

The crisis of civilisation and resistance What's happening in France

Lalit Conference “Free Diego” October/November 2010

The world today is in crisis: social crisis, economic crisis and ecological crisis.

The description of the crisis is unfortunately all too familiar:

- * The economic crisis of capitalism described by John Percy on Sunday with its consequences of unemployment and poverty;
- * Poverty and war leading to the dislocation of millions of people, one case of which we have learnt so much in the past few days – the Chagossian people forced to leave their homes because of the warmongering of the US supported by their loyal allies British imperialism;
- * Deepening poverty in all parts of the world caused by the capitalist drive for profits, bringing about a breakdown of all forms of social networks;
- * The ecological crisis that threatens the destruction of the planet and in the meantime floods and cyclones that destroy the living and working standards of some of the poorest populations in the world such as the floods in Bangladesh and more recently Pakistan, or alternatively desertification in regions of Africa for example that means peoples cannot grow food and sustain themselves.

The reasons for this crisis are built into the capitalist system: the drive to increase profits and the need to defend markets, leading to economic war, military war and unplanned and unsustainable use of natural resources leading to disaster.

The answers to this crisis have to tackle all three aspects in an overall programme developed on the basis of the real experience and struggles of those suffering from its effects in all parts of the world.

The Fourth International, as a small but international organisation, attempts in its modest way to contribute to developing such a programme and linking up with all other forces that share such a goal. That is why we are pleased to have this opportunity to participate in this Lalit conference discussing one of the most blatant acts of injustice suffered by a whole people.

* * *

All acts and movements of resistance are valuable, from what they can win themselves – and we hope we will see this movement win – and the lessons that can be learnt from why and how they did or didn't.

Today in Europe the ruling classes are making a particularly brutal attack on working class living standards in the name of paying off the public debt.

In the first phase of the crisis we saw billions of euros pumped into banks and financial institutions by governments to save them from collapse. Now that money has to be recovered.

The paradox is that profits are on the rise in the first half of 2010 – by 85% for the CAC 40 companies in France.

And the working class is already paying by the stabilisation of unemployment at a very high level 19.7% in Spain, 17.7% in the Baltic countries, 11.8% in Greece. And everywhere the rate in sectors such as among young people or immigrants is much higher, reaching over 50%.

Where there is creation of jobs it is by casualised (precaire) jobs – 95% of the 59 000 jobs created in France in the first half of 2010 were in that category. Still in France, we have lost only 2% of jobs in the industrial sector compared to 2007 whereas in Spain they have lost 9%, in Ireland 11% and 14% in the Baltic countries.

* At the same time very low economic growth is forecast, the Gross Domestic Product in the Euro zone will be 3.25% lower than in 2008, only in Poland is growth forecast of 4.5%, France expects a drop of 1% whereas in Germany and Spain a drop of 3.8% is forecast.

These figures show the unlikelihood of job creation able to absorb the unemployed, the increase in active members of the labour market caused by the raising of the retirement age, and other measures proposed, for example in Britain, to bring mothers currently caring for their children or those who have been classified as unable for medical reasons to work back into the labour market. More people in work is the goal of governments determined to decrease the public debt. An avowed goal that never includes a discussion as to whether in fact this is the absolute necessity for a government – we are back to the days of Margaret Thatcher portraying herself as the “good housekeeper” of Britain wanting to “balance the books”. Swingeing reductions in the public sector are eliminating thousands of jobs whereas the contributions of those very people could in help to finance what is being cut.

The monthly bulletin of the European Central Bank in December 2009 set out the two primary goals for the European Union:

- * introduce flexible labour laws in order to reduce wage costs;
- * drastically reduce deficits and public debt: for example from 14.3% to 2.9% in five year period up to 2014.

This drive to reduce the debt is thus the reason for wide-ranging social attacks that have been stepped up since the May 2010 meeting of the IMF and the ECB and Ecofin.

We have already see the countries where these attacks have been the most severe: Greece where the movement this spring showed a level of resistance rarely encountered, notably the general strike on the 5th of May. That month the European Union was obliged to give 750 billion euros to Greece to enable it to pay its banker debtors, thus the EU countries saved their own banks. But the Greek workers have lost up to 20% or 30% of their wages through wage cuts and price rises. The divisions between the different trade-union confederations and the low level of self organisation by the workers have been an obstacle to continuing mobilisation of the same scope.

In Spain - where notably the bubble in the construction industry collapsed - 10 million workers participated in a general strike on the 29th September

That same day 100 000 workers demonstrated in Brussels at the call of the European trade unions.

In Portugal and Greece there have been strikes and movements, notably in Ireland a long and determined strike by the workers in Waterford Crystal.

In Britain where the government announced the most drastic cuts for decades on the 20th October there have been limited and local protests, but the main action called by the TUC, the single trade union confederation, is next March – six months later.

For the moment the movement in France is the most important.

It is the most powerful movement that we have seen for years. It is a rejection of unbridled neo-liberalism, a determined refusal to pay for the crisis of capitalism. It is rooted in the same dynamic as the 1995 strike movement but it is broader, deeper rooted in more sectors, more determined. Although it is not an explosion of the same scope as May 68 it expresses a mass desire to enter into a prolonged battle.

It is the first time for a very long time that there has been a really cross-sectoral strike. There has not been a real general strike, but very important sectors have been on strike: the oil refineries – for the first time since 1968, the electricity power stations, the petro-chemical sector, railway workers, lorry drivers, public transport, hospital workers, public sector workers including in local authorities, airports and factories where the form of action has most often been repeated one or two-hour stoppages by day, revoked from day to day. At the highest point hundreds of thousands of strikers were on ongoing strike, revoked from day to day. They were often young, particularly in the private sector.

As well as those on ongoing strike there were those who were on strike simply on the days of action, with a very strong participation from the private sector. And then of course the student movement joined in, on a broader scale from the high schools than from the universities. From the day of strikes and demonstrations on October 19, young people participated fully in the mobilisation, with very significant and dynamic contingents and many high schools blockaded. There is a determination and politicisation here that was not there in previous mobilisations. The more they are said to be manipulated and the more their right to demonstrate is contested, the more their determination grows. The very fact that they joined a movement on the question of pensions is enough to show the social importance of the movement.

The movement started at the beginning of the year after Prime Minister Fillon announced in January that pensions would have to be reformed and brought up the idea of raising the age at which people have the right to take retirement, claiming that this was a demographic necessity – as people live longer the pensions bill is higher. The Socialist Party leader Martine Aubry accepted this argument, saying it was inevitable. A statement that caused controversy within the SP and was retracted a week later.

After a social summit in February at the President's Elysee Palace the trade unions – in the intersyndicale bringing together all the major confederations - called for “general mobilisation” against the reforms that were being imposed. On the 23rd March a first demonstration brought 800 000 onto the streets. From the beginning of the negotiations in April it was clear that on the one side the government was determined to impose an increase in the legal retirement age whereas all the trade unions considered that retirement at 60 is an untouchable right.

On the 7th of April the global justice movement Attac and the leftwing think tank the Copernic

foundation produced a joint statement on the proposed reform signed by a very broad range of representatives from political parties, trade unions and associations. This established a broad unity framework alongside the specifically trade-union intersyndicale.

On 27th May one million people again took to the streets in opposition to the government's likely reforms and the lack of real negotiation.

On the 16th of June the government's project was announced, including the raising of retirement age. The fight started.

The first day of action was on 24th June which brought out 2 million people. On that day President Sarkozy was talking to Thierry Henry who had flown straight back from the debacle in the football World Cup in South Africa to talk to the president. Since then other questions have come to the fore and we haven't heard any more about the etats generaux on the state of French football.

Since the beginning of September seven days of strikes and demonstrations (the 7th and 23rd of September and the 2nd, 12th, 16th, 19th and 28th of October) have brought out 3 to 3.5 million people on each occasion, except the 28th during the school holidays when it was around 2 million. The CGT estimates that well over 5 million people have participated in the strikes and demonstrations since the start, as not everybody has been on strike every day of action or at every demonstration.

Our last reference point, the 1995 strikes, are outstripped by the number of people mobilised and the sectors affected in the autumn 2010 movement. And this movement is massively supported by the population since September, over 70% of the population support the movement and are against the proposed reforms. There is a certain aspect of what we call “strike by delegation”, that is people who are not able to go on strike themselves counting on other to strike for them but this is less so than in 1995. All the mass social movements in the last 15 years have been based on one sector in struggle (railway workers in 1995, teachers in 2003, high school students in 2007) supported on days of action by other sectors, but this movement has been cross-sectoral from the start.

Different forms of cross-sectoral organisation have appeared: general assemblies of union militants and organisers from different sectors (sometimes publishing daily bulletins); or more occasional meetings, or development of committees more or less outside the union structures. Whatever the structure in which the decisions have been taken, the most combative union activists have come together in cross-sectoral actions in the hundreds of blockades organised every day – the docks in Marseille, the airport at Toulouse, the oil refineries, the lycees....

All of this has helped to fight corporatist tendencies, trade union rivalries and to pose overall political questions more easily, particularly as the question of pensions has clearly appeared as a choice about what sort of society.

In 1995 the strike was a lot stronger in the sectors concerned, but it was only the broad public sector, accompanied by sympathy from the private sector. May 1968 was based on the meeting but not the convergence of a youth movement and the workers' movement. The current movement is that of the waged workforce, not only as the public demonstration of a statistical fact but the expression of a sociological and political reality. Thus the raising of the retirement age from 60 to 62 is seen as something concerning EVERYBODY. So on one side we have the the workforce, including those who were in it, are in it and who will be in it, and on the other the small layer of those who are lucky enough

to be rich. The class frontiers are very clear.

It is clear after this movement the question of social injustice will be key. While so many forces around us, in the media, the discourse of governments and so-called economics experts fight to impose the idea of the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism, this movement has focused the limelight on the moral scandal of the world we live in, which has been deepened with the global crisis of 2008. **Them** - those on top - against **Us** – those below.

To understand the force of this movement we also have to remember the context. Sarkozy was elected in 2007 by the traditional rightwing, electors drawn from the far right National Front and layers of left voters seduced by his promise of “working more to earn more”. The inevitable disappointment sharpened by the effects of the crisis has left Sarkozy without a project to present. The use of the insecurity and racism themes, disastrous as their lasting effects are, such as the mass expulsions of the Roma over the summer, are not enough to compensate.

At the same time nothing has been forgotten of the “bling bling president”, his victory celebration at Fouquet's on the Champs Elysees, his self-attributed wage rise, the tax shield for the rich. Now there is the Bettencourt affair – central governmental figures, including the president, involved in a scandal concerning the management of the financial affairs of the richest woman in France, heir to the L'Oreal fortune. The resentment of unmerited and ostentatious wealth sharpened the determination of the movement. One sign of that was the popularity of an NPA flyer which took the form of a 500 euro note with the slogan “Sarkozy and Woerth out, because they're worth it”. We distributed thousands in the demonstrations. I even found one pinned up on the noticeboard in my school staffroom, not by me!

Despite the popularity of the movement, 70% approval, and the unpopularity of Sarkozy, 22% approval in the latest opinion polls, the law has been voted and will undoubtedly be promulgated. Why?

Only a general strike of all sectors for the dropping of the reform would have been able to impose such a defeat. This was the strategy argued for by the NPA and the most combative sections of the trade unions. But despite the cross-sectoral movements differences remain profound between sectors depending on the level of unionisation, the level of casualisation, and recent experiences of struggle and defeats. A clear call from the union leaderships for a general strike in all sectors was necessary. The intersyndicale played a key role in maintaining the unity and the continuity of the movement, but it was as Francois Chereque of the CFDT said “because the activists want to continue”, not through a desire to give determined leadership to a movement, of which in fact the trade union leaderships underestimated the strength. And even the most active sectors remained dependent on the calendar of strike days and demonstrations fixed by the intersyndicale.

The movement of course isn't over. Olivier Besancenot is quoted widely in the French press which I read online yesterday saying “the mobilisation hasn't ended, I think there will be more people in the streets of the 6th of November than on the 28th of October. Schools are back and perhaps the strikes will be back. We'll see what the lyceens will do, and what the intersyndicale will do... The bases of the mobilisation are still there because it's a much broader question than pensions. There's a real democratic gap, an abyss between what the majority think and what the ruling classes think.”

Although the law has been passed and Sarkozy will undoubtedly promulgate it, a clear stand has been made, workers in France will resist attempts to make them pay for the crisis.

Other forces on the left seem to be thinking that now the next challenge is the presidential election in 2012 and that the unpopularity of Sarkozy and his reform mean that the left has won in advance. That is a mistake. This government is determined to implement the line of the European Central Bank and claw back from working people the amounts they used to bail out the banks. The attacks will continue and become harsher on working hours, on paid holidays, on other social gains. Their determination was also shown by the level of repression used against strikers and even lyceens. You may have seen in the papers or on TV the way they “unblocked” the oil refineries. In the city where I teach, in the Paris banlieue, the riot police, the CRS attacked the lyceens blockading their lycee, one received a flashball in the face. It's illegal to fire at the level of the face and head.

Anyway a victory of the left in 2012, what would it mean? The SP was prepared to sign a common statement and participate in the united front to defend retirement age at 60 while saying it was inevitable that workers would have to pay contributions for longer than 40 or 41 years as is the case now. Do the sums, it doesn't add up. The Parti de gauche concentrated its call on a referendum, while millions of workers and students were on strike and in the streets. What perspective is that? The Communist Party didn't have any profile with clear propositions.

The NPA is a militant party and our members, all our members, in the unions, in the workplaces, in the schools and universities, and in the neighbourhoods, were part of the mobilisations organised by unions, workplace and school general assemblies, the local unitary collectives. We are as is often said like fish in water in social mobilisations, what we say is well-received, we have many comrades among the strike leaders in different sectors. But from there to offering a political alternative at a mass national level is a qualitative jump for a small party. We know we want to present a radical anti-capitalist programme that breaks with the logic of the capitalist system, with profits, with private ownership of the means of production, with the exploitation of workers. We will discuss at our forthcoming congress how best to do that in the 2012 elections. We know that it can't be in alliance with any of the political forces that would agree to participate in a government managing capitalism.

In the meantime we will continue to push forward mobilisations against the pensions reform and against all the other attacks that we can expect. Other movements already exist – my local hospital has been on strike for 5 weeks in protest at the lack of staff and facilities, on the 6th of November an already planned demonstration on women's rights will converge with that against pensions reform, over the last two years thousands of undocumented, sans papiers, workers have been on strike and the battle for regularisation continues.

France is for the moment an exception, but we hope and try to help this “French exceptionalism” spread so that workers throughout Europe and the world will see that it is possible to resist and that as the NPA says “we won't pay for their crisis, our lives are worth more than their profits”.