



INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT

News and analysis from the Fourth International

IV378 - May 2006



USA - An Eruption in the Streets

ESF - An Unquestionable Success

Britain - Respect breakthrough



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Iraq

Why America wants endless war

Phil Hearse

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

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

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

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

For this the strike in Iraq was vital. The idea that the war was about oil is simplistic, but of course it contains an important element of truth.

Occupying Iraq and thus controlling the world's largest proven reserves of oil, but also vitally having strategic dominance of the vital oil routes out of the Middle East gives the United States an unparalleled power and massively reinforces US clout with East Asia (especially Japan) and Europe.

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

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

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

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

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

Taking hits worldwide

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

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

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

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



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

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

So much so that the line expressed by sections of the South Korean military top brass is "a reunited Korea with its own nuclear bomb"! Korean trade links with China are now pervasive; China is Korea's one indispensable economic partner.

As in Latin America, the US is paying the political price for neoliberal globalisation in its crudest form - "privatization by expropriation". When the South Korean economy crashed in 1997 World Bank president James Wolfenson declared "Now there will be many opportunities for globalisation!" - which meant, bluntly, now is the time for US finance capital to buy up bankrupt Korean companies. This brutal approach has not been forgotten.

Opinion in East Asia is also polarized by the magnetic attraction exercised by China. The Chinese government is engaged in exceptionally aggressive economic diplomacy with countries like Thailand and Vietnam, granting hugely favourable aid and trade deals which bring China little or no economic reward in the short term, in an attempt to tilt structural economic dependence towards China long-term.

This is not designed to force any kind of political confrontation between these states and the US or to break their many political ties with the US system of alliances. Rather the effort is longterm subversion of the US position.

To bolster its Asian position the US has been vigorously courting India, appearing at one point to promise the Indian government the status of accepted and legitimate nuclear power, in return ironically for Indian support over Iran's nuclear weapons and the 'war on terror' in general.

However the US position turned out to be so hedged round with demands for economic and political concessions from India that this rapprochement has faltered.

Regime of accumulation

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

Despite all the political hits the Bush administration is taking at home, including George Bush's falling popularity ratings and the deepening unpopularity of the war, the truth is that no major strategic alternative to the Rumsfeld-Cheney endless war is emerging in mainstream politics. Democrats and Republicans both have eyes fixed on the November 7 Senate and governor elections, and the Democrats and Republican critics like John McCain are running scared of being accused of being 'soft on the war on terror'.

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

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

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

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

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

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Bolivia

Nationalization of Gas! Bolivia's Historic May Day, 2006

Jeffery R Webber



Monday, May 1, 2006, amidst celebrations and marches commemorating the day of the working class internationally, the Bolivian government nationalized the country's hydrocarbons sector (natural gas and oil). With presidential supreme decree 28701 - named Heroes of Chaco in memory of the overwhelmingly indigenous Bolivian soldiers who died in defense of oil reserves in Bolivia's Chaco War with Paraguay in the 1930s - Evo Morales reversed the privatization of hydrocarbons instituted in 1996 by then-president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada.

Speaking from the balcony of the presidential palace in La Paz, vice-president Álvaro García Linera addressed tens of thousands of supporters of the governing Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism, MAS) in the early afternoon. He declared the measure, "the first nationalization of the 21st century...."

After today the hydrocarbons will belong to all Bolivians. Never again will they be in the hands of transnational corporations. Today the country - la patria - stands up.... This is a patriotic and heroic decision that takes back our soul and dignity. But it will be a measure attacked by dinosaurs, conservatives, and traitors of the country."

Later that evening, addressing the same crowd, president Morales told those assembled how he couldn't think of a better gift to give the workers on May Day than the surprise announcement of the nationalization of the hydrocarbons sector.

In fact, it was never his gift to give. The workers, the informal indigenous proletariat of the massive slum of El Alto, the Aymara peasantry of the altiplano (high plateau), the miners, among so many others, demanded and won the nationalization of gas in their monumental street battles of October 2003 and May-June 2005.

As Edgar Patana, executive secretary of the Regional Workers' Central of El Alto (COR-El Alto) pointed out, "We are moved because the nationalization of hydrocarbons has been one of the fundamental demands of the mobilizations of October 2003 and May and June 2005. For us, it's homage to the fallen of October. [While numbers cited by different sources ranges quite dramatically, many agree that between 60 and 80 protesters were killed in the October 2003 "Gas War"]. It's an historic act that, hopefully, in the following

months, will bring the country more revenue, to relieve unemployment, and make more jobs available...."

Bolivia's May Day

May Day promised to be fairly uneventful. MAS was elected on December 18, 2005 with an historic 54% of the popular vote. After starting to govern on January 22, 2006 the first three months of the administration showed minimal ideological coherence or political direction. The rhetoric of leading figures in the government changed with the direction of the wind, depending on the audience.

Many observers proclaimed the revolutionary potential of the administration, but this spoke more to their hopes and aspirations than to a sober, grounded analysis in the increasingly reformist history of the party since Morales's near-electoral victory in the 2002 elections.

The MAS was largely a bystander in the historic mobilizations that ousted two neoliberal presidents in under two years: Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003 and Carlos Mesa Gisbert in June 2005. Worse, MAS tactically supported the Mesa regime for several months in 2004 and early 2005, before being tossed from that informal coalition.

The Morales administration proudly reminds Bolivians that in March this year it moved to schedule a Constituent Assembly to rebuild the foundations of the Bolivian state in the name of the poor indigenous majority. Apart from the nationalization of gas this had been a key demand of the popular social movements in recent years. They demanded the unmediated, direct participation of unions, social movement sectors, and

indigenous nations in the Constituent Assembly process.

However, the Constituent Assembly envisioned by the MAS looks far more like an institutionalization and taming of revolutionary hopes through the formation of "social pacts" with elite forces, channeled through political parties and citizen groups.

Vice-president Álvaro García Linera, taking the old stagist line of the Bolivian Communist Party (PCB), believes that socialism is impossible for at least 50 to 100 years, and that the country first has to traverse through a stage of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism." The government repressed mobilizations by striking airline workers and their supporters in the city of Cochabamba in their first months in office, and reneged on a promise to increase the minimum wage by between 50 and 100%.

The administration furthermore quickly adopted the line that any part of the social movements that demanded autonomy from the MAS, refused cooptation, or criticized the government from the Left was "ultra-Leftist" by definition. The teachers, the healthcare workers, important indigenous radical Felipe Quispe, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), and the airline workers and their supporters, such as the leading Cochabamba organizer Oscar Olivera, have all been hung with this label at various junctures.

Leading up to May Day the government announced that at the MAS-sponsored, celebratory festival in the Plaza Murillo in La Paz, Morales would deliver a speech which would include a raise in the minimum salary - if not one of 50 or 100%, perhaps at least of 15% - as well as the end to a certain piece of hated "labour flexibilization" legislation dating back to 1985, the start of the neoliberal period.

In opposition to the first three months of the new government, the COB announced a separate assembly in a different part of town for May Day, to be followed by a dissident March against the MAS-sponsored festivities. In past years the COB marches have been legendary, huge demonstrative outpourings of workers' strength in unity and numbers. This May Day, as foreshadowed by a failed strike action by the COB in La Paz two weeks ago, the alternative assembly was abysmally small and subsequent COB march quickly fizzled to an early death, just after noon.

Nonetheless, outside of the COB, and yet not obviously at one with the MAS-sponsored events, tens-of-thousands of proud workers, peasants, and indigenous marchers paraded through the streets of the capital. I walked past the coca-cola workers with their red union jackets, Che emblazoned on the left

breasts. Factory workers, retirees, indigenous peasant groups from the altiplano, teachers, informal workers of a thousand varieties, and thousands upon thousands of disciplined marching women from various sectors, some in indigenous dress, others in jeans and union jackets. Restaurants and shops had their shutters closed. The only people working were the street vendors providing sustenance to the marching masses and journalists recording the events.

Signs of marchers read, "Death to Yankee Imperialism!," "Out with the Looting Transnational Corporations!" "The Nationalization of Hydrocarbons Now!" "Glory to the Martyrs of Chicago Who Offered Their Lives for the 8 Hour Day!," among many, many others. Chants included "Death to the Cruceño Oligarchy" (in reference to the most reactionary sectors of the Bolivian capitalist class, rooted in the department of Santa Cruz), "Long Live May 1," and "Long Live Tupaj Katari" (in reference to the anti-colonial indigenous leader of the 1781 uprising against the Spaniards).

Just before noon, the Plaza Murillo, where the presidential palace is situated, was already full with tens of thousands of MAS supporters. Marchers had descended from El Alto, a three-hour march to the La Paz's city-center. Bands were on stage playing Andean music, and entire families were dancing in the streets. The blue-and-white colours of the MAS adorned the buildings of the Plaza and the banners of many in the crowd. Massive, multicoloured wiphala flags were waving as symbols of indigenous resistance, and Bolivian flags as hopeful nationalism. A life-size Che placard stood out in the center of the Plaza. Finally, symbolizing the recently signed Peoples' Trade Agreement (TCP) between Bolivia, Cuba, and Venezuela, thousands of smaller flags with one side Bolivian and the other Cuban or Venezuelan were being waved over the heads of the dancing crowds.

Whatever one's analysis of the MAS as a party, the aspirations and sentiments of this crowd were of anti-imperialist hope, indigenous pride, and popular sovereignty. The physical, political occupation of this urban space - the Plaza Murillo - by indigenous movements and the popular classes was in itself a measure of political victory, however limited and potentially compromised in its adherence to the MAS.

I reflected on this as I remembered a very different rally I attended in March 2005. In the months leading up to Mesa's forced resignation I went to a midnight, spontaneous pro-Mesa assembly of primarily middle-class protesters. As then-president Mesa stood on the balcony waving and blowing kisses, the

crowd chanted for an "Iron Fist / Mano Dura! Death to Evo! Death to Abel!" (in reference to a key leader of popular movements in El Alto, and now Minister of Water in the MAS administration).

On this May Day afternoon it gradually became apparent that Morales wouldn't be delivering his address to the Plaza Murillo any time soon.

Nationalization and Military Theatrics

In fact, Morales was in the Southeastern department of Tarija, home to the largest of Bolivia's gas deposits. More specifically, Morales was in the gas field of San Alberto, in Caraparí, Tarija, a field operated by the Brazilian state-owned gas giant, Petrobras. There, at 12:30pm, flanked by various key ministers and the heads of the police and the armed forces, an uncharacteristically nervous president, reading from the shaking notes which contained the text to Decree 28701, declared the nationalization of the hydrocarbons sector.

The theatrical flare to the day's events was nowhere more evident than in the participation of the armed forces. 56 gas installations throughout the country were occupied by the military simultaneously, as the president gave his speech from San Alberto. Troops accompanied government representatives to the offices of Petrobras in Cochabamba to announce the nationalization decree. A bewildered looking office manager, totally taken aback by the video cameras, the military, and the government officials, said he'd let his bosses know the news.

Large banners were immediately strung up outside gasfields, refineries, and various petroleum related offices and sites: "Nacionalizado: Propiedad de los Bolivianos / Nationalized: Property of Bolivians."

On the one hand, the deployment of the armed forces was perfectly practical in nature. Offices of transnational gas companies were occupied by the army and military police with instructions to circumvent the destruction or removal of documents that will be necessary in forthcoming audits and preparation for newly negotiated contracts in adherence to the nationalization decree. At the sites of natural gas deposits, the army's presence ensured that sabotage by any groups on the Right, opposed to nationalization, was averted before it started. At the same time, the militarized presence was meant to reassure Bolivians that gas and oil supplies would be accessible and the industry functioning as usual in the interim, even while fundamental change to its structure would begin immediately.

Beyond these practicalities, the role of the armed forces served two important symbolic, political functions. First, it took the historically-savvy Bolivian populace back to the two earlier episodes of nationalizing petroleum in the country's history, both under military regimes. In 1936, the American multinational Standard Oil was expropriated - later compensated - and the Bolivian state oil company, Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB) created, all under General David Toro's watch. More recently, during the government of Alfredo Ovando Candia in 1969, pushed forward specifically by the socialist Minister of Petroleum and Mines, Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, Gulf Oil was nationalized. Morales paid tribute to Quiroga Santa Cruz - who was assassinated in 1980 - during his evening speech to the masses in the Plaza Murillo.



The second symbolic role of the armed forces in May Day's nationalization was to indicate to the far right forces, primarily in the department of Santa Cruz, that a right-wing military coup against the Morales government is impossible. This was surely in Morales' mind as he stood next to the leader of the Armed Forces during his public declaration in Tarija, and when he praised the Armed Forces and the police for their patriotism in protecting the natural resources of Bolivia in his evening speech in La Paz.

What Does Nationalization Mean?

All the fine details of the process are not yet apparent, and probably won't be until months have passed. Still, we can safely say that nationalization means less than the expropriation without compensation of transnational gas companies demanded by the most radical of the social movements, and more than the weakest of the MAS proposals over the last two years (during the May-June 2005 protests the MAS famously called only for an increase in taxes for transnationals to 50%, while most other sectors in the streets called for 100% nationalization.)

Article 1 of the Heroes of Chaco decree asserts that, "The state reclaims the property, the possession and the total and absolute control of these resources." Article 2 states that, as of May 1, 2006, all petroleum

companies that are currently active in the production of gas or petroleum within the national territory are obliged to hand over to the property of YPFB - the representative of the Bolivian state - the entire production of hydrocarbons. During the period of transition, according to Article 4, the largest gas deposits - those with average natural gas production in 2005 over 100 million cubic feet daily - will be subjected to the following tax regime: 82% of the value of what is produced will go to the state, and 18% to the gas company to recuperate costs and make a profit.

This measure will hit the two largest gasfields, San Alberto and San Antonio, currently owned and operated by Petrobras (Brazil), Repsol YPF (Spain), and, to a lesser degree, Total (France). The state will generate an additional \$320 million annually through this arrangement. The smaller camps will continue with the current tax regime of 50% to the company, 50% to the state.

The gas refineries of Gualberto Villarroel in Cochabamba, and Guillermo Elder Bell in Santa Cruz, owned and operated by Petrobras since 1999, will be brought under state control. The state will buy 51% of shares.

In a period of 60 days the debilitated YPFB is scheduled to be restructured such that it can assume the task of totally controlling the exploration, production, commercialization, transport, storage, and industrialization of hydrocarbons. In a period of 180 days, private companies operating in the sector in Bolivia will be obliged to sign new contracts with the state along the guidelines set out in the presidential decree. If they do not, they will no longer be permitted to operate in the country.

The Reaction

Petrobras (Brazil), Repsol (Spain), Total (France), and BG and BP of the UK are the major players in the natural gas sector in Bolivia. Petrobras and Repsol are by far the leading actors, controlling almost 70 percent of the gas reserves in Bolivia.

On the one hand the stakes are high for these companies. According to Jorge Alvarado, president of YPFB, even when they start to receive only 18% of the value of the gas being produced, these companies will enjoy 20-25% profit rates. But the days of superprofits are finished. On the other, the companies are so massive that their assets in Bolivia make up only a small portion of their overall asset base. This, in combination with the fact that the companies had already downgraded the value of Bolivian barrels given the Bolivian government's longstanding - if vague - calls for nationalization, meant that there was minimal

reaction in their shares as the news of May Day's decree became public.

Nonetheless, the pundits and relevant players have hardly kept their silence. One Wall Street energy analyst told the Financial Times that "This sends a very negative signal to the oil and gas market. It is a signal of rising nationalisation that could spread from Bolivia and Venezuela to Mexico and as far as Kuwait."

For Petrobras President Jose Sergio Gabrielli, "These conditions make gas operations practically impossible in Bolivia." Meanwhile, today (Tuesday) Brazil's president Inácio Lula Da Silva convened an emergency cabinet meeting to discuss the measure taken by Bolivia's president. The president of Spain has demanded authentic negotiation where the interests of both sides - the capitalists and the masses - are taken into consideration. The Spanish government has expressed that the measures taken by the Bolivian government are worrying. Chairman of Repsol, Antoni Brufau, told an Argentine radio station that "The news is of great concern to us... it's a matter which has been taken right out of the logical business framework which should guide relations between the state and companies."

The Future

The depth and importance of May Day's nationalization will only reveal itself fully with the passage of time. State capitalist control of industry has hardly been a means of human liberation and egalitarianism in the past, in Bolivia or elsewhere. Nonetheless, this is a popular victory borne from the days of mass action in October 2003 and May-June 2005. It's the beginnings of a break with the "logical business framework." The degree to which this can be broken down more fully will not depend on gifts from the MAS administration, but rather the self-organized struggle of the popular classes and indigenous nations.

It will also depend on the extent to which the deepening of radicalism regionally in Latin America, and we hope internationally, can continue. Recognition of these possibilities and obstacles also places a heavy burden of responsibility on those in the international Left rooted in the advanced capitalist countries, to strengthen anti-imperialism and forge new spaces for the Left at home.

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May Day

International Manifesto Of The Undocumented

May 1st: International Mobilization For Regularization

On May 1st the undocumented have taken to the streets demanding RIGHTS, DIGNITY, and RESPECT. We publish here a Manifesto drawn up by migrant/undocumented organisations from across the world.

May 1st is Labour Day in most countries around the world, celebrated in honour of those who lost their lives to gain the 8 hour work day. On this day, demonstrations around the world will come together to support the rights of the working class and of the oppressed. It is a day of struggle, commemoration, and pride. It is our day, no matter where we come from, even if we're born here or on the other part of the planet, we face the same injustices and struggles.

In the United States, it is those without papers that have taken the date of May 1st to bring to light the cause that they have been struggling for the past 6 years. Today, over a million immigrant workers have taken the streets to rally against the terms in HR4437, which passed in the House of Representatives of the US Congress. On May 1st, immigrants call for "a day without immigrants" and for a one-day consumer boycott to demand the legal status of 12 million undocumented workers in the United States. May 1st is not a holiday in the United States, the abstinence from the immigrants will show just how vital immigrants are to the economy of the United States.

In Europe, the undocumented are rallying for the same causes. In Belgium, 10,000 people took to the streets to demand legal status for immigrants and to say NO to the prisons for children born "in the wrong place." Today, the undocumented have held hunger strikes in six churches to demand legal status.

In Spain, a limited regularization process from a year ago has left hundreds of thousands of workers without papers and many other with serious difficulties in reapplying. A few months ago, thousands undocumented workers took to the streets of Madrid with the chant: "Nativa o extranjera, la misma clase obrera" ("Native or foreign, we're the same working class").

In other parts of Europe, the masses rose to rally against the dozens of undocumented workers who burned in cages like rats in Schiphol this past October... In France, the undocumented struggled for the last 10 years for the regularization for all, thousands of young people from the popular suburbs took to the streets to protest discrimination, and today the undocumented, the students and French workers joined in the struggle against the CPE. Their unity and determination won the first step in that battle.

Unconditional legalization for all

It is a system based on the unlimited search for profit and on the savage exploitation of the earth and its people that has led to the displacement of millions of workers from the poorest to the richest countries searching for work and a way to sustain their families. Facing the phenomena of migration, the receptor countries arbitrate cruel laws that criminalize and control immigrants. Different "regularization" or "adjustment"

laws for immigrants all over the world also regulate the working conditions, the quality of life and residency of the immigrants submitting them to a double standard, creating a second class of workers, and developing situations of new slavery. These are then, xenophobic laws (hate to the foreigner). The same way that Europe wants to "export" its borders South, to Libya, Morocco, etc., the United State wants to export its border to the South of Mexico to stop the flow of immigrants in the south of the country. The situation is similar the struggle expands through all the rich countries: France, the United States, Belgium, England, Switzerland ...that's why the struggle of immigrants in one country reflect on the rest and should begin to be coordinated with each other.

All immigrant workers contributing in receptor countries have the right to legal documentation that would allow them to work with dignity, and to fully enjoy full rights and human dignity. The use of the "immigrant status" allows governments to keep a massive class of workers that cannot ask for just working conditions, which in turn lowers the working conditions and salaries of all the workers.

Native or foreign, we're the same working class

The division between native and foreign workers, between the documented and the undocumented, affects all

workers and impedes our unity. This allows for the passing of laws as the New Labour Reform in Europe, which attacks and reduces labour rights for all. The first to be affected by these reforms are the immigrants.

For this reason we call on all workers, with or without papers, to participate in the next mobilizations to defend everyone's rights. "Native or foreign, we're all workers" signifies the end of the division between workers, the unity against a system that favours slavery, and racism ...

On May 1st we will take to the streets demanding RIGHTS, DIGNITY, and RESPECT. Native or Foreign, we're the same working class. We call upon everyone, documented or undocumented, to join us in subscribing to this international declarations of the movements of the undocumented.

Signed on May 1, 2006

United States: Coalición Nacional por Dignidad y Residencia Permanente

Spain: Asociación de Trabajadores Inmigrantes En España ATRAIE

France: La Coordination Nationale des Sans Papiers CNSP/France

Bélgium: Unión De Sans Papiers UDEP

Italy: Le Comitato Immigrati in Italia

May Day

Which side are you on?

Renewing the traditions of May Day

Sharon Smith

FOR THE first time in six decades, International Workers Day will be celebrated on U.S. soil with mass working-class demonstrations on May 1. May Day, celebrated the world over, commemorates the seismic upheaval inside the U.S. that launched the struggle for the eight-hour workday in 1886, a time when native-born workers had few rights and immigrants had still fewer, yet both united in a class-wide battle.

The decision to organize a national day of protest for immigrant rights on May 1 this year is a conscious nod toward the traditions embodied by this working-class holiday, in which immigrants have played such a vital role historically.

May 1, 2006, holds the potential to begin to revive that tradition, from America's grassroots. The movement's most powerful slogan, "a day without immigrants," is based upon a strategy of social struggle tied explicitly to the power of workers to withhold their labor—which successfully built the U.S. union movement in the first few decades of the 20th century.

For the labor movement, the lessons of this new struggle, with traditions rooted in its own history, could finally begin to reverse decades of retreat and setback.

To be sure, there is a debate over strategy underway inside the immigrant rights movement. Last week, Time magazine featured an article, "The Immigrants' Dilemma: To Boycott or Not to Boycott? A split is growing over how militant the upcoming 'Day Without Immigrants' should be."

Since hundreds of thousands turned out to protest in more than 100 cities on April 10, spurring several days of student walkouts from Dallas to Los Angeles, congressional Democrats and their movement

minions have done their best to rein in workplace and school walkouts on May 1.

Democrats have warned supporters that walkouts could create a "backlash," while dangling the promise of "comprehensive immigration reform"—a misleading term denoting "legalization" rather than "amnesty."

Thus far, Democratic-sponsored proposals for legalization exclude the vast majority of immigrants from the path to citizenship, instead promoting guest-worker programs that offer immigrant workers no right to workplace representation, to the delight of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Moreover, Democrats are carefully playing to both sides in the national immigration debate, as Sen. Hillary Clinton demonstrated in a recent New York Daily News interview, in which reporters described her "embracing both conservative and liberal goals."

In the interview, Clinton argued that U.S. borders should be secured with a wall or "smart fence" before legalization begins.

In contrast to the moribund antiwar movement, however, Democrats have not successfully derailed the militant wing of the immigrant rights movement—and plans for a May 1 boycott continue in major U.S. cities. The



difference has been the strength of the immigrant rights movement inside the working class and the growth of a committed left wing willing to challenge the dominance of strategies that rely on congressional Democrats.

While the catalyst for this movement has been the Sensenbrenner Bill, HR 4437, criminalizing undocumented immigrants and anyone who assists them, the sentiment among millions of immigrants is for full rights and amnesty. And Democrats' attempts at sabotage have begun to embolden a self-conscious left wing within the movement.

New York City activists booed Clinton's proposals at an April 22 planning meeting for a human chain protest. Los Angeles-based Nativo Lopez, president of the Mexican American Political Association, argued, "So what's the ruckus about a boycott? We need to put the focus of power with the worker and immigrants, not in the hierarchies, to resolve the immigration reform debate."

The fates of both native- and foreign-born workers are inextricably tied, despite widespread claims to the contrary. As Julio Huato argued recently in Monthly Review, "The working and living conditions of U.S. workers don't have to be subject to a zero-sum game played by natives versus immigrants (and this includes our thin and frayed social safety net). But they will be for as long as we treat the interest of capital as immutable and sacred."

There is nothing new about the modern immigration debate except the legal terminology. Immigrants have not been welcomed in the "land of opportunity" since the first wave of Irish immigrants landed on U.S. shores in the late 1820s. No distinction existed between documented and undocumented immigrants before broad immigration controls were imposed in the 1920s. All immigrant labor was used to compete with white, native-born workers—as were disfranchised African Americans.

Corporations have traditionally used racism to encourage competition between workers, in order to drive down wages for the entire working class and weaken the labor movement. Yet all too often, union leaders have betrayed workers' interests by opposing the rights of immigrants while failing to champion the rights of African Americans.

In 1867, when 10,000 Chinese workers staged one of the most important strikes of the 19th century, they stood alone. They demanded higher pay, shorter working hours (including an eight hour-day for tunneling workers), a ban on whipping and the right of workers to quit their jobs. Yet no unions came to their defense, and within a week the strike was crushed—a setback for the entire labor movement, which would not win the right to unionize until the 1930s.

Immigrant workers have performed another service for the U.S. working class, long unacknowledged and broadly

USA

“The power to stop the system”

Nativo Lopez

At an April 22 meeting of organizers in Chicago, Nativo Lopez, president of the Mexican American Political Association, spoke about the importance of the next step in the struggle against vicious anti-immigrant legislation - the Great American Boycott on May 1.

WE HAVEN'T seen anything as odious and hateful as the Sensenbrenner legislation since the Fugitive Slave Act of 1857. People should look it up—another law that asked citizens to participate in the persecution of others and the returning of escaped slaves to their former masters.

HR 4437 is the culmination of state and local legislation that we have been faced with—persecution in different places for the past 10 years.

It's also the product of 10 years of hate speech on right-wing radio. The level of hate speech and hate-mongering coming from the Clear Channel and others is unprecedented.

This is also globalization coming home to roost. There is a dynamic with the economic powerhouses of Europe and North America in relation to developing countries. The powerhouses are extracting as much wealth as they can from those countries. Legal and undocumented immigration is going to continue in a structural and profound way as long as this is the case.

Our greatest fear is that the Democratic Party is going to cut a deal behind closed doors and contain the movement that has been born.

Capital is creating for us a movement that we didn't have 20 years ago. Capital has sent immigrants to every corner and every town of the country, so that mass demonstrations are possible everywhere.

Therefore, I'm going to go to the capital and invite George Bush to join us in “One Day Without

Immigrants” on May 1 and participate in the movement that he is helping to create.

There are some people who are criticizing the call to boycott, but nevertheless, the call has been made, the word is out there, and people are ready to pursue it.

I happened to be at a conference last Friday at the Catholic Cathedral of Los Angeles, right after Cardinal Mahoney made the announcement not to boycott. I talked to the workers who work at the Cathedral. They came up to me and told me excitedly, “Nativo, we're not going to work on May 1!”

This movement is based on the Gandhian principals of non-cooperation. It's also based on the idea that the only power we possess is our labor power. The only power we have is the power that creates value in this society. When workers refuse to cooperate, they realize the power they have to tinker with and stop the system.

The immigrant “problem,” as some call it, can only be resolved when workers themselves refuse to cooperate with the system until it fairly remunerates them. And in this case, fair remuneration is full unconditional legalization for all workers past and present.

(This article was first published by the US Socialist Worker - journal of the ISO)

❖ Nativo Lopez is president of the Mexican American Political Association and a leading organizer of the 1 million-strong March 25 2006 demonstration in Los Angeles, called to protest vicious anti-immigrant legislation

unappreciated. Since 1886, when German immigrants incorporated the politics of anarchism and Marxism into the struggle for the eight-hour day, immigrant workers have brought radical politics with them when they migrate, pressuring the U.S. labor movement from within to challenge the conservative ideology U.S. rulers seek to impose.

In 1886, anarchists from the International Working People's Association (IWPA) led the struggle for the eight-hour day, and its ground troops were overwhelmingly German immigrants. Forty thousand workers struck for the eight-hour day in Chicago, including an altercation with police on May 3 alongside strikers at McCormick Harvester Works that killed four workers and injured many more.

A rally the next day at Haymarket Square to protest the police brutality attracted just 1,200, dwindling to 300 when rain began to fall. Just as the speeches were concluding, police entered the square and ordered the rally to disperse. As the speakers were leaving, a bomb was thrown into the crowd, killing eight and injuring 67 police. In response to the bomb, police opened fire on the crowd, killing and wounding civilians and police alike.

Without evidence, eight Chicago anarchists were tried and convicted-not of actual murder, but of “conspiracy to commit murder” and for “inciting,” rather than committing, violence in Haymarket Square. The struggle culminated in the trial and execution of four of the movement's leaders, including anarchists August Spies and Albert Parsons.

In 1893, Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld finally issued a pardon, acknowledging that no evidence incriminated any of those convicted in the bombing. Nonetheless, the Haymarket incident unleashed a wave of antiradical and anti-immigrant hysteria. Newspaper headlines screamed for revenge against “Dynamarchists” and “Red Ruffians.”

Because German immigrants provided the largest base for anarchism, the Chicago Times described America's “enemy forces” as “rag-tag and bob-tail cutthroats from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vuistukla and the Elbe.”

Today, Mexicans, El Salvadorans and other Latinos have brought with them traditions of class struggle absent since McCarthyism excised radicals from the U.S. labor movement in the 1950s. These traditions hold the potential to revitalize the U.S. labor movement, if it welcomes them.

Only in 2000 did the AFL-CIO finally reverse its longstanding opposition to the rights of undocumented immigrants, making possible a historic opportunity for uniting workers across racial and ethnic barriers. But labor leaders must also reverse their long-standing aversion to class struggle for the movement to succeed.

Far from creating a backlash, the return of struggle is the key to U.S. labor's survival.

(This article was first published by the US Socialist Worker - journal of the ISO)

❖ Sharon Smith is a leading member of the US International Socialist Organisation (ISO).

USA

An Eruption in the Streets

Gran Marcha and Beyond

Against the Current

MARCH, 2006 MARKED an eruption that hit the streets, showed its strength, and took everyone including its participants by surprise. Millions marched all over the country: 300,000 in Chicago, 50,000 in Denver, 10,000 in Detroit and Milwaukee, 10,000-20,000 in New York, 20,000 in Phoenix - and somewhere between 500,000 and a million in the Gran Marcha in Los Angeles on March 25. As the U.S. Congress and Senate hold their wretched deliberations on "immigration reform," the communities affected have shown they will not be passive objects, but active subjects, in this debate. As this issue goes to press, mass marches have continued and Congress has recessed in deadlock on the issue.

On the day of the Gran Marcha the white liberal left seemed to have missed the mobilization and didn't know to meet downtown at Olympic and Broadway at 10am. Why? As Daniel Hernandez reported in the LA Weekly (reprinted elsewhere in this issue), if you didn't listen to mostly Spanish-language media (but Korean too) and didn't read La Opinion, or didn't tune into Pacifica radio KPFK all week, well, you probably missed the news.

The non-English media and the Catholic Church played a major role in mobilizing people for these marches. Spanish-language media promoted the march continuously for ten days. Cardinal Mahony, who heads the largest Catholic archdiocese in the nation (Los Angeles), came out against the Sensenbrenner Bill [1] as a violation of Christian principles, affirming that the mission of the church was to aid the poor.

In the 1980s and 1990s Mahony opposed Padre Luis Olivares' work in providing refuge and sanctuary to the poor and undocumented. Olivares' sermons regularly quoted from Leviticus 19:33-34, "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." It took 15 years for Cardinal Mahony to realize that Latinos are the present and future of the Catholic Church in California (75% of the Southern

California archdiocese of five million are Latino).

Student Walkout and Tragedy

On March 28 came the students' turn. Forty thousand Los Angeles high school students walked out of their classrooms, continuing the wave of protest against measures to turn their families into felons. If Spanish-language media contributed to the gigantic turnout on March 25, text-messaging and MySpace helped create a collective walkout that surpassed the Chicano walkout of 1968 as well as the walkouts of 1994 - and faced police violence and suspension.

The LA Unified School District imposed a lockdown that afternoon, but the walkouts continued all week. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa - who supported the Gran Marcha - disappointed students by urging them to go back to their classrooms. KPFK broadcast live a four-hour town hall Student Speakout on March 31st that featured passionate and articulate students explaining their actions.

In a horrifying tragedy, 14-year-old Anthony Soltero committed suicide after an assistant principal at De Anza middle school kicked him out of school, banned him from eighth grade graduation activities and told him he'd be sent to prison for organizing a walkout on March 28.

The Realities of Immigration

There are persistent myths about "illegal immigration":

- ❖ The debate focuses mainly on Mexican immigrants, but in fact only about half of all undocumented workers are Mexican. Another 10-15% are other Latinos. It is estimated that there are 500,000 undocumented Chinese living in the United States, who tend to be more silent because of the fear and consequences of deportation. The Gran Marcha was overwhelmingly Latino, but there were many other contingents. One in five Koreans is undocumented and they had a contingent; Filipinos marched as well as Irish.

- ❖ We're told that organized labor won't support the undocumented who, the Republicans keep telling us, undercut middle-class American living standards and access to jobs. Historically there's some truth in this. But one of the strongest institutional supports to the march in Los Angeles was none other than the Service Employees (SEIU), whose spectacular growth in the last decade was due to organizing low-wage service workers, mostly undocumented, and UNITE-HERE who have organized hotel and restaurant workers.

- ❖ Undocumented immigrants supposedly use public services but contribute little to the economy and tax base. The most pernicious myth is that women cross the border to have babies



Marching in LA

born in America, while others come to collect welfare. Not only is this false, but people know it: In fact most Americans see undocumented workers as very hard working (80% according to a Pew Hispanic Research Center report) and only 4% of the population thinks "illegal" immigration is a pressing problem. The same study reveals that the population is seriously divided over what to do - give the immigrants green cards (40%) or deport them (53%). In a CNN poll released on April 3, 70% said they feel sympathetic toward the undocumented.

Amnesty, Legalization and Open Borders

The Sensenbrenner bill (HR 4437) is about as pointless as it is vicious - except as an organizing tool for the far right. This backlash bill would further drive undocumented workers underground and to the margins of society. It's not only Californians who depend on the work and skills of these essential workers. The Senate's attempt to come up with a more "moderate" bill (McCain-Kennedy) that creates a guest worker program, favored by Bush, could be the carrot to Sensenbrenner's stick.

The debate is a potential political disaster for the Republicans, four of whom - Senators Sam Brownback, Mike DeWine, Lindsay Graham and Judiciary Chairman Arlen Specter - sided with Democrats on the issue. Senator Frist forced the debate because he is currying favor with the far right in the party for his own presidential bid.

President Bush sits in the middle because he knows that passing the infamous anti-immigrant Proposition 187 [2] made the Republican Party radioactive in California and destroyed

Governor Pete Wilson's political career. For Bush, who has immigrants in his family, comes from a border state and wants Latinos in the Republican Party, a "guest worker" program is perfect because it answers the need of employers for a contingent, low-wage labor force that will be rotated out before it can organize.

In fact, this is no solution at all. What's needed is immediate legal status for immigrant workers, and a clear, uncomplicated and inexpensive path to U.S. citizenship for those who desire it.

The racist anti-immigrant campaign has been building. One year ago the Minutemen Vigilantes began their watch on the borders in California and Arizona. As Marc Cooper has reported in the LA Weekly and The Nation, the Minutemen vigilantes on the borders were miniscule, outnumbered by the media reporters, vans and cameras hyping them to the public. Four hundred news stories followed the "border blockade" by 30-200 Minutemen.

California's number one immigrant, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger joined the debate with an op-ed in the LA Times on March 28, positioning himself to the right of Bush but still in the center on this debate. He wrote, "Criminalizing immigrants for coming here is a slogan, not a solution," yet "granting citizenship to people who are here illegally is not just amnesty... it's anarchy." Republican leaders like National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman, Congressman Dana Rohrabacher and others have suddenly discovered the disappearing middle-class, low-wage jobs and loss of benefits - and blamed the undocumented for taking "their" jobs. For the record, Rohrabacher thinks prisoners should be put to work in the fields.

The Democrats have been little better, worrying that if they utter the word "amnesty" they will lose all future elections. The guest worker program in the

"moderate" McCain-Kennedy bill is no answer - it institutionalizes permanent exclusion of part of the labor force, and places huge financial and bureaucratic burdens on becoming legal.

But supporters of immigrant rights are all over the lot about what kind of legislation to support. The only decent bill, introduced by African-American Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (TX-D), grants legal status to anyone living in the United States five years from the date of the bill's passage. It builds in a family reunification policy, enforces protection of immigrant workers and requires that the fees paid for those applying for legal status be used for job training in communities suffering high unemployment.

Too Many Silences

Initially civil rights leaders and the Black Congressional Caucus (as Earl Ofari Hutchinson commented in New American Media, March 27, 2006) were MIA. A dirty secret of Prop 187 in California in 1994 was that while polls showed Blacks opposing the measure, 55% voted for it. Hutchinson notes that civil rights leaders "are loath to equate the immigrant rights movement with the civil rights battles of the 1960s." They were a growing presence, however, in the second round of mass marches on April 10.

There's a danger of pitting low-waged African-American versus undocumented workers. It's particularly important for all supporters of human and civil rights to wage a united fight for better wages, benefits and decent jobs. Today immigrants are targeted for "stealing American jobs," while the Black poor are often demonized as "lazy and unproductive" in contrast with "hard-working immigrants." These racist labels don't create jobs: rather they let corporations and the government off the hook.

One concrete example is UNITE-HERE Local 2's bargaining proposal with hotels to include contract language that both protects immigrant rights

and increase the diversity of the work force, particularly by hiring African-American workers. The union pointed to statistics that Black employment in hotels has dropped below 6%.

Globalizing Poverty

Neoliberal economic policies have increased poverty and desperation throughout Latin America. NAFTA did not benefit impoverished Mexican workers. It depressed their wages - in particular, destroying Mexican farming as low-cost food from subsidized U.S. agribusiness flooded the market - and accelerated the immigration wave. The wage differential between the US and Mexico is 11-1, and 20-1 in the agricultural sector (see Marc Cooper, "The Great Immigration Debate: Getting Beyond Denial," Truthdig.com, March 14, 2006.)

Stanford historian David Kennedy notes that the income gap between the United States and Mexico is the largest between any two contiguous countries in the world. That gap produces massive demand for labor in the United States, matched by a massive supply from Mexico and Central America. Quoted in the Washington Post, Kennedy noted that any attempt by governments to come between these two forces by increasing enforcement does not work - just as it hasn't with drug trafficking.

Socialists are clear on this issue. We are in favor of amnesty, legalization and open borders with an efficient and transparent path to citizenship. Right now the borders are essentially open (to illegal traffic) but dangerous. The trek to the North has increased since the passage of NAFTA in 1994. Mexicans are joined by Central American workers and peasants who face a harrowing and dangerous trip through Mexico and another perilous journey through the hot Arizona or California desert. The U.S. Border Patrol reports that 1,954 people died between 1998-2004 attempting to cross the southern border - more than ever died crossing the Berlin Wall.



UNITE-HERE hotel workers campaign

The enforcement measures being proposed in both bills - either more border police or a wall - will only make the journey deadlier, not stop it. In the era of globalization, capital moves freely and instantaneously across borders. Yet labor faces border patrols, police, super-exploitation in the workplace and fear of deportation. The drive for ever higher profits has led to a higher level of exploitation of the American worker, the increased use of unprotected immigrant labor - and super-exploited workers globally.

The realities of exploitation in the United States create openings for organizing. Unions should follow the lead of SEIU and UNITE-HERE, organize the undocumented and the low-paid, and press for reforms that are beneficial to all workers whatever their immigration status.

This article is an editorial from the US radical socialist magazine *Against the Current* (#122 May/June 2006). It was drafted by editorial board member Susan Weissman.

 ❖ Against the Current is the magazine of Solidarity, a radical socialist regroupment in the United States.

NOTES

[1] Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 proposed by House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner, which would considerably tighten controls on immigrants and make it more difficult to become a US citizen.

[2] A 1994 ballot initiative designed to deny illegal immigrants social services, health care, and public education. It was supported by the republican governor of California Pete Wilson. After a series of legal challenges it was dropped by the newly elected governor in 1998. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Proposition_187_\(1994\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Proposition_187_(1994))

Nepal

This is no rah-rah revolt

Tariq Ali

We reproduce here an article from Tariq Ali published in The Guardian on April 25.

Since this article was written events in Nepal have accelerated. Following King Gyanendra's recall of Parliament, a new government has been formed, comprising most of the seven legal opposition parties. The government has promised that a Constituent Assembly will be convoked which would have the power to abolish the monarchy and make Nepal a republic.

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) has declared a three-month ceasefire and has held open mass rallies in Kathmandu and other cities, addressed by party leaders newly emerged from clandestinity. The country's second-biggest legal party, the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) has echoed the Maoists' call for a republic.

The government has now offered to hold talks with the Maoists, who apart from controlling most of the Nepalese countryside, clearly played a major role in the mass urban movement that forced King Gyanendra to give in. IV editors

There is something refreshingly old-fashioned taking place in the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal: a genuine revolution. In recognition of this, the US has told citizens except for "essential diplomats" to leave the country, usually a good sign. Since April 6, Nepal has been paralysed by a general strike called by the political parties and backed by Maoist guerrillas. Hundreds of thousands are out on the streets - several have been shot dead and more than 200 wounded. A curfew is in force and the army has been given shoot-to-kill orders.

But the people have lost their fear and it is this that makes them invincible. If a single platoon refuses to obey orders, the Bastille will fall and the palace will be stormed. Another crowned head will fall very soon. A caretaker government will organise free elections to a constituent assembly, and this will determine the future shape of the country.

The lawyers, journalists, students and the poor demonstrating in Kathmandu also know that if they are massacred, the armed guerrillas who control 80% of the countryside will take the country. This is not one of those carefully orchestrated "orange" affairs with its mass-produced placards, rah-rah gals and giant PR firms to aid media coverage, so loved by the "international community". Nor does the turbulence have anything to do with religion. What is taking place in Nepal is different: it is the

culmination of decades of social, cultural and economic oppression. This is an old story. Nepal's upper-caste Hindu rulers have institutionalised ancient customs to preserve their own privileges. Only last year was the custom of locking up menstruating women in cowsheds declared illegal.

The Nepalese monarchy, established more than two centuries ago, has held the country in an iron grip, usually by entering into alliances with dominant powers - Britain, the US and, lately, India - and keeping them supplied with cheap mercenaries. It is a two-way trade and ever since the declaration of the "war on terror", the corrupt and brutal royal apparatus has been supplied with weaponry by its friends: 20,000 M-16 rifles from Washington, 20,000 rifles from Delhi and 100 helicopters from London. Meanwhile, half the country's 28 million people have no access to electricity or running water, let alone healthcare and education, according to the UN.

In 2005, King Gyanendra suspended all civil liberties and outlawed politics. To deal with a problem that was essentially structural, but which in the global context of neoliberalism could not be solved through state intervention, he decided on mass repression: physical attacks on the poor, concerted attempts to stamp out dissident political organisations and blanket social repression. The chronicle of shootings, beatings, imprisonments, purges and provocations is



staggering. The sheer ferocity of his assault took the tiny middle class by surprise and isolated the politicians.

Will the triumvirate - the US, the EU and the UN security council - try to keep the king in power? If it does, it will have to add Kathmandu to a growing list of disasters. Recent newspaper editorials indicate that the west fears the disease may spread to neighbouring India. A top-level summit between the Naxalites and civil servants after the defeat of the BJP government revealed a remarkably pragmatic Maoist leadership: all it wanted was for the government to implement the constitution and pledges contained in successive Congress manifestos.

What the uprising in Nepal reveals is that while democracy is being hollowed out in the west, it means more than regular elections to many people in the other continents. The Nepalese want a republic and an end to the systemic poverty that breeds violence and to achieve these moderate demands they are making a revolution.

reprinted from The Guardian, Tuesday April 25, 2006

❖ Tariq Ali is a socialist writer and broadcaster who has been particularly active in anti-imperialist campaigns, from Vietnam to Iraq. Born and brought up in Pakistan, he now lives in London.

ESF

An Unquestionable Success

Ingrid Hayes

In spite of widespread apprehension beforehand in the global justice movement, the Athens forum did not show that the process of the European Social Forum (ESF) was running out of steam. The ESF, which took place from the 3rd to the 7th of May, was a success both for the Greek organizers and for the European global justice movement.



With all due respect to Liberation or Le Monde (French daily newspapers), who are always prompt to proclaim the death of the social forums and the global justice movement, it has to be said that the reality and the experience of the militants who came to participate in the European Social Forum (ESF) in Athens flatly contradicted them. Before the forum we were insisting on the need to “find a second wind” and admitting some difficulties and fears. This Greek edition of the ESF dissipated many of them.

In announcing that more than 35,000 had registered (as against 25,000 in London in 2004) the Greek organizers themselves admitted that they were astonished by the numbers. Equally, the massive demonstration on Saturday afternoon showed that there was a contact between the global justice activists and the population of Athens. On Saturday evening the media were announcing 80,000 demonstrators, a record since the anti-war mobilisation on February 15, 2003.

The debates were directly related to the struggles that are taking place in various European countries. The victories won in France against the European Constitutional Treaty and against the CPE were at centre stage. This time, unlike in London, the European and social questions were at the heart of the discussions. Of course the international dimension was not absent, whether it was the risk of imperialist war in Iran or the political situation in Latin America. In addition, many debates dealt with the strategy of the global justice movement on the European and world scale.

Finally, and this is perhaps one of the essential aspects of its success, the Athens ESF enabled different networks to make significant progress from the point of view both of working out policies and of building solidarity and joint campaigns. This was the case in particular for public services, for the solidarity that needs to be built between trade

unionists in Eastern and Western Europe and for the fight against job insecurity.

Feminists were also able to renew the links of European cooperation that were initiated at Bobigny in 2003 during the Paris Saint Denis ESF. On all these questions work absolutely has to continue, without waiting for the next central meeting of the whole of the movement, in order to be able to resist step by step the liberal offensives. All that should convince us that the risk of running out of steam can be excluded for the moment and that the usefulness of the process of forums has once again been demonstrated.

Among the questions that were posed in the forum was the participation of political parties in social forums. In London the parties, in particular the British ones, didn't intervene as such in the debates, but occupied an unreasonably large space, provoking general irritation. This time the political parties were able to intervene as such in the main debates, alongside trade unions and associations.

Up until now the barrier to this came essentially from the French side. It is difficult not to think that this turn, if it is confirmed, is linked to the unitary campaigns conducted over recent months, in particular against the European Constitutional Treaty. All the same, that doesn't mean that the problem has been resolved. We have to think in particular about the ways in which parties can intervene and of the limits that have to be set, in particular to avoid some of them using the forums as a platform, or considering them as just an arena of confrontation with rival parties.

But difficulties remain. On the political level the Italian situation weighs heavily. The trade union front seems today to be a bit paralysed. The self-justifying interventions by the majority of the Party of Communist Refoundation - which supports the Union (centre-left coalition) presided over by the ex-President of the European Commission,

Romano Prodi, who is today heading the government - introduced a “recentred” political tone that we must learn to combat. Furthermore, there remains uncertainty about the place and the date of the next ESF. But after the success of Athens edition, it is certain that the next European assembly in September will give a positive answer to these questions.

The LCR and the Fourth International were very much present in Athens, in particular through the debates in which their representatives took part, along with other political currents, but also with trade unions and associations. These debates dealt with Europe, ecology, the future of the anti-capitalist left, international question and the mobilisation against the CPE. Our visibility was also ensured by a free newspaper that was massively distributed and by a significant presence in the demonstration on Saturday.

 ❖ Ingrid Hayes is a member of the National Leadership of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International), with particular responsibility for work in the global justice movement.



ESF

News from the European Social Forum, Athens

ESF Press Release



The success of the 4th European Social Forum (Athens 4-7th May) exceeded even the most optimistic expectations. With 100, 000 people participating in the rally and with more than 35,000 participants attending the seminars and workshops, the Forum proved both the potential of the Greek movements and the strength of the alterglobal movement. For four days, Athens was the European capital of resistance, for four days, tens of thousands of people have been sending the message: Another world is possible!

Beside the mass participation we should also mention some qualitative characteristics of the 4th ESF:

1. The participation of activists from Eastern Europe and Turkey was larger than ever (more than 2.000 people), showing that the Forum embraces the whole continent and not just Western Europe.
2. There has been mass attendance in the seminars and workshops. People came to listen and discuss, not just to browse around.
3. For the first time in a European Social Forum, trade unions had a significant role as members of the organizing committee.
4. Art and culture had a central place in the Forum, with more than 120 cultural events and with a participation of hundreds of artists.

The greek social forum addresses its warmest greetings:

- ❖ To the thousands of citizens from all over Greece and abroad who filled the streets of Athens and marched with determination despite the throw of tear-gas from the police
- ❖ To the hundreds of volunteers of the Greek Social Forum, who did their best for the organization of the 4th ESF. To them we owe the success of the event.
- ❖ To the Greek Social Forum's teams of safeguard that contributed in the successful finishing of the rally as it was

originally planned by the organizing committee.

The groups that used the demonstrators as a protection shield between them and the police, showed with their actions that they consider the Forum and its people as enemies. Their behavior during Saturday's rally is a sample of an extreme authoritarian political behavior.

With the closing of the 4th ESF, we have every reason to be optimistic for the potential of the alterglobal movement as well as for the forthcoming struggles in Greece. All those of us who were present in the events taking place in the 4th ESF, sensed the breath of a forthcoming Spring.

Declaration of the Assembly of the Social Movements

Declaration of the Assembly of the Movements of the 4th European Social Forum - Athens 7th May 2006

We, women and men from social movements across Europe, came to Athens after years of common experiences, fighting against war, neoliberalism, all forms of imperialism, colonialism, racism, discrimination and exploitation, against all the risks of an ecological catastrophe.

This year has been significant in that a number of social struggles and campaigns have been successful in stopping neoliberal projects such as the proposed European Constitution Treaty, the EU Ports Directive, and the CPE in France.

Movements of opposition to neoliberalism are growing and are clashing against the power of trans-national corporations, the G8 and organizations such as the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, as well the neo-liberal policies of the states and the European Union.

Important political changes have materialized in Latin America that have shaken the neo-liberal offensive, and in some of them popular mobilizations managed to reverse the privatization process.

The current situation is full of opportunities but also dramatic dangers. Opposition and resistance to the war and occupation of Iraq have exposed the British and US strategy as a failure. The world is facing the nightmare of a new war in Iran. The arbitrary decision of the EU to cut funds to the National Palestinian Authority is unacceptable and exacerbates the whole situation. The oppression of Kurdish people has still not come to an end.

Conservative forces in the north and the south are encouraging a 'clash of civilization' aimed at dividing oppressed people, which is in turn producing unacceptable violence, barbarism and additional attacks on the rights and dignity of migrants and minorities.

Although the EU is one of the richest areas of the world, tens of millions of people are living in poverty, either because of mass unemployment or the casualization of labour. The

policies of the EU based on the unending extension of competition within and outside Europe constitute an attack on employment, workers and welfare rights, public services, education, the health system and so on. The EU is planning the reduction of workers' wages and employment benefits as well as the generalization of casualisation.

We reject this neo-liberal Europe and any efforts to re-launch the rejected Constitutional Treaty; we are fighting for another Europe, a feminist, ecological, open Europe, a Europe of peace, social justice, sustainable life, food sovereignty and solidarity, respecting minorities' right and the self-determination of peoples.

We condemn the witch-hunts and criminalization of alterglobal and other progressive movements in Eastern and Western Europe.

We emerge from the ESF in Athens having made a step towards a better coordination between Eastern and Western movements, with a common determination to fight for peace, jobs, and secure existence. We will promote our agenda of European campaigns and mobilization on the main issues of our common platform developed in the ESF networks.

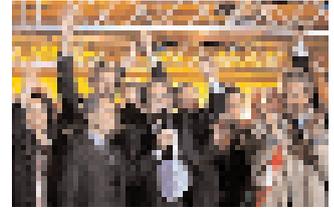
We need to coordinate our work, to define an effective strategy for the next period, and to strengthen and enlarge our movements.

We call on all the European movements to open a large debate in order to decide all together new common steps during the next months within the framework of the ESF process.

Italy

A dangerous situation for Rifondazione

Flavia d'Angeli



Prodi declares victory

Some very important events are already on the agenda:

❖ We will mobilize for a complete withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, against the threat of a new war in Iran, against the occupation of Palestine, for nuclear disarmament, to eliminate military bases in Europe and we call for a week of action from 23 to 30 September 2006.

❖ We appeal for an international day of action and mobilization the 7th of October 2006 in Europe and Africa, for a European unconditional legalization and equal rights to all migrants; for the closure of all detention centers in Europe, for the stop to externalization, for the stop to deportations; against the precariousness and for the uncoupling of the link between resident permit and the labor contract, for a residence citizenship.

❖ We will mobilize against the casualization and the dismantling of public services and for the social rights coordinating our struggles in the whole Europe in the next months.

In January 2007, the WSF will meet in Nairobi. The growth of the African social movements is crucial for the world. Building for the WSF will be an opportunity to fight against European exploitation and neo-colonialism.

In June 2007, there will be a meeting of the European Union Council and a meeting of the G8 at Rostock in Germany after the one in St Petersburg in July this year. We will seize the opportunity of these occasions for a general convergence of our struggles.

The Unione (Union) of Romano Prodi won the elections on 9-10 April by a short head [1].

The alternative Left, which was part of this centre-left coalition, is now faced with a challenge: how to block the road to social-liberalism, without, however, in any way helping Berlusconi to get back into power.

The elections of 9-10 April illustrate a very complicated panorama of the Italian political situation; The Union, Romano Prodi's centre-left coalition, only just won a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and got only two senators more than the Centre-Right. Although the Union won more votes than Silvio Berlusconi's House of Liberties [2] and gained support among young people, it failed in its objective of winning over right-wing electors. As a result, the victory had a bitter taste.

Prodi, by conducting a moderate electoral campaign, without denouncing the evils of neo-liberal policies, lost a whole sector of his own electorate. The good result of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) in the Senate (7.5 per cent), even though it was partly offset by a less brilliant score in the Chamber (5.8 per cent), demonstrates that there was a broad space for a radical critique of the neo-liberal model. This space was not occupied by the larger and more moderate forces of the alliance (the Left Democrats and Margarita): their disappointing results weakened the alliance.

In this context, the situation is looking very difficult for the PRC. The building of an alternative and anti-capitalist Left in Italy is now at a decisive stage. Locking itself into the government, as a majority of the

party proposes, could turn out to be a very dangerous perspective. The PRC's appeal to a sense of responsibility and respect for the discipline of the coalition will exercise a formidable pressure on the party to submit to the decisions of the Union, since Berlusconi's return to power will weigh heavily in the balance. The election of PRC Secretary Fausto Bertinotti to the presidency of the national assembly is likely to increase this pressure.

As the Critical Left current, we put forward an alternative hypothesis to the majority's at the last central committee meeting on 22-23 April. The other opposition currents seemed to be avoiding the need for a battle in the party. So we stressed that the conditions for the PRC to participate in the government didn't exist. But we did not conceal the fact that our votes were necessary for the Prodi government to come into existence, and especially to ensure the departure of Berlusconi from the Palazzo Chigi (the centre of government), a departure which is demanded by a big majority of the electorate.

This support "from the outside" would set Prodi on the only road that could give him a broad social base of support: the road of a clean break from the neo-liberal and warlike policies of preceding governments. What would be the signs of such a break? The immediate withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq and Afghanistan; the repeal of Law 30, which reforms working conditions, and also the repeal of the education reform and of the Bossi-Fini law on

immigration; addressing seriously the question of wages; the refusal of any new privatizations; a real policy of disarmament.

The possibility of defeating the right-wing parties on a social level, and no longer simply on the political and institutional levels, lies in the building of a social alternative that goes beyond the schema of governments changing without anything really changing. Prodi, on the other hand, wants to situate his government in the direct line of the old neo-liberal policies which characterized his presidency of the European Union. The participation of the PRC in this government will only delay the perspective of a strong anti-capitalist Left in Italy.

❖ Flavia D'Angeli is a leader of the Bandiera Rossa current, which organises comrades identifying with the Fourth International within the Critical Left current of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC).

NOTES

[1] The Unione encompasses among other forces the Left Democrats (DS) (ex-Communists who have now been converted to social liberalism and are members of the Socialist International), Margarita (a centrist grouping), and the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), a party of the anti-liberal Left. Within the PRC there is the Critical Left current, in which the members of the Fourth International participate

[2] The principal forces in the House of Liberties are Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, the post-fascist National Alliance and the populist Northern League

Italy

"The Project of Prodi's Centre-Left Union has failed"

Franco Turigliatto

The recent election defeat of Berlusconi was not any kind of lasting defeat for the Italian right, which waged an aggressive and mobilising campaign. By contrast the centre-left "Union" waged a very defensive campaign and has resulted in a weak and divided government. It is far from being a tremendous victory for the left or the workers movement, according to Franco Turigliatto, interviewed below.

How do you explain the very close result of the election of 9-10 April?

In spite of a deep economic and social crisis which could have provoked strong opposition to the government, there is no sign in this electoral result of a victory of the Centre-left. Fundamentally, we can cite three main reasons for this.

One is the capacity of the Right to reactivate all its potential electors, thanks to a campaign that was very wide ranging and very aggressive, linked to domination of the media. It articulated the use of fears (fear of increasing taxes, fear of the "Bolsheviks", fear of "oppressive bureaucracy") - in a society that is traumatized - and of promises, for example, concerning taxes and tax evasion, which had an impact on a significant sector of the so-called middle classes.

The second reason is the following: in spite of the mobilisations, in spite of the struggles, the social recomposition of the workers' movement remains very limited. As a result what can be described as the workers' movement cannot project its hegemony over the whole of society. And that explains the difficulty of not only winning the votes of those who are favourable to the Centre-left and the Left, but also of making a breakthrough in sectors of society which can be the object of manipulation by populist propaganda.

And on this terrain Berlusconi demonstrated all that he was capable of. During his term of office he had to face some difficult moments, moments of open crisis. He found himself under the pressure of some mass movements. However, the trade union organizations and the parties of the Centre-left avoided building a solid and consistent anti-government mobilization.

It is not just a question of the mobilization against the war in 2003. I am also referring here to the electoral routs he suffered on the occasion of the local and European elections in June 2004 and especially the regional

elections of April 2005, where Berlusconi's party only held on to two regions out of the thirteen that were up for re-election. The rhythm of the electoral calendar was respected by the Union and no mobilization demanding the resignation of the Berlusconi government was organized by the trade union and political forces of the so-called opposition.

The third reason relates to the very great weakness of the Centre-left's electoral campaign. The Centre-left waited for the ripe fruit to fall into its hands. Whereas on the right the campaign was conducted in a radical fashion and with a strong ideological content, the forces of the Centre-left didn't know how to - or didn't want to - incorporate and set in movement broad popular sectors around simple proposals and demands which respond to their needs.

For example, the Centre-left was completely defensive on the question of taxes, whereas it could have very concretely shown the legitimacy of an offensive tax policy by demonstrating the plunder that was carried out by the Berlusconi government. It could have responded in this way, even just in the limited framework of redistributed justice. That was not done. In reality on all the important social and economic questions, the Centre-left was on the defensive.

It was forced to act in that way because at the heart of the Centre-left there was a conviction that the Confindustria (the Italian employer' organization) was going to facilitate or even guarantee victory. So even from a purely propagandistic point of view, the Union did not want to sharpen its demands, because it didn't want to endanger its relations with the Confindustria and with all the big press organs. Furthermore, the press provided proof that in the present politico-mediatic context it cannot guarantee electoral success.

How would you define the Union from a socio-political point of view?



In the Union there is a whole sector of the old Christian Democracy which expresses itself through La Margherita. There is a sector which directly represents capital, like Lamberto Dini (who was Director General of the Bank of Italy, President of the Council of Ministers from January 1995 to May 1996 and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1996 to 2001, establishing excellent relation with the United States: he went from Forza Italia to La Margherita in 2002, transiting via his own movement, *Rinnovamento Italiano*).

Furthermore there is a whole sector of the Left Democrats (DS) which manages capitalism and has completely gone over to its side. DS has a relationship with the organized workers' movement, let's say with the CGIL, of the same kind that the American Democratic Party has with the AFL-CIO.

Furthermore, the relationship that has been established with the big daily newspapers is only the cover for a more organic relationship with factions of the big bourgeoisie. The links with the banks are also very strong.

We can cite for example the position taken by the boss of Uni-Credit, Alessandro Profumo, who was clearly to be seen - and he wasn't the only one - taking part in the primary elections within the Union which were organized in October 2005. So he openly chose Prodi. That was a political act of some weight. The links with the BancaIntesa and Giovanni Bazzoli are just as explicit. So we can make a rather ironic remark.

This front which goes from the Confindustria to the PRC via the main bourgeois newspapers only won 50% of the vote! The other 50% was also won by another part of the bourgeoisie, with the support of a whole spectrum of bosses of small and medium enterprises, of fractions of what we could describe as the lumpen bourgeoisie, and obviously of popular sectors.

And if the Union is making a compromise with the Confindustria, which it is in the process of doing, it is a sort of politico-arithmetic compromise within 50% of the electorate. Which ought to provoke some more serious thinking, to say the least, within the "radical Left".

The leaders of the Union thought that the plebeian and vulgar tone used by Berlusconi in his campaign was the sign either of loss of self-control or of obvious excess. In reality this type of propaganda was very well studied. And when he used the term "imbecile" he was not only employing a way of speaking that is very widespread, but placing himself within a dominant ideological framework. In reality, on the Left too, themes such as individualism, the domination of the market, the centrality of the enterprise are dominant. Which means that calling those who are opposed to these themes "imbeciles" appears as quiet natural.

Besides, Berlusconi succeeded in mobilizing against the Confindustria a large section of small and medium employers for whom, in order to survive, the only solution is to exploit their workers to the maximum. They are far from the kind of collaboration with the unions advocated by the Confindustria. So that is the overall socio-political framework; it is very negative.

So, how do you see the framework within which the Union should act?

The project of the Union has failed. Many people thought that the Union was going to break up the Berlusconi front. We can discuss to what extent that happened. What is certain is that Berlusconi succeeded in mobilizing all his bases of support to go out and vote. Now we can discuss whether this cohesion of the Berlusconi front can be maintained now that he is no longer in power.

But we are in a situation where the social and parliamentary relationships of forces are as I have outlined them above. Berlusconi and the section of the bourgeoisie that he represents can exert permanent pressure, exert blackmail over the new Prodi government. This Berlusconi front is still solid enough to have an effect on the action of the government's. To which should be added the more than serious influence of the Confindustria and also the pressures exerted by the Church.

The Confindustria has already said what it wants. It wants none of the measures which have created job insecurity to be touched. It wants that to be accompanied by a reform of the Cassa Integrazione (a mechanism which allows a layer of workers who have lost their jobs to maintain a substitute salary as if they were in a sense just technically unemployed; it is something that was won in the 1970s). In

addition the Confindustria wants a reduction of the taxes paid by companies.

All this with the aim of "facing up to the international competition", according to a credo that is repeated in all countries. The program of the Union suits the employers' organization. It would even be willing to allow some social elements to be introduced in order to better push through the fundamental counter-reforms.

As far as the Church is concerned, it certainly played an important role through its ultra-reactionary campaign around all the themes concerning "the question of Life".

This time the PRC is entering the governmental coalition, with all the constraints that flow from that ...

In fact, in this context, once it is in government, the PRC in its turn will be subjected to strong pressures demanding greater moderation from it. These pressures will be all the stronger in that, faced with the Berlusconi front, the feeling that we have to maintain a "united bloc" is very widespread among a broad layer of workers.

I am already hearing workers saying to me, when they know that I have just been elected to the Senate, where the Union only has a majority of two seats: "Careful, you will always have to be present. Of course we won't be able to demand a whole series of things. But we will have to be satisfied with what we can win in this period".

Many people say to me: "You'll have to be present, faced with Berlusconi, and immediately propose a law on conflict of interest". In other words a law dealing with the mixing up of the private interests of the big businessman Berlusconi with those of the politician Berlusconi. Now this theme is not at the centre of the coming social confrontations. But for many people, dealing with the conflict of interest appears as an urgent task, if only because of past debates.

If the Union's project has failed, the PRC's project has met the same fate. In reality, for the leadership of the PRC the perspective that was at least suggested should have been a massive victory of the union, accompanied by mass movements, therefore with the possibility of establishing a relationship of forces that would allow the implementation of the so-called positive points of the Union's programme and also provide the slight

possibility of being able to take some independent positions in relation to the government.

This last aspect could only be concretized insofar as different kinds of mobilisations developed, with a certain continuity. This was supposed to have an influence, in a first stage, on the content of the programme, and then in the second stage on its implementation by the government.

Given the election results and the institutional situation, this orientation was way off the mark. Obviously this failure has not been admitted by the leadership, even though in the ranks of the party a certain number of doubts are being expressed on the subject.

The official version is as follows: it's a fine victory; we escaped a real danger (a victory of Berlusconi); the government must go forward; it must implement its programme because the danger is the establishment of a "grand coalition" (by analogy with the CDU-SPD Grand Coalition in Germany).

Face with this "grand coalition danger", the leadership of the PRC affirms that we have to support the change of government at any price. You have to understand that by change of government is meant a centre-right government followed by a centre-left government; which has nothing to do with a real alternative. The leadership of the PRC has always denied that taking part in an alliance in the framework of the Union only implied this kind of change of government. It always said either that it meant a real alternative or to be more precise, a transition towards a real alternative.

Throughout the whole recent period the leadership has nonetheless been clearer on the subject. It announced: in the present circumstances we absolutely have to support a change of government, against the danger of a "grand coalition". To put the cherry on the cake it added: because it is the only way to keep open the road to a real alternative. Which is nothing more than a statement and obviously not a political orientation. The leadership made maximum use of a widespread feeling - which many people took it upon themselves to spread widely - the feeling of "anything but Berlusconi", echoing the "anything but Bush" during the last American election.

What is the essence of your immediate response in the present situation?

The orientation that we are adopting can be described as follows. First of all, to reject any kind of triumphalism and to underline the difficulties, for example the difficulties that flow from the inability of the Union's orientation to break up the Berlusconi front.

Next, we must insist on the fact that the government will not be able to carry out its task, at least the task that is hoped for by a very large part of those who voted for it, because the pressure on it will be very strong. Starting from there, to resist it is necessary to organize a mobilization of workers to demand the implementation of measures favourable to them.

Only such a dialectic between mobilizations and concrete gains can make it possible also to win back a certain political influence over sectors of the working class and popular sectors who voted for Berlusconi. That is the way that we are countering the "common sense", as I explained it before which is tending to become an element of legitimisation of the present policies of the PRC leadership. The refusal to support Prodi, as was the case in 1998, is not likely to be repeated, at least there is no sign that it will.

We can't separate the dynamic of the Union from its relations with the trade unions: what can you tell us about that?

To understand the situation you have to remember that the last congress of the CGIL (General Confederation of Italian Workers, the main union confederation) which was held from 1st-4th March 2006 was very negative. The leadership completely adapted itself to the Union and to Prodi. Furthermore, the left around the FIOM (Federation of Metalworkers) was defeated. It was put completely on the defensive.

The centre of gravity of the congress was one of complete support for Prodi. The declarations of Guglielmo Epifani, immediately after the election, on the need to repeal Law 30 (the Biagi Law on deregulation of the labour market) were circumstantial. He simply had to take account momentarily of the pressures exerted by Giorgio Cremaschi, national secretary of the FIOM.

But Epifani will find a way out, that's quite certain. We have to be clear - there is no willingness to fight on the part of the CGIL. In fact if the leadership of the CGIL had wanted to build a movement against Law 30, it would have had the time to do it long ago. But it wasn't the case.

In reality the degree of job insecurity that there is today in Italy is not a product of Law 30 which, besides, has not yet manifested all its negative effects. We have to start from the "Treu Package" - so called from the name of the minister, Tiziano Treu, who is at present a member of the Margherita.

In 1995, Treu was Minister of Labour and Social Provision in the government presided over by an authentic representative of the bourgeoisie, Lamberto Dini. Subsequently, in 1996, Prodi kept him in this job. He was also a minister in 1998 in the government of Massimo D'Alema. From this first Treu reform there followed a whole series of measures which increased job insecurity. Onto these measures was grafted Law 30 (the Biagi Law, enforced by Berlusconi).

This law opens the door to a multitude of fixed term contracts: in this case the very name of contract loses its meaning. In the Union's programmatic documents the proposition is basically to modify Law 30 and go back to its first version, which implied using fixed term contracts and temporary work for fewer categories of workers. Even symbolically such a going back does not correspond to the expectations of those who are today suffering from job insecurity.

The following confrontations seem to me to be on the agenda. First of all on deregulation, in other words on Law 30, because on its essential points the Confindustria doesn't want to give it up. The outcome of this "confrontation" is another question.

Next, the question of the fiscal corner will be debated. This is an invention of Prodi's. The fiscal corner is the difference between the direct salary, the indirect salary, the contributions for retirement pension, and the net salary of the worker, in other words what he really receives at the end of the month. Prodi has proposed to reduce this fiscal corner by 5 points. If the problem was to reduce the taxes paid by workers, the amount of contributions paid by workers, that could be discussed and it could be positive. But if the reduction of this gap is operated by reducing the employer's contributions - which are in fact a part of the salary that belongs to the worker - that quite simply amounts to a big swindle. Not only is the redistribution taking place in favour of the employers, but the future pensions of workers are being put into question.

The Italian political situation, as in other countries, is related to the state and the dynamics of the workers' movement: how do you see this question?

The fundamental problem that I see could be described as follows. The struggles of recent years, which have certainly been important, have not resulted in a cumulative effect

which would make it possible to consolidate, step by step, forms of organization, of struggles, of consciousness, which would have a more dynamic potential. Which would, in other words, make it possible to draw in new sectors of workers and to build "a classist hegemony". I don't want to say that elements of that don't exist. But the real process of rebuilding the workers' movement - to use a formula that to some people may sound old-fashioned - remains in a certain sense hanging in the air, "in waiting".

There have been important movements, but they were episodic, which reduces their cumulative dynamics. The last mobilisation of metalworkers (in the broadest sense of the term) did not have the same repercussions on other sectors as in the past. Even though quantitatively this sector of workers remains more or less the same, although the struggles that have been led and the forms that they have taken recall historical moments of acute social confrontation, even though the metalworkers succeeded in winning on certain points that are symbolically important, that didn't have the same effect on society as in the past. And what was won, in its material dimension, remains more than limited.

In addition, for someone who follows the situation in the workplaces, these mobilisations didn't lead to a change in the concrete relationships of forces in the workplace itself. Starting from there, instead of discussing, as many people in the PRC are doing, whether the social bloc behind Berlusconi is going to maintain itself or fall apart, it seems to me much more important to be discussing the limits - and why there are these limits - to the rebuilding of an anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist social bloc. Without that, society will find itself without real defences in the face of operations of plunder, in the face of demagogical populist operations, or in the face of counter-reforms which advance in a concealed fashion.

For me the main responsibility of the PRC leadership is to have canalised the various social mobilizations into the framework of the Union. And in this way it has created an obstacle to this recomposition of an anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist social bloc.

This interview with him was published in La Brèche, newspaper of the Movement for Socialism (MPS) in Switzerland.

❖ Franco Turigliatto was elected as a Senator for Piedmont on the PRC list in last month's elections. He is a member of the Critical Left current within the PRC, and of the Italian section of the Fourth International.

France

Marie-George, Arlette, José - what if we were to talk?

Olivier Besancenot

The anti-liberal left has demonstrated its strength over the last year. It must be present and united at the presidential election.

Our names appear in the opinion polls about the next presidential election - four names which came out, together or separately, for an anti-liberal and internationalist rejection of the European Constitution and Treaty.

In less than a year, on the terrain of the referendum on May 29, 2005 and on the terrain of struggle in this April, liberalism suffered two setbacks, with the rejection of the Constitution and the withdrawal of the First Employment Contract (CPE). These victories have given rise to great hopes among those who suffer every day the effects of capitalist exploitation.

Our four names do not on their own sum up all the diversity that was expressed on the campaign for a "No" from the left. However, we have joint responsibilities. Many people want to know if a united candidacy is possible and necessary. Necessary, it certainly is, if only to respond to the unitary aspiration which has been expressed since May 29, particularly in the collectives of the same name.

But possible? The conditions for going further still don't seem to have been met. However, the obstacles to be surmounted to bring us together are known by everyone: defeat the right and its policies; reject social liberalism; do not reproduce the strategy of the plural Left [1].

To defeat the right in a lasting way is a fine thing to promise, but it is better to fight it right away. Today, we have to build a broad movement, with the widest possible unity and without sectarianism, against unemployment and job insecurity, because the law "on equal opportunity" and the CPE, its big brother, the new employment contract (CNE) are still in force [2]. So it's true that to fight resolutely against the Right without putting off till tomorrow direct confrontation with it, means undertaking to undo in the future what it has done since it came to power.

And to get rid of once and for all the evils which have rained down on us, we have to put an end to all the liberal policies, even those which were implemented by the Left when it was in power. In short, to defeat the Right and not let it come back in five years' time means implementing a plan of social and democratic emergency measures which

would enable millions of people to keep their heads above water.

In order to really contest the hegemony of social liberalism on the left, we have to make another left emerge, a left that refuses the dictates of finance and of liberal Europe. We have no other choice if we want to keep our rights, or to win new ones, than to challenge the privileges of the strongest. Countering the stranglehold of the multinationals over the economy and over our lives means opposing the growing appropriation of the fruits of everyone's labour by a few big firms.

It is unimaginable to legislate effectively to ban sackings as long as the authorities do not take back from the "sackers" the subsidies that were so generously accorded them. Again, it is unimaginable to increase income or give an autonomy allowance to all young people who are in education without taking money from profits. And finally it is unimaginable to win a measure which is however free, like the moratorium on GM crops, without facing up to the agricultural multinationals. A left which does not propose to redistribute the wealth by giving the population the means of controlling it is a left that is full of fine promises, but which once in power will not implement left policies.

Finally to be convinced that the Left doesn't have the right to get it wrong in a new experience of the plural Left is not in itself a guarantee. The "plural Left" is not a formula but a political strategy which is still the strategy of the Socialist Party: to satellite other left parties around electoral agreements in order to get them to take responsibility for the main lines of its policies.

So hope lies in opposing the Right and resisting social liberalism, by refusing for example governmental and parliamentary alliances with the Socialist Party. That would not marginalise us. The idea that we could convert the leadership of the Socialist Party to anti-liberalism or exert significant influence on the summit meeting of the Left, thinking that it could give birth to a real alternative, is an illusion. There is no synthesis possible between anti-liberalism and social liberalism. All the more so as the institution of the Fifth Republic, which prevent universal suffrage having an influence over the economic decisions that



Jose (left), Marie-Georges (second left), Olivier (second right)

affect our daily lives, are constructed in such a way that on the left it is in reality François Hollande who sets the tone and not Marie-George Buffet, Segolène Royal rather than Arlette Laguiller, Dominique Strauss-Kahn rather than Olivier Besancenot and Pascal Lamy rather than José Bové.

So yes to a unitary candidacy if it is anti-capitalist. We are more concerned with the scenario and the content than with the casting. Two scenarios can be envisaged. One starts with the European referendum campaign, continues with support for social struggles, unveils a plan of emergency measure for the popular classes and youth and leads to the coming together of anti-liberal and anti-capitalist, internationalist, feminist, and ecologist forces. The other ends up giving a left cover to a new change of government under the wing of the Socialist Party. We won't be in the second scenario.

With a good scenario the casting will be easy to sort out. Between the eight left candidacies on April 21st 2002 and a single one in 2007, there must be a happy medium. A plural Left number 2, scarcely spruced up, seems to be being reconstituted. That's its problem. The struggles of today and tomorrow deserve better than that. So, I think we need to meet and have a little chat. We will soon be meeting up in various struggles, that's for sure...but why not over dinner for four? It's on me!

This article appeared in the April 28 edition of the Paris daily Le Monde

❖ Olivier Besancenot was candidate for the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR - French section of the Fourth International) at the French presidential elections in 2002.

NOTES

[1] The plural Left was the name given to the governmental alliance, dominated by the Socialist Party and including the Communist Party and the Greens, under the premiership of Lionel Jospin between 1997 and 2002

[2] The CNE (New Employment Contract) allows employers in companies with less than 20 employees to sack workers without reason during the first two years of their employment - exactly as the CPE did for young people under 26

France

The mass movement has defeated the government - what now?

Murray Smith

After two months of a mass campaign against the CPE (First Employment Contract), on the morning of April 10 the French government finally caved in and withdrew the measure. The CPE would have enabled employers to sack young workers under the age of 26 in the first two years of their employment, without having to give a reason. Its defeat was the first time a mass movement had blocked one of the government's neo-liberal measures since the Right came back to power in 2002. The government forced through a reform of pensions in 2003 in spite of months of demonstrations and strikes. The following year it imposed a reform of health insurance. Why did it fail this time?

In the first place, the CPE was aimed at a very specific part of the population, young people. And those young people who would have been directly affected, university and high school students, mobilized massively against it. There is a tradition of powerful student mobilizations in France, and this is not the first time one has been successful.

In 1986 the government was forced to withdraw an education reform and in 1994 a measure similar to the CPE was defeated. Last year there was a four-month long movement of high school students, not always massive but very militant. The fact that there are regularly movements among students, sometimes national, sometimes just local, means that there is a frequently renewed layer of activists.

Secondly, there was broad unity against the CPE. The trade unions - all of them - supported the movement from start to finish. One reason for the defeat in 2003 was that one of the main unions, the CFDT, defected early on and accepted the government measure in exchange for insignificant concessions. It lost many members as a result. This time everyone stayed on board throughout the movement. Only a few months ago a measure similar to the CPE, the CNE, went through with little opposition.

The CNE (New Employment Contract) allows employers in companies with less than 20 employees to sack workers in the first two years of their employment without giving a reason. A day of strikes and mass demonstrations against the CNE last October 4 was not followed up and the measure went through. The workers most directly affected, those working in small companies, are poorly organised and in an unfavourable relationship of forces with their employers. Only a national campaign by the unions that mobilised stronger sectors could have

compensated for that, and it wasn't forthcoming.

What was different this time was that the initiative was not with the union leaderships but with the students. And the student mobilization, which started off slowly, steadily expanded. By the end of the movement three-quarters of universities were occupied or blockaded and over a quarter of high schools.

And it really was a movement that involved the mass of students. General assemblies of several hundred were daily occurrences, and mass meetings of several thousand students took place in the most militant universities. In the latter stages of the movement, students engaged in forms of direct action - blocking train stations and motorways, occupying offices of employers' organisations and the government party. It is worth noting that many of the most militant contingents of the high school movement came from schools in the suburbs which were at the centre of the revolt of mainly immigrant youth last November.

The support of the unions was a key factor in the victory - there was throughout the movement a united front, the Intersyndicale, of eight trade union organisations and four student unions. But it was the youth who were the locomotive, the driving force of the movement.

Unions representing both university and high school students were actively involved in the movement, but its leadership was the Student Coordination, comprising representatives elected by mass meetings, which met every weekend in a different university and which was dominated by left-wing militants. The movement was supported by the entire French Left, from the reformist Socialist Party to revolutionary organizations like the



Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and Lutte Ouvrière.

Thirdly, the demand for the withdrawal of the CPE had mass support. As people understood what was at stake, opposition to it rose to around 70 per cent of the population - 80 per cent among young people. And more and more of them were ready to take to the streets. The first day of action on February 7 mobilised 400,000 demonstrators, which in French terms was only a modest success. The next one a month later had a million, then 1.5 million on March 18, three million on March 28 and even more on April 4. Particularly on the last two days the number of those on strike was significant but not really massive - not as big as the biggest strikes in 2003.

The bitter experience of the movement against pension reform three years ago demonstrated that a series of one-day strikes was not enough to make the government back down. This time it was the combination of the massive nature of the protests and the fact that the higher education system was progressively paralysed that brought victory. As the movement grew, usually conservative university presidents were calling for the CPE to be withdrawn and splits developed in the governing UMP party, with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who had introduced the CPE, becoming more and more isolated.

Underlying the whole movement is an ongoing refusal of French public opinion to accept the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism. In an editorial in its March 31 edition, the London-based Economist informed its readers, in a tone of exasperation, that only 36 per cent of French people thought the "free market" was the best possible economic system, as against around two-thirds of people in Britain, Germany and the US. This is a reflection of a deep-rooted attachment to the ideas of equality and solidarity among wide layers in French society.

The degree of resistance to the neo-liberal agenda was demonstrated at the polls when the projected European Constitution was defeated in the referendum on May 29 last year after a dynamic campaign for a 'No' from the left. It has just been demonstrated in the streets, and the activists who built the

mass mobilisations were often the same who campaigned against the European Constitution. In fact, there is now in practically every town a network of militants, who come from different unions and political organisations, from the global justice movement ATTAC, who are used to working with each other.

Some politicians and commentators in France and abroad have argued that it is “undemocratic” for mass protests to be able to over-rule the decisions of elected representatives. This reveals a touching faith in France’s democratic institutions

It is worth recalling that the UMP, which thanks to the peculiarities of the French electoral system has an absolute and indeed substantial majority in Parliament, won just 33 per cent of the vote in the 2002 elections - a figure that goes down to 22 per cent of registered voters when you take into account the 35 per cent of electors who abstained. Representatives elected under those conditions and subject to no kind of control or recall by their electors are ill placed to give lessons in democracy. In 2003, then Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin famously declared: “It is not the street that governs”. On that occasion he won.

Three years later, if the street did not exactly govern, it showed that it could block a measure that the government was trying to impose against overwhelming public opinion. The victory over the CPE has left an arrogant right-wing government in disarray a year before next year’s presidential and legislative elections. Calls for De Villepin’s resignation are mounting. He is now becoming mired in the Clearstream scandal, where it appears that there was an elaborate conspiracy to smear leading politicians, including the main right-wing contender (and De Villepin’s rival) for next year’s presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy, with accusations of corruption.

This victory is worth celebrating, but there is no room for triumphalism. In spite of often widespread opposition to their policies, successive governments of right and left over the past fifteen years have been steadily pushing forward the neo-liberal agenda - privatisations, labour flexibility, job insecurity, counter-reforms in health,

pensions, education. Periodically mass mobilisations slow the process or block particular measures, though sometimes even massive mobilisations are defeated, as in 2003.

But they do not stop the process. Of course the union leaderships bear considerable responsibility for defeats. Particularly in 2003, it was their refusal to call an all-out general strike that gave victory to the government. The experience of 2003 has made many workers sceptical about the utility of repeated days of action. And if opposition to the CPE had been limited to that, it is unlikely that victory would have been won. What made the difference was the permanent mass mobilisation of the students.

Where do we go from here? Symbolic as it was, the CPE was only one component of the ironically named “Law on Equal Opportunities” which has been adopted by Parliament, and which provides among other things for 14-year-olds to start work as apprentices, whereas up to now there was compulsory schooling till the age of 16. And the CNE is still in force. But to follow up the victory over the CPE by defeating these measures too would require continued unity and leadership from the unions and the left parties, and it would provoke a political crisis which most of them do not want.

There is also the problem of the lack of a credible political alternative. A defeat of the Right in the 2007 presidential and legislative elections is possible, though not certain. But as has been repeatedly shown over the last 25 years, a return to power by the Socialist Party would not mean the end of neo-liberal policies. Since 1981, there has been a change of government from right to left and left to right at every legislative election.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of centre-right and centre-left. Because over and above differences on details, there is a broad consensus in defence of neo-liberal policies. The Socialist Party, under pressure from the student movement and public opinion, was prepared to oppose the CPE. On the much more fundamental issue of the European Constitution, the party fell into line and supported it (though a minority campaigned against it). And nothing indicates that a Socialist victory in next

year’s presidential and parliamentary elections would in any way challenge the neo-liberal consensus.

That presents the anti-capitalist Left with a challenge. It has to move from campaigns and even victories on single issues to providing a political alternative. Following on the victories over the European Constitution and the CPE, the next step could be united candidacies of the forces to the left of the Socialist Party in next year’s elections. Both the Communist Party and the LCR have come out in principle in favour of such candidacies.

The basis could be a programme that broke with the left-right neo-liberal consensus and a refusal to participate in an SP-led government. On this latter point the Communist Party still has to completely clarify its position - though it is clearly wary of repeating the experience of 1997-2002, when it participated in the SP-dominated government of Lionel Jospin, serving merely as a left cover for neo-liberal policies and paying the price in the 2002 elections. There would also have to be agreement on the programme of any alliance. But if the obstacles can be overcome and agreement reached, a united campaign could begin to give directly political expression to the widespread rejection of neo-liberalism and mobilise many activists from the social movements.

❖ Murray Smith, formerly international organiser for the Scottish Socialist Party, is an active member of the LCR.



Britain

The crisis in working class representation

British trade union opens a historic debate

Greg Tucker

The Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT), which organizes transport workers, has long played a pivotal role in British politics. It was one of the trade unions involved in launching the Labour Party in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the rise of New Labour, it has been an increasingly strident critic at the political as well as the industrial level.

But while the trade union has backed the Scottish Socialist Party in Scotland and the maverick Forward Wales in that country, in England the union has not supported Respect.

Nevertheless, the union organised an important conference in January this year to discuss the question of working class representation. While it was not a delegate conference, and mainly attended by far left activists, never the less it was a significant event. Greg Tucker reports:

They were turning people away at the RMT's conference on the crisis of working class representation. Yes, the RMT had booked the small hall at Friends' Meeting House but it was still impressive. Three hundred people packed into the hall whilst another hundred were left outside.

Those who did get in were able to take part in a useful, if limited, discussion on the future of the left in Britain. The failure to renationalise the railways, the part-privatisation of London Underground and Labour's continuation of the Tories' anti-trade union legislation have long caused RMT members to question their relationship with the Labour Party.

Labour resolved the question by expelling the RMT because of its support for the Scottish Socialist Party. So at the last two RMT annual conferences delegates

have agreed resolutions calling for a wider debate about the problem of political representation. This conference was the result. Somewhat half-hearted in its implementation, but nevertheless a historic step forward. Committed to taking no decisions, the meeting was always going to be limited.

A long list of platform speakers threatened to crowd out a real debate from the floor, but in the end an impressive number of people got to speak, and a real debate did take place. Almost unanimously the debate rejected Labourism in any form.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow opened the meeting by refusing to commit the RMT to launching a new political party but did argue for a new national shop stewards' movement to rebuild a fighting trade union movement.

By his logic the emergence of such a shop stewards' movement would be a necessary prerequisite for the building of a serious new party to the left of Labour. In contrast, SSP convenor Colin Fox, speaking next, outlining the development of the Scottish Socialist Party,



RMT workers demonstrate in London

showed that in practice it was possible to combine both strategic tasks - building a united left in struggle whilst building a new left party. The key was open comradely discussion.

Whilst John Marek from Forward Wales, Jean Lambert from the Greens and Liz Greene from the Socialist Labour Party (the organisation set up by miners' leader Arthur Scargill) had little if anything to say, Dave Nellist from the Socialist Party (SP, British section of the Committee for a Workers' International) argued for support for the SP's campaign for a new workers party. Arguing for such a party to have a clear anti-war, anti-privatisation programme and plugging their conference in March, his call seemed to have moved beyond mere self-serving propaganda to be something the SP see as practically necessary. However suspicious one might be based on their past record, it is clearly necessary to engage with their arguments.

The other platform speaker, left Labour MP John McDonnell (secretary of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs) might have been expected to defend work through the Labour Party. He did not. Instead he talked of the need to build united fronts to confront capitalism. Rubbishing debate about organisational forms, he urged that we concentrate on working together in practical campaigns. New forms might emerge from the struggle, he argued, but you got the impression that as long as he was allowed his space in Parliament he would not be in a hurry to create them himself.

There was a big vacuum on the platform. Respect had not been invited to speak. Whatever the reasons for this sectarian error the absence of a key Respect speaker was at least ameliorated by the choice of speakers from the floor. Alongside a number of Socialist Party members who spoke of the need for the RMT to take the step in joining with them in calling a new party into being, a series of Respect members were called.

They were able to present Respect as the serious party of the left, going places after its breakthrough general election results. Whilst Respect National Secretary John Rees was somewhat triumphalist and fell flat, other Respect speakers addressed the need to engage with Bob Crow's call to rebuild a rank and file movement in the trade unions, whilst also actually building a new party of the left by building Respect.

The conference finished with a pledge from the RMT leadership that they would take seriously what had been said in considering whether to proceed with any other actions. Attendance on the day had mainly been drawn from the far left. RMT members were in a small minority and other independent trade unionists not present in large numbers. This meant among other things that the audience was largely white, ageing, and male.

Nevertheless, the fact of the event being called by a serious trade union had a disciplining effect on all speakers and the discussion, apart from a handful of veiled references to Big Brother, was conducted in a comradely fashion seriously engaging each other's arguments. There is clearly a potential for further meetings to address the problem of how to proceed to fill the vacuum left by Labour. RMT activists will be calling on the union's Executive to set in train such a process.

But if we are to go forward the RMT leadership needs to be more serious, getting commitments from other union forces, preparing itself before hand, involving all forces including Respect. If it were to do so then it would be possible to progress to a higher level than has been possible up to now.

❖ Greg Tucker is an long-standing activist in the RMT, a former member of its National Executive. He is a leading member of the International Socialist Group, British Section of the Fourth International and a member of the IV editorial board.

Britain

No renewal for New Labour

Piers Mostyn

The local government election results in England on May 6 saw Labour's worst local government vote on record. Twenty six per cent support on a 36 per cent turnout meant less than one in ten electors could be bothered to vote for them. The three major political parties are converging in the so-called 'centre', which is in fact on the neoliberal right. The major response to Labour unpopularity was a very low turnout at the election, but also a rise in support for the far-right British National Party, for the Greens and or the left wing alliance Respect, which won 12 councillors in the London municipality Tower Hamlets, 3 in Newham and one councillor in two other municipalities.

The decline in Labour support has been apparent for at least five years. Electoral support in local government dropped from 38 per cent in 2000 to 26 per cent in 2006. With lower turnout this time, no amount of 'spin' can put a gloss on this pummelling.

Last year's (2005) general election victory for New Labour did not amount to a reversal in the downward trend in support.. With a poor result on a low turn out, Labour's return to government owed everything to the peculiarities of the British 'first past the post' polling system, and the disarray of the opposition Conservative Party.

Media commentary has focused almost exclusively on the question of the leadership of the party, and the seemingly endless saga of when and if British economics minister ('Chancellor') Gordon Brown will take over from Tony Blair. It's true that Blair has long been seen inside and outside New Labour as 'on the way out'. And with this election his authority has further drained to near invisibility.

But while a Brown takeover might boost Labour fortunes, the revival would be small scale and brief. If "renewal" - Gordon Brown's insistent slogan - had any chance of success it was needed in 2001 or 2002. And to really "renew" Labour, even modestly, he would have had to break with Blair's Iraq policy and his welfare state "modernisation" (read: privatisation) policies that have caused such disenchantment on the street.

Instead Brown has oriented to the right - wrapping himself in the Union Jack, emphasising "security" and spearheading the private sector take-over of public services. What has changed this year has been the systemic character of Labour's failure -

across a range of issues and enveloping nearly all its leading players.

The theme tune to Labour's 1997 victory, "Things can only get better", turned into a fallacy - with inequality growing, education standards stubbornly low, unemployment rising, pensions cut and social alienation growing rapidly.

In practice this means the demise of what has been described as the New Labour "project". A recovery would be difficult without fundamental change. But this is absolutely excluded in today's New Labour party. No significant section of the party is organising for it or even presenting any real alternative.

New Labour's project of hegemonising British politics for a generation or more - claiming the mantle of "natural party of government" - is now looking like history. Once this aura of power crumbles it cannot be easily rebuilt.

Labour's response at these elections was to play on the supposed efficiency of local Labour councils(municipalities) - something few outside the party seemed aware of - spiced up with a heavy dose of "law and order" authoritarian populism. This strategy blew apart under it's own internal contradictions.

The revolt against Blair's Iraq crusade formed the backcloth of the electoral fiasco - a simmering catalyst for radical discontent, driving away thousands of New Labour members and hundreds of thousands of voters. Blair has spent three years vainly trying to stem this drift by a phony sales-pitch focusing on his personal "integrity" and Labour's purported delivery on "bread and butter" policies. But in the months prior to



Blair and Brown

May 4 a string of scandals on precisely these issues provided the crunch point:

- ❖ The "cash for peerages" scandal in which it became clear that Labour was raising money from business people in exchange for making them Lords or Sirs.
- ❖ The health crisis: thousands of nursing jobs have been destroyed in hospitals, while private contractors made hundreds of millions of pounds from the so-called 'Private Finance Initiative' in which private companies take over the provision of public infrastructure.
- ❖ The education revolt: massive opposition to a proposed law that would see the ending of 'comprehensive schools' which include children from all abilities and different social backgrounds, and the return of selection at the age of 11, which would inevitably see a deepening of privilege for middle class and upper class children.
- ❖ "Sleaze": salacious sex and corruption stories that ensnared a string of top Labour ministers - former interior minister David Blunkett, Culture Minister Tessa Jowell and deputy prime minister John Prescott.

Party managers responded to this crisis, with the elections approaching fast, by cranking up the authoritarianism. Critics of Labour who defended civil liberties were labeled "poisoners". But the exposure of Home Office incompetence in the management of released prisoners exploded this in a second - like a pinprick to an over-inflated balloon - as hypocritical cant.

Not only did these scandals wreck Labour's self-description as the party of competence and integrity, but in erupting so spectacularly during an election campaign highlighted Labour's loss of political control. This was a devastating blow to supporters for whom at least some semblance of authority was the bottom line, having long said "goodbye" to principle.

How things have changed. In 1997 Blair rode to power pledging to end the corruption, sleaze, maladministration and individualism of the Tory years.

In the preceding two decades there were few major conurbations that weren't solidly pro-Labour. A prime example was London. The Greater London Council and nearly all the inner city municipalities were ruled by a Labour Party at its most left wing. Now they run barely a handful.

How ironic, given the 2006 results, that the shift to the right from the mid-80s was sold as necessary to win back support. To achieve this, Labour collaborated with Conservative attacks on local government - savage cuts, "parental choice" in education, council house sales and so-on. A decade later with Labour in government it was full steam ahead - assets were sold, services privatised, education taken out of effective democratic local authority control and local accountability and democracy dismantled through the introduction of mayoral and cabinet government for councils.

For the past decade Britain's third party the Liberal Democrats - with a ruthless and opportunistic local party machine - has reaped the benefit. The Conservative revival appears now to have put a stop to that. The question is how far this will go?

A full swing of the pendulum back to popular endorsement for the Conservatives seems unlikely. The 'deferential vote' (working class people voting for the Conservatives) is a fading memory and New Labour is wearing Thatcherite clothes.

Nonetheless, the peculiarities of the voting system can allow a party with barely one third of the popular vote to form a government, making new conservative leader David Cameron a possible future prime minister in what would be little more than a lottery on a three-way split, with the abstention rate probably being the decisive factor.

As the three main parties converge into the same political territory - barely distinguishable on a left-right continuum - a continuing cycle of public disillusion seems almost inevitable. Whereas most voters have expressed this by not voting, a growing minority are clearly turning to the small parties. Most worryingly this includes the BNP - which is carving out a dangerous space with a doubling of its councillors. Labour's complete abandonment of depressed working class communities is the primary dynamic behind this fascist resurgence.

The Greens did well, showing an emergent new strength in some inner city areas. But the fact that Green councillors have been in the local administration in the major northern city of Leeds in coalition with Conservatives and Liberal Democrats for the past four years shows that there are problems. While many voted Green to punish Blair from the left, the



party is nationally incoherent and in some areas locally opportunist.

Respect, confounding critics on left and right, performed impressively - well into double numbers of councillors. There has been a genuine breakthrough in two East London boroughs and most of the 150 candidates performed strongly - with many coming second or third.

But new problems are now posed. Respect cannot continue as an ad hoc coalition. It needs the democratic machinery of a political party to ensure its representatives are accountable, policies are developed and its profile and campaigning is developed. To build a serious base it must draw thousands of the new voters into active participation - not just rallies and leafleting.

Secondly, in countless wards, Respect councillors were running neck and neck with the Greens - the combined vote of the two sufficient to allow one to win or come very close second. This has to be addressed. Respect need to push the environmental agenda to the fore and try to make local agreements with the Greens where possible.

Last but not least, fighting for a proportional representation voting system has to become a central concern.

More broadly, the loosening of Labour's links to the unions will continue. State funding for political parties is a real possibility. After all, Blair and Cameron's only alternative is continuing corruption scandals or rebuilding mass individual memberships. This calls for a decisive new orientation by Respect.

With Labour poised to go through a period of instability, signified by Blair's panicked reorganisation of his government in which several senior ministers were sacked, the dream of a 'smooth transition' from Blair to Brown and then endless Labour government has all but disappeared.

Respect - having established itself as the only serious left alternative - must seize these opportunities.

❖ Piers Mostyn is a supporter of Socialist Resistance, a socialist newspaper produced by British supporters of the Fourth International in conjunction with other marxists.

Britain

Respect breakthrough in English local elections

Alan Thornett

The election results achieved by Respect in the English local elections on May 4th - with the election of 16 local councillors - were qualitatively better than anything achieved for many years by any party of the left. Previously Respect only had three councillors (two in Preston in north-west England and one in Tower Hamlets in London) it now has a total of 18 (two of the existing councillors was not up for re-election this year).

The approach of Respect to the elections was to target the two East London Boroughs (London local council electoral districts) of Newham and Tower Hamlets where it did best in the general election last year.

These are large Boroughs, each covering two parliamentary constituencies. Newham has 240,000 inhabitants and Tower Hamlets 196,000. They are both deprived working class inner city areas. Tower Hamlets has a large Bangladeshi population (though not a majority) and quite big Afro Caribbean and Somali communities. Newham has a much bigger white population (a substantial majority) with a diverse mix of migrant communities.

Tower Hamlets contains the Parliamentary constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow - which was won by George Galloway for Respect in the general election. Respect stood candidates in all 51 seats in Tower Hamlets and all 62 seats in Newham.

Respect also stood in a small number (14) other seats in London and a small number of seats (25) in the rest of the country. This made 153 candidates in all.

It was a strategy both designed to tackle the hugely undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system in these elections - which discriminates heavily against small parties since you have to get somewhere between 30% and 40% of the vote to get elected (depending on the number of candidates) - and also to build on the general election results. This proved to be an effective strategy.

The results in Newham and Tower Hamlets were remarkable by any standards for a left party. Respect won three seats in Newham and 12 in Tower Hamlets. To get these seats it polled a massive 86,000 votes across the two Boroughs - 23% of the vote.

The highest percentage vote for a Respect candidate in Tower Hamlets was 46%.

The only seat Respect won outside of London was in Birmingham Sparkbrook - a deprived inner city working class area with big Pakistani and Kashmiri communities - where Salma Yaqoob (a remarkable young Pakistani woman who is a leader of the anti-war movement as well as Respect) won with a massive 55% of the vote. The full results for her ward was: Respect 4,339, Labour 2,700, Liberal Democrats 990, Conservatives 343, Greens 309, BNP (fascist) 109.

Respect also came close to winning in a number of other seats as well - Bristol and Sheffield for example. In Preston it missed winning another seat by only seven votes.

The only other left party to make any gains at all (or win any seats) was the Socialist Party (ex-Militant/CWI) - which increased its number of councillors by 1 from 4 to 5.

There has been some scurrilous comment from some on the left about the fact that all the new Respect Councillors are from an Asian and Muslim background - referring to Respect as a Muslim party. Respect rightly rejects such comments, which verge on racism. Respect is extremely proud of its Asian candidates and its Asian councillors. If they had all been from a Christian background there would be no such comments.

In fact a number of the non-Asian candidates got very good votes but none were actually elected. John Rees, the National Secretary of Respect, got 974 votes in Tower Hamlets, which was only just below the vote for the Respect Asian candidates and which beat all other parties except Labour. The Tories top vote was 264, the Liberal Democrats 876, and the Greens 253. The candidate who came second in Sheffield with 1208 votes was a non-Asian woman and the Bristol candidate who came second was a non-Asian man.

There was, therefore, an element of chance that it came out as it did, though where constituencies were chosen with big Asian populations there was, to one degree or another, an advantage for an Asian candidate built into the situation.

It should not be assumed, however, that the votes for Asian candidates were all from Asian voters - or even predominantly so in some cases. It was more diverse than that. This was clear when the new councillors attended a meeting the Respect National Council soon after the election. One of them, for example, who is a nurse, was able to demonstrate how she had made the defence the Health Service the centrepiece of her campaign and how she has drawn support for all sections of the community as a result.

In fact the platform on which Respect stood in these elections was a socialist/anti-neoliberal platform not significantly different to that of other left organisations that stood - including that of the Socialist Party. It was against the war and the occupation, against privatisation and liberalisation, against racism and in defence of asylum seekers, for the renationalisation of the railways and the public utilities etc.

It should also be remembered that most of the Asians who vote for Respect were previously Labour voters. And people from a Muslim background are a natural constituency for Respect because Respect came out of the anti-war movement and is seen and the most consistent and effective anti-war party.

Winning such a big Asian vote, however, does pose a challenge for Respect. Not in that it has too many Asian voters - Respect wants to win every Asian vote it can get - but because it needs to increase its appeal to sections of the community where it has not been so successful. This includes the Afro-Caribbean and African community, the trade unions and sections of the white working class. Steps are being taken to address this problem.

At the same time Respect needs to improve its geographical spread. And there will soon be an opportunity to do this as well. In Britain a proportion of local Councils are up for election every year on a rolling basis. In next years local elections London will not be involved - and Respect will attempt to strengthen its position in other parts of the country.

Having a much larger group of councillors - and being the "official opposition" on Tower hamlets Council, which is what it is (Labour has 26 seats, Respect 12, Tories 7 and Liberal democrats 6) - also means that Respect will have to tighten its structures and its accountability procedures if it is to develop its local Council work successfully - and there are already signs that this is being done as well.

These election results are a big step forward for Respect. They have opened up a new stage in the development for Respect with the new councillors creating a new political focus - making it harder for the media to present it as George Galloway's party. The future of Respect will depend on how successfully it builds on them.

❖ Alan Thornett is a leading member of the ISG, British Section of the Fourth International, and sits on the Executive Committee of Respect.

Britain

Latin America: a continent in revolt

Socialist Resistance Dayschool



Saturday 24 June, Celia Hart, Michael Löwy and Zbigniew Kowalewski will be the main speakers in London at a Socialist Resistance Dayschool analysing events in Latin America today.

Details from www.socialistresistance.net.

Celia Hart is the daughter of two historic leaders of the Cuban Revolution, Armando Hart and the late Haydée Santamaria. A physicist, writer and member of the Cuban Communist Party, she describes herself as a "freelance Trotskyist". She has published many articles on Trotsky and on the Permanent Revolution.

Michael Löwy was born in Brazil and is Research Director in Sociology at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) in Paris. His many books include: *The Marxism of Che Guevara*; *Marxism and Liberation Theology*; *Fatherland or Mother Earth?* and *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*.

Zbigniew Kowalewski is a Polish Marxist who has lived in Cuba and has written extensively on Latin American politics. He was a leader of Solidarnosc in the Lodz region (1980-1) and is a member of the Fourth International.

The Dayschool will look at Latin America today and the new challenges set by the new struggles; learning from history it will examine the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions and the Chilean experience; and looking forward it will consider strategic questions of permanent revolution, democracy and the state, and the role of parties and social movements. More details, and how to register for this important discussion at Socialist Resistance.

❖ Socialist Resistance is a socialist newspaper produced by British supporters of the Fourth International in conjunction with other marxists.

Cuba

Fidel and Trotsky

Celia Hart

The following interview with Rouge, weekly paper of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International) was conducted when Celia Hart recently visited France for a colloquium on Pierre Broué, the French Marxist historian who died last year.

For fifteen years now the definitive collapse of Cuban society has been announced at regular intervals. Fidel Castro himself has stressed the development of inequality in Cuba. Can we preserve and develop these conquests or are they condemned to disappear?

I identify totally with the Cuban revolution but I don't represent it. What I say is my personal opinion. The social conquests of the socialist revolution in Cuba are obvious: great social equality, a system of education which is accessible to everyone and on a level comparable to the United States or Europe - in other words to much richer countries - a health system superior to any other country in Latin America and which, contrary to what is happening in Europe, is not being privatised or dismantled.

But if the Cuban revolution has been able to overcome the difficulties of the "special period" [1]- power cuts, breakdowns of public transport, minimal rations of food, etc. - the result of Cuban trade agreements with the countries of the so-called "socialist camp" and of the continuing imperialist blockade - it is because the Cuban population as a whole defended the revolution and not social advantages.

The difficulties that we are now experiencing are not related to material needs. The liberalisation of trade and of possession of foreign currency - capitalist mechanisms that were introduced, and that some people justify by comparing them to the Russian NEP of the 1920s - led to social differentiation and the appearance of "the new rich". In a speech on November 17 last year the commander [Fidel Castro] formulated it in the following way "this revolution

can destroy itself all alone, and the only ones who can't manage to destroy it are them" [the US, imperialism]. "But we can destroy it and it would be our fault". And he said that while stressing that: "several tens of thousands of parasites produce nothing and earn everything..."

Similarly, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Felipe Perez Roque, insisted at the United Nations that the danger for Cuba was the creation of a bourgeois class. The interpenetration of the bureaucracy and the market economy, that's where the danger lies. We have to demolish the foundations of the bureaucracy, because it is on these foundations that the bourgeois class can develop - we saw in the USSR, in Poland, and elsewhere how the bureaucrats, who were managers, men of power, became owners, became capitalists.

In Cuba, unlike in the GDR of the 1980s, "Lenin is alive": the bureaucratic counterrevolution has not been carried through. We must take advantage of that to demolish the remaining foundations of the bureaucracy. Because it is from there that the danger of capitalist restoration can come.

The Venezuelan revolutionary process is making it possible to loosen the imperialist stranglehold around Cuba. And even if this process is only beginning and the parallels between the two revolutions are deceptive, can we speak today of reciprocal influences?

Cuban doctors, paramedics, and teachers, are working in Venezuela. But they don't take any part in the political life of the country, a choice with which I disagree, even though you can understand that there is a self-



Celia Hart

limitation to avoid Cuba being accused of interfering.

But the freshness of the Venezuelan process, the voyages there, the possibility of experiencing other realities and intervening there are an enriching experience and it is important that Cubans, in particular young people - and not the Cuban government or state of course - can take part in the Venezuelan revolution, not only as doctors or teachers, but in the factories, the neighbourhood meetings etc.

In any case it has to be stressed that the links that have been established between Cuba and Venezuela are different from those that existed with the USSR. Because it is a question of links between two revolutionary processes, one which is already consolidated and another which is beginning. Both of them are authentic revolutions. With the USSR, on the contrary, it was a question of relations between states, and of unequal relations.

The dynamic of the Venezuela-Cuba tandem, the possible integration of Bolivia into the process that is under way, actualises the permanent revolution and enables us to lay the foundations of a relationship that is going in the direction of building a real united front.

Why does Trotsky's theoretical contribution seem so important to you?

In Cuba we have been living through a process of permanent revolution since the Moncada [2].

The continuity of the revolution, the question of its deepening, were at the centre of the thinking of Cuban revolutionaries, and especially of the July 26 Movement. First of all Mella, then Guevara, were accused of being "Trotskyists". They weren't, but the accusations had

a rational kernel, because they were oriented towards the permanent revolution even without having read Trotsky. The permanence of the Cuban revolution is in the ideas of the Left Opposition.

In Cuba anti-Stalinist feeling has always existed, because people thought that communism was the Stalinism of the Communist Party. And the Communist Party was one of the last to join the revolution...But when Fidel announced in 1961 the socialist character of the Cuban revolution, people said: "If Fidel is a communist, you can sign me up too".

I always felt that there was something missing in my thinking about the revolution. That's what I've found through reading Trotsky: I discovered that social justice and individual freedom were not contradictory and that we weren't condemned to choose between them, that socialism could only be built by walking on both feet.

Celia Hart is speaking at the Socialist Resistance Day School on Latin America, 24 June,

❖ Celia Hart, who is a physicist, a writer, and a member of the Cuban Communist Party, has described herself as a "freelance Trotskyist" since discovering Trotsky's writings when she was studying physics in East Germany in the 1980s. At that time she could see at first hand to what extent this so-called "really existing socialism" was a society in decadence and without a future. Daughter of two historic leaders of the Cuban revolution, Haydée Santamaria and Armando Hart, Celia Hart was lucky enough on returning from the GDR to be able to find the writings of Isaac Deutscher in her father's library

NOTES

[1] The "special period" is the term used to describe the difficult situation that Cuba found itself in after the collapse of the Soviet Union, from which it is only now emerging

[2] On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro was arrested after the failure of the attack against the Moncada barracks. Defending himself in court, he made a speech which has gone down in history under the name of "History will absolve me", in which he outlined the perspective of a revolutionary struggle against the Batista dictatorship

Mexico

Zapatistas call Red Alert over state attacks

The leadership of the EZLN (Zapatistas) have suspended their 'Other Campaign' and called a new 'red alert' in response to massive state repression against the communities of San Salvador Atenco and Texcoco (both in the Valley of Mexico, about 28 kms outside Mexico City - just beyond the city's huge rubbish dump). The red alert calls for the closure of the Zapatista community centres in Chiapas and a raft of other security measures, including putting the EZLN fighters on maximum alert.

The red alert follows the clashes in on Wednesday May 3, when more than 200 people were arrested and one killed, as police brutally prevented flower sellers from Atenco setting up stalls on the building site which is to become a new Walmart shopping mall. According to local people, the police will only acknowledge 109 people arrested, nine people have completely disappeared and women have been raped by police, in addition to the 14-year old boy murdered.

An eyewitness report at Upsidedown World reports the events as follows:

"At 7am this past Wednesday, May 3, state police blocked 60 flower vendors from setting up their stands at the Texcoco local market. The police beat and arrested those who resisted.

"The flower vendors called to the residents of neighbouring San Salvador Atenco for help and the Atenco residents blocked the highway that borders their town and leads to Texcoco.

"The police response was overwhelming: hundreds of state and federal police, most clad in riot gear, arrived to lift the blockade. Atenco resisted, with machetes, clubs, Molotov cocktails and bottle rockets. The police tried to lift the blockade five times throughout the day, and five times they were repelled.

"The violence was extreme. Photographs published in local papers show Atenco protestors beating a fallen policeman, police beating tens of fallen protestors. Severe beatings. Protesters kicking one fallen police officer in the face, groups of police pulverizing tens of protestors with rocks and batons.

"Police also attacked photographers from both the national and the international press. Photographers and television cameramen from Associated Press, Reuters, Milenio, Jornada and Televisa all reported beatings and attempts to confiscate cameras. Photographs and film coverage of the

beatings were published on the internet and shown on national television. Local and international news articles however, have not mentioned the systematic police violence against reporters."

Why is this heavy-handed repression taking place? It is about much more than stopping local peasants from selling their flowers where Walmart wants to be. This district is an area with a long history of militancy, where local people in 2002 stopped the building of an airport on peasant land around Atenco. This campaign reached near-uprising proportions. Moreover Atenco has symbolically declared itself an 'autonomous municipality', like the Zapatista communities in Chiapas.

Local popular leaders invited Subcommandante Marcos, in nearby Mexico City for 'Other campaign' meetings, to visit Atenco as part of his tour. It was in the wake of his visit that the repression took place. During his visit, Marcos promised to align the Zapatista Army of National Liberation with Atenco's struggle. The Atenco Front, with machetes in hand, was in charge of providing security for Marcos during the May first Labor Day march to Mexico City's main plaza where the Front's leader, Ignacio Del Valle, spoke before tens of thousands gathered in the plaza.

Upsidedown World reports, "Two days later riot police stormed the house where he (Ignacio del Valle) had been hiding since the attack in Texcoco. At that moment the Televisa cameraman was outside the house filming the police operation when some five police officers approached and repeatedly beat him with clubs. As a result there is no film coverage of the police raid.

"Several newspaper photographers, however, photographed Del Valle's arrival to prison several hours later that night. He was carried in a headlock by a masked police officer, who, in the photographs, is pointing for the photographers to leave the area. Another



masked officer walked slightly behind, grabbing Del Valle's back.

"The two masked officers walk Del Valle through a gauntlet of a hundred riot police with helmets and shields. Del Valle's head is covered with a towel in the pictures, but his face, swollen and bloody is partially visible. Also visible is a blood stain the size of a fist on the groin of his jeans, evidence of repeated strikes to his testicles."

Subcommandante Marcos reappeared in Atenco at a rally on Friday 5 May, holding up empty cartridge case which he said police had used live ammunition when 14-year old Javier Cortés was killed on 3 May. Marcos called on the commercial media to stop their 'smear campaign' against the people, who have been accused by TV and newspapers of supporting the EPRI [1] Marcos also announced at a protest rally in Plaza de la Tres Culturas [2] that the Other Campaign was being suspended and that in the light of the situation in the Texcoco valley he would remain in Mexico City 'indefinitely'.

As a response to Marcos' campaign, the government and media are ominously arguing that Marcos has violated the nine-year old amnesty law that officially brought armed conflict to a temporary end.

On Saturday 6 May a judge committed peasant leaders Ignacio del Valle and Felipe Alvarez to jail for the crime of 'armed kidnap'. Forty-four prisoners also announced the same day a hunger strike for their release.

At Friday's Atenco rally Marcos said: "To the media and its workers; I have seen you in Chiapas, risking your lives, suffering hunger, and I have seen how your bosses change everything. I've seen how your photos, your videos, are disappeared into the desk drawers of your editors."



Mass resistance in the streets

“There is a lynch mob campaign against the FPDT (Peoples’ Front in Defense of Land, the Atenco organisation that stopped the multi-billion dollar international airport project in 2002) and its leaders.

“Your bosses are putting themselves at the service of lies. They are paid by those who have money, and we don’t have it. Well, they are not in the streets. They are not in the factories. They are not out planting the fields. The Mass Media... is dedicated to discrediting the good and noble people who fight.

“I am going to remain for an indefinite period of time in Mexico City to participate in the mobilisations.” Marcos also announced that Zapatista supporters would launch a nationwide campaign for the arrested and brutalised on Atenco and Texcoco.

In a statement on 4 May, the Political Committee of the PRT [3], declared the events at Atenco to be "a deliberate provocation against the Other Campaign" saying that "without a shadow of doubt" the police attacks has been designed to coincide with Marcos’ visit, and to impede the progress of his campaign. After finishing the Valley of Mexico part of his trip Marcos was due to travel to San Luis Potosí, were an important rally for the release of political prisoners was due to take place.

Latest News: Brutal beatings in Santiaguito jail

According to the left-liberal paper La Jornada (7 May), the detainees held in Mexico State’s Santiaguito prison have been systematically brutalised and threatened with death since their arrest.

Also according to La Jornada, two more gunshot victims in Atenco have been discovered. The paper also reports that the house of Ignacio del Valle has been broken into by state forces, clothes torn, furniture wrecked and electrical appliances trashed.

NOTES

[1] Independent Revolutionary Army of the Poor. Since the arrest of their major leaders in 1999 it has not been clear whether this organisation really exists.

[2] site of the 1968 student massacre

[3] Revolutionary Workers Party, Mexican supporters of the 4th International

MARCOS SPEECH AT RALLY IN PLAZA OF THE THREE CULTURES

"Companeros and companeras,

A few moments ago we were watching and listening to the media and the manipulation of what was happening, the informational manipulation about what was occurring [in Atenco]. We listened to the commentators on Television Azteca imploring that law be restored, that the military enter to restore order and end what was taking place there. We also listened to the indignation of the viewers who sent letters to the station stating that the commentators pleading for greater public force were idiots.

Years ago here, in the Plaza of Three Cultures [Tlatelolco] there was a massacre and in response to this the government claimed that the army had been attacked. And much time passed until someone asked what the army had been doing at a student meeting in the first place. And now over those same means of communication, including radio, it does not occur to reporters to ask what the public forces were doing in San Salvador Atenco.

And what they were doing there was enforcing this alliance that was made between the PRD and the PRI in order to oust a few flower vendors because the municipal president of Texcoco thinks they deface the city; because he wants to put a shopping center there, a Wal-Mart in Texcoco and the small merchants bother him and because the PRD aligned there with the PRI at the state level and with the PAN at the national level, and now they will have to be accountable for this death.

As the 6th Commission of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, signatory to the Other Campaign, we are asking, soliciting respectfully the regional and sub-regional coordinators throughout the entire country to execute actions and mobilizations in support of the Frente de Los Pueblos en Defensa de La Tierra [Salvador Atenco] beginning at 0800, eight in the morning tomorrow, the fourth of May, 2006.

As the Sixth Commission we are declaring a red alert. The troops of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation have already been declared under red alert and from that point onwards the Caracoles and Autonomous Zapatista Rebel Municipalities will be closed. Beginning at that moment, from that moment on, the new chain of command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation will be in place. Whatever may happen to me, there is now someone else in place to make decisions. We don’t know about everyone else, but today, we, the Zapatistas, are Atenco!

We are going to be attentive to their demands. We call for the holding of meetings by sector,



Marcos (centre front, back to camera) addresses protest rally in Atenco, 5 May

by region, as you all see fit. As the Sixth Commission we are canceling all of our participation in programmed activities and we are waiting for the cue from the Frente de Los Pueblos en Defensa de La Tierra. If it needs our presence there, we will go there. If not, we will participate directly in the actions that you all program tomorrow beginning at 0800, eight in the morning.

Close the highways, close the streets, fly, paint, whatever occurs to you, in a civil and peaceful manner. Atenco cannot be left all to itself. We will not cease these actions and this situation until the companeros of the Frente de Los Pueblos en Defensa de La Tierra indicate so to us.

We are not going to pay attention to any piece of information that doesn’t arrive directly from them. For us, they, those who comprise the Frente de Los Pueblos en Defensa de La Tierra are the Other campaign in those lands. We will respect their decisions. We will go wherever they tell us to go. They have been clear in their demands: immediate liberation of those detained and total withdrawal of the government forces that are invading their lands.

This is our message companeros and companeras. Not only for the Other Campaign in this Other Mexico, in this Other Mexico City that is rising up. It is our message to the Other Campaign in the entire country. From Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Campeche, until the two Baja Californias, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon. From the north to the south, from the east to the west so that the Other Campaign echoes in Atenco and let there be justice for those that have fallen!! Thank you companeros, thank you companeras."



Vienna protest at Euro-Latino government summit

Mexico

Mexican miners and steelworkers on strike

Fighting for Union Autonomy

Dan La Botz

ON APRIL 20 EIGHT hundred state and federal police launched an assault on 500 striking workers who had been occupying a steel mill in Lázaro Cárdenas. Two were killed, five seriously injured and 40 wounded. A video released to the press shows Michoacán police taking aim at the strikers.

Union members and townspeople retook the plant while representatives from unions and human rights organizations converged on the scene. Meanwhile, Villacero Corporation, which owns the plant, accused the strikers of being “terrorists.” This is the latest incident in a months-long struggle.

At the beginning of April, after a brief national wildcat, miners and steel workers launched a series of strikes for union autonomy. If successful, these would transform both Mexico’s labor movement and its political system.

At first the mining and steel companies, the employers association, and the Mexican government stood together against the strikers, whose backers include the independent National Union of Workers (UNT), a Catholic Bishop, and other mining and metal workers unions around the world.

Then, on April 10, Altos Hornos de Mexico SA, the nation’s largest steelmaker, broke ranks with Grupo Mexico, stating in a full-page ad in a local daily, that Labor Secretary Francisco Salazar is causing “chaos.”

Mexican courts declared the strikes illegal, but the strikes continued with labor leaders calling for a nationwide one-hour strike on April 28. At stake in this contest is a system of state and employer control of unions that has lasted over 80 years. If Mexican workers should ever achieve genuinely independent unions, not only would they have more economic strength, but they could become a social force and a political power.

Background to the Battle

The battle began with a big bang. More than a quarter of a million miners and steelworkers walked off the job between March 1-3 in wildcat strikes at 70 companies in at least eight states from central to northern Mexico, virtually paralyzing the mining industry.

The strike resulted from an attempt by the government to remove the Mexican Miners Union’s top officer, General Secretary Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, and replace him with Elías Morales Hernández, a union dissident who is reportedly backed by the Grupo Mexico mining company.

The coup in their union led miners to strike insisting that the government recognize Gómez Urrutia. In many mining towns and cities the miners also marched and rallied demanding not only the restitution of their leader but also safer conditions.

The strike by members of the National Union of Mining and Metallurgical Workers of Mexico (SNTMMRM) resulted from both labor union and political causes. The explosion and cave in at the Pasta de Conchos mine in San Juan de Las Sabinas, Coahuila in northern Mexico on February 19 killed 65 miners. The Miners Union leader Gómez Urrutia blamed the employer, Grupo Mexico, calling the deaths “industrial homicide.” The Pasta de Conchos cave-in set off a storm. Throughout Mexico politicians, academics, intellectuals, and ordinary people criticized the mining company.

Grupo Mexico stock fell. Copper and other commodity prices rose. The Mexican Catholic Bishops Conference criticized the employer’s negligence and called for an international investigation, expressing their lack of confidence in the government.

The Ousting of Gómez Urrutia

While miners throughout the country mourned the death of their brothers and complained of health and safety conditions in their own mines, there was no official or wildcat strike in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

Then, on February 28 the Mexican Secretary of Labor announced that Gómez Urrutia was not actually the head of the union, but that the



real general secretary was Elías Morales Hernández. The government’s action was based on part of Mexican labor law known as “taking note” (toma de nota), under which the government recognizes the legally elected officers of labor unions.

Six years earlier Morales Hernández had appealed to the Secretary of Labor, arguing that he had actually been elected and should be the new head of the union. The government had rejected the appeal by Morales Hernández, and in 2002 then Secretary of Labor Carlos Abascal Carranza recognized Gómez Urrutia as the general secretary. Why had the Mexican government suddenly opted to overturn its own earlier decision, recognize the dissident, and bring him out of retirement to assume leadership of the Miners Union? The answer has partly to do with the Miners Union and the recent accident, but just as much to do with the Congress of Labor (CT), the umbrella organization that brings together most of the largest Mexican labor federations and industrial unions.

Official Labor Movement in Crisis

In mid-February 2006, Miners Union leader Gómez Urrutia joined together with Isaías González, head of the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), to challenge the election of Victor Flores Morales, head of the Mexican Railroad Workers Union (STFRM), for control of the Congress of Labor (CT).

Gómez Urrutia was trying to position himself to become the top leader of the numerically most important Mexican labor organization. His ambitions troubled many. The CT, which brings together most of the “official” unions of Mexico, historically formed part of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party of Mexico. The CT had historically backed the PRI’s candidates, supported the PRI’s policies, and served in the Mexican Congress as PRI senators and congressmen.

More recently the CT had worked out a modus vivendi with Mexican president

Vicente Fox, collaborating with his National Action Party (PAN). Napoleón Gómez Urrutia's attempt to take over the CT not only challenged Railroad Workers Union leader Victor Flores, it also worried the PRI and PAN.

Rival Leaders

Victor Flores had been the ideal labor union leader under both PRI and PAN governments. He had worked closely with the government to carry out the privatization of the Mexican railroads, leading to their sale to the Union Pacific and the Kansas City railroads.

When rank-and-file railroad workers protested, Victor Flores cooperated with the government to have them fired - easy enough with some 100,000 railroad workers losing their jobs in the privatization - and if that did not work he had sent his thugs to beat them and threaten them with murder.

While somewhat volatile - as a PRI Congressman Victor Flores had once tried to strangle another representative - he was loyal to the government's program of neoliberalism.

Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, on the other hand, seemed, from the government's point of view, to be becoming a loose cannon.

Gómez Urrutia had inherited the leadership of the mine from his father Napoleón Gómez Sada. Both had been typical charros, that is, union bureaucrats absolutely loyal to the PRI. They had turned out the vote for the party, collaborated with the employers, and expelled union activists or leaders who opposed them or supported other political parties. Doing all of those things, they enjoyed the wealth, power and privilege to which their loyalty entitled them. Lately, however Gómez Urrutia had begun to challenge both the employers and the Congress of Labor/ PRI leadership.

The Miners' Union in Struggle

In June 2005, Mexican miners joined their compañeros in Peru and the United States as more than 10,000 miners carried out a simultaneous protest against Grupo Mexico to demand that the company stop violating workers' rights. The three unions accused Grupo Mexico of having a policy of repression, exploitation and unwanted involvement in union affairs.

The protest was organized by the United Steel Workers of America (USW) in the United States, the Federation of Metal Workers of Peru (FETIMAP), and the National union of Miners and Metal Workers (SNTMM) of Mexico. The international solidarity against the Mexican mining company was backed by the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF).

Then in September 2005, Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union won a 46-day strike against two steel companies in Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacan, in one of the most important strikes in Mexico in a decade. The local union and its 2,400 members succeeded in winning an 8% wage gain, 34% in new benefits, and a 7,250 peso one-time only bonus.

The union had broken the government-employer-imposed wage ceiling. The Mexican Miners Union also had an impact on domestic politics, playing a critical role in the union bloc that opposed the Fox administration's labor law reform package.

All these actions, economic and political, threatened to upset the Mexican system of labor control by which the governmental labor authorities, the employers, and the "official" unions of the CT collude to channel and suppress workers.

Then in February, Gómez Urrutia made his bid to take over the CT, raising the prospect that he would lead labor struggles at a national level. Clearly at that point the Fox government must have already been looking for a way to get rid of him. Then his remarks on Grupo Mexico's "industrial homicide" made him persona non grata with the PRI and with the employers.

Government Repression

President Vicente Fox's administration took swift action to defend itself and support Grupo Mexico. First, as already mentioned the government brought Elías Morales Hernández out of retirement and declared him to be the legitimate head of the union. Second, the government indicted Gómez Urrutia for allegedly embezzling \$55 million given to the union during the privatization of the Cananea copper mine under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Third, labor boards and courts declared the strikes illegal for various reasons, but often because they were inter-union conflicts.

While these might seem like particularly original and creative moves on the part of the government, they are in fact all rather standard measures.

Gómez Urrutia refused to accept Morales Hernández's usurpation of the union leadership, and local unions throughout the country - infuriated by the attempt to appoint a man backed by Grupo Mexico - voted to back Gómez Urrutia. He also categorically denied the charges of embezzlement, saying the money had been paid out to union members. His supporters filed a charge of industrial homicide against Secretary of Labor Francisco Salazar and two mine inspectors.

Meanwhile miners keep walking out on strike at mines throughout the country. The work stoppage is costing Grupo Mexico about \$2.5 million a day in lost production at La Caridad, the country's second-largest copper mine.

The Larger Context

The struggle over the Congress of Labor and now over the Miners Union takes place at a crucial time: Mexico is in the midst of a national election campaign, in which the conservative National Action Party's candidate Felipe Calderón and the Institutional Revolutionary Party's candidate Roberto Madrazo are being challenged by Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution.

López Obrador is running on a populist platform calling for putting "the poor first." He is leading in the polls, and while international bankers and Mexican industrialists have said they can live with him, some fear the poor make take his slogan seriously.

At the same time, Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), has left the Lacandon Forest in Chiapas to organize the "other campaign." This is not an attempt to win election, but rather an effort to organize the anti-capitalist forces of Mexico into a social movement with the power to overturn the government, call a constituent assembly, and write a new constitution for an egalitarian (and, though he hardly ever uses the word, socialist) Mexico.

Marcos has recently gone out of his way to speak to Mexican workers and union

Denmark

Huge demonstration against government welfare cuts

Aage Skovrind



More than 100,000 - organizers say up to 140,000 - joined demonstrations in Copenhagen and four other cities on May 17. The demonstrations were the largest for more than 20 years and reflect a growing alliance between trade unions and student organizations.

Protests are against the "welfare reform", launched by the government in early April and currently negotiated in Parliament. The ruling Liberal and Conservative Parties need support either from the far right Danish Peoples Party or Social Democracy to get the laws passed.

The plan includes attacks on several welfare issues, including later retirement age (pension age up from 65 to 67), obligatory employment training programs for elderly unemployed workers (now benefiting from an exemption), cuts in unemployment benefits for young workers and reduced public study grant.

Overall, the goal is to get more people to work more (by making their present conditions worse), in order to ensure "welfare in the future".

The Red-Green Alliance is refusing the general premises,

arguing that there is money enough for more and better welfare - now as well as in the future. The Alliance is taking active part in the current mobilizations.

In Parliament, the Alliance together with the Socialist Peoples Party are against the "reforms", while Social Democracy is divided on the issue. Although the party president joined the rally in Copenhagen, she is working for a deal with the government.

The Red-Green Alliance puts forward as a key demand, that Social Democracy abstains from an agreement with the bourgeois government.

 ❖ Aage Skovrind is press secretary of the Red-Green Alliance.

members, blue-collar laborers in private industry and white-collar workers in government agencies, suggesting that they have to turn against their union leaders, the bosses, and the politicians. Most of the people Marcos speaks to - the poor, Indian communities, the unemployed - don't have much economic leverage. Now the miners' strike has shown what real economic power and potential political power could be.

The Miners Union's nationwide wildcat strike showed Mexican industrial workers' taking center stage for the first time in decades. Twice in the past there have been such strikes against the Mexican government: first in 1959 when the Mexican Railroad Workers union called a nationwide strike, and again in 1976 when Electrical Workers and their allies in the Democratic Tendency carried out a national strike.

Both those strikes were crushed by the Mexican government - the PRI's one-party-state - using the army, police and massive firings. The Mexican government of that era, the era of the PRI, had the political and social power to carry out such military and police actions to put down a national labor walkout.

The Fox government, as demonstrated by six years of political failure, economic doldrums and social disintegration, does not have the force to face down the labor movement. A number of movements with different political leaderships and goals - López Obrador and the Party of the Democratic Revolution, Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, and Gómez Urrutia and the Miners Union - appear to be aligning in ways that could turn Mexico upside down.

Whether that happens depends on three things: 1) whether the government continues to make mistakes that inadvertently advantage and encourage its enemies; 2) whether the leaders of these movements prove willing to and capable of setting broader forces in motion; 3) whether workers, feeling and seeing their strength, move to build their own independent force.

 ❖ Dan La Botz is the author of several books on Mexican labor unions, social movements and politics. He also edits Mexican Labor News and Analysis, an on-line publication of the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) and the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), at: www.ueinternational.org/.

Fourth International Summer Camp July 2006

A new generation to build a new Europe!

The 23rd youth camp of the Fourth International will take place near Perugia in Italy from 29th July to 5th August.

Over 500 young people from all over Europe are expected to come together for a week of political discussion, exchange of experience, self-organisation and having a good time. They will discuss the neoliberal offensive in all its forms - from the war in Iraq to the war on the right to free education- plan the fightback and map out the strategy necessary to gain another Europe, another world while at the same time finding out at first hand what's the same and what's different in the politics and partying of each country.

For more information visit the website or write to International Viewpoint PO Box 112, Manchester M12 5DW, Britain.



Delegates at last year's camp

