of contemporary globalization is that a very large and growing proportion of the workforce in many global value chains is now located in developing economies. In a phrase, the centre of gravity of much of the world’s industrial production has shifted from the North to the South of the global economy,” as Smith quotes Gary Gereffi.

Reversing this key feature of what has been called ‘globalisation’ can only be damaging to American corporations, while at the same time shifting the burden of any cost and prices rises onto average American households.

Globalisation – the cross-border expansion of world trade and capital flows and the development of value-added chains internationally – has been an important counteracting factor to the falling rate of profit experienced after the mid-1960s up to the early 1980s in the major advanced economies. Deregulating labour rights, crushing trade union power, privatising public sector assets domestically went with global expansion by multinationals. Trump now talks about reversing this counteracting factor to benefit his supposed electoral support in the ‘rust-belt’ of mid-West America that has suffered the most from the movement of American multinationals to exploit cheaper labour in Mexico, Asia and Latin America.

On a standard measure of participation in global value chains produced by the IMF, the rise in profitability for the major multi-nationals is now stalling.

Sure, information flows (internet traffic and telephone calls, mainly) have exploded, but trade and capital flows are still below their pre-recession peaks. Global foreign direct investment as share of GDP is now falling.

And capital flows to the so-called emerging economies have plummeted.
The G20 leaders met recently before the Trump victory and they could already see the writing on the wall for globalisation. They said they were opposed to trade protectionism “in all its forms”. As Deutsche Bank economists put it: “It feels like we’re coming towards the end of an economic era... and time is running out to prevent economic and political regime change given the existing stresses in the system.”

The strategists of capital are worried that Trumponomics will only makes things worse for profitability globally. Bin Smaghi, ex member of the ECB and leading strategist of finance capital, commented: “Trying to reverse globalisation can be damaging, particularly for the country that takes the first step. It is the advanced economies that are facing the greatest challenges in its most recent wave, which is why anti-globalisation movements are gaining support and governments are tempted to become inward looking. However, because their economies are so large, and so bound by the web of globalisation, they cannot reverse its course, unless emerging markets also retreat.”

And the risk is that the emerging economies could be driven into a slump as trade falls further and capital inflows dry up. Emerging economies have been building up large amounts of debt (credit) raised from US and European banks to invest, not always in productive sectors. This has not caused any problem up to now because interest rates globally have been very low and the US dollar has been weak so that borrowing in dollars has not been a problem.

But this is beginning to change, partly due to Trumponomics. Moody’s Investors Service has issued 35 credit downgrades this year in countries including Austria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while only issuing five upgrades. And 35 of the 134 countries assessed by the ratings firm currently have a negative outlook hanging over them. That puts at least $7 trillion of government debt at risk of a downgrade, according to data from the Bank of International Settlements for the end of last year. This proportion of countries with a negative outlook from Moody’s is the largest it has been since 2012, and it couldn’t come at a worse time. Interest rates on bonds, especially ones with longer maturities, are now rising sharply. If this is the end of a 35-year bull run in the bond market, governments, after years of low interest rates, might have to prepare for significantly higher borrowing costs.

At the same time, the US dollar has spiralled upwards in strength compared to other major trading currencies.

USA- The Enormous Profit of Thirst

In June 2016, Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette filed a lawsuit against Veolia North America (a subsidiary of the French multinational Veolia) and the Texas law firm Lockwood, Andrews & Newnam (LAN). The lawsuit charged the two firms
with “professional negligence, fraud, and public nuisance.”

The criminal negligence of LAN and Veolia should have come as no surprise. The Flint water crisis also fits into a larger pattern, documented by environmental justice activists and scholars for decades, of people of color and low-income whites being disproportionately exposed to toxic health hazards.

Beginning in 2011, a succession of three Emergency Managers (EMs) appointed by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder hired LAN as an outside consultant to conduct feasibility studies on switching from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Flint River. Over the next five years, EMs outsourced professional engineering services at the Flint Water Treatment Plant to LAN and (beginning in 2015) Veolia. [1]

LAN failed to design a system of corrosion control for Flint River water, leading to the poisoning of a majority-Black, working-class city’s water supply for over two years. In early 2015, after the lead contamination was already well-known, the city hired Veolia as a water quality consultant.

Veolia’s 2015 Interim Report, released on February 18, declared that Flint’s water supply was “safe” and “in compliance with drinking water standards.” It dismissed widespread reports of health problems among residents, cynically stating that “[s]ome people may be sensitive to any water.”

However, Michigan’s water crisis (including the poisoning of Flint and an ongoing epidemic of shutoffs in Detroit) is also directly related to water privatization and outsourcing. Any observer of water privatization, in fact, could have predicted the disastrous consequences of outsourcing municipal engineering and water treatment work to firms like LAN and Veolia.

Two French multinationals (Suez and Veolia) control about 70% of the world’s private water market, and they operate in dozens of countries. Complaints of rising prices and falling water quality have accompanied their takeovers of municipal water systems across the globe.

For example, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 the Bush administration gave private contractors Bechtel, Fluor and Suez billions in taxpayer dollars to construct 158 water treatment facilities. In 2009, the City of Baghdad gave Suez and Veolia $5 billion to run the city’s water system. As Karen Piper notes in her book The Price of Thirst, in 2013 the UN found an “alarming increase” in waterborne pollution and waterborne illness in Iraq, and Baghdad’s water and sewer infrastructure remains unreliable and poorly maintained. [2]

Public water ownership only became the norm during the Progressive Era, between 1890 and 1910. Nineteenth-century water companies were notorious for overcharging ratepayers, and for failing to provide safe drinking water. Improvements in the scientific understanding of infectious diseases, such as cholera and typhoid, helped turn public opinion against private water systems.

The Detroit water system, which supplied Flint from 1967 until 2013, is a case in point. The system dates back over 200 years. Traditionally, the Huron people called what is now the Detroit River Karantouan. Indigenous people, and later French fur traders, drew water directly from the Detroit River, or relied on private wells.

Following the disastrous Fire of 1805, the Detroit Common Council ordered the digging of the first public wells around Fort Detroit. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Detroit began to transform from a colonial trading outpost to a small industrial-capitalist city (and, for African-American refugees from slavery, an important stop on the Underground Railroad).

The growth of industry beyond the shores of the Detroit River, however, required building a municipal waterworks. [3] In 1829 the Detroit Common Council decided to assign this task to the private Detroit Hydraulic Company (DHC), formed by the investors Bethuel Farrand and Rufus Wells. The Common Council gave the DHC exclusive rights to supply water to the City of Detroit.

By 1831 DHC had constructed two reservoirs, with a capacity of over 20,870 gallons, and laid wooden water pipes from the river to Jefferson Avenue. However, like private water companies in other cities, the DHC did not adequately maintain its water works. Residents complained about intermittent supplies of foul-tasting water.

These criticisms came to a head during a series of devastating cholera epidemics. In 1832, cholera reached Detroit aboard the U.S.S. Henry Clay, which was en route to Chicago with 370 soldiers, sent to wage war against the Sauk leader Black Hawk. By the end of the summer, 219 soldiers had died of typhoid, along with between 50 and 100 people in Detroit.

In the summer of 1834, a far more devastating cholera epidemic struck, killing 320 Detroit residents. The Cholera and Typhoid Company of 1832-1833, the Detroit Board of Health, and the city’s newspapers all focused on public health threats. In the aftermath, critics accused the DHC of contributing to the epidemic.

In 1836, an investigative report commissioned by the Detroit Common Council concluded that the DHC had violated the terms of its charter. It found that “the irregular supply furnished has been far from being pure and wholesome; that it has endangered the health of our citizens; and that, from the present condition of the works, their location and circumstances, it is utterly impracticable for the Company to furnish pure and wholesome water.”
Building a Public System

This failed privatization experiment led directly to the creation of Detroit’s public water system. In May 1836 the city bought out the DHC for $25,000, and began to gradually expand out a system of wooden water and sewer pipes from the original two reservoirs. In 1853 the Michigan legislature passed a bill that created a Board of Water Commissioners, which could issue municipal bonds and collect rates from water users.

In the late 19th century, politicians (including labor leaders like Samuel Goldwater of the Socialist Labor Party) criticized the Water Board for overcharging residents and exploiting immigrant workers building infrastructure projects. In his mayoral campaign in 1895, Detroit Mayor Hazen S. Pingree used this issue to electoral advantage, accusing the Water Board of paying themselves inflated salaries and subsidizing property speculation in the suburbs.

In an 1897 referendum, over 60% of Detroit voters approved a plan to abolish the Water Board, and to replace water rates with a “general tax.” But when a “free water bill” with these provisions passed the Michigan legislature in 1899, the state Supreme Court struck it down, ruling that the Michigan constitution prohibited “piecemeal” amendments to city charters.

These events set the stage for the massive expansion of Detroit’s public water system in the 20th century as its land area more than tripled in the 1910s and 1920s.

During the Great Depression, with hungry and unemployed residents unable to pay water bills, the Detroit Department of Water Supply adopted a policy, as Water Consumers Account Superintendent Hal F. Smith wrote in 1933, that “water service should not be discontinued to a residence where the only result would be to deprive a family of water service.”

Beginning in 1940, New Deal public works investment finally eliminated typhoid in Detroit by funding primary sewage treatment. However, the city still lacked secondary sewage treatment, meaning that (while drinking water was finally safe) the city continued to discharge raw sewage into the Detroit River. The Detroit Water Board was primarily concerned with expansion during this period, not pollution and public health.

Results of Suburban Expansion

By the early 1960s, the Detroit water system had expanded to cover more than 50 municipalities beyond the city itself. The Water Board, with the support of real estate developers and corporate leaders (and millions of dollars in federal infrastructure spending) subsidized the growth of Detroit’s segregated postwar suburbs. The Water Board functioned essentially as a state capitalist enterprise, focused on minimizing labor costs and maximizing market share.

In 1963, during negotiations about bringing Flint into the Detroit system, Gerald J. Remus, the General Manager of Detroit’s sewage plant, wrote a memo to Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh that reveals much about the Water Board’s thinking. “This not only captures the Flint market,” Remus wrote, but it “will eliminate Flint as a potential competitive water merchant and Flint is the only remaining threat to DWB as a supplier of water to the central state cities (Lansing, East Lansing, Jackson, Battle Creek and Ann Arbor/ Ypsilanti on the “loop”).

When the Flint Commission voted 6-3 to reject Remus’ proposal to join the Detroit system, Remus threatened to make separate water deals with Flint’s suburbs, which would wreck Flint’s plans to build its own pipeline to Lake Huron. Faced with these high-pressure tactics, Flint officials agreed to join the Detroit system, and remained on it from 1967 until 2013.

The Water Board’s expansion plans in the 1950s and 1960s rested on the assumption that Detroit’s population would remain stable, while the city’s suburbs would continue to expand. As we know today, the first half of this prediction was very wrong. As Detroit’s tax base and population continuously declined in the 1970s and 1980s, the system’s fixed capital costs increased.

While Clean Water Act regulations required improvements in sewage treatment, suburban public officials pushed bills through the Michigan legislature that restricted the rate increases that Detroit could pass on to suburban customers. (However, they did not prevent suburban municipalities from adding heavy mark-ups of their own.) The result: Detroit’s primarily Black, working-class residents would bear the brunt of rate increases.

In 1977, the EPA sued Detroit for violating the Clean Water Act, and Federal District Court Judge John Feikens placed Detroit under a consent decree. Detroit successfully installed its secondary treatment by 1982, which was good for public health and for the survival of Lake Erie. But partly due to technical problems with the city’s sewage treatment plants, the city remained under a consent decree overseen by Judge Feikens from 1977 until 2010.

During this period Judge Feikens, a conservative Republican, became notorious for combining support for suburban control of DWSD (Detroit Water and Sewerage Department) with racist statements about African Americans. In 1984, he told the Detroit Free Press that “[o]ne of the things we have to give black people the time to learn to do is to learn how to run city governments.” Feikens went a long way to associate regionalization with white racism in the minds of Detroiter.

Price Increases, Shutoffs, Debt Swaps

Feikens also accelerated the internal privatization of DWSD. In 2002, Feikens recommended the appointment of Victor Mercado as its new CEO. Mercado had previously served as an executive at United Water (a subsidiary of Suez) and Thames Water (a U.K. water company privatized by Margaret Thatcher in 1989).
Mercado hired the Infrastructure Management Group, a pro-privatization consulting firm, which recommended laying off unionized workers (represented by AFSCME Local 207) and replacing them with private contractors. Mercado also ramped up DWSD's already harsh policy of shutoffs for households behind on their water bills. According to the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), DWSD shut off water for 40,752 households in Detroit in 2001-2002 alone.

Beginning in 2006 unpaid water bills were added to residential property taxes. We the People estimates that between 12-27% of tax foreclosures during the economic crisis included these debts.

Under Mercado, Detroit water rates more than doubled. One cause of rising rates was DWSD’s municipal bond debt. As in the case of subprime mortgages, financial deregulation in the late 1990s and 2000s made new forms of predatory lending possible in the realm of municipal finance. In particular, the Commodity Futures Modernization Act of 2000 deregulated the swaps market, removing restrictions on the marketing of high-risk interest rate swaps.

In 2005, UBS, Bank of America and Merrill Lynch made a $1.44 billion deal with Detroit, including variable-rate debt to fund city worker pensions and an interest-rate swap to fund DWSD. The deal constituted a bet that interest rates would rise rather than fall — something the banks were in a better position to predict than the city.

When interest rates plummeted, due to the Fed’s “quantitative easing” policy in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, DWSD was forced to pay $537 million in “swap termination fees” to the banks. To pay off the fees, DWSD took on further debt. By 2014, the majority of the department’s annual budget ($420 million) went to pay debt service. By 2014, an interest-rate swap to fund DWSD. The deal constituted a bet that interest rates would rise rather than fall — something the banks were in a better position to predict than the city.

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**Emergency Managers and Selloffs**

A final factor setting the stage for the water crises in Detroit and Flint was Emergency Manager legislation. In 2011 Governor Rick Snyder signed Public Act 4 into law, which expanded the power of Emergency Managers to sell off public assets, void public union contracts, and suspend collective bargaining for up to five years.

This law had important implications for privatization. In 2003-2004, Highland Park Emergency Manager Ramona Pearson had tried unsuccessfully to privatize the Highland Park Water Plant. The Highland Park Human Rights Coalition and MWRO led a grassroots campaign against this proposal, and won.

Public Act 4 gave EMs much more power. In 2011, Pontiac Emergency Manager Louis Schimmel sold Pontiac’s water treatment plant to United Water, which proceeded to lay off unionized workers and raise water rates. In Flint, Emergency Managers Michael Brown, Ed Kurtz and Darnell Early also increased water rates, while outsourcing water treatment to private contractors like LAN and Veolia.

In 2012, after a majority of Michigan voters struck down Public Act 4 in a popular referendum, Snyder signed a replacement and referendum-proof Emergency Manager law during the lame-duck session. Under the new law, Public Act 436, Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as Emergency Manager for Detroit shortly afterward. Orr soon began negotiations with suburban officials about replacing DWSD with a regional Great Lakes Water Authority.

During the 2014 negotiations Orr began placing bids for private companies to take over DWSD, including Veolia and United Water. When the Great Lakes Water Authority began operations in 2015, its Memorandum of Understanding listed Veolia as a contractor hired to “undertake an assessment of the systems and make recommendations to assist the parties in operating models, capital requirements and saving opportunities.”

These “recommendations” will undoubtedly include increased outsourcing and layoffs for AFSCME workers. (In 2012, DWSD approved a four-year, $48 million restructuring contract with the consulting firm EMA, Inc., which called for laying off 81% of DWSD’s workforce. In response, AFSCME Local 207 went on strike.)

The creation of the GLWA under Kevyn Orr only accelerated this process. In November 2015, DWSD (now controlled by the GLWA) laid off 137 workers. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) found that because of the layoffs, staffing levels at Detroit’s waste water treatment plants fell to 85% of a state-approved staffing plan. As a result of understaffing, GLWA received an environmental safety violation notice from the state in March 2016.

While the DWSD takeover occurred, a humanitarian crisis was developing in both Detroit and Flint. In Detroit, water shutoffs skyrocketed to over 6,000 a month under Kevyn Orr, leading to a campaign of civil disobedience led by the People’s Water Board and MWRO in the summer of 2014 (and provoking condemnations from the UN Human Rights Council).

According to official statistics, DWSD ordered 71,436 shutoffs between 2012 and 2015, of which about 97% were residential. Although DWSD statistics do not differentiate between vacant and occupied homes, a conservative estimate for the number of Detroiters deprived of running water in this period is 100,000. Given that there are, according to DWSD, 175,000 residential customers, by the fall of 2016 approximately 33,000 households were missing. It is unclear how many residents remain off the grid but the Detroit News located 11,800 accounts that were never reconnected. We the People estimates the number as somewhere between 17,000 and 24,000.

**Flint’s Fatal Switch**

Meanwhile, as DWSD’s debt service to banks increased, Flint’s EMs used rising water rates as an excuse to switch Flint to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). This would be a regional entity
(similar to the GLWA) and needed Flint’s bond-raising pipeline to clinch financing.

The first CEO of the KWA, Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright, was a former FBI informant who’d been accused of money laundering in 2005. One of the motives for the KWA was the prospect of selling Lake Huron water to multinational corporate interests.

In 2012, Genesee County Board of Commissioners Chair Jamie Curtis said that the KWA Lake Huron pipeline “opens this whole region up to the blue economy.” It would sell “raw” water to towns that would process it in their treatment plants.

In May 2014, The New York Times reported that KWA backers not only “want to dodge Detroit’s future rate increases, but in an age of climate change, they also hope to harness Lake Huron for investments and jobs in agribusiness, food processing and other industries that use lots of water.”

A case in point is Nestlé. Rick Snyder’s chief of staff Dennis Muchmore is married to Nestlé spokesperson Deb Muchmore. It may be no coincidence, then, that Snyder’s staff at the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) approved Nestlé’s extraction of 200 gallons of fresh water per minute from Lake Huron for free.

The decision of Flint’s Emergency Manager to switch to the Flint River, backed by State Treasurer Andy Dillon and MDEQ, occurred in this context. The stated purpose was to save money while Flint prepared for a long-term transition from the Detroit system. Although warned by Michael Glasgow, Flint water plant supervisor, that there was inadequate preparation to monitor the Flint water, which was known to be highly corrosive, the switch occurred just a week later, on April 25, 2014.

Outsourcing water quality control to LAN, officials boasted about the quality of the Flint River. Yet almost immediately residents began complaining about the dirty, smelly and foul-tasting water. As early as that August Flint issued a boil-water advisory after fecal coliform bacteria was found. LAN added chlorine but in early September issued a second boil-water advisory.

By October, management returned the GM plant back to the Detroit system — the Flint water corroded its engine parts! That same month, Susan Bohm of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services hypothesized in an email to Genesee County officials that Flint’s water might be linked to an outbreak of Legionnaires’ disease. Forty-seven cases were diagnosed in 2014, almost four times the number the previous year. Yet throughout the year MDEA regulators insisted that the river water met standards.

Early in 2015 Lee-Anne Walters, a resident with two children under three, asked Michael Glasgow to test her water, which had black sediment. The test revealed high iron levels (104 parts per billion). Yet when Veolia submitted its recommendations to improve the chemical treatment of the Flint River, it said nothing about lead.

By the end of March the City Council, inundated by the complaints of residents, voted 7-1 to reconnect with Detroit’s water system but Emergency Manager Jerry Ambrose called that “incomprehensible.”

As a result, Flint’s Emergency Managers’ decisions exposed an estimated 99,763 people (the population of Flint in 2013) to lead-contaminated water for over two years. By the time Governor Rick Snyder acknowledged the Legionnaires’ outbreak, nine people had died. Meanwhile, Detroit’s Emergency Manager ramped up shutoffs, resulting in over 100,000 residents losing running water in 2013-2015.

We thus have the surreal spectacle of roughly 200,000 people losing access to clean water in a state that borders the Great Lakes. The ideological commitment of a neoliberal state leads to austerity, privatization, outsourcing and Emergency Managers. In the case of Flint, that commitment saw LAN and Veolia as the experts, and they ignored elementary corrosion control standards under the EPA’s Lead and Copper Rule.

**Advocating a Solution**

How can we address this crisis? A decade ago MWRO championed Roger Colton’s water affordability plan for income-eligible Detroit customers. The proposal passed city council but was never implemented by the Water Department, which claimed it would be considered illegal under the state constitution. A similar plan has been adopted by Philadelphia.

The Environmental Protection Agency standard is that water rates should be pegged at 2-3% of household income. Yet in Flint and Detroit, where more than 40% of the residents are poor, they pay the highest rates in the state.

In response to grassroots demonstrations, the DWSD rolled out a one-year water assistance program (renewable for a second year) for those who are 150% below the federal poverty level and put 44,000 households on a payment plan (half are already in arrears). Gary Brown, DWSD’s director, feels the plan improves record keeping and “changes the culture of delinquency.” But it doesn’t address the problem that rates are too high and people too poor.

The People’s Water Board, a coalition of three dozen Southeast Michigan organizations, calls for a moratorium on Detroit shutoffs, restoration of service and implementation of the water affordability plan. For the past two years they have organized meetings, actions and water stations for those without water.

In the case of Flint there are also a variety of grassroots organizations keeping up the pressure for justice, transparency and long-term reparations, particularly for the affected children.

As for Emergency Manager laws in Michigan (and similar ruling-class tools, from Detroit’s Financial Advisory Board to Puerto Rico’s Fiscal Control Board), they stand in the way of people having control over their lives and must be repealed.
USA- Busting the Myths of a Workerless Future

Where’s our economy headed? Soon every factory worker will have to start driving for Uber, and the trucks will drive themselves—at least so the business press tells us. But Kim Moody, co-founder of Labour Notes and the author of many books on U.S. labor, paints a different picture. Chris Brooks asked him to cut through the hype and describe what’s coming for working people and the opportunities for unions. It appeared in two parts in Labour Notes but we are reproducing it as one.

Labor Notes: We read a lot about the “gig economy,” where workers cycle through multiple jobs using app-based companies like Uber, TaskRabbit [for everyday tasks such as cleaning or moving], and Mechanical Turk [for online tasks such as labeling images]. Is this really the future of work?

Kim Moody: One thing to notice is that, aside from outfits like Uber, most of these are not employers. They’re digital platforms where you can find a job. The apps are not determining the hours and pay, or even the technology used on the jobs. It’s still employers that are calling the shots. So if jobs are getting worse, it’s not because people can find them digitally as opposed to reading them in the newspaper.

Also, discussions of the gig economy often assume that suddenly there are all these people who are multiple job-holders. But the fact is that the proportion of the workforce who have more than one job hasn’t changed much in 40 years.

The vast majority of them are people with regular full-time jobs who are also moonlighting, which is a very old thing. There are a lot of multiple job-holders, but there have always been a lot of them.

There’s also been talk of the “1099 economy.” Are we really moving towards a future where 40 percent of workers will be freelancing?

The idea that freelancers can become 40 percent of the workforce is science fiction.

There are two kinds of self-employed. The greatest number are the “unincorporated self-employed,” or independent contractors. Their numbers have been dropping for years.

The other group, the incorporated ones, are people who run a small business. They have grown somewhat, but they are still just 4 percent of the workforce.

You argue that the “gig economy” and “precarious work” concepts miss the mark because they don’t get at the most concerning change: the rise of the crappy-job economy. Can you talk about what’s changed for workers and why?

KM: The first change is work intensification. Work has gotten dramatically harder in the last 30 years or so, and continues to.

That’s happened through lean production, which reduces the amount of labor to produce the same or greater amount of product or service and is tied to just-in-time production. Lean production began in the automobile industry in the 1980s, but now it is everywhere. It’s in hospitals, it’s in schools.

Another aspect is electronic and biometric monitoring, measuring, and surveillance, which allow employers to see how to get more work literally out of each minute. Another aspect is that the amount of break time has fallen dramatically since the ’80s.

Whether you are working full-time or part-time, in a precarious job or not, chances are you are going to experience some of this.

The other side is income. Wages have been falling since the early 1970s. More and more people are actually working for less, in real terms, than they used to. This also impacts everybody, although part-time and precarious workers are likely to get paid even less than full-time people.

And if you look at the Bureau of Labor Statistics projections for the fastest-growing jobs, millions of new jobs over the next decade or so, 70 percent are projected to be low-skill, low-pay jobs.

In other words, we are not heading for some big high-tech economy. Instead we are heading for a low-paid workforce with crappy jobs. The end of good jobs is nigh.

While app-based “just-in-time” gigs have gotten lots of media attention, far less attention has been paid to “just-in-time” production. Can you talk about why massive logistics hubs have emerged, and what they mean for union organizing?

KM: In order for globalization to be efficient, low pay isn’t necessarily enough, because you have to move products from one location to another. That required a change in the way products are moved—the “logistics revolution.”

The time it takes to deliver a product to the point of sale is an important factor in competition. Like
production, transportation now operates on a just-in-time basis. Products move faster.

The speed of trucks, planes, and trains did not change. What did was the way things are processed. Goods don’t stay in warehouses very long. Products arrive on rail and are cross-docked and moved out by truck in a matter of hours. This process has really only taken shape in the 21st century.

In order to make it work, the industry has created logistics clusters. These are huge concentrations of warehouses where rail, truck, air, and water transportation meet and can be coordinated, usually electronically.

You might think, “Well, this is all very high-tech.” But it turns out that it still requires thousands and thousands of workers. In the U.S. there are 60 of these clusters, but three stand out: the Port of New York and New Jersey, the Los Angeles and Long Beach port area, and Chicago. Each of these employs, in a small geographic area, at least 100,000 people.

Now, the whole idea of outsourcing back in the 1980s was to break up the concentrations of workers in places like Detroit, Pittsburgh, or Gary. But what these companies have done now, inadvertently, is to recruit incredibly massive concentrations of manual laborers.

It has evolved in a way that might shoot these companies in the foot—because here you have the potential to organize vast numbers of poorly paid workers into unions. And there are attempts to do just that.

The other thing is that these clusters are tied together by just-in-time systems—which means you have hundreds, maybe thousands, of points in the transportation system that are highly vulnerable. If you stop work in one place, you are going to close down huge areas.

Grind to a Halt

The vulnerability of “just-in-time” production was on display recently at General Motors.

Clark-Cutler-McDermott Co., which provides parts for almost every GM vehicle produced in North America, filed for bankruptcy in June.

But with no inventory on hand and no alternative source of supply, GM warned that a shutdown at this supplier would halt its vehicle production across the continent within a day—and every day the shutdown lasted, the company would lose millions of dollars.

GM scored a temporary restraining order, forcing Clark-Cutler-McDermott to continue production while the automaker sought out other suppliers.

Ford faced a similar issue in May when the all-temp workforce at its Detroit Chassis parts plant in Ohio threatened to strike, which could have halted production at a nearby Ford factory within a day. The employer quickly agreed to recognize their union.

Media commentators and even presidential candidates blame the loss of millions of U.S. manufacturing jobs on trade and outsourcing. You’re skeptical. How do you explain it?

KM: Outsourcing, if it is in the U.S.—which most of it has been—can break up the union, it can be very inconvenient to the people who lose their jobs, but it doesn’t necessarily eliminate jobs in the U.S. The jobs are just moved to a different, lower-paid group of workers.

Offshoring is another thing, but it’s not as widespread as people think. While moving production abroad has definitely impacted certain industries like steel, textile, and clothing, it cannot account for the loss of jobs we have seen. I estimate that between a million and 2 million jobs have been lost since the mid-’80s to imports and offshoring.

Manufacturing output, from the 1960s to just before the Great Recession in 2007, actually grew by 131 percent; the manufacturing sector more than doubled its output. If everything was going abroad, you couldn’t possibly have that kind of growth.

How can this be? I believe the answer lies in lean production and new technology, as we talked about earlier. Productivity literally doubled, and manufacturing jobs dropped by 50 percent or more.

It’s the productivity increase that explains the loss of jobs.

It is very difficult for politicians to deal with this question, because it means attacking employers. It means saying, “You are taking too much out of your workforce.” And of course since most economists, politicians, and experts think that productivity growth is a wonderful thing, it’s beyond criticism.

There’s a lot of hand-wringing about the future of automation. Former Service Employees President Andy Stern has been making the media rounds claiming that driverless trucks are going to replace millions of drivers.

KM: You can sell a lot of books with this pop futurology. It reminds me of the great automation scare of the 1950s. It was popular then to make predictions that there wouldn’t be any factory workers left.

And automation has reduced the number of factory workers, but there are still 8 or 9 million of them lingering around—despite all this technology, which is much greater than anything they predicted in the ’50s.

I have a shelf of books predicting “the end of work.” And yet we have millions more workers than we used to—the problem being that they are worse off than they used to be, not that they don’t exist.

Increased competition between corporations has led to massive mergers. What has been the impact on workers?

KM: It’s in the mid-’90s that this new mergers and acquisitions wave took hold. It was fundamentally different from the big mergers and acquisitions waves of the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s. Those mostly were...
about conglomeration—companies buying up all different kinds of production, finance, and everything you can get your hands on. Diversification would be another word for it.

The mergers of the mid-'90s forward have gone in the opposite direction. More companies are shedding unrelated divisions. For example, General Electric and General Motors used to have huge financial divisions and they dumped those, even though they were moneymakers.

All these major industries have seen mergers that are creating bigger employers. In some industries the concentrations are huge. If you look at trucking, UPS is this massive employer that it wasn’t 20 years ago. UPS is in every field of logistics—not just in delivery or even in trucking, but also in air freight.

So companies are buying up things that are in their basic core competencies. The structure of ownership has been realigned in a way similar to the first half of the 20th century, when unions, including the CIO, organized these big corporations.

This concentration of ownership along industrial lines means that there are more economically rational structures now in which unions can organize.

So you would no longer see a situation where the union strikes one division but the company has plenty of unrelated divisions that are still making profits.

Right. And when you put that together with the logistics revolution, you begin to get a picture of what I’m calling “the new terrain of class conflict.”

We are dealing with production systems, of both goods and services, that are far more tightly integrated than they used to be, and companies that are bigger, more capital-intensive, and more economically rational.

So unions should be able to take advantage of the vulnerable points in just-in-time logistics and production to bring some of these new giants to heel. The old idea of industrial unionism might have a new lease on life if—and it is a big if—the unions can take advantage of this situation.

My view is that this is going to have to come from the grassroots of the labor movement. Or those who today are not organized, like the people in warehouses. There is a potential that really hasn’t existed in well over half a century.

The consolidation of industry and the whole logistics revolution: these things have only come together in the last 10 or 15 years. When workers and unions in these industries—and many of these industries have unions in pieces of them—look at this situation, it’s something they’re not used to yet.

It usually takes a generation for the workforce to realize the power that it has, and the points of vulnerability. This was the case when mass production developed in the early 20th century. It took pretty close to a generation before the upheaval of the ‘30s.

Another important change has been in the demographics of the working class. Can you talk about what those changes mean?

This bears not only on unions but on American politics. An obvious change that has taken place in pretty much the same period—the ‘80s up until now—and will continue on is the change in the racial and ethnic composition of the entire population, but particularly concentrated in the working class.

For example, if you look at what the Bureau of Labor Statistics calls the “transportation and material moving” occupations in the ‘80s, maybe 15 percent of those workers were either African American, Latino, or perhaps Asian. Today it is 40 percent.

Workers of color now compose a much bigger proportion of the workforce, much of it due to immigration. The biggest growth, of course, is among Latino workers. Workers of color are now between 30 and 40 percent of union membership.

It seems the right is making its own hay out of the changing demographics of the country.

This is happening everywhere in the West. It is much easier to blame immigrants for the lack of jobs or housing or crowded schools than it is to figure out how to deal with the powers that be.

So a lot of people turn towards these self-defeating ideas that they can solve their problems by closing off borders and sending people back, or by keeping Muslims out.

We have the potential to have a phenomenally different kind of labor movement. It is going to be different from anything we have ever seen in the United States, or pretty much anywhere else, for that matter. That is, if we have a multicultural, multiracial labor movement that is larger and is growing and is taking advantage of the new terrain that we just talked about.

A common tactic used by business is whipsawing workers against one another, using non-union areas of the country against union-dense areas. I am thinking of Boeing and South Carolina. Boeing got from Washington State the largest subsidy ever given to a company in the United States. And yet they still sent all those jobs to South Carolina, which also provided them with massive subsidies.

How much of a hindrance has the inability to organize the South been for labor?

The answer is massive. This goes all the way back to the end of the Second World War, and the amount of manufacturing value-added that was produced in the South just grew until the ‘80s.

The amount produced in the South continues to grow a little, but it has more or less leveled off. I have some ideas why.

If you look at the auto parts industry, for example, in the last 10 or 15 years it has dramatically reorganized, one of the most dramatic reorganizations of any industry that I have seen. You
have many fewer companies, and those that remain have gotten bigger.

The bulk of them are in the Midwest and not in the South. A huge percentage of them are actually in Michigan. Of course, they are nonunion.

So I am not saying that the South is not important. You won’t crack manufacturing until the South is unionized. These big corporations do whipsaw. But given the new structure of these industries and the logistics revolution, there is a possibility of counter-whipsawing.

Say you have a union drive at a South Carolina plant and you want to cut off production there, to force management to recognize the union. My guess is that you can find suppliers, if they are unionized or can be unionized, whether they are in the South or Midwest, that can strike and close down that plant.

Given the rise of these tight new logistics systems, unions can counter-whipsaw by closing down suppliers or even the transport links, and thereby starve management at these Southern plants into submission. That would require the cooperation of many different unions—but they have to begin thinking about that if they are ever going to organize the South.

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USA- On Imperial Conundrums

THE SWIRLING CRAZINESS and bizarre entertainments of the 2016 presidential election sometimes obscure how much the outgoing U.S. administration — and the next one taking office in January 2017 — face a set of global crises on a scale that’s hard to recall in recent history.

There’s not a central “superpower conflict” as during the Cold War, but rather partially interlocking developments in a world of general turmoil. Some of these conundrums, particularly in the Middle East, result partly from ruinous imperial policies, creating problems for which the global masters have no solutions. At least one, an environmental crisis of staggering proportions, is deeply embedded in the dynamics of capital accumulation, accelerated by the drive for unlimited corporate power in the global economy.

This issue of Against the Current goes to press weeks prior to the November 8 election, but will reach our readers just before or immediately after the results are known. As these lines are written in the immediate wake of the obscene Trump video and leaked Clinton emails, we don’t know whether the new leader of the U.S. empire will be the centrist militarist Hillary Clinton, or the economic nationalist, anti-immigrant racist Donald Trump. Most of U.S. and global capital are united in an almost unprecedented way in support of Clinton, while Vladimir Putin’s Russian regime and almost certainly the leadership of ISIS are devoutly hoping for a Trump upset victory, but none of this guarantees the outcome of this strangest of electoral seasons.

A discussion of the present global chaos must really begin with Syria, where the Assad regime and its Russian godfather has turned the country into a land of a hundred Guernicas, of slaughter and destruction of civilian life on an unimaginable scale. Every accusation leveled against the Damascus regime and Moscow — the deliberate terror bombing of hospitals and markets and aid convoys, chemical attacks, starvation as both a weapon and consequence of war — is essentially accurate. The heroism of Syrian “white helmet” rescuers and international aid workers is matched by the cynical violations of the Kerry-Lavrov “cease-fire agreement” that didn’t even survive its initial seven days.

But almost the same level of destruction is being perpetrated on Yemen, by Saudi Arabia with U.S. backing — mostly away from the international press and without even the coverage afforded by useless diplomatic bleating at the United Nations Security Council.

To get a handle on the multiple wars in Syria, we urge our readers to listen to an expert September 14 presentation by [Phyllis Bennis. As Bennis lays out in much more detail than is possible here, what began as a “heroic” popular democratic movement in the context of Arab Spring has been overwhelmed by militarization and external intervention — in which the United States is heavily involved, but not the only or dominant power — as well as deepening confrontation between the Kurdish national struggle and the Turkish regime, the regional Sunni-Shia conflict, the rise of ISIS and al-Qaeda forces in Syria and Iraq with backing from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf oil kingdoms, and more.

Bennis explained that the only way forward now requires an urgent end of the fighting, and that the U.S. peace movement needs to demand ending our own government’s military intervention. However, we find it hard to see either a military or any political “solution” to the overwhelming Syrian tragedy anywhere on the horizon. Meanwhile, of course, the massive flight of desperate refugees — the American response to which is so shamefully small — is not only destabilizing the neighboring Arab states of Lebanon and Jordan, but shaking the foundations of an already weakening European Union.

Two aspects of the Obama administration’s current position in Iraq and Syria are certain to continue under Hillary Clinton, and most likely under Donald Trump as far as the latter’s hypothetical behavior in the White House can be foretold. The first is the involvement of U.S. special forces — “boots on the ground” under a different guise — and bombing on a heavier scale than officially acknowledged. The presumably accidental U.S. “coalition” bombing of a Syrian army position (Britain and Australia have also admitted involvement), which provided a pretext for Assad and Russia to blow up the fragile cease-fire, is one window into the hidden extent of American-led intervention.
The second is a partial policy paralysis of the Obama administration, which has continually repeated the “Assad-must-go” mantra while not equipping rebel forces with the means (anti-aircraft capacity in particular) to defend themselves and the population against the regime’s savagery. There’s been a logical basis for this hesitation, including real fear of weapons falling into the hands of extreme Islamists — who are well-armed anyway, however, thanks to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — as well as the U.S. desire from the beginning, to replace Assad without bringing down the Syrian state apparatus.

Washington’s two critical allies have separate strategic priorities. Saudi Arabia’s rulers, seeking to curb Iran’s regional strength, have encouraged and enabled jihadist forces, while the Turkish regime wants above all to crush the Kurdish autonomy movement which has been the most effective anti-ISIS fighting force on the ground.

A huge underlying factor, of course, is the severe weakening of U.S. power to control the region following the Bush-Cheney gang’s adventures, which could be summarized with the phrase “It takes a village idiot to blow up the Middle East.” But the consequences have reverberated long past the life of the George W. Bush administration. The United States has been entangled in the Afghanistan war for 15 years after the 9-11 attacks, and the choice of the Obama administration to keep U.S. forces there pretty much guarantees that they’ll be on the ground for 15 more.

Nor is there any likely early disentanglement from Iraq, where the impending battle for Mosul against ISIS will be followed by long and messy inter-sectarian conflicts. As the brilliant British journalist Robert Fisk observed a decade ago: “The United States must get out of Iraq. The United States will get out of Iraq. And the United States can’t get out of Iraq.”

For the international left in this desperate situation, unable to influence the military course of events, our demands must be for ending the bombing in Syria and Yemen, immediate and massive humanitarian aid to save the population, and the right of refugees to settle in the rich countries of Europe and North America — although none of this is an adequate response to an overwhelming disaster.

Moscow, Washington and Europe

The United States remains a massive power, but not a controlling one. While the destruction of the Iraqi state under the U.S. invasion greatly empowered Iran, the devastation in Syria opened the door for Russian intervention to save Assad — and to open a second front and bargaining chip for Russia along with its frozen half-annexation in eastern Ukraine.

It would be mistaken to view Vladimir Putin’s Russia as a “rising power.” The crisis of the central state budget is taking a terrible toll on less affluent regions of the Russian Federation, made all the worse by the effects of European economic sanctions and collapsed oil prices. Moscow does have, however, a revamped and modernized military, the ability to respond to NATO’s aggressive expansion toward Russia’s borders in Eastern and Central Europe, Russia’s importance as Europe’s natural gas supplier, the potential to exploit the United States’ problematic relations with Turkey and China, and growing uncertainty over the political and economic viability of the European Union.

It’s not that there’s a dominant or rising power in the Atlantic and European arena — not the United States, not Russia, not post-Brexit Britain, not Germany and certainly not the EU. Greece continues to be waterboarded under the brutal austerity imposed by German policies. Germany’s own export-dependent economy is visibly slowing down with the shrinkage of its Chinese and southern European markets, and its largest financial institution Deutschebank is facing severe problems.

In Italy, the economic malaise is taking the form of a growing banking crisis that could rapidly spread to German and other financial centers. In Spain there’s a political impasse, against the backdrop of terrible wave of housing foreclosures and the revival of the Catalan independence movement. In many countries, political conflicts are sharpening over the admission and absorption of refugees from Syria as well as Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Libya.

Developments in Latin America would appear to pose opportunities for reviving U.S. hemispheric hegemony. The parliamentary coup in Brazil, the electoral victory of the right wing in Argentina, and the end of the guerilla insurgency in Colombia all look like restoring the “stability” to which U.S. capital in Latin America was so long accustomed.

Thanks to the return of Honduras to the rule of death squads and drug gangs following the 2009 coup that was welcomed and supported by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, refugee children and women from that country have piled up in border detention centers to the everlasting disgrace of Clinton, Obama and the United States.

On a larger scale, the catastrophic meltdown in Venezuela — the causes of which are discussed by Jeffery Webber in his interview in this issue — is not only a disaster for the hopes that were inspired by the “Bolivarian Revolution.” On its face, this is another gain for U.S. domination. But the potential for either a social explosion in Venezuela, or the ascendance of an extreme rightist regime, might prove destabilizing for the region and bring about yet another wave of fleeing refugees.

Nature vs. the Empire

Very few of these seething issues find their way into the U.S. electoral debate, aside from Trumpian ravings about banning Muslim immigration, invading Iraq’s oil fields (the craziest idea of all), and tearing up the nuclear deal with Iran. That prospect, however unlikely, must leave Vladimir Putin salivating over the prospect of driving Iran into a strategic alliance with Russia. But despite the lack of serious discussion, these are emergent explosive problems.
In our previous editorial (ATC 184) we covered the potential effort by the Obama administration and congressional leaders to ram the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) through the post-election lame-duck session. We won't repeat that discussion here except to reiterate its connection to rising tensions over China's military-political outreach and the United States' strategic effort to counter it.

The broader issues posed by the emerging power of China must be left to a separate discussion that's beyond the space limitations of this brief overview. China is both a major force in the new power relations in global capital, and at the same time subject to the pressures and strains of a fragile world economy on which its own export-dependent model heavily depends.

It's impossible to grasp the global picture, however, without confronting the reality of capital's forced march toward environmental disaster. The year 2016 will be the hottest in the historical record; eastern and southern Africa from Ethiopia to Zimbabwe and South Africa are suffering a massive drought and the threat of famine; southern Louisiana was deluged by floods beyond anything in living memory; fish stocks are collapsing and coral reefs are bleaching and the most remote parts of the ocean are choking with microscopic plastic particles.

These and other horrors are at least partial causes of some of the crises we've surveyed here, including years of severe drought that contributed to the Syrian uprising.

It's as if nature itself is in revolt against capitalist production and the empire, and poses the question of which side we want to be on. There is no sign that either U.S. capitalist party or their presidential candidates have a clue about the scale of the crisis or inclination to do anything remotely close to what's required.

But for thousands of activists who get it, solidarity with the Lakota Sioux fight to stop the Dakota Access pipeline is not only an ethical imperative — to stand with people protecting what remains of the homeland stolen from them — it's a struggle for sanity and the survival of humanity. If we don't overcome capitalism, we'll all wind up as refugees with nowhere to go.

November-December 2016, ATC 185.

**Syria- Peace in Syria: without Assad**

LeftEast editor Ilya Budraitskis conducted this interview with Swiss/Syrian revolutionary activist Joseph Daher, first published in Russian on Open Left on October 17.

The attempt at an agreement between Russia and the USA failed dramatically. What were the reasons? Is there any chance that this type of peace talks on the level of «great powers» can bring real peace to Syria? Do you think that any sustainable ceasefire or even peace process is possible with the participation of Assad?

First, the ceasefire was poorly respected on the ground even when implemented, especially by the Assad regime and its allies, but the main reason why it failed was that this ceasefire did not address the political roots of the problem in Syria: the Assad regime. The agreement provided for greater military coordination between Russia and the United States in the “war on terror” in Syria, targeting the jihadist groups of the Islamic State and Fateh al-Sham (the former Jabhat al-Nusra), by the establishment of a Joint Implementation Center. The agreement did not denounce the interventions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah and other various Shi’a fundamentalist militias alongside the Assad regime, while it did not to mention any political transition to a democratic system and the departure of the dictator Assad and his criminal clique. This political agreement concretely led to the stabilization of the Assad regime under the pretext of the so-called “war on terror” for the political interest of the USA and Russia. That is why this agreement was rejected by large sections of the democratic opposition, whether armed or peaceful.

Any political transition to put an end to the war and move towards a democratic system must include the departure of the dictator Assad and his clique in power. Otherwise the war will continue and provoke more catastrophes in terms of human lives. In this transition, all war criminals must be held accountable for their crimes, including and first and foremost Bashar al-Assad and his clique.

This is why the peace talks on the level of great powers can hardly bring peace if the source of the problem is not tackled. I will only add that despite some oppositions and contradictions with the Russian State, and contrary to the beliefs of many, the consistent policy of the US and Western states has not been to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, but to maintain it with it only superficial changes. This they have done while preventing any serious armed assistance to democratic groups of the Free Syrian Army. Among all powers, there is a near consensus around certain points: to liquidate the revolutionary popular movement initiated in March 2011, stabilize the regime in Damascus and keep at its head the dictator Bashar Al-Assad for the short-to-medium term. Also their objective is to oppose Kurdish autonomy and try to militarily defeat jihadist groups such as Daesh.

**Do you think Assad was interested in this failure? What is the position of his regime at the moment? How much popular support does it enjoy, and to what extent is it dependent on Iran and Russia?**

Bashar al-Assad and his associates in power aim to recover the whole of Syria and do not accept any form of opposition, especially not a democratic one. In September, following the ceasefire concluded between Russia and USA, Bashar al-Assad said the Syrian regime was still “determined to recover every area from the terrorists, and to rebuild”.

Assad’s regime is not popular, quite the contrary —aeven among the majority of those who oppose
the revolution—because of its corruption, insecurity, bad economic situation and high inflation, the way he instrumentalized sectarianism, the multiplication and thuggish behavior of pro-Assad militias, etc... but the problem is that it is seen as the lesser evil by many, especially large sections of the minorities and the Sunni middle and upper class strata in the cities, by comparison to the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements, which as a reminder was part of the Assad regime’s objective as it repressed democrat and progressive individuals and groups, while liberating from prisons salafists and jihadists and letting Islamic fundamentalist movements develop. In addition to this, the ability of the Syrian state, under Assad, to remain the irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that are outside the regime’s control, has also been a key factor in its resilience. The state indeed still played its role as a supplier of subsidised goods and services such as bread, education, health, electricity, and water, as the country’s main employer – civil servants were estimated at more than 50 percent of the total working population, and a higher percentage of wage earners – and guarantor of law and order. The provision of state services, in contrast to the perceived chaos in other areas, especially those controlled by the opposition, was among the most powerful sources of regime legitimacy.

The assistance of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah has been absolutely indispensable for regime survival at all levels: political, economic and military. The military battle of Aleppo would for example not be possible today without the assistance of Russian airplanes and Iranian-sponsored ground forces and Hezbollah. The Syrian army has indeed been weakened considerably since the beginning of the uprising, with various estimations indicating that its numbers fell from 300,000 to as few as 80,000. The weakness of the regime’s army has led to the creations of militias throughout the country. These paramilitary forces can be broadly divided into two groups: those militias strongly connected to the regime’s security apparatus and the Republican Guard through General Bassam al-Hassan, the Republican Guard officer who established the National Defence Forces (NDF) and those personally linked to the Assad family and private businesses. This is in addition to foreign militias, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and mostly Iranian-sponsored sectarian Shi’á ones from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The security and intelligence services of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) have been advising and assisting the Syrian regime since the beginning of the uprising. These efforts have evolved into an expeditionary training mission using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Ground Forces, the Quds Force, intelligence services, and law enforcement forces. The IRI has been providing essential military supplies to Assad and has also been assisting pro-regime militias.

In addition to its military assistance, the IRI has also provided 3 important loans to the Assad regime, of $1 billion in January 2013, of $3.6 billion in August 2013 and $1 billion in June 2015 respectively. Trade between the two countries also grew from approximately about $300 million in 2010 to $1 billion in 2014.

For its part, Russia has long supplied Assad’s armed forces with the vast majority of their weaponry. The Russian state has continued to ship substantial volumes of small arms, ammunition, spare parts and refurbished material to pro-regime forces. In January 2014, Russia stepped up supplies of military gear to the Syrian regime, including armoured vehicles, drones and guided bombs. In the end of the summer of 2015, Russia greatly expanded its military involvement on the side of the Assad regime, including providing serious training and logistical support to the Syrian army. Another level of Russia’s military involvement was reached on September 30, 2015, when Russian jets conducted their first raids in Syria. Since then, the regime has been able to stop military advances from various oppositional armed forces and recover territories.

How would you characterize the opposition for the moment? What is the role of Al-Nusra and its relation with other anti-Assad groups? To what extent does the Sunni population support these forces?

From the beginning of the revolution, the regime specifically targeted activists and groups with democratic and secular positions opposing sectarianism and racism. They targeted those who had initiated demonstrations, civil disobedience and strike action. They came from across the various religious and ethnic backgrounds. Because of these factors and their capabilities as organizers, they undermined the propaganda of the regime that denounced the revolution as a conspiracy of armed extremist Islamist fundamentalist groups.

The resulting militarization of the uprising and increasing power of fundamentalist Islamists further repressed democratic forces and the objectives of the revolution.

Nevertheless, though weakened, they still exist. Local Coordination Committees and popular organizations opposing the regime and Islamic fundamentalist movements still are active in various regions. In the areas liberated from the regime, activists and local populations have developed forms of self-organization and free and independent media, and campaign on various subjects such as raising awareness, providing education, democratic aspirations and so on. Local councils, elected or established on consensus, also still exist in some regions, providing municipal services to the local population.

It is not for no reason that the free areas of Aleppo and Douma in Damascus province both run by local councils have been the target of the regime’s and Russia’s bombing, as they represent democratic alternatives in Syria, free from the regime and fundamentalist Islamists.

The presence of these popular forces was witnessed in February when massive demonstrations occurred
PYD forces (a sister organisation of the PKK) are the relations between the Assad regime and the Kurdish forces? Do you think that they could build any kind of long-term alliance?

What are the relations between the Assad regime and the PYD? How you could characterize the humanitarian situation—in Aleppo and in Syria in general?

Lastly, Jabhat al-Nusra has regained some popularity, especially following its participation in the breaking of the siege of the liberated areas of Aleppo in the beginning of August, although people are still very cautious towards it because of its reactionary and authoritarian practices. In some areas, popular resistance against it still exists, especially in the Idlib region, where Jabhat al-Nusra is very influential. The town of Maaret al-Numaan has continued its popular protests, which have been ongoing for more than 100 days, against Jabhat al-Nusra. This said, armed opposition groups and some sections of the population welcome its help, though not its ideology, when faced on their own against regime forces and its allies. People feel abandoned by the world, and therefore seek help from everyone to defend themselves, which is understandable in situations such as the siege and continual bombing that face the liberated areas of Aleppo.

It is important to understand that it is not enough to put a military end to the capacities for violence of Jabhat al-Nusra and similar groups, only to see their reappearance in the future; rather, we must address the socio-economic and political conditions that enable and enabled its development. Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra feed on authoritarian regimes and their murderous repressions, their neo-liberal and sectarian policies, as well as the support they get from imperialist and sub-imperialist countries. What is necessary is to get rid of the conditions that allow fundamentalist groups to develop and expand, and this means empowering the people on the ground to overthrow the authoritarian regime and face reactionary groups.

What are the relations between the Assad regime and Kurdish forces? Do you think that they could build any kind of long-term alliance?

The relations between the Assad regime and the PYD forces (a sister organisation of the PKK) are stable without being good; tensions persist between the two actors. A kind of tacit non-aggression pact existed between PYD and Assad regime forces for a long period. There is however no strategic alliance or even strategic collaboration between the Assad regime and the PYD: many examples attest to this. The Assad regime repeatedly declared that it refuses any kind of autonomy for the Kurds. In addition this pact of non-aggression has been challenged by several events. In August, regime airplanes bombed the Kurdish neighborhoods of the city of Hassaka. The US-led coalition scrambled fighters to protect US advisers working with Kurdish forces after Syrian regime jets bombed the area. The coalition scrambled its own jets to the area in a bid to intercept the Syrian jets, but the regime planes had left by the time they arrived. This allowed the YPG forces to take near complete control of Hasaka after a ceasefire, which included the withdrawal of the Syrian army and allied militia from the city, ended a week of fighting with the regime forces, consolidating the Kurds’ grip on Syria’s northeast as Turkey increased its efforts to check their influence.

Turkey’s military intervention all along its border with Syria is designed above all to counter the PYD. This intervention, which targets the Islamic State also, but above all the Kurdish PYD forces, has been occurring with the tacit green light of the Assad regime, Iran and Russia. They all called, however, for the Turkish government to collaborate with Damascus. Since the failed military coup d’état in Turkey, the AKP government has come closer again to the Russian government, while diminishing its opposition to the Assad regime, notably by saying it would accept Assad in a transitional phase, and Erdoğan has kept silent on the bombing and offensive against liberated Aleppo.

How you could characterize the humanitarian situation—in Aleppo and in Syria in general?

The Humanitarian situation is catastrophic in general. In the besieged opposition-held areas of Aleppo, in which 250,000 people are still living, Russian and regime bombing continue with great violence, while residents are lacking everything. Most of the hospitals have been destroyed or are unable to work because of the shelling. Water supplies, residential neighbourhoods and rescuers’ equipment have fallen victim to the bombings.

In Syria, the war has claimed more than 450,000 deaths. In all, 11.5 percent of Syria’s population has been wounded or killed since 2011, while more than 85 percent of the country is living in poverty, with close to 7 in 10 Syrians stuck in extreme poverty — unable to afford essentials like food or water. More than half of the population of Syria is displaced, around 6.8 million internally displaced within Syria and the rest outside the country. In September 2016, UNHCR and different partners were addressing the concerns of 4,794,473 refugees registered in neighboring countries, of which women and children make up three-quarters of the refugee population. The regime of Assad and its allies are the main responsible for the situation.
The end of the war is an absolute humanitarian and political necessity. The end of the war must lead to the end of the suffering of millions of people within and outside Syria and give them the possibility to come back to their homes. The end of the war is also a political objective because it is the only way for democratic and progressive forces to re-organise and play once again a leading role in the struggle for a new Syria for all without discrimination, far from the dictatorship of the criminal Assad regime and the authoritarian and reactionary practices of Islamist fundamentalist forces.

The basis for any future democratic Syria must include the democratic and social empowerment of the underprivileged classes to manage their own societies and to be able to self-organise – free from gender, ethnic and religious discriminations.

**October 24**

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**Middle East- Standing Against Barbarism**

The Arab political opinion falls into two main categories: those who condemn the murderous and destructive bombing of Syrian cities and rural areas by the Syrian regime and its Russian master and keep silent about the murderous and destructive bombing of Yemeni cities and rural areas by the Saudi-led coalition, when they don't support the latter; and those who condemn the murderous and destructive bombing of Yemeni cities and rural areas by the Saudi-led coalition and keep silent about the murderous and destructive bombing of Syrian cities and rural areas by the Syrian regime and its Russian master, when they don't support the latter.

We hardly hear the voice of the third category, those who condemn both bombings and regard them as equally criminal (even though there is no denying that the bombing by the Syrian regime and its Russian master has caused much more killing and much greater destruction than the other). And yet this third category exists and it is certainly larger and more widespread than what its silence would lead one to believe.

It is the category of those who put the interests and safety of populations above all political considerations and reject the deplorable logic according to which “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” regardless of the nature of this “friend,” the values that he represents and the goals that he pursues. The truth is, indeed, that the counterrevolutionary forces that mobilized against the great Arab uprising of 2011, known as the Arab Spring, are of various sorts and forms.

Both the Syrian regime and the Saudi one are key pillars of the old rotten Arab regime against which the uprising stood up, with the dream of being able to sweep it away and replace it with an order that would provide “bread, freedom, social justice, and national dignity” — the slogan that was chanted in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and numerous other squares providing the best summary of the aspirations of the Arab Spring. The purpose of both bombings — that perpetrated by the Syrian regime and its Russian master and that perpetrated by the Saudi regime and its allies — is one in essence: they both aim at burying the revolutionary process ignited in Tunisia on December 17, six years ago.

The role of the Syrian regime and its Iranian (with auxiliaries) and Russian allies in confronting the Syrian revolution and repressing it with the ugliest and vilest means at the cost of untold massacre and destruction, is as clear as could be — except in the eyes of those who don’t want to see and persist in denying the reality or strive to justify it in presenting the uprising as a foreign conspiracy, thus repeating the worn-out argument of all reactionary regimes confronted with uprisings and revolutions.

As for the role of the Saudi regime in heading the Arab reaction, it is attested by the kingdom’s entire history, especially since the winds of liberation from colonialism and imperialism started blowing over the Arab region. Since 2011, this role took different forms from direct repressive intervention as occurred in Bahrain to support to the old regime by various means as occurred in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as provision of assistance and funding to Salafist groups in Syria in order to drown the uprising in a religious sectarian ideology that suits the kingdom and thus to ward off the democratic threat that the Syrian revolution represented for Arab despotism in all its variants, and not for the Syrian Baathist regime alone.

In Yemen, the neighboring country where events are the object of its greatest concern, the Saudi kingdom intervened to foster a compromise between the very reactionary Ali Abdallah Saleh and an opposition dominated by reactionary forces. This shoddy agreement was doomed to be short-lived: it collapsed and with it collapsed the Yemeni state, leading the country in its turn into the inferno of war.

The Yemeni war is not one between a revolutionary camp and a counterrevolutionary one, but one between two camps antithetic to the fundamental aspirations for which Yemen’s youth rose up in 2011. The Saudi-led intervention is supporting one side in a war between two reactionary camps and for considerations that are exclusively related to the kingdom’s security. Its main tool fits well its reactionary nature: the aerial bombing of populated areas with indifference for the murder of civilians, identical in that respect to the Russian bombing in Syria, not to mention the Syrian regime’s deliberate murder of civilians.
That is why it is indispensable that all those who are loyal to the hopes created by the Arab uprising and keen on reviving the revolutionary process that it unleashed and that was faced with severe reactionary relapse two years after it started, it is indispensable that all of them stick to a consistent attitude in condemning the reactionary onslaught that is falling from the sky, whichever its source is.

This is one aspect of what it takes to build in the Arab region a progressive pole independent of all the poles and axes of the old Arab regime and its reactionary contenders — the indispensable condition if the Arab revolution is to arise again and resume the march that it began six years ago, short of which there is no hope of overcoming the catastrophic situation into which the region has degenerated.

20 October 2016

Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches development studies and international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Among his books are The Clash of Barbarisms, which came out in a second expanded edition in 2006; a book of dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, Perilous Power: The Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy (2nd edition in 2008); and most recently The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives (2010).

Middle East- What does Trump's victory mean for the Middle East?

Regarding foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular, Donald Trump, as the new president of the United States, would stand out as the most unpredictable man to have occupied this position ever since his country started deploying an overseas imperial policy in the late 19th century.

Trump has contradicted himself and changed positions and/or tone on several issues time and again during the electoral campaign. Judging, however, by a few key themes that he persistently reiterated over the past year, here is what can be guessed at this point about the way his presidency may affect the Middle East:

The Syrian people will be the first to suffer from his election. The doors of the United States will be slammed shut in the face of would-be Syrian refugees, with maybe an exception made for Christians as Trump’s agitation against Syrian refugees has always centred around Islamophobia.

To stop altogether the outflow of refugees from Syria, Trump has advocated the creation of a “safe zone” within the country’s borders [1], where Syrian displaced persons would be concentrated rather than allowed to go abroad as refugees. He boasted that he would make the Arab Gulf states pay for this as he would make Mexico pay for the wall that he intends to build on the border between the two countries.

Secondly, Trump will inaugurate a new policy of friendship and collaboration with Russian President Vladimir Putin, based on accommodating Russia’s interests. In the Middle East, this includes accepting Russia’s role in Syria as positive and supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime as the lesser evil.

It would logically involve demanding from the United States’ traditional allies in the region that they cease supporting the Syrian armed opposition. Washington would then co-sponsor with Moscow a Syrian “coalition government” that would include conciliationist “opposition” members. This could open the way to US collaboration with the Assad regime in the name of the “war on terror”.

Pursuing the policy of favouring “strong men” in power, which he shares with Putin, Trump will want to improve Washington’s relations with both Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

He may try to mend fences between the two men and coax them into adhering to a joint effort against “terrorism” that would accept each president’s definition of what he regards as terrorism in his own country.

Since Trump is poised to antagonise Iran by revoking the nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration, he may even try to entice Saudi Arabia into joining what would emerge as a Sunni triangle of Ankara, Cairo and Riyadh backed by Washington.

Herein lies the principal inconsistency in Trump’s vision for the Middle East (whereas his hostile stance towards China is the principal inconsistency of his global vision): overcoming it requires luring both Moscow and the Assad regime into breaking with Tehran.

Lastly, another regional “strong man” whose relations with Washington will greatly improve under Trump is Benjamin Netanyahu. Thus, another direct victim of Trump’s election will be the Palestinian people as Netanyahu will be given more of a free hand in dealing with them than any Israeli prime minister has had since Ariel Sharon in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

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Syria- The Kurdish national movement in Syria: political goals, controversy and dynamic

What are the goals of PYD and what is the purpose of its alliances?
Joseph Daher : There is a consensus among all Kurdish political parties, including PYD, to establish in a future Syria without Assad a form of decentralization, while all emphasizing the full integrity of Syrian territory within a federal system. The way to reach it is however different for numerous reasons. PYD has for example pursued a policy of strengthening its political influence through its own armed forces to control Kurdish majority inhabited areas, even more, and to try to link the 3 “Rojava” cantons geographically, but without any cooperation with Syrian Arab opposition forces, and sometimes even against them. On the other side, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) has argued that a federalist system has to be established following discussions with and explanations to the actors of the Syrian Arab opposition, which for the majority views federalism as a step toward separatism and division.

Regarding alliances, PYD officials actually recognized they have made a strategic decision not to confront military regime forces when they could, yet refusing accusations of collusion, describing themselves as a “third current” between an “oppressive regime and hardline rebel militants”. At the same time there is no doubt that the PYD has engaged the regime in a conciliatory rather than confrontational manner and has pursued a modus vivendi that served both actors, at least for the short term. The possibility of the PYD to organize freely in Syria and to bring few thousands of armed fighters to Syria from Qandil enclave in Iraq in the first year of the uprising in 2011 allowed it to reestablish a presence and operate openly in Syria. This was made according to few sources and in exchange for cooperation with regime security forces in order to crush anti regime protests in majority Kurdish populated areas, which did occur notably in Afrin and some Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo. This did not prevent at the same period confrontations between PYD members and regime forces, while PYD promoting an anti regime propaganda in its social medias.

The self-governance of majority-Kurdish areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – also known as ‘Rojava – Northern Syria’ – is a direct result of the mass movement by the people of Syria (Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians together) against the Assad regime. The popular uprising pushed the regime to conclude a deal with the PYD in July 2012, in which they withdrew from several majority-Kurdish regions in the North to redeploy its armed forces to repress the uprising elsewhere, while maintaining small presence in some areas such as Qamichli and Hassaka.

Rather than being an Assad proxy, we can consider that the PYD has played a mutual beneficial role for itself and the Assad regime, seeking to take advantage of the lack of security and to expand the land it currently controls

Therefore, there is no stricto senso alliance between the Assad regime and the PYD as some say, but a pragmatic agreement of non confrontation, with conflicts in some periods, but that can’t last for ever.

The best proof of this situation is that although a kind of non-aggression pact existed between PYD and the regime, Assad has repeatedly declared that it refuses any kind of autonomy for the Kurds in Syria. In August, the Syrian Regime air force bombèd the Kurdish neighbourhoods of the city of Hassaka, while Assad tacitly accepts Turkish military intervention and support to FSA and Islamic fundamentalist movements against the PYD in Northern Syria.

This does not mean in the same time that in the future new tactical and temporary collaboration between the two actors in a particular political context can occur.

In relation to the dominant trend of the opposition in exile, relations are not good, notably because of chauvinism of many groups and personalities within the Syrian Arab opposition – particularly the Syrian National Coalition, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhoods and the rightwing, while being allied to Turkey’s AKP government.

The majority of the Syrian Arab opposition believes that Kurds are normal Syrian citizens who have been deprived of some of their rights and that the problem is therefore limited to the single issue of the census in 1962, which resulted in around 120,000 Kurds being denied nationality and declared as foreigners, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination. There were between 250,00 and 300.000 stateless Kurds in the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, roughly 15 percent of the estimated two million total Kurdish population in Syria. The far majority of the opposition political parties have not been ready in any way to recognize the Kurds as a separate “people” or “nation” and are not ready and willing to listen to demands for federalism and administrative decentralization. As mentioned before, the demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the quasi majority of Kurdish parties in the country despite their political differences and rivalries.

We have to understand that the demand for a federal system by the Syrian Kurdish political parties is rooted in decades of state oppression, and this since the independence of the country in 1946, on a national basis (policies of quasi systematic discrimination against Kurds, policies of colonization in the framework of the “Arab Belt” and cultural repressions at all levels), but also has socio-economic consequences: the most impoverished areas of the country were the areas mostly populated by Kurds such as in the north-eastern Jazirah.

In this perspective, the majority of the Syrian Arab opposition did not address or even acknowledge this reality, mirroring the regime’s position.

Lately, the great majority of the Syrian Kurdish political movements, including the PYD and Kurdish National Council, were angered by the recent transition plan, proposed by the opposition’s High Negotiations Committee for the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, as the plan did not envision any form of federalism in post-war Syria. The High Negotiations Committee
program.

political experience that is out of their authoritarian forces would not allow any possible development of Syria. The Assad regime and the Islamic reactionary return to an era of oppression for the Kurds of revolution and of the popular movement would need to reaffirm that the defeat of the Syrian or any other Kurdish political party. uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD and elsewhere; this clearly does not mean being self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and providing unconditional support to the Kurds as a proper “people” or “nation” in social and political rights to all its ethnic, religious and linguistic groups”. They add “Whoever reads the document notes immediately that point 1 of the “General Principles” exclusively lists the Arab culture and Islam as sources “for intellectual production and social relations”. This definition clearly excludes other cultures – be they ethnic, linguistic or religious – and sets the majority culture as the leading one. As Syrian Kurds we feel repulsed by this narrow perception of the Syrian people. The similarities between this definition and the chauvinist policies under the Assad regime are undeniable”. Just as on October 25, 2016, The Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC) condemned the Turkish bombardment of populated districts in Aleppo Governorate. The council explicitly demanded that the Turkish Army stop killing civilians and demanded that it withdraws its forces from Aleppo countryside.

At the same time as we mentioned before, PYD policies have also been problematic such as its non-conflict orientation towards the Assad regime, support for Russian intervention in Syria and even benefiting in the beginning of 2016 of Russian bombing in the countryside of Aleppo to conquer new territories against FSA and Islamic opposition forces. According to latest news, new military fights are unfortunately occurring between these actors in the northern region of Aleppo. And there are also some accusations of human rights violations against Arab populations. In addition, it has practiced authoritarian and repressive measures against other Kurdish groups and activists.

In general, no solution for the Kurdish issue and an inclusive Syria can be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper “people” or “nation” in Syria and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere; this clearly does not mean being uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD or any other Kurdish political party.

We need to reaffirm that the defeat of the Syrian revolution and of the popular movement would probably mark the end of the Rojava experience and the return to an era of oppression for the Kurds of Syria. The Assad regime and the Islamic reactionary forces would not allow any possible development of a political experience that is out of their authoritarian program.

This is why we should not isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution.

This is important to understand because among all international and regional powers, there is a near consensus around certain points: to liquidate the revolutionary popular movement initiated in March 2011, stabilize the regime in Damascus and keep at its head the dictator Bashar Al-Assad for the short-to-medium term. Also their objective is to oppose Kurdish autonomy and try to militarily defeat jihadist groups such as Daesh.

What is the relationship of the PYD with the democratic forces of the Syrian opposition?

J.D: Unfortunately, increased separation and division has appeared at times between the Syrian Arab and Kurdish movements, and most particularly the PYD. The majority of the Syrian Arab forces opposed to the Assad regime see federalism as a step toward separatism and division. This is strengthened, as mentioned previously, by the non confrontational policies of the PYD towards the Assad regime, which included notably maintaining communication channels open since the uprising began in 2011, cohabiting with regime forces in the cities of Qamichli and Hassaka, (despite occasional and violent confrontations) and abuses and violations of Human Rights against Syrian Arab civilians in areas dominated by the military forces of PYD, raise suspicions and opposition of a part of the Arab population of Syria.

According to a survey conducted between November 2015 and January 2016 by the independent Syrian-led civil society organization The Day After Tomorrow (TDA), respondents in both regime (86.7%) and opposition-held areas (67.4%) agree on rejecting federalism, while proponents of federalism almost reach a consensus in Kurdish-led Self-Administration areas (79.6%). These results show that a Kurdish-Arab divide exists and that the first imperative regarding any future political system in Syria is dealing with the “Kurdish issue”.

In addition to this, in Kurdish majority inhabited regions, Syrian Kurdish democratic forces have tensed relations with PYD, because of campaigns of repression of this latter and its authoritarian policies.

Are there other Kurdish political forces? Which of them are left or forces of the movement? What they seek? What is their relationship with the PYD?

J.D: It is firstly important to note that all Kurdish political parties, except may be the Future movement headed by Mishaal Tammo at the time before being assassinated in October 2011 and the Yekiti party that was important since the beginning of the 1990s in mobilising the Kurdish youth against the regime, were absent or not the main actors mobilising the Syrian Kurdish streets at the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, adopting a more cautious approach. The protest movement in these areas emerged around pre-existing youth groups or newly established “Local Coordination Committees”, seeing
themselves as part of the national movement against the regime and calling for its overthrow. Young activists organized themselves by using social medias, including Facebook. Local coordinating committees in the Arab parts of the country were the model for the development of similar groups in the Kurdish regions. The collaboration between some of the Arab and Kurdish youth groups and LCCs continued in a significant way until around March 2012 and then it weakened to become more localized, especially after the main Syrian Arab opposition in exile rejected the demands of the Kurdish parties.

Meanwhile, Kurdish traditional political parties although may be rhetorically supporting the demands of the protesters, tried to divide or weaken, including repression in the case of the PYD, the Kurdish youth movement through various ways and organized their own demonstrations to boost their own credentials rather than the popular national movement against the regime.

This situation did not prevent however in October 2011 the organization of a conference gathering the majority of Kurdish political parties, putting aside internal differences, independents, Kurdish youth organisations, Kurdish women organisations, human rights activists and professionals. The objective was to unite the Kurdish opposition and establish a united and representative Kurdish voice in Syria, especially in the context of Kurdish concerns about the political program and agenda of several actors within the Syrian National Council, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its close relations with the AKP Turkish government. This is how was created the Kurdish National Council. Unfortunately, with time, the voice of the Kurdish youth and local coordination committees within the KNC, were taken over once more by the domination of the traditional Kurdish political parties which marginalized them by their control of the decision making process and political support from outside, notably Barzani.

The KNC was formed in Erbil, Iraq, under the sponsorship of Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. The stated mission of the KNC was to find a “democratic solution to the Kurdish issue” while emphasizing that it was part of the revolution. In June 2016, the KNC was composed of 12 parties, but most of them were acting outside of Syria now. Moreover, the KNC leadership left to Erbil, the regional capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), because it was unable to organise in Syria.

Despite several attempts of reconciliation between the PYD and KNC these past few years, relations are very bad with attacks on both sides. KNC members and representatives have been arrested on numerous occasions in areas controlled by the PYD, while the border with the Kurdish areas of Iraq controlled by Barzani were often closed by this latter to pressure the PYD resulting in lack of essential goods and medical supplies.

The domination of the PYD on these Kurdish inhabited majority areas did not however put an end to the activities of youth groups independent from the PYD and KNC. In cities like Qamichli, #Amudah, #Ayn al-#Arab (Kobani#), and ad-Darbasiyah, young people have joining forces in groups united by common interests and goals, not by party affiliation. Youth and community centers focusing on education, culture, politics, and human rights and built upon on the work of volunteers have developed considerably and enjoyed great popularity until nowadays.

**What conditions prevail in the areas controlled by the PYD (civil liberties, human rights etc.)?**

J.D: Institutions in PYD controlled areas are dominated by PYD-affiliated organisations, with an assortment of Kurdish, Syriac and Assyrian personalities who had little to lose from entering the project. For a far majority of Kurdish political parties and activists, Rojava is only a new form of authoritarianism rather than democratic confederalism in action. As evidence of this many of them pointed out to the exclusion of opposition parties and activists from youth groups within Rojava. Members and leaders of the people’s councils, which were established by the authorities of Rojava, are theoretically responsible for local governance and including representatives of all Kurdish political parties as well as non-Kurdish population in mixed areas, are appointed by the PYD. Likewise, the movement maintains overall decision-making authority, consigning the councils other than for distribution of gas and humanitarian aid to a largely symbolic role. The commune’s institution, one of the key element in the new Rojava system, whose role is to provide humanitarian assistance to the inhabitants in their neighbourhoods, has been criticized to enforcing the rule of PYD linked organisations.

At the same time, these new institutions lack legitimacy among large sections of the Syrian Arabs in these areas, although an Arab president had to be elected to the male/female joint presidency of the town’s local council. For instance Shaykh Humaydi Daham al-Jarba, the head of a tribal Arab militia and an outspoken supporter of the Assad regime, was nominated as the governor of the Jazirah canton in Rojava in 2014. His son became the commander of the al-Sanadid Forces, one of the main Arab militias fighting alongside the PYD-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Prominence of tribal leaders in the Rojava institution was also preserved, rather than challenges.

The authoritarianism of the PYD was demonstrated in its repression and imprisonment of activists, political opponents and the closure of critical organizations or institutions, such as the independent radio Arta in February 2014 and April 2016. Members of other rival Syrian Kurdish opposition parties like the Yekiti Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria and Azadi party have particularly suffered from the repression by the authorities in the autonomous regions of Rojava for their peaceful activism and criticism of the PYD. Just lately, the KNC’s president, Ibrahim Berro, was arrested in
August 2016 at an Asayish checkpoint in Qamichli, and then exiled to Iraqi Kurdistan the day after. As a reaction, in mid September, the local councils of the Kurdish National Council in the northern province of Hassaka, Maabdeh, ‘Amoudah, Qamishli, al-Jawadiyeh, and Malakiyeh organized a sit-in against the practices of the PYD and arbitrary arrests. The protesters demanded the release of political prisoners imprisoned by the party whose number has reached about 100. New protests occurred in October as well.

The PYD has faced growing opposition within the Kurdish population in Syria and active pro-revolutionary Kurdish activists for their authoritarian policies. The increasing political and military hegemony of the PYD and the inability of the KNC to project influence inside Syria further weakened the coalition with internal divisions.

At the same time, in the areas controlled by the PYD, there are advances on some aspects that must be acknowledged such as promotion of women rights and gender equality, secularisation of laws and institutions, and to a certain extent some forms of coexistence between the various ethnicities and religious sects, despite some tensions. Some parties within the KNC also saw cooperation with the PYD as the unique way to maintain a power-base in Syria, while large sections of the population saw it as a necessary evil to defend itself against some FSA, Islamic and salafist djihadist forces attacking Kurdish regions since summer 2012. For example, the launch of the campaign “Western Kurdistan for his children” by the PYD in the summer 2012 against the attacks by Islamic fundamentalist groups against the cities mostly inhabited by Kurds also diminished criticisms against the party and gathered temporarily the Syrian Kurdish political scene with the support of other Kurdish groups to this campaign, while reiterating the need for the PYD to work and collaborate with them. The PYD and its military branch, YPG, role as the sole viable protector of Syria’s Kurds were further strengthened therefore. These kind of feeling come back every time the Syrian Arab opposition gathered around the Etilaf reject Kurdish rights and make racist discourses and speeches against Kurds or when various opposition armed forces, from FSA to Islamic Fundamentalist region supported or not by Turkey, attack PYD and Kurdish regions.

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Turkey- Until hope appears...

The attempted military coup orchestrated by the former ally of the regime, the Gülen brotherhood, on the night of July 15, 2016 provided the opportunity for Erdogan to undertake a civilian coup attempt to destroy any possibility and ability of opposition to the dictatorial regime it is trying to forge. The arrest last Friday, 4 November 2016, of spokespersons, leaders and members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), a left Party from the Kurdish movement, is making a decisive step in the construction of this Ismo-nationalist dictatorship.

The arbitrariness of the state of emergency was declared following the attempted coup allowed the “Duce” of Ankara to undertake a restructuring of the entire state apparatus and public service. So tens of thousands have been laid off, dismissed, arrested under anti-terrorist operations. More than a hundred media (newspapers, television, radio, magazines) have been banned, and thousands of associations, schools, foundations, universities and hospitals closed.

Beyond potential followers (or not) of the Gülen brotherhood, these extremely repressive measures have also targeted activists and sympathizers of the Kurdish cause and the radical left. More than ten thousand members of leftist unions have been suspended from duty or directly excluded from the public service. Almost all Kurdish and Turkish leftist media have been banned.

The repression of democratic forces in particular has increased during the last week. Those fighting against the casualization of higher education and for the “universities for peace” who signed the petition protesting the war against the Kurdish people have been dismissed; the leader writers and cartoonists of the largest daily newspaper of leftist opposition, "Cumhuriyet" were placed in custody after searches of their homes and the mayors of the largest Kurdish city, Diyarbakir were arrested, accused of being members of “the terrorist organization PKK”. Just as was recently the case for twenty other cities in the Kurdish region, new pro-government administrators have been appointed to head the municipality of Diyarbakir.

But the arrest after of home searches, of the HDP leadership – who during the elections of 7 June 2015 had obtained 13.1%, an unexpected success totally destabilizing the party of Erdogan, the AKP – is a decisive step in annihilation of democracy by the dictatorship. This unacceptable offensive denying the vote of 6 million people is a consequence of the war waged by the Turkish state against the aspiration to self-determination of the Kurdish people in Turkey and Syria.

We, revolutionary Marxists in Turkey, having called at the two elections of 7 June and 1 November 2015 to vote for this party incarnating the hopes for peace, justice and democracy, strongly condemn the confiscation of the votes of millions of Kurds, women, workers, youth, environmentalists, LGBTI activists, ethnic and religious minorities, democrats.

Faced with this terrible storm which has already dangerously weakened the foundation for a common life in solidarity of peoples of Turkey, our last defence remains an unremitting fight for peace, freedom, democracy, secularism ...
“Even in times when you are most pessimistic, look not at the tips of your toes but to the horizon, you will see hope, certainly. If you do not see it, look again, keep looking until hope appears,” said Selahattin Demirtaş, co-chairman of the HDP today held in the prisons of the regime.

Yes, until hope appears ...

Sosyalist Demokrasi için Yeniyol, Turkish Section of the Fourth International

5 November 2016

Italy- For a united front saying ‘No’ this autumn

Squaring the circle

The Renzi [1] government has a serious problem – it has to square a circle. In other words it has to find the correct formula for a budget that:

• does not appear too much against working people;
• throws them some more or less fake crumbs;
• avoids a VAT increase which would have negative effects on the economic situation;
• but at the same time significantly reduces the taxes paid by business while gutting national labour contracts.

The political objective is absolutely clear – to win back support in order to win the referendum contest. [2]

Renzi has a difficult job. Even though the European Commission has been and continues to be ready to allow some margin of flexibility on its budgetary rules – permitting a budget deficit as a percentage of GDP above 2% - Renzi cannot extend this concession too much, as Juncker, EU Commission President, has reminded him recently. There has been no turn by the European governments – the fiscal compact remains the alpha and omega of their policy. They might accept some partial modifications if a very critical situation arose in Italy. Our country is a vital ally it is almost a positive thing for Renzi to be excluded from the Merkel/Hollande summit because it allows him to present himself as the ‘alternative’, someone who is ‘criticising’ austerity.

What is really happening is that government specialists are working to find additional resources by further cutting public spending, the health service and money sent to the Regions. As if the heavy measures detrimental to the working people being implemented, are more concerned with managing them alongside the bosses so that they do not lead to big industrial and community struggles...!

As for the leadership of the FIOI, particularly since the agreement with Camusso, it also has not wanted to become a protagonist in direct industrial struggle, even though the Federmeccanica (cf. Engineering employers’ organisation) wants to basically tear up the existing national contract. [4] Although of course Landini plays the ‘left’ protagonist in the TV studios. Then there are the public sector workers, who have had their salaries frozen for 6 years. The government is allocating ridiculously inadequate resources to this sector without any reaction from the trade unions in terms of mobilising their membership.

There is not going to much progress if we give up a resolute fight against austerity and refuse to reject the dogma and blackmail of the capitalist markets.

This is also why we insist on the need to closely link the democratic battle for a No vote in the referendum about the Boschi counter reform with industrial and other struggles.

It will be difficult to win the constitutional battle if we cannot launch a movement of workers and community struggles capable of building political hegemony in the country. It will be difficult to resist the projects the bourgeoisie are undertaking both before and after the vote.

We need a united and pluralist mobilisation

From the beginning of the summer we have been arguing the need for a united and pluralist mobilisation to say No in the referendum, to push back Renzi’s budget and to defend jobs and contracts organised by all those affected: the referendum committees, the left forces, those trade unions willing to fight and the social movements.
Everyone can develop their own proposals but we must all take to the streets together without any sectarianism or arrogance. This is the only way to change the relationship of forces and build up a credible reference point not only for all workers but also for so many other citizens, facilitating the growth in consciousness and confidence in themselves as protagonists in the mobilisation.

There have been discussions in recent weeks between the rank and file trade unions and the class struggle political currents to prepare an autumn of struggle against the policies of the government and the bosses. It would include a general strike and a big national demonstration in Rome.

We know how difficult this will be given the relationship of forces so it is indispensable to work hard to develop a united way forward for all the participants.

We are a long way from achieving this objective, at the time of writing we have a general 8 hour strike set by the USB, Unicobas and the USI for the 21st October – with demands we would all share and a national demonstration for the 22nd October – the No Renzi day - promoted by a broad coalition of forces under the banner of the ‘Coordinating Committee for a social No to the Institutional Counter Reform’.

Sinistra Anticapitalista (the Anti-capitalist left) is part of this coalition, having striven to make it as open and broad as possible.

In the meantime the CUB and other rank and file trade union currents have set a date for a general strike of 8 hours on a different date, the 4th November on a very similar platform that we would support. So the problems are very clear.

As an organisation we have written and also said publicly that we will support all the strike actions and mobilisations but we cannot avoid pointing out a simple problem – it is very difficult today for workers to join a strike and also hard for trade union currents to develop the conditions for its success. If you are a worker who is convinced of the need to take action which day would you choose?

We sincerely believe that the workers of our country deserve another scenario and we do not believe every effort has been made to bring about some convergence among the rank and file trade unions. They seem to have given up on even the partial unity of action of recent years.

More than ever we need a unitary preparation of the strike with common mass meetings, unitary struggle committees in the workplaces – structures that are not set up to champion a particular trade union slate or policies but to develop a broad based dynamic which favours the involvement of many workers – including those who identify with the three big confederations, particularly the CGIL. In this way we can put the bureaucratic leaderships on the spot.

Perhaps working people deserve something better from the rank and file trade unions than the compulsion to repeat divisions. Why cannot we achieve the unity shown by the French trade unions in their struggles in the last few months?

Although we fear that the strike proposals will remain divided we would still ask the leaderships to make an effort to unblock the situation. We ask those activists who work in the different trade union to fight for a unitary approach. In this way the strikes become more credible and the relationship of forces in the workplaces could be modified. The stakes involved in the autumn battles are very high and we must believe in the possibility of helping working people to raise their heads and stand up to be counted.

**France- Mobilizations against the labour law**

“Our uprising has nothing to do with the collar-and-tie pantomime artistes who govern us. It was the visible expression of an invisible force. It was the public manifestation of a drive for life. It came from gut feeling and from the heart. You do not subject gut feeling to balance sheets. You do not lock up the heart in accounting columns.” Manuel Cervera Marzal [1]

On September 15, 2016, between 100,000 and 150,000 demonstrators participated in every major city in the fourteenth national day of action. This participation, even reduced, shows that the rejection of the labour law and its world remains intact, even after the adoption of the law on July 21, and can still mobilize in the streets teams of combative activists, against the government and the whole political system. Neither the terrorist attacks of the summer, nor the media coverage of the beginning of the presidential campaign have succeeded in preventing this resurgence after the holiday months. It appears today to be the end of the wave of mobilization that started in February by signing the online petition against the law, which registered a million signatures in two weeks. But let us not be in such a hurry to inter such a wave, which can reappear in other forms, given the magnitude of the social and political crisis. Because the radicalization is a response to the deepening of the neoliberal and authoritarian counter-reform, and to the inability of mainstream parties to offer perspectives to those below. [2]

**The stakes of the labour law for the bourgeoisie**

The mobilization against the labour law came up against a major project for the government and the bourgeoisie, who want to destroy most of the social advances that are still present in the labour code, acquired primarily during the half-century from 1936 to 1986. The objective is to align French labour law with that of the other European countries, something that the mobilizations of the last 30 years, although they did not lead to great victories, have prevented for the moment. They now want to impose a deregulation of the labour market similar to that which exists in the other major European countries.

So, much more than a bill, it is a central confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. To win, you need a massive and determined, one that can...
go all the way and establish a relationship of forces mobilization and fixed up to the end, be a balance of power such that they have no other solution than to yield, or lose much more.

**Breaks with the PS**

The mobilization marked a break of a part of the popular classes with the Socialist Party (PS) and its government, and the power of the movement shook the routine and the apparatuses of the trade unions.

While the leaderships of the unions (CGT, Solidaires, FSU) that were opposed to the law, which had been marginally reformed to obtain the support of the CFDT, the CGC and UNSA, did not prepare any real response, the first reaction came from some critical oppositionists on the left of the PS, via an internet petition. The speed with which the million signatures were obtained showed the spontaneous reaction of opposition to the project. This opposition would continue to reflect majority opinion in French society for the duration of the mobilization; according to all the polls, around 70 per cent were opposed to the law and 55 per cent supported the demonstrations and strikes; for the first time since 1981 at this level, the social base that had voted for Holland frontally opposed the Socialist Party government.

The initiative for the first day of action on March 9 started out from a group of young people who had made a video entitled "We’re worth more than that", on the harassment and attacks on human dignity, to which thousands of people reacted. Youth organizations took it up, drawing strength from the beginning of mobilizations in the universities, and they were followed by the trade union confederations. Overtaken by events at the first demonstration, the inter-union coordination took the initiative for the subsequent mobilizations. The succession of fourteen days of action fuelled a massive, sustained, persevering, determined mobilization of broad sections of the proletariat. The repeated mass demonstrations, although they did not equal the numbers for 2010, brought together forces far in excess of the usual teams of activists: between 200,000 and a million demonstrators.

There are various reasons for the drop in numbers compared to 2010: the absence of teachers and the weak mobilization among civil servants, the lack of trade union unity (in 2010 the CFDT did not support the government’s project), and the anti-Sarkozy factor. Unlike in the great movements of the past twenty years, workers in the private sector played a central role in these mobilizations. We saw the expression of the capacity to mobilize in various parts of the private sector, in small enterprises, among shop workers, social workers and health workers, with local strikes that were victorious. This was an important rehabilitation of collective action, clearly understood by the government, as shown by the formal climb-down before the lorry drivers at the crucial moment.

The strikes were minority actions, apart from a few sectors: refineries, some railway sectors... and they were not extended to all workers.

The more radical groups, essentially made up of trade-unionists, although they did not take on a mass character, remained mobilized permanently for between four and six months around blockades, various spectacular operations, occupations of town halls, the marriage between the PS and the MEDEF, blocking of motorways, filtered or complete blockades, always well accepted by the population. A radical militant fringe organized in very different forms, in "Nuit Debout" starting from the big demonstration on March 31, and it conducted debates over a period of for months, sometimes together with these more radical groups of trade unionists.

These last two groups regrouped the most radicalized activists, who constituted the layer of the exploited and oppressed who were the most aware of the dangerous character of the project and the society it represented, of the importance of winning this time, and who became politicized in this fight.

But these groups were a minority and their determination alone, although it was a ferment of radicalization for a number of them, was not sufficient to create the relationship of forces capable of making the government and the bourgeoisie give way.

The central question with which anti-capitalist activists were confronted is: how could these most combative sectors, in the vanguard, be a factor to lead, to set in motion, to influence wider masses opposed to the labour law, in a perspective of confrontation with the government. How to be a step ahead of the masses, but not ten steps ahead, because in that case, we are not showing the path to follow, we are alone, and the masses follow their own path.

**The need for a united front approach**

Because the main challenge was to set in movement in a sustainable way the 70 per cent who were opposed to the law, and the 50 to 60 per cent who were in favour of strikes, to try and make this majority opinion continue to be so, and to encourage hundreds of thousands, millions of young people and workers to move into action.

Working to convince workers who vote for the CFDT (one in four) and for the CGC/UNSA (14 per cent) is essential in order to isolate the leaderships of these confederations. We cannot forget that they represent between 35 and 40 per cent of workers, which is the expression (admittedly imperfect, but nevertheless) of a certain consciousness of an important part of the proletariat. This obviously has consequences in workplaces and in different sectors for mass mobilization... and the work that has made it possible during the mobilization to get the position of the CGC, and then much of the UNSA, to evolve, is essential: it is because the rank and file of these organizations no longer allowed their leaderships to...
maintain their position that these leaderships were more and more timid in supporting the law.

The confederations who actively opposed the projected law – the CGT, Solidaires, and more platonically, the FSU - did not unleash this mobilization: you only have to look at the limits of their criticisms of the project in the beginning, at the end of 2015 and the lack of mobilization from on high. The first big initiative on March 9 existed outside of the trade unions, even the combative sectors.

The speed with which the mobilization took off shows that it is the expression of a deep social crisis that affects all segments of society, a crisis that expresses all the resentment against the brutal acceleration of the neoliberal offensive, in the framework of the strategy of shock initiated by the government following the November terrorist attacks. It is the refusal of this offensive that explains the depth of the process. The union leadership of the CGT and FO understood this, and very rapidly oriented themselves towards the organization of this movement.

They did this all the more so as they are faced with a full-scale attack against themselves, something that is well understood by part of their leading bodies. Because the government is implementing a policy aimed at marginalizing and breaking unions that refuse to sign up to the neoliberal counter-reform. The message is clear: the trade unions must be cogs in the system or they will be attacked frontally. The PS government has refused any discussion, before, during and now, with the majority trade unions: it is leaving no way out for the CGT and FO. It is their future too that is at stake in this confrontation.

The attitude of FO is one of the markers that shows the depth of the rupture by part of the working class that voted for Hollande in the last presidential election.

The overtures of the CGT to the government have hit a brick wall. Some sectors of the leadership have not chosen confrontation with the government, as shown by the sabotage of the struggle at the SNCF by the CGT federation.

But there is a real vitality in the CGT: the confederation is no longer a bloc, there are wide-ranging debates in the federations and the local and departmental unions. There is not on one side the central bureaucracy and on the other the rank and file: there are profound debates at all levels of the confederation, involving many middle-ranking leaders, including some quite high up.

For example the chemical industry federation, led by critical currents of the Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party (PG) has opted for a political confrontation with the government. And the balance sheet of the failure of the generalization of the strike in the oil refineries is different from the one drawn in 2010. They made a political choice that they consider appropriate, and they remain convinced that they were right to try, but that it was impossible to hold on without generalization of the strike in other sectors; but especially, that they can do it again.

The effects of all this, like the pressure of activists at the CGT congress in April, after the big demonstration on March 31, led the new secretary general of the CGT, Philippe Martinez to call for "a generalization of strikes across France, in all sectors "- a novelty. In the same way Solidaires and FO served notice of renewable strikes and called on the maximum number of workers to harden the movement as much as possible by stopping work for long periods. The union leaderships, although they left it to the rank and file to decide on methods of action through general assemblies, at least did not oppose frontally this generalization.

Although these confederations have not organized an increase in the pressure of the mobilization, towards a confrontation with the government, they have generally stuck to the line of the withdrawal of the project and maintained the mobilization; and even, in many cities, their most combative sectors have organized blockades and other more radical actions.

They have sometimes been in in opposition to some combative sectors who were seeking to outflank them, to organize democratically outside their control, but most often they came to an accommodation without major confrontation.

All these elements show that the discrediting of political organizations does not affect these union confederations to the same degree: they still have a living, confrontational, critical link with the exploited and oppressed.

Criticism of the leaderships of these confederations should therefore be positive, proposing practical perspectives for the extension and reinforcement of the mobilizations, and not be a denunciation of those who hinder the fight against the law.

The question of the general strike

One of the points of debate among all the activists involved was the question of the preparation of the central confrontation through the general strike. For the more active fringes in this mobilization, it was clear that successive 24-hour strikes and weekly demonstrations were not enough to win, hence the appearance of blockades and other actions of the same type, as has happened since 1995.

Why has this debate has not produced a general strike?

How is a general strike possible, and on what points do we need to work to get there?

To try to be effective in agitating for a general strike, going beyond leaflets and slogans in the demonstrations, it is necessary to reconsider the place of the general strike in our outlook.

The general strike is a strike in which all workers take part, which defines goals that are general and where the proletariat is engaged as a class against the exploiting classes, with methods and means of combat which are its own and which correspond to its place in social production and political relations.
The strike is at the centre of the means of struggle, even if it is not the only one, and the evolution of struggles today demonstrates it. Trotsky wrote of the general strike of June 1936: "These are not craft strikes that have taken place. These are not just strikes. This is a strike. This is the open rallying of the oppressed against the oppressors to light the oppressed against the oppressors. This is the classic beginning of revolution." [6]

In France the two real mass general strikes of 1936 and 1968 broke out spontaneously, whereas the general strikes in waves of 1920 and again in 1938 were failures.

Furthermore, many of the factors that played a role in 1936 and 1968 have changed, such as trade-union unity, large concentrations of workers entering into movement and the existence of a political workers’ movement unifying the actions and providing in fact a political perspective.

We are in very different social, economic and political circumstances, which partly explains the absence of a spontaneous outbreak of the general strike - and the lack of extension of the strikes, starting from those at the oil refineries.

Nevertheless, agitation around this slogan remains relevant because it shows the way to win, to make the government retreat, by creating a relationship of forces such that the situation becomes unbearable for it, because its own social and political base pushes it to give in or face the risk of losing more.

The united front approach towards all workers aims to remove a supplementary obstacle to the general strike. Although there is never 100 per cent of workers who go on strike –that has never existed and it never will - it is easier to stop work en masse when we are united than when we go out on strike in part against others.

But more substantially, workers do not go on strike in order to... be on general strike, but when they are united around what they no longer want, what they want and when they are convinced that they can win it in this way, as a class opposed to the bourgeois class. This is a confrontation that is in itself objectively political, whatever might be the capacity for conscious expression of those who are engaged in it at a given moment.

What creates the conditions for a general strike, involving all sectors, paralyzing the economy, transport and government institutions, which comes about by itself, is that the atmosphere that exists in the country is an atmosphere of global confrontation between the classes, that is to say that it is not a clash between a sector of employers and a sector of the proletariat, but that all classes of society feel that this is a clash between the bourgeoisie as a whole and the proletariat as a whole. Rosa Luxemburg defined remarkably the content of the general strike in 1906: "The mass strike is merely the form of the revolutionary struggle (...). In a word, the mass strike, as shown to us in the Russian Revolution, is not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, but the method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution.." [7]

In 1936 it was: we won the elections, our lives are going to change and the bosses are not going to continue to exploit us and dominate us as they do!

In 1968, after 10 years of Gaullist power since 1958, it was: we do not want any more of this government and its world, we want to change our life!

Today it is clear that what crystallizes the mobilization is the labour law, but that the motor force of this mobilization, the profound motivations of hundreds of thousands of the exploited and oppressed, are: the refusal the deregulated, neoliberal, police-ridden world that the bourgeoisie and the government want to impose by a forced march, hatred of Macron, Valls, Hollande and the PS.

There were, in the past four months, several days at the end of May where this atmosphere began to dawn, because of the shortage of fuel [8], the strike of lorry drivers blocking certain depots, the beginnings of a strike on the railways - a moment when the ingredients of the political crisis began to come together, against a background of economic blockade.

This shows both what the union leaderships did not do and what the combative sectors tried to do, and that progress towards a major political confrontation is not automatic, while remaining an achievable goal.

After the utilization of article 49.3 [9] on May 10, the rejection of the motion of censure on May 12, faced with the violent repression of demonstrations to isolate "the rioters" break up the "Nuit Debout" gatherings and put end to the mobilization, strikes, roadblocks and blockades organized by dozens of local inter-union committees involving activists of the CGT, FO, Solidaires and "Nuit Debout" from all sectors represented a political turning point. That was when the government guaranteed the lorry drivers that their wage increases would not be put in question. This was a second tactical retreat after the commitments made a few weeks earlier to casual workers in the music and theatrical industries [10].

A step forward was taken in the political crisis. The attack on the CGT, with the prime target being Martinez as a representative of the political opposition to the government, failed to get the FO leadership to dissociate itself from the CGT. The spirit and combativeness of the activists of the movement became stronger and the mobilization for the 24-hour strike on Thursday, May 26 was much higher than on the previous days. The government and the PS began to waver. Only the leader of the CFDT, Laurent Berger, rose to their defence to demand that the projected law be maintained integrally.

Several additional factors would have had to come into play in order to cross a threshold and motivate many private sector enterprises to join the movement, precisely because the climate would have changed and given confidence to activists in small workplaces.
We need for example to take into account that the violence of the repression did not provoke a mass reaction like that after the Night of the Barricades in May 1968.

From the political point of view, in the demonstrations, the question of the resignation of Valls was omnipresent, alongside the demand for the withdrawal of the law, but the question that was posed was obviously: what alternative? We must trace a political perspective that goes beyond the rejection of the labour law, which unifies forces beyond the sectors that are mobilized and opens a perspective against the neoliberal world that is imposing its labour law. There is no ready-made answer, because there is no political alternative. However, it is by working with the most mobilized sectors, those who are most conscious of the need to destabilize the government, that we will move forward along this road.

Because in order to be effective we must try to solve the problems that are actually facing us, with the aim of creating this atmosphere of a central confrontation between the classes, starting from the central role of action as the source of consciousness.

It is not the work of convincing individual workers, to help them reach a certain level of consciousness, that is the key to such developments. Experience shows that it is through experiences of working together, of mass actions, that a layer of workers, who cannot develop class consciousness by the individual path of education and propaganda, wakes up, or wakes up again, to this class consciousness, and when it does so it becomes extremely combative. For the moment, in this mobilization, only very limited sections of "unorganized" workers have taken part in the actions. There are among these layers experiences that are important for the future, a spectacular politicization, because in the forms of action taken we can see the embryos of what could happen during mass mobilizations ... but a victory is important for them to be positive and productive.

Hence the importance of the link between the action of these militant sectors and the building of the global relationship of forces, of a perspective of victory.

Self-organization

From the point of view of self-organization, the present experiences are also very limited.

It was the inter-union coordinating committee, along with the youth organizations, that organized the days of action at national level, and most of the time also the various initiatives of blockades and mobilizations. But the general conjuncture, as well as previous defeats, affect the unions. Often the structures, in particular in small and medium-sized towns, have been weakened; FO and the CGT are no longer in a logic of controlling everything, because they no longer have the means. The FSU was almost absent from the field of battle and Solidaires is not very strong in very many places.

To have the objective of building another authority in the movement than that of the CGT and FO union leaderships that are the effective leadership, for the mobilization to be able to discuss and decide itself its perspectives, there must exist a more solid movement than we have seen up to now. We are not at that point, for all the reasons stated earlier.

But in day-to-day practice, the question of self-organization is a central issue for those of us who want to build an emancipated society run by all its members. Because in capitalist society, the exploited and oppressed are dominated in all the acts of their lives, at work, in the city, and also by the media, which fabricate a life centred around the needs of capitalist consumption. How to become everything, starting from nothing? [11]

Although a revolutionary situation is essential for these processes to develop on a mass scale, we must, in our daily activity, do everything to encourage discussion and for workers themselves to take charge of their own problems. This kind of fundamental preparatory work is essential, in a world where it is natural to delegate responsibilities, to leave decisions to the boss, the union leader; sometimes, more rarely, this leader can be a woman...

Everywhere, in everyday life, we have to work so that workers do more than trust us, call on us for help, but think and decide for themselves, organize themselves and act collectively. This also means that we activists must understand and encourage the fact that the final decision on what will actually be done will not necessarily be our proposal, which of course we believe to be better, but the one that is developed and accepted by the group of activists, on which then we can subsequently draw together collective balance sheets, which will produce a raising of consciousness that is superior to all the speeches, even the best ones. The experience of collective thought and action, within a capitalist society that seeks to format everything, including the conception of work, with neoliberalism, is essential.

Here again, where are we really at? In the workplaces, forms of self-organization concerned only certain sectors engaged in sufficiently active strikes, when the workers were not at home and could meet, decide and organize together.

We must reflect on the articulation between the occupation of workplaces which makes possible a dynamic self-organization, and a situation where workers who are employed in dispersed locations come together to meet. The big enterprises capable of playing by themselves a political role of centralization of movements are more and more rare. How can we avoid the struggles in the workplace becoming turned into a fight against the boss, becoming distant from the centralized struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie as a class? There are no miracle solutions that we can pull out of our hat, but asking ourselves the right questions gives more chance of finding, along with those taking part in the struggle, the right answers.

"Nuit Debout"

The slightly broader novelty, without taking on a mass character, is the appearance of "Nuit Debout"
as a new kind of practice, chaotic, very promising for the long term. The immediate repression prevented the occupying of squares taking place in a massive way: the police prohibited any permanent camp and organized in many cities and in Paris a guerrilla campaign against "Nuit Debout". Despite this, the process that got underway, breaking with the traditional rhythms of mobilizations, is rich in lessons for the future. The situations were very different, very uneven from one city to another. They all started out from the rejection of a society where nothing makes sense any more, where we no longer have any control over our future, in a movement born both from the defeats of the left for more than thirty years, and the present political context, in which the crisis goes on and on, without indignation finding a solution or an expression.

The rhythms were highly variable during three months of daily activity in most major cities, with a particular dimension in Paris, with weekly meetings elsewhere. The public which came together was very varied, ranging from young graduates to victims of social exclusion, along with young workers employed in small enterprises who found a means of expression through the movement. Although intellectuals and experienced activists were able to play an important role, "Nuit Debout" was for some an opportunity to organize, discuss, and act together. An experience in which the choice of being free was for many of those involved an end in itself. A concrete democracy being established through the organization of debates and exchanges through which were expressed aspirations to which the activists were not accustomed: we are not fighting to build a world in which we do not have to fight, we are fighting in order to live. Since "Nuit Debout" was engaged in action for itself, it did not pose the problem of representation: people acted by themselves responsibly, without delegation, in a framework of direct democracy; so it was difficult to make decisions that engaged those who voted.

Despite these limitations, "Nuit Debout" in some places served as a link between the demonstrations, as a meeting place, which intensified the energy of the activists. This passage from indignation to collective action sometimes made it possible to organize actions outside of the inter-union calendar: blockades, specific actions (in Grenoble, on people dying in the street; in Rouen a health and social services "Nuit Debout" around a collective of trade-unionists; in Pantin an action on schools...).

"Nuit Debout" in 2016 was the beginning of a cycle: nothing like this had existed in France. It is impossible today to predict the forms that this occupation of squares will take in the future, but it has already had an effect on people’s attitudes: political action can also take this form.

The "lead contingent"

Another new form of action appeared at in the demonstrations, the phenomenon of "lead contingent of demonstrators", in front of the official bloc of union leaders, involving thousands of protesters in Paris, hundreds in a number of cities. There were present, in an apparently not very organized contingent ordinary demonstrators, trade-union members, alone or in groups, who wanted to get out of the routine of the demonstration, and also organized groups of different currents of the "anarcho-autonomous movement", most of the time younger than the rest of the demonstration. These "leading contingents" were very dynamic, even though some union contingents, of the CGT and Solidaires, were also dynamic within the trade-union contingent, which remained the centre of gravity of the demonstrators. In many places, there started from these leading contingents actions which broke out of the normal framework, such as attacks on PS headquarters and on banks, as well as other attacks, and they were very often the flashpoint for clashes with the police.

The question of violence was very important, given the level of repression and the authoritarianism of neoliberalism. It is clear that social and police violence was the source of highly publicized clashes, with the aim of presenting the movement as the work of a minority. The government made the choice of a systematic confrontation, with an aggressive police presence, the intervention of groups of police in the demonstrations, filtering access to demonstrations, the use of tear-gas grenades, encircling of demonstrators, etc.

Concerning this violence, we must differentiate between groups that make a policy of it and demonstrators who needed to express their rage and their rejection of the violence of the system, as well as young people who wanted revenge for the police violence they had suffered.

In these contingents, which are apparently loosely organized, an important role is played by small groups that are organized with political project. They are different from one city to another, but the most organized of them are advocates of the theory of liberating chaos, creative disorder, and as a result they suddenly attack the police to show an example and create a spark. This conception is in contradiction with a democratic organization of the masses that organizes a collective consciousness. It is clear that the "autonomous" groups which defend this orientation, highly organized while hating all structures that are organized democratically and publicly (they must be differentiated from activists who simply reject the political party form) are manipulated by the government and the repressive apparatus. They are not a help to the movement: they have helped in fact to create a climate where to demonstrate becomes problematic, especially in Paris. In the present political context, minority violence does not take the mobilization forward. It contributes to legitimizing the reinforced deployment of police and facilitates all the means that the government is looking for to divert attention from the substance of its policies. It also helps to reduce the participation of certain sectors of the population in these demonstrations.

At the same time, the question of violent confrontation has become posed at a mass level,
although it does not concern all demonstrators. Some actions such as spraying graffiti on banks or actions against PS offices are perceived rather positively by many demonstrators. Tolerance and even acceptance of what the leading contingents do, including the charges against the police, are widespread and have even become more so with the increasing escalation of police violence and the government’s political attacks, and also with the rejection provoked by the government and the arrogance of the employers. While criticizing the policy of the "autonomous", we need to think about how this potential radicalism can find political expression in action, while maintaining the objective of developing the mass character of the movement. It is unquestionable that the demonstrations through the streets of towns and cities do not scare the government and the wealthy; they have a symbolic character. But the attacks on banks or on the police are also purely symbolic. They do not scare the holders of power and money either. What is taking place is actually a competition as to whose actions will become the most talked about: the classic trade-union demonstrators or those who "attack". No one has proven their effectiveness.

We must therefore once again pose the question of violence not as a means in itself, but as an unavoidable stage when the mass movement wants to impose its views. But to hope that confrontation with the state apparatus in the unfavourable relationship of forces that we have, without mobilization of the masses in this direction, without a situation that deconstructs from within the repressive apparatus and weakens the state, is an illusion that keeps us in the position of being a minority.

We must work to combine radicalism in action with clear political objectives, which can be defended and which we defend publicly, as do the environmentalists who occupy a mine in Germany for 24 hour, or the comrades of "There is no arrangement" in Toulouse.

**The need for open and plural exchanges**

Although it was not able to bring about the defeat of the government project, this prolonged mobilization was the crucible of very different forms of radicalization, in addition to other ongoing processes in France, with actions against big projects that are unnecessary and are imposed on us, environmental actions, actions against the state of emergency, against racism and Islamophobia, those in solidarity with migrants, etc...., which do not find a place in a central political debate, given the weakness of the role of political parties in the present situation. The parties to the left of the PS, stuck in their electoral projects, were present without playing a role in the confrontation with the government. The parties of the far left, the anti-capitalist forces, the revolutionary groups, are too small to play a leading role in politicizing these activists around perspectives that they can relate to.

The challenge of the coming months is to organize processes of meetings between combative activists from different sectors. Through open and pluralist exchanges, coupled with radical actions, it is possible that this mobilization can be fruitful for all social actors. For this it is essential that these processes are constantly centred on the perspective of mass activity, aimed at the majority of those below, in order to win. Then we will be able to see the outlines of a new form of mass political expression that starts from the reality of the class struggle.

**September 30, 2016**


[2] This contribution to the debate is based on a report given in a workshop at the 2016 the Summer University of the NPA, entitled "General strike, united front and self-organization - the central issues in the movement against the labour law."

[3] In particular Caroline De Hass, feminist activist of the association "Osez le féminisme". She is a former secretary of the student union UNEF and was a member of the PS, serving in a ministerial cabinet from 2012 to 2013. She left the PS in 2014 and initiated the debate on a primary on the left. Later she became a member of the presidential team of the, Cécile Duflot, who failed to be adopted as the EELV candidate.

[5] The following data gives an idea of the representativeness of the different unions, based on recent union elections (2012-2013): CGT, 26.77 per cent, CFDT 26.00 per cent, FO 15.94 per cent, CFE-CGC 9.43 per cent, CFTC 9.30 per cent, UNSA 4.26 per cent, Solidaires 3.47 per cent. Total of other lists (6-7)

[8] The refineries on strike and the blocking oil depots led to a temporary shortage of fuel in 4,000 of the 12,000 service stations in France. The situation became normal after the lifting of the blockades of depots by the police and the use of strategic reserves.

[9] This is a procedure making it possible to have the whole of a text adopted unless a motion of censure forcing the government to resign is tabled within twenty-four hours. This legislative weapon was used for the final adoption of the text. The left critics of the government failed to reach the number of MPs necessary to table a motion of censure from the left that could have been voted by the right, and they refused to vote the motion of censure motion tabled by the right.

[10] These “intermittents du spéctacle” - artists, musicians, workers and technicians working for the theatre, cinema and audiovisual - were fighting to maintain their status, which the employers have been attempting to liquidate for years and which has already been "chipped away". Their jobs are by definition of short duration and they have a special status of unemployed, enabling them to preserve their average income of the previous year provided they have been employed for at least 507 hours during the previous 12 months. In 2015 the employment centre registered in the whole of
China’s Property Policies Drive Divorce

One problem is that any such measures to regulate further inflation of the bubble are necessarily hugely undermined by the existence and reliance on China’s shadow banking system and its less regulated forms of lending. China’s shadow financing is significant and has been estimated to have amounted to 54 trillion Yuan last year, equivalent to 79% of GDP [2]. Such shadow financing has funded overcapacity across different sectors of the Chinese economy and especially so in the real estate industry. On the other hand measures to control the real estate market have themselves been called into question.

Yi Xianrong, an economist and professor at Qingdao University, who has previously discussed the dangers of China’s growing property market bubble, is an important example of someone who has questioned such measures. Earlier this year he drew attention to how GDP growth was mostly relying on government infrastructure construction and home sales spurred on by rising home prices. He predicted that while this growth may continue for a year or so, it cannot keep on in this direction and may cause future problems. [3] In a more recent commentary [4], however, he has questioned several recent local government policies which are seemingly aimed at regulation and argued that they are not really policies aimed at control of the real estate market but are actually “real estate hunger marketing” policies. In other words, the policies rather than being designed to cool the market are actually intended to have the opposite effect and encourage further speculation.

Yi cites some specific examples of locations where the local government’s actions and intentions are questionable in this respect. In Shenzhen, for instance, he criticises the way that the Shenzhen municipal government’s attempts to investigate developers and monitor and reform property agents fails to distinguish between individual consumers purchasing property and the investment companies which are a major cause of the out of control speculation in the property market. He therefore accuses the government of failing to deal with the problem while its attempts at real estate regulation are described as fake and only designed to allow the continuation of speculation. Likewise in Fuzhou, where the local government introduced policies to limit the price rise between different batches of the same development to 10% and stated that it wants to increase land supply for flats by 20% over the next three years, these measures he describes as being more directed at telling investors that the real estate market prices will rise, having the effect of encouraging them to buy housing more quickly. Furthermore in Nanjing, although temporary limits had been placed on loan applications, he criticises the loans for having previously promoted the further rise in the property market and how applying temporary limits only addressed one type of loan and was not a policy addressing the whole property market. Other policies were also criticised for encouraging an influx of real estate speculation.
into the markets, encouraging prices to further rise to even more highly inflated levels.

Such policies by local governments, as the rush to divorce in Shanghai illustrates, have also been further drawing the Chinese middle class into the property market, such that, according to Yi, they are becoming further trapped in the property bubble. He warns that in the future, when the market crashes, it may be much worse than the stock market crash in 2015, to such an extent that there may be no escape for the middle class this time.

Even beyond those middle class families who have been seeking investment opportunities and rushing to divorce in order to buy a second or third home, the effects of rising housing prices have further serious social and economic consequences. The levels of speculation, involving investment companies buying up hundreds of units of houses in the hope that they will make huge profits creates huge inequalities. In another article, Yi criticises the greater resulting unfair distribution of social wealth caused by speculation in the property market, making home ownership much more out of reach of lower income households. He also additionally observes that with the real estate market mostly led by speculation rather than consumers this negatively impacts on consumption –something which has been considered increasingly another key pillar of China’s economic growth – as such high prices, for those that can afford to purchase homes nevertheless increases the debt burden from mortgages and loans meaning that this can seriously squeeze their overall household consumption. Thus this potentially compounds further risks to the vitality of the Chinese economy.

But why does the government not address the underlying issues? Another significant part of the problem relates to land ownership and usage in China today. In China all land is owned by the state or by collectives. In practice today this means that use of land is controlled by the government, which sells land usage for designated periods of time. Often land is sold in this way by local governments through land auctions, with the land going to the highest bidder, or to developers with who the local governments have close connections. In many cases land is expropriated by the government from locals, supposedly in the name of “public interest”, so that it can be sold on to developers for the purpose of profit, providing the government with a significant percentage of its revenue (sometimes up to 50%) and significantly contributing to GDP.

Such practices over land use have not always been the case. Indeed in this respect China has learned from Hong Kong. Before 1988, the Chinese constitution stipulated that urban land was state owned, while rural land was collectively owned. Clauses prohibiting the buying, selling or renting of land applied to both categories. But the founding of special economic zones (first in Shenzhen in 1980), had already begun to shake up the nationalisation or collectivisation of land. As these zones aimed to attract foreign direct investment, the renting of land to foreign capital became necessary and since then the practice of renting out state owned and collectively owned rural land (with token compensation for the latter) became widespread despite the clause in the constitution. Many cities learned land auction practices from Hong Kong in order to promote the commodification of land. All Hong Kong land belonged to the crown at that time and the colonial government used crown land to make money by auctioning out land and handing out land to the highest bidder. The Chinese municipal governments began to adopt the Hong Kong approach and people like CY Leung, who himself is a professional surveyor, went to Mainland China to teach municipal governments about land auctions and how to promote the property market in general. The central government was impressed by these experiments and in 1988 the CCP amended the clause in the constitution on land to legalise land sales. In this way it copied Hong Kong’s crony alliance between the government, developers, banks and property market agents, who all profit from this monopolizing and commodification of so called state or collective land. This regime also determines that the continuous rise of the property is an innate interest of all the participants of the alliance. Allowing developers to then sell on the real estate at high prices ensures that they will continue to buy up land from the government, and so the incentive to fully address the problem of speculation in the property market is not in the interest of local officials. This means that any measures which only aim to address issues related to demand in the property market but avoid targeting the auctioning of “state or collectively owned land” to the highest bidder will never work for long.

Overall, China’s property crisis is an ongoing crisis for those who want to or cannot afford to buy a home to live in, and even more so for those who have been displaced by development projects, as well as a deepening crisis for the middle class as they are encouraged to invest in second or third properties. Continuing in this way fuelled by speculation and government complicity in aiding the enrichment of the developers, it may also have the potential to deeply destabilise China’s economic system when the bubble bursts.

South Africa- Modern slaves rebel in rural South Africa and win!

Updated version of article originally entitled “Boycott Robertson’s winery!” Robertson is a small South African town situated in the Breerivier valley, two hours’ drive from Cape Town. It has been nicknamed the wine and roses valley and vine growing plays an important economical role there. 61% of the 28,000 inhabitants are “coloured” to keep to the South African terminology, 23% are black south africans and 15% are white. It goes without saying that “coloured people” don’t live in the pretty Edwardian style town centre but inhabit the out of the city “townships”.

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Workers from the Robertson Winery stayed on strike for fourteen weeks. While South Africa is troubled by important social unrest against the ANC and President Zuma whose popularity never ceases to tumble down, the strike that took place at RW is emblematic of working class conditions in rural areas.

In order to try and understand the situation, we have interviewed by telephone two militants we met in 2015 and who had shown to us the harsh conditions for workers on farms and in the food industry. Mercia Andrews is a member of DLF (Democratic Left Front) [1] and has put a lot of energy at defending farm workers conditions, women's rights and access to land for them, whereas Deneco Dube is a shop steward for CSAAWU (Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union) and works at RW.

Since their recent unionisation, workers at RW have discussed about their conditions of work, wage levels, discrimination and inequalities, low pay which triggered off the strike. From the moment they are engaged, black workers (Mercia explains, “by black I mean those who have historically been oppressed”) are discriminated and treated in a way that is reminiscent of slavery. So this fight is not limited to a fight for a salary rise, it also a protest against the fact that workers are no better treated than during apartheid.

Deneco explains that at hiring, 19 to 20 years old youngsters are selected with the help of a lie detector. Many South African companies use this nasty system that originates from the US, but only blacks have to go through it, which suggests that blacks are liars but whites wouldn't know how to lie... As a consequence, only black workers are confined to a bargaining unit and represented by their union. Middle management, all whites, cannot be in the same union and negotiate their conditions directly with their bosses, which is illegal. But it ensures that CSAAWU is not the representative of white workers during negotiations.

Basic salaries at RW average 3,200 rands, approximately 200 euros per months, with a few workers with extra qualifications to drive engines and mechanics earning a little more. But not all workers are treated the same: a black mechanic with 15 years' experience may lay claim to R8,500 R (about € 550) when a white mechanic without experience will get 18 to R19,000R (about €1,200) and a lesser working load.

Working hours, 8.30 am to 17.30 pm do not give an accurate picture of the real working time as workers have to clock in three times before getting to their work station: once outside, whatever the weather might be like, once before the cloak-room, and a third one before the workplace. With more than 200 workers, queues are long and it is necessary to lengthen the day by one hour morning and evening. These hours are not paid and workers only have a 20 min break during the day (to include going to the toilet, eating and have a smoke), even a second extra time will lead to a written warning and a deduction on salary. But above all, only blacks clock in, and Deneco's anger when we questioned him about the legality of such a fact is perceptible: “no, it is not legal, and I don't understand why the Labour office tolerates these discriminations, these facts should be recorded in its reports; even audits on inequalities that companies annually transmit to the ministry show that black workers are a lot less paid than white workers, not even taking into account discriminations against women.”

Companies have had to give up the system by which they paid part of the salaries in kind with wine. But as Mercia explains to us: “though this system is no longer legal, its noxious effect has not stopped. In many of the areas we intervene, alcohol consumption is very high and a number of workers are completely dependent on it. Bosses no longer pay with wine, but they sell bad quality alcohol to their workers. For us, fighting against alcohol dependency is a major issue because the more people are dependent, the more difficult it is for them to fight oppression and exploitation.

Facing the strikers’ determination we asked how the wine industry reacted. Mercia: “the sector is very well organised, bosses have coalesced within VinPro, and its within this organisation that all policies on salaries are decided for all the various companies. This year, they have decided not to go over an 8% rise, and for them it is out of the question that RW gives in to strikers demands who wish to see their basic salaries rise to R8,500, as all the workers in the industry would then go for similar increases.”

For CSAAWU, it was of the outmost importance not to limit the fight to the 227 workers of RW but on the contrary to extend it all along the value chain, from the vineyards that supply the distillery with raw wine to the distributors and even across other distilleries. Though CSAAWU represents 80% of the workforce, the fight is rough and risks are high. Mercia: “the management tried to outlaw the strike, then it tried to dictate to the union how they could fight for their cause, then threatened leaders with prison and a R500,000 fine if they be in the way of lorries or scabs management had recruited.”

Facing a very unfavorable balance of power, strikers have attempted to broaden their supports towards the civil society in South Africa and abroad. From the beginning, DLF members got strongly involved and their role is central in this fight. The Red Brigades [2] have also brought their support and have invited workers to come to the Cape Town Parliament and read a declaration condemning their employers. As for the ANC's attitude, Mercia’s response is scathing and sharp “nothing”, which confirms how the ANC leader’s pre-occupations are remote from those of South African people. Food and money collections have been organised by other unions or some groups like students from the university of Cape Town. Some northern European unions are also involved particularly in Sweden and Denmark where wines from RW are commercialised. This is how strikers have decided to reactivate the boycott form of fight
forces for a new socialist movement. It is also engaged in the current left attempts at regrouping African left independent popular movements. DLF is came from different political currents and South members of Communist Party's leadership or that in 2008, which regroups militants who used to be international solidarity in mind.

It seems clear that fights must continue with the world at large engage in nationalist and reactionary policies. It is also a lesson for all of us, when Europe and the more as those in urban zones due to their isolation.

CSAAWU, the union, comes out much stronger of this victorious strike and it will give some hope to all rural workers in 2012, international help and support was essential as strikers would not be able to stay without pay indefinitely, and boycott is the best way to put pressure on bosses. “For us, wine from Robertson equals drinking blood wine, as it is our blood that produces this wine, and we don’t take any advantage from it, we’re paid slave salaries when bosses get richer and richer. Today drinking this wine means drinking our blood.”

On week 12th of the strike, whereas strikers had accepted proposals for a rise of R400 R for lowest wages, approximately 12.5%, the management refused to include a “peace” clause where it would promise not to proceed with dismissals, so negotiations stalled again. There was no doubt that the company was out to break workers morale and destroy their union. CSAAWU, therefore renewed its call for international solidarity, continuation and intensification of the boycott of all products from Robertson, and send protests directly to the company and by all means possible.

Workers refused to comply, give in to threats and fear and held out. On week 14, they decided to stop the strike and signed an agreement with management.

The agreement includes a rise in salary of 8% or a flat rate of R400 whichever is the most advantageous. This increase is backdated to August 8th. In addition, a annual bonus equivalent to one month’s salary will be payed on November 15th. And above all and just as important all threats of legal action against 16 leaders of the strike and union members have been definitely lifted.

Though strikers are far from gaining the salary increases they were fighting for, they have nevertheless, it is a victory on many points. One can even say that the wine industry will never be the same again. The government has had to accept looking into the slavery conditions of work that exist in farms and the wine industry. Women and men working in the wineries of this country will take heart and get inspiration after the success of the strike at Robertson and in turn fight for their own rights.

CSAAWU, the union, comes out much stronger of this victorious strike and it will give some hope to all rural workers in South Africa who suffer as much if not more as those in urban zones due to their isolation. It is also a lesson for all of us, when Europe and the world at large engage in nationalist and reactionary policies. It seems clear that fights must continue with international solidarity in mind.

The media rarely discuss AIDS anymore, and when a news report does appear it usually is about a new drug that helps people stay alive longer or even about “the end of AIDS.” Many doctors and biomedical researchers think that findings in the last five years have opened the way to use antiretroviral drugs to prevent HIV transmission and, in addition, see these drugs as prolonging the lives of the HIV-infected indefinitely.

Indeed, some evidence does suggest that life expectancy of the infected is beginning to resemble that of the uninfected. For some, this is true. For now.

But for millions of others, the nightmare of AIDS as an excruciating disease continues, and mass death continues at a rate of over a million people a year. Almost two million new people become infected every year. Most of them are in Africa, but the epidemic is also spreading rapidly in the countries of the former Soviet Union. And about 50,000 new infections take place every year in the United States, chiefly among African Americans and gay men.

All 37 million people with HIV infection need medical treatment to stay alive — but most (22 million) lack access to this treatment in spite of all the efforts that AIDS activists and well-meaning government officials and NGO members have put into trying to make the drugs available over the last 16 years.

And these will soon probably be viewed as “the good old days.” As of the International AIDS Conference in Durban in July 2016, it was becoming clear to all that the donations on which middle- and lower-income countries depend to fund the antiretroviral treatment that keeps people alive — and that is the basis of the Treatment as Prevention strategy that has been the mainstay of global HIV prevention policy in recent years — is at best stabilizing, and in all probability going down.

Unless the cost of treatment plummets, this will mean that too few of those needing to get treated will be able to do so, and they will die from the disease. Furthermore, many of those currently on treatment might lose access.
Activism and Demands

AIDS activists, like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) that successfully forced the South African government to abandon its refusal to fund HIV/AIDS treatment through years of mass action earlier this century, understand that this is a crisis. They held a number of demonstrations at the AIDS Conference.

I attended the biggest one, held on the first day of the conference (Monday, July 18). TAC organized several buses to take people from the conference several miles to the park where the demonstration was to begin.

The buses came about 40 minutes late, which gave me a chance to see who came from the conference. Few of them were researchers (other than myself and a few of my friends from various countries). Conference delegates from activist organizations made up most of those on the buses.

But when we arrived at the park, it was full of people from South African communities, and the crowd was overwhelmingly black and heavily female. After another 40 minutes, we began a very spirited march perhaps 5,000 people strong.

The march’s demands were 1) for all people living with HIV to get high quality treatment; 2) for health care workers and health care systems to get the money they need; 3) to end patents on medicines as antithetical to health; 4) to end discrimination and criminalization of people with HIV and of “key populations” like gay men, other men who have sex with men, sex workers, transgender women, people who inject drugs, migrants and prisoners; and 5) to increase funding for the global AIDS response.

Demonstrations continued throughout the duration of the conference, though most were focused on one or another key population and thus were smaller. I encountered (and joined), for example, a demonstration of several hundred sex workers and their supporters who marched through the large conference venue chanting “Sex work is work” and demanding an end to stigma against them.

It May Get Worse

Aaron Motsoaledi, the South African Minister of Health noted, “We must say no to complacency at this moment. There is no space for it. AIDS 2016 will help us as individuals and politicians to fast-track the ending of the AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by 2030.”

But the crisis of capitalism is not over. Pressures to continue cutting AIDS budgets will continue, and as other epidemics continue to crop up due to the global depredations of capitalism, budget pressure will get worse. Furthermore, climate change (the euphemism some use for global warming) is only going to get worse and bring more and more catastrophes in its wake.

These crises and the struggles workers and others mount to deal with them will draw money from AIDS treatment and prevention, and will mean that young people will spend their dedication and time around global warming, Zika and other epidemics, and the ravages of unemployment, evictions and racism — to the detriment of the volunteer efforts that so far have sustained some of the global response to AIDS.

More millions will get infected. Many of them will become refugees from climate change and from imperial wars and trade treaties — and will fall outside of the circles governments might be willing to help get medical care.

In the late 1990s, the slogan Silence = Death became the watchword of millions around the world as we watched the epidemic rage with little being done. Our activism and the gains of science have pushed the horrors back a little. But capitalism, if it is not eliminated, will continue to create crises that will re-create the mass death of the 1980s and 1990s.

In this, as in so much of our lives, more activism is needed. And merely making noise will no longer be enough. Even from a public health or even a narrowly medical perspective on AIDS and other coming epidemics, capitalism must be destroyed. This, of course, does not tell us how to do so; nor does it tell us with what to replace it. But the need is clear.

Obituary- Fidel Castro dies

Images of Fidel fill the newsreel of our lives: Dishevelled and defeated after the bloody attack on the Moncada barracks; walking free from prison into exile in a smart suit; interviewed by a US journalist in his mountaintop hideout in 1958; triumphantly marching into Havana with Che, Cienfuegos and the other young bearded warriors; announcing the confiscation of US capital and the socialist nature of the revolution to hundreds of thousands; at the front line at the Bay of Pigs with those big black rimmed glasses leading the victory over the CIA invasion force; announcing the fall of Che in Bolivia in a packed Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana; embracing Brezhnev in Moscow; meeting his people in the factories and sugar cane fields; presenting the machine gun to Allende months before the coup in Chile; welcoming back the soldiers from Angola after their victory over Apartheid South Africa; greeting Ortega, the leader of the Nicaraguan revolution in 79; the grim announcement of the austere special period following the fall of the Berlin wall in 89; welcoming Chavez and then other reforming Latin American leaders in the new century... and then his withdrawal into not quite retirement, a tracksuited old man with a whitening beard who was still sought after by radical leaders or personalities like footballer Diego Maradona.

Now he is gone but he has outlived all those US presidents who ordered the CIA to organise hundreds of assassination attempts, internal armed rebellions and a full scale invasion force. His demise and the impending collapse of the Cuban state has been prematurely announced a number of times since 1989. Unlike Russia and Eastern Europe it has not collapsed into gangster capitalism or experienced their catastrophic effects on living standards and life.
expectancy. The comparison between the response of Haiti and Cuba to the recent hurricane graphically shows that the gains made by the 1959 revolution still survive. In Cuba nobody died and whole towns were evacuated smoothly. Raul his brother in arms from the first battles still leads the government and is committed to a transition in leadership in 2018. Obama’s turn to more positive relations with Cuba is a gain for the Cuban people, it has relaxed certain restrictions and could help economic growth. Visiting Cuba this September I saw the cruise ship passengers swarming through Old Havana. Direct flights from the US to Cuba started in the summer to Santa Clara and increased just this week to Havana.

Whatever our subsequent judgements, Fidel’s life is a remarkable one. Born into the middle class he initially became radicalised as a democratic nationalist and was inspired by the great nineteenth century anti-colonialist fighter, Jose Marti. The first attempt at an armed uprising at the Moncada barracks in Santiago in 1953 ended with many fallen comrades and he was lucky not to be executed. As sometimes happens with defeats it had a radicalising effect, his famous speech at the trial played a role in that. Exiled to Mexico he wasted no time assembling a second armed group. In 1958 they left in the small boat Granma to try again. Again most of the fighters were killed in the first days but about a dozen survived and managed to make it to the Sierra Maestra – a friendly peasant played a crucial role. Once there they established a headquarters camp that was never found by Batista’s army and gradually Che, Cienfuegos, his brother Raul and himself built up a number of small fronts which could successfully take on the army. More importantly the political support was developed and links made with the underground in the big towns. Certainly Fidel and the other leaders were probably already aware that the direction of struggle would lead them into conflict with US but for a whole period they presented themselves as democratic nationalists fighting a brutal dictatorship. This helped disarm the US who took little or no action to bolster the Batista regime. If we study the period between the entry into Havana and the speech a year or so later where Fidel defined the revolution as socialist we can see a textbook example of how to take a democratic anti-imperialist revolution down the road to one that overthrew capitalism. Each move forward could be understood as a response to sabotage or to the urgent basic needs of the population. During the first years of the revolution Havana was the home for all radicals and revolutionaries. This was a revolution made by a group who were outside the Stalinist ‘official’ communist movement. The Cuban CP came to support the revolution but were subordinate to the Castroist leadership. The impact worldwide was particularly strong in Latin America. Armed groups launched uprisings mostly in rural areas and got the active but discreet support of the Cuban government. Unfortunately these brave revolutionaries failed to understand the specific conditions of the Cuban victory – it was never just a rural insurgency there anyway – and all ended in defeat. Che even left Cuba to set up a central guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia which also ended in defeat. Fidel supported Che politically and materially in this operation. Indeed in a second way of armed insurrections in the late seventies in Central America Cuba helped with resources and fighters. However the failure of these struggles elsewhere in Latin America and the consequent isolation of the Cuban revolution meant that Fidel was obliged to seek shelter in the Soviet camp. This had negative consequences on the way the economy and democratic organisation developed. Farming for instance was over-collectivised and productivity is still to recover since Cuba still imports today around 70% of its food. Also everything was nationalised, down to every restaurant and hairdresser. Today regulated small businesses and self-employment is increasingly allowed. One thing is clear, Fidel led a real anti-capitalist revolution that destroyed the bourgeois state. He was no Nasser, he did not just set up some sort of state capitalist regime.

Although Fidel never presided over a Stalinist Gulag there was some repression of dissidents and opponents. At the beginning of the revolution torturers and Batista leaders were tried and executed – indeed Che was partly in charge of this. Occasionally afterwards there were executions – notoriously of Ochoa and some other military leaders accused of drug running and of a ferry captain who had taken over a ship. Gays were also repressed and sent to special labour camps. Nearly all dissidents were released in recently although political opponents and artists for example are still hassled regularly. A degree of local democracy and involvement through the committees in defence of the revolution has always existed in a way that we did not see in the Stalinist countries. Debate goes on today in a number or restricted forums, particularly over the ‘modernisation’ of the economy. Of course the limits are that you cannot form a political current or party outside of the Cuban Communist Party, you cannot start up a really independent publication opposing the government and your internet use is tightly controlled.

Another distinction between Fidel and other ‘communist’ leaders is that he has not set up a dynasty as we have seen in China. His children had not been propelled into high government posts. Although he has enjoyed some of the privileges of government leadership he has not built sumptuous palaces or wallowed in the trappings of wealth. The US and the CIA have always tried to expose such leaders accused of drug running and of a ferry captain who had taken over a ship. Gays were also repressed and sent to special labour camps. Nearly all dissidents were released in recently although political opponents and artists for example are still hassled regularly. A degree of local democracy and involvement through the committees in defence of the revolution has always existed in a way that we did not see in the Stalinist countries. Debate goes on today in a number or restricted forums, particularly over the ‘modernisation’ of the economy. Of course the limits are that you cannot form a political current or party outside of the Cuban Communist Party, you cannot start up a really independent publication opposing the government and your internet use is tightly controlled.

Lately some of Fidel’s style of leadership and political positions on some questions have been altered by the current leader, Raul Castro. Several of Fidel’s appointees were shifted to one side by his brother who prefers a more institutionalised, conventional political procedure. Raul has also been more open
to economic reforms and welcoming investment by foreign corporations. Part of the problem of understanding what is going on in Cuba is the fact that the real debates are not very transparent. Rather infrequently there is a Party congress where a big document is presented to the people which is then subject to thousands of amendments but no counter documents are permitted or organised currents. A lively debate does exist around the continued influence of the old military guard, over whether the Chinese road is the correct one and over regulation of foreign investment. Some cadres are clearly positioning themselves for the fruits of any larger scale capitalist opening, others are concerned about defending and improving the living standards of the people.

One of the lasting legacies of Fidel is surely the fact that unlike in other equivalent countries literacy and health levels are high. Although people could definitely eat better, no-one goes hungry or dies of malnutrition. Cuban doctors go worldwide on solidarity missions. The economy has not collapsed and some sectors like tourism and biotech are going pretty well. The devastation of the narco economy that we see in Mexico or Columbia does not exist in Cuba. Cuba's prestige in the world is remarkable for a poorish country of 10 million.

Given it is a small non-capitalist country in a sea of rampant capitalism and its closest neighbour and dominant imperialist power has imposed a blockade on its economy since the 1960s, it is not surprising that Fidel's legacy is a mixed one. The blockade certainly contributes to the low productivity and poor wages most Cubans earn. Financing the necessary military apparatus to withstand US aggression also drains resources that could improve conditions. Opening up the economy and having a dollar based currency alongside another peso one that is worth twenty five times less means that inequality is inevitably increasing. Cubans who work in the tourist industry and can earn dollars or the 20% who get remittances from relatives in the US can live reasonably well. The 75% who still work for the state earn each month roughly what you can make from renting a room to tourist for a couple of nights. People, particularly young people, yearn for more freedoms too such as an open internet.

Fidel and his generation are leaving the scene. It will be up to those Cubans who are today considering these new problems to try and resolve them in the interests of working people. Fidel overall was on our side and never wavered in his resistance to US imperialism. His example inspired resistance in many places.

Venceremos, adios companero.

November 27, 2016

Obituary- Fidel Castro (1926-2016): A page turns

We must imagine the world at the time: the Cold War in full swing and Stalinism freezing the international

workers’ movement. The Cuban revolution would unblock this situation by creating a new hope.

Resurgence of an internationalist revolutionary dynamic

How could a “guerilla” force of first a few dozen and then a few hundred militants, involve a whole people in the overthrow of the bloody dictatorship of Batista? How can we explain that a population of 10 million succeeded in standing up to American imperialism and thus polarizing the world situation? It is here that we must recognize the leadership qualities of Fidel Castro. This is in keeping with the tradition of José Martí, a Cuban revolutionary, champion of the struggle for national liberation against North American imperialism. But we must note a double specificity of the Cuban revolution: while strategies of allying with the national bourgeoisie dominated the workers’ movement of the time, Fidel and his comrades developed a strategy of armed struggle, combining guerrilla actions, movement of the masses, demonstrations and insurrectionary strikes. The second specificity is that by opposing “Yankee imperialism”, the Cuban leadership ensured the sovereignty of the country. To do so, it nationalized the major capitalist holdings, especially North American ones, and began to bring the country out of underdevelopment, particularly in education and health.

Even though Cuba is a small country, Fidel propelled a revolutionary process within the Western Hemisphere itself. The alchemy between Fidel and Che Guevara revived the best internationalist traditions of the workers’ movement. From the outset, calls for support from the struggling peoples multiplied, beginning with support for the Vietnamese people. In January 1966, the Cubans organized the international conference called “Tricontinental”, which brought together the anti-imperialist forces of Africa, Asia and Latin America. This was a first since the major international conferences of the 1920s. This policy was embodied in the armed struggles undertaken by Che in Latin America (Bolivia) and Africa (Congo). It also manifested itself in the 1970s by sending thousands of Cuban soldiers to help the Angolan people to repel the assaults of South African troops.

We can - and must - discuss certain militaristic deviations within the Cuban strategies, but what is essential for this period was the resurgence of an internationalist revolutionary dynamic.

Soviet pressures and bureaucratic deformations

At the end of the 1960s, the Cuban Revolution was confronted with the reality of power relations and the global market. It paid in its flesh and blood the warning given to the revolutionary movement since the Russian revolution: “Socialism is not built in one country” ...

Isolated, strangled by the blockade and the North American embargo, the Cuban leadership was less and les in a position to implement its own policies. The tactical agreements with the USSR,
necessary against US imperialism, were transformed into political subordination. In August 1968, Fidel Castro supported the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia. In economic terms, the choice of strengthening the sugar monoculture weakened the country considerably and led to the failure of the “zafra” - sugar harvest - of 1970. It increased Cuba’s dependence on the USSR, particularly as the North American blockade was becoming harsher.

In this context, the Soviet model served more and more as a reference. Vertical conceptions of Cuban militarism’s imprint on Cuban politics added to the Soviet model accentuated the bureaucratic deformations of the Cuban state: the restriction of democratic freedoms, the absence of political pluralism, the repression of opponents, the consolidation of the one-party regime, lack of social or political structures of the Cuban people ...

**And now?**

Under these conditions, many predicted a collapse of the Cuban revolution, like the USSR and the countries of the Eastern bloc. But despite the terrible years of the “special period” marked by the end of Soviet aid, combined with the North American embargo, Cuba has held on! For, despite its errors, its revolution was never a Russian import. It is a historical movement peculiar to the Cuban people. Its “anti-Yankee” impetus, the achievements - even tenuous - of its revolution and its fierce will to sovereignty have been stronger.

Until when? The balance of power is terribly unfavourable. What will the North American administration do: overwhelm Cuba with goods or continue the embargo? After Fidel’s death, how will the forces within the Communist Party and the Cuban people reorganize? Will the supporters of a Chinese or Vietnamese road prevail? Once again, will the Cuban people find ways and means to continue the revolution? We hope so, and support them in this fight.

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