

6th Congress of the European Anti-Capitalist Left

Wednesday 17 June 2015, by [VERCAMMEN François](#) (Date first published: 19 September 2003).

Contents

- [An intermediary stage before](#)
- [The anti-war movement after](#)
- [The EU's offensive](#)
- [Employers' offensive, workers'](#)
- [Social democracy's miserable](#)
- [Intermediary stage, new \(...\)](#)

The European Anti-capitalist Left, at its Athens conference, took the decision to constitute ourselves as a specific current (by history, tradition, political sympathies), according to the terminology used by the EU to designate organizations, "a European Party of the Anti-capitalist Left".

An intermediary stage before new battles

One idea is central to the Conferences of the European Anti-Capitalist Left: [1] the advance towards a radical new political force is linked to socio-political experiences of great breadth. These, and not ideological debates, are what will lead to realignment and political convergence, the accumulation of forces, the sinking of roots in society, as well as the development of a platform which speaks to the masses and to youth. From this viewpoint, 2003 has certainly been eventful, with a war whose political impact has been felt across the planet, followed by a spectacular remobilization of labour in several European countries around a common objective.

Paradoxically, this powerful centripetal dynamic has, at this intermediary stage, not yet produced a simplification and a strengthening of analytical and tactical conclusions, nor a robust political and organizational impetus. The Conference in Athens, a prelude in early June to new mobilizations in Thessalonika, took place too soon to grasp fully the impact.

The anti-war movement after the war

The point of departure has undoubtedly been the role of the powerful international anti-war movement. In Europe, its point of departure was the European Social Forum in Florence - the political strength won through an immense debate, and a million strong demonstration. The initiative came entirely from the radical forces - political and social. That others joined in - from social democracy to the Pope - is still to the credit of these forces; at the head of these broader unitary fronts, they exerted a veritable hegemony in several countries, notably Italy and Spain, or, as in Britain, put the Blair government in difficulty and shook the Labour Party. Even in countries like France, Germany and Belgium, the governments, opposed to the Bush-Blair line, did not succeed in creating a 'sacred union' or demobilizing the occupation of the streets and cities. You have to go

back 30 years to find such a breadth of mass mobilization, such a will to impose on the dominant classes, such a situation of outflanking of the reformist apparatuses. And it is certain that the political, organizational and personal relations born in this period will be consolidated, ready to resurge at the next opportunity.

However, this favourable assessment is counterbalanced by three facts. First, the movement did not succeed in stopping the war, while the maximum of favourable conditions were met - mobilization from below, contradictions between great powers, the paralysis of 'neutral' international institutions, the ideological and practical isolation of US imperialism. This factor of setback has generated some mixed feelings among the masses ("who won?" "who is strongest?"). The defeat of the Iraqi army (almost) without a fight fed this impression of 'unstoppable power'. Bush tends to strengthen it by threats to North Korea, Syria, Iran, and his acts in Palestine. Secondly, there are the contradictions inside the Atlantic bloc which were very apparent during the war and surprised not a few. And they have not gone away. They will henceforth mark European societies. The European Union (EU) has drawn the conclusion (at its Summit in Thessalonika) in the line of Solana; link up with US policy "against international terrorism", but at the same time reject a uni-polar world (dominated by the USA) and adopt a Constitution which establishes a supranational state reflecting the economic power of the EU. Thirdly, the enormous anti-war wave has not clearly benefited the parties that were at the head of it at the recent national elections, notably where it was strongest, in Italy and Spain. The PRC in Italy, the party of the movement, did not gather the fruits of the very important and very visible role it played. The Italian left progressed overall (in percentage terms), but Berlusconi was not really punished. In Spain, Aznar's vote held up; the United Left (IU) progressed a little, avoiding a predicted collapse, but the PSOE made few inroads into the electorate of the right.

These three points raise a debate, and this will not lead automatically to a consensus.

The roadmap (of the quartet: USA, EU, UN, Russia) seeks to isolate and crush the Palestinian people - who need great solidarity in a complex diplomatic-political situation. The US occupation of Iraq, increasingly problematic and insupportable, will demonstrate without doubt that the 'easy victory' was only provisional. Will the main imperialist countries, who played at 'reconciliation' in Evian at the G8, be capable of finding a common strategy before the Middle Eastern quagmire?

The EU's offensive

But what will certainly weigh on the European political situation is the long offensive - from September 2003 to June 2004 - by the EU to pass to a new stage - creating a supranational state and winning sufficient popular legitimacy. The real nature of the operation will be clear - anti-democratic, anti-social, militarist. But that will not mean that the debate will also be clear.

For two reasons. Before a choice as fundamental as this, which affects all the mechanisms of stability and regulation of European capitalism, all manner of conservative and legitimist reflexes will come into play. The pressure to say "yes" to the draft Constitution will be enormous. The choice will affect the future of political parties and personal careers. All the tricks in vogue since the beginning of European unification will reappear: the 'lesser evil'; the possibility of amending the texts in the future; the argument that "you have to choose sides"; fear of mixing one's vote with the nationalist right/far right; standing together against the Americans, avoiding a crisis of the EU which would be a catastrophe; and so on. There is no doubt that European social democracy will be aligned - in fact it is already, through its collaboration in the Convention (which has been preparing the draft of the Constitution for more than a year).

Even in some CPs, up to and including forces involved in the ESF, positions supportive of voting for the Constitution - 'critically' of course - could multiply. On the other hand, a nationalist left (Greek and Portuguese CPs, the Chevènement current in France, a mass of small Maoist and/or Stalinist parties) will also manifest itself, rejecting the EU in the name of the defence of national sovereignty (and thus the bourgeois state).

Political clarification will be a complicated process. It will initially create more confusion than clarity. The European anti-capitalist left faces the challenge of being resolutely opposed to the EU and resolutely pro-European, in favour of another Europe. Whereas the confrontation with the 'nationalist left' will be rather simple, indeed caricatural, the debate with the pro-EU 'left currents' will be altogether more difficult. For this debate will be less ideological-abstract and clearly more political; it will not suffice to develop the contours and general perspective of another Europe opposed to nationalist withdrawal. Regulations and standards drawn up and controlled by the EU intervene increasingly in the everyday life of European citizens. Directly and indirectly, they influence increasingly the concrete conditions of the class struggle. Without a 'European' formulation of partial demands, a European comprehension of state mechanisms, a global European political perspective, a European workers' and social movement, the increasingly numerous militant layers and those who are increasingly concerned will not be won to our alternative. The acceleration and deepening of the establishment of the bourgeois-imperialist state that the EU represents offers an opportunity to the organizations of the anti-capitalist left.

Employers' offensive, workers' counter-offensive

As was predictable, hardly had the Iraqi war ended when the European governments went on the offensive on the social front. That goes in particular for those who cultivated their popularity on the backs of anti-Americanism. They have had a strategy since the EU summit in Lisbon (March 2000) and a green light to attack pensions (Barcelona summit, March 2002). The level of European harmonization on the employers' side is striking. This time the response of the working class has also been harmonized: Austria, Germany, France (and then Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Britain, with partial but very tough struggles) have been shaken by general strikes.

The working class has once again occupied the forefront of the political scene. This combativity has surprised the bourgeoisie, which had begun to believe its own ideology about the 'disappearance' of the world of labour and the left. A rule has been reestablished - providing the right conditions are met, workers engage energetically and in great numbers in struggles of great breadth. It proves that neoliberal policies remain massively unpopular, even if past defeats have left traces of lassitude and scepticism. Strikes retain a strong legitimacy among the people, notwithstanding the media hysteria. Moreover, as the struggles of the Italian metalworkers in Spring 2001 announced and the recent strikes of teachers in France have confirmed, a new militant generation is being born. This amounts then to a very significant change, as much in terms of the ideological climate as the reactivation of the trade union movement and the inter-class relationship of forces.

Nonetheless, this revival remains contradictory. It is only beginning. It is directly threatened by the brutality of the right wing governments and the employers who will attempt to strangle it at birth.

The level of activity is higher than ever in the cycle that is beginning. Austria has been the scene of the biggest general strike (24 hours) since the war (1 million out of 3 million workers!). In Italy, there has been strike activity for almost two years; millions of workers have on several occasions occupied the streets both for political objectives (the war) and for their own demands. In France, the recent 'creeping general strike', with millions of workers in the street, has seen in an impressive

succession of days of action, the biggest strike movement since May 1968.

On the other hand, this enormous activity is not enough to win. In Austria, the right wing government has momentarily drawn back. It is difficult for a regime that includes the semi-fascist FPÖ to attack the power of the trade union bureaucracy. But in France and Italy - where the counter-offensive of the workers is tough - the Berlusconi and Chirac-Raffarin governments are not giving way. On the contrary, in the autumn they intend to pursue their anti-social offensive against the gains built up by the workers throughout the 20th century. The goal is clear: to weaken the unions, demoralize the workers, increase competitiveness. A sign that the European bourgeoisies, supported by the EU, are stepping on the gas: Schröder's 'red-green' government has launched an attack on all fronts (pensions, health, conditions of hiring and firing, unemployment benefits and so on), generating the biggest crisis in the German trade union movement since the end of the Second World War. And Germany had been 'lagging behind' on the European neoliberal timetable.

Thus at this time of remobilization we can also feel the impact of the defeats of the last 20 years on the cohesion of the workers' and trade union movement.

We need to rebuild social resistance and reorganize an active and democratic trade union movement. We will see in the months to come what will be the contribution of the movement for global justice, in particular the European Social Forum (ESF) and the national social forums, to this sharpening of conflict between employers and workers.

Social democracy's miserable comeback

Social democracy has played an active and unsavoury role in this setback, in breaking the common base of social rights and reducing the weight of the trade union movement. It has itself paid a strong price for its heated support for neoliberal policies, weakening its parliamentary base and dilapidating its previous political cohesion. If a return to a 'classic' programme (Keynesianism, public services, social security, standard of living) is completely excluded, its return to government is not.

It is a perverse situation, but in the absence of a genuinely left political force, kicking out the right wing implies the return of the neoliberal left, lacking any trace of an alternative programme: the Olive Tree and the Left Democrats (DS) in Italy, the PSOE in Spain and the PS in France. It is an unhappy vista from all viewpoints; first, because the result will be a neoliberal policy hardly different from its predecessors. This neoliberal left will then probably need political support in Italy (PRC), Spain (IU) and France (PCF+Greens) to form a parliamentary majority. The poverty of the social democrats could lead to a lamentable confusion in some Communist Parties. Already the German PDS, as junior partner to the SPD inside administrations of the Länder of Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern have applied a brutal austerity policy, doubtless in the hope of ultimately serving in the federal government. Decidedly, the disaster of the PCF, after the plural left government, has not been assimilated, even within the PCF.

Intermediary stage, new battles

The situation today is paradoxical. There is an obvious gap between the enormity of the historic intervention of the masses on the political and social terrain on the world scale; and the fact that it has not yet, at this stage, affected strongly the institutional structures and the political and social organizations.

The traditional bureaucracies (trade union and party political) have known an unprecedented setback and lost the monopoly on the big mobilizations and political initiatives, including at the international level. But we are only at the beginning of an alternative force.

The rise of the movement for global justice has overthrown the tendency of profound retreat of 20 years (1980- 1999), spectacularly, creating through truly historic events, a new spirit of emancipation, self-activity, and hope. This movement is very legitimate, but still not deeply rooted. The new social movement has stimulated and inspired that of the workers (the trade union movement in particular) but it has only helped to awaken this latter, not to strengthen its militant structures. The trade union movement, depending on the country, has led strong, significant battles, in contrast with the preceding periods, but it seems that this is only the beginning of a true revival of trades unionism, especially in the workplaces. The anti-war movement - originating directly from the movement for global justice - has been extraordinary for its impact on society and the big traditional mass organizations, but this very political fact has only played a secondary role even in the most 'pacifist' countries. The 'new' organizations have not been significantly strengthened in terms of membership.

The most significant lag is clearly that between social activity and political commitment (electoral and party political). This is a fact which is explicable, and undoubtedly transient, but real. There is nothing in common, from this viewpoint, with May 1968, when thousands of youth organized themselves in revolutionary parties. That leads for the moment, to the relative weakness of the alternative 'new' forces (social, political) to the left of social democracy.

For the European anti-capitalist left, there are two things at stake: to be in the social battles, and to participate in the main electoral contests. It has solid convictions and many tactical experiences, which should allow it to contribute to the stage which is opening.

This new situation also poses questions for the CPs. Given a certain weakness of the alternative left, an extremely anti-democratic electoral system, and the difficulty of 'beating the right', certain tactical manoeuvres can be justified. The danger is to pass from manoeuvre to political engagement; governmental participation with a social democracy more than ever bogged down in neoliberalism, would mean the end of a cycle of radicalism, and would leave the Party in tatters. Nobody should forget the sad experience of the Parti Communiste Français.

The European Anti-capitalist Left, at its Athens conference, took the decision to constitute ourselves as a specific current (by history, tradition, political sympathies), according to the terminology used by the EU to designate organizations, "a European Party of the Anti-capitalist Left". It is an important step, not anodyne. It is a pan-European appeal to advance in this direction; regroupment, in each country, and on the European continent, of the maximum of radical, pluralist, representative, non-sectarian forces. But we do not conflate the setting up of such a formation with the political battle at the European elections of June 2004. We act also to fight against social liberal policies and to constitute a broad and unified electoral bloc, capable of dialogue with the social forces.

François Vercammen

P.S.

* From <http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article128>

Footnotes

[1] The Conferences of the European Anti-capitalist Left involves parties, movements or coalitions who share a clearly anti-capitalist, internationalist, anti-racist and feminist orientation, as well as the objective of a democratic and socialist society. Initiated in March 2000 (first conference in Lisbon) by the Red-Green Alliance (Denmark), the Left Bloc (Portugal), the Scottish Socialist Party and the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (France), their objective is to unite the radical left on the European scale on the basis of debate, pluralism and cooperation, so as to build a European political alternative to the parties of neoliberal social democracy.

At the sixth conference, held in Athens on June 9-10, 2003, present were: the Red-Green Alliance from Denmark, the Left Bloc from Portugal, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire from France, the Socialist Alliance and Socialist Workers Party of England and Wales, Espacio Alternativo from the Spanish state, the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) of Italy, SolidaritéS from Switzerland, the Party of Freedom and Solidarity (ÖDP) from Turkey, as well as observers from the Socialist Party (Britain) and the Socialist Party (Ireland). Moreover, Synaspismos (Greece), Esquerra unida i alternativa (Spanish state) and the DKP (Germany) participated as guests. Other organizations who had participated in at least one of the preceding conferences - the Red Electoral Alliance of Norway, the Socialist Party of Holland, La Gauche of Luxembourg, Izquierda Unida from the Spanish state, le Mouvement pour le Socialisme from Switzerland - were not able to attend in Athens.