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Fourth International

Turkey: Relentless - Forty Years of struggle from “Sürekli Devrim” to “Yeniyol”

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“Trotskyism”: an insult, betrayal or, in the best of cases, an exotic strangeness. It was in 1978, at the heart of a period when ideologically Stalinism and its variants weighed heavily on the radical left which, while valiantly leading its fight against fascism, was beset by fratricidal conflicts, that *Sürekli Devrim* (Permanent Revolution-SD), the first revolutionary Marxist review in Turkey, was born. Of course, Trotsky was not unknown to Turkish and Kurdish revolutionaries. Alongside a number of books denouncing the “counter-revolutionary essence” of Trotskyism, Deutscher’s trilogy and Trotsky’s books such as “My Life”, “Fascism - What it is and how to fight it” and “The Permanent Revolution”, had been published. But it was the first time that an organized revolutionary Marxist movement had emerged in the country of Nazim Hikmet.

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International movement, local organization

An originality, therefore. Because unlike all the other far left currents, *Sürekli Devrim* did not come from the common base that was the Turkish Communist Party but emerged independently of Stalinism and its Maoist and Hoxhaite variants, as part of an international movement stemming from long years of struggle against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union and the sectarian or class conciliatory policies of the CPSU, the Comintern and its national sections.

So a first challenge for *Sürekli Devrim* and then for *Ne Yapmalı* (“What is to be done” - which appeared subsequently) was to denounce the historical betrayals and erroneous policies of the Stalinist leadership and thus demonstrate the legitimacy of revolutionary Marxism through publications and articles dealing with issues like the bureaucratic Thermidor, the second Chinese revolution, the politics of the third period and the popular front and so on. Another important effort was to provide a Marxist and internationalist analysis of Turkish history breaking with a certain Kemalist nationalism intrinsic to the Turkish left. The first issue of SD, for example, was devoted to the national question and the defence of the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people.

Debates and polemics with local Stalinist or centrist currents were another category of articles, inevitable and necessary for this period. And finally, the internationalist perspective required to inform and take a position on events that marked this period such as the revolutions in Iran, Nicaragua and El Salvador, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan or the revolutionary struggles in Peru and Bolivia.

During the two years that were to end with the military coup of September 1980, relations with the Fourth International were ensured by comrades Livio Maitan, Pierre Rousset, Jim Percy of Australia and of course François Bouée, known as "Momo" (of the French LCR), who was like a full member of the group. The publications, training materials and pamphlets that Momo carried during his numerous round trips as a travel guide between 1977 and 1980 would be of great importance in the political orientation of the group, in a period when means of communication were drastically reduced.

The program, the fetish and the street

What connects a political current, what marks its unity is above all its program. *Sürekli Devrim* thus published in July 1978, before its first issue, its manifesto declaring its positions on the three sectors of the world revolution, the balance of power between the bourgeoisie and the working class, the Kurdish question, the anti-fascist struggle, women's liberation, the student movement and the unity of the revolutionary forces. Also included in the manifesto was the Transitional Program, the founding text of the Fourth International.

As Trotsky put it, every organization experiences an initial propagandist period in which it affirms its foundations and stands out from other political currents. What is important, however, is not to remain at this stage, not to become a sect that limits its activity to a fetishism of the program and a defence of the holy book, which multiplies splits based on interpretations of lifeless texts. One of the main merits of the *Sürekli Devrim-Yeniyol* (SD-YY) current was probably never to fall into this trap, however comfortable it may be; not to freeze and schematize the realities of an era to create unshakeable dogmas.

This question was expressed in the following terms at the second conference (1986) held at the Amsterdam Institute, by the members of the group exiled in Europe - coming from six different countries - following the coup d'état. "We never stopped fighting in the 'mud of the street'. We participated in the class struggle not as masters of sectarian thinking but as revolutionaries anxious to translate their program into a concrete political line, trying to fuse the working class." A concrete example of this perspective was the revolutionary activity of the Union of Forest Industry Workers (ASIS) - one of the components of the DISK Confederation opposition - with the special contribution of our late comrades Alev Ates and Rifat Kendiriligil.

However, this refusal of programmatic fetishism is not a question of individual clairvoyance but of political culture, that of the Fourth International. It is true that there were times when the defence of the program against all odds - which meant a defence of Marxist analysis and revolutionary perspective against all sorts of reformism - had to be a necessity and have a certain function. But this belief of holding the truth alone in the face of a world at risk could also engender the suspicious sectarianism of the last guardians of the temple. However, the programmatic base has been renewed with the radicalization of the "1968" turn and contact with a new revolutionary generation and therefore with new questions. Because it is the struggle and the questions that emerge through this struggle that renew, that "refresh", that sharpen the program so that it does not lose any of its subversive character, its edge over time.

Thus, two texts that were debated from the late 70s to the mid-80s, one on the importance of democracy and pluralism in socialism (and the revolutionary party!) and the other on the need for independence of the women's liberation movement have been key programmatic achievements in the political orientation of the Fourth International. The same is true of the manifesto "Socialism or Barbarism" in the context of the fall of the bureaucratic dictatorships and the two texts on eco-socialism and LGBTI struggle in the early 2000s. The SD-YY current paid particular attention to reporting these debates and translating the texts into Turkish, and of course to training its cadres and organizing its sectors of intervention according to these political lines.

In search of revolutionary unity

The turning point of the 1990s, marked by the collapse of the bureaucratic dictatorships and the social and political consequences of the neoliberal counteroffensive, was a stage of restructuring the far left at the international level. With very different modalities, the attempts to create a pluralistic and unified left that began mainly with the Brazilian PT in 1979, continued with the efforts of our Italian and German comrades, resulting in a whole series of unitary organizational experiences in the 1990s, in countries such as Portugal, Uruguay, Denmark, Spain and Italy.

In Turkey, in a context where the left was torn apart by murderous divergences, *Sürekli Devrim* in its first issues called for a "revolutionary united front": "The task of the revolutionary Marxist movement is, while waging a struggle for the propaganda of its own program, to attract various revolutionary currents to the same platform, to define commonalities beyond differences, and to lead an anti-fascist struggle with an anti-capitalist orientation through a single front of action and thus accomplish its historic mission." The style has certainly aged, but the "mission" is still relevant.

Sürekli Devrim was banned with the introduction of martial law in 1978. In book format, easier to conceal in the pocket, *Ne Yapmalı* appeared under martial law before being banned in turn six months later. During the years of exile after the coup d'état, the political continuity of the current was assured by the magazine *Enternasyonal* (International) published in Paris - and described as a "subversive miniaturized libel" by Daniel Bensaïd in his autobiography- to be shipped to Turkey in tin cans.

It is then in conditions of a relative democratization that the newspaper *İlk Adım* ("First Step") and finally *Sosyalist Demokrasi için Yenyol* ("New Course for a Socialist Democracy") would appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s, through the efforts, with others, of our deceased comrade, Necdet Sarac. And 1994 saw the launch of a unitary initiative, the United Socialist Alternative (BSA) which was an electoral alliance, and then the foundation of the United Socialist Party (BSP) which Ernest Mandel evoked in laudatory terms in his debate with the North American "Spartacist" sect in 1994. The rapprochement between this party, constituted by various ex-Stalinist and centrist currents and the important centrist-Guevarist current of the 70s, *Devrimci Yol* ("Revolutionary Path") led to the foundation of the ÖDP, the Freedom and Solidarity Party, which provided the conditions for a much larger unitary struggle than had previously been possible.

Yenyol mobilized all its energy for the construction of this party --which for a time was part of the European Anti-Capitalist Left (EACL) alongside the LCR, the Italian PRC, the Portuguese Left Bloc and so on - through its successes and setbacks, while expressing its criticisms. After a last effort - from the drawing up of the program to the editing of the newspaper - to push the party towards a more anti-capitalist stance in 2006-2007, *Yenyol* finally left the party when the dominant group affirmed its resolve to make it a monolithic party.

This was also the period of the social forums to which *Yenyol* contributed, in particular thanks to its

international relations. With the weakening of the anti-globalization dynamics, it was in the environmental movement, solidarity with migrants, the trade union struggles of the public sector workers and in the LGBTI movement that *Yeniyol* intervened to the extent of its abilities. From 2010, *Yeniyol* also devoted part of its activity to trying to break from, on the one hand, the weight of secularist-republican positions in the radical left in the fight against the AKP and on the other hand the liberal ideological positions still held in sectors of the left (including the group related to the IST) which saw the AKP as a force able to democratize the state faced with the weight of the military and the Kemalist republicans.

We should also note, from the 1970s to the present day, with the publishing house Kız and then Yazın, the publication of the writings of Trotsky and Mandel, and works by comrades such as Daniel Bensaid, Michael Löwy, Catherine Samary, Gilbert Achcar, Jeanette Habel, Enzo Traverso, Michel Husson, Michel Lequenne, Claudio Katz, as well as the Notebooks for Study and Research and the programmatic texts of the Fourth International, have accompanied our militant commitment. Nearly 90 volumes have been published up until today.

However, our current has not ceased to search for unitary initiatives. This is why it took part in the June United Movement (“Birlesik Haziran Hareketi”) which tried to continue the dynamics of the Gezi/Taksim revolt in 2013. But this broad initiative reduced its intervention in taking positions in cultural/religious conflicts with the AKP (like defence of secular education) rather than giving priority to intervention within the class struggle. Its real sin, however, was not to take a stand in such a critical phase as the elections of June 2015, when the AKP could have been overthrown.

The SD-YY current which, since its very first publications, has defended the democratic and revolutionary demands of the Kurdish people - including of course its right to self-determination - and displayed a critical solidarity with its struggle, has been the initiator of unitary campaigns for the HDP - which originated from the Kurdish movement - with other currents of the radical left in the three elections that took place since 2015. For a year now our current has also been one of the founding members of the United Labour Coordination with the objective to intervening in the class struggle with a project of self-organization independent of the trade union bureaucracies, but also putting the labour struggle on the agenda of a left torn between the two reformist poles that are the CHP and the HDP (although the latter is of course more left wing and requires full solidarity because of the repression against it).

An article in *Yeniyol*, published in 1999 and titled “Relentless”, said: “The renewed credibility of a socialist project is not an issue that can be resolved in the short term. Only by regularly and stubbornly taking part in struggles around issues which are urgent and burning for the broad working masses will it be possible to make this long-term project meaningful to them.” In order to render desirable for workers, women and youth, the only alternative capable of giving human beings (and any other living being!) the lives they deserve, that of a self-managing socialism, environmentalist, feminist and internationalist, our current will continue its fight, as it has done for forty years - relentlessly.

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P.S.

• IVP, Tuesday 4 December 2018:

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