

International VIEWPOINT

International Viewpoint—magazine of the Fourth International

IV467 December 2013

The euro crisis and contradictions between countries in the periphery and centre of the European Union

BULGARIA:

The wave of protests, 2012-2013

Belgium:

Bulgaria:

USA:

Spanish state

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Germany

Environment

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Britain

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Philippines solidarity

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Denmark

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BELGIUM:

Elections 2014: the LCR-SAP will campaign with the PTB

LCR-SAP SECRETARIAT ·

The sacrifices imposed on the majority of the population aggravate deficits and recession. But the dominant class continues to pursue them. Why? Because its objective is not purely economic but strategic: it wishes to break social resistance, dismantle what remains of the "welfare state", reduce the public sector to its simplest expression and structurally weaken the trade unions. The drift of the employers' discourse on competitiveness is revealing: for the bosses, it is no longer enough that "labour costs" are aligned with other European countries — it is henceforth in the context of the world market, faced with the "emergent" capitalism of China and elsewhere, that workers on the old continent should be "competitive".

The EU, capitalist war machine

The European Union and its governments are at the service of this cruel and unjust policy. The very structure of the EU is in fact a capitalist war machine, and provides an alibi to national governments: "It's not us, it's Europe", they say. But Europe is them! The new European treaty (TSCG) which inscribes the "golden rule" in marble, is down to them! The Fortress Europe which repels, imprisons and deports asylum seekers is down to them. The Council, the sole body of effective power, is made up of heads of state and of government. The European Parliament has virtually no real power. The Commission, alone authorised to propose legislative initiatives, is made up of member states.

The influence of the employers' lobbies has recently again been highlighted by the draft Commission communication on the electricity market. This text has been dictated by the fossil fuel sector and the Round Table of European industrialists. The employers want less renewable fuels and more shale gas powered stations as in the United States — to cut costs. And so much the worst for climatic disasters, the danger of which has nonetheless been shown by the typhoon which has ravaged the Philippines! The fact that a former Goldman Sachs employee — Mario Draghi — heads the European Central Bank is symbolic: all these institutions are linked to big capital which exploits labour and pillages natural resources.

Social neoliberalism

Needless to say, social democracy is collaborating in the offensive of social regression and ecological destruction. In Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal... everywhere, the "socialist" parties have applied the neoliberal and productivist programme. In Belgium, the PS and Sp.a [1] have been in government for twenty five years. A lesser evil? No: as in other countries, the "socialists" have actively contributed to the dismantling of numerous social conquests (early retirement rights or unemployment benefits) and public services (under-financed, deregulated or indeed privatised), to the security crackdown and the transformation of taxation at the service of the employers and the wealthiest. They are now ready to attack the trade union counter power, by breaking collective agreements and discrediting workers' struggles. As in other countries, this favours a slide to the right in public opinion: a rise of racism, Islamophobia, sexism, of each for themselves and the far right.

The polarisation to the right coincides in Belgium with a community polarisation. This specificity should not lead to the false conclusion that the PS and the Sp.a are the last rampart against a division of social security. Behind the scenes, the PS has already agreed with the MR [2] and the Cdh [3]. And that of the far right. What message does the president of the PS give when, as mayor, he criminalises begging in Charleroi? Who, if not the far right, benefits from the police violence that the PS mayors of Brussels and Saint-Josse have unleashed against Afghans and against the squatters at the [former convent of] Gèsu? A dangerous dynamic is established, paving the way to coalitions still more to the right — with or without the PS and Sp.a.

2014, what is at stake?

It is in this general context that we must locate the parliamentary, regional and European elections of May 2014. What is at stake for the left? Continuing a policy which, in the name of the lesser evil, plans the exclusion of tens of thousands of the unemployed? No, the argument that "without the PS it would be worse" is "an insult to our intelligence" — as the regional secretary of the FGTB of Charleroi, Daniel Piron puts it. The real issue is to open a first breach in the social democratic and Green monopoly over "left" parliamentary representation. To provide an anti-austerity political solution to the despair and anger which is accumulating in a section of society. To show to the PS and Sp.a that the time is coming when they can no longer fool their social base with fine promises, thrown aside when the elections are over. To set up a marker towards a new political expression of the exploited and oppressed.

Almost everywhere in Europe, the degeneration of social democracy (and the Greens) is freeing up political space for left forces. Belgium has until now been an exception. This is the result of a multitude of factors: social democratic control over the trade union base and the low political level of the social movements on the one hand, and the Stalinist sectarianism of the main left formation — the PTB [4]

— and the inability of others to unite on a lasting basis around an innovative anti-capitalist project, on the other. However, this situation is changing. Two elements witness to this:

1. The evolution of the PTB, which has allowed it to grow and realise an initial breakthrough in the communal and provincial elections of October 2012;
2. The fact that more and more trades unionists and activists from other social movements understand the need to fight also at the level of a political alternative.

Taking responsibility

The LCR has thus decided to stare reality in the face and take responsibility, having in mind the interests of the workers as a whole. In Flanders, our comrades of the SAP have concluded an agreement with the PTB: we will be present on the PVDA+ lists. The common press release of the two organisations is clear: "For the first time in a long while, the elections of May 2014 offer the possibility, by a vote for the PTB+, to have left elected representatives ... which will give a clear voice to the fight against austerity policies... The PTB and the SAP have a different vision on a number of questions. By this agreement, we strengthen the left. Thus, we can help advance the fight against austerity, unemployment and for a radically social, ecological and democratic alternative|".

The situation in Francophone Belgium is different: the PTB is not as hegemonic there as in Flanders. Above all, the appeal of the FGTB of Charleroi-Sud Hainaut and the echo it has received (notably in the CNE) allow hopes for a first step in the direction of a deep going recomposition of the workers' movement, both at the political/electoral level and at the social/trade union level. This chance should be seized. That is why the LCR has worked for months on a proposal which responds to four objectives: the desire of the trade union left to set up a marker towards a unitary political alternative to the left of the PS and Ecolo [5], the legitimate concern of the PTB not to abandon its profile, the autonomy of

other left formations and the desire of independent "personalities" to participate in the process.

Emergency anti-capitalist programme

Success will depend in the first place on the PTB. It has the cards in its hands. In Francophone Belgium, the "emergency anti-capitalist programme" of the FGTB of Charleroi-Sud Hainaut constitutes a solid contribution to the regroupment of forces. It is mainly on this basis that the LCR will take its responsibilities. We hope that others will do the same, because today it is the only way for the appeal of Daniel Piron and his comrades to receive an initial political and electoral form – and it is essential that it receives one, however imperfect. The LCR (and the SAP in Flanders) maintain their complete political independence in relation to the PTB. We will lead our own campaign by calling for a vote of preference for our own candidates who will defend our programme: anti-capitalist, internationalist, feminist, eco-socialist.

Some will claim perhaps that the "the LCR is kow-towing to the PTB" and so on. It is ridiculous. "They are them, we are us". We prove it in solidarity with the Syrian revolution, in the fight against the trade union bureaucracy and patriarchy, in the defence of eco-socialism and the self-organisation of struggles. As the Flanders press release says: "the PTB and the SAP have a different vision on a number of questions". At the same time, the PTB is changing, everyone can see it. We follow its evolution, hoping it will break with Mao-Stalinism without breaking with anti-capitalism... and without adopting the purely verbal pseudo-radical posture of the Greek or Portuguese CPs. But these questions, important as they are, will not stop us from loyally campaigning so that Raoul Hedebouw and Peter Mertens are elected to the Chamber... and all the better if they are not alone. Our wish: that this is the beginning of a new period of common left struggles.

This statement by the LCR-SAP secretariat was published on November 15, 2013 on the LCR-La Gauche website

The euro crisis and contradictions between countries in the periphery and centre of the European Union

ÉRIC TOUSSAINT ·

The crisis that started in the United States in 2007-2008, hit the European Union head on in 2008, and has been causing major problems in the eurozone since 2010. Banks from the strongest European countries are responsible for spreading this plague from the United States to Europe, because they had invested massively in structured financial products. It is important to explain why this crisis has struck the European Union and the eurozone harder than the United States.

18 of the 28 countries in the European Union share a common currency, the euro. [2] The population of the EU is about 500 million people, [3] about half the population of China, Africa, or India, 2/3 of Latin America, and 50% more than the USA.

There are major differences between countries in the European Union. Germany, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, and Austria are the most highly industrialised and powerful countries in the EU. 11 countries are from the ex-Eastern European bloc (3 Baltic Republics — Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia; Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, which were part of the Soviet bloc, and Slovenia and Croatia, which were part of Yugoslavia). Finally, come Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, and Cyprus, which have been brutalised by the eurozone crisis.

Large private corporations are taking advantage of wage discrepancies

Wage discrepancies are very significant: the minimum wage in Bulgaria (in 2013, the gross monthly salary is 156 euros) is less than one tenth of what it

is in countries like France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. [4] Wage discrepancies within European Union countries can also be very significant. In Germany, 7.5 million employees earn a paltry monthly salary of 400 euros, whereas the normal monthly salary in Germany is more than 1200 euros (there is no national legal minimum wage in Germany).

This discrepancy enables major European corporations, particularly German industrial corporations to be very competitive, because they outsource part of their production to countries like Bulgaria, Romania or to other Central and Eastern European countries, and then transport the parts back to Germany where they are assembled into final products. Finally, they export within the EU or to the global market after having cut the cost of wages to the bone. To top it all off, they pay no import/export taxes within the EU.

Increasingly large differences between countries

The EU's refusal to develop coherent policies to help the new members to reduce their economic disadvantages with respect to the wealthiest European countries has greatly contributed to exacerbating these structural differences, and thereby undermining the EU integration process. The European treaties have been designed to serve the interests of the major private corporations, which benefit from the differences between the economies in the EU to increase their profits and be more competitive.

The EU budget is minuscule: it only represents 1% of the EU's gross domestic product, whereas a normal budget of an industrialised country would represent 45-50% or more of its GDP, as is the case of the United States federal budget and the French

national budget. To give an idea of just how minuscule the budget managed by the European Commission is, it is comparable to that of Belgium that has 10 million inhabitants (1/50 of the EU population), and nearly 50% is earmarked for the common agricultural policy.

The crisis was not caused by foreign competition

The crisis is not due to competition from China, South Korea, Brazil, India or other emerging countries.

For the past 10 years, Germany (and also the Netherlands and Austria) has been pursuing a neo-mercantilist trade policy: it has succeeded in increasing its exports, particularly within the European Union and the eurozone by squeezing workers' wages in Germany. [5] It has thereby increased its competitiveness compared to its partners and in particular countries like Greece, Spain, and Portugal, and even Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (which are not part of the eurozone). A trade deficit has piled up in these countries with respect to Germany and other stronger European economies.

The euro straitjacket

When the euro was created, the German currency was undervalued (as requested by Germany) and the currencies of weaker countries were overvalued. That made German exports more competitive in the markets of other European countries, and the weakest, such as Greece, Portugal, Spain, and the Central and Eastern European countries were the hardest hit.

Generally speaking, within the EU, the debt of peripheral countries is essentially due to the behaviour of the private sector (banks, construction companies, big industry, and trade). Incapable of competing with the strongest economies, the private sector in these countries has gone into debt vis-à-vis banks in Europe's Central economies (Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Luxemburg,...) and domestic agents, since

the economies of these countries have experienced a high degree of financialization since they adopted the euro. Consumption boomed in the countries concerned, and in some of them such as Spain, a real estate bubble developed and subsequently burst. The governments in these countries came to the rescue of the banks, leading to a major increase in public debt.

Obviously, countries that are in the eurozone cannot devalue their own currency, since it is now the euro. Likewise, countries like Greece, Portugal, and Spain are in a catch-22 situation due to their eurozone membership. European authorities and their national governments have been applying what has come to be called internal devaluation: they impose wage cuts on employees, which are transformed into profits for the directors of major private corporations. Internal devaluation is therefore synonymous with decreased wages. It is used to increase competitiveness; however, it has not proven to be very effective in terms of creating economic growth because at the same time austerity policies and salary cuts have been applied in all of the countries concerned. On the other hand, corporate directors are very happy, because they have been long intent on radically cutting wages. From this point of view, the eurozone crisis, which became very acute as of 2010-2011 has been a godsend for corporate directors. The legal minimum wage has been drastically cut in Greece, Ireland, and other countries.

A single capital market and a single currency

Whereas the crisis first erupted in the United States in 2007, its impact has been much more violent on the European Union than on US political and financial institutions. In fact, the crisis that has been shaking the eurozone is not a surprise. It is an avatar of the two principles governing this zone: a single capital market and a single currency. More broadly speaking, it is the consequence of the mindset shaping European integration, which is based on the priority given to the interests of major private industrial and financial corporations, the active promotion of private interests, the fact that

within the eurozone, economies and producers of unequal strength have been put in direct competition with each other, the desire to withdraw a growing number of activities from the public services; the competition created between employees from and within different countries, and the refusal to standardise employees' health care and other social rights upwards. All of these aspects are part of a clear objective – to favour the accumulation of the maximum amount of profit for the private sector, in particular by providing Capital with a labour force that is as malleable and precarious as possible.

The private banks have a monopoly for lending money to the States

In reply to my explanation, some might retort that the same mindset shapes the US economy. We must therefore also consider other factors: whereas the credit needs of the governments of other developed countries, including the United States, can be satisfied by their central bank, notably by printing money, eurozone member states have relinquished this possibility. The European Central Bank is legally forbidden from directly financing its Member States. In addition, in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty, financial solidarity between Member States is expressly forbidden. According to Article 125, the Member States must assume alone their financial commitments – neither the Union nor the other Member States can be liable for or assume them. [6] Article 101 of the Maastricht Treaty, [7] which was included word for word in the Lisbon Treaty, [8] adds:

"Overdraft facilities or any other type of credit facility with the ECB or with the central banks of the Member States [...] in favour of Community institutions or bodies, central governments, regional, local or other public authorities, other bodies governed by public law, or public undertakings of Member States shall be prohibited."

We see then that the EU voluntarily serves the interests of the financial markets, for even in normal times the governments of eurozone countries are

totally dependent on the private sector for their funding needs. Institutional investors (banks, pension funds, and insurance companies) and hedge funds pounced on Greece in 2010, because it was the weakest link in the European debt chain, before attacking Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Italy. By acting this way, they made juicy profits, because they were highly remunerated in terms of the interest rates paid by the various government agencies to refinance their debt. Private banks made the highest profits among these institutional investors, because they could borrow money directly from the European Central Bank at a 1% rate of interest, [9] while at the same time, offering 90-day loans to Greece at rates of 4% to 5%.

By launching their attacks against the weakest links, the banks and other institutional investors were also convinced that the European Central Bank and the European Commission would be forced to assist the States that were victims of speculation by lending them money that would enable them to continue paying back their debts. They were right. In collaboration with the IMF, the European Commission gave in, and used the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) to grant loans to some eurozone Member States (Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus), so that they could first pay back the private banks of the wealthiest countries in the UE. This action was in violation of the aforementioned Article 125 in the Lisbon Treaty. However, it respected the neoliberal spirit of the Treaty: indeed, the EFSF and ESM borrow the financial resources they lend to States on the financial markets. In addition, drastic conditions have been imposed: privatisations, lower wages and pensions, layoffs in the public sector, decreases in public spending in general, and for social services, in particular.

It is worth making a small reminder. Whereas EU regulations do not allow the European Central Bank to lend to EU Member States, the situation is very different in the United States where on average the Federal Reserve loans \$40 billion per

month to the Obama administration by purchasing treasury bonds (which represents \$480 billion per year). The same is true in the United Kingdom, which is not part of the eurozone, where the Bank of England makes massive loans to the British government. The rules being applied in the eurozone are making their crisis worse than it is in the United States or the United Kingdom.

Misguided policies are exacerbating the crisis

The policies applied by the European Commission and national governments since 2010 have only worsened the crisis, and particularly in the weakest eurozone countries. By reducing government demand and market demand, the possibilities for economic growth have been more or less eliminated.

From the point of view of corporate owners, the policies proposed by European leaders are not a failure

The leaders of the wealthiest European countries and the owners of its largest corporations are very pleased that there is a common economic, trade, and political zone in which European multinationals and the economies at the centre of the eurozone can benefit from the fiascos unrolling in the peripheral eurozone countries to make corporations more profitable, and mark points vis-à-vis in terms of their competitiveness with respect to their North American and Chinese competitors. Their objective, in the current phase of the crisis, is not to revive growth and decrease the gaps between the strong and weak economies in the EU. Indeed, they believe that the economic disaster in southern Europe will present opportunities for the massive privatisation of public corporations and commodities at cut-rate prices. The intervention of the troika and the active complicity of the governments in the peripheral countries are helping them. The major capital owners in the peripheral countries are favourable to these policies, because they themselves are counting on getting a piece of the cake they have been eyeing up for so long. The privatisations in Greece and Portugal prefigure what is going to occur in Spain and Italy, where the public

commodities potentially up for grabs are much more significant given the size of these two economies.

To consider that the policies applied by European leaders have failed, because they have not produced economic growth, is to err greatly on the criteria of analysis. The goals of the ECB, the European Commission, the governments of the strongest economies, bank boards, and other big businesses are neither a quick return to growth, nor a reduction of the inequalities within the eurozone and the EU, which would create a more coherent union and a return to prosperity.

One fundamental point should not be forgotten: the ability of the technocrats, who obediently serve the interests of big business to manipulate a crisis, or a chaotic situation, in favour of Capital - they no longer bother to dissimulate their close complicity. Many high ranking politicians, ministers, and the ECB President have spent part of their careers in major financial corporations such as Goldman Sachs. Others have been rewarded by one of the big banks, with a high level post, for having faithfully applied policies favourable to finance while in office. This is nothing new, but it is more apparent and widespread than at any time over the last fifty years. There is a real "revolving doors" phenomenon at play today.

The social effects of the crisis

What wage earners and benefits claimants in Greece, Portugal, Ireland, and Spain are currently experiencing has been imposed on the developing countries since the debt crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. During the 1980s, workers in North America were also attacked, starting with the Reagan Presidency, UK workers were hit by the iron fist of Margaret Thatcher, and their neo-liberal admirers in Europe have applied the same policies. Workers in the ex-Eastern Bloc countries were also subjected to the brutality of their governments and the IMF. Then, in a less malicious manner than in the Third World (from very poor to developing) countries, German workers were attacked between 2003

and 2005. Many of them still feel the unpleasant effects today; even if Germany's exporting success [10] has reduced the effects on unemployment and part of the working classes has not directly experienced the consequences.

In Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain the crisis was worsened during 2012 – 2013 by due to the brutal austerity policies applied by the governing bodies in compliance with the Troika. In Greece, the total loss of GDP amounted to 25%, and the loss of purchasing power for much of the population has been between 30% and 50%. Unemployment and poverty have literally exploded. While in 2012 all the media and official announcements claimed that the national debt had been reduced by half, [11] the truth is quite different. Greek public debt, which was equivalent to 130% of GDP, in 2012, after debt write-downs, it had nevertheless jumped to 157% and reached a new peak of 175% in 2013. Over a similar period unemployment has grown from 21.6% in 2010 to 27% in 2013 (50% for the under 25s).

In Portugal, austerity measures have been so violent that one million Portuguese rallied spontaneously on 15 September 2012, the biggest turn-out since the 1st May 1974 celebration of the Carnation Revolution. The failure of austerity measures has caused a government crisis. In little mentioned Ireland, unemployment is enormous, 182,900 young Irish between 15 and 29 have left the country since the crisis began in 2008. One third of the youth have lost the jobs they had before the crisis. The bank bailouts have cost close to €70 billion, about 40% of Irish GDP, which amounted to €157 billion in 2011. The economy has slowed down by 20% since 2008, and the government has reaffirmed that it will eliminate 37,500 public sector jobs by 2015. In Spain, 50% of the young are unemployed, and 350,000 families have been evicted from their homes because of mortgage arrears. In 2012, the number of families in which there is not one person employed increased by 300,000 to 1.7 million (about 10% of all Spanish families). The situation in the ex-Eastern Bloc countries is getting

worse and worse, particularly those in the eurozone.

A People's Europe based on international solidarity

Only powerful popular action can halt the strategy rolled out by the dominant classes. The popular movements must build a continent-wide strategy of resistance. Leaders everywhere are using the pretext of debt to justify and impose policies that are undermining the economic and social rights of the vast majority of people. If the social movements, including the Trade Unions, really want to win this battle, they must take the debt question by the horns in order to deconstruct one of the principal arguments repeated by those in power. The essential measures needed to manage the current crisis of capitalism differently | [12] include abolishing the illegitimate part of public debt, abandoning austerity politics, heavily taxing Big Capital, expropriating the banks so they can be integrated into a public deposit and credit service, decreasing the number of hours worked, ending privatisations, and developing public services instead.

This process may start in one country, or spread from one country to another, but it cannot stop at national boundaries. An authentic constituent assembly bringing together European peoples must be created to abrogate numerous European treaties, and give rise to a federation that will be given the responsibility of, above all else, guaranteeing Human Rights in all their aspects. At the same time, policies must be implemented that break with the "productivist" consumer society, so that nature and its limits are respected. From this process will emerge a Europe of its peoples that will reconsider its relations with the rest of the World, and return to other peoples, on other continents, what has been taken from them through centuries of European domination and plundering.

Translation : Charles La Via and Mike Krolkowski

CADTM

BULGARIA:

The wave of protests, 2012-2013

MARIYA IVANCHEVA ·

First, the recurrence or persistence of a strong neo-liberal capitalist party in power – which draws on the symbolic legacy of state socialism but fervently destroys socialist welfare institutions – perpetuates a strong 'anti-communist' framing of the protests. Second, the trope of the 'hard-working middle class' – a main slogan of the transition to liberal democracy and free-market capitalism since 1989 – has made inter-class alliances between the economically vulnerable low- and high-skilled workers impossible. Last, but not least, given the decades of creation of neo-liberal hegemony in the country, 'smoothly functioning capitalism' has been seen as a solution to, and not the cause of, impoverishment, indebtedness, and precarity. These three motives, which are all present in the Bulgarian case, make it impossible to frame protests in an anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist way. They also draw a line between parallel but not coinciding waves of social protests around the world: a demarcation that might turn out to be a frontline in emergent mobilization for global social change.

The protest wave emerges

Since 2007, Bulgaria has witnessed a continuous wave of protests. Triggered by the increasing construction on protected land, they took place mostly in the capital city of Sofia. Despite the protection of Bulgarian reservations under the European Commission's Natura2000 program, a massive wave of semi-legal and unregulated construction was brokered by the Bulgarian political class and profit-seeking developers. Spots of natural signifi-

cance were turned into concrete wastelands, resulting in the destruction of water sources, soils, and natural habitats. The protest wave was paralleled by campaigns against genetically modified organisms (GMOs), shale-gas fracking, and the ACTA agreement: all framed as important assets of middle-class consumption, health, and access to education and leisure. This wave peaked in June 2012, when a new Forestry Act was passed in Parliament. The capital city's central boulevard was occupied for days by protests. Pressed by the massive unrest, the political class passed the law without the clauses concerning reservation lands.

Ecological activists hailed these protests as a success. Yet, their struggle for nature was not grounded in debates about crisis-born alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. Slogans against oligarchy and corruption have eclipsed the debate of similar practices in other sectors since 1989. In the process of mass rapid privatization and draconian austerity, governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s dismantled the infrastructure and welfare institutions of the socialist state and led millions of Bulgarians into unemployment, precariousness, or misery-forced migration. Yet, the protesters against the Forestry Act, shale-gas fracking, ACTA, and GMOs showed little solidarity with teachers, academics, students, miners, factory workers, and drivers, who marched in parallel to them in order to contest the privatization of industries and the cutting of public-sector jobs, salaries, securities, and services. Despite their use of slogans inspired by Occupy Wall Street and other anti-austerity protests, Bulgarian environmentalists did not see capitalism as a problem. Not only did they declare themselves 'anti-communist' and thus opposed to the state socialist past and its metastases in state power, but they often declared capitalism as an ideal, problematic not in its global manifestation (e.g., the crisis

since 2008, to name but its most recent failure), but in its local 'oriental' version: disrupting the consumption and leisure of the hard-working middle class.

Due to the same reasoning, in the summer of 2012, the environmental activists ignored two crucial possibilities to engage with people who were concerned not with leisure, consumption, and the long-term ecological survival of the planet, but with making ends meet. First, they haughtily ignored the counter-protest of peasants from the reservation areas, for whom the development of these regions could only mean jobs and economic survival. Second, while protests about reservation land were taking place, the environmental protesters did not challenge the 13-percent increase of the price of electricity, which occurred when they were still marching in the streets of Sofia. At that point, activists had already pointed out that the increase would mean that half of the monthly pension or minimal salary of millions of Bulgarians would go into the accounts of privatized power redistributive companies. And while no one took the topic seriously in the summer of 2012, all Bulgarians began paying a steep price for their lack of response to electricity price hikes starting in the winter of 2013.

'Civil vs. social'

In late January, Bulgarians woke up to enormous electricity bills, which many could not pay. The response was incendiary: an increased suicide rate and casualties among elderly people culminated in seven self-immolations of unemployed and working-class people. The cases did not cease during the winter: two more acts of self-immolation also occurred this past summer. The bills and the casualties catalyzed social mobilization around the country starting in the winter of 2013. Protesters were mostly rank-and-file Bulgarians: middle-aged men and women, young couples with children and students, and also a number of right-extreme football hooligans. Using different protest repertoires, they all questioned the high energy costs, mediocre living standards, and blatant corruption. The protests

were not massively joined by the environmental movements from the summer of 2012, although they also protested throughout the winter season against the Belene nuclear power plant and against new legislation that outmaneuvered the Forestry Law. Trying to please the government that made the concession in the summer, the environmentalists insisted that only the Minister of the Environment – and not the entire government – should resign. In their discourse, they said that they did not want to join the contestation of price hikes, emphasizing that they fought for 'civil' and not 'social' causes. The salvation of the Bulgarian forest was a cause of a 'civil society', while welfare, labor rights, and access to services were seen as 'social' – ergo, irrelevant – causes.

The counterproductive division between civil and social causes was reproduced in the next peak of the protest wave, which started in the summer of 2013. After clashes between protesters and the police in February 2013, the center-right government of GERB resigned and was replaced by a similarly neo-liberal government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Movement for Rights and Liberties (DPS, representing the Turkish minority in the country), and the right-extreme party Ataka. This coalition between social Democrats, ethnically based liberals, and a right-extreme party could be seen as a true contradiction in terms, yet it was completely aligned with the traditional procedure of Bulgarian political coalitions throughout the past 23 years of transition: parties of allegedly different segments of the political sector converged around the interest of global power blocks and local capitalist elites. BSP, an oligarchic structure with roots in the socialist nomenklatura, and its post-socialist national and transnational allies elected Plamen Oresharski – a financial minister of two former cabinets, declared as left- and right-wing – to head a coalition cabinet.

Oresharski's promise of reforms that would benefit the economically vulnerable Bulgarians could not suppress the moral panic among many anti-communists. They feared the return of BSP to power,

which would make Bulgaria subservient to Russian interests. Curiously, the fear of power blocks beyond Russia was mostly eclipsed. At the same time, the distrust against the new government was fueled by an increasing crisis of political representation and the apparent lack of any political and economic program that could fill the emptied state treasury. Successive appointments of oligarchic figures made the government's credit of trust quickly dissipate. The straw that broke the camel's back was the election of Delyan Peevski as Head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). Oresharski announced Peevski as a fighter for transparency, but in the eyes of most Bulgarians, the media monopolist and beneficiary of shady privatization deals was corruption incarnate. Even when Peevski resigned, people continued to go out in the streets on a daily basis. As of the writing of this article, thousands of Bulgarians (mostly high-skilled workers and students) still gather on the streets (mostly in Sofia) on a daily basis, demanding Oresharski's resignation. They equate the neo-liberal, capitalist BSP and its oligarchic parties in power and the opposition as 'communist'. As in the summer of 2012, the protesters mostly neglect the daily counter-protest staged by Bulgarians with less symbolical and economic capital: those for whom a change of the government would not mean much, whereas cosmetic reforms would mean a few more crumbs to survive the winter.

Winter vs. summer?

The protests of the summers of 2012 and 2013, in addition to those of the winter in between, seem to be part of the same protest wave in Bulgaria. Since they coincided with protests in Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, and other countries in Europe and beyond, they were also at times interpreted as part of a larger wave of anti-austerity and anti-privatization protests. Yet, the reality on the ground was more complex. While the protests during the winter were an outburst of people suffering poverty and deprivation amid the economic crisis, those in the summers of 2012 and 2013 were caused by a

moral panic of oligarchic and illiberal ruling forces. And while all of the protests made claims against the state's takeover by oligarchic networks, the February protests articulated some anti-capitalist demands for security and equality, while demands in June have either eclipsed or been watered down to claims for democratic liberties. In this, 'oligarchy' is justly equated with the current political elite. Yet, instead of seeing it for what it is – a typical state power elite, defending the interests of big capital – the Bulgarian neo-liberal oligarchy is seen as 'communist', and thus any claims against it have to be either anti-communist, or invalid and futile.

What is more, while many Bulgarians who were in the street in the winter of 2013 also came out to protest in the summer, the liberal media has taken to dividing the two waves as incompatible, using the trope of the 'middle class' borrowed from the protests of the summer of 2012. This motif eclipses the reality of those with mediocre incomes in the European Union's poorest member state, who hardly make ends meet on an average salary. Yet, the rhetoric of the 'middle class' remained present in local narratives in favor of the protests. It was used by the protesters in the summer of 2013 and also one year earlier, in order to defend their 'civil' cause of 'values' against the 'social' cause of 'starvation'. Intellectuals who sided with the protests have claimed that the split between winter and summer has been between those who read and those who don't; between those who comprehend European civilization and values, and those who don't; between the 'poor' and the 'morally indignant'; between those who can pay their bills and taxes, and those who can't afford to do so and who therefore live off of welfare. This fake division has enraged many socially minded people, and made them stop going to the protests.

At the same time, the protesters' economic demands during the winter and summer remained rather unclear and intrinsically contradictory. In the summers of 2012 and 2013, the discussions of how reservation land or public resources could be managed by the people in a more transparent way

usually drew blanks. Privatization was seen as wrong only when it hit reservation lands or when it happened in a non-transparent way. Green capitalism, green energy, low taxes for the rich, and a rapid smooth privatization to earnest and moral capitalists were some of the demands raised by the summer protests. And while they shared the concern of anti-corruption and transparency, their analysis did not see the current economic system as unjust or problematic. Western free markets and representative democracies, all shaken by substantial crises, were still idealized: 'Europe' was asked in protest slogans to help Bulgarians out of corruption. The winter protests allowed for anti-privatization rhetoric, but only initially. Once the key demand of 'the end of all monopoly' was raised, it transpired that the majority of people blamed the not-sufficiently privatized power distribution companies for the high electricity prices. They glossed over the fact that prices were kept high by a cartel agreement and because they were not regulated by the government. On the issue of political rights, winter and summer protesters also did not significantly diverge: they made various mutually incompatible demands, and the expert government, majority representatives, and direct democracy were all to be seen and heard as slogans born from the streets.

Opportunity openings and closures

All of these mutually contradictory claims have presented an equally fangless diagnosis and prognosis that would allow people to mobilize against the current political and economic system. What they

showed, more than anything, was that the amnesia of 23 years of transition to a liberal democracy and market economy has emptied the political imagination, dictionary, and repertoire of the protesters. Despite the global wave of protests against neo-liberal capitalism, it was still celebrated consensually by all parties of the Bulgarian transition, and seen by the people in the streets as the only way ahead. The prevalent 'anti-communist' frame of the protests made any appearance of a left-wing, socialist, or anti-anti-communist frame impossible. The middle-class trope precluded coalitions built with those suffering not only moral, but also economic, deprivation.

Still, a small number of critical voices emerged among the ranks of the summer protesters, who stated that they shared much in common with those who went out during the winter, but also with the summer counter-protesters: that all people are suffering from the current political and economic situation, and that precariousness is a country-wide condition. It is now their call to reframe the protests in a more inclusive way, and to make the Bulgarian protests resonate with the global wave of anti-austerity mobilization. If this does not happen, Bulgarian protesters will still remain on the opposite side of the barricade. They will increasingly represent the outrage of the peripheral wannabe elite, who wishes to maintain the powers that be in a different constellation and fight to the last drop of blood for the early transitional utopia of global capitalist prosperity – a cause that has been withering away in the core countries of the global capitalist system.

USA:

Manufacturing Bankruptcy – The assault on pensions

AGAINST THE CURRENT ·

Within a week Forbes magazine, aimed at audiences who don't rely on public sector pensions for their secure retirement, published an article proclaiming "a silver lining" to be found in the ruling. The author, Martin Fridson, believes this teaches public sector unions that it will be safer to negotiate 401(k)-type plans, which "belong" to the worker and would not figure into future municipal bankruptcies. He does not mention, of course, that such plans typically pay significantly less than the traditional defined-benefit pension plan.

The same day as Rhodes' bankruptcy ruling, the Illinois legislature cut cost-of-living raises on that state's plan. As in Michigan, Illinois public pension rights are guaranteed under the state constitution. No matter, according to Judge Rhodes' ruling. They're on the chopping block, along with all of Detroit's material assets. The pillage is on. And the implications are staggering not only for Detroiters but nationally, as the Detroit bankruptcy ruling is considered to mark new legal precedents in previously uncharted legal territory.

To understand the politics behind Detroit's manufactured bankruptcy, one has to unpack the essence of capitalism. It is capital's expropriation of assets — land, nature's resources and workers' capacity to produce — that produces wealth. There's also a clear policy of Michigan's elites: After so many years of corporate downsizing and relocation, after so many years of renovating Detroit's downtown at the expense of the neighborhoods, their "solution" is deepening austerity and abandonment for much of the city's African-American, working-class majority.

Trending Downward

It used to be that 40% of all U.S. workers received pensions. Although corporations have cut that figure in half over the last 30 years, more than 80% of all public sector workers still have defined-benefit pensions. Studies have shown that these workers make less than private-sector workers, but in this era of neoliberalism, it's the public sector workers who are on the hot seat.

The attack on pensions, which began in the corporate sector, is spreading now to a full assault on public workers. Teachers and other municipal workers are demonized as lazy and overpaid. Since proportionately more African Americans and women are public sector workers, the racism and sexism that infects our culture is an additional factor in viewing these workers as "undeserving."

State pension funds currently top \$2.6 trillion. In 15 of those states, public employees do not receive Social Security so they are entirely dependent on pensions and their own savings in their retirement. These include California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio and Texas. In Detroit, uniformed (fire and police) workers aren't in the Social Security program.

When the economy heated up in the 1990s, states were advised that they didn't need to contribute to the pension funds; high interest rates alone were enough. Since accounting standards for public sector pensions are lax, officials were able and delighted to act on that advice! Then, when the bubble burst, many states skipped their contributions as a way to balance their budgets.

As a result, two-thirds of state pensions are now considered underfunded, meaning that they do not have enough money to cover all the long-run claims of their work force. Supposedly Illinois is about

67% funded while New Jersey is at 33% and Massachusetts stands at 27%.

This underfunding, the result of bad advice by high-paid financial advisors and banks and indolence of state legislatures, also seems to be a convenient setup for the next stage of making working people pay. In April 2013 Moody's, one of the biggest rating companies, changed the way they evaluate pension assets. Instead of using a formula to smooth out market price fluctuations over a three- to five-year span, they will only count the current market value.

Another important change that Moody's instituted is to assume a yearly interest rate on investments of 4.5% rather than the 7-8% (admittedly, wildly overoptimistic in the post-2008 Great Recession climate, but historically reasonable) that had been used. In a recent article Dean Baker pointed out that over a 20-year period the difference would result in a 40% decline in value. (See Dean Baker's "The Financial Health of Public Pensions," 5/3/13 at <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs....>)

Next Stage for Detroit

The pensions that the city owes to 30,000 retirees and the thousands of active city workers now have no greater standing than any other "unsecured" creditor. "Unsecured" means that there is no stream of revenue, such as a tax or fee, dedicated to paying the debt. Of course, city workers for decades have contributed a percentage of their earnings, and the city has put in money toward these funds. Currently the two city pension boards control more than \$5 billion worth of investments. But in bankruptcy those funds are effectively up for grabs and their boards subject to dismissal by Emergency Manager Orr.

The bankruptcy process, Judge Rhodes ruled, will proceed without interruption. Next, Orr will develop a "plan of adjustment" by early 2014 and reopen negotiations with those "unsecured" creditors, including workers, who are expected to take a haircut. In reducing those obligations, Orr would sup-

posedly free up that money to rebuild the city's deteriorating infrastructure. However \$62 million has already been spent to pay multiple "consultants" for their restructuring proposals, including Orr's own former law firm Jones Day.

The big question for the shock-doctrine restructurers may be how far pensions can be cut for retired city workers — many of whom barely get by as it is — without running the risk of a political or social explosion. That may be an underlying reason why Rhodes announced that he would not necessarily rubberstamp Orr's plan.

The suggestion Orr has floated is that pensions would be tiered, with some receiving close to their current payment (an average of \$19,600 for city workers and \$30,000 for police and fire). For the current work force, at least those who become "vested" with three years seniority, their retirement contributions would be transferred to individual 401(k)-type plans, with limited city contributions. These workers, who have already taken a 20% pay cut and contribute 20% to their health care benefits, would be free to add to their account — if they can afford it! — and could expect a retirement benefit between 25% and 50% of their pay.

What then might happen to the pension boards, which are made up of officials and elected union representatives? The Emergency Manager's claim that the pensions are underfunded opens the door to seize and turn them over to the State Treasurer. According to the Emergency Manager law (PA 436) rushed through the legislature and signed by governor Rick Snyder — after a referendum vote in the November 2012 election voided the previous version, PA4 — if pension funds fall below 80% of the total obligation, the EM has the go-ahead to snatch them up. Since his appointment by the Governor in March 2013, Orr conveniently skipped the city's 2013 contribution.

The police and fire pension board maintains that it is funded at 96%, while the city pension board's funding stands at 78%. Orr asserts that both funds are significantly less healthy, and given that he

used a different formula for evaluating the funds, it's understandable how he came to such a dire conclusion. Yet one might wonder why long-term debt features so prominently in the discussion. After all, most homeowners have a longterm debt (their mortgage) but don't count the total amount owed when they are figuring up their yearly cash flow.

The banks — who have stiffed the city with huge fees, variable interest rates and taken advantage of lowered bond ratings to jack up the interest, to say nothing of foreclosing on thousands of financially distressed Detroit homeowners — aren't penalized to pay for their role in creating the mess. Quite the contrary, they're first in line for repayment, under the pretext that their loans are properly "secured" through pledged tax revenues.

A Way Out?

Demos, a public policy think tank, released a report authored by Wallace Turbeville, who examined the city's finances and concluded that its problem stems from a decline in revenue, not from obligations to the so-called legacy costs. He points out that the \$18 billion debt that Orr maintains is the city's albatross includes both "secured" debts — such as the \$5.8 billion Water and Sewerage Department debt, which is covered by the fees charged to the three million users throughout southeastern Michigan — as well as pension and health care costs. He suggests these obligations are overstated and in any case irrelevant to solving the city's cash flow problem.

Chapter 9 allows for municipal bankruptcy when it is unable to pay its debts as they come due. According to Orr's bankruptcy filing, the deficit is \$198 million for fiscal 2014.

Certainly with the city's longterm decline in jobs and infrastructure, Detroit is continuing to lose population — a 53% decline in employment and a 25% population decline between 2000-12.

What has Michigan done to help its largest city? Since 2011 alone the state has cut \$67 million a year in revenue sharing to Detroit. (About \$24 mil-

lion is the result of the decline in population, but that still leaves \$43 million that the city should have received.) It has done nothing to make sure commuters who work in private sector jobs in Detroit pay non-resident income taxes, costing the city an estimated \$30-45 million annually.

Both Democratic and Republican governors have taken over the school system, resulting in closing 200 schools, approving for-profit charters and driving the system into debt. Governor Snyder keeps telling Detroiters that he is only "trying to help" as he appoints Emergency Managers to both the city and the school system. At the same time, Snyder has enthusiastically supported Mike Ilitch's proposed downtown sports arena, offering to contribute some \$300 million in state funds.

Meanwhile, Detroit cut operating expenses by nearly 38% between 2008 and 2013 — mostly by laying off 2,350 workers, cutting pay and reducing benefits. Pension contributions were relatively flat during this period while healthcare contributions increased 3.25% per year, less than the national average of 4%. City workers protesting the bankruptcy speak from experience when they say that they have already been fleeced.

One reason for Detroit's fiscal debacle is the downturn in the stock market at the time the housing bubble burst. When mayor Kwame Kilpatrick entered into a bargain with Wall Street in 2005-06 via Certificates of Participation instead of general bonds, they wined and dined him. These certificates were essentially a gamble that variable interest rates would go up, making them more valuable for the city. Once the Federal Reserve, in response to the economic crisis, set rates near zero, the city (like many homeowners) went underwater, its credit rating downgraded.

This is the way the scam worked in Detroit: The city was deliberately underfunded and the infrastructure took a hit, then city officials listened to various financial advisers and borrowed recklessly from the banks — racking up huge fees and agreeing to risky variable rates. Now the deficit is over-

stated by the trickery of combining short- and long-term obligations, and public sector workers take the fall.

Detroit's bankruptcy is manufactured and manipulated, but the crisis is real. The fact is that neither Detroit, nor any other municipality or state in the same sinking boat, can cut, slash and burn a way to a viable future. The way out is not to destroy the safety net, but to expand it. With retirement savings next to impossible for more and more families, Social Security needs to be substantially increased.

Health care needs to be guaranteed by a "single payer" system of Medicare for all.

Can we free the resources now wasted on military and prison spending, and massive corporate subsidies, to rebuild our cities and turn to production for human need and a sustainable environment? The answer: Yes we can; but no, capitalism won't.

This is an editorial that will appear in the January/February 2014 issue of Against the Current.

Against the Current

The attack on abortion rights

IZQUIERDA ANTICAPITALISTA ·

A draft law aims to suppress abortion rights in Spain!

1. Our body, our decision

We should again explain where the debate is really located. The Church and the most reactionary sectors are again mobilizing against those among us who exercise our liberty and to criminalise us. It is not about when life begins. For that, science has more to tell us than the Church.

They are not defending life. They are not concerned with women who die though backstreet abortions, or women who cannot let themselves become pregnant because they are unemployed. They are not concerned with the right to education, to health, to housing, to a worthwhile life for those already born. And they are silent in the face of the austerity policies and the dismantling of social conquests.

Because they are not interested in life, but in control over women's bodies, over their capacities of reproduction. For them it is about questioning the ability of women to decide over their own bodies and their sexuality; to restore the traditional roles to which women should be subject; to impose a model of sexuality linked to reproduction and to reduce sexuality to the single heterosexual model.

2. We want neither to go backwards nor continue as now

The Popular Party (PP) is threatening us with a new law — proposed by the Minister of Justice and not by that of Health — which would eliminate the 14 weeks of free abortion and establish a system of pre-requisites more restrictive than the current law dating from 1985. But in the current situation, abortion is already only partially decriminalized. The Socialist government of the PSOE had made

some steps forward but had not dared to frontally oppose the Church or break with the logic of health privatization.

– 98% of abortions take place outside the public health sector in private clinics. Some Autonomous Communities do not practice them, in others you have to pay but have the abortion in another health centre, another town, in secret, as if it was a crime.

– After you have alerted your doctor, you have three days to reflect, with an information document whose content is far from impartial (tax breaks, adoption and so on). The choice of women is constantly questioned, as if we were hysterical and impulsive, incapable of taking a decision alone.

– There is no free access to contraception. But prevention is fundamental; it is an elementary right.

– There is no longer any sex education which involves a response to the situations of real life. The only information given concerns sexually transmissible diseases and the biological aspects of reproduction. But sexuality is part of our identity and that involves much more than reproduction.

– Many doctors who publicly declare themselves "conscientious objectors" in relation to abortion carry out abortions in private. Morals are secondary where good business is concerned. For women who do not have the means, an absurd morality is imposed which punishes all that does not fit into their reductionist definitions of sexuality, the family and so on.

– Budget cuts in education, social aid, to dependent persons, layoffs, evictions and so on limit our rights in all areas. Cuts and measures which hit women more because they are already in an unfavourable position and because they are the main users of public services.

3. *New law from the PP, new turn of the screw*

Le PP threatens to recriminalize the choice of women over their maternity, forcing us to become mothers, unless we can show that we have been raped or run a serious health risk. This law could condemn to death women who cannot travel to London to have an abortion. It places minors under tutelage by considering them capable of becoming mothers, but not of deciding on the question, whereas they can make this choice in relation to other surgical operations.

This new attack is not isolated from the other measures we suffer: budget cuts, layoffs and insecurity form part of the same logic. Capitalism needs to control our bodies to survive and emerge from this crisis, to draw profit from the situation of women on the labour market, to generalise more job insecurity by spreading it to the entire working class, by loading onto the backs of women domestic work, the education of children, care for sick or dependent persons. Meanwhile, public budgets are cut and the living conditions of women and other social categories are rendered still more precarious.

The new law is a new turn of the screw. The right to decide is part of the rights and social and political conquests which hinder the profits of capital and that is why they want to dismantle them. We who fight every day to defend our dignity are conscious of what is at stake. It is by going onto the streets that we must fight our feminist struggle for the

right to decide. Free abortion on demand! Reproductive and sexual rights for all!

4. *Our proposal: reproductive and sexual rights for all*

– The right to self determination over our own bodies and our sexuality without interference from Church or State. Recognition of our capacity to decide if we wish to be mothers or not and when we want it, without tutelage, or periods of reflection whether we are minors or have reached the age of majority.

– Decriminalisation of abortion: withdrawal of abortion from the criminal code and the right to decide on our body without any limitation. To decide is not a crime, it is a right.

– Free abortion on demand. An end to the waltz of the private clinics. Abortion for all in the public health system.

– Free access to contraception: in educational centres, in health centres, in social services centres.

– Sex education to enjoy our own sexuality, without risk, with autonomy and responsibility, breaking with hetero-normality. Pleasure is not a sin.

– Reproductive rights for all: withdrawal of the restriction on assisted reproduction for single women and lesbians. There is no single model of the family.

– Defence of life against austerity and insecurity. Our lives are worth more than their profits!

THE PHILIPPINES :

After Haiyan/Yolanda and the politics of reconstruction:

RICHARD SOLIS ·

However, at this juncture, one cannot help but ask questions like: what is there to rebuild or to recover? Does this mean going back to the pre- disaster period?

It should be recalled that the hardest hit region by the Super Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan (STYH), which are the Eastern Samar and Leyte or the Eastern Visayas, is the country's third poorest region. Nearly half of its 4.2 million populations are made of low-income copra workers and fisher folks. There has been a stark absence of sustainable development framework as the local economy had been politics driven and extractive industries like mining and logging which directly affected the fragile ecosystem to its natural barriers against calamities like the super typhoons.

This situation resulted to chronic poverty to its general population. The case of Eastern Visayas for instance would clearly illustrate this poverty situation, which simply turned from bad to worse. In 2009, 47% of its population was under poverty line and in 2012; it (poverty line) nosedived to 60%. The region (Eastern Visayas) has the widest income gap nationwide with 30% of its working population earning eight times more than bottom 30%.

The worsening poverty situation of the people in Eastern Visayas (as well as in other parts of the country) has deprived millions of people of their capacity to protect themselves from natural (or even the manmade) calamities and of the means to recoup their losses after the disasters.

It is not surprising then to know that almost 90% of the hardest hit population by the STYH are the poor and 40% of those killed are those over 60

years old who could not save themselves from such ferocious disaster.

The abovementioned situation was the pre-disaster condition of the people in the regions hardest hit by the STYH. The Yolanda survivors would not want to go back to such disposition when one speaks of rebuilding or reconstructing their lives. It should not be the rebuilding of the mistakes of the past.

Rebuilding lives and correcting the past

President Benigno "PNOY" Aquino and his administration have estimated the total damage of Yolanda to \$12 billion and the need of the total amount of \$130 billion for reconstruction and rehabilitation. PNOY had mentioned such amount during the meeting of the international donors for the Reconstruction Assistance for Yolanda (RAY) two days ago. The PNOY administration has also defined different phases of the reconstruction and rehabilitation activities, which are six months for critical period, short term, would be one year, and medium term will be for four years.

This coming 24th of December 2013 there will be turnover of bunkhouses in Tacloban and by this time a promise of the secretary of energy (Sec. Petilla who is from Samar) that 100% of the electricity will be completely restored in the cities and urban centers. Obviously, the PNOY administration with the local elites have been making it clear that the extractive industries and politics driven development framework will never be touched and therefore will be restored during the reconstruction and rehabilitation period.

Meanwhile, the Yolanda victims have barely survived from the devastation with daily dependence on the food ration coming from the non-govern-

mental institutions and organizations coming from both domestic and international. The food packages from the government are finally reaching their target beneficiaries, if at all, in a rotten stage.

There are documentations that several victims to human trafficking have been happening in the affected areas where young women are lured to prostitution. Hovering around are the vultures in the persons of illegal recruiters for the potential Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and where they can exploit and make profit for those Yolanda survivors turned into OFWs.

Rehabilitation and the rebuilding plan should not be committing the mistakes of the past. It should begin with the total stop of mining and logging activities and operations. One should bear in mind that more than ten years ago (2001) there was a great disaster in Ormoc City where flash floods had killed more than five thousand people and yet, aside from the immediate reaction after the infamous event of mentioning about the ban on logging activities, it has been intentionally forgotten. Everybody knows that the political and economic elites are behind the logging and mining activities.

Clear signs are shown now, that the idea of reconstruction is actually rebuilding the mistakes of the past. It will be creating the conditions where the people will be exposed once again and become more vulnerable to the worst disasters like Yolanda.

The rebuilding and reconstruction should be framed in such manner that economic and social inequities should be fundamentally addressed and a system that creates oppressive mechanism which make the poor people and their communities highly vulnerable to natural and manmade disasters should be dismantled.

The rebuilding and reconstructions are not simply about building infrastructures like shelters and bridges; it is about democratic governance and peoples' empowerment. Therefore, it is most of all about respect of basic rights of people to rebuild themselves in all stages of its implementation whether it is in the construction of climate-change

resilience houses, any long-term livelihood programs or even in the rehabilitation of the mangroves in the coastal areas. In all these phases, the survivors should be principal spear headers for the simple reason that they are rebuilding their own lives and communities.

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The people through their own organizations with the development institution should initiate a strategic plan and implement programs that will reduce their long-term vulnerability to disasters and installing mechanism for recoupment process in the post disaster period.

However, such activities need emancipatory mechanisms, genuine land reforms for the farmers and the protection of fishing rights for the fisher folks.

In other words, a lot of things should be done in changing the system before we can adopt programs to minimize if not eliminate the structures which creates high vulnerability of the poor people to disasters of the climate change.

This is a long and winding road for the majority of people to avoid disastrous effects of typhoon and floods but in our warmed world, there cannot be a shortcut.

What needs to be done?

As has been mentioned earlier, that Eastern Visayas the hardest hit by the Super Typhoon Yolanda is also the third poorest region of the country. Before the monster typhoon hit the area, more than 50% of its 4.2 million populations were under poverty level. The chronic poverty in the region has turned bad to worse from 47% in 2009 to 60% in 2012 and to unimaginable level this year especially after Yolanda.

The worsening economic marginalization and the political alienation of the majority of its population have turned the region into fertile ground for insurgency. Recruitment for the Communist Party of Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing-New People's Army has been very easy. Peoples have been frustrated and desperate with the blatant corruption

committed by the ruling economic and political elites in the region that they do not have to think twice when approached by the CPP-NPA and join their ranks.

It is not surprising then, that Eastern Visayas, particularly in Samar has been known to be the most advanced of the military wing of the CPP in terms of cadres' development and size of its NPA formation. It should be noted that the first battalion size of the NPA was organized in this region. It has also been known that the NPA and its faster recruitment made the area their pilot area for the intensification of their tactical armed guerrilla offensives. The natural and human resources in the region have been conducive for such experimentation. The result of the intensification of the armed struggle led by the CPP has caused additional burden to the majority of the poor people in the area. This has been evident that after more than 40 years of this type of revolutionary movement, it has not brought positive gains for the people or makes their lives less miserable.

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Moreover, one can easily notice that there has been a big gap in the development of civil society organizations and the open mass movements especially in the town and urban centers. The development of the open mass movements to push for meaningful reforms in the different aspects of the peoples' lives, are intertwined with the development of peoples' mass organizations and development institutions. Definitely, peoples' options here are limited to the armed form of struggle. The stress of the CPP-NPA in the areas (as in other areas) is the development and intensification of armed struggle using the Maoist strategic direction working for the protracted peoples war with the political line of surrounding the cities from the countryside.

The struggle for reforms such as developing the mass movement for the genuine land reform and protection of fishing rights of the peasant and fisher folks respectively has been neglected. Such neglect has direct impact on the development of political empowerment and helps make a change in po-

sition of power between the few political elite and the majority of the poor people. This obvious neglect has been one of the decisive reasons of unpreparedness of the basic masses to protect/recoup themselves against disasters in the past as well as the super typhoon like Yolanda.

It is not surprising then that relief teams found themselves dealing with unorganized people and survivors when they made their interventions for Yolanda victims and survivors. Even the practice of Oriental Medicine, which in the past had been the trademark of the presence and influence of the CPP/NPA in the area and the people, had been obviously absent.

In the construction and rehabilitation phase, it is a very important that Yolanda survivors should be helped to organize themselves in order to become effective drivers for their own recovery. The absence of peoples organizations in place will make the work more difficult but less complicated because one has to start the organization with less baggage of the negative experience.

The building and strengthening of the survivors' organization should be the first to be done in order to face and confront the issue of rebuilding and reconstructing the emotional and physical damages. It also insures that we are not building the mistakes of the past.

The direction of building and strengthening of the peoples' organizations should be to help in the development of peoples' mass movement towards achieving concrete democratic reforms. The process will definitely help strengthen peoples' empowerment in their day-to-day struggle against climate change and the disasters it will always bring upon the people. Positive results of the open mass movement of the peasant to own the land they till will also strengthen their rank to use organic agriculture method in order to mitigate the negative results of the global warming. Moreover, it is also building their (peasants) power in order to liberate themselves from the political alienation of the elite. In other words, their economic activities have

brought them to political emancipation and therefore can make themselves more prepared for the disasters and for recoupment process after the disaster.

Meanwhile one has to consider seriously the paradigm and its possible shift being followed by the left like the CPP/NPA in the affected areas. In rebuilding and reconstructing the society, the context of the intensification of the disastrous effects of the climate change should be factored in. At this stage and as proven by several decades of experience, the peoples' protracted war (PPW) as strategy is not definitely making the majority of the poor people less vulnerable to disasters brought about by the climate change. Serious rethinking of the relevance

of such strategy should be in place. Otherwise, such strategic orientation in pursuing revolutionary objectives regardless of how noble one is claiming, is actually adding burden and difficulties upon the people whom we vow to serve. In addition, one has to consider the government's framework in facing the realities of climate change and its paramount interest of perpetuating the existing exploitative and oppressive system.

At this point, one can say that the best and effective way to face the consequence of climate change is working for a system change and major reorientation of existing paradigm from both the right and the left.

December 19, 2013

CHILE

Election day in Santiago

FRANCK GAUDICHAUD ·

After an often long working week [1], couples laden with plastic bags take the time to breathe a little, less than ten days before the start of the festive season. People constantly come and go between stands selling trinkets from China and those offering local crafts or coloured garlands. To the dismay of some, the Americo Vespucio Mall, just on the other side of the immense Avenue Vicuña Mackenna, remains closed: on this election day, the authorities have decided to close the temples of consumption. No matter: at the same time, close to the city centre, the Meiggs neighbourhood is submerged by a human tide of thousands of people who have come to enjoy the shops. Business is good and there are more customers than ever: "Here, we buy, we do not vote," says a poster on the wall of a shop.

Already in the morning, the site of the conservative newspaper *El Mercurio* indicated the very low turnout. Once his "civic duty done," the outgoing president Sebastián Piñera - a wealthy businessman who in 2010 pulled off a win for the Right for the first time since the end of the dictatorship in 1989, solemnly declared: "Every Chilean who does not want to go and vote demonstrates a lack of affection for his country." To no avail.

This is the sixth presidential election since the beginning of the democratic transition, but the first one to take place on the basis of voluntary voting (with automatic registration on the electoral rolls). Until then, as in many Latin American countries, registered voters were obliged to vote or risk having to pay a fine. Under these conditions, many Chileans, often among young people and the work-

ing class, did not register to vote: if you're not on the list, they can't prosecute you.

The municipal elections in 2012 had already taken place according to the new rules. Abstention reached 60 per cent, putting politicians in a cold sweat. In the first round of the presidential election, and despite the presence of nine candidates, less than half of the 13.5 million voters (out of a population of over 17 million) went to vote. At the end of the election day, the result was no surprise: Evelyn Matthei, the candidate of the Right, got 37.8 per cent of the vote, so the Socialist candidate, Michelle Bachelet, with over 62.2 per cent, will be the next president. But the victory of someone who was president between 2005 and 2010 was obtained with 255,000 fewer votes than in her first term. Only 41 per cent of voters turned out to vote: this is the lowest figure since the democratic transition. To this must be added the denial of the right to vote to more than 850,000 Chileans living abroad (a legacy of the military regime).

For Laurence Golborne, a former minister and a leading figure of the Right, "it is a matter of concern that only 25 per cent of Chileans elected the new president." The director of the Electoral Service, Patricio Santa María, emphasized on the contrary that the high level of abstention does not in the least detract from the legitimacy of the result. Backed by the chorus of a myriad of members of parliament, the Christian Democrat Senator Ximena Rincón reminded us that "President Obama was elected with only 40 per cent of the vote and no one doubts his leadership." Obama coming to the rescue of Chilean democracy? Beyond the numbers game, all the political leaders know that there has been a profound crisis of representativeness in the Chilean political system for many years. A system based on the Constitution in-

herited from the dictatorship (1973-1989) and consolidated during the governments of the Concertación, a coalition of Socialists, Social Liberals and Christian Democrats (1990-2010). At the entrance to the Christmas market in La Florida, an old man with weather-beaten features remarks with an ironic smile: "It's better to take advantage of this beautiful Sunday to do our Christmas shopping rather than go and vote! Anyway, what use is politics to us? Tomorrow we will still have to get up early for work."

Concertación 2.0

Bachelet's victory was not much of a surprise. At the end of her first term, polls credited her with a level of popularity of more than 80 per cent. After a spell in New York at the head of an agency of the United Nations specializing in the defence of women (UN-Women), she returned to Chile after an impeccable campaign of communication. Her success (74.92 per cent) in the primary on June 30 even had her hoping for a first-round victory. All the more so since, faced with critics reminding her that the Concertación had deepened and worn out the neoliberal model when it was in government from 1990 to 2010, Bachelet showed herself capable of forging a new narrative aimed at re-enchanting a section of the electorate.

First of all, the coalition managed to bring in the Communist Party (PC) and small social democratic organizations [2], thus creating the "New Majority". In exchange for several constituencies and arguing that it was now a case of creating a vast electoral majority around a project of reforms, the PC - the main party to the left of the Concertación - thus became an important ally when the time came to defend the progressive image of the former president. The party, created a hundred years ago by Luis Emilio Recabarren, thus doubled its parliamentary representation. Among the six Communist MPS, there are two young women: the former leader of the Communist Youth, Karol Cariola, and one of the leading figures of the student movement of 2011, Camila Vallejo (elected with 40 per cent of

the vote). And despite making the Christian Democrats (DC, centre-right) gnash their teeth, the PC offers the future government (limited) support among the social movements, in particular in the leadership of the Unitary Confederation of Workers (CUT), led by the Communist Francisca Figueroa, who openly called for a vote for Bachelet. The day after the election, the president of the PC, Guillermo Teillier, could not yet confirm whether the party would be taking part in the government, but he reaffirmed "its loyalty" to the programme defended by the president, recalling the historic significance of this victory at the polls: "The Communist Party has not won a presidential election since the time of Salvador Allende" in 1970.

Besides the PC, all the parties of the New Majority got very good results in the parliamentary elections - held at the same time as the first round of the presidential election - winning a fairly comfortable majority in the Congress, with 21 senators out of 38 and 68 MPs out of 120. This position of strength will give the executive some qualified majorities to start modifying "organic laws" and begin the promised reforms, despite the multiple legislative "locks" that were inserted in the "Pinochet Constitution."

A government of reforms?

Bachelet, with the benefit of an enormous 500-strong team of experts, organized her campaign around three main axes, with a great deal of political marketing.

Firstly, the promise of a "participatory, democratic and institutional" constitutional reform, which will require an agreement in Parliament with the Right (in order to obtain the necessary two-thirds quorum). The discussion could be preceded by consultations within "civil society" and approved by referendum: a queen of ambiguity, playing on the internal tensions within her coalition, the candidate refused to come out either for or against a genuine Constituent and popular Assembly (CA), to the chagrin of the collectives who conducted the campaign "Mark CA on your ballot paper " [3]. The second

axis was a fiscal reform equivalent to 3 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) aimed at increasing (moderately) the enormous profits of the major companies in the country [4]. And finally, a reform of education that is partly in response to the big youth mobilizations of 2011- 2012.

On the evening of the victory, from the luxurious Plaza San Francisco Hotel, Bachelet also made a point of thanking "the street", especially young people, and reiterated her promise to establish a "public education system, free and of quality". "Today" she said, "no one doubts that profit cannot be the driving force of education." In a country where the education market is gigantic and where many leading figures of the Concertación are central players in this lucrative business, some people have doubts [5]. All the more so in that the reform, envisaged as being "gradual" and intended to be completed in six years (which means after the end of the president's term of office) aims at making it possible for students to have free access to universities through public subsidies... without however putting an end to the hegemony of the private universities and the system of subsidized private colleges (a system instituted in the last days of the dictatorship).

Emergence of social movements and neoliberal fragmentation

As the noted historian Mario Garcés points out, Chile today is characterized by the "awakening of society" and the emergence of social movements. The powerful student struggles for education were preceded by mass mobilizations in different regions, by extremely important environmental struggles, but also by the renewal of strikes over wages and different trade-union struggles.

In this context, some people see the election of Michelle Bachelet as a defensive manoeuvre, capable of stabilizing the export-centred neoliberal model in a context of a powerful rise of social conflicts. Among them are the sociologists Felipe Portales and Alberto Mayol. The latter analyzes the incombustible figure of Bachelet as a "Christological" phenomenon, embodying in the

collective imagination the pain of the dictatorship (she was a victim of torture and her father, a loyalist general, was murdered), while at the same time stressing that this candidature is enabling a Concertación that was running out of steam to improve its image, without jeopardizing macro-economic stability and the interests of the multinationals. In this regard, the candidate and her team have reiterated – without it being a question of an "exclusive ideological agreement" – that it will be essential to "maintain an active relationship of economic coordination with the Pacific Alliance," a geostrategic axis supported by the United States along with Mexico, Colombia, Panama and Peru (all of which have right-wing governments). The election was hardly over when Bolivian President Evo Morales did not hesitate to challenge the new president, emphasizing the "pro-imperialist and pro-capitalist" nature of the Alliance: "I doubt that [Michelle Bachelet] is a socialist. I'll tell you frankly, openly: if Bachelet remains in the Alliance for the Pacific it will be definitively confirmed who she defends, where she comes from and what she wants."

In the first round, on November 17, some prominent members of the business elite did not hesitate to lend their support to the former president. Starting with a heavyweight of local capitalism: Jorge Awad, president of the Association of Chilean Banks, who stressed to what extent the tax reform proposed by the candidate would be painless and that she had already demonstrated that she would be effective in guaranteeing foreign investment (especially in the mining sector). Mr. Awad is not an exception: the contribution of the country's big companies to the socialist pediatrician represented three times the sums allocated to the candidate supported by the outgoing president...

Matthei was only a candidate by default, following a string of defections. She was also the daughter of a general, but one of those who supported the dictatorship; she represented the most reactionary sectors of the right-wing coalition, the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), promising to govern with

"the Bible in her hands." In comparison, the outgoing president and some members of National Renewal, the other party in the coalition, still nurture the strategy of a liberal renewal of the Right, so as to regain power in 2017. But the ghost of Pinochet and of the massive violations of human rights still sticks to the soles of the coalition and the UDI is far from being liquidated: it is still the strongest force in Parliament, thanks to well-established clientelist practices in some of the poorest neighborhoods.

And now...

Madam Vasquez is a street vendor who sells clothes. Living on a modest income and at the head of a large family, she "does not feel represented by either Matthei or Bachelet." According to her, the victory of Bachelet is a signal for "new strikes and demonstrations all over the place. We will surely go back to the time of Popular Unity and there will be destruction, violence. And who pays in situations like that? Well, it's us, the common people." A certain number of unions and militant collectives are in fact on a war footing, but rather to try and rebuild the social fabric and with the perspective of demanding more from the government. In a society

that remains one of the most unequal in Latin America and in which job insecurity prevails in the working class, this is not an easy task [6].

Several subterranean signs confirm, however, that 2014 could be "hot". Recently, the presidency of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) was won by the libertarian "Struggle" list ". Its leader, Melissa Sepulveda, refused to vote in the second round of the presidential election and spoke against the "parliamentarization of struggles," a dig at Vallejo and Cariola, as well as at two other newly elected MPs who come from the student movement: Gabriel Boric (Autonomous Left) who succeeded in entering Parliament without the support of the Concertación, and Giorgio Jackson (Democratic Revolution), an ally of the New Majority who was elected as an MP for Santiago at the age of 25.

For its part, after campaigning for Matthei, the newspaper *El Mercurio* now emphasizes that one of the objectives of the new government will be "to restrain the enormous expectations that have been awakened, so as to channel them."

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GERMANY

The Grand Coalition and left perspectives

MANUEL KELLNER ·

On December 14, 2013, the result of this party plebiscite will be known and it is clear from the opinion polls that there will be a large majority in favour of the coalition. Initially, there were many protests from local branches, from the Young Socialists, and even from regional organisations. Many SPD members fear again being responsible for an overly right wing policy, and perhaps above all that their party is weakened still further electorally by being again the junior party to the Christian conservatives under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The social democratic minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hannelore Kraft, considered as a rising star in the federal hierarchy, has made herself the spokesperson for the party malcontents. But she eventually had to do a volte-face by calling for support for the grand coalition, even if, during the electoral campaign, her party had always stressed that it was opposed to such an arrangement. It is not by chance that she, as well as others, had been elected to the leadership of the party at the recent SPD congress.

The "democratic" character of the vote by the party rank and file should be very much put in context. What is the choice with which SPD members were confronted? In fact, it was not for or against the some 180 page long governmental agreement. All the SPD leaders had already signed it and expressed their agreement publicly, before any consultation with the "rank and file" of the party. The real question to which the members had to respond was in fact the following: "do you want to plunge your party into an agonizing crisis by completely disavowing its leadership and virtually all its known leaders at the federal and international

level?" Seen from this angle, the "yes" of the big majority of SPD members is not really surprising.

Continuity

In essence, the policy sketched out in this letter of intention represents continuity in the main choices already made in the orientation of the outgoing government of Angela Merkel. For it was already not only a CDU/CSU government with the liberals of the FDP, but also an informal "grand coalition" with the SPD.

The policy of tax breaks for the big companies and "umbrellas" extended to the banks, to the detriment of the public budgets, was carried out in consensus with social democracy, as was the transformation of the Bundeswehr (the German army which according to the "Grundgesetz", the German constitution, is devoted exclusively to defending the country against aggressors), into an army of intervention playing a role of world policeman in collaboration with the USA, NATO and other allies in the West.

In the area of ecology, the coalition text projects an absolutely retrograde policy. The development of alternative energies will be reined in, and a Pandora's box opened for the production of energy by coal. European policy is still more reactionary. The SPD supports the policy of the memorandums, the cruel austerity programmes imposed on Greece and the weakest EU economies, victims of trade imbalances, which throw millions into poverty and disarray. What is more, the refugee crises in the Mediterranean find a unanimous response from the new coalition: strengthen Frontex, strengthen fortress Europe, send drones, and strengthen propaganda in the countries where people flee poverty, oppression or war, to tell them not to come.

It is true that there are declarations of intention in the coalition agreement text which could generate partial progress in the social area. For example the "Mütterrente", the extension of existing pensions benefits to parents who have devoted a part of their life to the education of their children. These benefits only existed until now for the education of children born from 1992 onwards. Now, they will also be applied to parents of children born before 1992 (which includes the author of the present article, to his great relief).

But there are other details of the agreement which are less comforting. The very conservative Bavarian CSU had already obtained through a Bundestag vote a kind of "bonus" for parents who did not put their children in public crèches and kindergartens. This will be financed by reducing the public funds earmarked for improvement of childcare in public daycentres, still notoriously bad in Germany. The grand coalition will not correct this situation.

Although the liberal FDP did not obtain the 5% share of the vote necessary to enter the Bundestag, tax breaks for hotels introduced under its pressure by the outgoing Merkel government remain in force. And the Bavarian CSU was able to impose its electoral symbol: the introduction of a highway toll payment solely for "foreign" drivers (which contradicts European law).

Minimum wage

The gross minimum wage fixed by law of 8.50 euros per hour was one of the SPD's main demands during the electoral campaign. During the negotiations, the leaders of the SPD said incessantly they would not cede on this point and accept a lower minimum wage or the fixing of a minimum by agreements between the employers' organizations and the trade unions. As the SPD obtained literally nothing in relation to its other main demand — readjustment of taxes on high incomes and the reintroduction of a wealth tax — the minimum wage issue became all the more important.

However, the formulations in the agreement should be precisely analysed. First, in Germany there are 6.9 million employees who earn less than 8.50 euros gross per hour, 2.7 million of them full time workers. A third of them have worked for firms subject to tax schemes fixed by collective bargaining.

Also, for one week of 40 hours work, the 8.50 per hour rate yields at most 1450 euros per month. The normal working week being 38 hours, those affected obtain an income at the level of the social minimum. To raise a family on this income second order unemployment benefits (Arbeitslosengeld II) would be needed. Such an income could not generate any pension income above the official poverty level.

But only some of the employees concerned will get the new minimum wage in the next years, Until the end of 2016, the rates agreed by collective bargaining for minimum wages below 8.50 euros (notably in areas like security, laundries and the systematically inflated temporary work sector) remain in force. It is only from January 1, 2017 that the minimum wage will be generalised. The unions in the sectors concerned could possibly cancel part of the collective agreements to obtain the minimum wage sooner (but yellow unions like the Christian CGB unions will then have the right to agree rates with wages below 8.50 euros per hour).

For the other sectors, the 8.50 euros will enter into force from January 1, 2015. If we take an inflation rate of 2% into account (the ECB projection), they will only have a purchasing power of 7.85 euros. If we add productivity growth in 2017 a minimum wage of 9.70 euros would be needed to compensate for the increased inflation according to the most optimistic projections

But that is not all. After the agreement a commission made up of representatives of the employers' organisations and the trade unions as well as economic "specialists" will have to assess in June 2017 the level of the minimum wage to adapt it to the general circumstances. And the agreement does not

fix whether this adaptation will be up or down! The decision of this commission will be applied from January 1, 2018.

All is not so clear, then, in the area of the SPD's "great victory" in the coalition agreement negotiations. Still, the introduction of a minimum wage in Germany is the main novelty. The union leaderships had moreover called on their members in the SPD to vote for the coalition agreement, stressing particularly the gains obtained in relation to the minimum wage.

If we accept that the introduction of the minimum wage of 8.50 € is real, in the context of the 22 European countries which have a legal minimum wage, Germany is in sixth place, after Luxembourg (11.10 €), France (9.43 €), Belgium (9.10 €), Holland (9.07 €), Ireland (8.65 €), and just ahead of the UK (7.78 €). After 8th place, it's a vale of tears, going from Slovenia (4.53 €) via Poland (2.92 €) to Bulgaria (0.95€!).

In the statistics taking into account real purchasing power, the image does not change much. Germany remains in sixth place after the same countries, but with only 7.40 €, Poland is a little better placed with 3.78 €, Bulgaria climbs to second from bottom with 1.90 € and Rumania has the wooden spoon with 1.85 €.

Pensionable age

The second purported "big victory" for the SPD would be the ability to retire without deductions from 63. The SPD, which was with Merkel one of the architects of the introduction of pensions at 67, wished to regain sympathy in the area of social policy, arguing that employees who have worked for 45 years benefiting from social insurance should have the right to a full pension. The CDU and CSU were said to have yielded in this area

First, such people are increasingly rare, so only a few employees will benefit from this reform and their numbers will decrease. But the text of the agreement concluded employs a more restrictive formula: it is no longer a question of 45 years of so-

cial insurance, but 45 years payment of contributions. It is not clear if those who have been unemployed and have collected "Arbeitslosenhilfe [unemployment benefit] II" (not paying contributions), will see their years of unemployment counted or not. The same goes for years in education, if there are more than three of them, and for years of professional training.

There is also the "Lebensleistungsrente", a kind of minimum pension. An amount of 850 € was spoken of, but this figure does not appear in the text of the agreement. "In principle" the agreement stipulates the introduction of this new form of pension. But it could be introduced with a lower minimum amount.

There is also a systemic problem, violently denounced by Norbert Blüm, former employment and social security minister, part of the more worker-friendly wing of the CDU. Although in harmony with the neoliberal policy of dismantling what existed in the area of institutionalised solidarity, this reform deepens the mix of social insurance and social assistance. Pensions are in principle financed by the contributions of employees. Already before the Hartz reforms, the "Arbeitslosenhilfe" (unemployment benefit, now "Arbeitslosengeld II") was half outside of this system. Now, employment insurance for the medium and long term jobless has become a social allocation those concerned are subjected to a very repressive checking procedure to see whether they are "in need".

The minimum pension means that those who have a lower pension than the sum fixed — say 850 euros — would have the right to complete their pension up to this amount. But this supplement will be financed outside of the social insurance system by tax means. Among other things this system means that a full time worker on a low wage having paid contributions all their active life to have a pension of 850 euros would have the same amount of pension as an employee having worked the same number of years, perhaps being paid much more, but part time. This kind of rule would seem designed above all to discredit the system of social insurance

to speed the realisation of the neoliberal model: on the one hand social assistance at a miserable level, and on the other the generalization of the private responsibility of individuals to insure against the inconvenience of old age, illness or unemployment by enriching private insurance companies.

What perspectives for the left?

In the light of the new situation, democracy inside Germany's federal parliament seems precarious. The parties supporting the grand coalition government have around 80% of the deputies in the Bundestag. Also, the agreements signed seek to "discipline" members of parliament. They stipulate that factions of the parties of the ruling coalition "always vote in a unitary manner" and that "changing majorities are excluded" — a fairly authoritarian "centralism".

What does the grand coalition mean for the unions, the social movements and the political left? In principle, the Die Linke (Left) party is well placed, since it has the strongest opposition group in the Bundestag. That gives the possibility of exploiting the possibilities of mobilising public opinion and the social movements against the coalition. The latter, even more than the outgoing Merkel government, will try to pacify and integrate the union leaderships.

But there is a small complication. In the midst of negotiations with the CDU and CSU, the SPD leadership announced a change of strategy. It publicly stated that it no longer ruled out the possibility of a coalition with Die Linke in the future. While awaiting the next federal elections scheduled for 2017, this statement seeks then to encourage inside Die Linke those forces which only aspire to be in government. And to demand that they impose a course of adaptation with a view to rendering possible participation in a government led by the SPD in 2017.

The price of that would be very high. First in the area of foreign policy, because it would be necessary to support wars of intervention. Then in the area of social and economic policy, because it would be necessary to support a policy of "budgetary discipline » and thus austerity.

The debate on the German left should then be oriented towards solidarity-based solutions and practices combating the infernal logic of competition: for action from below, across borders of localities, sectors and states, for the elaboration of demands and unitary plans of action for the trade unions and social movements in Europe, for a democratic, social and ecological renewal of a political Europe, which can only emerge from an internationalist movement of the exploited and oppressed of all countries.

ENVIRONMENT

Canary Islands vs. Big Oil

NORMA WILLOW ·

Three of the seven volcanic isles are world heritage sites, maintaining unique ecosystems, conservation land and a home for abundant sea life. They may also provide Europe with a renewable energy role model, stepping stones metaphorically to a sustainable future, as the archipelago aims for total self-sufficiency in 2025.

But in March 2012, the Spanish government approved prospects for oil exploration off the islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, both of which are UNESCO biosphere reserves, describing the project as a potential solution to the country's 26 billion euro deficit. If predictions are correct, it could be the biggest oil find in Spanish history.

Thousands of Canary Islands residents and activists have begun campaigning against Spanish oil company Repsol, and the potential oil spill that could devastate the wildlife and tourist and fishing industries. Local campaigners have demonstrated on all major islands and taken to the streets of Madrid in order to stop the drilling.

As an "Autonomous Community," the Canaries are politically part of Spain but divided into two autonomous provinces of Tenerife and Las Palmas. They have their own government, parliament and administration and recognized as having their own "nationality" by the Spanish people.

As one of Spain's most attractive holiday destinations, hundreds of thousands of livelihoods would be put at risk from pollution. Drilling will be deep, up to 6,000 meters, with wells within 18 miles of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. An investigation by environmentalists will research the impact on ocean life where over 50,000 plant and animal species have been identified.

Both islands have little rainfall so there's a possibility of sea contamination, as islanders' drinking water is supplied by desalinated sea water. Trade winds would further the potential spillage area. Concern that deep sea drilling causes earth tremors, for many, just adds to the feeling that drilling doesn't make sense. These are volcanic islands and naturally prone to seismic activity.

But the unveiling of the new reform of the Spanish electrical system in July, 2013 has swept further disharmony over the islands. Its 3.5 billion euro cut in the renewable energy sector each year raises eyebrows over Spain's longterm conviction to ecological development.

A new tax on solar panels has been introduced charging high fees for grid use so that it is effectively no longer economical for households to generate their own energy. The new law has been criticized by the Spanish National Energy Commission and provoked national anger, but anyone refusing to connect to the grid could face fines of up to 30 million euros.

Sustainability Under Siege

Rumors of civil unrest are circulating along with doubts that Spain will now reach the EU's 2020 renewable energy goal. But while the world awaits the outcome, one that affects the whole mechanism of alternative energy production, it may just have set the precedent for other nations to claim the sun.

It's sad news for El Hierro, the smallest isle expected to become one of the first in the world using 100% renewable energy. The hybrid hydro-wind plant has received international recognition for pioneering technology and its Zero Waste scheme. If it's successful in utilizing natural resources of wind,

sea and even volcanic craters, it could be a breakthrough for other isolated communities.

The Sustainability Plan was approved over 16 years ago but stems back to the sixties and took years of conviction to realize. New local jobs, a boost in tourism as El Hierro becomes a center for scientific research, along with profits that will be reinvested into the community, are part of the project's development.

With over 30% unemployment and a history of drought and emigration, sustainability could spell a new era for islanders. Perhaps it's time the island's luck changed, as volcanic activity left it abandoned in 2011. But estimates of saving over 1.8 billion euros a year, as well as 6,000 tons of diesel and 18,700 tons of CO₂, have been iced as local owners and developers find themselves battling over rights and tariffs, under governmental review.

It's not the first time that the Canaries have held off the oil exploration. Repsol's first proposal in 2001 was refused three years later after claims of "deficient environmental controls." Public opinion hasn't changed and controversy has followed over pollution risks and the income drilling would generate through a forecast 20-year lifespan.

Three to five thousand new jobs have been cited, a claim that's disputed as the work will require highly trained specialists. A recent Environmental Impact Study was made unavailable to the two islands it directly affected. Yet if the oil exploration is successful, it could reduce Spain's fuel imports by 10%, 7.5 billion euros will be invested into the Canaries, and the oil fields could produce up to 150,000 barrels of oil a day.

Explorations are due to start in 2014, to determine the boundaries of mining area, which is within 30 miles of Moroccan shores. In yet another area of contention, Morocco has warned of a border violation and already began its own survey.

The deal is tempting, however, in these genuinely hard times. The global crisis that struck Spain's housing market five years ago dive-bombed into

the loss of thousands of jobs and a major recession. Now 5.9 million Spanish people are unemployed, the highest figure since the 1930s, with 55% of young people aged 16-24 out of work.

An estimated 350,000 families have been evicted since 2008; some now squat in empty buildings or live on the streets. For the first time ever, Red Cross has asked for donations to help the Spanish population. A brief respite of social justice came from firemen refusing to carry out the eviction of an 85-year-old woman from her home.

According to the charity Cáritas, over 30% of the Canary population is now under the poverty line. The islands have the third highest unemployment rate in the European Union, with 62% of the youth unemployed. Lack of opportunities will force many islanders, like their peers in the mainland, to leave home to find work in other countries.

Yet the local population is united in keeping oil drilling out, and gaining international support from organizations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and World Wildlife Fund in defense of more than 300 protected areas, 43 special zones for birds and 11 marine reserves that are visited by whales, dolphins and turtles. As an important study area for educators in marine science and universities of oceanography, these resources are also backed by a number of academic institutions.

The islands' stand for a future that respects its environment and social, economic and cultural development should be praised; it's a gift for others. Now as local movements start up and flyers are handed out to tourists on the beaches, the numbers of protesters are slowly growing.

But the opponent that islanders face over the next few years is a tale of David and Goliath, and time is running low. People need an economy, a roof over their heads and food on the table, but is there an alternative other than destroying the planet? As earth's resources deplete and oil companies are forced to mine in new remote places, these two islands could be any number in the world — any par-

allel community facing the crisis of sustainability
and survival.

November/December 2013, ATC 167

INDIA:

Scrap Article 377, Defend LGBT /Queer Rights Through Mass Movements

SOMA MARIK ·

On the view that same sex relations were unnatural, Bernstein commented:

"Our entire cultural existence, our mode of life from morning to night is a constant offence against nature, against the original preconditions of our existence. If it was only a question of what was natural, then the worst sexual excess would be no more objectionable than, say, writing a letter – for conducting social intercourse through the medium of the written word is far further removed from nature than any way as yet known of satisfying the sexual urge. Have there not been observed among animals (usually amongst domestic and captive animals, of course, but these are still significantly closer to nature than man himself) and amongst so-called natural peoples practices relieving the sexual urge which would colloquially be termed, "unnatural"?"

He went on to argue that in reality, in most civilised countries, sexual intercourse, while formally being described as being related to the propagation of new generations, was actually conducted for pleasure, and was "unnatural" in the sense that all attempts were usually taken to ensure that child-births did not result from the act.

Bernstein used the word "abnormal" in preference to "unnatural", suggesting that this was a deviation from the norm. He suggested that there was a need to understand the history of same sex relations rather than to condemn it. In particular, he made out an extremely strong argument. It is the male same sex relation that has been the prime target. Both English and German law condemned this.

Anal sex perpetrated between two men was a criminal offence, as it indeed still is, in terms of Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code. But quoting Kraft-Ebbing, Bernstein showed that Prussian law did not punish sodomy when one partner was a woman.

As he argued, this latter was most often carried out on women who had no say in the matter, so that it was in fact "inferior" (in his words) to such a relationship between two males. The rise of the "paternal-right family" meant the woman's body was of little consequence. If she was a prostitute, the state in Prussia oversaw the health of her sex organs to the extent that if a man infected her with a sexually transmitted disease, she was kept locked up. But how a man, whether the husband or the customer, used a woman's body was of supreme unconcern to the state.

Bernstein's authority being Kraft-Ebbing, he had the problem of viewing same-sex relations as a medical or psychological issue. Despite that, a century and eighteen years back, he, and a large part of the SPD, were involved in the campaign for the abolition of punishment for homosexual relations.

118 years later, the Supreme Court of India as well as the entire range of Indian political parties have shown their inability to grasp this. Bernstein had grasped, however imperfectly, that hetero-sexism is rooted in the heterosexual, patriarchal family relations. Under capitalist conditions, the family of this kind is important for the perpetuation of class divisions from one generation to the next. It provides a cheap and ideologically acceptable mechanism for reproducing human labour.

This involves using unpaid, and overwhelmingly female labour in the family to care for the young, the old, as well as for the male working adult.

Monogamous, heterosexual love as a compulsion is a central aspect of the family system as it exists. The state and its laws, the medical and psychiatric establishments, much of the educational system, are all tailored to promote procreative heterosexuality and to stigmatize and suppress other forms of sexuality, often described as abnormal, irresponsible, or medical cases.

Marxist responses subsequently to start with Engels varied from hostility, indifference, and deprioritization. Since the 1970s different currents of Marxists have been compelled to take up the LGBT issue seriously as a political issue. The Fourth International argued in 2003:

"As long as society is organized in a way which assumes that many basic needs will be met within the family, all those who are marginalized from it or choose not to live in it will have difficulty in meeting their needs. This family form under capitalism presupposes and reproduces a heterosexual norm, which pervades the state and society and is oppressive to anyone who deviates from it. As long as heterosexual love is the basis for forming a family, people whose emotional and sexual lives revolve largely around same-sex love are marginalized from family life.

As long as the family is a central place where children are raised, lesbian/gay/ bisexual/transgendered children will grow up alienated - even more than children and young people in general are alienated in the family; and children's access to adults, especially unmarried adults, and other children to whom they are not biologically related will often be limited. As long as only heterosexual desire and romance permeate capitalist consumer culture, LGBT people will feel invisible. As long as heterosexuality is defined as the norm by the state and medical and psychiatric establishments, LGBT people will be explicitly or implicitly discriminated against and marginalized. Repressive laws and widespread social discrimination intensify this oppression in most parts of the world, but repealing repressive laws and combating social discrimination will not by themselves eliminate it".

In India, the LGBTQ community is mostly hidden. The Telegraph, reporting the SC judgement, suggested the figure of 12 million for a possible size of this community. In course of the case, Suresh Kumar Kaushal & Another v. Naz Foundation & Others, attempts were made to present before the Supreme Court a mass of evidence concerning discrimination, harassment, and torture faced by LGBT persons.

The Supreme Court, in striking down the Delhi High Court judgement, has argued that the High Court had relied too much on foreign judgements, which cannot be applied to the Indian context. This is not the first time that judgements in foreign courts have been discussed by Indian courts. So this insularity has to do with a political orientation, regardless of the formal words uttered. In that case, what the Supreme Court is deferring to, is the socially constructed and maintained conservatism. This finds striking confirmation in the utterances of Baba Ramdev, the BJP, and the Darul Uloom Deoband. For Ramdev and the BJP this is a western aberration that has no space in "Indian tradition". For the Darul Uloom Deoband deputy Vice Chancellor Maulana Abul Khlik Madrasi, "Homosexuality is an offence under Islamic law and 'haram' [prohibited] in Islam".

The apex court has upheld the constitutionality of IPC 377 by rejecting the constitutional validity of Articles 14, 15 and 21 of our constitution. By this it had written off the very cornerstone of democracy, ---pluralism.

The court distinguishes between "those who indulge in carnal intercourse in the ordinary course" and "those who indulge in carnal intercourse against the order of nature". The Court says that therefore section 377 is not classified irrationally or arbitrarily. In other words, the Supreme Court is opposed to sex against the "order of nature". But in that case, should the Supreme Court not oppose, in a spasm of judicial activism, the Government of India's decades long birth control or the so-called 'population control' campaigns? Sex using condoms, sex after various measures to ensure that

women do not get pregnant? Is not it going to the extent of authorising the policing of sex lives to check whether fellatio is committed?

The Supreme Court has also argued that the LGBT community is a very small community. So it seems that if a community is sufficiently small, then being a minority confers no assistance. Rather, if you are a small enough minority, then your rights can be violated with impunity since that does not disturb the public peace. The Court cites the fact that there have been only a handful of convictions as proof the community is small. It prefers to ignore how the police routinely harass, take bribes, etc, when it sees same sex activities. The fact that the existence of the law acts as a perpetual threat to the LGBT community is totally ignored.

The court also rejects the claims that Article 377 leads to violation of the right to privacy, the right to bodily integrity and sexual choice and the right to live with dignity. The cases cited by the court have been extremely confused. Of course, the women's movement has long opposed certain uses of the argument of privacy, for e.g., when it is used to hide rape of a wife by a husband. But that is not the concern of the SC. Ignoring the fact that what was under the scanner was consensual sex between two adults, the SC cited a case where a doctor had disclosed the HIV positive nature of his patient to her fiancée. In that case, it had been correctly held that privacy was subordinate to the right of health and freedom of others. But changing the scope of Article 377 to remove consenting adults from its purview does not come under this head. Once again, if two consenting adults have any kind of sexual relations, whose health and freedom is negatively affected?

The strategy of over-reliance on judiciary can sometime be counter-productive. To cite two landmark cases, the Supreme Court did not come out with a rights perspective for the marginals. It had rejected the Narmada Bachao Andolan plea, and had acquitted the accused in the Mathura Rape Case. If we focus on the elite, if we focus on well-paid lawyers arguing in courts, we cannot expect a

wider discourse of rights to be articulated or honoured. To rely on NGOs, to lobby, cannot go far when fundamental social issues are involved. And at the beginning of this essay that is what we argue. To decriminalise and recognise the equality of same sex relations is detrimental to fundamental interests of the ruling elite.

Lesbian/gay liberation is part of a broader, human liberation we are fighting for. We cannot fight for full rights for LGBTs and think that we do not need to fight for the immediate scrapping of the AFSPA. Even closer to the community itself, the 'queer movement' of the subcontinent has to look at the queer who are poor, who are not from the upper castes, who are non-urban. To get rights one has to fight for rights, not just lobby for rights. Lobbying can get little advantages for small segments. Full equality cannot be gained other than by mass struggles.

It is when there are mass struggles that courts, legislatures, have shown themselves to be willing to be positive. This is not a call for rejecting court battles, but a call to recognise that if we want, not slight gains for small sections of LGBTs, but full equality, then we need to fight for it.

One needs to be grateful for the SC nonetheless, for it has forced into the open the issue of LGBTs. One is grateful also to the BJP, for having come out openly, showing that it is reactionary across the board. But what about the hypocrites in the mainstream parties who are today suddenly concerned about LGBT rights? Much calculation goes into their stances.

The Congress has today declared it will bring legislation or push for ordinance. Where was it all these years, especially in periods when it enjoyed comfortable parliamentary majorities? Clearly, at best, the Liberals on the Right wanted to let the courts decide. To take up the cause of alternative sexualities risked losing votes, which they were not keen to do.

The reason for Rahul Gandhi's sudden concern is not far to see. The Deobandis have already declared

that they are not particularly keen to take the side of Congress against the BJP. Meanwhile the Delhi elections have shown that the younger generation and the middle class generally has rubbed the Congress out. So this is a desperate gesture to try and regain some support.

At the same time, it is quite a safe gesture. The government will either try for a "curative petition" (i.e., again ask the Supreme Court) or ask Parliament, a very safe option since in the current parliament the bill cannot be driven through with a party whip, as not enough parties are openly for the decriminalization of alternative sexualities, so that the congress gets left-liberal approval without antagonising its other potential voters too much.

Nor, sadly, are those whose stated agenda are for social change fully behind the struggles of the LGBTs. The AIDWA demonstrated criticising the Supreme Court. Yet it was also the same AIDWA that had criticised the World March for Women, because in the AIDWA's opinion, the WMW was wrong in putting LGBT rights upfront along with issues like economic security. Biman Bose, the CPI(M) leader and Chairperson of the Left Front in

West Bengal, was blunt. He is on record as having said that there is no hurry as there are more important issues. In other words, the Left is unable to understand that pushing LGBTs back to the closet will be worse for LGBTs from socially deprived sectors.

The women's rights movement has also not always taken up LGBT rights sufficiently seriously, or in a sufficiently central way. One can think of moments when one has seen LGBT organisations visibly distressed by the reluctance of the sectors of the women's movements one has participated in, to foreground LGBT rights.

And the LGBT movement, likewise, has to recognise that political rights and civil liberties are indeed indivisible. If we fight for civil and political rights, we cannot afford to be sectoral. One cannot say that one is supporting the rights of people of Manipur but not someone accused of being a Maoist. Likewise, one cannot desire rights for LGBTs but say that one is unconcerned about the rights of others. It is by building popular alliances, by launching peoples' struggles, that we can win. And we cannot fight purely on the terrain of courts.

Radical Socialist

| UKRAINE:

An uncertain future

CATHERINE SAMARY ·

Divided between negotiating rewordings and blockading government buildings to obtain early elections, they relied on the mobilisation of a million protesters on December 8, against "the sale of the Ukraine to Russia". It was police violence against the first "pro-European" demonstrations which changed the breadth of the mobilizations on December 1 and accentuated the discrediting of the regime. Fearing the opposition would spread to his Russophone bastions in the east of the country, the Ukrainian prime minister came to Parliament on December 3 to ask forgiveness for these "excesses", in the name of the government and of the president. And he proposed a tripartite commission (government, opposition and European mediators) to investigate the violence. But part of the opposition advocates ongoing mobilizations to blockade public buildings – at the risk of provoking confrontations – hoping thus to bring the government down.

But we are far from a new "Orange Revolution" in the style of the "Orange candidates" who succeeded the régime of Leonid Kuchma (1993-2004), borne by popular hopes of a non-corrupt regime. Disillusionment was rapid, hence the election in 2010 of the candidate defeated in 2005 – Viktor Yanukovich.

He was elected on the basis of a programme of military "neutrality" and balancing of international relations – allowing the de facto reconciliation of various oligarchs. Also negotiations with the EU were carried out by the ruling party in Vilnius, until the recent rupture. The hope of the opposition parties

of winning a vote of defiance in parliament on December 3 was not then unfounded.

Behind all this, in addition to the fate of Yulia Timoshenko which the EU has made a *casus belli*, there is the socio-economic situation of the Ukraine and the nature of the accords. The country has not recovered from the shock of the disintegration of the USSR and privatisation, or from the recession of 2009. Its GDP per inhabitant is 20% of the EU average, lower than Rumania and Bulgaria. The country's budget deficit has grown since 2009 (it was nearly 6% of GDP in 2010) and the trade deficit was more than -7% of GDP in 2012. But the ruling party fears a social explosion in case of an increase in energy prices: it had to choose between the Russian offers and the increases advocated by the IMF – after vainly asking the EU to intervene with the IMF or organise a tripartite negotiation (Russia, Ukraine and EU).

Most of the European media has deflected emphasis from the question of the treaty of association with the EU that president Viktor Yanukovich has refused to sign towards a struggle for democracy. The democratic stakes are real, but they lie elsewhere. The parties are all very discredited – except perhaps for that of the former boxing champion Vitali Klitschko (precisely because they denounce the endemic corruption and stress some of the social issues). Like the revolt of the indignant in Bulgaria, the movement is both critical of the parties and of various ideological shades: blue and yellow are at the same time the colours of the Ukraine, of an idealised EU flag and of the Svoboda/Liberty party which commemorates the SS battalions, destroys a statue of Lenin and demands the banning of the Communist Party – signs of a democratic European consciousness?

ALGERIA

A president and system without opposition?

NADIR DJERMOUNE ·

The economic field

The Algerian capitalist economy has essentially been built on oil taxes since the 1970s, even if the oil income in 2012 was 73.981 billion dollars on a GDP of 207.96 billion dollars, according to the official figures. The fluctuation of fuel prices continues to render public finances fragile. Such is the case in the current conjuncture. The dinar is depreciating. This depreciation is declared to be a form of devaluation and presented as a voluntary and intentional act to limit imports of manufactured products into Algeria. A way of protecting the national economy! If this is the case it should be said that this depreciation is not reflected by any price increase in raw materials imported. It should also be said that this national production will be taken on by a private sector whose activity is fully within the context of neoliberalism, according to the statements of Prime Minister Sellaal. We are in reality witnessing a process of the transfer of money from public to private finance, embellished by the slogan of "national production". Which poses the question of the ability to construct any kind of economic sovereignty in the context of a global privatisation.

Whatever, prudence should be the watchword, insists the official discourse. Some even advocate the freezing of wages and the halting of recruitment to the civil service. However the projects of big infrastructural works, highway networks, hydraulic and urban transport projects (tramways in the main

cities) are maintained. If this situation persists, they will surely be cut back, which would lead to increased unemployment. But for now we are not there. In the short term, the regime has a certain financial leeway, since Algeria is not in debt.

The discourse on austerity is from this viewpoint intended to rein in the demands of the workers and the masses. The project of the grand mosque, for example, costing 1.5 billion dollars, or something like 2% of the income from fuel exports, a vanity project simply for the glory of the president, is being maintained. That gives us an idea of the margin of manoeuvre the regime still has.

Social reaction

Since 2011, under the shock wave of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, we have witnessed a social explosion provoked directly by an increase in the price of basic necessities and a fall in value of the dinar. This social explosion has been followed by a strike movement involving workers in the civil service, the public and private sector and even the unemployed and precarious workers. We have also seen a succession of local social revolts around living conditions: housing, roads, health and so on. The government has succeeded in controlling the situation by satisfying a certain number of social demands (wage increases) and by according credits and other benefits to jobless youths who wanted to start up enterprises. It succeeded by these actions in keeping opposition at the social level and, by a peaceful management of rallies, avoiding any dynamic which would have transformed the social conflict into political revolt. Thus the social opposition has been dissociated from political action. But the social protest has still not halted and strikes and protests have continued.

The response of the regime

The response of the government remains the same: give way on the financial aspects and prevent any overspill onto the political level. Indeed it remains fairly tranquil at the latter level. The opposition remains incapable of presenting a consistent and credible political response. The time is for consensus, it is said! This is explained by the integration of the ruling political élites and the social components which structure the main political parties making up the opposition. The case of the Islamists of "Algerian Hamas", of Muslim Brotherhood affiliation, is revealing of this sociological integration, even if the latter is now trying to reconstruct its virginity after years of collaboration with the government.

Bouteflika's version of capitalism has succeeded in giving a social and economic base to the bourgeoisie, rebuilding a middle layer which no longer needs Islamism to channel its ideological deviations. It has succeeded in dividing the popular classes and in absorbing a good part of the social opposition in a populist tunnel.

One of the cards in the president's hands is article 87a of the labour code. The article in question defines the national minimum wage, the SNMG, not on the basic wage but including bonuses! The subject of dissent during the tripartite negotiations between the government, the UGTA trade union and the employers' representatives, the article in question should have been abrogated. But according to recent statements by the general secretary of the trade union federation, the file is in the hands of Bouteflika who will announce it when the right time comes! Meanwhile the minister of labour has just indicated that the new labour code will favour short term contracts so that flexibility allows employers "to recruit more"!

Credibility of alternation

The "Bonapartist" tradition of the Algerian regime, consolidated by the successive crises which have engulfed the country, has served Bouteflika who has often sought through popular plebiscites to rule

alone and uncontested. His illness has however weakened his personal power. But his desire to go to the end of his reign finds an echo among the different social and political factions which make up and structure the Algerian regime. However it meets indifference among a part of the popular layers. If the former factions have every interest in maintaining the political status quo which royally serves their economic interests by largesse in the distribution of the financial manna, the lack of interest of the second category is explained above all by the absence of an alternative political project, be it only in terms of alternation inside the same regime. It is true however that the search for stability is underpinned by a relative improvement of social and economic conditions comparative to the previous situation. It is above all fed by the fear of a return to insecurity with respect to what is happening in Libya, Egypt or Syria.

The option of a fourth term is not ruled out. The great unknown remains however the attitude of the voters. A strong abstention and a popular disavowal will tarnish the image of a president seeking a final plebiscite. A technical scenario to salvage things seems to be in construction: it would involve a constitutional revision before the end of the current term introducing an amendment which would make possible the extension of the presidential term and also install the post of vice-president who would succeed him in case of a premature death.

The revolutionary left?

The absence of a consistent and credible opposition is also felt on the left. In what one might call the parliamentary left, represented by the PT (Parti des Travailleurs – Workers' Party), the discourse is on the defence of the borders against imminent imperialist attacks. Because Algeria is in NATO's gun sights like its Arab neighbours, according to this critique! This justifies the barely critical support given to the president, presented as guarantor of this stability. The rest of the left is unhappily weak and divided. The ideological inertia and the political differences reflect the absence of an alternative

project at a mass scale today. The time has come for the rallying of this left despite the difficulties, which the PST (Parti socialiste des travailleurs –

Socialist Workers' Party, Algerian section of the Fourth International) is laboriously trying to do.

RUSSIA

A call for days of international solidarity 18-26 January

The tragic story of the so-called Bolotnoe case perfectly maps the criminal story of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term. It was precisely on 6 May 2012, on the eve of his inauguration, that tens of thousands went out to demonstrate in the centre of Moscow, only to become victims of an enormous police provocation. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, with dozens beaten up. Putin, who had held on to power through massive electoral fraud, had clearly decided to inflict a fatal blow on the mass protest movement that had emerged during the election campaign.

A few weeks later, in May 2012, the arrests began. As a result, 15 people are now in prison and 3 more are under house arrest. Even more activists had to leave the country to avoid detention.

And while the right hand of Putin's regime has continued campaign of repression against the opposition, its left hand has organized waves of aggressive xenophobia and reactionary policies. When, for example, in October 2013, a racist pogrom took place against a largely immigrant-operated fruit-and-vegetable market in a Moscow suburb called Biriuliovo, the authorities reacted by conducting a police raid on "illegals" on an unprecedented scale. Acting upon direct instructions from the Kremlin, journalists from the main media channels poisoned mass consciousness with stories of "ethnic crime" or "homosexual propaganda" which "threatens our traditional values". The state and its media forcibly are create in front of our very eyes a conservative "silent majority", ready to close ranks in the struggle against foreign and domestic enemies.

The astonishing cynicism of Putin's "right turn" is closely linked to the continued flow of Russian capital to offshore zones and West European countries. Not only the economic elites but also top state bureaucrats no longer link their future with Russia and purchase instead castles from English lords and miles of Florida's shoreline. Xenophobia is the cheap product for consumption by the poor while the elites prepare their retreats in the face of the deepening stagnation of the Russian economy.

In this situation, we – representatives of the Russian left – need the help of our comrades from Western Europe, the USA and worldwide as never before. You are the ones who can inflict painful and effective blows to the self-confidence of Russia's elite, especially when they have to face the questions that they can easily brush off at home. Recently we have seen some brilliant examples of such actions: on 20 November French activists interrupted the lecture held by Alexander Bastyrkin, the head of the Investigative Committee and chief architect of the Bolotnoe case. A few days later, in Germany, the appearance of Elena Mizulina – the main lobbyist of the "struggle against gay propaganda" – was met with massive protests.

A month ago, upon the initiative of leftist deputies from the Swedish Riksdag, a parliamentary resolution was passed, calling upon the Russian state to free its political prisoners.

All of these are important elements of the struggle, which must be multiplied. On 19 January 2014 [1], a day when Moscow will be the site of a demonstration against the racism and xenophobia of the authorities, we call upon our comrades to conduct actions in solidarity with Russian political prisoners.

We call for pickets in front of the Russian Federation's foreign consulates, as well as in front of institutions of your own governments calling for resolutions condemning political repressions.

Please, send your reports on solidarity action and any other information or questions to this email: russiasolidarity2014@gmail.com

| BRITAIN

Left Unity launched

LIAM MAC UAD ·

The first indication that Left Unity is different from most other left wing organisations came very early in its November 30th founding conference. Ken Loach, the person who is seen as having given the inspiration for the launch of the new party, proposed that we shouldn't take a decision on which of the political platforms to endorse. Ken lost the vote and conference moved on to next business. There was no dramatic tension, no sense of impending crisis. It would have been hard to imagine a similar scene at a Respect conference. [1] It was a very promising omen.

Around 400 people attended the event. The morning sessions was given over to a discussion on platforms – documents which were intended to establish the general framework of Left Unity's politics. Socialist Resistance was strongly behind the Left Party Platform which we think defines Left Unity as a radical socialist party with strong positions on ecology and feminism. To various degrees the other platforms wanted to define the new party as an explicitly revolutionary one.

The existing interim leadership received what was effectively a vote of confidence. Members voted to allow it to remain in place until a new leadership is elected at a conference to be held by the end of March.

The Left Party Platform (LPP) won convincingly with 295 votes in favour and 101 against. The Socialist Platform was supported by 122 members and opposed by 216. The significance of this is that it failed to win much support beyond the list of people who had originally signed the statement proposing it. By contrast the LPP got the endorse-

ment of the majority of Left Unity's members in the hall.

Another thing that made the conference rather different was that it was impossible to predict which way any of the votes would go. This was hardly surprising as most of the participants were strangers to each other. A vigorous debate on the safer spaces policy saw conference agree to refer it back for further discussion. [2] While most participants understood the need for guidelines on protecting members from harassment and abuse the conference clearly felt that such a complex policy needed more time spent on it.

The afternoon was taken up with a long and intricate discussion on the constitution. From our perspective a crucial clause here was one which would have enabled Left Unity to organise in the north of Ireland. This emblem of the weight of British imperialism on the country's labour movement was removed. [3]

More explicitly than other attempts to launch new political parties Left Unity has set out to tackle issues of gender imbalances. It has a commitment to women comprising at least 50% of its leadership and speeches in defence of male privilege were received coolly, this despite the fact that men were over-represented in the hall. Left Unity is set to be a self-consciously feminist organisation. [4]

Although the party only formally launched on November 30th it already has over 1200 members, 400 of whom were sufficiently committed or able to attend its first conference. That is a small but significant base which already makes it one of the largest organisations on the British left. It has come into being at a tricky time. There are local government elections in May 2014 and a general election the following year. Labour will win most of the

anti-coalition votes as people want to punish the Tories and it will be hard to win a big audience for a new left wing party. But there is an audience for such a party. Many people will vote Labour with no

great enthusiasm and will want a party that articulates something better, different, radical and socialist. Now Left Unity is there for them.

TUNISIA

The "national dialogue" at the sickbed of the Tunisian regime

FATHI CHAMKHI ·

Only political parties represented in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) are accepted in this dialogue. Their tasks are to complete the writing of the Constitution, promulgate a new electoral law, establish the Independent Election Commission, set the election date and reach agreement on a new government "of competence" with wide powers, over which "an independent person" should preside. All within a month.

The FP, as such, was left out of the dialogue. Only three parties among its 14 components participate, alongside twenty other parties. The eventual goal is to get Tunisia out of the crisis and to complete its "democratic transition".

This "dialogue" goes against the hundreds of demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes that have mobilized, across the country, hundreds of thousands of people to impose the dissolution of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) and all the institutions of power which emanate from it, including the transitional government. This revolutionary movement accuses the Islamists and their allies of having betrayed the revolution and of being responsible for the worsening crisis and the deteriorating security situation in the country. This means purely and simply the cancellation of the electoral mandate, and the end of the legitimacy to govern that follows from it.

During the last quarter century, the local economy has been deconstructed, refocused on the external market and its revenues largely appropriated by the forces of neoliberal capitalist globalization. The consequence of this neocolonial holdup is a phenomenal extension of precariousness, exclusion

and poverty. A repressive political authority was necessary for the system to maintain itself for such a long period.

By breaking the relationship of forces which allowed the rich minority to exploit violently the poor majority, thanks to the revolutionary uprising, the oppressed classes managed to oust the dictator and to create the political conditions for breaking all the chains that condemn them to poverty and subject them to oppression.

However, the revolutionary process is still faced with many obstacles. On the one hand, the hesitations and ambiguities, and even the opportunism, of the left parties and their lack of confidence in themselves, the working class and the youth. On the other hand, the passing over of part of the democratic movement to the counter-revolutionary bloc. Finally, the stubborn refusal of the dominant minority, which still holds all the economic and political power, to meet the most urgent demands of the working classes, its determination in its headlong rush towards neoliberal capitalism, the hardening of its austerity policy, its deceit and its multifaceted reactionary ideology.

All this is combined with the colossal pressure exerted by the imperialist forces on the principal social and political organizations, which gives an idea of the resilience of the counter-revolution that is attempting to block the path of emancipation and freedom to the working classes and the youth. This revolutionary crisis is accelerating the transformation of the social crisis into an economic, financial, political, security and environmental crisis.

By continuing along the path of Ben Ali, while accelerating the neoliberal capitalist liberalization of the economy and accentuating the measures of so-

cial austerity, Ennahdha is only sawing off the branch on which it sits. The religious mask, which facilitated its access to power, has fallen away! Unmasked, its bourgeois, corrupt and reactionary nature appears in broad daylight.

We must maintain the pressure against Ennahdha, by continuing popular mobilizations to further isolate it, reduce the harmful impact of its ideology, limit the political and social damage it can cause and drive it from power in order to give fresh impetus to the revolutionary process. Instead, the leadership of the Popular Front, which has managed to place itself at the head of the revolutionary movement, allowed itself to be led in the wrong direction by the bourgeois parties, which joined with it in the National Salvation Front (NSF); the direction of the "national dialogue", which is a real life-saver for Ennahdha, coming just in time to help the Islamists keep their heads above water.

However, saving the Islamist party is the least of the concerns of the regime in power. The objective of the counter-revolution is to defeat the revolution! All the nice speeches about "the supreme interest of Tunisia," "the democratic transition", "national salvation" and the "national consensus", etc., are petty-bourgeois rhetoric, designed to conceal this objective from the masses. In 1987, Ben Ali, his sponsors and his associates concealed from the Tunisian people what the coup d'état was really about, under a heap of fine speeches and slogans that were intended to lull Tunisians to sleep.

The counter-revolutionary task of the Islamist party is not finished; the system still needs its cooperation to defeat the revolutionary movement. Ennahdha knows that it has failed miserably in power; it could not suppress social protest and impose a new bourgeois order. At the same time, because of the betrayal of the hopes that part of the population had put into it, Ennahdha has lost much of the confidence that it enjoyed among the popular classes before it came to power.

The legitimacy that came from the elections is exhausted, and the powers that derived from it have

been eroded. The counter-revolution needs a new project to overcome social resistance. The Islamists are aware of this, but they are paralyzed by the dramatic reversal of the situation in Egypt, and fear that a similar fate awaits them when they move away from power.

The assassination of Belaïd in February, then Brahmi in July created real electroshocks. Ennahdha succeeded, in the absence of an adequate response from the Popular Front, to absorb the shock of the first murder. But at present it is still suffering the effects of the assassination of Brahmi. The political crisis, which is the most obvious expression of this, continues, despite the start of the "national dialogue". The economic and social situation is quite catastrophic; the deteriorating security situation, because, in particular, of the proliferation of jihadist and terrorist groups, as well as the numerous mistakes and incompetence of the Islamists in power, is an important part of the problem. But the energetic and very appropriate reaction of the leadership of the PF in response to the murder, which was to issue a call for the Tunisian people to mobilize, to drive the Islamists from power, also contributed to weakening and isolating Ennahdha.

The call of the FP had a broad echo. The mobilization had a rising momentum in Tunis, as it did everywhere in the country, and it culminated in the huge demonstrations on 6 and 13 August in Tunis. Parallel to the extension and radicalization of the revolutionary movement, the pressure on the leadership of the FP from the bourgeois parties and the embassies of the imperialist states, as well as the leadership of the trade union confederation and the employers' organization, have increased, seeking to direct it on to the road of the "national dialogue". From the beginning, Nida Tounes, the main bourgeois party, latched on to the PF in the framework of the NSF, which emerged just hours after the PF had launched the famous "call to the people."

The objective of Nida Tounes, a modernist version of Ennahdha, is clear: on the one hand stop the rise of the FP, deflect it from its revolutionary line; and

on the other get Ennahdha to tone down its behaviour, in order to force it to normalize its relations with Nida Tounes and to form around them a broad political coalition whose main task will be political support to the new government, and whose objective is to implement the agreement reached on June 7 with the IMF. As for the elections, they depend on the ability of the government and the political coalition supporting it to carry out the policy of austerity as well as paving the way for elections which will aim to consolidate the victory of the counter-revolution. But we are not there yet! Far from it.

The leadership of the Popular Front is making a mistake when it agrees to dialogue with bandits, while for the last three years the masses have been taking a fairly obvious anti-imperialist and anticapitalist orientation. It is also mistaken when it favours dialogue with the product of the degeneration of the propertied classes, instead of the path of revolution traced by the revolutionary insurrection that began on December 17, 2010. Whatever the reasons for this rightward shift, the consequences

will be disastrous for the revolutionary process, unless this leadership quickly corrects its line, while there is still time to do so.

The FP has a lot of work on its plate! It has a revolutionary process that it must lead to the end. It must, in addition to the need to correct its present orientation, engage, without delay, the battle against the harsher austerity policy and the deepening capitalist liberalization which is dictated by the agreements with the European Union, the IMF and the World Bank. It must pursue the mobilization in order to sweep away the institutions and the authorities that came from the elections of 23 October, and it must continue the struggle for the defence of fundamental freedoms. It must arm itself with clear tasks and perspectives, and help the working classes to participate consciously in their self-liberation. To have a better chance of succeeding in these heavy tasks, the FP has an interest in continuing to build its organization, which it has abandoned in recent months in favour of the structures of the NSF.

Tunis, 13 October 2013

Ormoc, Palompon, Villaba — the initial phase of relief operations is completed, the financial campaign continues

PIERRE ROUSSET ·

The financial campaign

On Friday, December 6, 2013, we made a new transfer of 1,000 euros to support the Mi-HANDS campaign, "Mindanao Solidarity for Typhoon Yolanda Survivors".

So far, we have sent a total of 12,000 euros to Mi-HANDS - or € 12,500, taking into account the two other small contributions mentioned in the previous information point (help for the rebuilding of houses of the members of the tricycle workers' union of Tacloban, and also for the reception of refugee families in Manila).

The action of Mi-HANDS is concentrated in the north of the island of Leyte, one of the areas most devastated by the super-typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda. We have already reported on the arrival of relief supplies in Ormoc. Since then, teams of activists from Mindanao have also gone to Palompon and Villaba.

In Palompon

A big lorry had been hired to deliver aid — nearly 1,200 batches of food, hygiene products ... — from Iligan (Mindanao) to Ormoc (Leyte). It was expensive to hire, so now it had to be done without. Consequently, the teams of activists got up at 4 a.m. so as to make in the course of the day three trips to Palompon, each round trip taking two hours. By nightfall (18 hours), it had been done.

On 30 November, aid was destined for 413 homes in the locality of Sitio Kalag - itan, in Lat-osan

Barangay (Palompon municipality), alongside the main road and easy to get to. However, as in the most remote villages in Ormoc, no government aid had yet been distributed in the area and the population had received only one visit from a private institution.

Apart from some services (transportation, laundry...), the main economic activity is agriculture. Because of the devastation, most — if not all — workers have lost their jobs. Local authorities submitted an incomplete list of families to help, drawn from the electoral register. Rather than stick to it, a list of beneficiaries was drawn up directly with the local population.

All three teams completed their tasks without any particular difficulty: distribution of relief consignments, medical care and psychosocial therapy for children aged 7 to 10 to allow them to express their feelings in the aftermath of the super typhoon and their hopes: some said they wanted to become teachers, doctors or nurses to help people in need...

In Villaba and Ormoc

On 2 December, 542 households were targeted to be helped, in three locations: 124 homes in Bangkal, in the municipality of Villaba, further north, 373 in Curva and 45 in Tambulilid (both in Ormoc City). A big day lay ahead: the volunteers got up again at 4a.m....

Help? The people did not really believe it, fearing that it was only a publicity stunt or just a minimal distribution of aid. So families were content to send their children get the little that would be available - children who had to call their parents for help, be-

cause they could not carry the batches of aid, which each contained 5 kilos of rice, a kilo of lentils, dried fish, tinned food, cooking oil, salt, soy sauce and hygiene products they were not hoping for! People were delighted, the quality and quantity of goods distributed were greatly appreciated.

For people willing to be treated, the Mi-HANDS medical team had to first explain that oriental medicine would be used: acupuncture, herbal remedies... 142 people received treatment.

80 children and young people aged 4 to 17 participated in psychosocial activities, with the backing of their parents: expressing themselves through games, getting to know one another, preparing themselves to better face up to disaster situations...

On December 3, the activities began at 6 a.m. - 5 barangays in Ormoc City had to be supplied in the morning, 281 households distributed as follows: Alegria - 23 homes; San Pablo - 63 homes; Luna - 30 homes; Punta - 25 homes; Sitio Su-ong - 140 homes.

Psychosocial activities concerned this time dozens of children and young people from 1 to 17 years old. However, it was difficult to find suitable locations for these activities (and medical care), while continuous rain did not help things.

The aid provided by Mi-HANDS during these days was much greater than anything that had previously been distributed and the population was not sparing in its thanks to the donors and volunteers. The latter, for their part, had a very rich human experience.

One stage closes, another opens

One stage in the campaign is closed, that of bringing the first level of aid. All those who had gone to Leyte returned to Iligan, where they met up with, on 4 and 5 December, those who had remained mobilized in Mindanao, so as to draw up together a balance sheet of the work that had been carried out, and then consider the next steps.

A quantified balance sheet

Mi-HANDS Teams intervened in six barangays located in a city and two municipalities. It was originally planned to distribute aid to 1,042 homes, but it was actually 1,168 families who received relief.

In total, 522 people received medical care, including 270 women and 252 men; 563 children and young people participated in psychosocial activities, including 212 girls and 351 boys.

The funds raised for this first stage of the campaign amounted to 1,325,000 pesos (30,813.15 dollars or 24,537.04 euros). The expenditure (an initial estimate) was about 1,310,000 pesos (24,259.26 euros). A more detailed financial statement will be provided later.

The origin of the funds received is as follows:

ESSF, for a total (at the time) of 11,000 euros.

Local loans totaling 800,000 pesos (14,814 euros).

Funds collected locally, amounting to 54,000 pesos (1,000 euros).

Other international solidarity groups have appealed for donations, such as partners engaged in development work in Belgium, Luxembourg and the United States, but they have not yet sent money.

Donations in kind have not been included in the balance sheet. For example, NADA has provided 5,000 needles for acupuncture. This material aid will also be detailed later.

Recommendations

All the teams of activists met up by the sea near Iligan, for two days. After a little rest, well deserved, the participants discussed in workshops the lessons learned from the experience and presented a series of concrete recommendations:

- A small team must return as soon as possible to Ormoc to prepare the next stage of the campaign – "early recovery" – involving choosing a centre of operations and making a more precise study of the conditions and needs.

- Training more volunteers in how to organize aid, in psychosocial activities, in medical assistance, as well as "social investigation" on the basis of which activities can be properly planned.
- Strengthening the capacity of members of the communities concerned to play an active role in the reconstruction of their living environment. This is particularly important, because in all these areas there were no active social movements. There were probably groups of parishioners, but they did not survive the devastating typhoon.
- Continuing to collect financial resources, logistical and material support, both locally and with international partners.
- Sending emergency doctors, nurses and midwives to address the risk of epidemics, especially in evacuation centres.

Once the exchanges were completed, the activists took advantage of the sea to relax...

This is only the beginning ...

In many ways, the solidarity campaign initiated by Mi-HANDS has laid the groundwork for the future.

It relies on a mobilization of activists and not on heavy administrative structures and full-time apparatuses: it is truly a "horizontal", popular solidarity between two regions (Mindanao and the Visayas) and it is directed at people who were not previously known, whereas in the Philippines, this type of non-institutional aid generally concerns only relations, family members.

The phase that is opening now is crucial to sustain the links originally established and to help rebuild lives, in order to encourage the formation of local social movements able to defend the rights of grassroots communities. But this is a difficult step, among other reasons because up to now aid from the government has been completely lacking: if it existed, it would at least be possible to demand that it be distributed equitably...

On the international front, as we have seen, Mi-HANDS hopes to receive support from partners in Belgium, Luxembourg and the United States ... but for the moment, concrete financial assistance is only coming from the campaign initiated by ESSF. Let us hope that this will change, but it is our responsibility to pursue the effort of solidarity that has been undertaken.

SOUTH AFRICA

Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.

BRIAN ASHLEY ·

Yet Mandela was no God, no saint but a man of the people. He reaffirms that people born of humble beginnings can rise and achieve extraordinary feats. Victory is possible against all odds.

Mandela had all Shakespeare's attributes of greatness. It is with this sense that the South African nation, such as it exists, in its divisions, polarisations and inequities pays tribute to a man that dedicated his life to the liberation of his people.

People who never knew Mandela have woken up to a sense of numbness, you only feel when told of the death of one's closest. This is how most of Venezuela felt with the death of Chavez. Strangely in this divided nation, a nation still under construction and at times deconstructing, Mandela's passing will almost universally be mourned.

He was loved by South Africans, black and white, poor and rich, left and right. He was loved for his honesty and integrity. He was loved because he was neither Mbeki nor Zuma. He was a visionary, he had a grand project. He was political. He had a great sense of strategic timing. Yet he was not Machiavellian. He was loved because he was neither Mugabe nor Blair. His vision consumed his life. He was gentle. And like a good father to be kind, he sometimes could be cruel.

He was dignified and above all he had an immense love for his people and for the project of building a non-racial and non-sexist South Africa.

But above all he was an African man of conscience. He was a man of virtue. Virtue and conscience that made him so acclaimed globally since he led a nation at a time when virtue and morality were universally absent amongst global leaders. He slammed Bush and Blair for the war on Iraq: "What

I am condemning is that one power, with a president who has no foresight and who cannot think properly, is now wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust." For Blair he had these words: "He is the foreign minister of the United States. He is no longer Prime Minister of Britain."

He rose above bitterness and resentment. He was self-sacrificing and could reach out to his enemies and cross many divides. He was great because he was the great unifier. In many ways he was the architect of the New South Africa.

But for all this we must avoid myth making. Mandela was neither King nor Saint

Mandela was not alone. You only have to read Bertolt Brecht's great poem to know.

Questions From a Worker Who Reads

Who built Thebes of the 7 gates ?

In the books you will read the names of kings.

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock ?

And Babylon, many times demolished,

Who raised it up so many times ?

In what houses of gold glittering Lima did its builders live ?

Where, the evening that the Great Wall of China was finished, did the masons go?

Great Rome is full of triumphal arches.

Who erected them ?

Over whom did the Caesars triumph ?

Had Byzantium, much praised in song, only palaces for its inhabitants ?

Even in fabled Atlantis, the night that the ocean engulfed it,

The drowning still cried out for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.

Was he alone ?

Caesar defeated the Gauls.

Did he not even have a cook with him ?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down.

Was he the only one to weep ?

Frederick the 2nd won the 7 Years War.

Who else won it ?

Every page a victory.

Who cooked the feast for the victors ?

Every 10 years a great man.

Who paid the bill ?

So many reports.

So many questions.

The struggle to liberate South Africa was a collective effort. Moreover it was the power of the most downtrodden, the workers in the factories, the poor in the community, working class women and youth that brought the Apartheid government, if not completely to its knees – at least to negotiate the terms of the end of their racist system.

Every struggle needs a vehicle, a movement with a leadership that can give political direction, take the difficult strategic and tactical choices. Mandela's ANC came to predominate. Yet Mandela was the first to acknowledge the role of a broad range of movements that made up the struggle for national liberation and the mass democratic movement.

And while Mandela was the one to initiate talks with the Apartheid government, he bound himself to the collective leadership of the ANC. He took initiative, he led but he did so as part of a collective. He was an organisational man. He was at pains to explain he was a product of the ANC He was a man

of the black, green and gold but he could reach beyond organisational boundaries.

In the words of Fikile Bam, a Robben Island prisoner from the left-wing National Liberation Front:

"Mandela had this quality of being able to keep people together. It didn't matter whether you were PAC or ANC. or what, we all tended to congregate around him. Even his critics - and he had them - deferred to him at the end of the day as a moral leader. He still has that quality. Without him I can't visualize how the transition would have gone."

Yes, millions of words will be spoken and written on Mandela's legacy, now, in the months to come, next year and thereafter. And we will struggle to do this legacy justice. The most difficult part will be to capture the essential Mandela going beyond myth-making while accurately assessing the contradictory nature of that legacy.

For the present cannot be understood without understanding the past and not all that is wrong with current day SA can be put at the door of Zuma or Mbeki.

The negotiated settlement that brought about democratic SA on the basis of one person one vote will be regarded as Mandela's greatest achievement. It avoided the scorched earth path of blood letting which we now see in Syria.

"His goal always was the deracialization of South African society and the creation of a liberal democracy, for that end he was willing to make compromises with people of different views. He was able to concentrate on his goal with utter conviction and lucidity, and he was a man of extreme discipline."

And yet it is those compromises that are now coming apart at the seams. The unresolved social inequality that has given rise, in the words of Thabo Mbeki to South Africa as a country of two nations: one white and relatively prosperous, the second black and poor.

Mandela's legacy will also have to be weighed by the fact that SA is more divided than ever as a result of inequality and social exclusion.

The rich are richer and the poor poorer. The great unifier could undertake great symbolic acts of reconciliation to pacify the white nation but because, by definition, this required sacrificing the redistribution of wealth, reconciliation with the whites was done at the expense of the vast majority of black people.

Mandela was great but not so great that he could bridge

the social divide rooted in 21st century capitalism that has given us the era of the 1 per centers. It is the unfortunate timing of SA's transition occurring as it does in the period in which global power became rooted in the global corporation, empowered through the rules of neoliberal globalisation. Reconciliation required the abandonment of ANC policy as articulated by Mandela on his release from jail, "nationalisation of the mines, banks and monopoly industry is the policy of the ANC and the change or modification of our views in this regard is inconceivable."

Yet it is this abandonment of nationalization, nationalization symbolizing the redistribution of wealth, which was dictated by the needs of reconciliation not just with the White establishment but with global capitalism. In the words of Mandela in an interview with Anthony Lewis: "Private sector development remains the motive force of growth and development." His encounters with the global elite at Davos, the home of the World Economic Forum, convinced him that compromises were needed to be made with the financiers. It was also the late night encounters with the captains of South African capitalism such as Harry Oppenheimer that

reinforced his belief that there was no alternative but the capitalist road.

In the words of Ronnie Kasrils: "That was the time from 1991–1996 that the battle for the soul of the ANC got underway and was lost to corporate power and influence. That was the fatal turning point. I will call it our Faustian moment when we became entrapped – some today crying out that we 'sold our people down the river'".

It is precisely this capitalist road that has proved such a disaster and which may ultimately destroy Mandela's life's work of the achievement of one person one vote in a united non-racial, non sexist South Africa. To do justice to Mandela's life of dedication and sacrifice for equality between black and white the struggle must continue.

It now has to focus on overcoming inequality and achieving social justice. In this struggle we will need the greatness and wisdom of many Mandelas. We will need an organisation dedicated to mobilising all South African black and white for the liberation of the wealth of this country from the hands of a tiny elite. We will need a movement like Mandela's ANC, a movement based on a collective leadership with the combined qualities of Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Fatima Meer, Albertina Sisulu, Chris Hani, Ruth First, Joe Slovo, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, IB Tabata, Neville Alexander and the many greats that led our struggle for national liberation. But most importantly we will need the people who take their lives into their own hands and become their own liberators.

Is that not what Nelson Mandela fought for?

PHILIPPINES

Solidarity aid arrives in Ormoc

PIERRE ROUSSET ·

However, we have responded (very modestly) to two other appeals:

300 euros have been sent to a fund for the reconstruction of the houses of members of the tricycle trade union of Tacloban (on the island of Leyte).

200 euros have been sent to aid the installation of refugee families in Manila.

Donations have come from:

Europe: Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Britain, Italy, Holland, the Basque Country, Switzerland

Asia-Pacific: Australia, Hong Kong

The Americas: Canada, USA, Québec

International networks

If we are missing anything tell us. At the end of the campaign, we will make a balance sheet in figures of the origins of donations.

From Iligan (Mindanao) to Ormoc (Leyte)

Our Philippine partners have initially had to decide where solidarity action would be carried out in the Visayas; to define needs; inform and mobilise in Mindanao; collect funds; buy supplies and resolve a good number of logistical problems.

The decision was also taken to increase the number of households Mi-HANDs was responsible for, from 850 to 1050 [1]. In Ormoc (Leyte), the choice was initially focused on a single community which was Muslim, but it turned out that their neighbors, Christian (like the great majority of inhabitants of the centre and north of the archipelago), were in just as much need. There was a great risk of stirring up a feeling of injustice leading to tensions. One of the objectives of Mi-HANDs being on the contrary to favour inter-community solidarity [2], it was im-

portant to make an extra effort to integrate 200 families more into the aid programme.

Nearly 1200 batches of aid – one per household – were packed in Iligan (Mindanao) including food, washing necessities, maintenance products, toys for children and on, before being loaded on two lorries. Teams of volunteers who went to Leyte, in the Visayas, also brought their own food, medical equipment, radio and Internet equipment, and generators (there is no longer any electricity in the areas affected).

To prepare everything and load the trucks the associations involved in Mi-HANDs sent to Iligan activists from various provinces: Pagadian, Lanao del Norte, Cotabato, Maguindanao and so on. A cooking team specially constituted for the occasion was particularly appreciated by the volunteers! A whole network of organisations was mobilised.

Once the convoy left, it took 32 hours by ferry and roads for the aid to reach the town of Ormoc on November 29, at 2.28 am to be exact.

The situation in the villages in Ormoc

It's now 21 days since typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda struck and Mi-HANDs hesitates to speak still of "emergency aid". But for many beneficiaries, that is what it is, because this aid in goods and services is the first that has arrived from the outside since that terrible day of November 8.

An Indonesian institution has offered 250,000 pesos to repair a mosque in a Muslim community in the village (the "barangay", abbreviated as "Brgy" or "Bgy", is the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines and could be a village, a neighbourhood or a district. Municipalities and towns are made up of several barangays) of Tambaliling in the Ormoc conurbation. A local councillor ("barangay ka-

gawad") had distributed three kilos of rice, two boxes of sardines and that is all. An inhabitant said that they were told by government officials and the Department of Social Welfare and Development that relief goods are still under repacking in government offices.

Here, 80% of habitations have been destroyed by the super-typhoon. None of the affected families have yet been able to rebuild their houses, in the absence of the necessary materials and carpentry tools. Each has had to build temporary refuges with the rubbles that pile up everywhere. Also their means of existence (fruit trees and so on) have been destroyed.

The same is true of Sitio Baugo (Curva barangay), still in the Ormoc conurbation and the second place where Mi-HANDs has begun distributions. Here again the inhabitants said it was the first external aid that had reached them. Can the absence of the big humanitarian organisations be explained by the fact that this is a village somewhat buried in the hills, difficult to access? The truck bringing aid could not get through and it was necessary to hire motorcycles to bring the equipment while the teams of volunteers climbed on foot.

The distribution of aid was significantly delayed by heavy rain. Hence only 31 households in the Tambaliling barangay and 98 in Sitio Baugo received their family batches of basic needs goods. The sessions of psycho-social aid (aimed at children in particular) had to be cancelled and medical aid has remained limited. Thus the Mi-HANDs teams will have to return to complete the work, while also having to visit other sites.

A new stage is now emerging: the reconstitution of a context of family (reconstruction of houses) and collective life to restore hope and a reason to live for inhabitants after the trauma of the typhoon.

Basic principles of humanitarian aid

The Internet site for Mi-HANDs is now operational [3] and publishes daily news from Leyte (most of the information above comes from there). The first

texts put on line also include the initial call as well as a summary of the basic principles and operational rules of humanitarian intervention [4].

This summary is important. The fight against climatic disaster is waged at multiple levels. A level which is very classically political because on the one hand the dominant order is often at the origin of humanitarian disasters [5] and, on the other, it always remains significant in the area of prevention and aid [6]. For example, in this case, the violence of the typhoons increases with the rising temperature of the tropical oceans and *"inside each new born violent storm thus is the DNA of the fossil fuel industry and capitalism"* [7], to paraphrase a recent article by Alexandre Costa while the victims of Haiyan/Yolanda pay an unbearable price for the neglect of the elites and the Philippine regime.

That is why we advocate a "people to people" solidarity, from social movements to social movements, independent of the powers that be. According to our (limited) resources and needs, we give priority to aid to popular sectors or the most deprived communities and often where the aid of the big organisations does not go. This also is a fundamental political choice.

However, once we commit ourselves to aiding the affected populations, we enter a terrain of intervention which has humanitarian rules which we must be the first to respect. Take three examples.

- **Non-discrimination.** Where our partners intervene, aid is provided without discrimination to all households, according to need. No question of asking who they voted for, of separate treatment, or offering aid under conditions. It is the dominant elites (and some others) who break with this golden rule by using aid to reinforce their political "clientele" and social grip.

- **Protection of victims.** The people affected have lived through a deeply traumatising experience and are in a situation of great material and psychological weakness. They must be helped to get back on their feet and not asked to relive unceasingly the apocalypse of November 8 – they should not be

"harassed" to "witness" but given time to recover their own destiny and make their own choices.

• **Listening.** It should not be forgotten that even with the best intentions in the world blunders are possible. What happened in Ormoc offers an interesting illustration of this. As already stressed, the member associations of Mi-HANDs are determined to strengthen popular inter-community solidarities in an island where social conflict often takes the form of inter-religious violence. Seen from Mindanao, their aid programme in the Visayas responds to this concern by including a Muslim community in an essentially Christian region; but seen from Ormoc, it is different, the aid being only originally intended for a village populated by Muslims. It was preferable to include a neighbouring village inhabited by Christians, so they could have a common experience of solidarity. The permanent adjustment of aid programmes demands a great ability to listen.

These basic principles of humanitarian action bring together some very diverse movements of varied specialisations. This allows them to act together, or at least in a convergent fashion, and to strengthen the efficacy of aid. They have their own political approach, because they express respect for victims – a respect without which the very notion of self emancipation would lose any meaning.

This principle of respect combines in the documents from Mi-HANDS with two other basic principles:

A politics of rights – Often victims live "without rights" while awaiting charity: accepting aid thus involves carrying a debt of recognition – "*utang na loob*" in Tagalog – a very significant social relationship in the Philippines which underpins clientelism and patronage in politics. For the member associations of Mi-HANDs on the contrary, receiving aid is a right and does not involve any abandonment of freedom. Thus, after typhoon Sendong hit Mindanao in 2011, RDRRAC published a document aimed at the people affected stating that "*even in*

times of disaster, know that your basic human rights are non-negotiable" [8].

Actors in their own protection – Affected Individuals and populations are recognised as actors in their own protection, who should defend their rights throughout the process going from emergency aid to reconstruction. This is a fundamental line of divide with aid policies controlled by the élites (who have no desire to see an independent capacity of mobilization appear from below), as well as with these NGOs which substitute themselves for the social movement, giving priority to their own construction to impose themselves as necessary intermediaries on the "humanitarian market".

A considerable experience has been accumulated in the Philippines concerning intervention in times of humanitarian disaster. A campaign of solidarity can and must be the opportunity to learn in area too long neglected by the European social movement.

The urgency remains however in continuing financial aid. The second funds transfer made by ESSF (2,000 euros) arrived in Iligan just in time for the teams leaving for Ormoc to take enough liquid cash with them. The third (3,500 euros) has – like the first (4,000 euros) – allowed the purchase of supplies and equipment, as well as the hire of trucks this time. The fourth (1,500 euros) is on the way... while the fifth is awaited.

Pierre Rousset

To send donations

Cheques

cheques to ESSF in euros only, payable in France, to be sent to:

ESSF

2, rue Richard-Lenoir

93100 Montreuil

France

Bank Account:

Crédit lyonnais

Agence de la Croix-de-Chavaux (00525)

10 boulevard Chanzy
93100 Montreuil
France
ESSF, account number 445757C

International bank account details :

IBAN : FR85 3000 2005 2500 0044 5757 C12

BIC / SWIFT : CRLYFRPP

Account holder : ESSF

Through PayPal

You can send money through Paypal: see the

PayPal button on the upper left side of ESSF home page [English version of Paypal form is on the English Home page].

[https://www.paypal.com/fr/cgi-bin/webscr?](https://www.paypal.com/fr/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_flow&SESSION=HYicOYx_ee-jYpZ4KToLb3oCFQ__alLhQDaCsf2UhDzHg-ORSJCLJk_DiCqy&dispatch=5885d80a13codb1f8e)

[cmd=_flow&SESSION=HYicOYx_ee-](https://www.paypal.com/fr/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_flow&SESSION=HYicOYx_ee-jYpZ4KToLb3oCFQ__alLhQDaCsf2UhDzHg-ORSJCLJk_DiCqy&dispatch=5885d80a13codb1f8e)

[jYpZ4KToLb3oCFQ__alLhQDaCsf2UhDzHg-](https://www.paypal.com/fr/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_flow&SESSION=HYicOYx_ee-jYpZ4KToLb3oCFQ__alLhQDaCsf2UhDzHg-ORSJCLJk_DiCqy&dispatch=5885d80a13codb1f8e)

[ORSJCLJk_DiCqy&dispatch=5885d80a13codb1f8e](https://www.paypal.com/fr/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_flow&SESSION=HYicOYx_ee-jYpZ4KToLb3oCFQ__alLhQDaCsf2UhDzHg-ORSJCLJk_DiCqy&dispatch=5885d80a13codb1f8e)

We will keep you informed through our website of the state of the permanent solidarity fund and how it is utilized.

DENMARK

The Red/Green Alliance stood firm – and now we must move on

SAP (DENMARK) ·

?Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen said it clearly on the press conference Tuesday evening: Sometimes one has to stand firm. The RGA went into negotiations with the goal of making the government change its course. It would not. It chose to lock into the right wing's economic theories. It chose to submit to the budget laws of the EU. It chose to be bound by each and every agreement it has made with the blue bloc.

?The RGA went a long way to get an agreement on the budget, but even that was not enough. The government held its course – to the right, and the RGA stood firm.?

?

The union leaders failed

?No amount of spin from the government can hide this in the long run. Not even when the party comrades of Corydon hasten to the rescue and blame the RGA for the negotiation breakdown. If they had thought a little more about their members and pressured their party comrades in the government, then we could have had a budget, that would be quite a lot redder, than the governments "final offer" to the RGA.

?- The chairmen of HK, Metal and 3F should have worried a bit more about their unemployed members and demanded that the unemployment subsidies were improved during the budget negotiations.

– They ought to have helped the RGA creating jobs in the municipal welfare.

– They ought to have insisted that mandatory clauses securing Danish workers' rights weren't hidden away in a committee.

– They ought not to have forgotten, that their members, too, will grow old and have the need for proper care, and they ought to have known from their trade-union work, that that which is not rights can disappear like snowflakes to the sun.??

The RGA on the offensive

?When the RGA stood firm, we send out a clear signal that there exists in Denmark a political force, which wants another way than the neoliberal, pro-capitalist and employer-friendly direction, that all other parties follow.

That's why it was in the right place, when Johanne in the same press conference talked about the RGA as the opposition on the left. The political basis for this government is the right wing. The task for the RGA is now to fight the government.??The party energy must concentrate on supporting any kind of resistance and movement:

?- against the boss' pressure on wage and working conditions, including social dumping.

?- against the budget cuts on education.

?- for better unemployment subsidy regulations.

?- for better welfare in regions and municipalities.

?- for public climate investments

?- for more jobs

?The RGA have always defined one of its tasks in this way. But this final opting out of the RGA must lead to an adjustment of the course. At all levels of the party we must actually prioritize the local resistance and building of movements. And then we, as RGA-members, RGA-branches and RGA-networks

have to see it as our task to take the initiative to activity and organizing.

We should do this together with others, also members of the Social Democrats and SF. But we cannot wait for this to happen spontaneously, or for the leaderships of the big organisations to take the initiative. We should do it even if no other political force is willing.

The attacks of the union tops on the RGA is an obvious sign, that we cannot wait for them, that we have to organize for the unions and in the trade-union organisations with a view to change the passivity and accept of the trade-union movement in face of the government's policies.??

Alternative solutions

?At the same time we must present in public political answers to what is needed to solve this crisis on the conditions of the working class – not on the conditions of the upper class. The perspective in the last year on whether or how to drag or pressure the government to the left have consciously or unconsciously made the RGA spokespeople focus only on the day-to-day proposals that the government might jump onto. In this way we have underpriori-

tised the demands and proposals that actually change something because they break with the logic of capitalism.

The RGA should continue to exploit the possibilities of the parliament, that can arise if the right - wing does not want to play with the government. Or if there is an actual pressure on the government from the outside. But this is not in conflict with pointing out anticapitalist solutions. Here we can find inspiration from as unlikely an angle as the USA.

Recently the first openly-declared socialist ever was elected to the Seattle municipality. Her campaign was focused on simple, easy to understand demands like raising of the minimum wage, control of rising rents and better public transportation, financed by a billionaire tax.

But she also spoke to striking workers at the Boeing airplane factories and said: "We don't need the bosses. Boeing should be owned and led democratically by the workers and the local communities."

That's the kind of stuff we need to get better at in the RGA. ??

Political bureau of SAP 29 November 2013

DENMARK

Great victory for the Red-Green Alliance in Danish municipal elections

SAP (DENMARK) ·

The results were also a defeat for the Social Democracy and the Socialist People's Party that are in government at the moment. A large number of voters and in particular in the working class have become disillusioned with the neoliberal economic policy including cuts in welfare and unemployment benefits at the same time as large tax-reductions are handed out to companies and people with the highest incomes. The Red-Green Alliances has for the past two years protested actively against the austerity policies. It has mobilized and taken part in struggles against the government and thus has gained increasing support in the unions and among working people.

Following the elections the Alliance has put forward a set of demands and a plan that could roll back some of the major cuts in welfare and unemployment benefits but in the Parliament the SD and SSP in connection with the negotiations for next year's national budget instead chose to enter into

an agreement with the two largest bourgeois parties. An agreement that marks the continuation of the neoliberal political course. There is no doubt that this will further strengthen the opposition to the government. At the moment polls show that the Red-Green Alliance stands to gain 12% of the votes if there were to be a parliamentary election today.

The tasks of the Alliance are to continue to organize resistance to government austerity policies. To increase the ties with the unions and to use the many newly elected representatives in the municipal councils, to put forward demands that restore welfare and social benefits and to take the initiatives in mobilizations that can give strength to the demands.

Member of the Socialistisk Arbejderparti – Danish Section of FI, working with in the Alliance took an active part in the campaign prior to the elections and had a leading role in several cities. 4 comrades of SAP were elected as municipal representatives for the Alliance.

For more details on the results of the elections see.