
INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT

News & analysis from the Fourth International - December 2007 - # 395

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assassination



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International Viewpoint

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France

Le Monde on Besancenot

La gauche c'est moi

Sylvia Zappi

He seems to be everywhere. Olivier Besancenot has a prominence in the political arena that now goes beyond his wildest dreams.



This is a far cry from the time when Alain Krivine presented his young protégé, the future presidential candidate, to the press, saying: "Isn't he nice?" Six years later, this chubby little Tintin face is now ubiquitous on the left, on the TV screen with Canal+ or i-Télé, on the radio waves, and in the columns of *Le Parisien* ... He even takes pride of place in a double page spread in *Paris Match*, sitting on a stool in an 18th District [Clichy/Montmartre] bistro, posing beneath a photo-portrait of Che Guevara. And the ultimate tribute: a team from "Groland", a satirical programme with a big youth following, turned out for his last meeting in Paris on 22 November at the Mutualité hall.

The popularity polls, which place him just behind Ségolène Royal and Bertrand Delanoë [Parti socialiste, Mayor of Paris], have become accustomed to this rapid media breakthrough. First it was the BVA poll, which gave the young postworker a 40%-favourable rating, just behind the Mayor of Paris, then the Ipsos poll, and lastly the Sofres poll. Olivier Besancenot, 33 years old, now competes with major figures in the Parti socialiste [PS] for prime position on the Left. That would seem to show that his party, the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR), is right to claim that it has become "the sole beacon of socialism in the midst of a Left that has collapsed".

At his meetings, his mentors, Alain Krivine and François Sabado, who not so very long ago had him repeat their scripts, are now placed on the second rank, as onlookers delighted at their success story. "He's very good", they keep repeating, when the young leader thrills his audience by insisting that he wants them to be "the Left that sticks to its guns", set against the PS, which is "nowhere" and which will have to "relearn the

habit of carrying placards on demos". Even those who have only ever seen the "League" at the political margins can now take delight in this.

After thirty years of standing Krivine as their candidate, these older members decided they'd have to take a gamble on recognising the "generation gap" if they wanted to be able to compete with the popularity of "Arlette" (Laguillier) [the candidate of Lutte Ouvrière]. The results they obtained in 2002 (4.27% of the vote) and especially the 4.08% of the vote in the Presidential Election of May 2007 (twice the vote of Laguillier or of Buffet, the Communist Party candidate), have outstripped all their predictions and have decisively placed Besancenot at the head of the radical Left.

Over the past month, they seem to have moved on a further stage and established themselves in direct competition with a PS that has become too pragmatic and which no longer knows how to put clear water between itself and the Right. "The PS doesn't represent any alternative, and has left a vacuum which Besancenot now fills", says Vincent Tiberj, Research Fellow at Cevipof, the Political Research Centre of Sciences Po [a political-science university institute in Paris]. This phenomenon has become more marked in the wake of the Presidential Election. An IFOP opinion poll commissioned by Le Journal du dimanche, and published on 2 November, shows that 7% of those interviewed would vote today for Besancenot. The surge in support is particularly strong among manual workers (12%) and clerical workers (11%). "The PS seems to lack any line or leader that it can put up against Sarkozy. On the Left, only the postie [i.e. Besancenot] remains as the opposition", according to the analysis of Jérôme Fourquet, director of IFOP.

Besancenot remains a militant and, since the end of the summer holiday period, he has been trying to stick as closely as possible to the course taken by working class struggle. He is everywhere, among the homeless on the rue de la Banque, at a demonstration supporting "users of the Postal Service", at Colombes for a press conference against the EPR nuclear power station. When he has his say in the television studios, he always mentions an example of "workers in struggle" with whom he has met just beforehand. Playtex, Yoplait, Nestlé, Citroën or Well ... He conveys the anger of workers and the demands of those who have been pushed to their limit.

A strike breaks out in the SNCF? He is the first to come out in public to offer his support to the railway workers, rushing down the day before the strike began to the depot at Sotteville-lès-Rouen to ask "the guys to stand firm". The railway workers received him like one of their own. Alongside the marches during the big demonstrations in Paris, he was given cheers: "Hold out, Olivier! You're not alone." In the union offices, his interviews were now being pinned up on the notice boards: "He was already popular, but here he was just

brilliant", says his friend from the 18th District, Basile Pot, switchman at the Gare de l'Est. "There is so much confusion in the way the PS expresses itself politically that people can identify with his straight talk", says Annick Coupé, spokesperson for Solidaires, the union grouping that comprises the various SUD sections [a militant rank-and-file based union movement that has grown over the past 20 years]. "He had the intelligence to see that there was a political space left empty" as Communist Party deputy Patrick Braouezec concedes.

From 2001 onwards, the young leader of the LCR has been able to show that he is different. There is the casual style: the dark jeans and black t-shirt he always wears, his simple and punchy way of speaking with finely honed slogans, and his stance as "just another wage earner like everybody else" which he insists on in contrast to the suits and ties of the notables. He is just as happy to advertise his friendship with the rappers Joey Starr et Monsieur R as he is to advertise his admiration for Che Guevara. "In the political arena, you get the impression that he comes from another planet", laughs Léon Crémieux, a member of the LCR's Central Committee.

The style may be out of place on the Left, but the younger generation is happy with it. "By drawing new causes like ecology and anti-globalisation into the arena, he's been able to build up a base among first-time voters", as the researcher Vincent Tiberj emphasises. Within the generation born between 1977 and 1982, Besancenot's vote has reached 12%.

Besancenot continues to work on his "prole" and youthful niche. His public image receives the attention of his whole team. For his interviews, he chooses Le Parisien and free papers like Métro and 20 Minutes. And he prefers to reply to the enquiries of RMC Info, "a radio station of the people", rather than the large media outlets for more general audiences. "For lots of workers, these are the only sources of information. It's become our means of political communication", as Léon Crémieux says by way of justification. Not to forget the radio stations based in the outlying districts, "to reach the young people in the big housing estates".

Our thanks go to Jonathan Walker for translating [this Le Monde article](#) on Olivier Besancenot.

► *Sylvia Zappi is a journalist in the editorial team of the French daily newspaper, Le Monde..*

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Denmark Court delivers a victory for liberation fighters the world over

[Ron Ridenour](#)

A great victory, an unexpected one for several of the affected and observers, was delivered today by Copenhagen's City Court for those who fight for their liberation and sovereignty and for those who act in solidarity.



One juridical judge and two lay judges found the seven accused Danish solidarity activists, “Fighter and Lovers”, innocent of the Justice Ministry’s charge that they had materially supported “terror groups” FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine).

Since FARC and PFLP are not terrorist organizations, concluded the judges, neither are the seven activists guilty of any crime.

The seven had produced and sold t-shirts with FARC and PFLP emblems in an effort to raise a debate about Denmark’s terror law, which is shaped after USA’s Patriotic Act and EU’s terror list, on which FARC and PFLP are placed as terror groups.

The court’s decision is a worldwide precedent. No other court, outside those in Colombia and Israel, have legally judged the contested groups for terror crimes. This will have significance in the international world of politics and justice, and is a setback for the imperial coalition’s “war on terror” with civil liberty restrictions as one consequence.

The court found for the defense in its argument that while both armed movements fighting oppressive governments over four decades had committed specific

atrocities their goal is not a terrorist one, rather their goal is to combat government and paramilitary forces, and create a different political course, albeit not with the intent to do damage to constitutional foundations.

FARC and PFLP, said the court, were not engaged in “terrorizing the population,” as is required in Danish law, paragraph 114, to be classified as terrorist, nor was their intent to “destabilize or destroy the land’s basic, political, constitutional, economic or societal structures”.

One of the lay judges was in disagreement regarding terror actions purported by FARC.

The total vote was 4-0 against the states attorney’s terror charge against PFLP and 3-1 for FARC.

It is unknown if the state will appeal the decision. The case for them is clearly thin, as the 50-page court decision clearly shows. No hard evidence of terror was presented. The court’s report states that only one of the state’s witnesses had any direct knowledge of the charges. Israeli researcher, Reuven Paz, testified against PFLP as a purported terrorist organization. His credibility, though, was not well taken as he had worked for Israeli intelligence services for 27 years.

Another state’s witness, Angel Rabasa, a former Cuban, testified as a witness from Rand Corporation, a California based weapons industry and US military think-tank.

His credibility was discredited when it was revealed that he had worked for the US military in contrast to his denial of such. Furthermore, he had asserted that FARC had never operated in the legal political arena, yet he had written to the contrary in his book, “Colombia Labyrinth”, published in 2001 by RAND with support of the US military.

Surprising decision

It was a surprising verdict, given the temper of the times: the constant fright signals for terror attacks daily disseminated by the mass media and the government. The Danish government is also fully committed to the war against Afghanistan and has 650 troops there with tanks and heavy artillery. Danish soldiers are regularly shot and killed.

The Danish government, with support from the Social Democratic “opposition”, also continues its “commitment to the Iraq project”, albeit with fewer and fewer military forces.

Yet another reason why the decision was surprising, and an uplift for political activism, is that the court could have taken an easy way out of the dilemma on who is or is not terrorist. The state’s case against the seven had to be based upon material support. Therefore, the collection of proceeds from the t-shirt sales, which was to go to a radio station for FARC and a poster printing press for PFLP, was decisive.

A technical problem for the state’s case was that the \$4-5000 collected, slated to be sent to the two groups,

was confiscated by the Danish secret police (PET) before any could be sent. PET also confiscated some t-shirts and "Fighters and Lovers" computer and homepage.

The court could have easily found the seven innocent for not having broken the law concretely. Instead, it decided to take the political case head on: are FARC and PFLP terrorists. Their decision is a clear NO.

Collateral consequences

The city court's decision will also have positive consequences for three other Danish organizations, which have also donated material support to FARC and or PFLP.

The first group to do so, Rebellion (Oprør), had actually sent several thousands of dollars to both FARC and PFLP to do with as they chose. One of Rebellion's spokespersons, Patrick Mac Manus, was charged with violating the same law, paragraph 114. That case has been postponed due to his illness.

A key figure in Rebellion said that with this court's decision there is no ground to continue a case against MacManus.

A veterans group from World War 11 (Horsørød-Stutthof Foreningen) also sent some money to FARC to challenge the state, which refused to prosecute those old heroes. In an act of solidarity with "Fighters and Lovers", a Copenhagen union of carpenters and constructions workers (TIB) recently did the same.

In the festive aftermath, complete with Colombian music, one of the involved mused that this decision should be taken up by solidarity activists around the world as a tool to go on the offensive against the repressive terror laws. Use the verdict, he said, to demand that the terror lists be thrown in the waste basket, and increase solidarity with the just struggles for liberation the world over.

▀ *Ron Ridenour's journalistic career started in the movement against the Vietnam war and in the US alternative press. In Cuba between 1982 and 1996, he translated, wrote and edited for the publishing house, Editorial José Martí, and news agency, Prensa Latina. He now lives in Denmark. His books, 'Cuba Beyond the Crossroads' and 'Cuba at Sea', are published by Socialist Resistance.*

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An Interview On the Middle East

[Gilbert Achcar](#)

"Tehran doesn't need nuclear weapons to start exerting effective deterrence because they already have a powerful deterrent that is "conventional", aside from the fact that they have a network of allies in the area which they could also incite against the US and its own allies."



State of Nature: Although 2007 proved to be the deadliest year for US in Iraq, the Bush administration is putting on an optimistic front with talk of casualty rates declining, al-Qaeda being routed from Baghdad, Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar and Diyala provinces cooperating with the US forces and so on, all primarily tied to the surge in troops. How do you assess the recent developments in Iraq?

Gilbert Achcar: Well, there's no point denying each and every statement that comes out from Washington. So yes, on the face of it, there has been a relative, but only relative, decline in casualties, at least in recorded casualties. Security controls in Baghdad seem to be working to a certain extent, but that's also because the so-called "surge" was concentrated in the capital and the "Mehdi Army" of Muqtada al-Sadr decided early on to withdraw from any points of possible confrontation with the US army, and so did Sunni insurgent groups. I tend to believe, therefore, that all this has had some effect, but it is purely temporary. There is no structural change, but only a result of the ongoing "surge", which cannot last forever. As with all such operations, people get used to them after a while and the relative decline in the number of casualties can quickly be reversed if the political conditions remain the same.

As for collaboration with the US occupation, there has been increasing friction between some of the tribal configurations in Arab Sunni areas of Iraq, on the one hand, and al-Qaeda, on the other. Coalitions were set up in some instances opposing or trying to get rid of al-Qaeda from their area, as part of collaboration between some tribal chiefs and occupation authorities or the Iraqi government. Tribalism has always been a tool of last resort for various proponents of modernisation in Iraq, who ended up making use of this most backward and traditionalist feature of Iraqi society. For example, although Saddam Hussein's regime displayed, on the face of it, a modernist nationalist ideology, Saddam very much exploited tribalism, especially in the last dozen years of his rule after the first US onslaught on Iraq. Before that, of course, colonialism also made quite extensive use of tribalism despite its "civilising" pretensions, and so did various republican leaders after the 1958 overthrow of the monarchy. And now, it is the US occupation that has been resorting to this same mechanism of buying tribal leaders with big amounts of money and other privileges.

But all this is very unstable, very fragile. The fact is that, whatever relative decline there is in the level of violence in Iraq, there is no political breakthrough for the United States in the sense that it is not really able to control the country. That's absolutely clear. Probably one of the best illustrations of that is provided by the country's political institutions. Although these were built under US patronage, the US can't have, for instance, the oil law ratified by the Parliament, as there is a majority there that is opposed to the draft law that Washington wishes to push through. This tells us a lot about the lack of real control by the United States over Iraq. And this is a major failure, mind you, because the oil law is one of the key "benchmarks" that the US administration has set for the assessment of the whole Iraqi situation when it launched the "surge".

The failure is blatant. There are lots of contradictions at the governmental level between the various forces that were willing to operate within the institutional framework. To these serious problems, we should add the prospective tension over Kirkuk between the Kurds and the rest, which has not yet come completely to the fore until now. By the rest, I mean not only the other Iraqi communities, the Arab majority and the Turkmen minority, but also the Turks. Turkey itself has been escalating its threats of a military intervention in Northern Iraq, officially because of the PKK, but actually in a context where the issue of Kirkuk was supposed to be settled by a referendum originally planned for November of this year, and then postponed. This is an issue on which the Turkish government has been very nervous. They would not accept Kirkuk to be turned over to the Kurdish de facto autonomous state, and would prevent such an outcome by any means necessary. This is a further problem for the United States because it involves a possible clash between two

regional allies – the Iraqi Kurdish alliance and the Turkish military. If you put everything we've mentioned in the picture, the failure is absolutely dismal. And it's not only a failure in Iraq – the whole Middle East policy of the US administration is a disaster, actually.

This is even more apparent if you take the "Greater Middle East", as they call it. Just look at Afghanistan, where the comeback of the Taliban is impressive. And Pakistan is now in a state verging on chaos – a source of anxiety for the United States, because Pakistan is not only a key ally of Washington, but also a nuclear state. Of course, if chaos prevails in Pakistan ultimately, you can imagine what sort of consequences this would have for Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Tehran very clearly shows that it knows well that the US is bogged down with all these problems and therefore it doesn't take US threats very seriously, or at least it shows that it is not deterred by such threats.

There we see the problem of the so-called credibility of US power, which has been very much affected by the disastrous balance sheet of the Bush administration. This administration has dilapidated most of the capital that the United States got out from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The paralysis and then collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with the first war against Iraq as a spectacular demonstration of US tremendous firepower and military gadgetry built up during the Reagan years. The overall image resulting from that was then one of a United States more powerful than ever and ahead of the rest of the world by a longer distance than at any previous point since the middle of last century, when the Soviet Union got the nuclear weapon. George W. Bush inherited not only this military supremacy, increased and enhanced throughout the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, but also a country experiencing the longest period of economic expansion in its history.

So there were a lot of ingredients comforting US supremacy. This administration got the responsibility for managing this huge capital and then achieved the great feat of turning the US Empire's accounts into the red. This is really an achievement! The Bush administration will certainly go down in history not only as the most reactionary the United States has ever seen – they broke this record already from the start – but also as the most disastrous ever for the US imperial project. That's absolutely clear, I believe.

SoN: You mentioned Moqtada al-Sadr and the Mehdi Army withdrawing in order to avoid a confrontation with the US. Sadr ordered a six month suspension of the Mehdi Army's operations in August to "rehabilitate [the army] in a way that will safeguard its ideological image." The order followed two days of clashes between rival Shia factions in Kerbala, which killed over 50 people and forced hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to flee the holy city. What does Sadr mean by

“rehabilitation”? Can he retain control over the whole army? What are his long term objectives?

GA: It is very difficult for him to exert control because, from the start, the Mehdi Army was a ragtag assembly of people, and Sadr is a very young person who only emerged after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime and had no organisation or network of officers on which he could rely. His clout attracted a lot of people of various kinds. Some probably were believers in his credentials, more likely to be followers of his family, or his father, than of himself and his “charisma”, which is usually only a matter of expectations (you know the sociological accounts of the so-called “charisma” as more a product of expectations than of any inherent feature of the “charismatic” person). Sadr also attracted a lot of people who wanted to exploit that clout opportunistically, knowing that there wouldn’t be any major constraints on their behaviour, because Sadr’s organisation has a very weak structure. And, indeed, that’s his problem. Compare the Mehdi Army with the Badr organisation of al-Hakim, of the previously called SCIRI: these are people who had years to build up their organisation, with logistical help and military training provided by Iran. They already had a militarised structure before 2003 and are therefore much more organised and centralised than whatever Sadr’s movement is or could become in the foreseeable future. I can’t really see how under present conditions he would be able to organise something that would really be under his firm control. So, yes, I think the feasibility of that project is quite limited.

SoN: The US has unilaterally imposed economic sanctions on Iran, the harshest since the 1979 revolution and the US embassy crisis. It appears that European governments, particularly Britain, France and Germany are supporting the US campaign. Multinational companies outside the US are facing threats from Washington that they risk jeopardising their US interests if they continue doing business with Tehran. How likely is it that the economic pressure on Iran will be followed by military action?

GA: Let’s try to look at it, first of all, from the point of view of Iran. How would Iran perceive what is going on? They know the United States is bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and US forces are already facing a situation of overstretch regarding their human resources. It’s not a problem of military technology or hardware; the Pentagon’s are absolutely huge. Their problem is the human factor, where they have a real shortage of troops. This is a point that I am keen on stressing: the real Achilles’ heel of the US is the US population! And the so-called Vietnam Syndrome is still there, despite everything that has been said to the contrary. It had receded for a while after 9/11, under the impact of the attacks, but then it came back with a vengeance when people discovered that Iraq was turning sour and that they had been lied to. When you compare the United States of today with that of the

Vietnam era in terms of military power, it is much more powerful today than at the time of Vietnam in all respects – except one: the number of troops. At the time of Vietnam they had the draft, plus a much larger professional army. After Vietnam, they had to abolish the draft, of course, and it would be very difficult politically for any administration to re-establish it, especially with Iraq in the background. The Pentagon has not been successful in its recruitment campaigns, and the number of troops is very much below what they would need ideally, in light of their experience in Iraq, to sustain the kind of renewed interventionist frenzy and expansion of military control that this administration tried to set up.

The Iranians see all that, and they know therefore that, to start with, it’s out of the question that a ground invasion is launched against Iran. They know also that the Pentagon brass, the uniformed military in the United States, are hostile to the very idea of a major operation against Iran, given the conditions. So the worst that they could see coming would be some missile strikes from afar on some of their nuclear locations. But they built those already taking into consideration the possibility of such threats, and it wouldn’t be easy for the US, therefore, to secure any meaningful result out of such strikes. And finally, the rulers of Iran know that the US knows that they can retaliate, that they have various ways of retaliating and various targets. To be sure, the US territory proper is not one of them because Iran doesn’t have the vectors to reach it and the Iranian regime is not suicidal, even though it sponsors suicide attacks. But there are US troops in the Gulf, mainly in Iraq, who could be targeted and Israel also could be a target. Moreover, as the Saudi foreign minister himself said in a recent interview, the Saudi kingdom would make an excellent target – probably the most effective one, because strikes on the kingdom would have a tremendous disruptive effect on world economy. I mean if the oil production or exporting facilities of the kingdom are successfully targeted, you can easily imagine the huge economic impact it would have.

Iran’s rulers have all these means of retaliation and deterrence, and in a sense they don’t really need nuclear weapons. I am not saying that they are not interested in getting nuclear weapons; such weapons could actually enhance their deterrent power tremendously. However, Ahmadinejad keeps repeating that they are not interested: he even says that the nuclear weapon is not Islamic, and so on. Anyway, I’m not interested in getting into a guessing game about Iranian intentions. The fact is that Tehran doesn’t need nuclear weapons to start exerting effective deterrence because they already have a powerful deterrent that is “conventional”, aside from the fact that they have a network of allies in the area which they could also incite against the US and its own allies. So this is how they see things in Tehran, I believe, and that’s why they feel secure. They are just

not intimidated by the gesticulations of the US and its allies.

Now, looking at things from the perspective as seen from Washington, I would say first of all that the Bush administration is very much aware of the factors I mentioned. Besides, this President is politically a lame duck: he has lost Congress and his approval rate in the polls is appallingly low, and so is his overall credibility. So although there has been some kind of bipartisan convergence in the US establishment against Iran, in favour of increased sanctions, there certainly is no consensus yet for any kind of military action.

So if we take all that into consideration, I think that the likelihood of a military strike against Iran is quite low. It's quite low at least in rational terms. Now this is an administration which has proved that it doesn't fully abide by rationality, to say the least. So, would they go for some new crazy, adventurist operation? Well, once again with a reluctant or either hostile Pentagon, this is difficult to conceive. Those who are most interested in a military strike against Iran are in fact the Israeli establishment. They feel that this US administration owes them that because they asked for it before the invasion of Iraq as they considered Iran to be the real priority, and they were told by the Bush administration that Iran's turn would come next. They feel now that this administration will soon leave the scene with such a catastrophic balance sheet that the "Vietnam Syndrome" could be largely renewed: the ability of any future US administration of getting involved in major military operations might well be quite limited again, as it was during the Reagan years. That's why the Israelis would like this administration, since it's here for its last year now, to deliver on its promise before it leaves. It is even possible that Israel would take the initiative, after some secret understanding with the Bush administration, or parts of it at the very least. But then the technicalities of this scenario are also a problem, because to get to Iran by air would entail a lot of risks for Israel unless they got a green light from countries like Turkey, Jordan or the Saudi Kingdom. And, of course, since the US controls the skies over Iraq, if Israel took this route, that would very obviously be proof of US direct collusion. Israel could also resort to missile strikes, in order to ignite the whole situation. But I am not sure that they have the means to achieve any meaningful result at that level, and if they only set the area ablaze without achieving any significant military impact over targets in Iran, what would they have accomplished? They would have only enhanced the Iranians' inclination to get nuclear weaponry as they could see in Israel's aggression a forerunner of a possible future nuclear strike.

SoN: The Bush administration has designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force as a supporter of terrorism, which is the first time a sovereign state's military is labelled a terrorist entity.

What is the extent of the Quds Force's involvement in the Middle East?

GA: There has not been any open direct involvement out of Iran in the last few years. But Tehran, of course, is actively intervening in covert ways in countries like Iraq and Lebanon, where it has powerful allies which it can access easily, unlike the 1967 Occupied Territories in Palestine where they also have allies, like Hamas, but where the possibility of interaction is very limited. At any rate, we know well that Washington's designation of who is a "terrorist" and who is not is just political manoeuvring. It is part of the same pressure as economic sanctions and military gesticulations. It's not that they suddenly discovered in Washington something new about the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. This is just part of their overall offensive.

SoN: How significant is the transnational Shiite community for the regional aspirations of Iran?

GA: Iran uses different cards which it wishes to be able to play simultaneously. Regionally speaking, on the one hand, the Shiite factor is important, as it is the most "natural" network for the expansion of Iranian influence for obvious reasons. But then there is also the pan-Islamic factor and Iran is very keen on countering all attempts at isolating it as a Shiite power by fostering anti-Shiite sectarian feelings among the Sunnis, who are, of course, the vast majority of Muslims. Therefore, an important part of Iran's strategy has been to secure some key alliances among Sunnis, and that's why the one they established with Hamas is very important in their eyes. This is not, or not only, because of the objective importance of Hamas in terms of actual power on the ground, but because of the symbolic importance of Hamas as the most prestigious Sunni Islamic fundamentalist anti-Western, anti-Israeli force, aside from al-Qaeda – or so it used to be. And, unlike al-Qaeda, Hamas has some real legitimacy because of its mass base, which is why it bears a tremendous symbolic importance for Iran. So does the issue of Palestine as a whole: I have explained repeatedly that Ahmadinejad's rant about Israel is not a sign of mental disorder but actually, to a certain extent, a well-designed way of setting Iran as the most radical anti-Israeli Islamic state, thereby outbidding all the rest and appealing to the entire Sunni popular constituency in the Arab world, striking a positive chord with movements like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Iran uses the Shiite card as a tool to expand its influence, but it is careful not to play it openly in a sectarian way as a counterforce to Sunnis. In that regard, there is a clear difference between the Iranian discourse, emphasising Islamic unity, and the ultra-sectarian Wahhabi discourse originating in the Saudi kingdom. To be sure, Wahhabis have always been very much anti-Shiite sectarians ideologically, but politically too, the Saudi and Jordanian monarchies are whipping up Sunni sectarian feelings against Iran because this is the only ideological weapon available to them in order

to counter what Tehran is doing, since they can certainly not outbid Iran in anti-Western anti-Israeli statements due to their close links to the United States. They are trying to throw oil on the fire of sectarian tensions everywhere. The most recent major case is Lebanon, where there was no history of Shiite-Sunni friction, but in the last couple of years this has emerged prominently as a real danger and it is increasingly so very worryingly, fanned by depictions of Hezbollah as a mere Iranian puppet in order to discredit it.

SoN: The possibility of a cross border offensive into northern Iraq by Turkey appears to have rattled the White House. Bush has reiterated to Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan that the US regards the PKK as a terrorist organisation and has pledged to share intelligence in a bid to head off any significant Turkish military operation in Iraq. Will that prove satisfactory to the Turks? Will Erdogan be able to resist the pressure from within Turkey for a military operation?

GA: As I said a little while ago, I think that the PKK is just the official part of the story. I believe that this whole recent gesticulation by the Turkish military was mostly motivated by the issue of Kirkuk, knowing that the deadline for a settlement of the dispute over the town by way of a referendum is coming quite close. And I think that the Turkish military – I say the Turkish military because they are the holders of decisive power in Turkey, not Prime Minister Erdogan – are very much worried about Kirkuk. The reason is that they very much dislike already the de facto autonomous quasi-state that exists in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan. They know that, if the Kurdish alliance gets hold of Kirkuk and controls therefore this piece of the oil cake, it would give it greatly enhanced means and this would just consolidate and perpetuate the autonomous state in Kurdistan. This would be a source of inspiration for the major part of Kurdistan that is under Turkish control. This is why the Turkish military want to prevent the Kurds from getting Kirkuk. They argue that there is an important Turkmen community in Kirkuk, which was considered to be the largest community in the city some decades ago, claiming to speak on behalf of these people with whom Turks have ethnic and cultural affinities, rather than admitting that they are acting for their own agenda.

I don't think, therefore, that US assurances about the PKK would solve the problem and defuse the tension decisively. What I don't know however – since I suppose that this has also been part of the discussion – is what kind of promises the Bush administration has made to the Turkish authorities on the issue of the future of Kirkuk. This is a big problem for the US because it might very well be the cause of a war, which might take larger proportions than any internal violence that has occurred until now in Iraq, since the Iraqi Kurds possess a real army, unlike the various Arab Iraqi fractions, and Turkey itself would interfere. This could

have far-reaching consequences for the situation in the region.

SoN: While the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US, the PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party), which appears to be tightly linked to the PKK is said to be receiving direct and indirect aid by the US to wage a similar battle on the Iraqi border with Iran. The PJAK leader Rahman Haj Ahmadi was recently welcomed in Washington and Iran remains convinced that the US is using the PJAK in a proxy war. What do you think is the US Kurdish strategy?

GA: I really doubt that they have any coherent strategy with a long-term perspective on this issue. I think that they are just navigating by sight and nothing more. In the first place, I very much doubt that they could devise any kind of coherent policy for such a complex situation with so many almost irreconcilable contradictions. They have to live with that and try to prevent the situation from exploding. But will they be able to avoid an explosion? It remains to be seen.

SoN: Alain Gresh of Le Monde Diplomatique describes Lebanon as “a fragile entity that depends upon a subtle sectarian alchemy.” To what extent do you think the political chaos over the presidential election, the huge amount of weapons entering the country and the ever deepening sectarian divisions signal that Lebanon as “a fragile entity” has been tested to the limit and is on the verge of another civil war?

GA: It is clear that Lebanon, one more time in its recent history, is presently standing on a major crossroads because of the fight over the presidency. Since the 24th of November, the country is without a president. Until now the parliamentary majority, which is the coalition of forces backed by the United States and its regional allies, and the opposition, which is the coalition of forces including Hezbollah and backed by Syria and Iran, have not been able to reach a compromise. They have been therefore postponing the meeting of the Parliament dedicated to the election of the new president. (In Lebanon, although the President of the Republic is elected by the Parliament, he used to have very extensive powers – a peculiar combination of features pertaining to a presidential regime with features belonging to a parliamentary one. Presidential prerogatives were however reduced at the end of the fifteen year civil war in 1989-90.) No compromise has been reached to this day between the majority and the opposition, and – more importantly – between the key regional and international players standing behind them and meddling in Lebanon's affairs: Washington, Paris, Damascus, Tehran and the Saudis.

If they never reach a compromise and don't manage to get a consensual president elected, there are several possible scenarios which would all amount to an institutional split and would very likely lead to a sharp increase in sectarian and political tensions, possibly even ignite a new civil war. A civil war this time would

oppose Shiites and Sunnis, whereas this was not at all a feature of the fifteen-year war. It would also set the two camps within the Maronite Christian community against each other: in itself, this is not new as there were already several clashes during the fifteen-year war between Maronite factions. A new civil war could even be bloodier and more destructive than the one that ended in 1990, given that Sunnis and Shiites are much more intermingled than Christian and Muslims were prior to 1975, when the previous civil war started.

That's a really terrifying perspective, and one can only hope that reason prevails – for there is a matter of sheer reason involved. I mean that both camps should realise that they have nothing to gain from a conflagration: it would be absolutely devastating for everybody – above all for ordinary people, of course. I do hope that some kind of compromise will prevail and that the worst-case scenario will be avoided.

*SoN: You mentioned the classic accusation against Hezbollah that it is effectively an Iranian proxy. Yet in your book *The 33-Day War*, you assert that although Iran remains “the supreme reference” for the party, Hezbollah is still not “simply an outlet of the Iranian regime, under direct control from Tehran.” How does Hezbollah differ from the Iranian model? To what extent can it in fact be considered an autonomous political organisation?*

GA: Well, it differs from the Iranian model in the sense that it's not a state. Although it controls some areas, it doesn't govern, so it's difficult to compare them in that sense.

SoN: But in terms of ideology.

GA: In terms of ideology, Hezbollah abides in principle by all the key tenets of the ruling ideology in Iran, including allegiance to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But despite this ideological allegiance, Hezbollah declared from the time it was officially born – in the name of Lebanon's specificity as a multi-religious multi-sectarian country and with acquiescence from Iran – that the Iranian model of the Islamic Republic cannot be implemented in Lebanon. They stated at the time of their official proclamation that, in order to be able to implement their ideal model, they would need to get the Christians to convert to Islam, which was tantamount to pushing their doctrinal agenda into the realm of pure fantasy. As a result of that, the Iranian model has the status of a Utopia for Hezbollah, while in reality they act within the sectarian political framework in Lebanon in order to maximise gains for themselves and the Shiite community. Hezbollah cannot contemplate controlling the state, but they certainly strive to exert control over their own community, as every other sectarian force in Lebanon does. More precisely, they exert control over their community along with their competitor and current ally Amal, the other Lebanese Shiite movement. They are happy with the existing situation whereby each community applies its own religious rules for issues

like women's status, marriage, inheritance, etc., while political power and state functions are shared among political forces representing the various sectarian communities.

Hezbollah's main concern, presently, is defensive, because they know that they are targeted by Israel and the United States and that Washington wants them to disarm. They wouldn't accept because they know that, if they disarmed, either they would have to relinquish their political profile, which was built on their resistance struggle against Israel's occupation and their opposition to Western domination, or they would make it easier to crush them. That's why they wouldn't surrender their arms unless major guarantees were given to them. This is at least what they say, but the political changes necessary for such guarantees would have to be of such a profound character that they are very unlikely in the foreseeable future. This means that Hezbollah will stick to their arms for still a long time to come, unless both Damascus and Tehran advise them to the contrary, which would leave them then with little choice but to abide.

Update question: 2nd December 2007

SoN: The Lebanese government has nominated the commander of the armed forces, General Michel Suleiman, as a compromise president. Is this likely to go ahead and, if so, is it likely to be a suitable solution?

GA: As things appear at the moment, Suleiman's election is very likely. Funnily, every protagonist has claimed him as their candidate: Hariri made the proposal in the name of the governmental and parliamentary majority, after consulting with his key allies; the opposition waited for their fellow, General Aoun, to react as he had claimed the post for himself; the latter said that he had been the first to propose Suleiman as a compromise president and therefore approved the deal; then Hezbollah officially announced, today, their own approval and their 'respect' for the general. The only dissensions are minor ones within the Hariri camp, and this fact points to a reality that Hariri and his media are desperately trying to blur. Suleiman is actually Syria's preferred candidate; the previous president, Emile Lahoud, closely linked to Damascus, had considered handing power to Suleiman, but was deterred from doing so by the Hariri majority.

It is no secret in Beirut that Suleiman's designation is a result of what Hariri's ally and (presently) anti-Syrian leader Walid Jumblatt himself has called an 'American-Syrian bazaar'. He was referring to the deal that Washington did cut with Damascus to get Syria to join the Middle East conference recently at Annapolis. The truth is indeed that Suleiman is above all the object of a compromise between the US and Syria – in the well-known tradition of Lebanese politics whereby the real makers of presidents are foreign powers. There is some parallel between Suleiman and General Fouad Chehab,

who was elected president in 1958 after having kept the army neutral in the civil strife that occurred in that year, which led to the landing of US Marines in Lebanon. Chehab was a candidate of compromise between Washington and Cairo. He ruled the country making an intrusive use of military intelligence, but also in what was certainly Lebanon's most 'enlightened' reformist presidency to this day.

Whatever Suleiman's ambition to imitate Chehab could be, he won't be able to deliver unless the US-Syrian concord goes far beyond a compromise president to a fundamental agreement that would represent a major shift in regional politics. Even in such a case, Suleiman would still face a Hezbollah that is actually stronger than the official Lebanese armed forces and able to split them on sectarian lines in case of confrontation. The difference with 1958, when the army led by Chehab was indisputably the major force in the country, is obvious. In other words, not only is a more substantial bargain between Damascus and Washington necessary for Suleiman to establish a stable regime, but also Tehran's own acquiescence to the deal as a prerequisite for Hezbollah's acceptance of disarming. We are still far from such a perspective as the US and Israel are basically trying to split Syria away from Iran.

Cihan Aksan & Jon Bailes interviewed Gilbert Achcar for StateOfNature.org, with whose kind permission it appears here.

► *Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. His best-selling book 'The Clash of Barbarisms' came out in a second expanded edition in 2006, alongside a book of his dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, 'Perilous Power'. He is co-author of 'The 33-Day War: Israel's War on Hezbollah in Lebanon and Its Consequences'.*

Other recent articles:

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- June 2006

[Why America wants endless war](#) - May 2006

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[Shadow of war or war of shadows?](#) - October 2006

[An Islamic "Chinese model"?](#) - October 2006

Pakistan Solidarity still needed

Pierre Rousset



The struggle continues against the martial law regime in Pakistan and it deserves our solidarity.

Dear friends, Various solidarity initiatives have been taken. From ESSF, here are three links:

1. FOR INFORMATION

We are trying to offer through our website a wide range of information, news, and analysis. See: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?rubrique56>

2. INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY CALLS

The solidarity call was originally initiated last May, after the first wave of arrests. It has been updated after the imposition of the state of emergency. Many of you signed already. There are presently 490 signatures. See: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article8258>

► You can send NEW signatures to my (Pierre Rousset) email address or to [ESSF contact form](#).

► The list of signatures can be used to back various solidarity actions (delegation to the embassies, publications, etc.). Fell free to use it!

3. CALL FOR FINANCIAL HELP

The LPP has issued a call for financial support to the struggle against the martial law and the defense of political prisoners. ESSF is endorsing this call. See: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article8187>
Please donate! (the bank's data for transfers are posted on the website).

Help to circulate these calls for solidarity in wider networks.

► *Pierre Rousset is a member of Europe Solidaire Sans Frontiers (ESSF). He has been involved for many years in Asian solidarity movements*

The remaking of the movement

[Farooq Tariq](#)

There are daily demonstrations against the military dictatorship all over Pakistan. Students, lawyers, journalists and others from the civil society are in the lead this time.

It is yet small in numbers but it is growing every day. The numbers are increasing and so is the militancy of the demonstrations, picket lines and rallies. The movement is in the remaking once again.

This is happening just after two weeks of the large scale repression, arrests and detentions of the over 10,000 activists from different political parties and advocates. Most of those arrested are released but the main leadership of the Advocate movement is still under detention. Most of the judges who refused to take oath under the new constitutional order are under threat of thrown out of their official residences. But the 24 hours picket lines by the activists not seen earlier in the movement at Lahore and Islamabad have made the task of the police more difficult.

There are many new faces in the movement; mainly young students, advocates and social activists. This is a new layer that is remaking the movement and it is spreading day by day.

Journalists, advocates, students and radical social organizations representatives are uniting in one or another form to organize the movement. They are taking new initiatives. SMS, mobile telephone calls and emails have become the main source of communications of the event organized by different groups. Resistance is organized on very short notice.

When a judge of Lahore High Court Shahid Siddique was under threat of evacuation: in half an hour, many dozens activists started a picket line of the house on 3rd December. Now this has translated into 24 hour picket line at the front gates of the judge's house. Hundreds of activists have visited the house and the judge has made very radical statements.

Thousands of students, journalists, advocates and social activists are demonstrating on daily basis in Islamabad. Police is using baton charges to disperse them on regular basis.

There are daily protests by the journalists all over Pakistan against the restriction on the media. One of the most popular private television channel GEO is still not been allowed on air in Pakistan. The Sind High Court dismissed a petition of this TV channel after hearing six times saying that they can not hear this case. These are the hand-picked judges of Musharaf who are denying justice. So are the judges at Supreme Court who are giving a go-ahead to this military dictatorship.

The boycott campaign against the holding of general elections under the emergency is growing as well. More

and more political parties are boycotting the elections on the basis that it will be rigged at a level never seen before. There is no counter-balance or a place to go against any sort of rigging during the elections.

The Left Alliance of seven political parties and groups has also announced (a decision) to boycott the general elections. Labour Party Pakistan candidates who have submitted the nomination papers are taking back their nomination papers on the instruction of this Left alliance, AJT.

At an all-parties conference on 5th December at Lahore Press Club, almost all except Pakistan Peoples Party were in favor of rejecting the elections. The representatives of journalists, lawyers, doctors, civil society organizations and students argued in favor of boycott to further the movement against the military dictatorship.

The movement is in remaking; so is the level of repression by the military regime. A new wave of arrests has started already in Islamabad. This is despite the assurances of the military dictatorship that no more arrests will be made on political grounds. But the repression is generating new militancy among different groups to come on the street.

The Musharaf regime is in real crisis. Its entire plan for future prolongation of its rule is facing serious difficulties. More and more people are speaking openly against the military regimes. The trade unions in one district have come forward as well against the military regime and bad social conditions. The others are in preparations. Several public opinion surveys have described the growing discontent among the ordinary citizens of Pakistan against general Musharaf.

The ordinary people have not yet come to the street in bulk. But all the signs are there. The demonstrations are small but very vocal and growing day by day. Musharaf's regime can not last very long despite the fact that American imperialism is trying to rescue him for the time being. It is a weak military dictatorship and that is fact becoming known to many day by day. Youth are in the forefront this time, a guarantee for success, According to Lenin, "he who has the youth, has the future".

■ *Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of Labour Party Pakistan.*

Other recent articles:

Pakistan

[Unprecedented mass reaction](#) - December 2007

[Statement on the Assassination of Benazir Bhutto](#) - December 2007

[Bhutto assassination: a Product of Military Despotism and Anarchy](#) - December 2007

[Public Again after 20 days of underground life](#) - November 2007

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Bhutto assassination: a Product of Military Despotism and Anarchy

Tariq Ali

Even those of us sharply critical of Benazir Bhutto's behaviour and policies - both while she was in office and more recently - are stunned and angered by her death. Indignation and fear stalk the country once again. An odd coexistence of military despotism and anarchy created the conditions leading to her assassination in Rawalpindi yesterday. In the past, military rule was designed to preserve order - and did so for a few years. No longer. Today it creates disorder and promotes lawlessness. How else can one explain the sacking of the chief justice and eight other judges of the country's supreme court for attempting to hold the government's intelligence agencies and the police accountable to courts of law?



Their replacements lack the backbone to do anything, let alone conduct a proper inquest into the misdeeds of the agencies to uncover the truth behind the carefully organised killing of a major political leader.

How can Pakistan today be anything but a conflagration of despair? It is assumed that the killers were jihadi fanatics. This may well be true, but were they acting on their own?

Benazir, according to those close to her, had been tempted to boycott the fake elections, but she lacked the political courage to defy Washington. She had plenty of physical courage, and refused to be cowed by threats from local opponents. She had been addressing an election rally in Liaquat Bagh. This is a popular space named after the country's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, who was killed by an assassin in 1953. The killer, Said Akbar, was immediately shot dead on the orders of a police officer involved in the plot. Not far from here, there once stood a colonial structure where nationalists were imprisoned. This was Rawalpindi jail. It was here that Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was hanged in April 1979. The military tyrant

responsible for his judicial murder made sure the site of the tragedy was destroyed as well.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's death poisoned relations between his Pakistan People's party and the army. Party activists, particularly in the province of Sind, were brutally tortured, humiliated and, sometimes, disappeared or killed.

Pakistan's turbulent history, a result of continuous military rule and unpopular global alliances, confronts the ruling elite now with serious choices. They appear to have no positive aims. The overwhelming majority of the country disapproves of the government's foreign policy. They are angered by its lack of a serious domestic policy except for further enriching a callous and greedy elite that includes a swollen, parasitic military. Now they watch helplessly as politicians are shot dead in front of them.

Benazir had survived the bomb blast yesterday but was felled by bullets fired at her car. The assassins, mindful of their failure in Karachi a month ago, had taken out a double insurance this time. They wanted her dead. It is impossible for even a rigged election to take place now. It will have to be postponed, and the military high command is no doubt contemplating another dose of army rule if the situation gets worse, which could easily happen.

What has happened is a multilayered tragedy. It's a tragedy for a country on a road to more disasters. Torrents and foaming cataracts lie ahead. And it is a personal tragedy. The house of Bhutto has lost another member. Father, two sons and now a daughter have all died unnatural deaths.

I first met Benazir at her father's house in Karachi when she was a fun-loving teenager, and later at Oxford. She was not a natural politician and had always wanted to be a diplomat, but history and personal tragedy pushed in the other direction. Her father's death transformed her. She had become a new person, determined to take on the military dictator of that time. She had moved to a tiny flat in London, where we would endlessly discuss the future of the country. She would agree that land reforms, mass education programmes, a health service and an independent foreign policy were positive constructive aims and crucial if the country was to be saved from the vultures in and out of uniform. Her constituency was the poor, and she was proud of the fact.

She changed again after becoming prime minister. In the early days, we would argue and in response to my numerous complaints - all she would say was that the world had changed. She couldn't be on the "wrong side" of history. And so, like many others, she made her peace with Washington. It was this that finally led to the deal with Musharraf and her return home after more than a decade in exile. On a number of occasions she told me that she did not fear death. It was one of the dangers of playing politics in Pakistan.

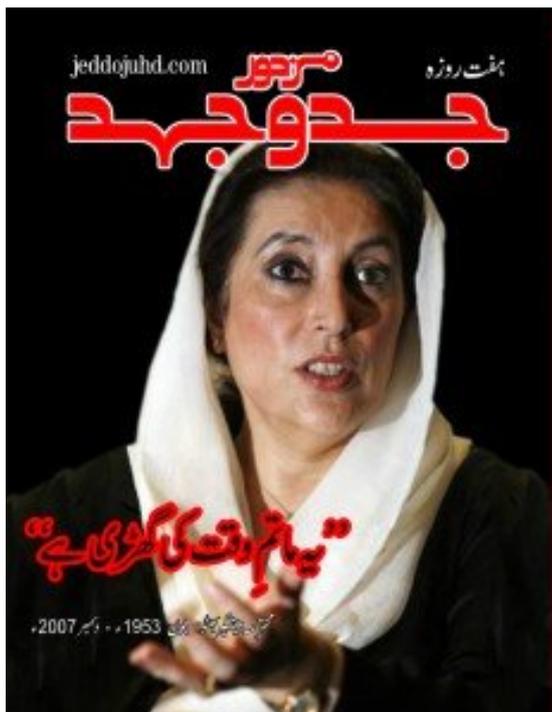
It is difficult to imagine any good coming out of this tragedy, but there is one possibility. Pakistan desperately needs a political party that can speak for the social needs of a bulk of the people. The People's party founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was built by the activists of the only popular mass movement the country has known: students, peasants and workers who fought for three months in 1968-69 to topple the country's first military dictator. They saw it as their party, and that feeling persists in some parts of the country to this day, despite everything.

Benazir's horrific death should give her colleagues pause for reflection. To be dependent on a person or a family may be necessary at certain times, but it is a structural weakness, not a strength for a political organisation. The People's party needs to be refounded as a modern and democratic organisation, open to honest debate and discussion, defending social and human rights, uniting the many disparate groups and individuals in Pakistan desperate for any halfway decent alternative, and coming forward with concrete proposals to stabilise occupied and war-torn Afghanistan. This can and should be done. The Bhutto family should not be asked for any more sacrifices.

First published in the Guardian 28/12/07. Tariq Ali's book The Duel: Pakistan on the Flightpath of American Power is published in 2008. Contact: tariqali3@btinternet.com

[See also: Daughter of the West](#)

► *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.*



Mazdoor Jeddojuhd is printed by the supporters of Labour Party Pakistan.

Labour Party Pakistan mourns Benazir's tragic death Statement on the Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

**It's a murder of democracy.
Musharraf should resign.**

Labour Party Pakistan

A tragedy wrought by combination of dictatorship, fundamentalism, imperialism

Lahore (PR), 28 December: The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) strongly condemns the tragic murder of Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister and chairperson Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

In a joint statement issued here on Friday, LPP spokesperson Farooq Tariq and National Secretary Nisar Shah said: 'It is not mere a murder of an individual but murder of democracy and political culture in Pakistan'. They said it was the duty of the regime to provide Benazir Bhutto with a fool-proof security.

'This is a failure on the part of the regime hence exposing country to an unprecedented danger and chaos. Therefore, we demand an immediate resignation of Pervez Musharraf and his cabinet,' they added.

They said the tragedy that struck Pakistan yesterday was yet another expression of the instability created in the region owing to the US presence in the region. 'Her brutal murder is a tragedy jointly wrought by religious fundamentalists, military dictatorships in Pakistan and the USA', they commented.

They said Al-Qaida had taken upon itself the responsibility for this horrendous crime according to media reports. 'But the Frankenstein of Al-Qaida would not have been ruling the roost in Pakistan had it not been created by the USA and pampered by military dictatorships in Pakistan', they said.

Urging the PPP workers restraint, they said LPP workers were with them in that hour of grief. 'We must turn this anger on the culprits who plotted this dastardly murder', they said. They appreciated Pakistan Muslim League (N)'s decision to boycott the elections due on January 8 and APDM decision to suspend the campaign recently launched for the boycott of elections.

Benazir assassination Unprecedented mass reaction

Farooq Tariq

Pakistan has never seen so many people protesting in the streets as over the last two days. They were all united in condemnation of Benazir Bhutto's brutal murder. The news was heard with a great shock; immediate mass anger erupted. 28th December was the first day of general strike called by many organizations, ranging from political parties to various professional groups.



The first targets were most of Pakistan Muslim League's election posters, banners, flags and billboards. The PMLQ is a major split from Pakistan Muslim League, which is headed by Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister. The PMLQ—comprised of the most corrupt feudalists, capitalists, former army generals and black marketers—has been in a power-sharing arrangement with General Musharraf since 2002.

The PMLQ had spent billions on its election advertising; all that was gone within a few hours. The crowd was proud it has done its home work. Removing all these anti-people election materials was done with utmost sophistication. None of the Pakistan Peoples Party or Pakistan Muslim League material was removed.

In many cities throughout the province of Sind (Bhutto's home province), banks were attacked and burned, and most ATM machines were destroyed. Banks were targeted because they had made unprecedented profits over the last few years, while also eliminating services such as free banking. In some places, people were lucky enough to bring some money home.

In Sind there were also incidents of trains being damaged. According to the Daily Jang 28 railway stations, 13 engines and seven trains have been burnt,

resulting in a loss of over three billion Rupees. (In a bid to reduce railway losses, the Musharraf regime increased rail fares several fold, partly privatizing the system as well. But since the night of 27th December the railway system has collapsed. Thousands of passengers are waiting in the rail stations but there is no sign service being restored. The Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and two private airlines, Air Blue and Shaheen Air, have cancelled their domestic flights in the name of "rescheduling." The reality is that the staff did not turn up.

Throughout the country hundreds of private buses were burned. During Musharraf's eight years of rule public buses have been eliminated and fares on the private lines have skyrocketed. In fact many PMLQ government ministers had their own bus companies, making huge gains out of mass poverty.

Thousands of private cars have been damaged all over Pakistan by the angry mobs, mainly youth. They were showing their anger on the car companies (mainly Toyota, Suzuki and Honda) because while the majority of the population has no subsidized public transport, the companies have been raking in tremendous profit. Many leasing companies have been robbing the growing middle class by offering cars at abnormally high prices.

Houses and offices of PMLQ politicians, local mayors and administrators were also damaged or burnt.

Over 100 people involved in incidents related to mass protest have died during the first 40 hours. They were murdered by the police or were caught in cross firing from different groups.

Following the death of Benazir Bhutto, hundreds of thousands have raised slogans against Musharraf's regime and American imperialism. The anger accumulated during the last eight years simply exploded. This was the masses' response to the strict implementation of a neoliberal agenda, resulting in unprecedented price hikes, unemployment and poverty. After the assassination anger that was to be channeled through either boycotting or participating in the elections has spilled over.

There is a great anti-Musharraf consciousness. It has been shown in different ways in different parts of the country and to a different degree. The so-called capitalist economical growth under Musharraf has left millions in absolute poverty. There was no "Pakistan shining" as the dictatorship proclaimed.

2007 has been a year of mass awakening. It started with lawyers' movement after the removal of Ifikhar Choudry as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. The Chief Justice said "No" when the generals pressured him into resigning. He was removed, only to be reinstated on 20th July, after a massive movement of 80,000 lawyers. They were joined by political activists from almost all political parties, but not by the masses. The masses only welcomed the chief

justice from the side roads; they did not actively participate in the movement for his reinstatement.

Then Musharraf got himself elected as president for the second five-year term in a “democratic manner” by a parliament elected for one five-year term. He was still wearing the military uniform when elected as a “civilian” president. His theme was “elect me president for the second term and I will take off the uniform after taking oath as a civilian president.”

The November imposition of martial law in the name of an “emergency” was used to remove the rather independent top judges of Pakistan. The law also put restrictions on the media; over 10,000 were arrested.

So Musharraf got himself duly elected president and took off his uniform after removing the top judges. His hand-picked judges gave him all the necessary backing. He was helped in this process by Benazir Bhutto who, in the words of Tariq Ali, was forced into an “arranged marriage” by U.S. and British imperialism. In this unholy alliance, every one was cheating everyone with utmost honesty.

After large-scale repression and removal of an independent judiciary, Musharraf announced general elections for January 8th and lifted the emergency. The regime was happy that everything was going according to “plan.” The three major parties [Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party, Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League Quid Azam (PMLQ),] had agreed to participate in these fraudulent elections. The religious fundamentalist political alliance (MMA) had split over the question of participation, with a major part contesting in the election.

But when the religious fundamentalist struck and killed Benazir Bhutto on the evening of 27th December, the “plan” was shattered into pieces. It was big blow to the agreed-upon terms and conditions of various participating parties. It was not a bump on the road to conciliation and compromise but a total destruction of the road.

The murder of Benazir Bhutto is a double-edged sword. While it is big blow to the plans of British and American imperialism, it will not cause celebration for the religious fundamentalist forces. The initial anger has gone against the military regime and its crony politicians. But it can go against the fundamentalists as well. No party will be able to celebrate the shocking killings.

The Musharraf regime has understood this clearly and now is trying consciously to steer the direction of the movement against the religious fundamentalists. On the 28th December, in a two-hour press conference, a military brigadier, representing the government, named Baitullah Mehsud, an Al-Qaeda associate in tribal areas of Pakistan, as the one who carried out the attack.

Foolishly the military officer tried his best to prove that Benazir Bhutto, while waving to crowds after the bomb blast, was not killed by a bullet but by the lever of the sun roof in the bullet-proof car. What difference

does it make if it is proven that Benazir Bhutto is not killed by the bullet but in another way? Not much.

The Military Brigadier’s explanation did not satisfy the angry journalists, who asked him again and again about the connection between Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and Abdullah Mahsood. Their question went unanswered: Why was Mahsood released quietly on the day emergency law was imposed, the same day over 200 Pakistan army men, kidnapped by Mahsood’s group the week before, were also released? The ISI has had a relationship with religious fundamentalists dating back to the ‘80s, when imperialists and fundamentalists were close friends.

It is very volatile, unstable, unpredictable, explosive, dangerous, impulsive, fickle and capricious political situation. It has been many years since mass reaction has erupted to this degree. The general strike was a total success. All roads were empty. No traffic at all. All shops were closed. All industrial and other institutions were completely shut down.

After the initial inhibition to curb the strike, the regime has now issued strict orders to kill anyone on the spot if there is any “looting.” It has called the regular army into 16 districts of the Sind provinces and paramilitary forces elsewhere in Pakistan.

The regime has not postponed the scheduled election so far but it will be very difficult to hold it on 8th January. Nawaz’s Muslim League and several other political parties have already announced their intention to boycott the fraudulent elections.

The Labour Party Pakistan is demanding the immediate resignation of the Musharraf dictatorship and the forming of an interim government comprised of civil society organizations, trade unions and peasant organizations. This government would then proceed to hold free and fair general elections under an independent election commission.

The LLP is also demanding immediate restoration of the top judges and their convening an investigation into the two attempts on Benazir Bhutto’s life. Further, as part of the All Parties Democratic Movement, the LPP is supporting a three-day general strike, linking it to the overthrow of the military dictatorship. It is asking that all parties reject the general elections fraud on 8th January.

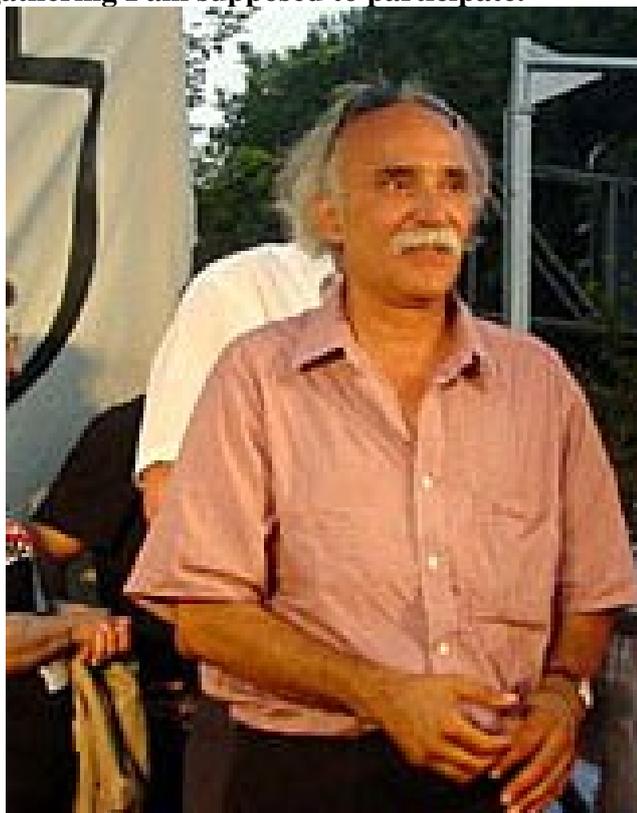
29th December 2007 Farooq Tariq spokesperson
Labour Party Pakistan 40-Abbot Road Lahore, Pakistan
Tel: 92 42 6315162 Fax: 92 42 6271149 Mobile: 92 300 8411945 [E-mail] www.laborpakistan.org
www.jeddojuhd.com

► *Farooq Tariq is the general secretary of Labour Party Pakistan.*

Palestine conflict Why I Will Not Participate in the Madrid Social Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East

[Michel Warschawski](#)

I have no problem in taking part in a conference where Zionist spokespersons are invited too, for debates are part and parcel of a healthy political arena. As well, I have no problem being invited to official public meetings, initiated by government agencies, including Israeli ones. I need, however, to know exactly what kind of gathering I am supposed to participate.



Michel Warshawski at Jerusalem anti-war rally

By its own definition, the Madrid Social Forum for a Just Peace in the Middle East belongs to the family of “social forums,” as defined in the Porto Allegre Charter, i.e. a forum of grassroots and popular organizations, without any involvement of State’s agencies, political parties (or armed-organizations). The Alternative Information Center (AIC), together with PNGO (Palestinian NGOs coordination), Ittijah, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions

(ICAHAD) and the Israeli Women Coalition for a Just Peace were much involved in the International Committee that was established in order to assist the local committee in shaping the forum and fixing the list of the invited organizations.

Whoever has been involved in Middle East progressive politics is aware that the list is a major political issue: most Arab organizations, including Palestinian ones, do not participate in political gatherings with Israeli organizations that don’t support Palestinian rights, as defined by the United Nations and international law, including, obviously, the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees. This excludes most of the Israeli Zionist organizations.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, the Madrid organizing committee and the international committee issued, at an early stage, a Declaration of Principles that defined the political framework of the Madrid Social Forum. On the basis of that Declaration of Principles, the Israeli delegation was designed and the speakers for the various plenaries were selected. In a nutshell, Madrid is the first big international Anti-Annapolis conference, and this is why it is so important.

The composition of the delegations, however, especially the Israeli one, didn’t satisfy the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs... or the Peres Peace Center. Obviously, the Spanish government has the right to sympathize more with Zionist organizations, and it can organize its own conference. Nevertheless, it cannot interfere in the Social Forum. Two months ago, I wrote on the AIC website:

“The involvement of a government ministry in a social forum is, in and of itself, a serious violation of the Porto Alegre charter, which established the absolute independence of the social forums from the government. Yet the problem is not only statutory but absolutely political: what are bodies that openly support neoliberalism and the war doing with a conference that is entirely in opposition to neoliberalism and the war???? This is not the first time that this quasi-governmental entity attempts to sneak into a conference of non-governmental organizations, and we have reviewed other attempts in the past [...]. However, this time the matter is more serious, as a majority of the participants perceive the forum in Madrid as being anti-Annapolis, and it is unacceptable that blatant supporters of Annapolis will be present to seek converts for their plan of war, a plan being created right before our eyes”. (“Anti-Annapolis in Madrid,” 29 November 2007).

In an unacceptable procedure, the Spanish Foreign Ministry established a parallel Israeli delegation, bigger than the official one, aimed to change the agenda of the Madrid Social Forum from an Anti-Annapolis conference to an “all inclusive” gathering, discussing the pro and against of the war plans shaped in Annapolis by George W. Bush and Ehud Olmert. The procedure is unacceptable, the content is outrageous.

nooses. The point was obvious: “This is our tree. Stay out!”

The Black parents demanded that the white students be expelled for their clearly hateful, racist act. Instead the white students were suspended for three days. The action was called a “prank.”

The La Salle District attorney later said his inaction was because there was no state law for hate crimes. After peaceful protests by Black students, the district attorney told them, “I can make your life go away with a stroke of a pen.”

Eventually there was a fight in which a white student making racist comments at Black students was beaten, treated for a concussion and multiple bruises. Yet the student, Justin Barker, was well enough that evening to attend a school function.

The six Black youths between the ages of 15 and 17 were arrested. Five of them were charged as adults for attempted murderer and conspiracy. The sixth was charged as a juvenile.

Mychal Bell was tried for “attempted murder” and convicted as an adult — all before the case was nationally infamous.

The (white) media for the most part gives “balanced” coverage by pointing out that the victim — meaning the white student — shouldn’t be forgotten. He was, in their view, the only person actually harmed; speech (a noose?) is protected by the Constitution.

These facts, basically agreed to by both sides, show that a blatant racist act was treated as a “prank” and the white students were given a slap on the wrist. Black students, on the other hand, were treated as criminals with the legal book thrown at them.

Positive Impact

The mass pressure has had an impact in the town and state. The [Jena 6](#) finally got proper legal representation, and the conviction of Mychal Bell for attempted murder as an adult was overturned; he was released on bail September 27. Bell and the other five youth now face charges as juveniles and a new trial. Significantly some whites in the town are visible and speaking out against the double standard.

The relatively quick retreat of the powers that be in Jena so far is better seen when looking back 30 years ago at a similar case in the same state. A high school youth, Gary Tyler, was falsely charged and convicted of murder — on the basis of no evidence at all — and sentenced to death.

Like today, there were protests — national and international. But the legacy of racism and Jim Crow was still too strong for justice. After the death sentence was overturned, the case faded from public view. Tyler still sits in the Angola state prison 32 years later.

The initial victories in the Jena 6 case, however promising, do not necessarily mean a new civil rights movement. That requires a sustained campaign to

rollback other setbacks to civil rights that have occurred over the past 20 years, such as the defeats of affirmative action in employment and higher education, and court reversals of school desegregation/integration programs.

But there are signs of a new generation of youth stepping up to leadership. They are speaking up at many university campuses; and in the case of the Jena 6 at many of the traditional Black colleges. It also includes unexpected leadership from leading rap musicians, who are not generally known for their political activism.

The always outspoken Mississippi rapper David Banner, for example, wasn’t at the September Jena protest. Instead, he went on a radio tour to promote his album so he could let listeners know about the case, reported Melanie Simms of Associated Press.

“I thought it would have been more powerful for me to get on the radio and talk about it, and drive people there and let people know what’s going on than actually being there,” said Banner.

Banner became involved because “it’s so close to home. No. 2, there’s a Jena 6 that goes on in Mississippi every month — or every two months,” he continued. “America has a tendency to try to make things — single out things — as if this is a one-time occurrence. ... We have to stop acting like stuff don’t exist.”

Bakari Kitwana, an author whose books include *The Hip-Hop Generation* and *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop*, says the rap community has gotten more politically active in recent years, especially after Hurricane Katrina. “What’s different about this moment in terms of hip-hop and political activism is that ... grass roots activists and hip-hop artists are talking with each other about political change,” said Kitwana.

Singer David Bowie sent a \$10,000 check for the defense. Musicians including Nick Cannon, Jagged Edge, Twista and Hurricane Chris put together an “Jena Six Empowerment Concert” September 29 in Birmingham, Alabama. In early October a big protest took place in front of the U.S. Justice Department in Washington, D.C. demanding, “Drop all the charges! Free the Jena 6!”

The movement is more energized since Mychal Bell was freed from prison. High school walk outs have been advocated and supported by rappers Mos Def and Soulja Boy. These young people — college students, rappers — represent some of the future leaders in the fight against racism.

Yet it is wrong to refer to the blatant racism spoken to by Banner and some civil rights leaders as a continuation of the Old South rising up again. The strong reactions against blatant racism and the retreat by local government officials show that the Old South and Jim Crow are dead.

Not the Old South

There have been real changes since the 1960s across the South, including rural towns. That's why the white prosecutor so quickly backed down in the face of national and international protests. He couldn't turn his back to that scrutiny.

Many whites in Jena spoke out against the double standard. Whites overall are less racist than ever. Most support integration and equality, and would vote for an African-American man for president, when asked.

Moreover, Black parents and others haven't defended the beating of the white student. They are demanding equal justice and treatment. The fact that the discussion and debate on racism is taking place (even while recognizing that there are extreme Klan-type fringe elements still active — South and North) shows how much the Old South has changed, even if cases like Jena 6x occur more frequently than the media report, as David Banner points out.

While the subtle and not-so-subtle racism is still alive and well, the resistance is more visible and powerful — and effective. The Jena 6 case resonated among Blacks, especially youth, because of the post-Jim Crow socio-economic and political changes in society. They were confident they could win the fight too.

Another positive result of the ongoing Jena 6 case is that the broader framework of exposing the underlying racism in the criminal justice system.

"There's a sense," writes Leonard Steinhorn, professor of communications at American University in Washington, D.C., "that parts of the judicial system still remain anchored in the bigoted attitudes of old and that a Black person can't get fair or true Justice." (September 21, 2007, *The Christian Science Monitor*)

Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard University, adds in a September 20, 2007 [Op-Ed](#) piece in *The New York Times*: "America has more than two million citizens behind bars, the highest absolute and per capita rate of incarceration in the world. Black Americans, a mere 13% of the population, constitute half of this country's prisoners. A tenth of all Black men between ages 20 and 35 are in jail or prison; Blacks are incarcerated at over eight times the white rate.

"The effect on Black communities is catastrophic: one in three male African-Americans in their 30s now have a prison record, as do nearly two-thirds of all black male high school dropouts. These numbers and rates are incomparably greater than anything achieved at the height of the Jim Crow era. What's odd is how long it has taken the African-American community to address in a forceful and thoughtful way this racially biased and utterly counterproductive situation. "How, after decades of undeniable racial progress, did we end up with this virtual gulag of racial incarceration?"

While Patterson notes the unfair nature of the criminal justice system, he also points his finger back at the

Black community itself: "The rate at which Blacks commit homicides [what is sometimes called "Black on Black crime"] is seven times that of whites."

There are many reasons for this dysfunction and breakdown, including historic discrimination, unfair justice and assumptions by police (Black and white) that young Black men in particular are more likely to commit certain criminal offenses.

Patterson, and others in Black academia and middle-class civil rights organizations, are right to point to internal problems within the Black community. But the "take personal responsibility" critique targets only a secondary factor. It has little to do with addressing racist attitudes still prevalent among many whites, even as a large majority of whites and society oppose blatant racial discrimination. An Inspiration

The fundamental impact of the Jena 6 defense campaign is that many Americans — whites as well as Blacks — have woken up and begun to act. After years of inaction on issues of racism, this change is inspiring. The politicization of the rap community, as well as other artists, is indication of that change.

Yet no movement is ever a repeat of past movements. However lessons can be learned. The reality today, where legal segregation is now illegal, is to fight de facto segregation and racism. To grow into a new civil rights movement, the current campaign must define its own agenda.

The new racism must be fought town by town. The problems within the Black community must be faced. The lack of generalized response by the Black middle class must be recognized as well.

For a new civil rights movement to rise, it must include demands to reform the criminal justice system. The hundreds of thousands of Black youth falsely incarcerated should be freed and allowed to re-enter society with proper training and jobs.

The Jena 6 has opened the doors to look at all issues of modern day racism, as well as a discussion of what is necessary to help forge a new Black solidarity effort within the community that can move the fight for true equality forward. The campaign to free the Jena 6 makes all this possible.

from [ATC](#) 131 (November/December 2007)

✦ *Malik Miah is an editor of 'Against the Current', the magazine of the US socialist feminist organisation, Solidarity.*

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Russia

Strike At Ford-Vsevoljok

A unique and exemplary struggle

[Carine Clément](#)

On November 20, 2007 at midnight the assembly line stopped. Of the 2200 workers at Ford-Vsevoljok (region of Saint-Petersburg), 1500 took part in the strike.

The management reacted by prohibiting the workers of the morning shift to enter the factory. It even called in the OMONs (Russian riot police) to block the entrance. Since then, every day, hundreds of workers hold a permanent meeting in front of the factory, taking care not to let any possible strike-breakers pass.

In a dash of enthusiasm, they dance and sing. The employees of the canteen, who are also on strike, distribute tea and sandwiches. There is an atmosphere of euphoria and enthusiasm as they find themselves together again to fight for their rights. The principal demand of the strikers relates to the level of wages, which they ask to be raised by 30 per cent. For the moment the average wages in the factory turn around 19,000 roubles (550 euros). The strike is attracting a lot of attention, linked to the massive strike movements in France and in other countries of Europe – you can hear the workers chanting: "France shows us the road to follow, hurrah! ", and also in relation to the next parliamentary elections, which will be held on December 2, 2007.

Especially, public opinion and even the traditional trade unions of the FNPR confederation, which are, however, hostile in principle to any open conflict with company managements, is starting to shift. A public letter signed by twenty sociologists of work, asking for a liberalization of the Labour Code in relation to the regulation of the right to the strike, was published by several newspapers. The trade unions and collectives of other companies of the country, and also from abroad, have sent messages of support. Pickets in solidarity with the strike have been organized in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The president of the FNPR, Mikhail Chmakov – allied with "United Russia" [Putin's party] in the elections – has dared to speak publicly of the need to revise the Labour Code, which was, however, adopted in 2001 thanks to him and the party in power.

On the other hand, the management of Ford Russia, for the moment, says that it will refuse any negotiation before the ending of the strike. The strikers have been warned that they will not be paid. Those workers who agree to sign a formal declaration of non-participation in the strike have been promised that they will receive two thirds of their wages for "forced unemployment".

Feeling that the strike was going to be prolonged, the strikers, meeting in general assembly on November 22, unanimously decided divide into two groups: one would resume work in order to be receive minimum remuneration; the other would continue the strike and the permanent meeting at the entrance to the factory "In any event", - explains Alexei Etmanov, the president of the trade union of the factory, "that will not be enough to start up production again and will only worsen the financial losses due to the strike."

The case of the "Fordists" is rather unique and exemplary for Russia. A young trade union, which left the traditional FNPR confederation two years ago, continuous work on the ground by the leaders of the union in order get the workers to understand that the union is all of them and not a service agency in cahoots with management, an offensive strategy of trade union unity. On the initiative of the Ford trade-union committee there was formed this summer the Interregional Car Workers' Trade Union, bringing together independent trade unions from several large companies, in particular the Lada factory in Togliatti (where a strike took place - savagely repressed - at the beginning of August) and the Renault-Autoframos factory in Moscow. So it is an exemplary case of a combative trade union supported by the majority of the workers.

It was following the first strike of the "Fordists" (concluded by the signature from a collective agreement), last February, that the strike movement started to develop in the country. Since then, we have learned of dozens of cases of strikes. Most of the time, because of the regressive labour legislation and repression by employers, they ended in sackings, disciplinary actions and condemnations for "illegal strikes".



Workers demand a 35% pay rise

Renault workers supported the strike at Ford

The most recent examples: the strike of the dockers of the port of Tuapse (November 4-7, 2007), then of Saint Petersburg (November 13-17, 2007), and that of the Post Office in Saint Petersburg (October 26, 2007). The

first two were stopped by court decisions. The third – in fact a work-to-rule - ended in the dismissal of three leaders of the Post Office lorry drivers' union. But despite repression the epidemic is spreading. For November 28 a strike is announced of the rail workers belonging to the independent trade union RPLBJ. The strike, even though it has not started, is already the object of a lawsuit initiated by the management. The railway workers nevertheless declare that they are ready to go into action. The demands relate to the regulation of wages and the right of the minority trade union to take part in collective bargaining.

So a wind of strikes is blowing over Russia. Even if the dimension is less compared to what France is experiencing, the radicality of the change has to be put in the Russian context, where strikes had practically disappeared since the beginning of the 2000 decade, when Vladimir Putin came to power. There is a change in mentalities, in the conception of what a trade union is, in the practices of solidarity which are being established. There is also a change of generation, with the arrival of young workers who refuse to sell their labour power on the cheap, rightly demand the recognition of their qualifications and are less impregnated with traditional paternalist attitudes towards management and the trade unions.

These changes are also related to socio-economic evolutions. Stable economic growth, a rise in profits and in the salaries of management, galloping inflation - all these factors are accumulating to produce rising discontent. To this should be added the incidences of globalization in Russia. Industrial disputes particularly affect the multinationals, as the workers see how trade unions function in other countries and measure the difference between their wages and those of the workers of other countries. Lastly, the key factor is provided by the second wave (after that of the beginning of the 1990s) of the creation of independent trade unions, generally constituted at rank-and-file level, starting from a core of workers more conscious than the average.

In short, although it is not comparable to the movements that are setting France ablaze, the germs of a change of tendency are undeniable. And neither the elections nor repression will do anything about it. The transformations, essentially qualitative, go much deeper.

This article first appeared on the Swiss web site www.alencontre.org.

► *Carine Clément is a sociologist and runs the Institute of Collective Action in Moscow.*

A series of strikes and anti-union repression

Protest letters and funds needed in support

[Carine Clément](#)

Since the strike of February 2007 at the Ford factory (in the region of Saint Petersburg, the Russian trade-union movement seems to be waking up.



Hundreds of workers blocked the Ford factory
The greatest strike for seven years.

New trade unions are being formed just about everywhere, first of all in the profitable sectors of oil, metallurgy, cars and aluminium, and in the transnational corporations. And faced with the refusal of factory managers to negotiate over wage increases or the improvement of working conditions, some even go as far as to organize or support strikes, in a situation where it has become practically impossible to conduct strikes legally, in the framework of the new Labour Code. This code requires that at least half the employees, meeting in a general assembly, decide by a majority vote to go on strike. If this does not happen, the strike is declared illegal and workers run the risk of being sacked.

Workers' Victory at Ford-Russia

On February 2, at half past one in the morning, the conference of the workers of the Ford factory of the region of Saint Petersburg ended. After a vote, the decision was taken - there would be a strike starting on February 14. In all, 1300 people, representing 70 per cent of the factory's workers, took part in meetings after finishing work (the factory operates on a three-shift system) - in the street, in temperatures of minus 15 degrees, because the management of the company refused to put a meeting room at their disposal. The result of the vote: unanimity, with five abstaining, to

start the strike, which would thus proceed entirely in conformity with the Draconian requirements of Russian labour law.

The principal demands were on the one hand the regulation of work norms, and on the other support for the proposals made by the trade union during negotiations on the collective agreement of the company, all of which were rejected by management. These demands concerned in particular transparency over work norms, respect of safety measures, the establishment of social guarantees and the limits on the externalisation of work (outsourcing).

This strong action taken was due to the new trade union, founded less than two years ago, with at its head very dynamic young workers who have worked hard since then to solidarize the collective and radically transform the relationship of the workers to union activity.

As Alexei Etmanov, president of the new union, says: "With my mates on the union committee, we taught them to make the union theirs, as a fighting weapon, to say 'us' when they speak about the union".

Feeling cramped in the traditional trade-union federation, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), which is hostile to any kind of struggle, the Ford factory union very quickly left to create a free, fighting trade union. With other new emerging trade unions in the industry (in particular the union at General Motors in Togliattigrad), they even formed, in July 2006 at the time of the Russian Social Forum, a new car workers' union.

The position of the management, which is however foreign and accustomed to negotiations, was astonishingly hard. In spite of negotiations which lasted three months, none of the points proposed by the union was included in the draft company agreement, which confined itself to reproducing the Russian labour code. According to Alexei Etmanov, the management quite simply found the traditional methods of management in Russia to their taste. "They believed that, as in the majority of workplaces in the country, they could impose their law on the workers and they didn't think that we were able to defend our rights", he said. "But this time, they were completely mistaken", he added.

To give an idea of the working conditions in this factory, which is, however, highly profitable and equipped with the most advanced technology, here are some elements: average monthly wages of 19 000 roubles (540 euros); work stations without a fixed assignment (workers moving from one to the other); systematic refusal to respect holidays which are due; maximum flexibility; accumulation of hours of overtime; many tasks which are dangerous and harmful to the health of the workers. To which must of course be added, an enormous disproportion between the wages of the workers and those of management...

We should remember that it was not the first collective action carried out by the workers of the

factory. In the summer of 2005, after a work-to-rule lasting several weeks, they had already obliged the direction to increase wages by 14.2 per cent.

Shaken by the workers' determination, the management of the Ford factory announced to the press on February 9, 2007, five days before the strike was due to start, that it was conceding wage increases of from 14 to 20 per cent, according to the category. "They want to calm us by giving us alms", that is how Alexei Etmanov commented on this gesture. The union leader promised that the strike would take place in any event, since it did not have as its main object wages, but working conditions as a whole. The final decision was made by the workers' collective of the workers, called on by the union to decide on February 13, the day before the announced strike. Finally the strike at Ford lasted one day. The management immediately gave in and accepted almost all the demands of the union.

Strike at Severstal

A strike has just finished with a victory at the Karelski Okatich factory (in the Republic of Karelia), which belongs to the powerful Severstal iron and steel group. To avoid falling foul of the law, the workers of the rail transport department of the factory struck in the form of an act of refusal to work without guaranteed conditions of safety, calling attention to the deplorable technical condition of the locomotives. The action lasted from June 28 to August 3 and ended with management accepting the workers' demands. The main ones were a wage increase and an improvement of working conditions.

One of the keys to the success of this action was the good organization of the workers, of whom the majority are members of the alternative trade union Sotsprof, whose leaders succeeded in conducting negotiations at the same time as making a show of strength.

Unfortunately, the days following the victory were more bitter. A few days after the end of this strike of a particular kind, the workers received a warning for refusal to work without legitimate grounds, which opened the door to possible sackings. The Sotsprof trade union was expelled from its union office, and the city prosecutor opened an investigation into the "illegal" intrigues of the trade union leaders.

Strike at Avtovaz

The strike on August 1 2007 of the workers on the principal assembly line of the automobile giant Avtovaz (Lada cars, in the region of Samara) resounded like a bolt from the blue. Nobody expected it, since this factory was dominated by the traditional trade union FNPR, which was strongly hostile to any action of frontal opposition to management. And yet...

Anger had been welling up for a long time already, since the workers were extremely dissatisfied with the level of wages, which since 1994 had been falling in

purchasing power because of inflation. Today, an average worker earns hardly around 7 000 roubles a month (200 euros). Consequently, workers have been leaving the factory massively. Among those who decided to remain, some found the courage to start a collective fight for a wage increase. To carry it out, a strike committee was set up in June 2007. It transmitted a list of demands to the management of the company, in the first place the demand for a wage increase. Since the management did not react, neither to the demands (signed collectively by a large number of workers), nor to the work-to-rule strike which accompanied them, the decision was taken to go on strike. The date had been announced a week before: August 1.

Nobody among the commentators really believed it would happen; The factory has more than 100,000 workers, largely unorganised and remaining through inertia members of the traditional trade union. Moreover, in the days preceding the strike, the management did everything to dissuade the dissident workers: threats revealed by department managers and foremen, calling the "ringleaders" to threatening interviews, calling in the police on the pretext of an "extremist threat" in the factory. Thus, one of the militant workers, Anton Vetchkunin, was arrested at his place of work by the police, a few days before the announced strike. The motive that was cited was distribution of leaflets of an extremist character.

Despite everything, the assembly line was indeed stopped on August 1, as planned, from 10.45 in the morning till four in the afternoon. And an assembly took place in front of the entrance to the factory, where the strikers sang and danced, exultant to have found the courage to do such a thing. Around 2000 workers took part in the strike. To avoid repression, it was collectively decided to make it a warning strike and to resume work at the start of the second shift. But this strike of a few hours was very much talked about. All the media reported it and public debates were held on whether the strike was justified. They revealed broad support among the population for the striking workers.

Among the factors that played a role in facilitating the strike it is necessary to evoke the active assistance provided by the alternative trade union Edinstvo (Unity), very much a minority in the factory, but very active. It is also necessary to speak about the actions of support organized by networks of political and trade-union militants, including protest pickets in front of the offices of the group in various towns in Russia (including Moscow, where militants were arrested and condemned to several days in prison for "unauthorized action"). Lastly, it should be pointed out that the strike was the initiative of the workers themselves, working mainly in three workshops, all linked to the assembly line and occupying a key position in the production process.

However, if the reaction of public opinion was positive, that of the traditional trade union and the

management was much less so! The leadership of the traditional trade union completely dissociated itself from the action, which was publicly presented by its leader as a provocation by extremists. As for the management of the factory, it decided to deny the facts and put out communiqués according to which nothing had happened. In spite of the promise made to open negotiations with, as representative of the workers, Petr Zolotarev, president of the Edinstvo trade union, two weeks after the strike the negotiations had not even begun. Worse still, measures of repression started...

Repression by employers

One week after the strike, the workers who had taken part in the five-hour strike started to receive warnings for refusal to work without legitimate grounds, fines and other disciplinary measures. In all, on August 16, more than 170 workers had been affected by these repressive measures. Two workers, one of whom is a member of the alternative trade union Edinstvo, received warnings of dismissal. And measures of repression are continuing.

The Edinstvo union committee is preparing to conduct a legal battle to defend the participants in the strike. It succeeded in opposing the sacking of Anton Vetchkunin, union representative of Edinstvo" and for this reason more protected. However, the traditional trade union FNPR gave its approval for the sacking of the second worker, Alexei Vinogradov, victim of betrayal by his own union.

The free trade union Edinstvo has undertaken to defend all the victimised workers, without regard for their trade-union membership, but the task is gigantic and far exceeds the organisational and material means of this minority trade union (it organises at most 700 workers out of the total of 100,000). So it needs help, among other reasons to be able to provide compensation for the material losses incurred by the strikers.

It is an important issue. It is a question of showing the factory workers and, more broadly, public opinion:

1. that the trade unions can and must be fighting unions, independent of the employers;
2. that it is possible to strike, that it is an inviolable right;
3. that solidarity, inside the country and on the international level, is a key value which makes it possible to win struggles.

The solidarity campaign has already started in Russia itself. I join with the comrades of the Edinstvo trade union in asking international militant networks to take part in this campaign in one way or another.

Since the strike of February 2007 at the Ford factory (in the region of Saint Petersburg, the Russian trade-union movement seems to be waking up.

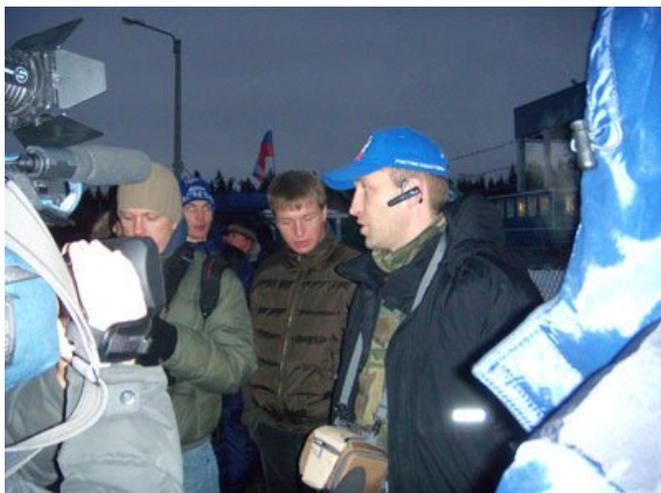


Photo from vpered.org.ru

Appeal of the Edinstvo trade-union committee of Avtovaz to social and trade-union movements

Dear colleagues!

The wages of the workers of the Avtovaz factory are gradually losing purchasing power. At the time of the last regional elections, one of the slogans of the party that is in power, "United Russia" was "wages of 25 000 roubles - it is possible! ". The list of this party was headed by the principal managers of the Avtovaz factory.

Once elected, the deputies of "United Russia" forgot their promise.

The workers of the automobile giant Avtovaz, despairing of never obtaining a wage increase, decided to strike. To defend their human dignity, as of July 2007, the employees of two workshops in particular (the mechanical assembly shop and the body shop) addressed to the managers of the factory their demands concerning the respect of the electoral promises of wages at 25 000 roubles. They never received any answer.

On August 1 the employees of workshops 46-1, 45-2, Motor-3 and some others went on strike to defend their demands. The main assembly line was out of action for four hours. The representative of the management, I Ivanov, arrived on the spot, promised that the president of the Avtovaz group, V.V. Artiakov, would soon come to Togliatti of the and that negotiations with the representatives of the strikers would begin. It was also promised that no repressive measures would be taken against the strikers.

The employees once again believed the promises and stopped the strike, waiting for the beginning of the negotiations on wage increases.

The promises once more proved to be deceitful.

The employer did not accept negotiations. Worse, in violation of the Labour Code (art.414) which prohibits disciplinary measures against strikers, the employer add

We, the Edinstvo trade-union committee appeal to all social movements and trade unions to ask you to support workers who are victims of arbitrary employers. The new management of Avtovaz presented itself as professional and supporting respect for law and order in Russian companies. However, instead of law and of the order, the managers showed their incompetence and of their attraction for easy money. They bought luxurious cross-country vehicles on a large scale and founded a management company in Moscow where the wages of the personnel are several tens of times the wages of the factory workers. The incompetence in the management of the factory led to the massive departure of its workers, to a fall in production, to the ending of social programmes for the workers and thus, as a consequence, to their impoverishment.

A campaign of solidarity and protest by Russian and international public opinion will oblige them to put a stop to illegal repression against people who are working hard to earn their bread and feed their families.

We ask you to send letters of protest to the address of the management of Avtovaz.

We ask you, as far as it is possible for you, to send your donations to the bank account of the Edinstvo trade union. We guarantee that the money thus received will be entirely transmitted to the striking workers illegally and wrongfully hit by repression.

Thank you in advance!

The Edinstvo trade-union committee

Contacts:

President of the trade-union committee, Petr Zolotarev,

fax: (+7-8482) 53-41-48,

e-mail profedinstvo@yandex.ru

To help financially:

The Edinstvo trade union does not have a bank account in currency, and given the new legislation in Russia, it is better not to receive money from abroad. With the agreement of Petr Zolotarev, I place my French banking account at the disposal of those who would like to make donations. Contact me at this address: info@ikd.ru (Carine Clément, Avtovaz donation).

To send letters of protest:

Address: 445633 Region of Samara, town of Togliatti, Chaussez Iuzhnoi, 36, OAO Avtovaz

President of the Avtovaz group V.V. Artiakov

Tel. in Togliatti: (+7 8482) 73-82-21,

fax (+7 8482) 757274

Tel.. (+7 495) 970-11-00

Ford-Vsevolozhsk strike continues

- although management claims different

[Maria Kurzina](#)

The strike on the Ford assembly plant in Vsevolozhsk continues already for three weeks although management already twice announced it is broken.

The strike started at midnight November 19th after the four-month negotiations with management failed. The main demand of the workers led by the Interregional Trade Union of Autoworkers (ITUA) is a 30% wage increase along with improving conditions and renegotiation of the collective agreement.

Management acted in a most unconstructive way, initially refusing to have any negotiations with the union "during or under the threat of strike". But after a week of strike during the top sales period it was not possible any more to cover an irretrievable fall of production using the old stocks. So management called ITUA to hold a "meeting" where it offered an 11% increase from March 2008. Yet the official rate of inflation in Russia this December already topped Ford's generosity (at 11.5%) and the union rejected the sop.

Three weeks of strike is an all-fired long term for Russia, and not just because strikes are usually stated to be illegal by courts on the employers claims. But with the current wage levels people are able just to keep their head above the water therefore they can't stop work for such a long time.

Under these circumstances ITUA made an ambiguous step: most of 1500 strikers officially went out of the strike after 3 days. But even 350 activists who were still refusing to work were enough to keep plant still. They got paid by the union. Others therefore could get 2/3 of their wages from Ford as their absence from work was now from legal point of view a "forced outage". This situation continued from November 23rd to 28th.

Although on November 28th management made an attempt to restart production. It was able to reach, by night phone-calls and bringing to the plant, about 350 workers from different shifts and stations that were not able to provide any good excuse for their absenteeism. But it turned out to be impossible to organize normal production even in one shift. During the first day of "production" just 66 cars were assembled (normal production would be 350 cars a day). Not one of these 66 passed quality control as that department was on strike.

At the same moment workers started spontaneously getting officially back on strike. Notwithstanding that the union was not able to pay this number of people, today about 800 Ford workers are on strike. Every day the union committee get about 30-40 new notifications of people joining the strike. About 600 people more are

absent from work, by the different excuses, and are getting their 2/3 of wage.

On December 11th management widely announced an attempt to restart night time production ("the third shift"). This "shift" assembled yesterday about 40 cars (normally would be 90). In total yesterday 117 cars went off assembly line. ITUA claims that one third of normal production (and almost 100% of this is even faulty) is hardly a "resuming normal work of the plant".

Last day there were in total about 500-600 people working at the assembling line including office stuff and trainees. Therewith work in the paint and welding shops is recognized as dangerous for health and by sending there people without corresponding training and admittance management commits a criminal offence. According to workers who were at yesterday's "third shift": "In the welding shop there were 4 people per station instead of 11. The supervisor tried to force us to work faster and, when he was told that there're not enough people, offended workers and added that 'who doesn't like it can go on strike'".

Today it's a matter of fact that Ford-Vsevolozhsk is on strike. And the results of this strike will determine a lot more than just wages of its workers. Russian workers from all regions of the country watch on the small assembling factory near St-Petersburg. Ford workers' victory will become a general victory and powerful impulse for Russian labour movement. Strikers get wage loss compensation of 500 RUR (US\$20) a day from a specially launched solidarity fund. Those who have some incomes yield compensation in favour of single parents and larger families. But today union hangs on by the skin of teeth - people are ready to fight till the end but there's tragic lack of money. Many Russian and foreign trade unions including International Metallist Federation affiliates transfer money to Ford-Vsevolozhsk union. Fundraising campaign is organized also by [Labourstart.org](#).

You can help Ford union:

Mezhregional'nyi profsoyuz rabotnikov avtoproma (MPRA)- interregional union of autoworkers of Russia

OGRN: 1077800001102

INN: 7813202800

KPP: 781301001

r/s : 40 70 381 02 000 100 00 384

BIK: 044 03 08 87

k/s: 301 01 810 8 000 000 00 887

filial "Sankt - Peterburgskii"

AKB "OBPI" OAO g.Sankt - Peterburg

Official address: 197110 Sankt - Peterburg

Nab. Admirala Lazareva, d.16 lit. A, pom. 2N

Rukovoditel' (Chair) Etmanov A. V.

Gl. buhgalter Skipper M. V.

► *Maria Kurzina is part of the 'Vpered' group in Russia.*

A Draw for Ford but a Victory for All

[Boris Kagarlitsky](#)

The strike at the Ford factory in Vsevolozhsk, located right outside St. Petersburg, ended on Dec. 14. It was the longest and most intense standoff in post-Soviet times.

The strike began on Nov. 20 and continued for three weeks. According to union activists, the plant's conveyors came to a full stop. Then management threw together one shift mainly composed of office workers and, toward the end of the strike, a second shift to keep the assembly line running. But the quality control department continued its strike, which means that cars produced in early December might not meet all of the technical standards.

The conflict at the Ford factory took on significance far beyond the organization itself and even beyond the auto manufacturing industry in Russia. The media from all over the country covered the story extensively. This was the country's first open-ended strike since the new Labor Code came into force several years ago. It was also the first strike that the authorities did not squash and in which its participants obtained a guarantee that they would not be subjected to reprisals. The strike once again demonstrated that the laws work against labor unions, but it also showed that strong workers' organizations can find ways to get around many of those restrictions.

*This is an extract from [a longer article](#) in today's *Moscow Times*, with whose kind permission it appears.*

► *Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies in Moscow.*



Photo: [vpered.org.ru](#)

The Anticapitalist Left and Social Struggles

[Ilya Boudraïtskis](#), [Maria Kurzina](#)

The language of the contemporary radical left in Russia seems surprisingly antiquated. That concerns not only the habit, bad but forgivable, of using phraseology. Such linguistic stagnation also testifies to the ossification of thought.

We have to ask ourselves, for example, what this association of words means: "work in the left milieu"? Does that indicate the technological process of association or the redistribution of resources? And "work with the workers" or "with youth", what is that? Is it the development of the movement or its instrumentalisation and adaptation to the tasks of its own reproduction? Accusing those closest to you of "reformism" deserves a particular mention; it goes hand in hand with the demonstration of one's own "revolutionarism". Those who strut around with such phraseology are in no way trying to understand why and how in this concrete society the revolution can and must take place. Because the revolution is not the result of the circumstances of people's lives, however unbearable they may be, but the outcome of people's activity in these circumstances.

In our opinion it is time to put an end to the existence of a left which conceives of itself as an industry producing ready-made answers, with no sell-by date indicated and which, moreover, are neither taken back nor exchanged. Admittedly, if you conceive of socialist organization as a leadership that is irreplaceable and by definition "effective", it would be difficult to find a better model. The problem is that in objective reality there is no place for such a mechanism of production of duly authenticated valid answers.

If we want to find our place in events, we have to be able to seize the present moment and to analyze the current situation in all its ambiguity and all its contradictions.

The trade unions

The trade-union organizations have constituted the biggest and most advanced part of the social movement in Russia during the last years of the USSR and the post-Soviet era. At present, they appear to be social forces that are organized and consistent in their struggles, and their importance is constantly growing. However, an attempt at an objective appreciation (even quantitative) of the scale and level of activity of the trade unions in Russia inevitably encounters considerable difficulties, which concern in the first place methodology.

At the present time, the Russian economy employs approximately 69 million people, to whom it is no

doubt necessary to add approximately 5 million unemployed (the employment agencies record approximately 1.5 million). The total number of members of the various trade unions comes to 31,5 million citizens of the Federation of Russia, if we take the figures of the unions themselves. Among them, the FNPR (1) organises 29 million members (91.2 per cent of all trade unionists), the Pan- Russian Confederation of Labour up to 1.5 million members (4.7 per cent), Sotsprof (2) up to 500,000 (1.6 per cent), the other federations and the independent organizations approximately another half-million (1.6 per cent).

Thus, trade-union activity concerns 42.5 per cent of Russian workers. In comparison, in France, the Netherlands and Spain, this figure does not exceed 15 per cent; in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Austria and Britain, it is between 20 per cent and 40 per cent; in Norway, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, between 50 per cent and 90 per cent. At first sight, the table seems fully reassuring. But, paradoxically, the level of participation of Russian workers in trade unions can only be regarded as extremely low.

Across the world trade-union activity is by no means homogeneous. There exist not only serious differences but also divergences concerning forms of organization, the level of work and of trade-union activity. The small trade unions of France and Spain seem to be in the vanguard of working-class struggles. To be active in them, according to their conception, resembles what here would correspond to membership of political organizations. Moreover, the influence of these unions, their capacity to mobilize and to organize strikes extends considerably beyond their militant base in the strict sense of the term. Collective struggles and collective agreements involve in these countries 70 to 90 per cent of workers. There is also a "Scandinavian" trade union model: that of an organization whose role of mechanism of redistribution of the benefits of the Welfare State is inscribed in law. These unions have a very large membership (since obtaining social protection depends on membership of a trade union) They are strongly centralized, with a heavy apparatus, whose decisions are seldom taken as a result of open debate, but which has a direct influence on the organization of production, outside processes of collective discussion.

It is obvious that the situation of the Russian trade unions corresponds to neither one nor the other model. Consequently, as a general rule, it more or less resembles the two models at the same time. It is certainly possible, although not always pertinent, to draw a parallel between the combative unions of France and the "alternative" unions of Russia (although they do not stand comparison either as concerns the level of membership or, even more so, their influence, they do use similar methods of struggle and organization). But to define the FNPR, strictly following the same parallel, as a "yellow" trade union or, better, as a trade union

"with a yellow leadership", would raise serious and well-founded doubts.

The "alternative" unions in Russia come from the wave of perestroika and the rise of the social movement, in which they played a central role. However, the rapid decline of social activism, engendered by the cruel disillusion with the ideals of "democratic capitalism", had as a consequence that these trade unions were not formed as mass organizations of the working class. They manage to maintain themselves as mass organizations only in some sectors, where the working class is solidly united and where there is a high concentration of workers within the framework of the enterprise: in the coal branch the NPGR (3), in transport the RPD (4), the RPLBJ (5), the pilots' unions, the air controllers. In all the other sectors, the "alternative" trade unions are only small groups of the conscious minority of workers.

Today, all the independent trade unions represent in Russia only 7-8 per cent of organized workers (i.e. 3 to 3.5 per cent of all workers). However it is within this small segment of the social movement that there are currently taking place extraordinarily important processes for the whole of society, above all linked to the appearance and the development of independent organized labour in the multinationals and the large Russian corporations. It is the syndrome of the ever greater demand for collective self-organisation of the class. Such trade unions are coming into existence in new contexts, in the milieu of young workers, in companies which are experiencing the new generation of management (often foreign), in other words outside the old work relationships founded in the "Soviet" enterprises on the inter-class interests "of the whole of the personnel", from the manager to the cleaning lady.

This representation was preserved for a long time because of the partial and paradoxical coincidence of the interests of the workers and the old body of management on the question of safeguarding the company, the workplaces, the vertical relationships between work teams and the administration of the company. Furthermore, this arrangement reached the apogee of its development a few years after the end of the Soviet Union, in the middle of the 1990s, in the middle of the movement of privatizations. "We do not give to foreigners! ": this slogan united the workers and the managers "of the old generation", linked to the work teams, in tens and hundreds of companies, as with the example of the TsBK in Vyborg (6).

The FNPR, in its current conception of itself, that is, basically, as a whole system of corporatist relations inside the enterprise, is the product of this contradiction and this paradoxical situation. Consequently, at the moment when the process of redistribution of property was finished, when the conflict between the leaders and owners of "the old generation" and "the new generation" became secondary, overshadowed by the opposition between the classes, the terrain on which this

organization had grown and maintained itself disappeared. This is reflected in the change of the political loyalties of the federation, which changed from the KPRF (7) to United Russia (8). Now that the time of paternalism and inter-class unity has gone, there comes the moment to prostrate themselves at the feet of the victor.

For the victorious bourgeoisie the FNPR thus appeared not to be necessary. It does not defend the workers (and even often betrays their interests directly), and at the same time it is absolutely ineffective as an instrument of the employers. In fact, the only social groups which are still directly interested in the work of this organization are the "intermediary layers": foremen, workshop and department chiefs, assistant managers... The particularity of the situation of this intermediary layer is that it appears as the "advanced detachment" of the management of the company. Its task - to motivate and supervise - is extraordinarily complex. Its psychological situation is more than uncomfortable because, whereas it is permanently rubbing shoulders with ordinary workers, it must follow the line of the management, although its wage situation is closer to that of its subordinates than to management. "At home among foreigners, foreigners among their own". In this situation, the FNPR as a corporatist, workshop structure, while at the same time the possessor of means of encouragement - poutiovki (9) etc. - and accelerator of promotion, remains irreplaceable.

Neither in its social composition, nor by its role in the relations of production and in social existence, nor by its policies, can the FNPR lay claim to the name of "trade union". Nevertheless it plays a very important part in the labour and social movement in Russia. But this is not thanks to its "combative" rank and file militants, but to its role as an enormous and almost bottomless reservoir for the canalisation of social protest and also as the most effective instrument for discrediting trade-union work as such.

Consequently, in our opinion, it could be said rightly that the real membership of trade-union organizations in Russia, according to the most optimistic calculations, does not exceed 3 million people, that is, 4 per cent of all workers. That represents the "alternative" trade unions and certain of the healthier sectors of the FNPR.

The "free" trade unions, in the majority of cases, organize an active minority of workers in the enterprise, which lays them open to attacks by management, and thus does not allow them to take part in the conclusion of collective agreements. Often, the independent trade unions do not have a "second level" of organizers and the sacking of some leaders deprives the rank and file of the ability to fight and often leads to the destruction of the union organization, which disappears before being able to prove in court the illegality of the sackings. On the other hand, the members of the "alternative" trade unions, in general, are characterized

by a high level of consciousness and by self-sacrifice in the struggle; they are more united and ready to resist the attacks against the organization. As for the mass membership of the FNPR, very often joining the union is not the result of a conscious decision to join a workers' organization, but of completely different motives: a suggestion by the personnel department, habit, perception of the union as source of benefits (poutiovki, places in the kindergartens...).

The serious difficulties for both the "alternative" trade unions and the combative unions of the FNPR lie in the relationship with their own leadership. They appear as fighting class organizations at the local level, but their national structures are often not built on transparent and democratic bases. You can observe a distance between the leadership and the rank and file. The national leadership plays a role of centre of co-ordination, of legal and material support, of providing information but not really of an active and representative institution under control of the rank-and-file activists. The independence of the leadership makes it possible for individuals to use this situation for personal ends. The combative unions of the FNPR, because of the characteristics already described above of the structure of this organization, in situations of radicalisation and of open opposition to the employer, often enter into direct conflict with the local or industrial leadership body, which involves either the defeat of the militant action or the autonomisation of the trade union, which leaves the Federation.

The social movements

It is no accident that the stabilization of labour relations and the reawakening of the trade unions have coincided with the offensive against the social sphere. At the end of the 1990s, privatization of production was in its final phase. On the other hand transport, the various infrastructures, housing, the organizations of health, education, of science and culture, the pension system, all of which represent an enormous section of public property, had not yet been touched. At the same time, the guarantees that the state gave to the working class and to the social spheres remained an obstacle to Russia joining the WTO.

The first blow was dealt by the modification of labour legislation and simultaneously by restrictions on democratic freedoms. The mass actions of the beginning of the decade have not yet been forgotten by the Russian elite. The purpose of the restriction of the rights of organization and assembly as well as the control established over the media was to guarantee its rule and to legitimate repression in the event of "popular fury".

These counter-reforms were not carried out frontally, but were directed against a sector of the population, while preserving the indifference of the majority. The adoption of these laws dragged on for years. Thus, the

modification of the labour code was presented by the Russian government in the mid-1990s, but the new version was only adopted in 2001; the reform of pensions took more than five years; begun in 1993, the reform of education is still not finished. Later, the forced adoption of antisocial laws, even less destructive ones, was faster, but Russian society, overcome by the blows of the beginning of the 1990s and plunged in frustration, was not able to build a strategy of resistance in the long term. Lastly, the real contents of the bills adopted were not understood by broad layers of the population, and the work of explanation of the opposition was not able to compete with the propaganda of the neo-liberal mass media.

In total, approximately 300,000 people took part in the very massive "days of united action" against the new labour code, organized at the call of the "alternative" trade unions, but only a minority of them took part in the meetings and the one-day strikes. In response to the reform of pensions, there was only a passive protest: citizens did not place their money in the non-state funds, which led to the failure of the plans of the government.

Growing confidence in its ability led the bourgeois elite to accelerate the rhythm of the preparation of the projects of reform and their examination by Parliament. The composition of the State Duma, transformed after the elections of spring 2003 into a body of pure form, contributed to this. Thus, the infamous federal law 122, presented to Parliament in autumn 2004, was signed by the president the same year (10). The housing code, adopted in 2005, went through in only one year all the stages, from its preparation to its entry into force (11); and the complex arsenal of projects concerning the privatization of education, science and culture was presented to and examined by Parliament during autumn 2006.

The consequences of these reforms have already affected very different layers of the population: workers, pensioners, students and unemployed young people. The revolt against federal law 122 at the beginning of 2005 was the first strong signal of resistance from below. The protest actions, a majority of which were of a radical nature, took place in almost 600 cities, in other words in almost all district capitals. The first demonstrations, which began after the Christmas and New Year holidays, were of a particularly spontaneous nature and were only slightly marked by the influence of the parties of the "official" opposition, which did not understand the importance of what was happening and only tried to take control of the movement when in local areas structures of self-organization were set up and began to take action. And although the movement quickly declined, its importance was decisive for the subsequent development of the protest movement.

Co-ordinations of councils (KSs), formed on the wave of the "cotton revolution", attracted the most varied

elements, from the militants of small left groups to people who were showing interest in the social process for the first time.

In this context, there took place in April 2005 the first Russian Social Forum, bringing together more than 1,000 participants, on the basis of representation of the regional KSs. It was an attempt to structure the movement at the national level and to politicise it, by working out a global alternative programme to the antisocial policies of the Kremlin.

The adoption of a new housing code and of a series of related laws gave fresh impulse to the development of social protest. The particular characteristic of this reform is that it directly runs up against the interests of all the citizens of Russia. Around the question of housing thousands of initiatives took place, concerning housing management as well as building programmes, the problems of households, the situation of housing funds, service charges paid by tenants (12), rent increases, the right to housing, the rights of investors who had been cheated, etc. In spite of the similarity of the problems related to housing (the contradiction between the interests of the inhabitants and those of the building companies), we did not manage to have unified demands. The repeated attempts to coordinate these initiatives ran up against reciprocal incomprehension and the focusing of struggles on local problems.

The existence of contradictions between particular social groups, which appeared during the movement of protest, is in general an obstacle to its development. The deepening of the process of privatization of education, science and culture led in the same way to unambiguous protests by the students and the workers of this sector. However, the working out of a position of coordinated protest poses a major problem. The implementation of this reform provokes fears of various kinds. The students are dissatisfied with the attack against exemption from payment for education, whereas many of the professors hope that it will improve their material situation. At the same time, the professors in higher education are acting against the introduction of selection in access to studies (13) while the parents of pupils calculate that it will save them from having to pay for private tutors. The scientists who deal with fundamental sciences are worried about the loss of independence of the Academy of Sciences and fear that their institutes will be closed; but their colleagues who specialise in applied science are getting a foretaste of the additional finance that they will receive. The self-financing of secondary education places in fact all those employed in schools in competition with each other.

When politics begins

Throughout post-Soviet history the new ruling class, intrinsically linked to the state apparatus, was the only subject which created its political institutions and its political representations in society as such. We can

consider the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000 decade as a form of "loneliness of the bourgeoisie", building structures of decision-making that were coordinated with its interests, without involving the participation of society as such. The unilateral war against the majority in society, which manifested itself through privatizations, required the foundation of a political regime capable of speed in carrying out attacks against the social milieu, against workplaces and living standards. It is not by chance that the beginning of the radical social counter-reforms coincided with the political counter-reforms, which began with the fusillade at the Parliament and the introduction of the short-lived state of emergency state in 1993 (14). Such a system, by its very nature, did not leave (and still does not leave) any place for the opposition from below in its political dimension.

For the representatives of the workers' organizations and the social movement, any attempt to situate themselves within the existing public policies subjects them to the colossal pressure of corruption and the manipulation of the existing institutions. Each new electoral cycle leads to the creation of a panel of quasi-political formations, which, like a tsunami, threatens to drown what remains of independent initiatives. The big question with which we are confronted is how the movement can, under these conditions, preserve its independence, remain outside of the dominant political culture and work out clear alternative programmes capable of ensuring that workers have an independent instrument which speaks with their own voice and which fights to change their condition.

However, at present, the Russian left does not have the forces to propose anything at all going in this direction. Though existing outside of the political field built for the bureaucracy and the corporations, the left is under its permanent influence, interacting unconsciously with it and imitating its strategy in its relations with the social movements. In aspiring to self-affirmation, the left groups try to use the trade unions and rank-and-file initiatives to affirm their common feature: the ratification of particular programmes. The strikes and the actions of protest in the field of housing, the actions of working-class solidarity and the demonstrations against the consequences of the reforms are attractive and accessible summits for those who want to be the first to plant their flag or their own partisan logo. In the eyes of relatively inexperienced social activists, such a relationship often practically wipes out the differences between the radical left and bourgeois politicians, who are interested in electoral successes or in the fact of being the representatives of their concrete commercial interests.

We have to try to overcome the reciprocal mistrust between the social movements and the left, as well as the fear of a mutual instrumentalisation. The situation that is considered as usual today, and which acts as a norm, leads the trade unions or the organizers of the

social movements to see political militants as free auxiliaries, in the image of "give, bring and go away" (15), who are available when it is necessary to lead a picket or organize a lobby of an MP, but definitely useless, indeed harmful, for "real" work. "Leave politics outside!" and "We support those who help us!", those are two slogans with which the overwhelming majority of activists of the social movement identify. In its turn, the left has a similar attitude to them.

So the very first question for socialists, for those who want a real change of society, remains the search for freedom of action in the movement, for a truly decisive rupture with the technicized and consumerised approach of the militant social movement. Immersion in the movement, being present within it with independent positions based on a real political alternative, is the only real possibility for the adequate expression of a left perspective in the public space. Such an immersion, such a presence within the class, not only does not mean for the left the loss of its identity or the refusal of any form of offensive on the political level, but, on the contrary, creates the conditions that allow it to begin to exist.

The role of the left

We can distinguish four starting points which mark at the same time the weakness of the social movement and the left in Russia and the possibility for them to have a coordinated development and a common growth: the problems of the diffusion and the reception of information; the low level of coordination and interaction; the insufficient number of trained militants; the impossibility of having a mass mobilization.

Whether it is on the left, social and militant or trade-union, the movement in Russia finds itself today in a situation of isolation from the media. The absence of interest in its activity and even the frontal disinformation that the mass media engage in are only one part of the problem, although an important one from the point of view of propaganda and the organization of resistance on a massive scale. No less serious is the question of the exchange of information and experiences within the movement itself. The current level of communication scarcely makes it possible to make known concrete cases of repression. For broad long-term campaigns that is insufficient.

Information on events functions (especially by Internet) like a kaleidoscope, whereas we need it to be generalized, to make it possible to look for tendencies, for points of contact, for common demands and approaches. Today this work is done by sociologists - in the first place we must salute the role played by the Institute of Collective Action (16) - more than by political activists, which unfortunately affects its character.

Without overcoming the extreme reserve of the social movement and without going beyond the subculture of

the left, without the creation of a general space for communication, it is impossible to speak about perspectives for the politicisation of the social movements or of them becoming conscious of their general interests. In this context, solidarity campaigns play a particular role. They are important and will remain so - and they should be, for the social movements, not only a method of resolving their specific problems (not always effective enough), whereas the left should not only see in them a self-sufficient demonstration of its formal bond with the class. Such common actions must on the contrary become the field of active and successive convergence of the present consciousness of the protest movements and the unions, putting on the agenda the question of their political representation and, consequently, of the political alternative.

Compared to an isolated campaign of solidarity, the appearance of co-ordinations of councils and committees of trade-union solidarity has constituted a step forward. Conceived of as permanent spaces for the exchange of opinions and the working out of global action plans, putting out joint publications, they have made possible the appearance of broad structures on the national level: the social forums and the Union of Co-ordinations of Councils (SKS). The effectiveness of such structures depends on the precise circumstances, on the requirements of the moment, expressed at a certain level of consciousness for each concrete form as a practical necessity. Moreover, the political activists must still fight to be able to take part on an equal basis with others in these initiatives.

The shortage of trained cadres is a general problem for the left, the social movement and the trade unions. On the one hand, there is a crying lack of competent militants in the social movements and not enough education and self-education. In this sense, the question of the shortage of cadres intermingles with the insufficiency of information and analysis within the movement. On the other hand, the left in general lacks relations with the social actions that are taking place, even though what is involved is not a purely practical struggle, but a social or trade-union movement (that is, the political generalization of such a struggle, the consciousness that a unified movement often has of itself).

As we know, Marxist theory is not only a direct product of the struggle of the working class, but is at the same time the generalization of all its past experiences. This is why the safeguarding of Marxism as a practice of political analysis is possible only if each new individual experience is not dissected according to established rules but is treated as forming part of a coherent social experience which evolves in contact with it. Thus the training of cadres is inseparable from the insertion of the left in the mass movement and from obtaining the political support of the social activists and the leaders of the combative trade unions.

One of the major problems remains on the one hand the capacity of the social movements to organize mass mobilizations, and on the other hand the extremely reduced growth of the left groups, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Today the mobilization against the commercialisation of public services (17) is undoubtedly the only experience of a real mass movement capable of giving an adequate response to the situation and of formulating unifying demands in such a way as to bring hundreds of thousands of demonstrators into the streets. At the same time, both this movement and some other large-scale movements of a more local nature, were related to situations that were concrete and of short duration. The initiatives which emerged on the crest of the wave of these mobilizations turned out to be, in the majority of cases, incapable of qualitatively broadening their presence in public life or of constructing their activity on a regular and methodical basis. Leaving aside objective reasons linked to the characteristics of the present consciousness of the masses, these modest results are to be explained by an acute lack of a broad organized political movement.

The glaring inability of the left to be present and to take part in the movements, although it is doing so more and more, explains the insignificant number of its militants and why it finds it impossible to attract new forces towards it. We can say with certainty that today the left is only to a very limited extent taking advantage of the potential for increased interest in anti-capitalist ideas among young people and is not showing itself capable of reacting actively to current social problems, by putting forward open and convincing arguments, by giving clearly and without hesitation an alternative interpretation of the broad spectrum of current issues. This "splendid isolation" leads both to sectarian tendencies and to the "reduction" of participation by the activists, and to the complete dilution of their political positions into daily activity as "good social militants".

Independently of all the objective differences, mistrust towards political forms, towards the political dimension of issues, is not a distinctive feature of the situation in Russia. The fundamental rejection of European political organizations that the social movements demonstrated, typical of the beginning of the 2000 decade, diminished once the very logic of resistance pushed people to seek an active alternative. Thus, by the decisive "no" to the European constitution, the organized left became precisely the force which could express the growing consciousness by society of the organic link between privatization and the offensive against the social milieu, and its institutional manifestations on the level of national states and the European Union. This is what can be called the "return of the party", based on the link and the profound interaction between theory and practice, between the daily experience of struggle and the socialist tradition. Such a change of situation was linked not only to the

awakening of society but also to a major revision by the left of its past experience and its relevance to the problems of the present situation.

Such a revision is possible only on the basis of daily work within the movement, by demonstrating decisive influence on the development of an understandable and mobilizing political alternative. It is precisely on this that the very principle of the Transitional Programme is based, the idea of putting forward clear and consistent demands, which are addressed to the broad masses, intrinsically linked, thanks to the opportunities of the moment, to the need to fight against the logic of the market, to the necessity of the conscious and definitive overthrow of capitalism.

Ilya Boudraïtksis and Maria Kurzina are members of the "Vperiod" ("Forward") organization, which has established relations with the Fourth International. This article was first published in Levaya Politika ("Left-wing Politics") n° 01-2007, a quarterly review edited by Boris Kagarlitsky.

Endnotes

1. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), founded in March 1991, comes from the Central Council of Trade Unions of the Soviet Union, which under the name of "trade union" was an instrument of control over workers. The FNPR kept the majority of its members, its cadres and its property. It is dependent on the government for the maintenance of its institutional status and its property.

2. The Sotsprof confederation was founded in 1989, in opposition to the model of the single trade union and later of the FNPR. Its leadership supported capitalist restoration and the neo-liberal reforms but its base is often very combative and in opposition to its own leaders. However, it concentrates on the defence of its own members.

3. Independent Trade Union of the Miners of Russia. It was founded in 1990 on the wave of the great strikes of the years 1989-1990. The leadership of the union insists on the union maintaining an apolitical stance, but the base is often much more combative. For example, the militants of the NPGR took the initiative of the "war of the rails" of summer 1998 (strike pickets, blocking of railways) and demanded the resignation of Boris Yeltsin.

4. Russian Dockers' Union.

5. Russian Union of Brigades of Engine Drivers.

6. Vyborg is a town of 80 000 inhabitants on the Finnish border, on the Gulf of Finland. TsVK is the town's cellulose factory, which produces paper. A struggle between the workers and the employers led the workers to take over the factory, from March 1998 to January 2000. The production of the factory is of high quality and has important export outlets, but the speculation engaged in by the owners since its privatization in 1994 led to bankruptcy. The 2,200 workers of the factory elected a "popular manager" and took control of the factory. In the face of the opposition of the employers and the local authorities, and after two attempts at invasion of the factory by the police, the self-management experiment was short-lived.

7. The Communist Party of the Federation of Russia (KPRF) was founded in 1993 on the ruins of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by the intermediary bureaucratic apparatus which had not managed to be recycled in the framework of capitalist restoration, around a conservative ideology identifying with Communism (the Stalinist version) and Great-Russian nationalism. It is led and ruled with an iron rod by Guenadi Zyuganov.

8. United Russia is a neo-conservative party set up in 2001 to support Vladimir Putin and to give him a parliamentary majority. Since 2003 this party has held 305 of the 450 seats of the Duma and 88 of the 178 seats of the Council of the Federation (the Upper House). That is enough for it to modify the Constitution at will. Its president, Boris Gryzlov, is the president of the Duma.

9. Coupons which enable workers to take advantage of the offers of the Works Council (holiday camps, collective holidays for children...).

10. Law on the "monetarisation" (commercialisation) of social rights, which means in plain English that the poorest are deprived of state aid. The free nature of certain services (for example: health, medicine) is replaced by a financial "compensation". The entry into force of this law led to big demonstrations in January 2005.

11. The Housing Code came into effect on January 1, 2006. Its objective is the privatization of municipally-owned housing. It put a stop to the ease with which tenants could buy their houses, something which Yeltsin had encouraged in order to privatise housing as quickly as possible. It makes it possible for the management of housing estates to be given over to private companies, which are chosen by the municipality if the co-owners do not do it themselves.

12. Zhilitchno-kommounalnoe khozaïstvo: all the domestic services that go with housing (electricity, heating, communal space...).

13. EGE, United State Examination. Introduced from 2001, the EGE is the final examination of secondary education and makes it possible to operate selection for entry into university. It will be generalized in 2009.

14. After its independence in June 1991, the Federation of Russia placed itself in the institutional continuity of the old Federative Soviet Socialist Republic of Russia (the RSFSR, Russia within the USSR), with the same Constitution. The last Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR played the role of Parliament. Composed mainly of Communists, it was opposed to the neo-liberal "shock therapy" of Boris Yeltsin. The situation seriously degenerated between the executive and the legislature and in 1993 Yeltsin sent tanks to bombard the Parliament and elite troops to take the building by storm. You can see today in the Museum of Modern History in Moscow one of the doors of the Parliament riddled with bullet holes. The present (presidential) Constitution of the Federation of Russia was promulgated following this coup d'état.

15. The Russian expression "work in the style: give, bring and go away" indicates work of simple execution at the humblest level.

16. The Institute of Collective Action is directed by the sociologist Carine Clément. Its web site (in Russian: www.ikd.ru) publishes information and analyses of social movements and trade-union struggles, as well as weekly digests.

17. Against federal law 122 of January 2005, which we have already mentioned.

Venezuela Referendum: A Setback for Chavez

François Sabado, Sébastien Ville

The smears of the right and sections of the media have been contradicted by the facts. Chavez's Venezuela is not a dictatorship. It was in complete freedom that millions of partisans of the YES and NO camps participated in the electoral process and demonstrated in the streets of the country. The "putschist lieutenant-colonel" is not the dictator that the right and its press lackeys have presented to us. With the results barely announced, Chavez recognised his defeat. The democratic rights won since 1999 remain very much alive, the political discussion intense. But a question arises immediately: Why did Chavez lose?

He lost the referendum by around 200,000 votes. With about 4.5 million votes on each side, it was the Chavista camp which was not mobilised: 3 million Chavez voters in the last electoral consultation did not vote this time. The opposition won 300,000 votes corresponding to the defections to the right that have taken place in the "Bolivarian" camp (Podemos, the social-democratic wing of the bloc, and general Baduel who openly fights the "Marxist" evolution of Chavez).

It is too soon to provide all the explanations. But it is indubitable that Chavez lost millions of votes among the popular classes. With this constitution, he has not been able to respond to the expectations of a large part of the Venezuelan people. Chavez was weakened internally. It is the first electoral victory for his opposition. This vote strengthens the more conservative tendency of the coalition which will now advocate moderation, notably in the process of construction of the PSUV.

He is also weakened externally, even if his election in 2006 could only be challenged by a new recall referendum which can only happen at his mid-term in 2009. It is unhappily the Latin American radical left which will pay the cost of the defeat inasmuch as Venezuela represents a point of support for all the forces of transformation which have emerged in recent years in Latin America.

The "class struggle" forces are consequently weakened. This defeat reflects moreover

to the degradation of relations between the government and the most combative sectors of the Bolivarian revolution which have fought for a long time for an anti-capitalist outcome for Venezuela, as shown by the significant defections in the popular sectors. In recent months Chavez has had a tendency to prefer the sectors linked to the bureaucracy and corruption rather than the partisans of radicalisation and self-organisation of the process.

Chavez's Bonapartist tendencies have led him to place confidence only in his own power resting on the state apparatus rather than on the mass movement. Chavez did not lose because he did too much, but because he has not done enough for the emergence of an authentic popular power.

For our part, we continue our support for the Bolivarian revolutionary process. We are without hesitation at the side of Chavez against the right and the imperialists on all sides, and we will continue to fight at the sides of our Venezuelan comrades for the radicalisation of the process, by defending their proposals for a break with imperialism and Venezuelan capitalism.

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

► *Sébastien Ville is a member of the LCR who has been a frequent visitor to Venezuela.*



Lack of organisation of honest and consistent sectors which underlie revolutionary process

[Marea Clasista y Socialiste](#)

Faced with the close victory of the “no” vote on reform of the Constitution, rendering possible a victory for the right, we should begin a profound reflection. It should be useful to us to understand the situation we are experiencing and that we are going to face in the months to come, with the aim of building what we need. It is urgent and necessary to change and deepen, it is the task of those who believe and fight for a socialist Venezuela.



Photo: lcr-lagauche.be

There is already, and there will be in the days to come, different balance sheets and analyses — the right and imperialism will debate the way to continue to weaken the process whereas the bureaucratic sectors will try to hide their responsibility for what has just happened. It is necessary to take these facts into consideration.

We who have campaigned for a “yes” vote, in trying to deepen the revolutionary process, who had put all our efforts into confronting imperialism, the bosses and the private media for all these months, we have the need and the duty to reflect deeply, to propose, to stress anew the existing problems. We believe that they are one of the reasons for our defeat, for the moment. We wish to have this debate and this exchange of proposals with the millions who voted “yes”. And also with the rank and file sectors of the workers and poor of the country who have not unhappily done so but who have nothing to do with imperialism and the opposition.

Maintaining the socialist objective and resolving neglected problems

In the first place, we believe that any proposal should be made starting from the reaffirmation of the actuality of the struggle to transform Venezuela into a socialist country. None of the problems that we have can be resolved in the framework of the capitalism which still exists in our country. Profiting from this defeat, numerous sectors — including inside the state apparatus itself — will bring pressure and will try to show that to speak of socialism was erroneous, that it is better to negotiate, rein in the march of the process. President Chavez will surely be subject to these pressures and we hope that he will reject them. Because to go back in this area will mark the defeat of the revolutionary process. We discuss the steps that we can take, measures that it is necessary to take, how to reformulate party, social and decision-making forms, so as to firmly maintain course towards the kind of county we need.

If an important sector of Chavista voters abstained, and there was even a sector that made the mistake of voting “no”, that is due to profound causes that we cannot ignore. A part of this has surely been the fruit of the media campaign of the right and imperialism that threatened individual expropriations. It is obvious that the weight of private media and the freedom that employers’ sectors still have to campaign all over the country weighs. But there are also other problems which are the direct responsibility of the government. First, having include in the reform proposal an excessive concentration of power in the hands of the President (including the end to presidential term limits, the choice of vice-presidents and other subjects) which has not been appreciated by a sector of the population which had voted for Chavez last December.

Obviously, while the right wing media campaign developed, other contradictions emerged. The government talks of the project of socialism and equality, but it does not always resolve key social problems like insecurity, housing, the wages of big sectors of the population, whereas other wealthy sectors still dispose of big companies and maintain their economic and political power. We all know that there are very positive social gains and that the reform brought others, but revolutions have unavoidable laws: to advance, it is necessary to take clear measures which weaken capitalist economic power and orient according to social needs. In this area, despite the important steps we have taken, we are still far short of what is necessary. This contradiction between the media campaign of the right and the real still unresolved problems is at the origin of the doubts, mistrust and fear in a sector of our own social base.

At the same time the results of Sunday have shown that a big sector shares the idea of advancing towards socialism. But there is also discontent, doubts and fears faced with real problems. In this confrontation with the

right and the empire, certain sectors, which were involved in the process, have unhappily called for a “No” vote, or abstention or a spoiled ballot, collaborating de facto with the right and its victory. Some like Podemos [Podemos is a centre left party which. campaigned against the proposed Constitution reform.- ed/]or Baduel [General Raul Baduel was Commandant of the Maracay base during the failed coup in 2002 and threatened to march on Caracas against the putschists – now retired, he has become much more critical of Chavez and compared the proposed reform to a coup –ed.] because they have turned towards an anti-socialist project. Others, the trade union and social leaders, have refused to call for a “yes” vote through sectarianism and have thus helped the right win by a very short head. . It remains nonetheless that we, the class struggle union leaders and the workers, should mobilise and conquer from now the 6-hour working day, including in the informal sector, housing security, land ownership and other measures which appear in the reform proposal. No revolutionary or class-conscious person should then celebrate the result of the non-approval of the reform, but we should see how we organise, build morale and consciousness and develop the struggle to obtain the social conquests which appeared in the reform project. In remembering that even certain opponents to this reform, said that these conquests could be obtained without it.

Stopping the bureaucracy and the corruption of government and state sectors

A corrupt and bureaucratic structure in the federal governments, the town halls and ministries, is the product of unresolved social problems, reciprocally it leads to a situation without exit. Thus, either we deal with this problem at the root, or we lose the revolutionary process. As we militants of Marea Clasista y Socialista had already said, it is necessary to put an end to the enriched state functionaries, with those who have the links and who do business with the sectors of economic power, with those who go around in Hummers and other types of luxurious van. The Ministers who attack basic rights constitute obstacles, of which the current Minister of Labour and all his team are the most perverse and the most bureaucratic expression. The President should concentrate on this situation, which has heavily weighed in the decision to vote “no” or to abstain. All the Bolivarian socialist sectors together await a profound change of the governmental team. These are the state functionaries who demoralise the rank and file, who distance the workers and the poor from the process. These are those who have been able to convince certain sectors to vote “yes” because they indicate daily that they will do everything contrary to what they say. .

Our revolutionary process needs a profound and urgent change. It deserves it. The time is no longer for superficial, moreover impossible changes. It is necessary to open the debate on the big economic and political decisions with the rank and file and with the social, popular and political organisations of the process. It is necessary to break with the state functionaries chosen at discretion who act only according to their personal interests. It is necessary to revise the role of the Ministers and the Ministries of Popular Power, so that all the decisions taken are debated and decided by the bases concerned. As we have already proposed, it is necessary to put an end with the wages of state functionaries who live as if in Saudi Venezuela, buy properties and live in luxurious hotels. That has nothing to do with a socialist project. From the rank and file, we demand the dismissal of these inefficient and unscrupulous functionaries. It is necessary to make room to those who work for the process, to the real worker, popular, peasant and student leaders who are involved with their social sectors and reflect them directly. Organisation of the honest and consistent sectors is lacking.

For a long time we have denounced these problems. During the “yes” campaign we have maintained our critical vision, as have done also thousands of compatriots in the battalions of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela [The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) was proposed by Hugo Chavez during the electoral campaign of 2006. Most parties supporting the Bolivarian government have joined the PSUV, and the bulk of the far left also decided to participate grouped inside Marea Clasista y Socialista – ed]. and the social movements. In all the demonstrations for a “yes” vote we breathed the atmosphere of support for Chavez and the process, combined with a critique and the intuition that great problems remain. We have for our part thousands and thousands who support Chavez, together. We have been on the streets to support the demands of employees, peasants and those in need of decent housing. We have debated together so that the PSUV does not transform itself into a new bureaucratic body, or something similar to a new ministry or mission, as claim certain sectors of the apparatus who have controlled the functioning of its first months of life. We are also a big sector who have been the vanguard of the campaign for the “yes” vote and we will not accept that Congress now tries to maintain the bureaucratic vices which have led to the current situation.

To emerge from this situation and so the process can deepen, power should really pass into the hands of the people and its organisations. The Congress of the PSUV should transform itself into the most democratic body in which we can all express, propose, criticise and decide for the good of the Bolivarian revolution, without restrictions or bureaucratic interference which blocks a free discussion. We have an immense confidence that

with hundreds of thousands of compatriots we can continue the socialist project and confront on this road any right wing attempts. But confidence should go in hand with unity and organisation, by building a common space to debate all these themes. We offer the publication of Marea and our meetings so that they are a place and a tool in the service of these necessities. It is indispensable that the most conscious and honest rank and filers and militants of the process dispose of common spaces.

With the hundreds of class-conscious union and popular leaders of the country, and with tens of thousands of militants of the PSUUV, we have been where we should be, with the Bolivarian people, confronting the empire and the right in making the maximum effort to deepen the revolution. We are satisfied with this. This task continues to be necessary and that is why we reaffirm our commitment to the revolutionary process as well as our demands for resolution of social problems, by seeking ways of giving the workers and the people the social conquests which were in the reform project. We repeat our proposal to transform the congress of the PSUUV into the most democratic body, where the rank and file could express themselves and decide, bypassing the bureaucracy and the constituted government. All should be able to propose, express, criticise, that is the most important need. Of course, Chavez has the right to express his opinions and proposals. But he has also the responsibility of listening to the rank and file and to open himself to the changes that reality imposes.

Caracas, December 3, 2007

* *Stalin Pérez Borges, Vilma Vivas, Marco García and Ismael Hernández wrote this statement in the name of Marea Clasista y Socialista following the defeat of the referendum for reform of the Constitution of December 2, the “no” having won 51% of the vote.*

► *Marea Clasista y Socialiste is a grouping of revolutionary left militants in Venezuela who have decided to join the United Socialist Party.*

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The United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bali An Initial Balance Sheet

[Daniel Tanuro](#)

How should we judge the outcome of the Bali Conference? The fact that the IPCC targets were not explicitly and directly included in the roadmap has led some to call it a pointless meeting, a victory for the USA, etc.



This view was expressed by George Monbiot in his Guardian column on December 17 [1] (“we have been suckered by the US, once again”). This analysis is questionable.

The media focused on the quantitative recommendations of the IPCC and the EU-US arm wrestling over the reference to these recommended targets in the roadmap. This is an important issue, but the focus can be misleading. From the organizers’ point of view, the conference was not a failure. The meeting decided to negotiate an agreement to replace Kyoto. The stated objective is to adopt new agreement in 2009, at the fifteenth conference of the parties in Copenhagen. It will establish a “long-term global goal” and “urgently enhance the implementation of the Convention (UNFCCC) in order to achieve its ultimate objective “(to prevent dangerous degradation of the climate). This will require “deep cuts in global emissions.” The preamble emphasizes “the urgency to address climate change as indicated 4th Assessment Report of the IPCC.” Etc.

The compromise is not a win for Bush

The Bali roadmap was signed by all of the delegations. A careful reading shows that the compromise with the United States mainly involves the following points:

► There is no direct reference to the recommendations of the IPCC figures in the text, only an indirect reference in the preamble, a footnote that refers to specific passages of the 4th IPCC report where the recommended figures appear. The US victory on this point is largely symbolic — although not entirely, as I discuss in detail below.

► The roadmap maintains the concept of different treatment of developed countries (they must accept “quantified emission limitation and reduction objectives”) and developing countries (they must undertake “appropriate mitigating actions in the context of sustainable development, supported by technology and enabled by financing and capacity building”).

► The formula for developed countries (“commitment or mitigation actions”) leaves the USA, which rejects fixed reduction targets, some manoeuvrability. But its room for manoeuvre is very limited. Indeed, immediately after that sentence, in the same point, the text clearly poses the need for “reduction targets and quantified emission limitations.” It says explicitly that these goals must be “measurable, reportable and comparable.” This is exactly what the US has refused to accept for 10 years.

The compromise is not a win for Bush. Rather, it anticipates the rather predictable shift in the US political climate after Bush leaves. To understand this, three factors need to be considered:

1) **The increasing isolation of the Bush position in the USA.** As the conference opened, the US Senate began discussion of the proposed Warner-Lieberman bill to impose emission reductions on sectors representing 80% of the American economy [2] A McKinsey study commissioned by Shell and various companies in the electricity sector concluded that by 2030 the USA can reduce its emissions by half compared with forecasts, at minimal cost, using existing technologies, and save money in 40% of cases (BusinessWeek, Dec. 14, 2007). Increasingly, large companies want quotas and a long-term plan (See for instance the Financial Times, Dec. 12, 2007: “Business lobby demands emissions goals”).

2) **The increasing isolation of the United States on the international scene.** The unplanned 13th day of the conference was spectacular from this point of view. US obstruction and arrogance provoked widespread protests, notably by representatives from the South. When asked a few days earlier about the lack of American leadership in the fight for the climate, James Connaughton, head of the President’s Council on Environmental Quality, told reporters that “the US will lead but leadership implies that others fall in line and follow.” In the plenary, the representative of Papua New Guinea retorted: “If for some reason you are not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us. Please get out of the way.”

Pressure on the United States reached a peak when the EU has threatened not to participate in the coming “Major Economies Meeting” in Hawaii (these MEM meetings were proposed by Bush at the G8 in Heiligendamm, as a contribution to the struggle against global warming on basis of voluntary targets by the big emitters).

A major turning point: the involvement of the South

3) **The increasing involvement of the South, particularly the large emerging economies** (Brazil, India, China, South Africa). This group’s mood has changed. Several representatives clearly expressed willingness to participate in the common effort, but in a framework of “differentiated responsibility” (as posed in the UNFCCC). Brazil’s Environment Minister: “even if developing countries do not have historic responsibility for climate change, they must act.” China’s representative: “The unprecedented severity, depth and breadth of the impact of climate change, mean that it cannot be solved by the efforts of developed countries alone” (Le Monde, Dec. 18, 2007).

As the Christian Science Monitor wrote: “In the past, analysts say, industrial countries cut the deals and essentially presented developing countries with the results. No longer.” (Dec. 17, 2007). The “Group of 77 plus China” (which actually includes 123 developing countries) clashed hard with the USA, especially when it rejected an amendment on technology transfer and financing for adaptation.

Behind these developments is the unprecedented influence that expert scientific reports on climate change have had on political decision-makers. Governments that stand in the way (USA, Canada, Japan, Russia, New Zealand) can no longer claim that the science is uncertain, and it is very significant that they did not make that argument in Bali. These governments are in an awkward position because now they can only argue from economic or strategic concerns. In the final analysis such arguments do not outweigh the seriousness of the climate crisis, even in neoliberal circles.

New challenges, new dangers

Hervé Kempf’s evaluation [3] of Bali, in Le Monde (Dec. 18, 2007) appears to be much more realistic than Monbiot’s. “A done deal ... The global agreement leading to Copenhagen, and the new attitude of the countries of the South, means that the ball is now in rich countries’ court. They can no longer just talk about numbers: they must actually implement them.”

Indeed. We are no longer in a stable situation. Bali has moved us into a transition period that may result in a new global agreement that is different from the Kyoto Protocol. This period involves new challenges and new dangers. We must take this into account and prepare for it.

What challenges, what dangers? Hervé Kempf is silent on those questions. By contrast, George Monbiot is correct to some degree when he describes the agreement as possibly “worse than Kyoto,” even if he does not say how it would be worse. We can note three issues

1) The absence of any explicit mention of the IPCC's recommended targets is clearly not without consequences. It opens opportunities for nitpicking and sharp-dealing. For example, on the key issue of the reference date for emission reductions, the proposed Warner-Lieberman bill proposes a reduction goal of 70% — but compared to 2005, not compared to 1990.

Arnold Schwarzenegger has already played this trick: the Californian climate plan promises a 25% reduction in 2020, but only compared to what the level of emissions in 2020 would be otherwise. In fact, despite the sticker shock figure, the result will be less than what California would have had to reach in 2012 if it had ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

In the same way, at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Angela Merkel spoke about a 50% reduction in 2050 without mentioning the reference date. By all accounts, the European Union may not be unhappy with the fact that the IPCC recommendations are not explicitly mentioned in the Bali roadmap. We need to watch this, and other similar issues, very closely.

2) The discussions and decisions in Bali emphasized a neo-liberal approach to climate policy. In this respect it must be stressed that the goal is to negotiate a new global agreement — within the UNFCCC framework, of course, but a new agreement nevertheless. This means that certain relatively positive features of the Kyoto Protocol [4] are not assumed as starting points, that many questions are now reopened. This could mean including nuclear projects in the Clean Development Mechanism, eliminating penalties for non-compliance with commitments, or changing the balance between CDM and domestic efforts to reduce emissions (if not abolishing any limitation to the CDM, as proposed by Nicholas Stern in his report on the economics of Climate change). These are obviously extremely important issues.

In one case protections included in Kyoto have been already undermined by decisions made in Bali. Under Kyoto only projects involving newly planted trees qualified for emissions credits under the CDM. The Bali conference decided to extend this to the protection of existing forests against deforestation, and even against degradation. Here, although the environmental associations don't understand it, the road to hell is truly paved with green intentions.

Obviously a halt to the destruction of rainforests in the Amazon, South-East Asia and elsewhere would be welcome — but not if it produces emissions credits so cheaply that they allow developed capitalist economies to defer or avoid essential reduction efforts at home. That is the real goal: protection of forests is just a pretext.

According to Stern, a tonne of carbon generated by protecting existing forests would cost \$5, compared to \$10 currently in the European trading system. The World Bank has already created a fund just for this purpose. In that situation, we can guarantee that the

rights of indigenous communities in the forests will not bear much weight. For example, nomadic cultivation and livestock grazing in clear forests may well be labelled as “deforestation” or “degradation.” Experience to date reveals no shortage of examples of such rulings. (See for instance “How do CDM projects contribute to sustainable development,” Tyndall Center for Climate Change Research. June 2004).

Similarly, some voices in Bali urged that the export of new technologies for carbon capture and sequestration, involving high-pressure injection of CO₂ into deep geological deposits, should also qualify for CDM credits.

At the same time, calls to end the scandal of emissions credits acquired cheaply by burning HFC-23 went unheeded, as were calls for a general overhaul of the CDM system to put an end to fraud, corruption and abuse (Read about the HFC-23: “Truth about Kyoto : Huge Profits, Little Carbon Saved », Nick Davies, The Guardian, June 2, 2007).

Profound threats to the poorest

3) A third challenge and danger relates to the poorest countries. It is they who will pay the price if the governments of developed countries and the dominant classes of the large emerging countries reach an agreement. In this regard, the discussions and decisions about the “Fund for adaptation” are very revealing. Created in Nairobi in 2006, the adaptation fund relates to the least developed countries (LDCs), to use the official euphemism. These LDCs, the main victims of climate change, do not have the financial, technological or human resources to adapt. In Nairobi, it was decided that an adaptation fund would be financed by a 2% levy on CDM projects. This alone is unjust, because it means that the money available for adaptation in the poorest countries depends on the volume of investment from developed countries in emerging countries (where the vast majority of CDM projects are), and not on the needs of the people at risk in the LDCs.

The money available under this formula is insufficient: according to UNFCCC estimates, the fund could raise \$300 million a year from now to 2030. By way of comparison, the damage caused by the cyclone that recently devastated the coasts of Bangladesh is estimated at four to five billion dollars. In fact, under Nairobi logic, an increase in the fund's resources would require expansion of the CDM, and that will undermine the principle that CDM projects must be additional to (not substitutes for) emissions reductions in developed countries, a principle that is enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol.

But that's not all. The Bali conference decided that the adaptation fund will be managed by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), in association with the World Bank. The LDCs opposed this decision because

the GEF operates on the principle of “one dollar, one vote,” meaning that the fund’s backers — the rich countries — will control the adaptation policies of the poorest countries. Based on the LDCs’ past experience with the GEF, we can expect its policies to be at least as damaging as climate change.

Tentative conclusions

What does all this mean? Essentially two things:

1) Worldwide social mobilization for the climate is more necessary than ever. The demonstrations that took place in various countries on Dec. 8 (and in Australia a month earlier) are an example and a starting point. We must build the widest possible unity around the simple idea that the climate agreement now being negotiated must fully incorporate the IPCC’s recommended targets:

- ▶ A 25%-40% reduction in the emissions of industrialized countries by 2020;
- ▶ Total global emissions must peak within the coming 10-12 years, then begin to decline absolutely;
- ▶ Total global emissions must be cut 50-85% by 2050.

2) Within this united mobilization, it is increasingly urgent to build an anti-neoliberal pole that links the climate issue to defence of social justice and the need for redistribution of wealth, from North to South, and within all societies in both North and South.

We have two years until the Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen in 2009. Those two years will be decisive for the climate and for an alternative to neoliberal climate policy.

An earlier version of this article, in French, was published in [Europe Solidaire sans frontières](#), Dec. 20, 2007. The translation of the expanded article was done by [Climate and Capitalism](#). It has been reviewed by the author and appears here with his kind permission.

▶ Daniel Tanuro is an environmentalist and the ecological correspondent of the newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party (POS/SAP, Belgian section of the Fourth International), “*La Gauche*”.

NOTES

[1] George Monbiot, [Guardian, December 17 2007](#).

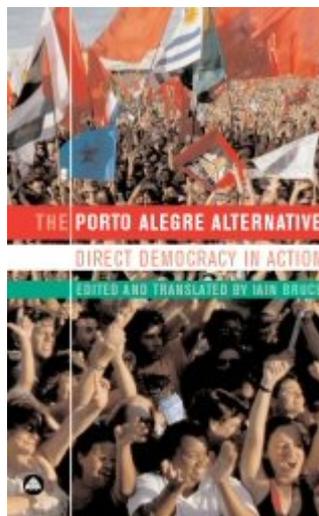
[2] See [Post-Kyoto is likely to be very liberal...](#)

[3] See at [Europe Solidaire](#).

[4] See my article “[Post-Kyoto is likely to be very liberal](#)”.

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The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action



The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action

Iain Bruce editor
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Brazilian socialists André Passos Cordeiro, Ubiratan de Souza, Pepe Vargas, Raul Pont and João Machado describe in The

Porto Alegre Alternative how Porto Alegre's participatory budget was born, how it works, how it developed in interaction with popular movements and spread with local Workers' Party (PT) victories, and how it has staked out new ground in promising a radically democratic alternative in the interests of the poor to top-down political and economic decision-making. They argue that the 'Porto Alegre' model does offer an alternative to capitalist politics as usual, but that Brazilian President Luis Ignacio da Silva ('Lula') unfortunately does not seem to have learned its lessons.

As editor Iain Bruce writes, the participatory budget's linkage of socialism and direct democracy takes up 'an inescapable task for those seeking to restate the case for socialism in the twenty-first century, in an idiom that makes sense to the new generations coming to politics after Seattle and the immense movement against war in Iraq'.

Iain Bruce is a British journalist and filmmaker who has made documentaries for Channel 4 and the BBC. His latest documentary touches on Porto Alegre and its connection with the wider global justice movement.

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