Building the fightback
Europe for people NOT profits
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"A breath of red air"

The revolution on the march and under discussion

Édouard Diago

The Caracas component of the polycentric 2006 World Social Forum took place from January 24th to 29th. Its exceptional character derived from the fact that it was taking place at the heart of the revolutionary process that Venezuela is experiencing. The Forum provided an illustration of the depth of this process, the vitality of the global justice movement and the importance of international solidarity.

The sixth stage of the WSF in Venezuela was a success. The radical wind that is blowing across the country was felt by the tens of thousands of Latin Americans and the Europeans who were present.

The eternal prognosis of the death of the WSF or its absorption by social democracy failed to materialise. The WSF is continuing on its way and in Caracas it received a breath of red air. The question of whether the WSF should take decisions about action or content itself with discussions remains posed.

But though the WSF did not make a choice, Chavez had no hesitation in giving his own opinion to the 15,000 people who were present at the meeting on Friday January 27th, which was shown live on television. He basically came down on the side of taking action in the face of the offensive by neo-liberalism and its wars.

The Venezuelan social movements had obviously not been included in the official framework of the WSF, and the opening march was to a large extent dominated by foreign delegations. The principal trade union organisation, the National Workers’ Union (UNT) was conspicuous by its absence, suspicious as it was that the WSF might appear as an event that was too much organised by the government.

But on the fringe of the official framework, in the popular neighbourhoods, in the barrios, in the factories, links were established. The meetings with the inhabitants of the La Vega barrio, Olivier Besancenot’s visit to the SEL-FEX factory, occupied by its 240 women workers, the visit to the Fuerte el Tuna cultural project (self-managed and financed by the municipality), the discussions in the streets of the old city in which militants dressed in red took part, the people from the co-operatives, or the fact of taking part in television programmes...all that enabled us to confirm the importance of internationalism in order to resist and then to build a society radically opposed to capitalism. Here in Caracas, no one is afraid to call it socialism and questions of strategy are at the heart of the discussions.

We discussed these questions with hundreds of people. The Party of Revolution and Socialism was one of the organisations we discussed with, alongside militants from the “Our America - April 13th Movement” project, sectors taking part in the government, organisers of social missions... And that enabled us to improve our understanding of the revolutionary process that is at work and the forms that our activity in solidarity and cooperation with it should take.

Venezuela was able to show the world its recent successes and the enormous challenges it will face in the coming period. The WSF also served to increase direct solidarity between Venezuela and the rest of the world. The rise of the Left in Latin America, in terms both of governments and of popular movements, the first measures taken by Evo Morales and the debates linked to the situation in Brazil meant that the questions concerning the anti-imperialist struggle were not simply a matter of posturing. They are having immediate consequences.

For Chavez, it is indispensable for the Left, even social-liberal, to win, so as to avoid an axis being created between the Brazilian giant and the United States, with the military implications that this would have. Chavez is not, however, sowing any illusions about the ability of the government in Brasilia to carry out real changes.

As Plinio Sampaio, a Brazilian theologian who recently left the governing Workers’ Party to join the PSOL, put it concisely, “one of Chavez’s big problems is Lula...”.

* Édouard Diago is a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR - French section of the Fourth International). He has spent considerable time in Venezuela over the last several years.
WSF Karachi - A short report

Farooq Tariq

Karachi World Social Forum ended with a closing rally addressed by mainly young activists from different countries. Over 35000 attended this unprecedented event in the history of Pakistan during the course of five days. Over 300 events attracted hundreds of activists from different walks of life. Activists from 59 countries participated in the event.

Held at Karachi Sports Complex from 24th March to 29th March, WSF Karachi brought together most of the movements in Pakistan on one platform, from peasants to fisher folk, from women rights groups to national liberation struggle groups, they were all there.

Never before in the history of Pakistan were so many different walks of life united in opposing the new liberal agenda, militarization and imperialist globalization. There were countless rallies and cultural programmes during the five days. It was people at liberty. It was activists’ freedom to say anything at a time when they are unable to say it in public due to the fear of prosecution at the hands of present military dictatorship.

Never before had delegates from 59 countries got together in one platform in Pakistan. They were here to show their solidarity with the Pakistan masses in their struggle against imperialism and religious fundamentalism. They were here fearing that something would happen during the WSF as there has been many unfortunate incidents of bombing and firing by the state forces and religious fundamentalists. But to everyone’s relief, there was no incident of that sort.

The media could not find any issue to yse against the WSF Karachi as was the case in Mumbai during the WSF in 2004. At Mumbai, the media fabricated a story of rape during the WSF. Here the media gave full coverage to the cultural and serious political and social issues during the all five days. There were newspapers full of WSF stories on the front pages. The journalist was also amazed to see the response of the people and the way they were expressing their feeling against the rotten capitalist feudal system. They had many good stories to report from one venue.

The Left parties now united in one Peoples Democratic Movement (AJT) found themselves surrounded by many hundreds who wanted hear them on every issue. I was invited to speak in countless events and during the five days, I spoke time after time on issues related to the class struggle, trade unions rights, women issues, the national liberation struggle in Kashmir and Baluchistan, question of unjust distribution of resources and so on.

Labour Party Pakistan supported organizations like Women Workers Help Line, National Trade Union Federation, Progressive Youth front, Pakistan Peasants Coordination Committee, Labour Education Foundation organized seven different workshops and seminars during the five days. Here are some details of these functions

Progressive Youth Organization: Falsification of Soviet History, Dr. Mark Glavineon from Russia spoke to over 200 on 25th March. Tariq Ali and Farooq Sulehria and Jamal Jumma of Palestine spoke on “Political Islam, Challenges and responses” to over 1000.

Women Workers Help Line seminar on “Women Workers in Pakistan, struggle for change” was addressed by Bushra Khaliq, I and Pip Hinman of Australian Socialist Alliance and attended by over 500.

Labour Education Foundation seminar on “Globalisation and Anti Globalisation” was addressed by Pierre Rousset of Europe in Solidarity Without Borders, Olivier Bonfond of Committee for the Cancellation of third World Debts, Assim Sajad Akhtar of People Rights Movement and Pip Hinman attend by over 400.

National Trade Union Federation seminar on “Privatisation, New Liberal Agenda and fight back” was addressed by Pierre Roussset, I, Salim Raza and Rasul Bukhash Paleejo of Awami Tehrik (Peoples Movement). It was attended by over 700.

Another seminar by NTUF on “Socialism as an alternative” brought together over 700 and speakers included Abid Hassan Minto of National Workers Party, myself, Pierre Roussset and Masoor Karim of Pakistan Communti Party.

Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee (peasant coordination committee) seminar on Peasants struggle in Pakistan was addressed by Dr. Abbdul hai Baluch of National Party, Mehr Abdul Sattar of Anjmanam Mozarren Punjab (AMP), Gul Hassan of Sind Hari Tehrik and Fateh Mohammed of Pakistan Kissan Committee. Over 500 listened to this seminar as well.

Struggle Publications stall was a hit and they sold over 1600 copies of Weekly Mazdoor Jeddojuhd (www.jeddojuhd.com) as well as a range of books. Tariq Ali’s book Clash of Fundamentalism in Urdu translations second edition was another hot cake here. This was also the case of Eric Toussaint’s new book Who Owes Who. This book is also printed by Jeddojuhd Publications.

On 28th March, all these organization organized a rally within the premises against the demolition of shanty towns in Karachi with hundreds of Labour Party Pakistan red flags.

* Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of Labour Party Pakistan.
Students mobilized massively against the CPE, occupying and blockading universities and high schools. They were supported by a united trade union front – the movement was led by the Intersyndicale, a coalition of 12 trade union and student organizations. There was a succession of strikes and demonstrations, which at their peak brought 3 million people onto the streets. The movement was supported by the entire left, from the reformist Socialist Party to revolutionary organizations like the LCR and LO. In opinion polls 65 to 70 per cent of people opposed the CPE.

In nearly four years of the right-wing UMP government, this is the first time that mass protests have succeeded in blocking one of its attacks. Previously defeats were suffered over pensions in 2003 and health insurance in 2004. Some politicians and commentators in France and abroad have argued that it is undemocratic for mass protests to be able to over-rule the decisions of elected representatives, revealing a touching faith in France’s democratic institutions. It is worth recalling that the UMP, which thanks to the peculiarities of the electoral system has an absolute and indeed substantial majority in Parliament, won just 33 per cent of the vote in the 2002 elections – a figure that goes down to 22 per cent of registered voters given the 35 per cent of electors who abstained. Representatives elected under those conditions and subject to no kind of control or recall by their electors are ill placed to give lessons in democracy.

According to the electoral calendar the government still has more than a year in office, until the 2007 elections. But after this it will be very difficult for it to push through any more major attacks. Indeed now would be the time for the unions and the Left to undo some of the damage already done, by going on the offensive and calling into question the “reforms” already adopted. A good place to start would be with the CNE (New Employment Contract) which was passed last autumn without the unions really mobilizing against it, and which allows employers in companies with less than 20 employees the right to sack workers during the first two years without justification.

Since the victory of the ‘No’ vote in last year’s referendum on the proposed European constitution, France has had a lame duck president. Now it also has a lame duck prime minister and government. The simplest solution would be for them just to get out now, as more and more French people want them to. But they won’t go unless they are forced to.

*Murray Smith, formerly international organiser for the Scottish Socialist Party, is an active member of the LCR.*
"The question of a link between workers and students is immediate"

Daniel Bensaïd

Daniel Bensaïd, in this interview with Socialist Worker, reflects on the current battle of the French students and its comparisons with student movements of the past. Interview by Jim Wolfreys.

As someone who took part in the mobilisations of May 1968, what do you think are the principal similarities and differences between those events and what’s happening today?

There are many more differences than similarities. In reality, the student movement of 1968 was an important but minority movement even up to the “night of the barricades” on 10 May.

It was after the occupation of the Sorbonne university and the start of the general strike by workers that the movement really generalised.

The other difference lies in the motives of the movement. In 1968, the spark was a demonstration against the war in Vietnam. The themes were very internationalist - solidarity with Vietnam, and with the German and Polish students.

Along with these issues were others like the question of mixed university halls of residence.

The present movement is directly based on a social question - the destruction of workplace regulations and the generalised casualisation of employment, which is common both to youth in education and to workers. The question of the link, and not just solidarity, between the two is therefore immediate.

Finally, the fundamental difference is with the general context and in particular with the way unemployment weighs on things. In 1968, the unemployed were counted in tens of thousands in a period of great expansion, so students had no worries about the future.

Today six million people are either without work or casually employed, and over the past few years we have experienced a series of social defeats, despite the big movements of 1995 over public services, and of 2003 over pensions. So the balance of forces that the present movement has intervened in is, at the outset, very unfavourable.

In 1968, and again in 1986, the student movement was followed by strikes. What is the relationship between the present mobilisations and the labour movement?

The link is natural, and the labour movement is less closed, or even hostile, than it was towards students in 1968.

At the time this hostility, or wariness, was fostered in particular by the workerist demagoguery of the Communist Party and of the CGT trade union federation, which controlled the big bastions of the labour movement.

Today relations are not so closed. On the one hand the ability of the bureaucratic machines to control things has been considerably weakened.

On the other the overall expansion of secondary and higher education means it is no longer possible to portray students as an exclusively middle class layer.

But the trade union bureaucracy continues to act as a brake, as we can see from their slowness to call a general strike. After the big demonstrations of 18 March this would be the only way to take things to another level and, perhaps, make the government give way.

CGT union leader Bernard Thibault has raised the prospect of a general strike against the CPE. What role are the major trade union confederations - the CGT, Force Ouvrière and the CFDT - playing in the movement?

All the unions have declared themselves against the CPE and have called for days of action. But on 7 March only Force Ouvrière gave official notice of strike action, thus allowing its members to take part. The CFDT is dragging its feet.

And the CGT did not do all it could have done on 18 March to mobilise beyond its apparatus (which is considerable). Up to now, apart from the FSU teachers’ federation, which is putting forward a clear proposal for strike action, it seems that the confederations are preparing for another mobilisation some way off - on 28 or 30 March - which for us is much too late.

This runs the risk of letting the movement degenerate, and brings back bad memories of the kind of bureaucratic stalling that characterised the manoeuvres which exhausted the 2003 movement against pension reform.

Political organisations seem to have a low profile in the student movement. How do we explain this?

The political organisations are weak among students. The three most visible forces are a Socialist current (identifying with Socialist Party MP Henri Emmanuelli) which controls the UNEF students’ union, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), and a nebulous anarchist grouping.

The Communist Party backs the movement, but it is very weak among students. The majority within the Socialist Party would like to benefit from the way the government has been discredited, with a presidential election due in 2007.

At the same time it is afraid that if the movement becomes too strong it will
deepen the party’s contradictions and benefit, if only at the margins, the radical anti-neoliberal left. The LCR’s Olivier Besancenot is the only prominent political figure who is both young and popular in the movement.

A victory against the CPE will make it difficult for the government to pursue neo-liberal policies. Will it also make it easier for the left to unite against neoliberalism?

This victory has not been won yet. There is a lot to be played for in the week ahead. A victory would be the first defeat inflicted by the street against the neo-liberal counter reforms for many years.

But that alone will not be enough to overturn the balance of forces and, above all, to give the social movement a credible means of political expression, because it will do little to modify the political balance of forces.

It is likely that the Socialist Party would be able to channel hopes into a change of government perceived as a lesser evil - even if Ségolène Royale, one of its leading candidates, is already singing the praises of Tony Blair.

The crucial question remains continued identification with the themes of the campaign for a left “no” in the referendum on the European Union constitution, and that of a future governmental alliance.

The most probable outcome is that former members of ex-prime minister Lionel Jospin’s coalition will become satellites of the Socialist Party in a scenario à la Romano Prodi (in Italy, where sections of the left have formed an electoral alliance with mainstream social democracy). The question of a genuine anti-capitalist alternative therefore remains the key issue.

* Daniel Bensaïd is one of France’s most prominent Marxist philosophers and has written extensively. He is a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).
and that the document that has emerged from this first reading will be communicated in the coming weeks to the European Council of Ministers, before a probable second reading and its coming back before the European Parliament.

After the success of the demonstrations on February 11th and 14th in Strasbourg, the battle for the total rejection of the Bolkestein directive and the demand for a harmonisation of working conditions in all the countries of the European Union, on the basis of the legislation that provides the highest degree of protection for workers, can and must continue.

* Patrick Tamerlan is a member of the National Leadership of the LCR and the International Committee of the Fourth International. He writes regularly on the EU for Rouge, the LCR's weekly paper.

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**European Left Party - First Congress in Athens**

**Georges Villetin**

The first congress of the European Left Party took place in Athens on October 29-30. About 500 delegates and observers were present. The LCR was there with observer status, represented by Alain Krivine. This report of the congress appeared in the LCR weekly, Rouge of 3 November.

The congress of the European Left Party (ELP) was chaired by Fausto Bertinotti of the Italian PRC. The congress initially aimed at bringing together, in a flexible structure, all the European communist parties, whatever their differences. Since the disappearance of the USSR and the East European bloc, all that had existed between them were bilateral contacts, and sometimes some one-off conferences.

The construction of Europe, with all its political and social repercussions, pushed towards the constitution of this party. Only a small number of communist parties, among those who are most nostalgic for Stalinism, refused to come to Athens, denouncing the “revisionist and reformist” nature of the enterprise. This was the case with some East European parties and with the Portuguese and Greek CPs. Overall, the congress was dominated by a desire for consensus, not touching, either in the debates or in the final resolutions, on the issues that posed problems, in particular questions of strategy.

On the level of generalities, the documents that were adopted correctly denounced the capitalist offensive in Europe and defended social mobilizations. On the other hand, there was not a word on the crucial problems of what means to employ to “change Europe”, in particular the problem of alliances and of governmental participation. The decision by the majority of the PRC to be ready to enter a government led by the liberal Romano Prodi was on everyone’s mind, but it did appear in any of the interventions, except the one from a representative of the “left” of the PRC. In reality, the theses of the ELP are more akin to those of a united front than of a party.

In this climate, a real spirit of openness towards all progressive forces dominated, in particular in the delegation of the PCF. It is in this context that our comrade Alain Krivine was invited, and that he intervened in the name of the LCR, to remind delegates that there also existed a Conference of the European Anti-capitalist Left and that we were ready to conduct joint campaigns, but also to engage in debates, in particular on the strategic questions of programmatic content and of alliances. In fact several parties, such as the Left Bloc in Portugal, the ODP in Turkey and Respect in Britain, are members of both regroupments.

So there was a big change in the atmosphere, when we recall that during the founding conference of the ELP, held in Rome eighteen months ago, the organizers had refused to invite the LCR. Since then, there has been the ‘No’ campaign in France and the new unitary dynamic. So the PCF also had invited to Athens, Raoul Marc Jennar, Yves Salesse [1] and representatives of Mars, Alternative citoyenne and PRS. [2] For its part, the PDS in Germany had invited
Oskar Lafontaine. So there are two regroupments in Europe and a single enemy: the bosses. There really is room for unity of action and for debates.

* Georges Villetin is a regular correspondent of Rouge.

NOTES
[1] Raoul Marc Jennar organizes Unity of Research, Education and Information on Globalization (Urfig). Yves Salesse is president of the Fondation Copernic, a left-wing think tank. Both were actively involved in the French “No” campaign.

[2] Mars (Movement for a Republican and Citizens’ Alternative) and Alternative citoyen (Citizens’ Alternative) are two small political organizations who took part in the “No” campaign, as did PRS (“For a Social Republic”), a left current in the French Socialist Party, whose best-known leader is Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

**Women**

**Mediterranean Social Forum: Womens Assembly meets**

A.L.

At the Mediterranean Social Forum (FSMed), Catalan and Italian activists from the World March of Women pressed for a plenary session devoted to the question of women’s rights in the Mediterranean. A woman from Iraq spoke on the terrible situation created by the war, for everybody but particularly for women, whether in US prisons or as victims of sexual aggression.

A Palestinian woman who works as a psychologist in the occupied territories gave a moving explanation of how the second intifada has worsened the situation of women. In addition to the violence of the occupation, conjugal violence is on the rise, with men, often humiliated by the occupation and their situation (unemployment and extreme poverty) taking it out against women. Another intervention concerned the impact of neoliberalism on the situation of women, particularly in the developing countries with deleterious consequences of structural adjustment plans in the areas of education and health and for women.

The contradictory character of economic neoliberalism on the situation of women was stressed, in that across the world (apart from sub-Saharan Africa) women have entered massively into the sphere of wage labour, which gives them greater autonomy although they are concentrated in the most insecure forms of work (super-exploitation in the workplaces and development of informal work).

An assembly of women was also held during the FSMed. Several hundred people attended and the organizers were surprised by the high attendance. This exchange was very rich, with women from Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, Tunisia (and again many who did not get visas to attend the FSMed) discussing their lives and experiences and, for some, issues concerning immigration.

These debates allowed the drawing up of a Declaration of the Women’s Assembly of the First Social Forum of the Mediterranean.

**WOMEN’S ASSEMBLY AT THE MEDITERRANEAN SOCIAL FORUM**

Barcelona, June 17, 2005

Women in the Mediterranean area are victims of violence, poverty, trafficking, wars and systematic violations of the human rights. In the Mediterranean the women are victims of domination by three powers: patriarchy, neo-liberism and fundamentalism. These dominant powers support and feed off each other to keep women under unacceptable conditions of life, with lesser rights than those of men in the same society.

The Mediterranean is the theatre of wars which generate violence, rapes, killings, arbitrary detention and unacceptable life conditions and lack of rights, in particular for women.

Many women from the Southern shores of the Mediterranean were not able to participate here because they were denied visas. This instance adds to the reasons that motivate us to promote with the social movements in Medsf the struggle for the right of free circulation of people.

We, together in the women’s assembly in the first Medsf, and coming from all the shores of this sea.

**DENOUNCE**

The militarization of the area, the neo-colonial programs of control of natural resources
The systematic violation of women's human rights and the violence against women

The empowerment of fundamentalism and political currents that deny the equality in rights of women and promote their loss of civil and social rights

The family codes that institutionalize women's subordination to men

The persistence of tolerance towards the so called 'crimes of honour'

The market in women's bodies and the existence of women and children trafficking mafias

The enslavement, forced labour and sexual mutilation imposed on women and children

The increasing poverty and precarization of women lives, the absence or violations of our social rights and the lack of free access to education and health

The laws of the market, of neoliberalism, which make women more precarious and devoid of economic, social and cultural rights

The bilateral agreements between governments in the Mediterranean area which implement regulation with differential status for women and men, unfavorable for the women

The constitution of Europe as a fortress, denying economic, social, cultural and political rights for migrant women

The negotiations undergoing between Europe and the Islamic parties, even with the so-called 'moderate' ones

The persecution of women on the basis of their sexual choices

DEMAND

The recognition and support of the social movements, women's resistance and their struggles

The immediate application, without reserve, by governments and the international institutions of all the protocols that enforce women equal rights

The free circulation of women in the Mediterranean

The right to live in democratic and non-religious societies

That the right to be refugees is applied to all women who are victims of sexual violence

WE SUPPORT

The Iraqi women that resist the imperialist occupation of the USA and its allies

The Palestinian and Israeli women that work together towards the resolution of the conflict and against the occupation of Palestinian territories

All the women that work for resolution of the conflicts in militarized areas and those who struggle for cultural rights and against authoritarian governments

The women who struggle against the patriarchal family codes

Women that struggle for the right of self-determination in sexual preferences and of their bodies and for the recognition of the right to access to free and legal abortion

FOR A COMMON WORK, FOR AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND SOLIDARITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

WE PROPOSE

The establishment of a web site of the Women's network to continue and forward the debate and coordinate the struggles

A common day of actions against violence on women every year on November 25. In the year 2005 this day will be dedicated to the Iraqi women that are arbitrarily detained and will demand their immediate liberation

We, women in the Mediterranean wish and struggle for a Mediterranean of peace, de-militarized, freed from violence, with equal social rights, democracy and equality between men and women
Italian feminists defend abortion rights and women’s self-determination

Maria Gatti

Mass feminist demonstrations in Italy have returned to the streets and piazzas thirty years after their earlier wave - taking on Berlusconi and Benedict to defend abortion rights and fight social regression.

In Milan, on 14 January 2006, some 250 000 demonstrators, mainly women, took to the streets, to defend law 194, the 1978 law decriminalising abortion, and the principle of women’s reproductive, social and economic self-determination. As the Rifondazione Comunista daily Liberazione wrote: “The witches have returned, we have ‘emerged from the silence’ (as the banner opening the demonstration stated) and have no intention of returning”.

The participants included women from towns throughout northern and central-northern Italy, from social centres, the Union of atheists and agnostics which called for an end to clerical interference and for the Church to “get out of our pants”.

Some major delegations included Rifondazione, DS and a large delegation of CGIL trade-union women from Emilia, Romagna and Tuscany. But most of the demonstrators were women who had shown up by themselves or with friends, and were thrilled that so many others had the same idea. The general feeling was of power and joy to have emerged from demonstrations that were merely a “tired routine” with thousands of demonstrators continuing to dance for hours in still more photos of the demonstration the chilly evening air.

There was a lively and most varied participation in the demonstration, centred on defending the rights of women against the attempts to shore up the old moral order. It went far beyond the defence of the existing law, standing up for a secular state and society and the need to defend the freedoms of women and all citizens. The two slogans most heard were “nobody will decide in our place any longer” and “siamo uscite dal silenzio - we (women) have emerged from the silence.

Though the demonstrators’ ire centred on Berlusconi’s rightist coalition government and interference from the Vatican and the current papacy - reactionary even by Catholic Church standards - there were also many criticisms of the centre-left Union programme viewing women’s rights as a simple “issue” among many others and not half the population expressing their collective strength over the years and the current months.

Moreover, they decried “treason” in the Union’s backsliding on its earlier commitment to support civil unions for same-sex couples, a step back from secular and democratic Europe and self-determination of human beings, and a sop to the “family-oriented” (familist) tone of social policies, even among the centre-left.

The demonstrators insisted on the right to work, to choice and to health, not only defending Law 194, but the outlook that the right to control one’s own body is a material basis for all freedoms and for freedom for all people. The prevailing theme of freedom, “liberty to choose, liberty to love, this movement won’t be halted”; “freedom to live and live together”, was accompanied by a call to memory of earlier struggles. “Today’s women remember” and for a better future for youth “precarity is the contraceptive of the future” and migrant women.

Other demonstrations and actions have taken place in Rome and Naples and more are planned throughout Italy.
French referendum

NO! - from the Left

Murray Smith

At ten o’clock on Sunday night, as the last polling stations closed, the result came down like the blade of a guillotine. France’s electors had voted “No” to the projected European Constitution. All the polls in the last few days before the vote were predicting a victory for the “No”. But the size of the majority, nearly 55 per cent, was absolutely unequivocal.

What was also clear, and finally recognised by a media that had been almost uniformly partisan of the “Yes” vote, was that the battle had been won by the “No from the left”.

Of course far-right leaders like Jean-Marie Le Pen and Philippe de Villiers were on television claiming victory. But the sociological and political composition of the vote showed that the bulk of the “No” votes didn’t come from their supporters.

Among social categories, 81 per cent of manual workers, 79 per cent of the unemployed, 60 per cent of white-collar workers and 56 per cent of “intermediary professions” voted “No”. The only categories where the “Yes” was in a majority were executives and intellectual professions (62 per cent), those with a university education (57 per cent) and pensioners (56 per cent).

An analysis of the vote by age group shows that the “No” won by 59 per cent among 18-34 year-olds and 65 per cent among 35-49 year-olds. The “Yes” was only in a majority among those over 65. Politically, 67 per cent of left-wing voters opted for the “No” - almost unanimously among supporters of the Communist Party and the revolutionary Left, but also 59 per cent of Socialist supporters and 64 per cent pf Green supporters. And 61 per cent of non-aligned voters voted “No”. Only supporters of the two mainstream right-wing parties, the UMP and the UDF, voted massively (76 per cent) in favour of the Constitution.

If we put the far Right at 15 per cent of the electorate, that means that the other 40 per cent for the “No” came from supporters of the Left and the non-aligned. Questioned on the reasons for their vote, those who voted “No” cited the economic and social situation in France, especially the issue of unemployment, and the “too liberal” character of the treaty.

And 35 per cent of them expressed the hope that the constitutional treaty could be renegotiated. So as the campaigners for a “No from the left” have been saying for months, most people who voted “No” didn’t do so because they were chauvinist, anti-European or whatever. They voted against neoliberalism and its devastating effects in France and in Europe.

The political effects of the vote will be multiple. “Chirac disavowed, Europe destabalised”, said the headline in the Monday edition of “Le Monde”. Chirac is likely to sack Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a convenient scapegoat. Raffarin may be replaced by Nicolas Sarkozy, who on television on Sunday night produced the somewhat original analysis that the French people had voted “No” because they wanted even more neo-liberal policies... Which is what they will get if he is nominated. Or Chirac may feel that nominating Sarkozy would be too much of a provocation.

The President himself is now indeed disavowed and seriously weakened, and it is difficult to see how he can still envisage standing again in the 2007 presidential election. On the left, only the LCR called clearly and unequivocally for Chirac to resign and for the dissolution of Parliament.

But of course not all the losers were on the right. The majority leaderships of the Socialist Party and the Greens were also disavowed by their own supporters, and post-referendum battles in both parties look set to be fierce.

Socialist leaders like François Hollande, Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Lionel Jospin who led the “Yes” campaign are unlikely to meekly hand the party over to those like Laurent Fabius, Henri Emmanuelli and Jean-Luc Mélenchon who defended the “No”.

On a European level it is not of course “Europe” that has been destabilised but the neo-liberal EU project. And listening to a succession of European leaders of left and right on Sunday night, they gave no signs of drawing any lessons from the defeat. One after the other they came on the screen to reprimand the unruly French and announce that business would go on as usual.

Of course most of them won’t have anything as messy as a referendum to contend with, having chosen parliamentary ratification of the treaty. Whatever the defenders of the Constitution say, the French “No” can open up the debate on Europe that hasn’t yet taken place in most countries of the EU. The opponents of neo-liberal Europe have a chance to go on the offensive, not only for the rejection of this Constitution but also for a break with the undemocratic way it was drawn up, and to demand that the peoples of Europe elect constituent assemblies to draw up new proposals. The LCR has called for a European Social Forum to discuss the way forward.

In France, on the left, the victory of the “No” opens up new possibilities for building a radical anti-capitalist force. The months of cooperation between militants of different parties and of none, of collaboration with trade unionists and activists of social movements, have created a real dynamic and raised expectations. Discussions have already begun on how to build a force on the left that can break with what in France is called “alternance” - the pattern whereby governments of left and right alternate regularly, with a high degree of continuity in their neoliberal policies.
These discussions will certainly continue, no doubt against a background of continuing social resistance to the neo-liberal offensive of Chirac and whoever he names as Prime Minister. What is needed is to build a credible alternative to the social-liberalism that is incarnated by the Socialist Party leadership. In a declaration the day after the referendum, the LCR proposed that the 1,000 committees for a “No from the left” that have mushroomed over the last months continue and work towards a national meeting.

It has also proposed a meeting of the political organisations that helped last autumn to launch the “Appeal of the 200” that was the basis for the committees. Some of the forces involved in the “No” campaign will be tempted to be drawn into a new union of the Left under SP hegemony, to prepare a new “alternance” for 2007.

But that perspective will be combated not only by the LCR but by many other activists, including in the Communist Party, and even by some Socialist Party members. Prospects have never looked better for building a radical anti-capitalist force in France. The coming weeks and months will be decisive.

Netherlands: A vote against neo-liberalism

Willem Bos

The outcome of the Dutch referendum on the European constitution is a clear stand against the neo-liberal project. It is not a vote against Europe, European co-operation, integration or union, but rather a vote against the neo-liberal Europe that this constitution was an attempt to set in stone. This does not mean that the vote was unambiguously left wing or progressive. Traditional, Christian, nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments also played a role. But they certainly did not dominate the campaign. The victory for the no opens up new possibilities for the Dutch global justice movement.

With turnout at 63%, almost 62% of eligible voters voted against the European constitution. Turnout for this first national referendum in the Netherlands was half again as high as in the last elections for the European parliament in 2004 (when less than 40% of Dutch voters went to the polls). It was higher than in the 2002 municipal elections or the 2003 provincial elections. There were only twenty-odd smaller municipalities with wealthy inhabitants in the country’s centre and south where the yes won. Everywhere else no voters were in the majority.

A class vote

The class basis of the no was clear. The less educated voters were, the likelier they were to vote no. Of voters with higher education 51% voted no; of voters with only primary education, 82%; of voters with only secondary education, 72%. The lower voters income as well the likelier they were to vote no. At the highest income levels the no had a narrow majority, while two-thirds of median- and below-median-income voters voted no. Women were also significantly more likely than men to vote no.

Dutch premier Jan Peter Balkenende

In the country’s poorest municipality, Reinderland in eastern Groningen, 84.6% voted no. Only one other municipality was more solidly against: the hard-core Protestant fishing village Urk, where 91.6% voted no. The only yes majorities were in a few of the very wealthiest municipalities in the central and southern Netherlands. The greatest yes majority was in Rozendaal, with 62.7%. In the cities as well the trend was evident: the more prosperous a neighbourhood or borough, the more people voted yes; the poorer it was, the more people voted no.

Among supporters of the social-democratic Labour party, 55% voted against the constitution. Among supporters of the Green Left party, a narrow 52% majority voted yes. Even among voters of the very pro-EU liberal D66 party, 45% voted against. Only among supporters of the ruling Christian Democrats was there a big yes majority: 80%. Among supporters of the right-wing liberal VVD party, almost 40% voted against.

Among parties that called for a no vote, by contrast, the number of yes voters was very limited. Only among supporters of the orthodox Protestant Christian Union did slightly more than 10% vote yes.

Anti-establishment

The result is all the more remarkable when one bears in mind that the traditional political parties that called for a yes vote - the governing Christian Democrats and liberal VVD and D66, plus the opposition Labour Party and Green Left - between them occupy 85% of the seats in parliament. The only MPs to oppose the constitution represent the Socialist Party (a party of Maoist origin that has grown in recent years to become the biggest political force left of social democracy, with 8 of the 150 seats in parliament), the two small orthodox Protestant parties, the remains of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn’s party, and one maverick
right-wing MP who has split from the VVD, Geert Wilders.

In addition virtually the whole of civil society supported the constitution: in any event the leaderships of the trade unions, the biggest environmental organisations, the small and medium employers’ association, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and even the automobile owners’ association and development NGOs. Only a very limited number of smaller environmental and animal rights’ groups were against.

The outcome reveals not only a looming gap between citizens and politicians, but also a vertical divide in virtually all large social organisations. Their leaderships supported the constitution, while a high proportion of their members rejected it.

The culture of the polder

Understanding this situation requires looking back at political developments in the Netherlands over the past several years. Since the Second World War, Dutch governments have traditionally been coalitions formed around the Christian Democrats, in alliance either with the liberals of the VVD or with the Labour party. The Christian Democrats’ hold on power ended in 1994 when they suffered a spectacular defeat in that year’s elections, whereupon a coalition government of liberals and Labour took office.

Under the leadership of former trade-union leader Wim Kok, this coalition carried out major neo-liberal reforms over the course of eight years. One consequence of this ‘purple’ period (so-called after the mixture of social-democratic red and liberal blue) was a far-reaching de-politicisation.

Political differences among the major parties, particularly between the traditional adversaries of Labour and the VVD, became almost invisible. The culture of consultation and consensus (the ‘polder model’), always strong in the Netherlands, covered the political landscape like a suffocating blanket.

With the rise of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn, this blanket was suddenly snatched off. Fortuyn’s crusade against multiculturalism and tolerance for Islam (which he described as a backward religion) rallied middle-class layers who had improved their economic position considerably over the years, and were now ready to lay claim to political influence.

But Fortuyn’s breakthrough was due to the fact that he also appealed to many less-educated white Dutch people, whose sense of security had been undermined by the dismantling of the welfare state and liberalisation of the economy. Traditionally these groups had been Labour’s property, but now they had completely lost faith in the left.

After Fortuyn’s dramatic assassination just before the 2002 elections, Fortuyn’s revolt found expression partly in an increased vote for the Christian Democrats led by Jan Peter Balkenende. Balkenende formed a new cabinet with the liberal VVD and initially the remnants of Fortuyn’s LPF party, but after a few months of the LPF’s inevitable blunders and scandals traded it in for the slightly less right-wing liberals of D66.

This Balkenende cabinet, still in power today, is without a doubt the most right-wing Dutch cabinet in living memory. Each of the parties taking part in it has moved further to the right - and this is true of the opposition parties as well. The general assumption has been that Fortuyn left behind a political landscape in which all the available political ground to be fought over lay to the right.

Last year however massive protests against the cabinet’s pension reform plans showed that reality is not so simple. The trade unions, much weakened in recent years, were forced to mobilise.

To everyone’s surprise this led to the biggest trade-union demonstration in Dutch history, which set an estimated half-million people in motion. The political impact of the mobilisation was largely cancelled out when a Muslim extremist murdered filmmaker Theo van Gogh a month later. Once more fears of an Islamic danger determined the face of Dutch politics.

Now however the referendum has shown that there are other issues and a different political approach that can put the Dutch on the move.

The course of the campaign

Before the campaign got under way, approval of the constitution seemed a foregone conclusion. In the first polls roughly 20% was ready to vote yes and only 10% no. Given the overwhelming support from political and social organisations, getting the constitution adopted seemed no problem.

The proposal for a referendum came from three centre-left MPs, who submitted a bill calling for a one-time, non-binding referendum. The government was against, but the bill passed with the support of the ruling right-wing liberal VVD. Support for the referendum was in part an expression of discontent over the adoption of the euro. Although there were calls for a referendum then, at the time there was no parliamentary majority for it.

Frustration about the switch to the euro and its consequences is still running high and still having an impact. Various politicians reasoned that it was better to hold a referendum in which people could make their voices heard rather than bottling up still more frustrations. The big miscalculation made by the constitution’s supporters was their assumption that overwhelming support from political and social organisations would also win over the population.

In fact the yes campaign derailed early on. Supporters hesitated for a long time before actually beginning to campaign. This had everything to do with divisions within the yes camp and the Balkenende government’s unprecedentedly low popularity. Only when the no camp began coming out ahead in the polls did the cabinet feel compelled to play an active role.

They did so in an unusually crude, intimidating way. They dug deep in the treasury in order to finance their own campaign, and their statements seemed designed to browbeat the Dutch into voting yes.

One minister declared that rejecting this constitution would jeopardise peace in
Europe. Without any subtlety Auschwitz and Srebrenica were deployed as arguments for a yes. The Dutch were told they would be the laughingstock of Europe if they voted no. Coming from a government with an approval rating of 18%, these arguments only helped the no campaign.

The no camp consisted of four components. The most extreme and dangerous standpoint came from maverick liberal Geert Wilders. As an independent MP he is working hard to establish a new far right political formation and position himself as Pim Fortuyn's successor. His campaign focussed on the dangers of Turkish EU membership and a consequent Muslim takeover of Europe.

The small Protestant parties waged a very different sort of campaign. Except for objecting to the constitution's failure to mention Europe's Judeo-Christian tradition, they had a relatively clean campaign in which they argued that further European integration makes no sense at this moment and that in any event this constitution is not necessary for it.

The strongest political force in the no camp was undoubtedly the Socialist party, which waged a very active campaign both in the media and on the streets. Their campaign stressed the need to save the Netherlands. This constitution would turn Europe into a superstate and Holland into a province, they argued. They illustrated the concern that the Netherlands might disappear from the map with a map of Europe in which the country literally disappeared into the sea.

Finally there was Comité Grondwet Nee (Constitution No Committee), a small ad hoc alliance of left-wing activists who waged a clear progressive no campaign. Grondwet Nee argued that a different Europe is possible and necessary as an alternative to this, undemocratic, neo-liberal and militarist Europe.

Despite its small size and very limited resources, Grondwet Nee played a considerable role in the campaign and clearly contributed to the visibility of a left no, preventing the no camp from being dominated by right-wing nationalism.

Which no won?

Of course all sorts of motives, intermixed with each other, played a role in the victory for no: widely shared aversion to government policy, and to politicians in general; opposition to constant interference from Brussels; fears of loss of national identity; Christian and nationalist motives; and intense irritation at the arrogance of the yes camp. It is difficult to judge which elements were decisive and which no won.

It is clear in any event that Wilders and his anti-Turkish, anti-Muslim campaign did not play a predominant role. There is also a quite broad consensus that this was not an anti-European campaign, but rather a campaign against the way the existing Europe functions.

A fair picture can be distilled from a survey done barely a week after the vote. The survey showed that a week later the no majority would have been even bigger: 64%. The shifts in support for different political parties in the campaign's wake give a pretty good picture of its impact. The big loser is apparently not the right but Labour, which declined in the polls from 50 MPs before the campaign to 41 now.

Today 70% of Labour voters would vote against the constitution. The biggest winner is the SP, rising in the polls from 13 to 21 seats. The Christian Union grows from 6 seats to 9, while Wilders' party loses a seat. Questions about the popularity of different politicians confirm the overall picture.

In general the outcome can be interpreted as an unambiguous rejection of the neo-liberal project, and that the left in particular has made its mark with the campaign.

Consequences of the no victory

The referendum's outcome will have far-reaching consequences. First, after the double no in France and Holland this constitution is clearly as dead as a doornail. Second, the outcome will have major consequences for Dutch politics. The left has a chance now to take new initiatives in the discussion on Europe. Grondwet Nee's proposal to convene a national convention, which would hold a democratic discussion about the future of Europe and the place of the Netherlands in it, has not evoked an immediate response.

The parliament has however passed an SP motion for a broad social discussion on Europe. It is not yet clear what form the discussion will take, but in any case we will have to fight to ensure that it does not become a pointless talking-shop, and that the proposals that come out of it are submitted to the people for approval in a referendum. It is also important that initiatives be taken on a European level to hold discussions and arrive at common positions on Europe's future.

Lack of synchronicity among the debates and the press of time made the referendum campaigns very much national campaigns. In the coming months there are possibilities for deciding on joint international initiatives, with rejection of this constitution as the starting point. The European Social Forum is one place where this could happen.

After the experience of this first national referendum, it seems likely that the referendum tool will be used on other occasions. This obviously makes it very important to fight for genuinely democratic referenda, in which advocates and opponents are given an equal chance and the government cannot make unrestricted use of public revenues for its own campaign.

Third, the legitimacy and representativeness of many political parties and social organisations in the yes camp is now subject to question. Calling for a vote for the constitution, unembarrassedly avoiding any internal discussion, and then finding out that your own base is against should be a problem for any serious organisation. The discussions that will doubtless break out in many organisations should create more space for critical left-wing ideas.

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The party and the period

Daniel Bensaïd

The following interview with Daniel Bensaïd was conducted during the Ernest Mandel Symposium held in Brussels on November 19th, 2005 (see IVP n° 372, November 2005). Bensaïd outlines his views on the role of a revolutionary organisation in the present period and recalls his first encounters with Ernest Mandel. The interview appeared in the January 2006 issue of La Gauche, which is published by the POS (Belgian section of the Fourth International).

La Gauche: Some people are talking about a new kind of organization, a new kind of party. What do you think about it?

Daniel Bensaïd: Today, a party, in its organisation and in its internal life, has to take into account the diversity of social movements. It can benefit from technological advances: a telephone conference, exchanges on the Internet, which can facilitate horizontal exchanges... That is already very important because one of the powers of bureaucracies was the monopoly of information and of the transmission of information. We are far from the vertical and military conception of the party.

Delimitation in relation to social movements is a condition for respecting these movements and their autonomy. It is less manipulative than hiding inside them and it also respects democratic life within the political organisations and parties themselves. If we have debates, congresses, if we make the effort to produce bulletins, to exchange contradictory positions, there has to be something at stake, otherwise it is democracy without an objective.

The objective concerns major questions. We are not going fight to the death over questions of local tactics. We can have various kinds of agreements on electoral tactics, when a local branch wants to try out something that is not within the framework of the general orientation at national level.

The famous democratic centralism is often criticised, because we have an image of the way it was practised by bureaucratic organisations. But by approaching the question in this way we forget that centralism and democracy are not antinomies, but that each is the condition of the other. We conduct a democratic debate with the aim of taking decisions to which we are all committed.

I think - I don't know if we'll always avoid this - that what has particularly enabled the LCR to avoid up to now the crises that have destroyed other organisations, is that we didn't have the pretension of founding a theoretical orthodoxy. From the beginning, at the end of the 1960s, there were among us followers of Althusser and Sartre, there were Mandelites, and obviously there is no question of a congress voting on the law of value or on the Freudian unconscious. We agree on tasks, on the interpretation of events and common political tasks. There is a whole space for debate.

A revolutionary party can be the bearer of historic memory, but that does not prevent it from missing out on things, for example on ecology. How can we act today so as not to miss out on the movement of ethnic minorities or the revolt in the suburbs?

Every continuity can lead to a certain type of conservatism. There can also be a religion of memory. For me, political memory is necessary, and it is all the more important for the oppressed, who do not have the same institutions to perpetuate memory as the ruling classes do. For the ruling classes, memory is passed on by a whole series of state institutions, and there is a memory of struggles, of the oppressed, of the defeated, which is carried forward by revolutionary organisations.

We have to deal with what is new, but we do not deal with it starting from nothing. The real problem is to know whether we are capable of welcoming what is new without making it fit into the repetition of what we already know. That is the challenge. When we say “we were late, we missed the rendezvous”, yes again. But precise rendezvous, even in love, are somewhat rare.

I make less use of the term vanguard, because the notion has a military connotation that can create confusion. It is rather a question of a metabolism, of an exchange between the social movements and the political struggle. It would be paradoxical to have a certain idea of the vanguard as being more “advanced” than the masses, and then reproaching it with not having invented feminism or ecology. It is after all quite normal that it should come in the first place from social processes on a mass scale, which are then expressed on the political level.

On the other hand today in France we can see very well the specific function of he party. That is why there is for me a “comeback” (of politics). We have had years of social resistance since the end of the 1980s. We almost had, given the bankruptcy of the policies of reform and of the revolutions of the 20th century, illusions in the self-sufficiency of social movements.

They are necessary, everything starts from there, but everything doesn't finish there. We can see the repeated waves of struggle in Argentina, in Bolivia. If that does not lead to a transformation at every level, including on the level of the structures of power, it becomes an endless, infernal repetition. You overthrow three governments in Bolivia, two in Argentina and afterwards you are still where you were before.

So we have to pose the problem in these terms. During the presidential campaign in France, we are going to ask the social movements for a posi-
tion on feminism, we are going to ask the ecology movement for a position on energies of substitution. At a meeting in Brest, our candidate, Olivier Besancenot, is asked about his position on the size of fishing nets. He can say: “I don’t know everything, I have no opinion about that”.

We are a political organisation which seeks to offer an orientation to the country as a whole, but the political organisations and the different social movements are obliged to synthesise at least the answers to the big questions. Today, that is the difficulty that an organisation like ATTAC is experiencing. It is very good that ATTAC is a unitary organisation, an organisation for popular education, but we clearly saw, when we got to the European referendum, that it was the political organisations that were the moving force of the mobilisation.

I think that we are at a turning point, the moment of transition from one cycle to another. We saw it with the German elections. We will see it again with the Italian elections, we will see what happens politically afterwards. Because resistance is a pre-condition that is necessary but not sufficient. If we want to respect the autonomy of the mass movements, then paradoxically, political organisations are necessary. Obviously, we need to have created a culture of pluralism, of respect, but at the same time, we have to firmly defend political positions.

We are also emerging from a period where the key word is consensus. To defend your convictions is not necessarily authoritarian. If you do it correctly, it is rather an expression of respect for others. If you are convinced of what you think, you try to convince others of it, because they are not any more stupid than you, they can reach the same conclusions.

By discussing seriously with others, we also run the risk of being convinced by them. That is in fact the logic of a real debate. On that point, Ernest Mandel was not at all sectarian, but he was very convinced of and very firm about his own positions. That is better than defending sloppy ideas.

My first encounter with Ernest Mandel was here in Brussels: at a meeting during May ’68. The meeting had been banned, but I had not been stopped at the border, because I arrived from the Ardennes. Cohn-Bendit had been turned back. It was already a pluralist meeting, because Cohn-Bendit was an anarchist; as for me, I can’t say I was a Trotskyist, I was more a Guevarist.

The meeting was finally besieged by the police, who succeeded in getting hold of me and taking me back to the border. It was my first contact with Ernest, but it was ephemeral, because I was immediately kicked out of Belgium. Afterwards we did in fact meet on many occasions. I would like to say that the contact was quite affectionate and respectful. We never had the cult of the personality.

Perhaps we were arrogant and insufferable, because we were young cocks. At the age of 20 we thought we had started a revolution. We discussed on what was really quite an equal footing. Ernest did not entirely persuade us when he tried to convince us to join the Fourth International on the basis of a rather favourable presentation of what forces it had. Well, it wasn’t very convincing, because there weren’t many forces.

We were more convinced by logical reasoning: the world was - less than today - globalised, an International was necessary, there is one, it isn’t what we wanted, but it is very honourable, it hasn’t betrayed, it fought Stalinism, so let’s go, and it will change with us. We will contribute to its transformation.

At the end of the day, Ernest underestimated the strength of logical arguments. That was unusual for him. He had great confidence in the power of ideas, but he tried to convince me on the basis of the material force of the Fourth International, which was relatively modest. But it worked all the same.
Interview

Anti-Imperialist Left Confronts with Islam

Tariq Ali

The following interview with Tariq Ali was conducted by Alex De Jong and Paul Mepschen of the SAP (Dutch section of the Fourth International) at the Ernest Mandel symposium held in Brussels in November 2005. It was published in the March-April 2006 issue of the SAP’s journal, Grenzeloos.

Grenzeloos: It is of course the assassination of the film-maker Theo van Gogh and the threats made against the liberal member of parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali which have particularly drawn attention to Islam in the Netherlands. Like her, you are an unbeliever who comes from the Muslim world. Have you already felt threatened?

Tariq Ali: No, never. I travel a lot both in the Muslim world and in the rest of the world, but I have never yet felt threatened. Why is that? It is no doubt because people who don’t agree with me about religion know that I am an enemy of imperialism. I unceasingly criticize imperialism and all its works, more than the believers do. Whereas Hirsi Ali and people like her in the United States and in Europe make a profession out of attacking Islam. There are other important questions in the world.

Why do these people concentrate endlessly on Islam? In the way that they attack Islam, they go along with existing prejudices. And for that they are hated. There is no excuse or justification for acts of violence against these people. It is necessary to discuss with them. But these acts are a sign of despair: people are so much at the end of their tether that they have recourse to violence.

Don’t you think that the violence and threats against these people also represent a threat to all those of Muslim origin who do not correspond to the norm? To the unbelievers, the feminists, the homosexuals?

Certainly. But you have to understand that the Muslim community is very diversified. People are very uninformed about the Muslim world. The image that they have of it comes to a large extent through the immigrant communities in Europe, who are, besides, very different from each other. Life in the Muslim world is not monolithic: there are believers, unbelievers, atheists.

Whether the unbelievers can freely express themselves is obviously another question. Often they can’t, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t exist. As is the case here, religion is not the central element in the life of Muslims. People work, eat, make love, build families. Some go to the mosque, others don’t. Exactly like in other parts of the world. The difference lies only in the fact that in some countries it is forbidden to criticize Islam. But that is not the case for example in Turkey. In other countries where it was also possible it has become more difficult today.

Religion is taking on much more importance. For young Muslims in the West, Islam is to a large extent a question of identity.

I think so too. It is a product of different factors, but above all of the vacuum of present day capitalism. There is no real alternative. Many people feel this and turn towards religion, not only Muslims. For the last 20 or 30 years, people who wouldn’t have considered themselves to be particularly religious have been turning towards Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. Why? Because capitalism flattens everything like a steamroller and human beings want to find a refuge for themselves. Because many of them no longer see any socio-economic alternative, they go back to religion. That is why in the immigrant communities there are people who consider their identity from a purely religious point of view, and I don’t expect anything good to come from that. But I also think that all that will change with the coming generation. Today people are not all religious with the same degree of intensity, we can see different variations. I don’t think that the return to religion is universal.

One aspect of the orientalist representation of Muslims that is dominant today is that they are portrayed as people who can only behave in an uncritical and dogmatic way in relation to the Koran, whereas other believers, above all Christians, are reputed to be capable of producing a modern interpretation of their holy book.

This is in fact a mistaken representation, although it is very widespread. That is why I insist on the diversity of the Muslim world. In Poland the Church played at one time a significant role in the struggle against the Stalinist regime. In the West its role was greeted with enthusiasm. Why do we have this double standard?

Many people in the Muslim world consider an attack against Islam as unacceptable. Many of them, without being at all religious - I know some of them - say: “Yes I am a Muslim”. That is a result of the fact that the US has made it from a certain point of view unacceptable to be a Muslim. You are living in a country (the Netherlands) in which religion occupied a dominant position in an extreme way.

Protestant fundamentalism is one of the worst forms of fundamentalism. Protestant fundamentalism, of English or Dutch origin, was responsible for a genocide in North America; it wiped out the indigenous population in the name of progress - something that Muslims have not yet done.

Wherever we see this religious revival of which you speak - among Muslims in the West, among Christians in the United States... - we can see that conservative representations of sexuality play a big role.

That has always been the case. I don’t think capitalism absolutely wants human beings to have conservative representations of sexuality, but capi-
talism does want them to be brought up in nuclear families, isolated from each other. When religion occupies a central place in a person's identity, then that person seeks to distinguish him or herself from those around them; he or she defends morality and takes a position against homosexuality, at the same time affirming that women have an inferior value.

In the formation of the identity of each person, the question of sexuality plays a big role. Human beings are constantly looking for differences and they find them most easily in religion.

**Is there a future for the feminist movement in the Muslim world and in the Muslim societies here in the west?**

Of course. There was for example a very effective movement in Pakistan against the Islamic legislation that was introduced during the dictatorship, in 1977. All over the country women organized, demonstrated, and criticized the sharia. Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia have seen feminist movements.

The state authorities reacted to this challenge either by themselves creating fundamentalist movements, as in Pakistan, or by collaborating with them, as in Egypt. In exchange for a policy that was conservative and hostile to women on the part of the authorities, the fundamentalists undertook to no longer attack the state.

In the West, in the future, feminist movements will have to develop which are at the same time explicitly anti-imperialist. Then it would be possible to win young Muslim women to feminism. Unfortunately in the West feminism has little existence as a political current.

**In the framework of your insistence on the differences, you speak in the “Clash of Fundamentalisms” of an official multiculturalism.**

Yes, there lies the cause of the search for differences. When you look at Britain, you can see that religion has been supported there - by the government and above all by Blair. Even after September 11, the foundation of religious institutions, for example religious schools, was encouraged. Within official multiculturalism the differences between people are seen as a good thing. In part that is really the case - people are different. But as a socialist I also know how difficult it is to forge unity. I think that among young people there are more points of convergence than there are differences. I am an optimist: the importance of religious dividing lines will not last long in Europe, perhaps 30 or 40 years.

**Why?**

To put it cynically: because capitalism is blind as far as sex, skin colour or religion are concerned. Insofar as it expands and extends it sets aside all the particularities of human beings. That is what has always happened.

**Is the Left capable of showing that there is an alternative?**

A: The Left is at present very weak. As far as the radical Left is concerned I am not optimistic. In Britain I am not a member of Respect. I disagree with them on some points. The way things are happening in Respect is pure opportunism. Obviously I am in favour of working with Muslim groups, but socialists the goal must be to win followers of religion to our own point of view, not to leave them in their entrenched positions.

**So we should work together in a less uncritical way?**

Of course. The way Respect is doing it won't lead to anything. We have to find a neutral terrain which can offer a space for discussion. We must not conceal our own point of view by hiding it under the table. Many of the (Muslim) groups with which Respect has developed collaboration have very conservative and reactionary roots. In the countries from which they come, like for example Egypt or Indonesia, they have always been the enemies of the Left.

This is one of the problems that anti-racists and socialists come up against. On the one hand we want to develop solidarity with minorities who suffer discrimination, while on the other hand we have to maintain a critical position in relation to the conservative ways of thinking that are partly dominant among these minorities.

For socialists the task is clear: the Muslim communities must be defended against being made scapegoats, against repression, against the very widespread representation that terrorism is proper to Islam. All that must be energetically fought. But at the same time we must not close our eyes to the social conservatism which reigns in these communities, nor hide it. We have to try to win this people to our own ideas.

I would like to give an example: the last chapter of my book is an open letter to a young Muslim. After having written this letter, nearly a year later, I received a reply from some young Muslims. They thought that my letter was talking about them because they found in it remarks that they had made themselves. They were surprised to be taken so seriously and they had also discussed a lot among themselves. The result was that two of them joined the Scottish Socialist Party.

Our aim must be to reinforce the position of the youngest ones, who are turning in the direction of a progressive and secular perspective. That is very important. There are a lot of progressive people who can be found in the Muslim communities, but because of the atmosphere that reigns there, they can obviously not assert themselves openly. It is these people who can build secular forces and it is them that we must support. And it is above all among the young women that we will find such resources.

We can win over many of them if we don’t ignore them, which the far Left in France tends to do. The French far Left is the mirror image of British opportunism. It has practically no contact with the Muslim community and doesn’t consider that as a priority. Both attitudes are mistaken - we have to find a middle way.

* Tariq Ali is a socialist writer and broadcaster who has been particularly active in anti-imperialist campaigns, from Vietnam to Iraq. Born and brought up in Pakistan, he now lives in London.
First Reflections On The Electoral Victory Of Hamas

Gilbert Achcar

The sweeping electoral victory of Hamas is but one of the products of the intensive use made by the United States in the Muslim world, since the 1950's, of Islamic fundamentalism as an ideological weapon against both progressive nationalism and communism.

This was done in close collaboration with the Saudi kingdom — a de facto U.S. protectorate almost from its foundation in 1932. The promotion of the most reactionary interpretation of the Islamic religion, exploiting deeply-rooted popular religious beliefs, led to this ideology filling the vacuum left by the exhaustion by the 1970's of the two ideological currents it served to fight.

The road was thus paved in the entire Muslim world for the transformation of Islamic fundamentalism into the dominant expression of mass national and social resentment, to the great dismay of the U.S. and its Saudi protectorate. The story of Washington's relation with Islamic fundamentalism is the most striking modern illustration of the sorcerer's apprenticeship. (I have described this at length in my Clash of Barbarisms.)

The Palestinian scene was no exception to this general regional pattern, albeit it followed suit with a time warp. Although the Palestinian guerilla movement came to the fore initially as a result of the exhaustion of more traditional Arab nationalism and as an expression of radicalization, the movement underwent a very rapid bureaucratization, fostered by an impressive influx of petrodollars and reaching levels of corruption that have no equivalent in the history of national liberation movements.

Still, as long as it remained — in the guise of the PLO — what could be described as a "stateless state apparatus seeking a territory" (see my Eastern Cauldron), the Palestinian national movement could still embody the aspirations of the vast majority of the Palestinian masses, despite the numerous twists, turns, and betrayals of commitments with which its history is littered.

However, when a new generation of Palestinians took up the struggle in the late 1980's, with the Intifada that started in December 1987, their radicalization began in turn to take increasingely the path of Islamic fundamentalism.

This was facilitated by the fact that the Palestinian left, the leading force within the Intifada in the first months, squandered this last historic opportunaty by eventually aligning itself one more time behind the PLO leadership, thus completing its own bankruptcy. On a smaller scale, Israel had played its own version of the sorcerer's apprenticeship by favoring the Islamic fundamentalist movement as a rival to the PLO prior to the Intifada.

The 1993 Oslo agreement inaugurated the final phase of the PLOs degeneration, as its leadership — or rather the leading nucleus of this leadership, bypassing the official leading bodies — was granted guardianship over the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

This came in exchange for what amounted to a capitulation: the PLO leadership abandoned the minimal conditions that were demanded by the Palestinian negotiators from the 1967 occupied territories, above all an Israeli pledge to freeze and reverse the construction of settlements which were colonizing their land. The very conditions of this capitulation — which doomed the Oslo agreements to tragic failure as critics very rightly predicted from the start — made certain that the shift in the popular political mood would speed up.

The Zionist state took advantage of the lull brought to the 1967 territories by the Palestinian Authority's fulfillment of the role of police force by proxy ascribed to it, by drastically intensifying the colonization and building an infrastructure designed to facilitate its military control over these territories.

Accordingly, the discredit of the PA increased inexorably. This loss in public support hampered more and more its ability to crack down on the Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist movement — as was required from it and as it began attempting as early as 1994 — let alone its ability to marginalize the Islamic movement politically and ideologically. Moreover, the transfer of the PLO bureaucracy from exile into the 1967 territories, as a ruling apparatus entrusted with the task of surveillance over the population that waged the Intifada, quickly led to its corruption reaching abysmal levels — something that the population of the territories hadn't seen first-hand before.

At the same time, Hamas, like most sections of the Islamic fundamentalist mass movement — in contrast with "substitutionist" strictly terrorist organizations of which al-Qaeda has become the most spectacular example — was keen on paying attention to popular basic needs, organizing social services, and cultivating a reputation of austerity and incorruptibility.

The irresistible rise of Ariel Sharon to the helm of the Israeli state resulted from his September 2000 provocation that ignited the "Second Intifada" — an uprising that because of its militarization lacked the most positive features of the popular dynamics of the first Intifada.

A PA that, by its very nature, could definitely not rely on mass self-organization and chose the only way of struggle it was familiar with, fostered this
militarization. Sharon's rise was also a product of the dead-end reached by the Oslo process: the clash between the Zionist interpretation of the Oslo frame — an updated version of the 1967 "Alon Plan" by which Israel would relinquish the populated areas of the 1967 occupied territories to an Arab administration, while keeping colonized and militarized strategic chunks — and the PA's minimal requirements of recovering all, or nearly all the territories occupied in 1967, without which it knew it would lose its remaining clout with the Palestinian population.

The electoral victory of war criminal Ariel Sharon in February 2001 — an event as much "shocking" as the electoral victory of Hamas, at the very least — inevitably reinforced the Islamic fundamentalist movement, his counterpart in terms of radicalization of stance against the backdrop of a still-born historic compromise. All of this was greatly propelled, of course, by the (very resistible, but unresisted) accession to power of George W. Bush, and the unleashing of his wildest imperial ambitions thanks to the attacks on September 11, 2001.

Ariel Sharon played skillfully on the dialectics between himself and his Palestinian true opposite number, Hamas. His calculation was simple: in order to be able to carry through unilaterally his own hard-line version of the Zionist interpretation of a "settlement" with the Palestinians, he needed two conditions: a) to minimize international pressure upon him — or rather U.S. pressure, the only one that really matters to Israel; and b) to demonstrate that there is no Palestinian leadership with which Israel could "do business." For this, he needed to emphasize the weakness and unreliability of the PA by fanning the expansion of the Islamic fundamentalist movement, knowing that the latter was anathema to the Western states.

Thus every time there was some kind of truce, negotiated by the PA with the Islamic organizations, Sharon's government would resort to an "extrajudicial execution" — in plain language, an assassination — in order to provoke these organizations into retaliation by the means they specialized in: suicide attacks, their "F-16s" as they say. This had the double advantage of stressing the PA inability to control the Palestinian population, and enhancing Sharon's own popularity in Israel. The truth of the matter is that the electoral victory of Hamas is the outcome that Sharon's strategy was very obviously seeking, as many astute observers did not fail to point out.

As long as Yasir Arafat was alive, he could still use the remnant of his own historical prestige. Contrary to what many commentators have said, the secession of Arafat in his last months by Sharon did not "discredit" the Palestinian leader: as a matter of fact, Arafat's popularity was at an all-time low before his seclusion, and regained in strength after it started.

Actually, Arafat's leadership has always been directly nurtured by his demonization by Israel and his popularity rose again when he became Sharon's prisoner. This is why the U.S. and Israel's nominee for Palestinian leadership, Mahmoud Abbas, was not able to really take over as long as Arafat was alive.

This is also why both the Bush administration and Sharon would not let the Palestinians organize the new elections that Arafat kept demanding as his representation was challenged very hypocritically in the name of "democratic reform."

The very nature of the "democrats" supported by Washington and Israel under this heading is best epitomized by Muhammad Dahlan, the most corrupt chief of one of the rival repressive "security" apparatuses that Arafat kept under his control on a pattern familiar to autocratic Arab regimes.

The electoral victory of Hamas is a resounding slap in the face of the Bush administration. As the latest illustration of the sorcerer's apprenticeship that U.S. policy in the Middle East has so spectacularly displayed, it is the final nail in the coffin of its neocon-inspired, demagogic and deceitful rhetoric about bringing "democracy" to the "Greater Middle East." It is, of course, too early to make any safe prediction at this point regarding what will happen on the ground. It is possible, however, to make a few observations and prognoses:

Hamas does not have a social incentive for collaboration with the Israeli occupation, at least not in any way resembling that of the PLO-originated PA apparatuses: it has actually been thrown into disarray by its own victory, as it would certainly have preferred the much more comfortable posture of being a major parliamentary opposition force to the PA.

Therefore, it takes a lot of self-deception and wishful thinking to believe that Hamas will adapt to the conditions laid out by the U.S. and Israel. Collaboration is all the less likely given that the Israeli government, under the leadership of the new Kadima party founded by Sharon, will continue his policy, taking full advantage of the election result that suits its plans so well, and making impossible any accommodation with Hamas. Moreover, Hamas faces an outbidding rival represented by "Islamic Jihad," which boycotted the election.

In order to try to rescue the very sensitive Palestinian component of overall U.S. Middle East policy that it managed to steer into dire straits, the Bush administration will very likely consider three possibilities. One would be a major shift in the policies of Hamas, bought by and mediated by the Saudis; this is, however, unlikely for the reason stated above and would be long and uncertain.

Another would be fomenting tension and political opposition to Hamas in order to provoke new elections in the near future, taking advantage of the vast presidential powers that Arafat had granted himself and that Mahmoud Abbas inherited, or just by having the latter resign, thus forcing a presidential election.

For such a move to be successful, or meaningful at all, there is a need for a credible figure that could regain a majority for the traditional Palestinian leadership; but the only figure having the minimum of prestige required for this role is presently Marwan Barghouti, who — from his Israeli jail cell — made an alliance with Dahlan prior to the election. It is therefore likely that Washington will exert pressure on Israel for his release.
A third possibility would be the "Algerian scenario" — referring to the interruption of the electoral process in Algeria by a military junta in January 1992 — which is already envisaged, according to reports in the Arab press: the repressive apparatuses of the PA would crack down on Hamas, impose a state of siege and establish a military-police dictatorship.

Of course, a combination of the last two scenarios is also possible, postponing the crackdown until political conditions are created, that are more suitable for it.

Any attempt by the U.S. and the European Union to starve the Palestinians into submission by interrupting the economic aid that they grant them would be disastrous for both humanitarian and political reasons and should be opposed most vigorously.

The catastrophic management of U.S. policy in the Middle East by the Bush administration, on top of decades of clumsy and shortsighted U.S. imperial policies in this part of the world, has not yet born all its bitter fruit.

The author thanks Steve Shalom for his editing and very useful suggestions.

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## Report on the international situation

### François Sabado

We reproduce here the written version of the report which François Sabado presented to the International Committee in February 2006 to introduce the debate on the international situation.

The international situation is characterised by a major contradiction between the deepening of neoliberal counter-reforms and popular resistance to neoliberalism.

There is popular rejection, there is a very deep crisis of political and ideological legitimacy but the steamroller of neoliberalism continues to advance. That leads to a great electoral instability, above all in the dominated countries.

### I. Some characteristics of the neoliberal counter-reforms.

a) We are witnessing, in a certain sense, the installation of a new mode of accumulation of capitalism. There is a generalisation on the world scale of the main tendencies of capitalist globalisation:  
- financialisation of the economy but a new growth of industry and services in certain countries (emergent countries or specialisation for some key countries, new technologies in the US and equipment goods in Germany).  
- continuation of privatisation  
- deregulation  
- tendencies towards the unification of the labour market on a world scale.

These main tendencies develop on the basis of an integration in the world market of new sectors like the countries of Eastern Europe, Russia and China.

They have led to rates of growth in the world economy which average 4-5% with rates of 8-10% in the developing countries or in China.

b) World growth is drawn by three locomotives: the USA, China and India. 5% for the USA and 10% for China, without forgetting India with more than 7%.

Nonetheless the dynamic of US growth remains unhealthy. It rests on a basis of huge deficits: a trade deficit of 6% of GDP, a budget deficit of more than 4.5%. Americans buy more than they produce and spend more than they own, in particular because of a brutal policy of tax cuts for the rich and an explosion of arms spending.

This policy risks being aggravated with the rise in prices of raw materials.

External indebtedness is financed mainly by China and Japan, notably through the purchase of US treasury bonds. Internal indebtedness - resulting from a high level of household consumption - is paid for by a systematic policy of credit, in particular in the area of property. There is now a huge property bubble in the USA which accounts for more than 50% of jobs created in the recent period.

Things are holding together, and the entire chain of the world economy and capital has an interest in the system continuing to hold. It should be said that anti-crisis mechanisms have been used to contain crises leading to potential collapse - since the crises of 1994, 1997 and 2001 in Argentina, there has not been anything similar - but for how long will that hold?

c) This new phase of the world economy also involves a reorganisation. There is a rise in power of the "emergent countries", China but above all India and Brazil, even if Brazil has had mediocre growth rates in the recent period. The discussions of the WTO and the role played by India and Brazil,
who have negotiated new positions for their economy, in particular the agro-export sector, are an indication of this. The positions taken by Brazil and Argentina on the question of the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) and involvement in Mercosur are a second indication. Socio-economic and political capacities - the ability to manage mass movements - to create the conditions for a temporary stabilisation form a third element.

d) In this phase of growth of the world economy, Europe is “dragging its feet”, with rates of 1% to 2% and a certain weakening in the face of world competition. The current phase of globalisation also has a specific dimension in the USA/China/Europe competition. The contradiction between the growing integration of “old Europe” in globalisation and its weak growth rates, like its unfavourable position at the level of monetary policy - a euro which is too strong faced with a weak dollar - lead to a hardening of all bourgeois economic policies, notably in France and in Germany.

The European “social models” are, in the eyes of the neoliberals who want to smash them, an obstacle in the competition between the great powers. Targets of these policies: the deregulation of social relations, the smashing of the labour code in France, the liquidation of the rights of the jobless in Germany and so on. In any case, in a country like France, the right is now attempting to liquidate the fixed duration contract of employment (the “CDI”) - which was the typical work contract - in favour of work contracts allowing employers to dismiss workers without explanation from one day to another. That exists in other countries but in France it amounts to a major turning point. This aggravation of competition can even lead some European countries or the European Union to attempt protectionist policies.

e) Finally, far from disappearing, the role of states is also still decisive. More precisely they are regrouping, focusing on the defence of the interests of the dominant classes, abandoning a series of social domains. States are concentrated on the policy of economic liberalisation, but also form an instrument in the economic war and in competition. We witness the authoritarian hardening of states, against the social movements and the revolts or explosions linked to the increasing precariousness of the living conditions of millions of people, and in immigration policies. We witness above all the hardening of states in the policy of armament and political-military domination of key territories, as shown by the US in Iraq and in central Asia. Capitalist globalisation is accompanied by armed globalisation. The state has a strategic place in these developments.

II. Contradictions and popular resistance

a) There will be a specific discussion on this subject, but one of the major expressions of these contradictions is concentrated in the US war against Iraq. The resistance of the Iraqi people, its will for independence and self-determination has until today counteracted the plans of US imperialism. This latter cannot withdraw without losing face.

The risk of becoming bogged down, indeed of a new Vietnam, is now regularly raised in the US press. It should also be noted that the difficulties in Iraq weaken the US in other sectors, like Latin America, where despite the maintenance of their political and military plans - notably plan Colombia - the US appears as a power whose strength can be contested.

b) In Europe, the brutality of the capitalist attacks and the headlong rush of the dominant classes into neoliberalism provoke situations of social and political crisis.

On the social plane, there can be resistance (although in recent months, the curve of social struggles has tailed off, the situation remains explosive, the mobilisation against the “first job contract” beginning in France is a new proof of it), there can also be movements of opinion like the “no” in the referendums in France and in Holland. The sentiment of a “no” to capitalist Europe is globally a majority sentiment: in France it is a majority which is markedly left in character, but in other countries it also includes sectors and parties of the right and indeed far right.

Capitalist brutality provokes crises of political representation on the right, opening spaces for the far right and the fascist or nationalist movements, but it also creates contradictions on the left. We will see them in the discussion on Europe. There are the apparatuses of social democracy which remain on the terrain of neoliberalism, but a whole series of sectors reacting against social liberal adaptation which is increasingly neoliberal. That has been the case in France with Laurent Fabius, the socialist left, but also with the Linkspartei in Germany, where Oskar Lafontaine accompanied by the ex CP has refused to follow Schröder to the end. Which is a step forward for the German workers’ movement and which should be accompanied. We have discussed this question with the comrades of the RSB, [1] with whom we have a divergence on this terrain: even if these steps forwards are partial, even if there are steps backwards as in the French PS where the socialist left and Fabius again rejoined the leadership at the last congress, it is necessary to take these advances into account.

This also created a debate in the Communist parties, which in general adapt to social liberalism. The shift of Italy’s Party of Communist Refoundation towards the centre-left is the last example, after the choices of Spain’s United Left and those of the ex-Communists of East Germany. The French Communists are for the moment at a crossroads, torn between links to the left “No” movement which has an anti-neoliberal dynamic and on the other hand the demands of a strategy of alliances with the PS to maintain their parliamentary and municipal positions.

c) It is in Latin America that this contradiction between neoliberalism and popular resistance is at its most explosive. There is a marked shift to the left in Latin America, with the recent defeats of the right and the coming to power of social liberals in countries like Uruguay or Chile, and the prob-
able defeats of the right in Mexico, Costa Rica, or Nicaragua. But also with the victory of Morales in Bolivia. Soon Colombia will be the only big country to remain as the direct relay of Washington.

In this context, there is a first polarisation between imperialism and the reactionary or putschist right who have a strategy of confrontation. The intervention of the right is often the factor which radicalises the process.

The US intervenes regularly on this line since Miami. There is Plan Colombia. There are the interventions of paramilitaries here and there. We should not forget the quotation that Chavez takes from Trotsky: “The revolution often advances often under the lash of the counter-revolution”.

There is a second polarisation between on the one hand the social liberals (Lula, Kirshner, Tabare Vazquez, Bachelet, Palacios, Duarte and tomorrow Lopez Obrador in Mexico and Ortega in Nicaragua) and on the other, Cuba, Chavez, Morales... and a question mark over Ollanta Umalla in Peru.

This second polarisation is more muffled. First for reasons of state and because of the popular aspiration to a project of Latin American integration. Faced with US imperialism, all look to another America. They have rejected the FTAA, but Brazil and Argentina put the accent on Mercosur, having previously integrated Venezuela into it, while Chavez and Castro stress above all the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA).

But it is necessary to take the full measure of the Kirshner and Lula project. Strengthened by the new positions of their countries, they can play on Mercosur, rest on their capacities to master the mass movement, the fact that they have succeeded in imposing a certain stabilisation. They have a real autonomy in the context of globalisation, even if on the medium term there is no place for a new Peronist or Cardenist project as in the 1930s in Mexico or the 1950s in Argentina.

There are two key issues:
- the first concerns Chavez. Can Lula and Kirshner draw him to the right and lead him to new agreements with imperialism?
- the other concerns Morales. Who will win him over? Chavez or Lula and Kirshner?

These are the two central issues for in all the mechanism in place - option of confrontation or option of negotiation in a social liberal framework - there are two flies in the ointment : Chavez and Morales...

We will discuss Venezuela. But Bolivia is the other country in ferment, where the situation is explosive. There is a mass movement there which retains the initiative: the co-ordinations of the landless have from the earliest days mobilised for a negotiation with Morales and there is pressure from a whole series of other associations. If Venezuela is dominated by Chavez, Bolivia is still for the moment dominated by the explosive character of the social movement. Evo Morales will not be Lula, firstly because the social pressure is much stronger. Then, in his declarations and initiatives (in relation to the army top brass, in cutting his salary by 57 %) he shows a certain direction.

There are certainly other forces : that of Santa Cruz, that in his own camp of the vice-president who is favourable to an Andean capitalism, but the situation remains open, very open. And we should concentrate our attention on these two countries.

III. Our tasks

a) To discuss of our solidarity tasks with the people of Iraq against the war and with Venezuela. To develop solidarity collectives, to talk about the Venezuelan experience, familiarise youth with the Bolivarian process. We should discuss solidarity brigades.

To combine the social and the democratic question: the social question in defending the social emergency programmes in defence of elementary demands but emerging into public and social appropriation, sovereignty over natural resources considered as common goods, enlarging the notion of the common good, to pose the problem of ownership in new terms.

To support in Latin America, but also in the movement for global justice, the perspective advanced by Chavez of the “Socialism of the 21st century”. There are, of course, many generalities in this formula, but we must enter fully into this debate, as we have done with the leaflet in Caracas. Because in putting the accent on socialism, there is the question of the rupture with capitalism.

c) Finally, the new coordinates of the social situation and of international politics confirm the possibility and the necessity of building of new “broad anti-capitalist parties”. Not as a uniform continental tactic, but taking account of the specificities of each situation. Because we face a difficulty, namely the lack of synch between struggles, the levels of combativeness and the levels of consciousness. There is no mechanical link between the two. We still have many difficulties on the level of a perspective of anti-capitalist transformation and it is this which gives more margins of manoeuvre to the radical reformist forces. But only before the tests of government because afterwards the problems are posed in other terms.

That involves putting at the centre a genuinely anti-capitalist programme and a perspective of a workers’ government against any form of participation in coalition governments.

In Europe, that implies a discussion with the Italian PRC or certain sectors of the Linkspartei who seek an agreement with the SPD in Berlin.

In Latin America, while integrating the experiences of even partial anti-imperialist rupture, while supporting, for example, the Bolivarian alternative, it is necessary to develop an anti-capitalist alternative to social liberalism. It is on this terrain that we situate our support for the PSOL, as for the organisations, currents or individuals which seek to deepen from inside the Bolivarian process and also the
Mexican left which is in the other campaign of the Zapatistas.

It is on this terrain that we propose a European meeting of the anti-capitalist left in May and also the relaunch of our activities in Latin America in particular.

* François Sabado is a member of the Political Bureau of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, French section of the Fourth International), and of the Executive Bureau of the Fourth International.

NOTES

[1] The Revolutionary Socialist League (RSB) is one of the sectors of the German section of the Fourth International. Its viewpoint on this subject was published in the September 2005 edition of IV. The July 2005 edition contains the viewpoint adopted by the other sector of the German section, the International Socialist Left.

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War in Iraq

Endless war

What stands behind the US drive to endless war?

Phil Hearse

In promoting his recently published Quadrennial Defence Review, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld spoke of a “generation-long war”, projecting thirty years of unceasing combat against radical Islam.

In promoting his recently published Quadrennial Defence Review, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld spoke of a “generation-long war”, projecting thirty years of unceasing combat against radical Islam.

The changes proposed to the US military plans involve more Special Forces and an ability to simultaneously undertake numerous flexible ‘irregular warfare’ missions. The message couldn’t be clearer: the US will plough on with the use of unbridled militarism as its key mechanism for sustaining its world position.

After three years since the start of the Iraq, where is the US in this project? To answer that we have to look at why the war was launched and what the neocon elite in Washington wants. Their aim is very simple, and very hard to achieve - control of the world order.

That doesn’t mean the impossible Utopia of direct control of the internal affairs of every country. What it means is that every significant country, and certainly every major power, has to make relations with the United States determine everything else about their international economic-political relations. Then the US will continue to hold all the key levers of power which give the United States unique access everywhere and enable it, uniquely, to live well beyond its means by sucking in vast loans and tribute from East Asia and elsewhere.

For this the strike in Iraq was vital. The idea that the war was about oil is simplistic, but of course it contains an important element of truth. Occupying Iraq and thus controlling the world’s largest proven reserves of oil, but also vitally having strategic dominance of the vital oil routes out of the Middle East gives the United States an unparalleled power and massively reinforces US clout with East Asia (especially Japan) and Europe.

But more than that, the strategic axis of US military-political policy is the domination of the Eurasian landmass.

This means pushing into central Asia, which in turn is part of the long-term objective of disrupting Chinese regional dominance or the re-emergence of Russia as a significant power. With the collapse of the Soviet Union a vast strategic void opened up in central Asia.

This is where US, Russian and Chinese interests intersect and this where the US is extremely keen to stabilise a significant military presence - in countries like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - in all of which the US has backed extremely repressive regimes.

In addition the massive US intervention into the so-called ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine is part of the process of bringing US-friendly regimes to all key parts of the Eurasian landmass, and denying Russia influence.

Connected with the drive against Chinese influence is the return of US soldiers to the Philippines, another part of the jigsaw of military encirclement.

Taking hits worldwide

Focus on the Middle East has meant the US taking hits worldwide in terms of influence and ability to call the shots. Most stark is the case of Latin America, where the ‘war on terror’ has virtually no traction or popular appeal, and where the election of Evo Morales
of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) as president in Bolivia and above all the deepening of the Bolivarian revolutionary process in Venezuela are serious blow to American plans.

Ideologically these developments are vitally important. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and the vast popular movement which led to the election of Evo Morales are giving for the first time in a generation an arithmetic content to the algebraic formula of another world is possible - the only possible one, socialism!

It’s true that Bolivia especially, but also Venezuela, don’t threaten US economic interests much. But the political impact of people calling themselves socialists being in government is immense. It gives a greater political space for opposition movements, but also for moderate pro-capitalist governments like Lula’s in Brazil, to manoeuvre and defy US policies.

And in the long term the regrowth of socialist movements in the region is really bad news for the US.

At the same time, overall the ‘war on terror’ has little popular support in East Asia, except perhaps in Indonesia. South Korea, a lynchpin for decades in the US order of battle, has become a basket case for US influence.

Anti-communist fear of the North has lost its hold and indeed support for reunification of North and South on a nationalist, anti-American basis, is massive.

**So much so that the line**

expressed by sections of the South Korean military top brass is “a reunit ed Korea with its own nuclear bomb”! Korean trade links with China are now pervasive; China is Korea’s one indispensable economic partner.

As in Latin America, the US is paying the political price for neoliberal globalisation in its cruelest form - “privatisation by expropriation”. When the South Korean economy crashed in 1997 World Bank president James Wolfenson declared “Now there will be many opportunities for globalisa-

*Phil Hearse, a veteran revolutionary socialist in Britain, writes for Socialist Resistance.*

**Regime of accumulation**

The basic thrust of Donald Rumsfeld’s military Quadrennial Review is easy to understand. Step up the ‘war against terror’, whip the US’s allies into line and demand they provide more resources for it, and prepare for stepped up US military activism in the Horn of Africa and Central Asia.

Despite all the political hits the Bush administration is taking at home, including George Bush’s falling popularity ratings and the deepening unpopularity of the war, the truth is that no major strategic alternative to the Rumsfeld-Cheney endless war is emerging in mainstream politics.

Democrats and Republicans both have eyes fixed on the November 7 Senate and governor elections, and the Democrats and Republican critics like John McCain are running scared of being accused of being ‘soft on the war on terror’.

This of course is the main strength of the necon coalition - the near unanimous support they get for the basic thrust from mainstream politicians and the dire mass media in the US itself.

This is enabling them to rather easily ride the endless revelations about the brutality of their torture chambers and the deepening brutality of the war itself.

Despite the large and vibrant US anti-war movement, all this has long-term negative consequences. The war on terror is becoming an organising principle of US politics long-term, like the anti-communist Cold War before it, a political regime, a “regime of accumulation”.

Such regimes limit the discourse of official politics, create new reactionary norms on surveillance and civil liberties, swivel the economy to higher allocations to the military, baptise torture and murder as the defence of freedom, heighten racism and xenophobia and bathe the whole of public life in a reactionary atmosphere.

What the anti-war and other progressive movements in the United States need now is that their struggle is boosted and magnified 100 times on an international basis.
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Into a new and better century

The International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) is a research and educational centre based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in the service of progressive activists around the world.

The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action

Iain Bruce editor

IIRE/Pluto Press,
Notebook for Study and Research no. 35/36
(162 pp., € 19.20, £12.99, $23.50)

Brazilian socialists André Passos Cordeiro, Ubiratan de Souza, Pepe Vargas, Raul Pont and João Machado describe in The Porto Alegre Alternative how Porto Alegre’s participatory budget was born, how it works, how it developed in interaction with popular movements and spread with local Workers’ Party (PT) victories, and how it has staked out new ground in promising a radically democratic alternative in the interests of the poor to top-down political and economic decision-making. They argue that the ‘Porto Alegre’ model does offer an alternative to capitalist politics as usual, but that Brazilian President Luis Ignacio da Silva (‘Lula’) unfortunately does not seem to have learned its lessons. As editor Iain Bruce writes, the participatory budget’s linkage of socialism and direct democracy takes up ‘an inescapable task for those seeking to restate the case for socialism in the twenty-first century, in an idiom that makes sense to the new generations coming to politics after Seattle and the immense movement against war in Iraq’.

Iain Bruce is a British journalist and filmmaker who has made documentaries for Channel 4 and the BBC. His latest documentary touches on Porto Alegre and its connection with the wider global justice movement.
International Viewpoint, the monthly English-language magazine of the Fourth International, is a window to radical alternatives world-wide, carrying reports, analysis and debates from all corners of the globe. Correspondents in over 50 countries report on popular struggles, and the debates that are shaping the left of tomorrow.

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