

INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT

News & analysis from the Fourth International – January 2009 # 408

France: “From NCR to LPA ”



Israel Slaughters Over 760
Palestinians

Argentina: Renationalization of a
pension system facing a black
hole

Interview from Gilbert Achcar Irish
Left Review

Palestine Behind the Gaza
Massacre

Also in this issue:

Greece On January 31, the Greek
anti-capitalist left will launch the
perspective of its convergence!

Sources and Dynamics of the
Revolt

Sri Lanka - Withdraw case
against NSSP leader Chamil
Jayaneththi

World Social Forum in Belem
Radicalize the alternatives

Pakistan
A government in pandemonium

USA
Reading, Writing and Union
Building

Bailing out Banks, Smashing
Unions

What Obama's Victory Means
about Race and Class

In this issue

From the LCR to the NPA2
 Break Links With Apartheid Israel4
 Renationalization of a pension system facing a black hole5
 Interview with Gilbert Achcar from Irish Left Review8
 Behind the Gaza Massacre12
 On January 31, the Greek anti-capitalist left will launch the perspective of its convergence!.....13
 Sources and Dynamics of the Revolt14
 Withdraw case against NSSP leader Chamil Jayaneththi20
 Radicalise the alternatives21
 A government in pandemonium22
 Reading, Writing and Union Building24
 Bailing Out Banks, Smashing Unions26
 What Obama's Victory Means About Race and Class ...29

International Viewpoint

IV is the English-language review of news and analysis published under the auspices of the Executive Bureau of the Fourth International. appears in a monthly .pdf document and online at:

www.internationalviewpoint.org

We reply on readers' donations.-- By bank transfer to Barclays Bank,
 876-878, Stockport Road,
 Manchester M19 3BP,
 Britain;
 Account number 40259691;
 Sort code 20-26-20

From outside Britain,
 Our IBAN code is: IBAN GB30 BARC 2026 2040 2596 91.
 Our bank's SWIFTBIC code is: BARCGB22.

By post to IV, PO Box 1109, London, N4 2JU, Britain. The Fourth International also publishes reviews in French, Spanish and German. You can visit them online at these locations: Inprecor, French language journal
<http://www.inprecor.org/>
 Punto de Vista Internacional, Spanish-language journal
<http://puntodevistainternacional.org/>
 Inprekorr, German-language monthly magazine
<http://www.inprekorr.de/>

France

From the LCR to the NPA

Contribution by LCR veterans

Daniel Bensaïd, Alain Krivine, Pierre Rousset, François Sabado

This contribution was written as part of preparations for the January 2009 congress of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). The congress agenda includes the political "self-dissolution" of the LCR, to set the stage for the new challenge of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). The authors of this piece belong to the generation of activists from the 1960s and 1970s; so while principally addressed to members of the LCR, it may be of interest to many others.

by H. Adam, D. Bensaïd, F. Coustal, L. Crémieux, J. Guillotin, S. Johsua, A. Krivine, O. Martin, C. Poupin, P. Rousset, F. Sabado, R. Vachetta



The LCR's weekly newspaper, Rouge

For 20, 30 or 40 years now, we have built the LCR.

Today, we are fully part of the constituent process leading to the launch of the NPA. We approach this new enterprise with confidence thanks to – and not in spite of – what the LCR has accomplished over these past few decades. This is a momentous development; the LCR's decision to dissolve itself in order to take up a broader challenge is a rather exceptional event in the history of the French working-class movement.

We are able to take this gamble because we are not beginning from scratch. It is no accident that — of all the groups within the

French and even international revolutionary Left – it is the LCR that has taken such an initiative. We are the product of a particular history of the revolutionary movement – the fusion of a current of Trotskyism with the youth radicalization of the 1960s. We are a non-dogmatic current of revolutionary Marxism that has been able to preserve fundamental elements of continuity in the history of the working-class movement, particularly in relation to Social Democracy and Stalinism. These include the defence of a program of demands that are both immediate and transitional towards socialism; a united-front policy that aims for mass mobilization of workers and their organizations; a policy of working-class unity and independence against any type of strategic alliance with the national bourgeoisie; opposition to any participation in governments in the advanced-capitalist countries that merely manage the State and the capitalist economy; and unflinching internationalism.

Unlike other currents, we have endeavoured to incorporate a wide range of new factors into our political tradition: the post-war evolution of capitalism; active solidarity with the anti-colonial revolutions and with the anti-bureaucratic movements in the Eastern bloc; an analysis of the new social movements such as the women's movement and, today, growing eco-socialist awareness in the face of the ecological crisis; and, above all, ongoing examination and enrichment of one of the key points of our program, socialist democracy.

This is a trademark of the LCR. The LCR has been able to ensure the continuity of the Left Opposition's struggle against Stalinism. What is more, unlike most currents of the revolutionary Left in France and in a whole host of countries, it has also upheld the principles and practical application of democratic and pluralistic organization and functioning. Throughout its history, taken together, our sensitivity to this question and our democratic and pluralistic internal functioning have enabled the LCR to provide a home for a series of currents and organizations with different origins and political cultures. And it has meant that the LCR is now in a position to build something with other forces and to embrace the new challenge of the NPA.

The NPA is the result of the political work of recent years, especially of our contribution to the renewal of the social movements and of the success of the presidential campaigns of 2002 and 2007 around Olivier Besancenot. But the idea goes back much further than that.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the collapse of the USSR and of the Eastern-bloc countries, combined with neo-liberal capitalist globalization, brought one historical cycle to a close and opened another. "New epoch, new program, new party": this was a three-pronged approach towards thinking about the new historical period. Political action would be framed by a new set of parameters. It would henceforth be possible to overcome the divisions that had separated the many revolutionary and anti-capitalist currents born in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Of course, we were uncertain about the new organizational forms, characteristics, limits and dynamics. But the question was posed, on both the international and national level. Internationally, we took initiatives through international conferences and went through a number of experiences, each with its own specificities: the PSOL in Brazil, after the experience of the PT; Sinistra Critica in Italy, after the experience of

Rifondazione Comunista; Respect in Great Britain and the Scottish SSP, before the splits in these two organizations; the Left Bloc in Portugal; and the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark.

In each one of these processes, some questions were settled – especially around the matter of the relationship with political power and participation or not in centre-Left and social-liberal governments. These questions led to the split of PSOL from the PT and Sinistra Critica from Rifondazione Comunista. They also underlie our differences with the leadership of Die Linke in Germany, which has declared its support for parliamentary and governmental alliances with Social Democracy.

The NPA will be clearly defined politically. Its preliminary documents set out some unmistakable terms: class struggle and support for all the struggles of the exploited and oppressed; unity in action of workers and their organizations; a break with the capitalist system; an eco-socialist project; opposition to any policy of managing the capitalist economy and the central executive powers of capitalist institutions; the struggle for a workers' government; the revolutionary transformation of society; socialist democracy; and an internationalist program and practice. To be sure, a number of questions will remain open: the nature of revolutions in the 21st century; problems of the transition to socialism; and a whole range of other questions having to do with the reformulation of the socialist and communist project. But we are not beginning from scratch; and the NPA will collectively determine its own positions on the basis of new common experiences.

It is therefore not a matter of building a revamped LCR. We don't only want to build a broader party; we want to build a party that is a new social and political reality. It will be pluralistic. It will take the best of all the revolutionary traditions of the working-class movement and of other movements such as eco-socialism. Its goal is to bring all anti-capitalists under one roof.

The NPA will be an internationalist organization, in charge of its own policies on international matters. It will not be a section of the Fourth International (which is a specific international political current). As a pluralistic party, the NPA cannot join the Fourth International (FI) as such. The process of building a new International – which has always been and remains our goal – will be long and complicated. The building of anti-capitalist formations in individual countries will not take place in synch with the building of a new international grouping. As allowed for by its statutes, we remain members of the FI, with ties to the LCR comrades elected to its leadership bodies. Given the role the LCR plays within the International, we have proposed that the NPA continue to shoulder a number of tasks for which the LCR was responsible within the FI.

We are also proud to have passed on to a new generation not only a part of our political heritage but also the full range of leadership responsibilities – without the turmoil and crises of succession that most parties experience. Credit for this goes equally to the older generation, the youth and those somewhere in between. As the LCR dissolves into the NPA, though, we make a specific appeal to the sense of responsibility of LCR members. Their experience and training are vital to the building of the NPA. They are among the preconditions for the new party's success, and for the successful synthesis of new and old.

Everyone should get fully involved, as we have decided to do ourselves. Without a doubt, this will be a remarkable exercise in learning to speak with broader sectors, in paying special attention to the vocabulary we use, in learning to listen to and respect others, and in learning from them without underestimating what we bring to them ourselves. After the NPA founding conference, every comrade from the LCR should get involved in building this new project, for which we have fought for so many decades.

15 December 2008

Translation: Raghu Krishnan

► *Daniel Bensaïd is one of France's most prominent Marxist philosophers and has written extensively. He is a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).*

► *Alain Krivine is one of the main spokespersons of the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire*

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

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

Other recent articles:

France

[Where is the radical left going?](#) - November 2008

[Toward the Foundation of a New Anticapitalist Party](#) - November 2008

[The New Anti-capitalist Party shakes up the left](#) - November 2008

[New anti-capitalist party gets underway!](#) - July 2008

[A new political factor emerges](#) - July 2008

Fourth International

[70 years ago: the founding of the Fourth International](#) - October 2008

[A conference full of hope](#) - June 2008

[Report on the International Situation](#) - April 2008

[Greg Tucker: towards a tribute](#) - April 2008

[LCR calls for new anticapitalist party](#) - February 2008

Israel Slaughters Over 760 Palestinians

Break Links With Apartheid Israel

Unions must build direct solidarity

Socialist Resistance

Since Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza, the Zionist rulers have maintained it as an open air prison and most of the time as a shooting gallery. Now they have made it an extermination camp. The premeditated slaughter of more than 760 Palestinians, one-third children, with more than 3,500

wounded has horrified the world and especially the Arab masses, who sympathize with the Palestinians.



The Palestinian people have been relegated to the status of vermin in their own land by the Zionist colonizers and their U.S. imperialist backers. In the Zionist treatment of the Palestinians the Arab masses recognize the contempt that the imperialists have for them, and the sight of it rubs salt in their wounds. They have suffered this bitterness and have harboured a justifiable hatred for their oppressors for decades without finding an effective outlet. Today their outrage can only become deeper; in time it will eventually overwhelm the neo-colonialist rulers of their own countries, who connive with the Zionists and the imperialists.

The Zionist colonization aims to condemn the Palestinians to hopelessness, which mirrors the hopelessness of all the Arab and Muslim peoples and all Third World peoples suffering under the economic dominance and exploitation of the imperialists. Egypt, by far the largest Arab state, in particular seethes with such frustration, both because of the collaboration of its brutal dictatorial rulers with imperialism and the failure of the promises that the road out of poverty would be opened by cooperation with world capitalism's economic overlords in the so-called Infitah (open door policy), which paralleled the peace with Israel. The Camp David Accords with Israel were a political capitulation, the Infitah, which opened up Egypt to imperialist economic exploitation, was a corresponding economic capitulation.

Egypt, the only Arab state to border on Gaza, is openly collaborating with the ongoing Zionist massacre. The international press reported that Egyptian border guards are firing on Palestinians trying to flee from Gaza. That is a violation of a fundamental human right, the right of flight, the right of refugees to international protection. Paradoxically, the Zionists' real objective is to drive out the Palestinians, but they want to crush them first. Palestinians will fight to stay in their country, to hold onto to their land, to resist the Zionist colonizers. But some may want to flee to save their lives or the lives of their children. If they want to, they have that right, and it is protected by international law and humane tradition. It is an outrage that Israel and Egypt are denying them this basic human right.

Egypt could also end the Zionist economic siege of Gaza. It need only open the border. Palestinian forces were able to force their way through at one point and keep the border open for a few days. But Egypt closed it again and reinforced it. That is another outrage. It goes beyond capitulation to Zionism; it is active

collaboration with it. Even the capitalist press has pointed out that the Israeli present campaign is the greatest slaughter of Palestinians since the 1982 massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by Lebanese fascists with the open complicity of the Israeli army. That is the measure of the challenge today.

Can world public opinion allow such a massacre to go on in the full view of the world's peoples? If it does, that will be a grave setback for the advance of civilization in general. The provocations of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups are no excuse for indifference. Acts of resistance can be expected from any human beings subjected to intolerable conditions. Similar acts can be seen every day, everywhere around the world, but the imprisonment of the Palestinians is far worse. Their acts of resistance should arouse sympathy and not censure.

Humanity is one. If one section of humanity is subjected to torture, all of humanity suffers, all humanity is endangered. It is time for all people of good will and reasonable sense to rise to the defence of the suffering people of Gaza. They can force their governments to pressure Israel to end its siege of Gaza.

Israel is and has always been a racist Zionist colonial settler state. It was established in 1948 with imperialist agreement by the physical removal of the Palestinian people from their historic Palestine. Shortly after the original "partition" which divided Palestine in roughly two parts, the imperialist-armed Zionist army organized a war to destroy hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages in order to occupy additional portions of Palestinian. What remains of Palestine today is less than 20 percent of the original homeland to millions, the majority of whom today live in exile and constitute the largest refugee population in the world.

Socialist Resistance, like the vast majority of British socialists, has never recognized the legitimacy of the Zionist State of Israel, just as we reject extending any legitimacy to the conquest and occupation of any nation by imperialist colonizers anywhere in the world, past and present. We support Palestinian self-determination. A democratic secular state should re-constituted on the original Palestine lands, with equal rights for all, and with the right of all Palestinians to return.

We call for the dismantlement of the Zionist structure of the state of Israel, which is a form of institutionalised discrimination analogous to Apartheid in South Africa.

We simultaneously support struggles for a socialist federation of the Middle East and for a socialist Palestine, where all inhabitants, irrespective of religious or ethnic origin, can live at peace in an egalitarian society free from capitalist profit and exploitation.

We demand that the Labour government:

- * Immediately ends all economic, political, intelligence, and logistical aid to Israel.
- * Immediately embargos arms sales to, and from, Israel, including components via a third party.
- * Severs all relations with Israel, including the withdrawal of ambassadors.
- * Withdraws forthwith the charitable status of Zionist fund-raising bodies in Britain.

* Confiscates Israeli government funds invested in the UK, and enable their use for the reconstruction of Palestine.

* Uses its seat on the UN Security Council to initiate a UN Security Council-sanctioned resolution against Israel.

* Supports the efforts to arrest Israeli political and military leaders and to bring them to trial for war crimes.

We call on the labour movement to show its solidarity with the people of Palestine by:

* Supporting the call from Palestinian trade unions and other bodies for a comprehensive campaign of Boycotts, Disinvestment and Sanctions against Israel.

* Establishing direct links of solidarity with Palestinian communities, including through the growing twinning movement.

* Arming the people of Gaza.

* Supporting the Israeli opposition to this oppression, including the scores of young Israelis imprisoned for refusing to take part in the army of occupation.

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

Other recent articles:

[Israel](#)

[Behind the Gaza Crisis](#) - January 2009

[The Lessons of a War](#) - May 2007

[The Limits of Might](#) - September 2006

[Twin Battles](#) - August 2006

[Israel's new Lebanon war](#) - August 2006

Argentina

Renationalization of a pension system facing a black hole

Private mismanagement erodes pension funds by a fifth

[Eduardo Lucita](#)

After the defeat of its project for a system of variable taxes on agricultural products, the Argentine government led by Cristina Kirchner has appeared inclined to seek an exit through the satisfaction of the requirements of the financial markets.



Cristina Fernández de Kirchner
Image: Wikimedia

Thus it let the exchange rate fall, announced the payment of almost 7 billion dollars due to the Paris Club and the reopening of the exchange system to holders of Treasury bills who had not accepted the renegotiation of 2005 - representing some 27 billion dollars. The official argument to justify these measurements was that the country could thus be reintegrated on the international financial markets, whose closure deprived Argentina of access to foreign credits.

Impact of the crisis

The aggravation of the world-wide crisis after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers however led the government to change orientation. The payment to the Club of Paris thus became a declaration "for the future" and the opening of the exchange of old Treasury bills to those who had refused it in 2005 was frozen. Only the renegotiation of the so-called "guaranteed loans" - bonds given to the banks in 2001 which should bring them 4.5 billion in total in 2009 - remains an actuality.

At the same time, amid general surprise, the president announced the nationalization of private pensions, which implies the automatic transfer of the subsidiaries of the Pension Fund Administration Company (AJFP) to the state system.

This decision had a strong impact on local markets, whether in Chile and Peru which have similar systems, or Spain which has important investments in the area and fears state intervention in big companies if the world-wide crisis worsens, seeing here a precedent which could be used for future nationalizations. And it is a fact that the possible expropriation of the air transport company Aerolíneas Argentina is increasingly spoken of.

Some antecedents

In 1994, within the framework of its policy of privatization of the public services, the government of Carlos Menem transferred all contributions to the pay as you go pensions system towards a funded pension scheme. Workers only had 90 days to choose to remain within the framework of the official system and the same was true for new employees entering the labour market.

Argentina thus entered the small club of around 20 countries whose individually funded pensions system was placed under

private management (it should be recalled that in several countries - inter alia Poland, Italy and Sweden - such a system remains under state management).

Some 4 billion dollars per annum were thus transferred to the private sector, accentuating the official pension fund deficit. In addition it represented a clean break with the historic criterion of social solidarity, according to which the active generations finance by their contribution the pensions of the retired generations.

The balance sheet of 14 years

At the beginning of this system, twenty-four private Pension Fund Administrations (AJFP) were created, the majority of them linked to banks, insurance companies and big trade unions. While fighting for the contributions of the affiliates and in competition to attract them, the AJFPs offered reductions on commissions and other costly attractions. Over the decade their profitability fell and there was a significant process of concentration through sales, absorptions and mergers of AJFPs. The trade unions were the first to give up "the business", followed by the banks. They were replaced by international insurance companies. Today only ten AJFPs remain, with some 9.5 million members of whom only 3.6 million pay contributions.

During these 14 years the AJFPs received 15 billion dollars as commission and administrative expenses, which amounted to 20-30% of the capital contributed. The system functioned as follows: the profit of the AJFPs was guaranteed, there was no "entrepreneurial" risk, whereas the capital accumulated by the members depended on the variations of the stock exchange markets and the investment criteria of the companies.

By September 2008 the AJFPs had accumulated a loss of 20% on the capital of the members, highlighting the nature of the private pensions system. It is subject to the logic of the market and equipped for periods of strong profitability, but it does not provide any social guarantee when profitability drops; the investments only bring losses, as it is currently the case.

There are currently 445,000 recipients of the private pension system. For 77% of them the State must contribute to the payment of services. 179,000 receive supplements so that their pension is not lower than the minimum pension established by the law, whereas 33,000 others have lost their capital completely and the state must pay them their pension in its entirety. That represents a cost for the state budget of approximately 6 billion dollars per annum.

Various interpretations and polemics

The government decision led to much polemic and some very varied interpretations:

a) either it was a strategic decision of the government aimed at guaranteeing the payment of pensions in the face of a strong loss of profitability of the AJFPs and the collapse of the system. Currently there is no doubt that the privatization of pensions led to a failure at every level. It does not guarantee the payment of pensions to the beneficiaries of this system, which is why the state ran to its assistance. It did not prove to be useful to the formation of a capital market which would finance infrastructural

work and productive investment, which had been presented as its initial objective. And those who hoped that social security cover would broaden must recognize their error: it went from 60% to 40% today and the tendency is ever downwards.

b) or it is an operation concealing the rescue of certain companies which were on the verge of bankruptcy and which are eager to get out of the business. This is a possibility, although we do not have concrete evidence yet. It appears that certain companies with national capital have made it known that they were ready to negotiate their withdrawal, whereas those with foreign capital were ready to plead their case before the courts. The government for its part estimates that the AJFPs could claim compensation of the order of 1.435 billion dollars and that the State would pay them by publishing new Treasury bills, i.e. by increasing its debt.

c) or the government is seeking to integrate the funds of the private funded scheme in its budget in order to be able to make use of them to face the payment schedules of the national debt which will reach 38.358 billion dollars in the three years to come (see Table 1).

The known estimates indicate that while taking over the private pensions the state would secure an annual flow of about 4.1 billion dollars (contributions), usable in budget revenue, and that it would recover for the social security administration (ANSES) investment funds valued at around 30 billion dollars (55% of these funds are invested in state treasury bills and only 10% can be immediately available - see Table 2). Thus the State would have an assured financing because it can invest Treasury bills guaranteed by these funds.

d) or the national government will get share packages in some 40 companies, currently forming part of the investment funds of the AJFPs, which will enable it to intervene in the decisions of the companies. That will depend on the type of shares concerned and for the moment there is no clarity on this subject.

Conclusion

Currently the private pensions system is not sustainable. The state has been obliged to transfer increasingly more resources to support it. Those who question the ill-considered renationalisation forget that this system was already created in a constraining way and that the State has transferred billions of dollars to the AFJPs.

Those who assert that the funds deposited are the private property of each member seem to forget that if these funds were effectively provided by them, they are not at their free disposal. In other words, that they cannot go to the counters of the AFJPs and say "I want my money".

When liberals and neoliberals challenge the political decision and accuse the government of grabbing these funds to improve its tax surplus and to pay its debt - a rather obvious thing - they forget that when they propose to cool the economy, to increase interest rates and to reduce public expenditure, they do it precisely to try to increase the tax surplus with the aim of facing the obligations of the state. What is the difference? It is that from their viewpoint if it is the workers and popular classes who pay

the price, it is good. But when the money is taken from the coffers of the financial sector, as it is currently the case, it is bad.

The payment of the debt is questioned. What all and sundry hide is that as long as we focus on the fact "of honouring the debt", and the latter is not analyzed, that we do not distinguish commercial debt from financial debt, or what is legitimate and what is not, this government and any other government which would replace it are obliged to seek the money as the can, because the payment dates are the payment dates. The debt is unpayable and a realistic policy would impose a moratorium until an audit defines which share of the latter was already paid, which part should be and which should not be.

We can summarise the project by saying that in the immediate future it guarantees the payment of pensions while providing the financing to face the obligations of the national debt. But that leaves doubts with regard to the payment of future pensions and the realization of the law of the sliding scale of pensions which was recently approved. How will long-term pensions be financed? And in particular if a significant percentage of workers continue to be employed in the "black economy"?

In my opinion an alternative system should be based on:

- a) a universal minimal pension for all those who reach retirement age;
- b) a pension plan which ensures an income of 82% of the last wage for all those who meet the conditions of age and number of years worked;
- c) the state can manage an individual funded scheme for all those who have the capacity to save and want to pay supplementary contributions;
- d) the system as a whole must be under the control of active and passive workers;
- e) the placing in liquidation of the AJFPs must guarantee employment to all their workers who wish to continue their activity in the state sector.

— -

Table 1: Payment schedules for National Debt (in billion dollars)

Years	Capital	Interest	Total
2009	9,646	3,944	13,590
2010	7,964	3,664	11,628
2011	9,860	3,280	13,140
	27,470	10,888	38,358

— -

Table 2: Composition of the investments which would pass to the ANSES

State bonds	55.5%
Shares	11.2%
Long term investments	7.5%
Foreign securities	6.5%
Others	19.3%

► *Eduardo Lucita is a Director of the Marxist review Cuadernos del Sur, and member of the group Economists of the Left (EDI).*

Other recent articles:

[Argentina](#)

[Argentina: Fresh Air, Old Storms](#) - May 2005

[The end of a cycle?](#) - June 2003

[Solidarity with Brukman workers](#) - April 2003

[The Argentinazo one year on](#) - February 2003

"Out with the lot of them!" - October 2002

Interview with Gilbert Achcar from Irish Left Review

Behind the Gaza Crisis

Gilbert Achcar

The interview was conducted by Daniel Flynn on the 10th of January 2009.

Daniel Finn: What do you think are the chief goals of Israeli strategy at present in their assault on the Gaza strip?

Gilbert Achcar: Well that's a complicated question actually, because there are different levels involved. Seen through a wide angle, it is part of an ongoing struggle between Israel on the one hand and both Hamas and Hezbollah on the other, a struggle which reached a previous peak in 2006, when during the summer Israel was simultaneously waging a war against Gaza and another one, a major onslaught, on Lebanon. That was related to the global strategy of the Bush administration in its confrontation with Iran, with the conception prevailing in Washington that Hamas and Hezbollah are tools of the Iranian state and therefore part of an alliance of forces that should be smashed if ever US hegemony in the region as well as Israeli security is to be stabilized. It is therefore a further stage in the same ongoing war that has been unfolding for the last few years.



Photo: STWC

Now if we narrow the focus, the fact that this has been launched at this very moment, starting on the 27 of December, is of course related to shorter term political considerations: on the one hand, the Bush Administration will soon be out of the scene and although the Israeli government have no real reason to fear a major change in US policy in the Middle East, if we judge from all the signs given by the Obama team, there remains the prospect that the new Administration will get into talks with Iran, as Obama said he would during the electoral campaign. In that case, US backing for a tough stance in the confrontation with Iran might be diluted. Taking that into consideration, one reason why the campaign is being launched right now is in order to

spare the next administration the need to cope from the beginning with a major crisis in the Middle East, so there was relief in the Obama team that this is done under Bush.

The problem is that the operation went on much longer than expected, as is now a recurrent pattern in Israel's aggressions: bygone indeed are the days of the 'Six-Day War'. Ideally for the Israeli government-and there were a lot of comments about this possibility some months ago-there should have been a strike against Iran itself before the Bush administration left the scene.

However, that became impossible for a number of reasons related to the deep trouble in which the Bush administration finds itself: not only the general political weakness of a lame-duck president, but also the economic crisis, which makes any kind of military confrontation with Iran at this point something that would certainly be harmful to the interest of the global economy [this interview was conducted before the revelation by The New York Times of the rejection by the Bush administration of a recent request by Israel of a green light for airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities]. Instead of these strikes against Iran that it was wishing for, Israel is attacking Hamas which it sees as a proxy for Iran.

And then there are even narrower perspectives involved which are the electoral considerations in Israel. As you know, new Israeli elections are to be held soon, and parties represented in the Israeli coalition government-Olmert and Livni's Kadima on the one hand and Ehud Barak's Labour party on the other-are facing strong competition from Likud, the far right wing of the mainstream Zionist scene in Israel. In a sense this onslaught on Gaza is a way to preempt the outbidding on which Netanyahu would certainly have built his electoral campaign. So if you put all these issues into consideration you get an overdetermination, i.e. a multiplicity of reasons for this operation to be launched right now. All the rest, the rockets launched by Hamas and all that, are just pretexts, in the same way that the abduction of 2 soldiers by Hezbollah in July 2006 was but a pretext used by Israel to launch a premeditated full-scale aggression.

Daniel Finn: The last major round of confrontation between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah in 2006 ended in a major setback for the Israeli state and all kinds of recriminations among the political and military elites. Do you think Israel now has a realistic chance of overturning that setback and talking up a victory, or does it face another defeat?

Gilbert Achcar: Well, here lies the reason why the situation is extremely dangerous and worrying right now. Think about it: this onslaught has started on the 27th of Dec so that means we are some 2 weeks into the fighting and you have already a heavier death toll in absolute numbers than what you had in Lebanon after the first two weeks of intensive bombing. And if you take it in relative numbers, knowing that the Lebanese population is close to 3 times larger than the population of Gaza, then it is much, much more. What is very worrying and dangerous about the present situation is precisely that, because of the previous fiasco in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Israel cannot afford another fiasco of the same kind. They cannot afford a new one, for both strategic reasons and opportunistic or short-term ones, small fry political calculations, that is.

On the one hand the Israeli state stands to lose a lot of its so-called military credibility if it faces a new fiasco, all the more so

that the enemy they are facing this time, i.e. Hamas in Gaza, is certainly much weaker than what Hezbollah is and was in Lebanon. Hezbollah is certainly stronger in the Lebanese Shiite community than Hamas is in Gaza where you have a bitter contest between Hamas and the PA/Fatah, and you have a few other groups competing for the same constituency. Beyond that, of course, for very obvious reasons, Hezbollah had much more weapons than Hamas has in Gaza, which is a small strip of land surrounded from all parts and under heavy surveillance. They can smuggle some light weapons, not major weapons into Gaza whereas in Lebanon, Hezbollah could build up an important arsenal - all the more easily that it was done with Syria's backing.

So if Israel gets into a second fiasco even against Hamas which is quite weaker than Hezbollah, then this will be seen necessarily as a major disaster, worse than the 2006 one for Israel. Not to mention, and this is the second point, the petty consideration. If the ruling coalition in Israel comes out from the present war with another fiasco, its parties won't even need to go to elections. Netanyahu would stand to smash them completely and they know that. So they cannot afford a fiasco for these two reasons combined and this is what makes the situation very, very worrying. They might develop the syndrome of the wounded beast, getting more ferocious than they are already. The level of Israeli atrocity is increasing war after war. The 33-Day War in 2006 was already the most brutal aggression in the long history of Israeli wars, the most brutal utilization of power by Israel, carpet-bombing whole regions of Lebanon, civilian areas.

The pretext then as now is that fighters are hiding among the population. This is the most hypocritical argument: what do they want them to do, to regroup in some wasteland with signposts saying 'Bomb us here'? This is preposterous. The truth is that Israel is trying to crush mass political parties, which are armed, of course, but they have to be armed because they are permanently under threat. These are armed popular movements. Most of their armed members are not professional fighters living in barracks. When you take all these aspects of the problem into consideration, there are very, very serious grounds for the mounting, increasing worries that are expressed by international humanitarian agencies.

A lot of people now sense that the population of Gaza is really under threat of massive extermination. This is not the usual kind of exaggeration, it is a sober assessment when you face such a level of violence and brutality, day after day, with more and more so-called accidents in which concentrations of civilians are targeted with mass-murder as a result. The only alternative to a fiasco for Israel is to push forward its ground offensive in the populated areas. The worst-case scenario becomes therefore quite possible, and that would mean thousands and thousands of people killed, not to mention the maimed and wounded, and that is absolutely frightening.

Daniel Finn: If Hamas is going to be seen as a victor even a partial victor coming out of this latest confrontation with Israel, what does it have to do? Is it enough for Hamas to survive? Do they just have to keep standing?

Gilbert Achcar: If Hamas manages to come out of this war standing up, that is. Due to the geographical conditions, they have already suffered a certainly higher proportional rate of casualties in their ranks than Hezbollah did in 2006. The day

when Israeli bombing started, the very first day, if you remember, it targeted buildings of the Hamas security force, and the death toll was immediately very heavy. But if at the level of leadership and basic structure they manage to come out preserving more or less their existence without giving any major concession or, let's say, no major concession that is not reciprocated like, 'We stop firing rockets but we get guarantees that you, Israel, stop shooting at us and stop embargoing us, strangulating us'-if they come out of this war with a deal of this kind, this would mean an Israeli fiasco and this would be seen for them as a political victory in the same way that Hezbollah achieved one in 2006.

But right now at the time we are speaking, this is purely hypothetical because we cannot predict how things will evolve. What is actually clear is that at the regional level, if not at the world level, this Israeli onslaught has increased tremendously the popularity of Hamas. We cannot take it for granted, however, that the same applies to the Palestinians in Gaza precisely because of this competition between Hamas and Fatah. On this there are mixed reports. Of course, Fatah supporters will say 'Hamas have put us in this terrible situation, we are suffering because of them; of course Israel is the first to blame, but...', this same 'but' that we have heard from some Arab regimes. This is what the Egyptian government, which is very obviously in collusion with this Israeli onslaught, expressed from the very start, and that is what we heard here and there from Arab allies of the United States, the same rhetoric we heard in 2006, the same blame that was put on Hezbollah for Israel's onslaught on Lebanon. The final political outcome for Hamas remains to be seen. It is, I think, too early now to make any assessment for what it will be in the long run or even in the medium term. For the time being, as I said, the only certain thing is for Hamas at the regional level an increasing popularity, which is the almost automatic outcome that you get every time Israel singles out an Arab target and starts striking at it. The target becomes automatically popular because of the hatred for Israel and its permanent aggression in the region: any victim of Israel, and especially any force resisting Israel, is sure of achieving popularity in the region.

Daniel Finn: There has been talk over the last week of a certain amount of discontent among a younger generation of Fatah. There have been reports that Marwan Barghouti has sent messages from his prison cell critical of the statements made by Mahmoud Abbas. Do you think that is likely to take on any substantial form with the current leadership of Fatah being undermined; do you think there's any chance of the Fatah leadership changing course?

Gilbert Achcar: Barghouti is in a sense a reserve card for Fatah. Mahmoud Abbas has already burnt his cards to a great degree. He doesn't have any credibility anymore, but appears as a servile man, a secondary pawn in this regional game. He is not popular even within Fatah, so it is clear that Fatah will be in need of another leading figure immediately or very soon, and Barghouti would be an alternative. But since he is in jail, his fate much depends on Israel-and on Washington, to be sure. Now, to know how Barghouti would behave if ever he was liberated from jail is hard to tell. The main problem is what kind of relation he would have with the US and their number one Palestinian stooge Muhammad Dahlan. Dahlan and Barghouti were in electoral alliance in the January 2006 election. Does it mean that they will maintain a collaboration and form a cohesive dominant team in

the post-Abbas Fatah, or will they be in competition? It remains to be seen.

Daniel Finn: As you said the Egyptian regime in particular and to a greater or lesser extent also all of the pro-US Arab regimes, have been seen as complicit with Israel particularly the Mubarak government. If there is further escalation, if Israel behaves, as you described it, like a wounded animal, using more and more brutal methods against the Palestinians living in Gaza, how difficult is it going to prove for the Egyptian government to be able to contain anger among its own people, which already seems to be very substantial.

Gilbert Achcar: Well, they are not only seen as complicit. They are actually complicit with Israel: They were told about the onslaught before it started and this was reported in the press. The day the onslaught started, the Arabic daily published in London, Al-Quds al-Arabi, ran an article by their correspondent in the West Bank explaining that Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, who had been in Cairo the day before, had told the Egyptian authorities that Israel was going to launch an operation against Hamas. General Suleiman, the head of Egyptian intelligence, asked her that Israel targets specifically Hamas fighters and takes care to spare civilians. Well on the same day the article came out the onslaught started, and it started by targeting police barracks in Gaza. So on the face of it, it was an onslaught sparing civilians and specifically targeting armed forces. This proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were told that this would happen and they did not even tell Hamas, which was taken by surprise when the onslaught started, hence the initial heavy death toll in the ranks of its armed forces.

The Egyptian government and other pro-US Arab regimes wish very much for a weakened Hamas. They are not for wiping out Hamas, as they know that it would entail a huge and traumatizing human cost, if it were possible at all. They would like a weakened Hamas that would have no choice then but to sever its links with Iran and be obliged to depend on them for its survival: This is what they wish. They want a tamed Hamas and therefore look for Israel to do the taming. So Israel has to teach Hamas a lesson and then Egypt and, behind Egypt, the Saudis and the Jordanians will say to Hamas: 'Look, you have no other choice but to cooperate with us; either you join the game under our conditions and sever all links with Iran and Syria, or you will have to face Israel alone and the possibility that it crushes you'.

Now if the Israeli operation backfires, they will turn coats immediately, of course, by pure opportunism. They will turn coats and start bashing Israel and multiply statements of condemnation, which don't go very far. The Egyptian regime could upgrade its disagreement with Israel on the issue of international troops on the Egyptian side of the border with Gaza, which Cairo is rejecting and Israel is demanding. There are issues of this kind which could be blown out of proportion, allowing Cairo and fellow Arab regimes to pretend that they do confront Israel, but in a responsible way because they know Israeli military strength and care for the welfare of the people and therefore they are not like those crazy guys of Hamas, etc. This is their kind of hypocritical discourse.

Daniel Finn: Hezbollah organized some very substantial rallies in Lebanon in solidarity with Hamas and in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Is their support likely to remain political or is

there any prospect, as some people have speculated in rather alarmist terms, that Hezbollah might open a second front against Israel on the Northern border.

Gilbert Achcar: I don't think there is any prospect of this kind. It seems that the 3 rockets fired from Lebanon into Northern Israel yesterday were launched by one of the small Palestinian groups linked to Damascus. Hezbollah immediately denied any responsibility and the Lebanese coalition government where Hezbollah is represented condemned unanimously the firing of these rockets. The reality, at this stage, is that you have huge demonstrations and manifestations of political solidarity, but Hezbollah have also drawn the lesson from 2006. If you remember after the 33-Day War in 2006, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said in an interview that had he known that Israel would react the way it reacted to the abduction of its two soldiers on the 12th of July, Hezbollah wouldn't have done it. He was meaning: 'Had I known that they would destroy my country and kill 1500 of my people, I wouldn't have given them a pretext for that'. This is what he meant, addressing human feelings.

At the same time we know that for Israel the abduction was but a pretext: had no soldiers been abducted Israel would have found or created-whatever pretext in order to do what they tried to do at that time. Hezbollah accepted UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which meant deployment not only of Lebanese troops to Southern Lebanon but also international forces, the UNIFIL, although this is not exactly in the interest of Hezbollah since these forces are heavily composed of NATO forces and are therefore a potential threat to Hezbollah itself. They had to accept them nevertheless because the alternative was to carry on with that horrible war and there were human limits on that level. Hezbollah cannot therefore take what would appear to be a completely irresponsible initiative in opening a second front-especially if it gets no green light for that from both Damascus and Tehran.

On the other hand, how can one expect the Lebanese to open a second front, when the Palestinians on the West Bank themselves, including Hamas, are not opening one: Hamas did not fire rockets from the West Bank. This by the way shows how serious an error was Hamas's decision to seize full power in Gaza alone, thus separating the two Palestinian territories. Not that they should not have preempted the coup that Dahlan was busy organizing against them with US and Israeli backing, but they should not have wiped out all Fatah presence in PA institutions as they did. Whereas the strategic need is for the struggle to be built on a pan-regional level, the Palestinian scene itself has been fragmented into two segments. This is a pity.

These events also bring into discussion the whole issue of the strategic choices of weapons. Hamas is resisting heroically, no doubt, but we cannot compare the conditions in Lebanon with the conditions in Palestine. During the years when you had the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah was waging a war of attrition against the occupation, concentrating mainly in Lebanese areas against occupying forces. It even reached with the occupier in April 1996, through US mediation, an agreement which stipulated that: 'Armed groups in Lebanon will not carry out attacks by Katyusha rockets or by any kind of weapon into Israel. Israel and those cooperating with it will not fire any kind of weapon at civilians or civilian targets in Lebanon. Beyond this,

the two parties commit to ensuring that under no circumstances will civilians be the target of attack and that civilian populated areas and industrial and electrical installations will not be used as launching grounds for attacks'. The geographical nature of the Lebanese terrain and the presence of Israeli forces in Lebanese populated areas made a strategy of popular resistance possible, and this triumphed eventually with Israel evacuating Southern Lebanon in what looked like a debacle in 2000.

In the case of Gaza however, Israeli troops had withdrawn from the interior of the Strip and were encircling it. It doesn't make much sense strategically to confront them militarily by launching rockets into populated areas in Southern Israel. The point is that from the point of view of the Palestinian occupied territories, if you drew up a balance-sheet of the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli state since 1967, it is very clear that the peak efficiency of the Palestinian struggle was reached in 1988 with the so-called Revolution of the Stones, the first Intifada, without firearms, suicide bombing, rockets, anything of the kind- just mass mobilization. This is what was most terrible for Israel: it put the Israelis in terrible political difficulty.

There is a lesson to be drawn here. These are matters of strategic understanding which not all forces in the region are sufficiently taking into consideration. There is today a lot of religious-inspired maximalism in the Palestinian struggle, as there was yesterday nationalist-inspired maximalism, but hardly any realistic assessment of the conditions in designing a strategy. Not a strategy of capitulation in the name of 'realism', of course, like that of the PLO-I mean the PA, Arafat and now Mahmoud Abbas-but a strategy of resistance and liberation, of popular resistance to impose on Israel whatever strategic goal is feasible in the present condition. And what remains possible in the prevailing objective conditions is to get Israel to withdraw from the 1967 occupied territories, with the possibility for these territories to organize their own government democratically, to enjoy at least political sovereignty-which is not the case presently when you see how Israel and its Western backers reacted to Hamas's electoral victory.

Beyond this immediate goal, the only sensible long term strategy has to involve a disruption in the Israeli society itself. It cannot be designed as purely from without Israeli society as have been both the PLO's strategy and that of Hamas. There is no possibility to defeat Israel militarily from without: no possibility in conventional terms because its weaponry is much stronger than all surrounding Arab states, not to mention the fact that no part of this environment is willing to confront Israel-not only Egypt and Jordan, but Syria too. A 'popular war' for the liberation of the whole of historical Palestine does not make sense, because Israelis are the overwhelming majority in the pre-1967 territory. This is not like an occupying army, whether the US in Vietnam or Afghanistan or Iraq, or Israel in Lebanon. Beyond that, everyone knows that Israel is a nuclear power since the late 1960s. Any thinking built on destroying the Israeli state from without is therefore irrational, in all senses of the term.

So aside from the requisites of internationalism, i.e. the kind of victory over the Zionist state that is desirable, there is no sensible strategy to defeat it anyway that does not take in account the necessity for a major disruption within Israeli society itself, with a major faction of Israeli society actively opposing the bellicose policies of the Israeli government and fighting for a

lasting peaceful settlement based on justice, self-determination and an end to all kinds of discrimination. This is a major, hugely important prerequisite. That is why the Intifada in 1988 was so important: It created a real, deep crisis within Israeli society.

But what we are seeing now is a very high degree of cohesion and unanimity among the Israelis in the most ferocious, severe and brutal aggression of their history and that is something which bodes ill. In such conditions even when you get fiascos like the one in 2006, what do they produce? Not a break of major chunks of the Israeli population away from its government's policy, let alone with Zionism, and their turning antiwar like major portions of the German population in the First World War or the US population during the Vietnam War, but what you get are rather further shifts to the right. That is why the whole picture is very gloomy in the region because, as I said, if this offensive ends in a fiasco, which is what we wish, we know in advance that this means Netanyahu, who is even worse than the present guys. Where all this will end is very difficult to see.

Daniel Finn: It does appear to be a very dangerous time for the Palestinians and perhaps as dangerous a time that it has faced since 1967. There's talk in Israel media circles, in establishment circles, about handing over the Gaza strip to Egyptian authority, handing over populated areas of the West Bank to Jordan. And if that plan or something similar was put into practice, that would surely be fatal for Palestinian national aspirations for many years to come. What steps do you think could be taken by forces within Palestinian society to improve the prospects of the national movement?

Gilbert Achcar: I don't really see things as you described them. First of all, the Jordanian monarchy itself would be rather scared today if it had to resume control of the West Bank. When this was a real prospect, it had already taken into account the rising militancy of the Palestinians, which is why the plans designed by previous King Hussein were federative in nature, that is, plans giving the West Bank, or the West Bank and Gaza, some degree of self-government. But the problem now is that the Jordanian monarchy cannot rely on the likes of Mahmoud Abbas to tame the Palestinian population. They know that they are facing a very radicalized population and that a new junction, a new merge between the Palestinians on the West Bank and Palestinians in Jordan, where they already constitute a majority of the population, would be very dangerous for the Jordanian monarchy. That's the problem.

A renewed merge of the West bank with Jordan would definitely be in the interest of the Palestinians because the so-called independent state in the West Bank and Gaza does not make sense. This is where I fully agree with those who criticize the two-state solution: A so-called independent state does not make sense in the West Bank, if it is to be held hostage between Israel and Jordan as vice and hammer. Therefore the Palestinian people need the necessary breathing space and outlet provided by Jordan, not to mention the human and familial continuities between the two banks of the River Jordan. There is a natural historical unity of human community between the two banks and for that community to be able to exert self-determination you need a different kind of government in Jordan, a really democratic one and not one where the majority of the population are oppressed by a regime that stirs up ethnical divisions of a tribal nature, as is the case right now.

This is why I don't think that the prospect of a renewed merging of the two banks is one that the Jordanian government is enthusiastic for, or even actively considering. In 1988 King Hussein officially severed the links between his kingdom and the West Bank: Why did he do so? Very simply because in 1988 you had the Intifada in full swing and he understood that the kind of West Bank that the monarchy ruled over since the deal that his father cut with the Zionists in 1948-the West Bank that his monarchy was able to rule more or less without major trouble until 1967 and that came under Israeli occupation afterwards-had become unmanageable in light of the Intifada. It became a hot potato: too dangerous to handle, and that is why he severed the links officially and abandoned any claims for the West Bank.

Daniel Finn: Do you think the Palestinian political stage is likely to remain the property of Hamas and Fatah for the foreseeable future, or do you think that some of the marginal forces at present have any chance of establishing themselves to a greater extent?

Gilbert Achcar: Well I don't really see any such prospect presently. I mean, there are no real challengers for the time being to the two major actors, which are Fatah and Hamas. Other existing forces, especially the Palestinian left, lost credibility throughout the years, after having lost so many opportunities. So one cannot expect a sudden miraculous development, unless some new force arises, which we haven't heard of yet and which would take some time to mature anyway. What you will have under the present conditions are further evolutions from within the two polar forces in Palestinian society-a struggle between different factions within Fatah, and the same for Hamas. Neither of these two forces, because they are big forces and have mass constituencies and memberships, is monolithic. Changes from within them are presently more likely than any unexpected rise of new forces from without.

Now that being said, I wish very strongly that a third force could rise, one which would be a progressive movement based on the left wing tradition that exists among the Palestinians and that is far from being negligible, even in Gaza, although it is not strong enough to be a counterweight to Fatah or Hamas. I wish very much that some Palestinian left-wing force could emerge as a real major player on the scene. But to be frank, for the time being, aside from hope or wish, this is not a realistic prospect, we don't see any premise for that.

[See original 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 It's Consequences'.*

Other recent articles:

[Palestine](#)

"The U.S. is sowing the seeds of a long term tragedy..." - June 2008

[The Crisis in Gaza: Made in Israel](#) - June 2007

[Gaza - Stop inter-Palestinian fighting](#) - June 2007

[The Water Crisis in Gaza](#) - February 2007

12

[Palestine: risk of civil war](#) - January 2007

[War drive](#)

[Pakistan on the flight path of American power](#) - October 2008

[From the Caucasus to the Balkans - an unstable world order](#) - September 2008

[Reject imperialist interference in Georgia!](#) - August 2008

[The Iraqi Debacle](#) - January 2007

[The Politics of the "Surge"](#) - January 2007

[Israel](#)

[Break Links With Apartheid Israel](#) - January 2009

[The Lessons of a War](#) - May 2007

[The Limits of Might](#) - September 2006

[Twin Battles](#) - August 2006

[Israel's new Lebanon war](#) - August 2006

[Gaza](#)

Palestine

Behind the Gaza Massacre

Stand with the people of Gaza!

[David Finkel](#)

The horror in Gaza is not some kind of accident or unexpected disaster. It is a result of events and decisions years in the making. It cannot be understood apart from years of United States policy in the Middle East. And it is most definitely not an act of "legitimate Israeli defense against unprovoked Hamas rockets."



Demonstration in Atlanta

The bombing of Gaza is the massacre of a civilian population. Homes in refugee camps, hospitals, a university and its dormitories with students sleeping inside, vital infrastructure – all have been hit by Israel's "precision bombs." Targets destroyed in the name of "destroying terrorist structures" include police stations and recruits, who are ordinary people not military personnel. Journalists are barred from entering Gaza, so direct accounts of the carnage come mostly from Palestinian bloggers or desperate United Nation relief officials.

The military operation has clearly been planned for months. All during this time, Israel has tightened the blockade of Gaza, with complete United States government approval – cutting off essential medicines including insulin, reducing critical food supplies to barely above starvation level – fully realizing that the Hamas authorities in Gaza would eventually respond with rockets at southern Israeli towns. That was exactly the pretext that Israel's government wanted.

Several hundred Gaza residents, including noncombatant women and children, have been killed and thousands wounded. Even before this onslaught, however, they have been dying from lack of medicines blocked by the Israeli siege. A recent solidarity delegation to Gaza, traveling by boat in defiance of the blockade, was asked by their Palestinian hosts to bring thousands of children's hearing aids – because children in Gaza have catastrophic hearing loss from Israeli noise bombs as well as jets' routine sonic booms.

The Israeli assault is intended to break the back of the Hamas government in Gaza, but it will fail in this, as the Palestinians of Gaza will rally behind Hamas in their solidarity against attack. Therefore, the massacre of Gaza's people can be expected to continue until international outrage forces it to stop. That outrage is quite rightly directed as much at the American government as it is at Israel. The Bush administration, with its proclamation that the elected Hamas Palestinian government "are nothing but thugs," is giving open full support to this crime against humanity.

Palestinians and their supporters are sickened by the complicity of Arab governments, particularly Egypt, in the Israeli-U.S. attempt to destroy the leadership that was chosen through a free election in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The European Union, which extends special trading privileges to Israel, has also done nothing to stop the Israeli blockade of Gaza and now the slaughter of its population. The pressure to force the bombing to end must come from below, from the Global Justice movement and from the outrage of people throughout the Middle East and the world.

Much of the world is awaiting with great hope the arrival of the Barack Obama presidency. Mr. Obama was elected, let us remember, with great majority support both from Jewish and Arab Americans, and his victory was greeted with elation in the Arab world and Israel alike. Tragically, his statements before the election, and his silence now, offer little reason to expect the Obama White House to change U.S. policies which are leading Israel, as well as the United States and the Middle East, toward mutual destruction.

What needs to change? The fiasco known as the "peace process" since the early 1990s has produced no peace, because it was always built on two false assumptions. The first was that Israel would keep the promises it made to halt settlement construction in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and allow a viable Palestinian state to emerge. No Israeli government ever intended to do so. The second assumption was that the Palestinian population would quietly surrender in the face of overwhelming firepower to whatever terms the United States and Israel would dictate. They haven't surrendered, and they won't now.

The Arab American community and supporters of the Palestinian people poured out in Dearborn, Michigan on December 30, lining

the sidewalk on Warren Avenue for a full half mile. At least two thousand people participated in this protest against Israel's murderous bombing of the population of Gaza, so many that a memorial service for the Palestinian martyrs planned for the evening had to be postponed as the crowd overflowed the hall. Another mobilization will occur at Dearborn City Hall on Friday, January 2.

Under this "peace process," the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the siege of Gaza have created a reality worse than existed in South Africa. The world must stand up against this to force the change that is necessary if there is to be peace for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. The growing international efforts for boycott and sanctions deserve full support, to end the Israeli occupation and force the slaughter in Gaza to stop. The only other possible outcomes, all too clearly foreshadowed by what we must call the Israeli-U.S. massacre in Gaza, are new forms of apartheid and ultimately genocide too horrible to contemplate.

— David Finkel, for the Political Committee of Solidarity

► David Finkel is an editor of *Against the Current*, published by the US socialist organization Solidarity (www.solidarity-us.org)

Greece

On January 31, the Greek anti-capitalist left will launch the perspective of its convergence!

Tassos Anastassiadis

The revolt of Greek youth (see the document of the Central Committee of the OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International,) upset political routine, which tended to relegate to the background the contradictions of a capitalism in crisis, in a sadly politicking spectacle, made up of scandals and corruption, of battles between apparatuses without any meaning for people's lives, which get worse every day.



And this upheaval also goes for the anti-capitalist left, which had up until then demonstrated in practice its usefulness in action, but also the limits of its organisational reality. But now a perspective of unification of its forces, already under discussion for some time, has taken a formidable leap forward with the movement of the masses! The bulk of the forces of the Greek far left have agreed to launch a perspective of more systematic

collaboration, by fixing as a first stage a big meeting in an indoor stadium in Athens on January 31, the second phase being a national meeting with elected delegates, which presupposes, of course, considerable progress in establishing structures at a local level all over the country.

The call for the meeting has been launched in particular by the two principal coalitions, EnAntiA and MeRA, which took part in the last legislative elections and which together already bring together a good number of organizations and several thousand militants, but it is not closed. Indeed, there remain organizations and militants who are always sceptical about the possibilities of structural unity of the anti-capitalist left, after so many failed attempts! Indeed, with the exception of the anarchist milieu – wary of political organisation as such – and two Maoist organizations (the ML-KKE and especially the KKE-ML) whose profound mistrust is based rather on organisational patriotism, there is also a part of the anti-capitalist left, certainly small but involving several hundred militants, which is attracted by the sirens of reformism – the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and especially Synaspismos. To build an anti-capitalist left, independent of any manoeuvre that would amount, even disguised behind a radical discourse, to taking part in running the capitalist system – that is the mass challenge that is opening up very concretely today for all the organizations of the far left!

Thanks to the formidable explosion of December – and because today, even though we cannot foresee how this movement will evolve, we can observe its limits – the perspective of building an independent anti-capitalist left, which can make its influence felt in the political situation and in the struggles of the mass of workers, is moving from the phase of preliminaries to that of concrete implementation. Although it will have to overcome the obstacles inherited from a history of the parallel existence of organisations over a long period, organisations which are not very inclined to emphasise the elements that they have in common (which are, however, obvious!), the guideline is clear for everyone: the objective situation requires an appropriate anti-capitalist response !

► *Tassos Anastassiadis is a leading member of the OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International.*

Other recent articles:

[Greece](#)

[Sources and Dynamics of the Revolt](#) - January 2009

[Down with the government of murderers!](#) - December 2008

[Solidarity with the social rebellion](#) - December 2008

[Growing polarization to the left and to the extreme right](#) - October 2007

[The Student Mobilizations Continue](#) - March 2007

Sources and Dynamics of the Revolt

Resolution of the Greece section of the Fourth International

[Tassos Anastassiadis](#), [Andreas Sartzekis](#)

Even though it dates from a month ago, this document of the Greek section of the Fourth International remains very topical: first of all, because it gives an eye-witness description of the formidable Greek youth movement, adding a political analysis that is essential if we do not want to remain about at the stage of the “youthism” that we have seen in quite a few publications over the last few weeks; then, because in this mid-January, the movement, which no longer takes the form it did during its first week, is starting up again, with demonstrations over education and also in solidarity with the Palestinian people, although we can obviously not foresee how it will evolve.

Document adopted by the Central Committee, OKDE-SPARTAKOS in mid-December 2008.



Clockwise, from top left: riot police face protesters; police move in to contain rioting civilians; a protester defies police; burned-out vans; an abandoned barricade; and protesters retreat from tear gas

Introduction

There is one notable difference: although the perspectives that are outlined in the document are more valid than ever (the reshuffle carried out a week ago by the right-wing government does not at all change the profound crisis that it is), a welcome development has taken place. In fact, the movement has produced an electric shock on the far left, by accelerating its understanding of its deficiencies and thus of the need to move into a higher gear in order to build an anti-capitalist left worthy of the name!

The sources of the revolt

The explosion of recent days has its roots in the social discontent that has accumulated over the last few years and it represents the continuation, and not only in a chronological

sense, of the mobilizations in the universities and the big strikes and demonstrations in defence of social security.

The unleashing of the “youth storm” took place in a conjuncture marked both by generalized anger against the government of the New Democracy (ND) and by the “objective” dead end that the workers’ movement found itself in. Indeed, the retreat that the trade-union bureaucracy and the leaderships of the parties of the parliamentary opposition (PASOK, KKE, Synaspismos-Syriza) [1] carried out at the time of the adoption of the reform of social security by the ND government last spring really blunted the combativeness that the workers had shown up until then. Social democracy really did put off the mobilisations until the (Greek) calends, in order to launch into a long pre-electoral phase. [2]

By channelling social protest towards the ballot box, the reformists at that time allowed the government to continue its offensive (privatizations). However, at a point where the Greek economy had been sucked into the world crisis and where the government of Kostas Karamanlis was mired in scandals, the rampant malaise was beginning to demand means of expressing itself. A willingness to take radical action could be perceived a few weeks before the youth revolt, in the unprecedented movement among prisoners, who started a hunger strike to improve their intolerable conditions of detention, and in the wave of solidarity with their struggle that was organized around the prisons. Identical tendencies appeared in the form of struggle decided on by the workers of companies which closed down (the occupation of ALTEC). Nor should we forget the peasant mobilizations that took place in November-December.

On the other hand, even though it is on a very small scale, we have seen some acts of racism, which are characteristic of sharpening social contradictions, and the target of course was immigrants in districts which are losing their bourgeois character (in Patras; in Athens, the district of Aghios Pandeléimonas).

The outburst of anger by the youth, who represent the barometer of the state of mind of society, against police violence, played the role of a valve, by releasing the powerful latent social tension. The assassination in the Athenian district of Exarcheia of the young Alexis Grigoropoulos, 15 years old, was the spark, but not the cause. It is obvious that the entire working class and popular layers had reached the point of rupture with the ND. The working class, student and high-school youth, and the peasants are all, armed by their mobilizations over the last two years, in a situation of confrontation with the liberal policies of the Karamanlis government.

However, the youth revolt does not only reflect this social discontent: it has its own particular characteristics.

The nights of the barricades

On Saturday December 6, the news of the assassination of Alexis struck like a thunderbolt just after 9 p.m. Faced with the police provocation, sectors of the revolutionary left were ready to respond. On Exarcheia Square, it was especially the anarchist milieu [3] that gathered, setting up barricades in the surrounding streets with the help of burning dustbins and confronting the police. And they “barricaded” themselves in the neighbouring

buildings of the Polytechnic School. The far left assembled its forces nearby, in Harilaos Trikoupi Street. Having set up barricades, they confronted the special repressive corps and tried to leave there in a demonstration towards the centre of the city, succeeding in occupying the Faculty of Law. A third block of demonstrators, made up of members of Diktyo (“the Network”) and of the youth of Synaspismos tried to take a demonstration to Omonoia Square. After an agreement among the organisations of the anti-capitalist left, it was decided to organise the following day, Sunday, a demonstration to the police headquarter in Attica. The Syriza coalition decided to take part in this demonstration. During this first night of barricades, it was approximately 2000 people, mostly militants of anarchist groups and of the far left, who clashed for hours with the police. Similar confrontations took place in Salonica.

At midday on Sunday, approximately 10,000 people marched in a demonstration towards the police headquarter, with the participation of the far left and of Syriza. On both sides of the demonstration, there was a massive presence of the anarchists, who very much wanted to have a confrontation with the police. Police using tear gas broke into the demonstration before it reached their headquarters. With their Molotov cocktails, the anarchists set fire to banks, new car salerooms and the entrances to ministries. The far left reformed its ranks and led the demonstration towards Parliament, whereas Syriza dispersed. During the night, there were running battles in the streets of Exarcheia and the neighbouring districts, with the Polytechnic School as the bastion of the anarchists [4] and the Faculty of Law for the far left. A new demonstration was decided on for Monday at 6 p.m.

Syriza hesitated: it made its political support known, while remaining as far as possible from the scene of the confrontations. The KKE was absent. A delegation of its leadership made a protest at the police headquarter. However, under the effect of the social movement, it announced for Monday that it would demonstrate, but on its own, in Omonoia Square, at a good distance from everyone else! So, during this weekend, the immediate response in terms of mobilization against the state and the government came above all from the revolutionary groups, anarchist and far-left. The barricades represented a “general rehearsal” and served as an example for the masses of student youth who were about to take to the streets, heading as of Monday morning towards forms of confrontation.

On its side, the government avoided repeating what it had said in the first few hours, following police sources, namely that the police assassin had acted in a situation of self-defence. It then adopted a passive attitude, confining itself to pushing back and containing the “troubles”. This attitude can be explained by the worsening situation and the rising social tension in which it found itself.

Flames of youth

From Monday, students demonstrated all over the country, laying siege to police stations! They were inspired by the examples of the two previous days, but they also remembered the recent experience of the militant student movement and the big

mobilizations for social security. And over the last couple of years, we also had movements, less broad in scope, of occupations of high schools. Starting from this experience, the student mobilization was impressive, unprecedented, impetuous. Alexis Grigoropoulos was one of them. The mass character of the movement and its readiness to engage in confrontation were not controlled or led by any political organization or current. The political forces were quite simply overtaken! On Monday evening, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Athens to make their voices heard. You could see there, apart from the members of political organizations, whole families, with the older generations, and the new ones who were already becoming politicised. However, the social force which set the tone was the mass of young people, above all the student youth, which, without having any organized links with the anarchist groups, adopted their methods without ever having had any experience of them. Groups of university and high-school students, from different social backgrounds, from all the popular suburbs, Greeks and immigrants, set fire – in the literal sense of the term, without exaggeration - to the centre of Athens. The confrontations with the police were the sharpest that had taken place since the 1970s, and the extent of the damage was unprecedented. The demonstration divided into several parts, so that the police were unable to disperse it, in spite of continuous volleys of teargas grenades. Groups of young people blocked the special police units by incessant stone-throwing in all the main thoroughfares and side streets of the centre of Athens. At the same time, the demonstration the KKE had organised set off, after an agreement with the police, in a direction far from the theatre of confrontation... There was a similar situation in dozens of towns and cities in the country.

Political crisis

When this night was over, the political crisis which struck the right-wing government reached its paroxysm. Repeating what the government itself said, we can say that “law, order and security were dissolved”, in the capital and in other towns and cities, large and small. The next day, the Prime Minister had an urgent meeting with the President of the Republic and the leaders of the political parties, calling for “national unity”. The government issued threats: “reduce the violence or else there will be a state of emergency”. The far-right party Laos and the KKE lined up with the government. The KKE attacked Syriza, saying that it was “caressing the ears of the hooded ones”. [5] PASOK, the largest opposition party, called for elections but also demanded that young people “show some moderation”, condemning violence and calling for peaceful forms of protest. Syriza was the only parliamentary party that called from the beginning for the government to resign. But under the pressure of the political system, it began to distance itself increasingly as the days went by from the “violent character” of the movement.

On Tuesday 9 a massive student demonstration, which set off in the middle of the day, was repressed by the police, and there were confrontations, on a smaller scale than the day before, which lasted until the evening. The government decided to take a harder line and gave the green light for ferocious repression. At the same time, the situation was becoming complicated, since the trade-union organizations had some time previously fixed for the following day a 24-hour general strike against the anti-working class policies of the government! The government asked

the trade unions to cancel their mobilization: the trade-union leadership refused, under the pressure of the anger in the streets. At the same time, it decided not to hold the demonstration that had been planned, from the headquarters of the GSEE confederation to Parliament, but to call directly for a rally in Syntagma Square, in front of the Parliament. The trade-union current of Syriza disagreed, and initially called for the demonstration to take place. Then it abandoned this idea and replaced it with a call for a pre-rally, a short distance from the official rally. In substance, Syriza conformed to the line of the trade-union leadership. The KKE, as it traditionally does (in reality, it operates a split in the trade union movement) called for a rally in Omonoia Square, from there organising a demonstration far from the centre of Athens. It thus conformed to the injunctions of Karamanlis not to demonstrate in the centre of the city. The far left decided to hold the demonstration on the day of the general strike, together with the teachers' unions. [6]

In spite of the campaign of intimidation by the government, a large number of workers took part in the GSEE rally. Because of its successive changes of position, the presence of Syriza was less strong. The demonstration of the far left and of the teachers' unions was made even more massive by the participation of the university and high school student unions which had come into the centre of the city. Following the demonstration general assemblies were held in the Polytechnic and the Faculty of Law, with a very high level of participation. However, trade unions did not move towards organising strike movements; they closed the door to any prolongation of the strike which would have brought the working class into the streets!

First elements for an appreciation of the movement

In this mid-December, the movement is still in a phase of extension, and so the first evaluation that can be made of its nature, its dynamics and its limits remains to be confirmed.

1- Although it is certainly a youth explosion which has the character of an uprising, it is not a generalized social uprising. Nowhere do we see signs of a similar movement in the working class, among rank-and-file trade-unionists, and of course even less so in their leaderships. The perspective of a general strike of a political character is not realistic. After the one-day strike on December 10, the possibility of linking up in the streets with the workers' movement is receding, and in a general fashion the conditions are not ripe for the rapid development of large-scale workers' struggles, in spite of growing discontent and the present readiness of the workers to fight.

2- The youth (student) revolt is firstly and especially turned against the police and against repression. There exists a hatred of the police which is quasi natural, profound and without any prospect of conciliation. That has been verified in the “war of the stones” and in “inflammatory” slogans. For a large section of the youth who took to the streets, this uprising tended to be spontaneously “anti-power”. Consequently it adopts the violent methods of the anarchist groups and is turned against the symbols of the state, the banks and the multinationals. What unites youth with the forces of the left is obviously the anti-government character of the movement. Elements of violence which are due to the specificity of Athens as a showpiece capital are present, but they are not at all sufficient to describe the

foundations of the revolt of young people. If we want to make a comparison with the French example, this revolt resembles to a small extent the movement against the CPE and corresponds more to the uprising of the youth of the suburbs. The starting point is the same: the death of a young person because of the police. At the same time, the social composition and the echo of the two uprisings is radically different: in Greece, what is involved is not minority violence, a revolt of those who are excluded, a voice of despair coming from suburbs that are neglected and left to their own devices. It is the student youth, coming from all layers of society and from the immigrant communities, which is participating, in a united way, and that also goes for the violent episodes. Moreover, we do not see any massive rejection of the movement on the part of the rest of society: even though there is not always support, there is at least a benevolent neutrality. In any case one thing is sure: a whole generation is being abruptly politicized in the circumstances of a revolt and in total rupture with the Right.

3- In spite of the extent of the damage and the violence, up until the fifth day of the mobilizations, the balance of "public opinion" leaned towards condemnation of the police and the government. The fact that the victim was a 15 year old child favoured the expression of sympathy in Greek society. Undoubtedly, we can distinguish various positions towards the movement, which go from open support to a kind of fatalistic resignation in the face of this "social catastrophe" that "we, Greek society" have well deserved! In previous situations, the reaction of the middle classes and the conservative sectors of the working class would have been to react, with the encouragement of the media, by condemning the "troublemakers". This time, whereas the damage to property is much more serious, the reactions are very different: the declaration of the Athens Shopkeepers' Association pointing out that "the damage cannot be compared to the loss of a human life" is characteristic! As for the older generations of workers, they reject liberal government policies, worry about the consequences of the economic crisis and are indignant at the police immunity which has led to the murder of a 15-year old youth, but at the same time, they are not ready to mobilise now, particularly after the discouraging outcome of the mobilizations in defence of social security. For the moment, they have "entrusted" this revolt to their children. In spite of this climate, on the fifth day of the mobilizations, we saw the appearance in two provincial towns of groups of "indignant citizens", at the instigation of the far right, with the aim of "taking the law into their own hands". Considering the strength of the movement, such phenomena have been up to now very limited, but as long as the crisis lasts, there is a danger of them re-appearing.

4- Up to now, there is an absence of real forms of self-organization of all those who are engaged in the struggle. It should be said that the high degree of violence and the scattering of forces which it causes have not allowed the movement to "breathe" and to establish basic structures for itself. The decrease in the number of confrontations, during the day as well as at night, can be combined in the coming days with the establishment of processes which will make possible the organization of the struggle on the level of the schools and universities and of solidarity with the struggle in the workplaces and the neighbourhoods. And in this beginning of the second week, that is under way: according to the secondary teachers' union, 600 high schools are occupied! In the universities, 150 departments are occupied, following decisions taken in general

assemblies. And administrative and municipal buildings are also starting to be occupied, even though the number is still very limited.

5- There is an absence of concrete procedures and concrete demands which would express the voice of all or of the majority of those taking part in the struggle.

The Left faced with the movement

- Syriza has neither the will nor the social forces to exert real pressure on the social democracy of PASOK, with the objective of mobilizing the parties and the trade unions in order to bring down the government. Inside the movement, it hesitates: as has traditionally been the case, its most radical tendencies (mainly the youth of Synaspismos), have been under the political hegemony of the far left. At the same time, as also happens traditionally, the leadership of Syriza enters the movement with hesitation and leaves as quickly as possible. On Thursday December 11 there took place the first demonstration in which Syriza did not take part, in spite of the fact that it had been decided on by the coordination committee of the Faculty of Law in which the youth of Synaspismos participate! Syriza is placed under a double pressure: that of the movement and that of the political system. In the first days it declared its official support and offered its "parliamentary cover" for the mobilizations, but in the following days, it condemned "violence" and showed itself to be clearly in favour of a rapid de-escalation of the mobilizations. One day it formulated the demand of dissolution of the special bodies of police, but the following day withdrew it and replaced it by "democratic control of the police by Parliament". [7] Under such conditions, Syriza is ceaselessly pulled in different directions, at the height of the mobilizations, by a tendency towards the dispersion of its components, something which particularly affects its smaller radical components. Let us underline on this point that the leadership of Synaspismos has found itself forced, under the pressure of the media, not to cover politically the youth of the party. Moreover, the smallest forces of Syriza, which come from the far left, are unable to exert the slightest influence on its political line, just as they do not succeed in developing autonomous political action in the course of events. And concerning the demonstration planned for the day of the general strike, they also let themselves be led by Synaspismos behind the decision of the trade-union bureaucracy and thus did not take part in the demonstration that was maintained by the teachers' unions and the far left! [8]

- The KKE takes a contemptible position of de facto identification with the government when it speaks about groups of agitators, of "hooded ones" and of people being manipulated, in the name a supposed organized class struggle line... represented by itself! [9] In fact, it exceeds in petty-bourgeois conservatism the actual representatives of these layers (shopkeepers, bosses of small companies) who are affected by the damage due to the confrontations. The declarations of the party secretary, Aleka Papanicolaou, are welcomed on the front pages of right-wing newspapers! In its declarations, it attacks Syriza, not from a left point of view, but in the same way as the Right, accusing Syriza of "caressing the ears of the hooded ones". Instead of demanding the resignation of the government that assassinates young people, it succeeds with such declarations in receiving the congratulations of the government and of the far-right party Laos.

At the same time, the youth of the KKE in the universities act - where the relationship of forces is favourable to them - to keep the university departments closed, so that general assemblies which can decide on occupation cannot be held! The KKE has not understood anything about this youth explosion, or does not want to understand anything that happens that occurs outside the suffocating framework of what it controls. It claims to want the politicization of youth but at the same time it sabotages, as soon as they appear, mass mobilizations – the best means of politicizing! - in the universities. Nevertheless, all that is not without cost for the leadership of the KKE: the pressure exerted by the developments of the movement on the militants of its youth wing is considerable, and in spite of the absence of any public expression of criticism (something that the Stalinist character of the party imposes), it is already known that more and more voices of protest are making themselves heard within the party. [10]

- The far left showed right from the beginning a remarkable level of preparation to intervene, and it was united on the barricades, in the street and in the occupation of the Faculty of Law in Athens. It did not “cave in” under the blows of repression at the time of the first great demonstration on Sunday 7 December. Since then it has been at the heart of most of the demonstrations. Faced with the climate of intimidation, it took the risk of holding a demonstration on the day of the strike called by the trade unions. It exerted a left pressure on Syriza to stop it pulling out of the mechanisms of building the movement, and it did not let the anarchist groups have the monopoly of the confrontations. It has launched initiatives to hold general assemblies in the universities and is trying to set up a coordination of sectors of the trade unions. It has also initiated the first attempts to organize the movement in the neighbourhoods. However it remains handicapped by the various tactical considerations of its components and rivalries between leaders, but also by an incapacity to turn out from the occupied university departments. But what characterizes it especially are insufficiencies on the level of political reflection and differences of appreciation within it, which prevent it from being able to propose clear objectives for the continuation of the mobilization. To bring down the government? Yes, but to put what in its place? It does not succeed in functioning as a really visible national political force, nor in exploiting the hesitations of Syriza or the abandoning of the movement by the KKE. Worse still: it does not manage to have a political project to exploit the political weakness of the government. The absence of a broad political regroupment and of the need to “be responsible” to a broad social public is thus not without consequences... And even faced with the erroneous practices of spontaneous anarchism of an important part of the student movement, whereas it is not in the position of being an enemy like the KKE or of taking its distance like Syriza, the far left has not, in the majority of cases, engaged forces proportional to what it could do to make the radical dispositions of youth evolve in its favour. And that is despite the fact that it has the advantage of having been from the beginning at the sides of the young people and not opposite them!

Perspectives

The first phase of the movement - spontaneous, particularly violent and made up of confrontations, is pretty much coming to an end. In this second week, which is getting under way, what is

dominant are the mass processes in the schools and universities, whose goal is to occupy, and also the organization of the movement in the neighbourhoods. However, the break of the Christmas holidays is too close for us to be able to make forecasts about the future of the movement.

1. The political crisis resulting from these events has been a gravestone for the right-wing government, coming after the confrontation over social security and the irruption of various scandals. It is particularly difficult, even impossible for it to succeed in pulling itself together and continue in office for long, and to finish its term of office. The slogan “Down with the government!” will continue to be on the agenda. To tell the truth, this government should already have fallen, on the evening of Monday 8 December, but the lack of political of both PASOK and the parliamentary Left has allowed it to remain in power. For this reason, it will be thanks to the struggles of the oppressed that it will have to go, and any subsequent government can be sure that “things will be even worse for it”.

2. We must insist on the anti-repression character of the movement, putting forward with a transitional logic propaganda for demands like the disarmament of the police, the dissolution of the special bodies of repression, the suppression of the anti-terrorist legislation, and by stressing the importance of the small victories that have been obtained by the movement, such as the reduction in police patrols and the withdrawal of the special forces from the district d’ Exarcheia, from the centre d’ Athens and from the area around the big university faculties. The release of all the demonstrators who have been arrested must be a central demand.

- 3- We have to link the youth upsurge demanding the punishment of those responsible for police brutality with the lasting objectives of the radicalized student movement to defeat the recent and future educational counter-reforms, and with frontal opposition to the liberal and anti-working class policies of the government (social security, privatizations, etc...). The launching of occupations in the university departments and the schools constitutes an immediate and decisive issue for the continuation of the movement. It is also essential to try systematically to set up a permanent trade-union coordination at branch level, which can encourage the organized participation of the workers in the unfolding movement and which can exert pressure on the leaderships of GSEE and of ADEDY [11], to push them to call a new general strike.

- 4- A key element for the relationship of forces between classes and for channelling the accumulated violence and discontent against the ruling class and its government is to overcome the division between Greek and foreign workers, to fight against racism, against the inhuman exploitation and the miserable living conditions that immigrants and refugees have to suffer. The murder by the police of a Pakistani worker a few weeks before that of the young teenager in Exarchia is far from having caused the same reactions. At the same time, the mobilization of the inhabitants of popular quarters, led by the far right, against immigrants, shows that exacerbated social contradictions can in present conditions take reactionary forms. [12]

- 5- We have to systematically repeat our appeal in favour of the political unity of the radical left, on the basis of our common experience in the movement of struggles, of yesterday and

today, with the perspective of building a strong anti-capitalist left and with the political objective of intervening in favour of the principle of a joint candidature of the Greek anti-capitalist left in the European elections, in co-operation with the anti-capitalist left in Europe.

6- Let us act in interaction with the youth radicalisation, so that it will organise itself in a lasting way and work for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system and the capitalist state. Let us give to the ongoing youth revolt a perspective that neither anarchism nor reformism can give it! *Central Committee, OKDE-Spartakos (Greek section of the Fourth International) mid-December 2008.*

*Andreas Sartzekis and Tassos Anastasiadis are leading members of the OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International.

► *Tassos Anastasiadis is a leading member of the OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International.*

► *Andreas Sartzekis is a member of the Organisation of Internationalist Communists of Greece (OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International).*

NOTES

[1] PASOK: Greek socialist party, founded by Andreas Papandreu and led today by his son Giorgos. After almost twenty years in government (except for one short period at the beginning of the 1990s when there was a government of the Right with Synaspismos, which then included both the present Synaspismos and the KKE), it lost power in 2004. Since then, in spite of various crises, it remains an example of the capacities of resistance of social democracy, even when it has become social-liberalism: whereas some people said it was finished, beset by splits, it still has the leadership of the trade union movement and is today ahead in the opinion polls, with more than 30 per cent of voting intentions. The KKE is the old Greek Communist Party, hyper-Stalinist and incredibly sectarian, especially in the trade union movement. After its crisis in the 1990s, when its youth organization split from it, it succeeded in reconstituting a youth organization, and it is the only party seriously rooted in the high schools. Syriza is a coalition with a radical label, made up of the reformist Synaspismos, a party coming from the Eurocommunist left, and various small groups of the radical and revolutionary left. Since many untrue things have been said (and believed) about this regroupment, it is necessary to make the following points: Firstly, for Greek public opinion, Syriza is the same thing as Synaspismos, and the far left has almost no influence, given the internal relationships of forces. Secondly: last spring some people were talking about a new phenomenon in Europe, with a coalition which in an impetuous movement was going to compete with PASOK electorally, quoting opinion polls which credited it with up to 18 per cent of voting intentions. We have said the same thing since the beginning: even though Syriza has been able to attract a new audience, thanks to the image of the young president of Synaspismos, the sympathetic Alexis Tsipras, nothing fundamental has changed, and the opinion poll results for Syriza were used above all by PASOK voters to exert pressure on their party. This analysis has been proved correct: even before the revolt of December, the opinion polls showed Syriza below 10 per cent (7.5 per cent in one poll). In this beginning of the month of January, it is credited with between 8.6 and 7.1 per cent (in the 2007 legislative elections it got 5.04 per cent). That does not mean that it cannot rebound in the opinion

polls. As for its policies, this document of the Greek section of the Fourth International shows what is crucial at this juncture. Nothing has changed under the Mediterranean sun: revolutionaries, as the OKDE-Spartakos has always done, will continue to discuss with and to work with Synaspismos, a party which is open to radical ideas, but the priority is more than ever to build, in complete independence, an anti-capitalist left, something which is possible in this country where the far left numbers several thousand militants. And, in this month of January 2009, things are progressing concretely on this question!

[2] In the same way as in France in 2003, the betrayal of the trade unions during the struggle in defence of pensions was very traumatic for the re-launching of big working-class mobilizations, the betrayal last spring treason in spring by the Greek trade-union bureaucracy of working-class combativeness on this question weighed heavily on subsequent mobilizations. Whereas important sectors (the electricity industry, road maintenance workers) engaged in sustained strikes, the bureaucracy did everything it could so that the general strike of March 19 did not lead to the only possible response in the face of the plans of the Right: an ongoing general strike. Instead of exerting its influence in this direction, Syriza chose to launch a campaign of petitions – taken up by PASOK and by the trade-union bureaucrats – to demand a referendum on the law that had been adopted, declaring that we would see what we would see... We saw everything: the law was applied, and immediately afterwards the Right began the reform of contracts for young workers, in order to inflict more flexibility on them.

[3] In fact, it is difficult to translate the Greek term “antiexousiasts”: literally, the “anti-power”. We can speak about a milieu in the sense that this current is very broad, going from organised libertarians to groups or individuals for whom the only political answer to the violence of the bourgeois state seems to be violence against everything that is symbolised by the state and its institutions, by banks and big business. We can translate it by “anarchist milieu” in the absence of a satisfactory term.

[4] The Polytechnic School is in fact the Athenian university of polytechnic sciences, it has of course no military status, unlike in France, and it was the scene of one of the great acts of resistance to the dictatorship of the colonels (1967-74): its occupation by the students, repressed in a blood bath, on November 17, 1973.

[5] The “hooded ones” is in fact the term that has been used for years, in particular in the press, to designate activists who engage in urban violence. In December, “hooding” was adopted by thousands of young people giving expression to their revolt.

[6] Like March 19, 2008 with the question of continuing the general strike, December 10 is a key date of the movement, moreover a date when it would have been possible to move towards a movement like that of May '68 in France, with the possibility of workers entering into a prolonged struggle. To hold the demonstration was to remind the government that the street belonged to us, by getting the workers and the youth of all the left currents to march together on a route of 2 or 3 kilometres (could the KKE have justified a separate demonstration? Perhaps, but at the price of internal conflict!). In this context, such a dynamic would inevitably and immediately have become

political! This is of course what the Right feared and what the various left bureaucracies did not want, instead falling back on a rally with a few speeches concluded as quickly as possible! Overall, several tens of thousands of workers and young people took part either in the demonstration or in the rally...

[7] We should point out that on December 12, right in the middle of mobilizations that involved confrontations and repression, Alekos Alavanos, one of the leaders of Synaspismos and president of Syriza, met the leadership of the police trade union to point out that on the one hand it was necessary for the rights of young people to be respected, but that "the other side of the coin is the police officer as a citizen", specifying that "a respectable police officer is one who has received good training and who carries out his functions within society". Of course, this conception of the democratization of the police is thoroughly typical of reformists, and is exactly the position of, for example, the French Communist Party. On the other hand, we are far from criticizing the fact of meeting with police trade unionists: but the difficulty which arises is really that of the moment chosen, when police violence was being unleashed against the movement and a campaign of the Right was under way in defence of the poor police who were exposed to all sorts of violence and projectiles... Did Alavanos have a mandate from all the components of Syriza for this meeting? One thing is sure: he had no mandate from the movement!

[8] With the notable exception of KOE, the most important of the far-left groups in Syriza. Furthermore, this position illustrates the absence of any common project of the far-left groups in Syriza: what is there in common between KOE, which acts in an autonomist way (groups under its control impose freedom from payment, for example of motorway tolls) and intends to have its political weight recognized in Syriza; DEA, which denounced in its leaflets for the 2007 legislative elections... the reformism of Synaspismos and which sees Syriza as a means of strengthening itself; and Kokkino, which thinks it can make Synaspismos evolve to the left, forgetting that it has never been a problem for Synaspismos to sign very radical documents, their implementation on the ground being another question?!

[9] Without forgetting an obsession of the KKE: according to it foreign secret services are behind the events of December!

[10] This justifies the need to force the KKE to take part in united actions. It would be a mistake to let its Stalinist leadership deform at will combative young activists, whereas what is necessary is in fact to reinforce unity of action on the left. A united front policy must, of course, also address PASOK members.

[11] ADEDY is the Federation of Public Sector Workers.

[12] To turn the situation around by counting on reactionary reflexes is one of the objectives sought by the Right (with some differences: it seems that certain sectors wanted after Monday December 8 to simply call in the army). At the same time it is trying to create the idea of nice police officers being attacked by violent troublemakers, and calling "for a return to normal", an idea that is accepted by all the parliamentary groups. In any case, and in spite of the very strange shooting which seriously wounded a police officer in the night of January 5 and was followed by a gathering of several hundred police officers on the

initiative of the far right, the demonstration in defence of education on January 9 mobilised around 10,000 demonstrators, led by the teachers' unions. It should also be noted that there is a growing campaign of active solidarity with Constantina Kouneva, an immigrant trade-union leader, who was seriously injured by vitriol in an attack on December 23, without any doubt because of her exemplary militant activity against the disastrous working conditions in cleaning companies.

Other recent articles:

[Greece](#)

[On January 31, the Greek anti-capitalist left will launch the perspective of its convergence!](#) - January 2009

[Down with the government of murderers!](#) - December 2008

[Solidarity with the social rebellion](#) - December 2008

[Growing polarization to the left and to the extreme right](#) - October 2007

[The Student Mobilizations Continue](#) - March 2007

Sri Lanka

Withdraw case against NSSP leader Chamil Jayaneththi

Appeal from Fourth Internationalists

NSSP

Last Friday Com. Chamil Jayaneththi, the organizing secretary of the Nava Samasamaja party had been informed to summon the magistrate Court on 2nd of February.



Chamil Jayaneththi was the part6y's presidential candidate in 2005

When he searched the reason he was learned that Slave Island police had filed a case against Chamil that he had tried to breach the law and order and arouse the people against the government on 12th January 2009.

Not only Com. Chamil but many leaders of various political parties., trade unions, media organizations were participated the demonstration against the assassination of Mr. Lasantha Wickramathunga. After the brutal assassination of prominent journalist and editor of Sunday Leader, the major media organizations have organized a big demonstration against the killings assaulting and harassing the journalists and force to secure the democratic rights of the people. Nearly thousand people including journalists trade union members and political parties were attended to the demonstration.

At that demonstration some police personals tried to disturb the crowd and Chamil has intervened to settle this incident. At that moment police had retreated and later they filed a case against him in the magistrate court. This step is the another attempt of Sinhal a racist Mahinda governments to stop the freedom of expression of the people in this country. They have already stop the voice of independent journalists either threat, assassination or made them to leave the country.

But they cannot silent the NSSP and other radical forces .So they are trying to imprison our energetic leaders using false accusations. We appeal all the progressive and revolutionary forces to pressurize the government to withdraw the case against Chamil. Please send your protest letters to the following persons and send a copy to us..

Mr. Mahinda Rajapakse fax- 0094112340340

President of Sri Lanka

Presidents house Email- president@presidentsoffice.lk

Colombo

Defence Secretary Fax 0094112541529

Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapakse Email- secdef@slnet.lk

Defence ministry

Colombo

NSSP-nssp@visualnet.lk

ccmu.union@gmail.com

Comradely,

Niel

For the NSSP.

► *The NSSP, Nava Sama Samaja Party, is the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International*

Other recent articles:

[Sri Lanka](#)

[Italy must free Tamil human rights campaigners](#) - July 2008

[Leftists worldwide call to defend Tamil Cause](#) - March 2008

[NSSP appeals for international solidarity](#) - March 2008

[On the Tamil National Question](#) - March 2007

[Sri Lanka: Stop support for this genocidal war](#) - January 2007

World Social Forum in Belem

Radicalise the alternatives

Josep María Antentas

The World Social Forum (WSF) held in Belem is a very significant one. It's the first WSF held after the outburst of the 2008 economic crisis. This crisis made evident the total failure of neo-liberalism and the destructive character of global capitalism. Besides, Brazilian Amazon is a privileged place to highlight the link between social and ecological crisis.



This Forum was celebrated after a long period of time in which the “antiglobalization” movement lost momentum and political prominence. In spite of this, social resistances have been growing all over the world but in a context of more fragmentation and more dispersion. In this scenario it would seem that the WSF relevance may have decreased as well as its concrete results. Nonetheless, the WSF continues to be the most distinctive reference for the “antiglobalization” movement. The latter needs to simultaneously boost the development of social movements from below and their general coordination.

The crisis poses the challenge to renew strategic perspectives and give an answer to the present moment, market by an increasing, but vague, refusal of the actual economic system. A mere “anti -neo-liberalism” approach is not enough. To shift towards consequent “anti-capitalism” seems to be a necessary strategic development that must be accomplished in order to attain this “other possible world” praised by the forum.

It's time to deepen the alternatives and radicalize their contents. We must set higher the bar for criticism and propose an agenda for breaking-off the neo-liberal paradigm from an anti-capitalist perspective. To the “classic” demands and proposals set forth during the past years (the Tobin tax, the debt cancellation, the suppression of tax havens...) one must add new proposals which until now were “out of catalogue” such as putting the banking and financial system under democratic public control, among others.

It's too soon to know what will be the result of the Forum at Belem. Social forums are not by themselves the goal. They are useful as if they appear as an expression of struggles and resistances and if enable the coordination of social movements and encourage strategic discussion and debate. Five years ago, at the WSF held in Mumbai the Indian writer Arundhati Roy pointed out: "What we need to discuss urgently is strategies of resistance. We need to aim at real targets, wage real battles and inflict real damage". And this is the thought that we have to keep in mind in our present time.

(Article published in Spanish in the newspaper Público 27/01/09)
 ► *Josep María Antentas is a member of the editorial board of the magazine Viento Sur, and a professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.*

Other recent articles:

[Social Forum](#)

[Looking for a second wind](#) - October 2008

[European social movement faces challenges](#) - September 2008

[Collective agreements under threat!](#) - September 2008

[Abortion rights: Still a fight in Europe](#) - September 2008

[The WSF at the crossroads](#) - July 2007

Pakistan

A government in pandemonium

The first nine months of Pakistan Peoples Party rule

[Farooq Tariq](#)

Instability, price hikes, growing unemployment and rising debts are the hallmarks of the first nine months of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government. There are daily demonstrations across Pakistan around one or another of these issues.



George W. Bush shakes hands with President Asif Ali Zardari

There is a real danger of a war between Pakistan and India after the Mumbai terrorist attack on November 26. The statement by Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari about the doubtful Pakistani

identity of Ajmal Qasab, the only terrorist captured alive, did not go down very well within the Indian establishment. The joint war-room meeting of all the Indian government's important officials is a very serious matter.

The PPP government is taking a very non-serious attitude towards the religious fanatics. On one side, it wants to please US imperialism and banned Jamat Dawa, a fundamentalist group in Pakistan claiming it is doing charity work. However, it is clear that all its charity work is for Jihad. Jamat Dawa openly has been advocating attacks on Hindus. On the other side, the PPP government wants to promote its popularity by advocating Pakistani nationalism by using war language. Anti-India feelings are the main way the religious fundamentalists build their support. The Pakistan state is heavily linked with religion and there is no attempt to separate the two.

The government is at its lowest ebb of popularity. A public survey put the PPP government's popularity at only 21 per cent on December 20, 2008. Even in Sindh province, where the PPP had a historic landslide victory in the February general election this year, it has met with growing anger on several issues, particularly against the proposed privatisation of gas fields. There are daily air strikes by the US imperialism and dozens are being killed inside Pakistan, an act of direct aggression not seen in earlier periods. "We have not given permission or entered an accord with Americans to attack", said Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, clarifying the government's position, contradicting a report by the Washington Post, which claimed the PPP government has made such a deal with Washington.

"You can attack wherever you like, we will protest in strong words, do not take it literally and keep doing your work to eliminate the terrorists in Pakistan's tribal areas" is what seems to have been accepted secretly by the Zardari PPP government. The PPP government has also accepted publicly that it cannot do anything when the US attacks. "We cannot fight the Americans" is the response of Zardari.

The foreign secretary, Kamaran Rasul, was immediately removed in November from his post by the government after he told a parliamentary committee that Washington does not inform the Pakistan government beforehand the nature of the attacks, they tell it the details minutes after carrying out the attacks. Along with the US air and ground strikes, Pakistani military operations ordered by the PPP government are taking place in several parts of Pakistan against the growing tide of religious fundamentalists. It claims to kill Taliban and anti-state elements every day. The war language is used by the government in private and public print and electronic media. Despite all that, the religious fundamentalists continue to retaliate with suicide attacks, burning of public property, particularly girl's schools, and the bombing of civilian, police and military areas.

It is a bullfight between the two mad groups. Every grubby and brutal tactic is justified in this war of the lords. However, the masses are paying the price. There are daily civilian casualties in the attacks from the both sides. There is massive internal and external displacement, and there is no one to help these "immigrants" in their own country. Minus-degree winter temperatures in some areas have resulted in even more hardship for those in temporary tents. No one can win this war by

military means. Both sides are losing the war, with the masses losing their lives with no end in sight in the near future. Rising debts; neoliberal agenda

The International Monetary Funds (IMF) agreed on November 16 to "bail out" Pakistan with a \$7.9 billion loan, with a nearly 5 per cent interest rate. The normal interest rate for many other countries has been less than 3 per cent. The loan deal has been hailed by Shoukat Tareen, the unelected federal finance adviser, as a result of the Pakistan governments brilliant negotiating skills. The full deal has yet to be made public.

However, many economists in Pakistan believe that will be littered with strict conditions not seen any earlier deals made by previous governments with the IMF. It is estimated that more than 100 billion rupees (US\$1.2 billion) new taxes will be imposed on the people to meet the criteria of this debt deal. With the present loan, Pakistan's total foreign debt has risen to \$53 billion. The IMF conditions also include agricultural taxes and corporate farming that will accelerate rising food prices in Pakistan.

The PPP government has continued with the same neoliberal agenda as was carried out by General Musharaf during his nine-year rule. One of the first measures it took to "cure the ailing economy" was to increase the general sales tax from 15 per cent to 16 per cent. Then, it went on to attack state subsidies that were only 7.9 per cent of the total budget. They did not dare to address the most unwanted expenditure, defence spending and repayment of the foreign debts, which account for nearly 50 per cent of the total budget.

The withdrawal of state subsidies from oil and electricity were felt very badly by the masses all over Pakistan. That was the turning point in decreasing popularity of the PPP government. Electricity prices were increased by 70 per cent. The spontaneous mass reaction of burning electricity bills and a non-payment campaign led the to the PPP government's first public defeat. It had to announce the withdrawal of the increases and later a 13 per cent decrease in the increased prices was announced.

Another major defeat of the PPP government during November was on the question of privatisation. The PPP government announcement of the sale of Qadirpur Gas Fields in Sindh on November 7 was immediately opposed by the gas workers' union and later they were joined by all the major political parties. The mass reaction in Sindh terrified the PPP government and it had to announce the postponement of the sell-off. It has not been abandoned but the government is waiting for a better time.

The PPP will now play the same dirty game that it did with the lawyers' movement. Offering "jobs for the boys" will be the main pillar of its strategy to go ahead with the privatisation. Most of the PPP-affiliated lawyers who were in the forefront of the lawyers' movement are now judges of the higher and lower courts, attorney generals or are representing state-owned companies. That was the price of these PPP lawyers and the PPP government paid it happily. Although this has resulted in PPP support being almost totally wiped out among the 80,000 lawyers — the PPP had nearly 80 per cent support in March 2007 — when the issue of the sacking of top judge Iftikhar Choudry came up.

The PPP government has a plan for wholesale privatisation of the major institutions of the state. However, the present setback will lead to more difficulties. The PPP government cannot repeat the hey day of foreign investment the Musharaf dictatorship had for a brief period. The international economic crisis, the image of Pakistan as a place of regular suicide attacks, the continued imperialist aggression and bombing there, the PPP government's image as a weak government, the ever-declining industrial infrastructure and the rising opposition and unpopularity of the government will all lead to buyers of these institutions staying away.

Losing support all over

During the last eight months the PPP government has been seen to deceive, mislead, swindle, fiddle, double-cross and rip-off individuals, groups and fellow political parties without any shame. The PPP promised to restore the top judges sacked by Musharaf within 24 hours of general's departure, but it did not. It promised to decrease local oil prices as they reduced in the international market, but it did not do so according in same proportion. It promised to protect the sovereignty of Pakistan and agreed not to allow the US to attack inside Pakistan directly, but it just caved in to Washington. The PPP's coalition partners promised to bring peace in North West Frontier Province, but failed to do so, and instead war is knocking on every door in the province. The PPP promised during the election campaign to provide "bread, clothes and homes", instead the prices of all these have risen beyond the reach of working people.

PPP government ministers now say that all this cannot be done overnight. However, when all the trends are going in opposite direction of your promises, it is hard to believe that it will be ok in future, if we suffer now.

The message of the PPP government is very clear, "suffer now to be in better position in future". That advice is not understood by overwhelmingly majority of Pakistanis. This is justification used by all capitalist politicians all over the world to persuade the masses.

The continues price hikes of almost every consumer good for the last eight months is mainly due to the policies adopted by the PPP government, following the footsteps of the Musharaf dictatorship. It is going on the blind road of market-guided policies. It is withdrawing subsidies. It is privatising or planning to privatize the main pillars of the economy. All that means, earning a good deal of hate from all quarters. It is losing support at a fast speed. Asif Zardari, the president of Pakistan, has become very unpopular. The PPP government has lost almost all support from the lawyers. Everyone speaks of the corruption that is going on. An army of 55 federal ministers have been inducted at a time when they are crying about an economic crisis.

All friends and contacts of Asif Zardari who helped him during his imprisonment of eight years under the Nawaz Sharif and Musharaf regimes have been inducted into key posts. The law minister's only qualification is that he was Zardari's lawyer at the time of his imprisonment. The interior adviser cum minister, with his multi-millions, was appointed because he offered his great hospitality to Zardari during his exile period in London. A police officer who offered Zardari an air-conditioned car during his

travels from one prison to another is being promoted to deputy inspector-general of police out of turn.

Growing contradiction with PMLN

The growing unpopularity of the PPP government has also increased tensions with the Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN). The PMLN does not want to share the unpopular feelings of the masses by being totally supportive of the PPP government. The PMLN's economic and political policies are no better than the PPP's. Both parties are right-wing parties. Both believe in working hand-in-hand with US imperialism. Both are implementing the neoliberal agenda.

The small difference is that of the PMLN is consciously trying to clean up the mess that it has created for itself by siding with every military ruler in the past. One must not be fooled by the PMLN promise to bring back the independent judiciary by restoring the judges. It might do that if it comes to power again. However, its overall policies will be anti-worker and anti-people in essence and for the promotion of the rich class. It is a party of the rich, by the rich, for the rich. It is a class party of the capitalists and feudal landlords. It will exploit the working class as the PPP government is doing at this time.

Future of the PPP government

The PPP government is weak, frail, fragile and in poor health. There are already reports of contradictions between the president and prime minister. Any action by one of them against the other will be the starting point for this government to end. Even if they do not do so, still the PPP government cannot complete its full five-year term. The reason is its unpopularity among the masses. It is now more and more dependent on repression and more in favour of continues army action in the NWFP and tribal areas. It is silent on the daily US military attacks inside Pakistan. It objects to Indian aircraft entering a few kilometres into Pakistan's airspace but seems happy to allow US war planes to make inroads of a few hundred kilometres.

PPP president Zardari is already the most unpopular elected president in Pakistan's history. He has no credibility. Billboards across Pakistan are beleaguered with pictures of Zardari and company, and local leaderships are thanking him for providing ministries. Benazir Bhutto's murderers are still free after nine months of PPP rule and there is no attempt by the PPP government to launch an investigation into the murder. It is using the issue of a possible investigation by the UN as an excuse to avoid the question.

We must build an alternative to the politics of the rich. The Labour Party Pakistan is attempting to do so. We need your support and cooperation. Please do not sit on sidelines. Take sides in favour of working-class politics.

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

Other recent articles:

[Pakistan](#)

[Pakistan on the flight path of American power](#) - October 2008

[Thousands demonstrate against neoliberalism and price hikes](#) - June 2008

[Workers take over Sugar Mill in Sind](#) - March 2008

["Pakistan is not a heaven for left ideas"](#) - March 2008

[A dictator defeated](#) - February 2008

USA

Reading, Writing and Union Building

Steve Early

THE UNITED STATES changed forever on November 4, 2008. It will undoubtedly change even more during the next four years — although just how remains to be determined. There has never been such a convergence of yawning crises facing an incoming U.S. government, including a collapsing credit system and the near-death spiral of the North American auto industry. It's an entirely open question whether the sheer scale of the objective emergency might impose serious structural changes on the way capitalism is administered in this country.



The January-February 2009 issue of *Against the Current*

What kind of change? One set of possibilities is represented by 260 members of UE Local 1110 who seized the factory in Chicago when their employer, Republic Windows and Doors, announced that it would close without giving the legally required 60-day notice or their earned vacation pay. Bank of America — fresh from its \$25 billion cash infusion from the banking bailout — had cut off the factory's line of credit! This kind of worker response can determine whether the coming economic restructuring will meet the needs of working-class Americans, or destroys what's left of union power.

The criminal and incompetent enterprise known as the George W. Bush administration has left a legacy of wreckage — from the Middle East to South Asia, from Guantanamo prison to global warming denial, from the ruins of New Orleans to bridges getting ready to fall down across the country. The November 4 vote swung the way it did, to Barack Obama and the Democratic Party, because people are at one and the same time hopeful and terrified.

So what next? Every discussion begins, of course, with Obama. Having an African-American president of the USA is a bit analogous to women becoming ordained Catholic priests. The day before, it seems impossible, unimaginable, never in a thousand years...the day after, it will seem as natural as the sun rising in the morning. What took so long? It's even possible, after the precedent-setting events of the long 2008 campaign, that we'll never again revert to all four of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates of both capitalist parties being white men.

Herein lies a paradox. U.S. voters elected a president — a genuinely brilliant individual and exceptionally talented politician — whose parents, the year he was born, might have been arrested in a number of southern states for miscegenation (“race mixing”). Malik Miah’s article in this issue of *Against the Current* discusses what a transformational political moment this represents. It is entirely appropriate to celebrate this truly amazing change in the face of American politics.

The politics of this historic president-elect are those of a thoroughly conventional corporate Democrat, as the configuration of his incoming administration shows. Some of Obama’s supporters on the liberal left are stunned by the speed with which he’s incorporated Clinton-era figures into his economic and foreign policy teams. As New York Times columnist Gail Collins delightfully retorted to such naïve types: “The only people who thought Barack Obama was a radical were you and Joe the Plumber.” Obama is doing pretty much exactly what he promised he’d do — with implications we’ll return to below.

Obama’s mandate came not only “from below,” the masses of people rallying behind his appeal for “change,” but also from above, from the corporate elites who clearly felt that the McCain-Palin continuation of the Bush regime was absolutely inadequate to confront the capitalist crisis. That elite mandate determines the makeup of the incoming Cabinet — and all the “Progressives for Obama,” antiwar and organized labor forces who worked so hard for his election have nothing to do with it. Saving the Empire

President Barack Obama, to whom literally billions of people around the world look to provide “U.S. leadership” with a human face, inherits an empire that the United States economy in its current condition can’t afford to maintain. He shows no intention, however, of downsizing American imperial reach. He’s surrounded himself with the same Clinton-era figures who promoted “free trade” agreements, happily enabled Israel’s strangulation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories under the cover of the never-ending “peace process,” and proclaimed that the deaths of Iraqi children under sanctions were “worth it.”

As his pre-election policy statements indicated to anyone who chose to pay attention, president-elect Obama has appointed a bipartisan, centrist war Cabinet. The neoconservative architects of Bush’s Iraq disaster, of course, are out of the “foreign policy and national security team”— and so is the peace movement, which has neither representation in nor meaningful access to the policy makers.

Robert Gates, the leading proponent of the troop “surge” in Iraq and previously a prominent member of the Baker-Hamilton Commission before being recruited to replace the disgraced Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, stays on to head the

Pentagon. (Surprised? You were expecting maybe Dennis Kucinich and the Department of Peace?) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her presidential campaign famously advertised her readiness to answer that 3 AM red phone call and to obliterate Iran if it attacked Israel (not vice versa, obviously). Attorney General Eric Holder was an early post-9/11 advocate of excluding “terrorism suspects” from the protection of the Geneva Conventions, although he’ll likely be more sharply questioned about his role in the sleazy festival of pardons at the close of the Bill Clinton presidency.

Hillary Clinton by most accounts is the riskiest appointment, given her political ambition and apparent need to prove how tough she can be. At a time when U.S. imperialist power has been seriously weakened both by the economic meltdown and the legacy of Bush’s blunders, threatening Iran and Russia in particular isn’t really smart strategy. Complex agreements and understandings with Iran will be needed to extricate the United States from Iraq without that country disintegrating. Careful negotiations with Russia are necessary to control the growing dangers arising from Georgia’s disastrous South Ossetian war (obviously approved by Bush’s gang), Russia’s aggressive military intervention, reckless NATO expansion and the U.S. scheme to station missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic — which the citizens of those countries don’t want.

Obama has pledged sending 20,000-30,000 more troops into the quagmire that is Afghanistan — where the United States military will never lose a battle and will never win the war. U.S. raids and bombing of villages in Pakistan have created growing resentment in that country, while the terrorist massacre in Mumbai has rekindled the India-Pakistan crisis. It’s even possible that neocon “dead-enders” — to borrow Rumsfeld’s infamous phrase — following the next Israeli election might aim to embroil the new American administration in a confrontation with Iran, a war that could destroy Obama’s presidency in its infancy.

Bailing Out Capitalism

For most of the U.S. population, to be sure, the above issues — even Iraq — faded into the background during the election campaign. The financial and economic crisis is the paramount question, and what kind of “stimulus” or “bailout” package can address it. The fact is that none of the experts on either the Keynesian “left” or free-market “right” wing know what might work.

The tragedy for the U.S. working class and social movements is that there is so little “pressure from below” on the powers-that-be for the moment. People who are facing massive insecurity in their employment and their families’ survival right now are generally paralyzed by fear, or waiting for some kind of salvation from Obama, or both. Naturally, then, the current debates over “rescue” take place within strictly capitalist bounds.

The initial “Wall Street bailout” was promoted as a program to purchase “toxic assets” from the subprime mortgage debacle, alleviate home foreclosures and re-start the frozen credit markets. It rapidly devolved under the leadership of Secretary of Treasury Henry Paulson, to simply stuffing money into failing or even not-failing banks to buy up each other. Paulson has

become the Mike Brown of the banking crisis (remember “Brownie, you’re doing a heckuva job” as New Orleans drowned?). But this is no real surprise: that’s how capitalism bails out capital. The problem of course is that it hasn’t worked; banks won’t lend and credit remains almost frozen, housing values continue to collapse and consumer spending sinks like a stone.

Obama’s “economic team” of Lawrence Summers, Timothy Geithner, Robert Rubin and company were Clinton-era architects of the financial deregulation that helped produce this mess. Once again, the liberal left is on the outside looking in. But the extraordinary pressure of the crisis, just as it compelled Bush’s advisors to dump their “free market” religion overboard, now forces the incoming centrist Democrats to undertake some massive stimulus and rescue measures for the economy and critical industries. The state is once again overtly a major economic player — but on what terms?

To be sure, the ongoing fight over auto is not about saving jobs and communities, or converting the industry to sustainable mass transit. It’s about whether the bankruptcy of the Big Three would be one of those moments of “creative destruction” so dearly beloved by free-market ideologues, whose own lives of course aren’t at stake. It’s about how (not whether) to most effectively shred the United Auto Workers’ contracts and reduce wages and benefits to the level of the nonunion sector. It’s about whether the companies will go bankrupt anyway — so do it now and crush the union outright — or whether the impact of their precipitous collapse on the system as a whole is too enormous to risk.

There’s been almost no hearing for the solutions that would meet real human needs: Since private banks won’t lend, and need public subsidies just to survive their own ruinous mistakes, they ought to be nationalized so that lending can begin for society’s urgent needs. The auto industry too ought to be a publicly owned asset under workers’ management, so that its conversion to production for a sustainable economy of renewable fuels and mass transit can begin. It’s important for socialists to present this program, without any illusion that such a fundamental transformation can come about through a centrist Democratic legislature — unless the example of those workers at Republic in Chicago is followed on a large scale.

Perhaps the one issue on which there’s the beginning of grassroots mobilization right now is for government national health insurance. What we in the backward USA call “single payer” is already taken for granted in other industrial countries. The rationality and necessity of such a program is overwhelming. It is even possible that the new Democratic administration and Congress, pressured by the sheer magnitude of the crisis, might take some steps toward guaranteeing some kind of insurance for 45 million U.S. citizens who don’t have any — but leaving the private health insurance industry intact allows only partial and inadequate solutions.

The role of the social activist left in this situation is not to position as supplicant “Progressives (or beggars) for Obama,” but to engage in building movements that could change the social equation and the terms of political debate. This will not be quick or easy, but it is most urgent if America is going to change, for real.

26

► *Steve Early is a labor journalist and lawyer who worked as a union organizer for 27 years. He is the author of a forthcoming book called *Embedded With Organized Labor*. Monthly Review Press, 2009.*

Bailing Out Banks, Smashing Unions

Dianne Feeley

WHEN GENERAL MOTORS and Chrysler received pre-Christmas bridge loans of \$17.4 billion, President Bush specified that the unionized work force had to become “competitive” with non-unionized workers in wages, benefits and work rules. This blatant attempt to destroy an already weakened United Auto Workers (UAW) illustrates how, in the midst of an economic crisis, U.S. capital is bailed out as working people are fleeced.



General Motors GMT800 car assembly line

Compare the first round of bailouts of financial institutions to the puny loans parceled out to the once powerful General Motors and Chrysler. For the banks on the bailout list there were no prerequisites placed on either the non-unionized workers or on a senior management that, according to Associated Press, received nearly \$1.6 billion in salaries, bonuses and stock options in 2008. A recent survey revealed that most of the 116 banks accepting government funds are sitting on their money or using taxpayers’ money to buy up banks.

Mountains of Concessions

UAW President Ronald Gettelfinger pointed out that the UAW has already made concessions over the last contracts, including a two-tier wage and benefit structure for newly hired workers. This concession severely undermines the union because it separates the newly hired worker from those previously hired, thus undermining solidarity between workers.

A history of the UAW since the government loan to Chrysler 30 years ago — by the way, repaid with interest ahead of schedule — reveals one concessionary contract after another. The discussion about reducing the work week without a loss of pay is nowhere to be heard, and the paid personal days that were to be

the transition into a shorter work week is something only old-timers can recall.

When I first hired into Ford in 1979, during my three-month probationary period I was paid a percentage of the permanent worker's wage. After passing probation, I earned that higher wage and, like all who lasted more than six months, received a check for the difference.

Ever since then — until the two-tier wage scale was introduced into the 2007 contract — there has been a stretching out of the period before a new hire reached the full-scale wage. The worker started at 70% and advanced 5% every six months until the wage rate reached 100%. The difference remained in the company's pocket.

The only serious attempt to reverse the concessions of a generation ago occurred in the late 1980s when Jerry Tucker, Assistant Director of Region 5, began using innovative work-to-rule tactics. Securing contracts that began to advance working conditions, he decided to run for Regional Director, breaking with the UAW leadership's Administrative Caucus to do so. It took several years for the caucus to defeat him and the militants who worked with him, but by concentrating their forces, they undermined and defeated him. The promise of the New Directions movement was cut short.

From the signing of the 1950 GM contract, an unprecedented five-year agreement dubbed the "Treaty of Detroit" by Fortune, the UAW leadership has been committed to labor peace — a partnership with the auto companies rather than an adversarial relationship. This has shaped the way union leadership is trained: While the UAW proudly holds to the tradition of its founding in the sitdowns of the '30s, today's leadership sees its role as negotiating and administrating.

Although the union is anemic from its concessions, the leadership still believes the fate of its members is tied to helping management. It rules local leadership with a tight fist, allowing plant closings even when it has the contract language to prevent it, only negotiating terms of surrender. While once the auto parts sector was 90% unionized, the UAW failed to follow and organize those plants as they moved to the low-wage, "right to work" South. Today those figures are reversed, with only 10% unionization.

In the 1990s the UAW leadership went along with the Big Three selling off its parts sector, assuring the workers that they would never allow a lowering of conditions, wages or benefits. Within 15 years two-tier wages and plant closings ravaged the work force at Delphi, Visteon and American Axle. UAW officials stood by, wringing their hands while explaining it was necessary to cut the losses and move on. The best clauses in the contracts are the ones that offer early retirement or a buyout.

The UAW Administrative Caucus' self-perpetuating belief that winning contracts occur through bargaining has led to defeat. Meanwhile they crush independent initiatives because such action is "unreasonable." However, they are willing to organize demonstrations in support of management's attempt to keep CAFE (gas mileage) standards low.

No wonder the UAW's attempts to organize Southern workers employed by Toyota or Nissan have stalled out. They have fed the crocodiles in order to keep the union boat afloat so long that they truly have no independent vision or strategy. They believe they have organized an "orderly retreat" because that is what's necessary under the circumstances. Then they discover a demand for even more concessions — this time by the government, and by the public, which has been fed outright lies about autoworkers' wages, benefits and working conditions.

The Big Lie

Do unionized autoworkers make \$70+ an hour? No, wages at the Big Three are already roughly comparable to what workers earn at the transplants. In fact, in at least one Toyota plant the average worker earns more. After all, in order to keep the union out, the companies pay their permanent workers a wage pegged to that of unionized assembly workers. Transplants do hire a large number of temporary workers who earn significantly less, but the Big Three is adopting that strategy as well.

Toyota's business model is one based on a small pool of permanent assembly workers who earn a wage much higher than temps or those who work in the auto parts sector. Parts workers subassemble at nearby plants, or even inside the assembly plant. This is another technique the Big Three is adopting.

At Chrysler's Jeep complex in Toledo, Ohio non-union workers hired by suppliers sequence parts going to the assembly line. They unpack supplies and place them in order on racks so the parts can be quickly assembled by UAW workers in the body, paint and chassis departments. At Chrysler's Sterling Heights, Michigan facility the local leadership refused to allow a separate parts operation inside the plant, so Chrysler had a sequencing center, employing several hundred workers, built right across the street.

Unionized autoworkers won, more than 35 years ago, cost-of-living increases, health care benefits for active and retired workers as well as pensions. This is what made working under grueling conditions desirable. But at that time between 25-33% of the U.S. work force was unionized; today the percentage of unionized private sector workers stands at 8%.

Given the attacks by corporate America and the way the UAW is connected at the hip to the Big Three, the average American has come to resent high-wage autoworkers, identifying them with the company and its arrogant practices. Yet these same Americas revere the rich — like the CEO who make a benefit package 440 times his/her own. High wages and benefits used to be a benchmark for other workers to aspire to, but today autoworkers are demonized for making \$70+ an hour.

In fact the average production worker in a Big Three plant makes about \$28 an hour — nowhere near the figure quoted in the media. A new hire makes half that, so the average wage will decrease as more workers retire. Companies claim the benefits for the longer-term worker are about \$15 an hour, but of course the new hire won't receive a pension and company health care benefits are also reduced.

To get to the \$70+ figure, the Big Three add in the benefits owed to its retirees. Since these companies have been around for a century, there are one and a half million retirees and surviving spouses who have contractual rights to some benefits. (Currently 40% of the Big Three retirees aren't old enough to apply for Medicare so their only health coverage is the company benefit.) Newer companies, such as Toyota and Nissan, have few retirees. They don't pay health insurance benefits for retirees either.

In the 2007 contracts, both Ford and GM demanded that the UAW take over its contractual health care benefits. They are in the process of setting up underfunded VEBAs, and now President Bush has stipulated that one half of all future payments be made in stock (which is rapidly becoming worthless), further jeopardizing health coverage.

President Bush also demanded a "reduction of the total amount of compensation, including wages and benefits, paid to their U.S. employees so that, by no later than December 31, 2009, the average of such total amount, per hour and per person, is an amount that is competitive with the average total amount of such compensation..." ("Indicative Summary of Terms for Secured Term Loan Facility," 5) If management is allowed to continue folding retiree benefits into that figure, assembly wages would drop to minimum wage!

In the 21st century, why are benefits in the United States tied to one's job? Every industrialized country in the world organizes health care as a public right, yet we all know people who hate their jobs but feel forced to stay because of company benefits. It's time to get rid of a dysfunctional and discriminatory health care system that provides inferior care at exorbitant prices.

This is an issue that can unite the entire working class and allies — but it will be difficult to win because the insurance industry is prepared to fight to preserve its profits.

Another important benefit autoworkers have had is a pension. In the 1930s Social Security was designed to be only one leg of a three-legged stool, with pensions and savings the other two. Many autoworkers in the parts industry do not receive pensions, and with the 2007 contract new hires at the Big Three are eligible only for a 401(K).

With fewer U.S. workers eligible for pensions, the obvious solution is to redesign Social Security so that it can provide a viable post-retirement income. We have just come through a eight-year reign in which the Bush administration campaigned to destroy the system already in place. Many young people now believe the myth that Social Security will not exist when they are ready to retire. Hopefully we are at the beginning of a public discussion about the need to adequately fund Social Security and, particularly given the reality that fewer workers are eligible for pensions, raise benefits.

Until that point, it seems to me that pension benefits should be extended across the entire auto industry. By having a much wider pool of workers participating, the cost per individual would be lower and more companies would participate. This would be particularly important for workers in the parts sector where wages and benefits vary widely, and for the growing numbers of workers at transplants. We don't have to begin from scratch,

because some industry-wide pensions already exist in the transportation industry as well as in construction trades.

These "commonsense" measures of reorganizing the country's patchwork health care and pension programs should have been implemented in the 1960s if not before. But because companies liked having workers dependent on them — it brought management-labor "peace" — unlike Germany and other industrialized countries, the U.S. government and capital resisted. But the crisis in the auto industry, combined with the country's economic crisis (more than half a million people being laid off each month), makes these reforms essential today.

Management's Mismanagement

The Big Three made a decision to build SUVs and trucks for the U.S. market because they could make an incredible \$10,000 profit on each vehicle sold. They decided they weren't going to make many medium-sized passenger cars or compacts for the U.S. market. (They are successfully producing them for the rest of the world.)

Skimping on innovative research and development, the Big Three used their profits for a variety of big-ticket items and CEO compensation. Although GM did build an electric car in the 1990s, it's clear that they never intended to mass produce it. "Who Killed the Electric Car?" is a fascinating documentary that ends with management's rounding up and destroying every EV4 ever built, much to the horror of those able to lease the car during its short life.

Over the past 15 years I have heard various workers at company town hall meetings ask management what was their strategy for developing new products. Although the executives claimed to be working on exciting new products, these nonetheless seemed to revolve around improvements for SUVs and trucks, as if those moneymakers were going to be around forever. While a certain section of the work force were lulled along others demanded more from management.

The current crisis in the auto industry is three-fold: an economic crisis deeper than any we have faced for the past three-quarters of a century, a crisis of global warming and a manufacturing crisis, given that the companies' decisions were based on profit, not on what was needed.

It's therefore ironic that so much attention is focused on the supposedly highly paid, and presumably lazy, production worker. Senior management has totally mismanaged the industry, and yet takes home bonuses and stock options in addition to big salaries. Interestingly enough, labor represents a mere 8-10% of the total expense package while management represents 20%.

Workers didn't cause the crisis, yet we are expected to "sacrifice." But workers are really the key to the solution, not the cause of the problem. Instead of thinking narrowly about what product can be sold most profitably, workers always know how jobs can be done more efficiently and safely, and which suppliers provide shoddy products that should be rejected.

At this time of a triple crisis in the auto industry, it's necessary to do more than loan the car companies money. It's time to

reconceptualize and restructure the industry. Let the government buy up the Big Three for cheap, as Michael Moore has suggested, and run it by a labor-initiated board that can comprise production and skilled trades workers, office workers and engineers with the added help of the environmental movement.

Why try to build 16 million cars, trucks and SUVs when we can build a smaller number of fuel-efficient cars and prioritize a mass transportation system? Plants can be renovated to build light rail, high-speed trains and buses. With the need to develop solar, water and wind energy, some plants — especially those near the Great Lakes — can be retooled to produce wind propellers and turbines as well as solar panels.

Wind, water and solar power technology can produce jobs for 3-5 million people, so by having a manufacturing industry that includes transportation and energy products we would be expanding jobs. By eliminating the drive for profits above all else and by expanding production under the direction of working people, it's easy to see that we would reduce competition between workers. Maybe we could even reduce the 40-hour work week, which should be relegated to a museum as a vestige from the last century!

Just as competition between workers would be minimized in a system not driven by profit, we'd want to abolish unfair trade laws like NAFTA. Instead of a global system in which wages are driven downward, we could develop a system in which workers produce and exchange goods that are "good fits" for their regions.

In this economic crisis the class struggle continues. That's clear with how the Bush administration organized various bailout and loan packages. Can we as workers can develop our strategy and vision for useful production? As global justice activists have pointed out, another world is possible. In fact, another world is desperately needed.

Other recent articles:

[USA](#)

[Barack Obama's Dual Mandate](#) - November 2008

[Barack Obama: A Campaign with Issues](#) - November 2008

[To the end, he was still working to do the right thing](#) - September 2008

[Balance-sheet of U.S. imperialism](#) - September 2008

[Peter Camejo dies - an advocate for the poor and oppressed](#) - September 2008

What Obama's Victory Means About Race and Class

[Malik Miah](#)

THERE WAS EUPHORIA in every Black community household November 4. High fives and tears of joy. No one could believe it. It didn't matter Obama's politics. A Black man had won! The election of the first Black president of the United States has a dual meaning: social and political.



Not just African Americans cheered: The crowd at Chicago's Grant Park was multiethnic — whites, Blacks, Latinos and Asians, all together. Obama's victory was overwhelming (two to one in the Electoral College) and more than seven million votes over his Republican challenger.

On January 20, the day Obama is sworn in as president, some two or three million or more people are expected in Washington, D.C. Every Black person would like to be present. Fae Robinson from State College, Pennsylvania, who attended the famous 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, put it on the night of Obama's victory:

"I told everybody, 'I'm going.' I don't have to have a ticket. I just want to be somewhere close. I have to be there. Just to be there is going to be overwhelming."

The social meaning is obvious. When Barack and Michelle Obama and their two girls walk into the White House on January 20, it will mark an event that few if any Black American of the civil rights era thought possible.

Guests at the White House

The White House was built by Black men and women (most were slaves). They were invisible to the founding fathers, even those who professed opposition to slavery.

Frederick Douglass, the 19th Century Black Abolitionist, visited President Abraham Lincoln three times at the White House. Yet he was never invited in to sleep as a guest. After Lincoln's second inauguration and an open house to the public, Douglass

was turned away at the door because of a standing order that Blacks were not allowed to enter for the celebration.

In the 1930s when first lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited Black guests to the White House, which she did often, the press sharply criticized her. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the great liberal, however, never invited an African American to stay the night.

Presidents Kennedy and Johnson at the height of the civil rights battles never dared invite Martin Luther King Jr., or other civil rights figures, to sleep as guests at the White House. These "friends of civil rights" clearly didn't want to cross their Dixiecrats in the South and bigots in the North.

Amazingly it was President Richard Nixon in 1973 who invited the first African-American guests, Sammy Davis Jr. and his wife, to sleep in the White House. (Davis turned down the Lincoln room out of respect of the "Great Emancipator.")

So it is not surprising that most Americans, including socialists, prior to the victory of the civil rights movement, did not believe it possible that a Black man could ever be elected president. It was a common view before the overthrow of Jim Crow that the end of legal segregation would take a violent confrontation with if not the overthrow of the government.

The dirty pact between the slaveholders and manufacturing capitalists at the founding of the United States (to delay an immediate breakup of the new country) created a defective Republic. Slavery was not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. Black people were not part of "we the people" much less citizens in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

Karl Marx wrote later that the seeds of the Great Civil War were planted at the founding of the United States. Marxists supported the capitalist North in that war with arms in hand to defeat the slaveholders, although some socialists of the day believed that a war between opposing property owners was not "our" war.

Similar debates occurred during the fight for equality after the rise of Jim Crow segregation. Since full equality was not possible under capitalism, should the focus be on "working-class unity" and not taking on racist views of white workers? Socialists understood that the fight for equality even led by liberals was a battle that they had to be in and actively support.

When Blacks finally won the vote and could be elected to public office, supporters of independent politics, including socialists, supported many of those campaigns even though we knew their election to office would not end racism. The issue was the democratic right to hold any public office, which both major parties had prevented up to the adoption of the 1964-5 Civil and Voting Rights Acts.

Context and Symbolic Significance

In view of that history, the November 4 election of an African-American father (a bi-racial Black man) as president marks the highest electoral point of the post-civil rights revolution. This is the historical context of Obama's election victory. For the Black community it is not about Democrat versus Republican, lesser

evilism or anything else. (Even the first Black female Republican Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice choked up the day after Obama's win).

For most African Americans, including myself, Obama's election is first and foremost an unprecedented victory — a blow against 400 years of Black slavery, legal segregation and institutional racism. I watched the returns on November 4 with similar emotions that other Blacks expressed in rural towns and major cities. I knew history was being made and cheered Obama's win being announced as the California polls closed.

Did this mean I think Obama is the answer to racism and Black self-determination? No. Blacks are realists about what his victory represents.

I know, as many others know, that Obama's party represents everything I oppose. I agree with Malcolm X (assassinated in 1965) who said that the road to full Black equality is impossible under the monopoly of the twin parties of capitalism. Malcolm, however, understood the power of the mass civil rights movement and preached the need for Black unity, self-reliance, alliances and Black power.

Obama's victory, more than symbolic, represents a change in attitudes. But the symbolism in and of itself is powerful, because of the country's racist history. It is that symbolism that every African American understands, including many of those on the right. It is also that symbolism that inspires the oppressed in every imperialist country — from London. Paris, Frankfurt to Sydney and Tokyo.

The question is: what follows?

Blacks will give Obama a long honeymoon. They have high hopes that he will bring real change, but there are few illusions. Blacks continue to suffer twice the unemployment rates as whites. Blacks have the worse housing and schools. More young Black men are in prison than in college. There is institutional discrimination on every level of society.

But even if Obama in the White House doesn't do much for the Black community directly, it means something to have a Black family running the place.

Beyond Race?

What does Obama's election tells us about race and a "post-racial" America?

Race does matter but it is not what it was even 20 years ago. I grew up in Detroit in the 1960s in a segregated environment. By the 1980s with years of white flight, Detroit became a basically Black city. The suburbs are where most white auto workers live. The term "Reagan Democrats" applied to these workers, who didn't like the changes brought by the civil rights movement. They felt that Blacks had gained privileges they did not have. Before the election the media focused on these white workers identified as "bigoted" and unable to vote for a Black man to be president. The Republicans believed it and ran blatantly racist ads in areas like Macomb County, which is near Detroit. It had worked for over 20 years.

It didn't work this time. Stanley Greenberg, a Democratic pollster, wrote in the *New York Times*, "Before the Democratic convention, nearly 40 percent of Macomb County voters were 'comfortable' with the idea of Mr. Obama as president, far below the number who were comfortable with a nameless Democrat. But on Election Day, nearly 60 percent said they were 'comfortable' with Mr. Obama. About the same number said Mr. Obama 'shares your values' and 'has what it takes to be president.'"

From 1972-1988, the Democratic presidential candidates running in Oakland County (also next door to Detroit), lost the election by 20 points. In 2008 Obama won the county by 57% to 42%. The economy clearly trumped race and racism. But more than that, race baiting failed because many of these workers have children who supported a Black man and told their parents so. Even in southern states Obama lost, he did better than most expected. He won North Carolina, Virginia (home of the old Confederacy) and Florida.

Reverse Bradley Effect

Not to recognize the evolution of attitudes since the 1960s is to deny reality. While gains in affirmative action have been pushed back and many positive programs that helped Blacks and other minorities no longer exist, the number of minorities in elected office is the highest ever. The number of Black executives and size of the Black middle class is unprecedented.

The "Bradley effect" (whites and others saying they would vote for a Black in public then deciding not to) was a negligible factor in the election. In fact I now believe a reverse Bradley effect occurred when many demonstrably voted for Obama to make a point against bigotry.

While some may dismiss these societal changes in racial attitudes as simply a reflection of economic insecurity, in previous hard economic times playing the race card worked. The same has occurred when anti-immigrant demagoguery was used to confuse many working people and led them to vote against their own self-interests. Republicans won many elections in the past by convincing white workers that their loss of jobs and opportunities was because of "special rights" supposedly granted to Blacks.

The change of attitudes on race are particularly seen among the younger generations — those born after the victory of the civil rights movement. In general they (all races) are less racist than their parents' and grandparents' generations.

Yet it is wrong to think Obama's election means the country has gone "beyond race." We aren't in a post-racial "color blind" country. Racism and bigotry, and institutional racism, still exist. What Obama's win does is encourage all minorities in whatever fields they pursue to believe more is possible.

There is a psychological change in the population that can't be fully quantified. But it is genuine. Unless there is a legal (and likely violent) reversal of these gains — and I'm not talking only about programs like affirmative action, but advances in social

and political consciousness — the heightened self-confidence over time will expand throughout the Black and minority populations. It is widely reported that non-white ethnic minorities as a whole will become a majority of the population by 2050.

Until the victory of the civil rights revolution and the gains won afterwards, it was common to believe in "two Americas" — Black and white. While that is still broadly true, it is more accurate to say that the class disparities — the divide between capital and labor — will become more pronounced as the minorities in the middle and upper classes gain more prominence and power.

Race will still play a unique role within both capital and labor. What's new is that the rising minority upper class will be more integrated into the corporate, political and government/state structures. The class dynamics, in this evolving social context, will become sharper within these oppressed communities.

It is not that any Black man or woman (or of any ethnic group) can do what Obama did as a standard bearer for a major party. The first time, however, is why the success of the rising Black privileged class is seen as a positive model to the Black community. But that example can't resolve issues of discrimination in jobs, housing and education equality.

On the one hand, the great excitement of the "first-time" election of a Black president — this unique moment — changes all discussions of race. On the other, it means that the democratic socialist vision of how to permanently end racism and confront the broad crisis of capitalism can get a broader hearing.

The debates and discussions about race and class going forward will surely be more complex and profound than any we've seen to date.

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