

Luxfer doit vivre : itw d'Axel Peronczyk, délégué syndical CGT de l'usine

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France: The “hi-viz” movement

A translation of a report from A.V. in Marseille. Published on lernnimkamp website in 23 November 2018

The “hi-viz” movement started with motorists protesting against the increase in fuel prices following an increase in the tax on diesel fuel.

For years diesel fuel prices in France have been low, and this led many people to buy diesel vehicles. Now the taxes on diesel fuel are going up. Calls for road blocks started on Facebook and other social networks. These began on Saturday 17 November. According to government sources, 280,000 people gathered together at 2,000 different locations on that day, blocking roads, demonstrating and occupying motorways. The road blocks have persisted since then.

Although parties like La France Insoumise or the far-right Rassemblement Nationale support this movement in the media, they do not officially contribute to it. What you hear on the roadblocks is above all peoples' fury at Macron and his

government. For years, and in particular since Macron came to power, living conditions for the majority of French people have been getting worse. He has cut taxes affecting the rich (what the French call "ISF"), raised the tax burden on pensioners and civil servants ("CSG"), cut housing benefit and at the same time introduced an annual cut of 40 bn euro on business ("CICE"). Inflation is rising more strongly and wages are stagnating, so real wages are falling. And now motorists, particularly in medium-sized towns, have to pay more for fuel, although they have no alternative way of getting around at a time when we are all told labour has to move more mobile. The overwhelming majority of people know that they are not paying this tax to protect the environment, and that in the framework of the reform of the state railways more and more routes are being closed. The entire French tax system is unfair. In comparison with what they earn, French workers pay a lot more than the rich, the shareholders, the bourgeoisie. A few weeks ago Macron told an unemployed person he only needed to cross the road to find a job. Today thousands of French people are not just crossing the road, they are blocking it shouting "Macron demission!" – "Macron resign!" With his pro-rich policies and his arrogance (he recently told a pensioner to quit complaining), Macron has lined up over 70% of French people – basically the whole working class – against him. To add fuel to the flames, the security service, who mostly had no idea on 17 November where the road-blocks and demonstrations were going to happen, have reacted very hesitantly. But since last Monday things have changed. Since Saturday thousands of workers, tradespeople and -noticeably – lots of women have been blocking France's roads. The movement is strongest in the medium-sized towns. However, on 17 November there were also actions in Paris, where over 1,000 demonstrators nearly got through to their stated target in front of the Elysee Palace (Macron's Official residence). Now the government is trying to criminalise the movement, portraying the demonstrators as wreckers. Even if the movement has ebbed a little, it remains popular. And it has a new goal:

the 24 November demo in Paris.

The demonstrators want Macron to resign and they know that power lies in the Elysee Palace.

Apart from the road transport industry sector of the (moderate socialist) Force Ouvriere union, who yesterday called for support for the movement, the "hi-viz" movement has not yet been supported by the big union confederations. The (traditionally Communist-led) CGT confederation calls for support for a demonstration they have already planned for 1 December. It is left to the bourgeois press to speculate about the movement's far-right potential. A lot of people are wondering why the trade unions are hesitating about joining the movement. The same is true of France Insoumise, which has not so far got involved in the struggle as an organisation. The well-known France Insoumise parliamentary deputy, Francois Ruffin, stated on the evening of 21 November on TV that France Insoumise is not calling for Macron's resignation, but that if he continued to defend only the interests of big business he would have to go. This lack of determination and political clarity help the government. Francois Ruffin demands a reduction in the fuel tax, more tax justice and the reintroduction of the wealth tax. That is right. These are also demands which the unions could bring into the movement.

Basically, the question of power is raised. So far neither France Insoumise nor the union leaders have contributed to bringing the government down. On 24 November the "hi-viz" are planning to head for Paris in numbers to force the government to listen to them. We can assume that these workers and intermediate layers who are not organised in unions will try to head for the Elysee Palace. They are right to do so. Today trade unions can establish a clear platform of demands and offer support in organising this demonstration.

“Hi-viz vests”: Unions slow to join the dance

The below article is a translation of an article appearing in French on the Mediapart website:

(<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/231118/gilets-jaunes-les-syndicats-hesitent-entrer-dans-la-danse>)

(Notes)

(CGT, Force Ouvriere and CFDT are the three main and separate union congresses in France, broadly-speaking divided along political lines, SUD is the common name for some more radical independent, breakaway unions. It is difficult to really know how best to translate “gilets jaunes” (yellow waistcoats), which applies to both the fuel-tax demonstrators and their “uniform”, the hi-viz safety jacket.)

“Hi-viz vests”: Unions slow to join the dance

23 November 2018: By Mathilde Goanec and Dan Israel.

If most national trade union leaders hold their noses when the “hi-viz vests” are mentioned, activists locally are taking the plunge citing the levels of social crisis. Nevertheless, there are still raw edges, mainly because of instances of racism and some of the demands about cutting taxes.

When we called CFDT member Pierre-Gael Laveder off the cuff, he replied (hi-viz vest on his back) straight from the Magny road-block at at Montceau-les-Mines (Saone-et-Loire). Last year, this man was one of the main actors in the fight against the closure of the Allia factory at Digoïn. Now “newly redundant” he is a “hi-viz vest”.

However, Laurent Berger, the national secretary of his union, has not called on his troops to join the movement. On Monday 19 November he even denounced the “totalitarian” tone of some of the meetings. Nevertheless, concerned about the movement’s increasing popularity, the leader of the CFDT on Saturday proposed to Emmanuel Macron to quickly unite unions, the employers and associations “to set up a social pact for ecological conversion”, a proposition which the government turned down flat. All this means little to Pierre-Gael Laveder, who wears no label when he goes to the “hi-viz vests” meetings, quite happy to play locally the role of go-between his national secretary hankered after.

“There’s a bit of everything on the road-blocks: tradesmen, shopkeepers, public service people ... and quite a few trade unionists”, Laveder explains. “I think it’s important to be there because what we’re fighting for here are things we stand up for in everyday union work: an increase in buying power and a wage rise. It makes sense to me”.

Like the CFDT, most union leaderships are hesitating, while on the ground many union activists have taken the plunge, even though the “hi-viz vests” always start a lot of arguments. The CGT position, for example is somewhat embarrassing. Less than a week ago Philippe Martinez was hammering out the line: “The CGT does not march alongside either people on the far right or bosses who talk about taxes but also mean social (National Insurance) contributions.”

All the same, on 20 November the national union published a statement calling on the government to respond to the “urgent social situation” which the “hi-viz vests” emphasise. Visiting Rouen last Thursday, Philippe Martinez went further, conscious of the pressures in his own organisation: “What worries us is not the ‘hi-viz’ movement but those who try to exploit it”.

There was the same shilly-shallying at Le Havre, a town the authorities are keeping a very careful eye on because it hosts

a port, docks and refineries. A general assembly of the local CGT discussed "hi-viz" on Wednesday 21 November. Activists didn't want to "be associated with 'hi-viz'", but planned to carry out a series of actions in parallel, especially since some of them are already out on strike over wages, for example at Total (six of whose seven French refineries are affected this Friday). On Thursday morning a two-hour leafletting session and a partial roadblock took place at the Oceane roundabout, where "hi-viz" have been setting up off and on since Saturday.

Sandrine Gerard, the secretary of the local CGT branch, has also informed Mediapart that there will be "growing popularity" from Monday 26 November with a possible blockade of "the economy" at Le Havre, almost certainly referring to the refineries. According to our information, the Le Havre CGT docks and harbour group, which has an extremely high percentage of union membership but is very tight-lipped where the media are concerned has been even clearer and passes the line on to members calling on them "not to let the caravan of anger pass by" but mix "their red vests with the yellow vests".

For all their concern about who might be trying to exploit the movement, the group believes "there is a place for the CGT in this movement" and calls on "all members to participate in progressive assemblies". Their comrades in La Mède (Bouches-du-Rhone Department) have already taken the plunge: they have been blockading their Total refinery alongside "hi-viz vests" since Thursday 22 November.

Even before 17 November, the union's chemical industry group was warning that the "hi-viz vests" anger was not "illegitimate" and calling for a mobilisation a mobilisation in all the main sectors such as transport, oil, energy, ports ... and the Lavera refinery and the fuel depot at Fos-sur-Mer in Bouches-du-Rhone have been regularly blockaded by "hi-viz vests" since Saturday.

Force Ouvriere union's national leadership is undergoing a big internal crisis and has not really adopted a stance. However, their Transport section, which is the strongest union in road transport and ambulance drivers, has officially called on members to join the "hi-viz vests" and join in actions in favour of greater buying-power. "We call on them to come to the support of existing movements" General Secretary of the transport section of the union, Patrice Clos, explains, one of three candidates standing to replace Pascal Pavageau at the head of the national union.

If the unions are going forward on tip-toe, the official reason given for that is first of all the occasionally racist, sexist and homophobic tone of a very disorganised movement which is pulling in all kinds of directions. The CGT is sticking to its guns: "This period of powerful contrasts of light and shade can give birth to monsters, and citizens should not allow their anger to be diverted by those pushing xenophobic, racist and homophobic ideas", the union says, referring to instances of physical and verbal violence experienced at a certain number of assemblies since 17 November.

Specifically the CGT section covering Customs Officers responded in a very lively way to publication on social media of a Facebook video showing "hi-viz vests" at Flixecourt (Haute-de-France department) congratulating each other on discovering migrants in the cistern of a tanker lorry and calling the police, and by the way making fun of the customs service. "Confident in their racist convictions, they preferred to call the police rather than an aid organisation which could have helped them", the union group says in a press release. "This video shows protagonists calling for a 'giant bonfire' All this is reminiscent of very sad and inglorious events in our history". The union follows up with an official complaint for slander and defamation of their service and incitement to racial hatred.

Acrobatics

CGT activist Vincent Labrousse was prominent in the struggle to save jobs at the La Souterraine factory (Creuse Department) in September. Now sacked, he too is careful in discussing the composite character of the movement. "I can't march with people from the fascistosphere. It goes against nature", this activist explains. "But they are not the only ones in the movement. Others simply want to denounce the society of exclusion we are being led into. I support them". Moreover, about fifty of his comrades were present at the road blocks on Saturday. "In our CGT industrial group there is no rejection. Some of us support it but don't go. Some do go there. Others will go".

The sociologist Jean-Michel Denis, who specialises in trade unions and social movements, points out that most trade union bodies are in "horror of spontaneous movements". "Most of those demonstrating here are wage-earners", CGT member Fredo, who we met in Rouen, states simply. "What do they want? More purchasing-power. Our job is, without imposing anything, to get them to think about the question of wages. After all, that's the heart of the matter."

Activists also claim that the movement can also help to restore faith a little. "I'm really struck by the conviviality, the atmosphere ... We've obviously got a lot to tell them, but a lot to learn as well", explains Manu at Rouen. "What's not to like about blockading Disney, supermarkets, petrol stations?" notes Laurent Degousse, who is a member of the independent union SUD Commerce in Paris and one of the founders of the social front "Front Social" "In any case it's very effective. 2000 people gathering together on 17 November. If it works, it's mainly because you can come as you are and it's on your doorstep. These are lessons for the social movement to bear in mind".

Xenophobic, sexist and homophobic language which does occur in

certain assemblies also do not discourage this "Solidaires" (independent union) activist, although he too mentions strong pressures within his organisation, which is used to sticking close to the social movement but is also involved in particular in anti-fascist and anti-sexist struggles. "Concretely, it's not enough to say 'that stinks' and 'that's infected by the far right', and in any case that's not the atmosphere on the road blocks. Even if it can crop up, since there is all sorts of everything in this movement, which has neither structure, leaders, or security stewards. But I think the determining factor is the rejection of Macron's policies and his very person". On Saturday he will put on his violet vest (union colours) to join in with the yellow crowd. "If you go there to play the red professor, it's guaranteed that it won't work, so no preachy-preachy".

"Solidaires" in any case spoke along more or less the same lines on 19 November, but without an official call to demonstrate. This trade union body firmly opposes neo-liberalism and the far right and its representatives, but it proposes to draw all forces together and to "look for what we agree on". It has also, in vain, invited the other national union bodies to meet to discuss possible mobilising strategies.

The national unions are just as much at sea as the political leaders. They are grappling with contradictions and prepared to adopt fairly acrobatic postures in the process. "Some trades unions have had such a hard time of it in recent years that they are telling themselves, for once things are moving, let's not miss the boat" notes researcher Jean-Michel Denis. "But it's still very complicated. The values expressed by the demonstrators are very mixed in character, not to say pretty reactionary." For example, what they have to say about fiscal matters, often anti-tax, doesn't go down well with activists very attached to the public services and a redistributive system.

“In other spontaneous movements like the ‘nuits debout’ (when protestors spent entire nights awake in crowds) or the indignados, there was a kind of left-wing consciousness, a shared culture which made a link”, Denis emphasises. “Nothing like that here. The people we are dealing with don’t seem to have any habit of mobilising, or to have lost it. In their yellow vests, you also see small-scale craftsmen, home helps, liberal nurses, etc. these are categories of people who don’t work in big businesses with big groups of trade unionists, and where they live, work has been more and more de-structures. That doesn’t help when it comes to building bridges with traditional organisations.

A few trades unionists on the ground admit to a little bitterness at seeing struggles which have for years been carried on in the shadows suddenly emerge into the light – outside of the trade union field. “We fight year-in-year-out in the workshops, in the street, for wages, pension rights, against unemployment. When we go and ask the ‘hi-viz vests’ to help us against the reforms of pension rights, will they then turn up?” asks Jean-Luc Bielitz, CGT delegate at Smart on the Moselle. But he won’t throw everything overboard: “I think we should jump onto the movement if it keeps going. The union is there to walk with them. Who in this crowd is going to negotiate with the government? Who is the leader today!”

Nevertheless, the period resonates as a lesson for Pascal Raffanel of the CFE-CCG at Bosch. “Trades unions have a few questions to ask themselves. If the resistance struggle is carried out solely on the basis of social networks or citizens’ movement, that could be the death of trade unionism. “. Laurent Degousse, who has long campaigned in the Front Social for a very aggressive trade unionism, is even clearer: I think that because of our repeated setbacks on the social level, we have created a monster, and the void has been filled as best it could. It is mainly the people in power who are responsible, including those we have been walking with in

trade union work and politics for 15 or 20 years.

Political situation in France after the first round of Presidential elections

First beat Le Pen, then fight Macron

By **Adriano Vodslon** in Paris

The Fifth Republic is on its last legs, and lots of people know this or sense it. The latest illustration of this is how hard the municipal officials organising the second round of the ballot found it to even staff the polling stations.

Repeated scandals and the treachery all governments have shown toward the majority population of employed people and workers have speeded up the Fifth Republic's decay. It was the great movement against the so-called Labour Law which caused the end of this form of bosses' government. Even before the campaign started – a campaign which all the media described as “out of the ordinary” – it was clear there would be a political upheaval. In fact, each in their own way, all four candidates with any hope of reaching the second proclaimed a break with the Fifth Republic. Le Pen wanted to do it by making “the Nation” a constitutional priority and instituting State racism towards immigrants; Macron through ruling by decree backed by a parliamentary majority drawn from the Republicans (the rump of the

former Gaullist party) the remnants of the Socialist Party (wiped out in this campaign) or from businesspeople, designed to rubber-stamp his plans to break up social provision and pass laws favourable to the bourgeoisie; Fillon for his part was weighed down by his corrupt past and more and more relied upon the more radical wing of Republicans, quite prepared to destroy their party in order to save his candidacy and get a shot at destroying workers' legal rights; and finally Mélenchon had already spent several years calling for a Constituent Assembly to found a Sixth Republic, while carefully avoiding saying which class should prevail therein.

In short, before 23 April the choice was between moving towards a Republic more and more openly in the hands of the bosses, a pro-bourgeois and anti-immigrant republic, or towards a Republic whose stated objective would be to defend the oppressed. Whatever happens, the whole framework of the fifth Republic will very shortly be a thing of the past.

It was no accident that Mélenchon managed to almost double his 2012 score of 11.1%. He embodied the possibility of a Republic which redistributes wealth through fairer taxes, significantly increases the minimum wage, massively invests in public services and ends discrimination against migrants and French citizens of immigrant origins. Workers and young people glimpsed a hope of a fundamental change in their favour. And it was not only French workers who saw this hope in the extraordinary movement against the El Khomry law launched in workplaces and schools and on the streets. Comrades all over the world have followed their movement and their campaign.

But facts are obstinate things. Mélenchon is not in

the second round and in the official media no-one talks about why. The main reason is that there was no alliance between Mélenchon's "La France insoumise" (Rebellious France) and the sectors of the Socialist Party which supported Hamon. So Mélenchon and Hamon are most to blame for the defeat workers suffered and the fact that the choice is now between voting Macron, voting Le Pen, or abstaining. Hamon did indeed try at first to co-opt Mélenchon's campaign, but the latter (scared though he was of seeming to block left unity) realised that he stood to lose more than he gained by this alliance because workers didn't trust the Socialist Party and the weathercocks in it were openly calling for support for Macron. In the end Mélenchon became the candidate of the militant left and Hamon got a mere 6.36% of the total vote and didn't make it into the second round.

What to do on 7 May

The current situation is that the two surviving candidates, Macron and Le Pen, together took less than 50% of the votes cast in the first round, and many people are reluctant to vote or have already decided to give their vote to neither of the candidates. To go by their speeches, they are diametrically opposed to each other on every issue. Macron is in favour of "globalisation", business, the European Union. Le Pen seems to be poles apart from him, talking about globalisation being "out of control", seeking exit from the Euro and for "protection" of wage workers against unfair foreign competition ...

The reality is a little bit different.

Both candidates aim to hold the line for the

bourgeoisie, to try to unite “the French people” in order to silence social struggles, the class struggles. The only difference is how they hope to do this, but this difference is important too.

Macron hopes to push the liberal policy of global capitalism to the uttermost, continuing to undermine workers’ rights and those of their union representatives.

Macron is the candidate of the financial bourgeoisie which depends on banks and the international exchange of capital and goods. That is why he wants to more or less abolish the ISF (Solidarity Tax on Wealth), further weaken workers’ legal rights (“Code du Travail”), stay in the European Union, make life harder for the unemployed and start governing by decree as soon as he takes office. So his mission is to defend the bourgeoisie by taking to the limit the policy it has been following since the fall of the Berlin Wall. i.e. to atomise the working class so as to bring down the price of labour power. Far from cutting mass unemployment, Macron wants to increase the precariousness of work contracts and reduce the power of the unions so as to deprive our class of the means to defend its interests, to bring us to heel.

In contrast to this programme, Marine Le Pen has recently had no difficulty in positioning herself as the candidate of “the people”. She does so all the more easily because, especially after the first round, she uses the same vocabulary as Mélenchon. Like him she attacks the “elites” and the “oligarchy” who govern France without regard for the “people”. These words serve to mask the reality that workers are sacked not by some oligarchy or abstract elites, but by identifiable bosses who belong, like

Marine Le Pen, to the French and international bourgeoisie.

Marine Le Pen presents herself as a candidate close to workers when she calls for a return to retirement at 60 and the abrogation of the El Khomri labour code law. When she turned up at the Whirlpool workers' picket line on 26 April she spoke against moving the work abroad and the plant closure and said she would put an end to all this, and she gained support among workers driven to desperation. In passing and just before she left, she attacked Macron for meeting union representatives of the workforce away from the factory. More to the point, she insinuated that trade union representatives represent only themselves. No need to read between the lines to understand that if she comes to power, Marine Le Pen will attack the unions and their representatives.

She realises that to win the second round she needs to appear as the candidate who will protect workers from the evils of "globalisation", i.e. capitalism. In the first round, to secure a solid electoral base, she attacked immigrants more and openly advocated so-called "national preference". At present, she emphasises unfair competition by foreign workers. She never mentions the exploitation of workers by employers, French or foreign.

In fact she only mentions competition with foreign workers in order to pit worker against worker, French against foreign, French against immigrant. Marine Le Pen doesn't say so openly, but her conquest of power as prepared by her adviser Florian Filippo aims to divide workers according to their origins in order to maintain the domination of the bourgeoisie in France. Never forget that Marine Le

Pen, a fascist from a family of fascists, is above all herself a rich bourgeoisie, a member of the capitalist class. Her objective is to unite bosses and "French" wage-workers against "foreigners" and "immigrants". In this sense she seeks to group "all French people", without distinction of social class, around "love of country", a project with distinctly fascist overtones. In her view, which she shares with Macron, the right-left divide is no longer justified. This "classless" vision is xenophobic and racist. The "national priority" will be written into the constitution (and if the constitution cannot be modified it will be cast in law). There will be a 5% tax on hiring foreigners, products coming from abroad will be taxed at up to 30%. These measures will not help wage workers. They will enable employers to put immigrant workers under greater pressure, and consequently French workers too, while trying to reserve the French market for the French bourgeoisie to sell their companies' products.

So we can confidently predict that Marine Le Pen will put little or nothing of her social programme into effect; it is only a façade. On the other hand, if by ill luck she actually does become head of state, she will legalise a new type of manhunt. A Marine Le Pen in power would put the entire State apparatus at the service of a racist policy of division and social exclusion for the benefit of the bourgeoisie. The oppression of workers as a whole would be ramped up, starting with immigrant workers. Her election would empower every kind of racist and fascist, who would not hesitate to attack immigrants and anyone who looks like them. This vote would trigger a wave of attacks against immigrants and migrants, just as the Brexit vote did in the UK and Trump's election did in the US.

So yes, on 7 May we wage-workers will only be able to choose between two candidates of the bourgeoisie. But between a bourgeois candidate and a racist bourgeois candidate there is a choice.

Some say they don't want to vote for Macron because they voted for Chirac in 2002, and were disappointed. But in order to be disappointed one must first have had hopes or illusions. In 2017, as in 2002, while the danger is not the same and the situation is different, it is without any illusions in him that we have to vote Macron in order to prevent Marine Le Pen from coming to power. On the contrary, it is those who decide to abstain on the grounds that Macron and Le Pen are identical who are deluded. Believing that Le Pen is no more dangerous than Macron in the short term is the illusion.

So the 23 April result leaves only one option: vote Macron in order to beat Le Pen while openly stating that we must fight both against Macron and against his competitor's racist project. This fight will have to be carried forward in the streets and in mass assemblies, but that does not mean that one can afford the luxury of not voting on 7 May, or the luxury of submitting a blank ballot paper to be counted as a "protest vote" against the appalling choices on offer. That might bring personal satisfaction, but a pretty insipid one, since neither blank ballots nor abstentions count as votes. In the end, every "protest" of this type increases by half the chances that the fascist will be in power on the evening of 7 May.

On May Day, one woman held up a placard saying: "First beat Le Pen, then fight Macron. That is the programme for the next few days."

What prospects after 7 May

We must prepare now to fight off the first attacks from Macron or Le Pen.

Macron has already announced that he wants to “reform” the country this summer. He has stated that he will rule mainly by decree and the use of Article 49-3 [of the French Constitution which excludes Parliament from voting on bills to do with financial matters or social security financing if the government chooses to accept responsibility]. While Marine Le Pen will launch a xenophobic, racist coup against the workers’ movement and in particular the unions if she comes to power, Macron has declared his will be an anti-social coup. We should start now, without delay, to convene assemblies and call for demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of the El Khomri law. It is certainly necessary to fight the Islamist fascists in Daesh, but we cannot count on the bosses’ state and its murderous and rapist police to do that. Their state of emergency has served only to normalise the everyday racism of racial profiling controls and to thwart the mobilisation against the El Khomri law. We can only defend our rights by going onto the offensive. The May Day demonstrations totalling 280,000 participants all over France (according to the CGT union) showed that workers are ready to resist. That said, workers need the broadest possible united front. This can only be built around specific demands such as withdrawal of the El Khomri law, the end of the state of emergency, regularisation of undocumented workers, withdrawal of the secondary education reform and retirement for all on a full pension at 60.

In the General (parliamentary) Election, we must

make sure that supporters of “Rebellious France”, the pro-Hamon sectors of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party agree on single candidates and do not stand against each other. That will need a reorganisation of workers’ political forces by creating a new party supported by the CGT [the main class-conscious trade union confederation], “Rebellious France”, the Communist Party, sectors of the Socialist Party still in solidarity with Hamon, and the which must urgently abandon its sectarianism. A party that is not “above classes” but entirely at the service of the working class and other oppressed strata. A party which will open up the political perspective that was so cruelly lacking in last year’s struggles. The only real and only possible democratic Sixth Republic; a republic of workers and young people.

2 May 2017

Situation politique en France après le premier tour des élections

D’abord battre Le Pen, puis combattre Macron

par Adriano Voslon

Freedom for the Peoples of Africa! No to intervention!

By **Balazs Nagy** February 2013 (*First published in Workers International Journal No. 1*)

[threecolumns]It would be very wrong to judge France's military intervention in Mali on the basis of the deafening and unanimous press and television chorus. They think this act of war was inevitable and celebrate it. It galvanised them unhesitatingly and pompously to laud President Hollande as a great leader – the very same politician they used to dismiss as flabby.

But it would be even worse to put any trust in this “leader's” own pronouncements, or those of his aides and their allies in Europe and across the world.

And yet ... you cannot actually blame Hollande and co. directly for the long-drawn-out deterioration in Mali and the region, culminating in the present utter decay. But nor can you exonerate them either, since as loyal inheritors of the whole mess they took it on entirely and without a second thought. And in that specific sense the intervention was indeed as inevitable as the – joyful but perhaps over-optimistic – claims of “victory” and a job well done.

Despite the – to say the least – simplistic presentation of the situation in the Sahara and the Sahel as goodies vs. baddies, reality turns out to be incomparably more complex. Understanding it requires a brief review of the more outstanding aspects of the historical development which prepared, shaped and conditioned the political and social scene – and the actors – which led to the current situation.

A glance at history

For a start, the immense revolutionary wave which swept across Europe in the second half and aftermath of World War II generally speaking hit the African continent a dozen or so years later. Within Europe, the leaderships of working class parties did everything they could to channel revolutionary movements into shoring up the bourgeoisie through conventional democracies. In contrast, French (and other) imperialisms had been deeply shaken and weakened by the war and were unable to withstand the colonial peoples' irresistible independence movement. After a shaky early start, first Tunisia and Morocco (in 1956) and then the Algerian people won independence in 1962 after eight years of gruelling armed struggle. The revolutionary shock wave travelled south, and De Gaulle, more clear-sighted than other leaders of an exhausted possessing class, was forced to accept the obvious need to re-vamp old-style imperialism and grant independence to a series of countries in the region – almost all of them by 1960 (Senegal, Mauretania, Mali, Burkina-Faso, formerly Upper Volta, Niger, Chad, Ivory Coast – Guinea from 1958).

Hopes of a promising new start roused and inspired these countries. Borrowing from Algeria and even Tunisia in their search for a path towards a system leading to socialism, Guinea, Senegal and Mali all chose more or less the same route. After Bourguiba in Tunisia and Ben Bella in Algeria, Sekou Toure in Guinea and Modibo Keita in Mali and their governments carried out a series of nationalisations of property of the colonial power and its nationals. On this basis they initiated a policy of taking charge of their respective countries. Distrustful of the continually obstructive colonial power, they turned squarely towards the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for desperately needed support and assistance. Senegal, too, worked towards a kind of socialism, but its president L. Senghor, whose attachment to the republican bourgeoisie in France was well-known, rejected the orientation towards the USSR, preferring a kind of panafricanism and so-called "third worldism". The national

struggle, first for independence and then for this take-over by a kind of "anti-feudal" socialism by Modibo Keita in Mali was particularly powerfully nourished by young people, who had previously languished in the kind of semi-slavery affecting a quarter of the population of the Sahel.

But these initial hopes and efforts and fruitful initiatives quickly came to grief on obstacles born of these countries' extreme poverty and the cruel shortages of resources imposed on them by the former colonial power. On the other hand, the inadequacies and material shortages in the so-called "socialist" countries, trapped in the impoverishing constraints of "socialism in one country" and hampered by an oppressive Stalinism increasingly in debt to its capitalist creditors, meant that they could not provide the necessary assistance even if they had wanted to. Far from it. And so, disappointed and discouraged, most of these Arab and African "socialist reformers" turned back to the former coloniser and towards a policy of oppression. This was all the easier since their origins and education separated them from the working masses, and in any case they could model themselves on how it was done in Eastern Europe. Not everybody can boast the strength of character or consistency of view of a Keita, a Lumumba or a Sangare. Nor is it a co-incidence that these three were all assassinated.

As for the leaders of the powerful workers' movement of the day in Europe, they did everything they could to bog these movements down in the swamp of deepening degradation, particularly since they everywhere resolutely drew this entire workers movement into the false and fatal path of "parliamentary cretinism" and collaboration with the bourgeoisie.

But from the outset, this bourgeoisie went in completely the opposite direction, determined to maintain and even reinforce its prerogatives and arrangements as a class. Forced to abandon the colonial methods of its imperial system, it

adapted to the new situation through the bonapartist rule of De Gaulle. Run in secrecy by his secretary, Jacques Foccart, the General's shadow organisations worked feverishly to re-organise France's political, administrative and military networks and adapt them to the new political configuration. And so the wild beast of colonial imperialism clothed itself in the post-colonial lamb's skin of "co-operation". And that is how a whole system was forged, the sadly famous "Françafrique" which (under all Presidents!) continued the old imperialist practices under the cover of close collaboration with the African countries and lightly disguised within the forms required by the "independence" of the respective states.

A whole series of military coups very quickly expressed and made manifest the limits of "independence" in most of the African countries concerned. Even in countries which had been better prepared by a long struggle, the dissident colonels Ben Ali and Boumediene resolutely put an end to the democratic scruples of Bourguiba and Ben Bella. Everywhere the military putschists installed a dictatorship resting on an oversized army and a single party, African regimes corresponding to the "Françafrique" system and symmetrically replicating it. Almost everywhere, independent regimes of the older generation of more radical bourgeois fighters gave way to corrupt regimes of dictators. Where the old guard did stay in power, their degeneration became inevitable.

This series of African countries was independent but had been impoverished and systematically, mercilessly, plundered in the course of the long preceding period of colonial rule. In the way of things, "co-operation" between them and a highly-developed great power like France simply maintained and exacerbated the monstrous economic and social inequality between such "partners". A hungry wolf in a sheep-fold comes to mind. It is very characteristic that from the end of World War II onwards the straitjacket that was the Franc zone tied the African countries to close dependence on France. On 25

December 1945, a special Franc of the African Financial Community (CFA) was created for use in these countries (including some further south) and its value was set outrageously low by the French government: 1 CFA Franc was only worth 0.02 metropolitan Francs. (N.B. following Sekou Touré of Guinea, Keita of Mali also took his country out of this Franc zone system in 1963. But faced with economic difficulties, he had to re-join it, shortly before he was overthrown).

These decisions to leave were fully justified, since the CFA Franc embodied the crying inequality between these economies – often kept excessively backward – and bourgeois France, one of the most highly-developed countries. Trade imposed by this “benevolent” France provided the latter with agricultural products and raw materials of all kinds at derisory prices, even below world prices which themselves are traditionally low. Conversely, her own industrial products were sold off virtually risk-free at guaranteed high prices on these markets. So this system not only maintained flagrant inequality, but intensified it intolerably. Need we add that this imposed and legalised inequality has continued right up to the present? To be more accurate, it was pushed by the Balladur government (under President Mitterrand in 1994) to the point of an explosion when the CFA Franc was devalued by 50%! The French bourgeoisie carefully retained this shamefully super-exploitative rate when the euro was introduced: in 2011, 1 euro equalled 655.957 Francs CFA. And they insult our ears with fairly stories about the end of imperialism!

In this re-vamped framework of imperialism, these countries were put under pressure – both directly and through successive dictatorships – to abandon dreams of progress. But worse was to come. Within the modified political configuration of the imperialist system, they still had to maintain their traditional role as providers of very cheap agricultural products and raw materials. Open, violent force had been

replaced with sly economic constraint. In this sense, these countries objectively contributed, kicking and screaming, to the ability of a thus reinvigorated world bourgeoisie to take on and sustain its “thirty glorious years”. And so the relative “social peace” that prevailed in the course of that expansion secured by that same bourgeoisie’s pact with powerful (reformist and Stalinist) bureaucracies, which kept the workers movement under lock and key, was largely paid for by super-exploitation of the former colonies. It led inevitably to colossal indebtedness on the part of these poor “independent” countries, over which even the bourgeoisie’s various nerve centres shed copious crocodile tears.

Economic, social and political deterioration

The situation got even worse when the bourgeoisie set its neo-liberal agents to work to reduce these debts overall. Starting in the early 1980s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank forced all the countries concerned to adopt massive “structural adjustments” in the form of drastic budget and expenditure cuts and extensive privatisations in return for “aid” in reducing these debt levels. French (and other) firms bought up a great number of local enterprises for peanuts, while huge companies like Total, Areva and a multitude of others made themselves at home. Catastrophic results quickly followed. (It is a remarkable fact that what is going on in Europe at present is not some novelty arising out of the crisis; the Latin Americans had painful experience of it even before the Africans).

In Africa, too, the first victims were the education and health systems, whose often remarkable initial achievements had been a source of legitimate pride to these young nations. Ever tighter budgetary constraints laid waste to these promising beginnings.

Merciless cuts in expenditure also deprived agriculture – bankrupt state farms as much as independent farmers ruined by

lack of access to credit – of all aid. Across Africa, already low rural wages saw a general fall of 30% in those years. Mali's agriculture, for example, which at the end of the 1980s contributed 67% of the country's exports through cotton production, saw the latter smashed up and the peasantry crushed. Moreover, from the 1960s onwards a series of terrible droughts hit the whole region, resulting in a regular desert encroachments. The funds needed for big irrigation networks and effective water supplies were cruelly lacking, as were the cheap credits essential for small farmers.

These calamities led on the one hand to the terrible famines which periodically descend on the region and on the other to the massive rural exodus which drives tens and hundreds of thousands of people into the terribly overpopulated slums in the cities. The inhabitants of Nouakchott in Mauretania, extremely poor as they are, describe the slums in "their" shanty-town as "rubbish dumps". As for famines, the hypocrisy of successive food-aid campaigns launched and supported by the bourgeoisie and beloved of right-thinking petit-bourgeois barely masks neither the formers' direct responsibility for these disasters and their organic inability to do much about them, nor the latters' deferential complicity. Having said that, no one would want to prevent good souls from helping the starving, but reality puts us on guard against this rather unreliable substitute which in no way attacks the root of the problem.

Chronic unemployment also affects the whole population, which has undergone geometrical growth in the period in question. By 1989 it exceeded 22% of the active population, including more than half of young people in Algeria, for all that this country is better off than Mali or other countries in the Sahara or the Sahel. A significant proportion of the population has persistently sought a way out of this social catastrophe in emigration. This explains the very high number of Malians (2 million) living in France around 1990, as many

as a quarter of the whole population of the country! But vigilant France kept a close watch on the situation, and Charles Pasqua – a worthy successor to “Françafrique’s” organiser Foccart – started forcibly repatriating hundreds of thousands of Africans. His successors, also under all Presidents, have virtually institutionalised this into a regular procedure. Following the regular expulsions organised by Guéant, Manuel Valls has most recently filled an aeroplane with several dozen immigrants. A veil is drawn over how they carry this out. Be that as it may, journalists estimate that there are currently still 120,000 Malians living in France. But who knows exactly how many of these working class pariahs there are who have escaped utter poverty over there only to be hounded and persecuted here for the lack of an all-important piece of paper?

While the people – especially the young – are fleeing the country, businesses large and small, French and other, are settling in there as a kind of Eldorado to exploit the natural wealth of the country and its cheap labour. Apart from the odd kick-back, these businesses *repatriate the whole of their profits* and operate above the law. According to studies by comrades at *Survie* (a French NGO founded in 1984 to fight hunger and corruption in the “third world”), France’s trade surplus with Mali was over 300 million euros in 2010-2012, five times more than the derisory public “aid” she grants to that country!

Alongside these destructive activities went a long drawn-out process of reducing these states to subservience, adapting them more and more to the needs of capitalists in the French “protector”. Metropolitan agents of “Françafrique” carefully guided this convulsive change by remote-control. Enriched local cliques devoured each other in order to establish, in an endless series of coups, which one would seize control of a state which itself was reduced little by little to its repressive apparatus. Having laid its hands on the manna from

the “co-operation” community and other so-called “development” loans, the winning group would set out to fulfil its role as a substitute for the former colonial power. As poverty grew in these states, their role was more and more reduced to one essential: securing, preserving and reinforcing power in order to consolidate France’s economic and political position and influence while maintaining a repressive regime against working people. Those currently holding power, such as the puppets Deby (Chad), Compoaré (Burkina Faso) and Touré (Mali) have nothing in common with the independent figures of the first generation of leaders. They are even the opposite of someone like Keita, for example. The most important, if not the only, means they use to achieve their objectives has been and is the army. Now, the rapid overall worsening of the situation has provoked a series of coups in which the impoverished masses’ role of detonator has become increasingly visible, reflecting the economic and social deterioration that has been eating away.

Unpicking the tangled politics of North Africa

Above all we must reject the simplistic way the interventionist power presents the context and conditions in this part of Africa. Even if – and this goes without saying – it is so constantly and noisily parroted in the media that certain political tendencies and individuals, while uttering reservations about “neo-colonial ulterior motives”, nevertheless give this military action guarded support as a necessary “pre-requisite”. These include the French Communist Party parliamentary deputy François Asensi (*L’Humanité* newspaper 18 January 2013) who swallows the intervention whole but hastens to add: “...France must state clearly her aim to rebuild a democratic state”. He actually seems to think that is possible on the basis of this intervention!

Despite all the resounding statements and those who are taken in by them, there is no way that trends and programmes in this region of Africa, or the political formations and groupings to

which they give rise, can be reduced to isolated groups of Islamic fanatics on the one hand and loyal government supporters on the other. Reality is much richer and more complicated. Before even attempting to sketch a few lines, with no claim at all to presenting the whole picture, it is enough to describe the interventionists and their accomplices as the famous bull in a china shop, especially given the brutal military aggression and lack of concern for "details" that are innate and natural characteristics of so-called "neo-colonial" imperialism.

As described above, after a very short period of national awakening in the aftermath of World War II, successive economic setbacks in the newly independent countries turned into a sustained social regression. The vast majority of the popular classes (workers, farmers, stock-breeders, pastoralists, etc.) have become considerably poorer, particularly the many peoples and ethnic groups at the bottom of society. Their degradation provided the ground for the astonishing explosion of a whole series of programmes and the most varied social and national movements. It is impossible to list them all here, but in general they rested on previous currents and movements, some of them going back to the nineteenth century. Several great traditions of thought and social movements have remained alive to this very day. In the majority of cases, social and national demands have overlapped inextricably. The roots of some movements are to be found in the distant past.

The European workers' movement of the twentieth century in particular inspired by example a powerful trade-unionism among workers in these countries, as well as the appearance of labour and communist parties. The present-day UGTT union confederation in Tunisia, which opposes the Salafists, is one of the fruits of this co-operation whose powerful resurgence can be considered as an important opposition factor to the government of religious people, but also of a positive

political change. We also know that Sekou Touré of Guinea (secretary of the CGT federation of black Africa in 1948!) rested on the Guinean trade unions for support in the national independence movement and spiced up his conceptions with socialism of a kind. The Algerian independence movement was also in large part influenced by the French workers' movement.

It would therefore be unforgivable to look down on the movements for the social and national liberation of these countries from the heights of some imagined European supremacy. Often centuries-old traditions and a wealth of ancient experience also nourish the struggles of workers and people in Africa and its northern part. These movements exist, despite the extremely difficult situation they are in because they pay the price of the backwardness imposed upon their countries, suffering from isolation and repression which are bound to mark the immediate future of the region.

This social and national situation was essentially what we had in mind when we published the press release from the comrades at "Survie" in issue no. 1 of our journal, expressing the desire to "look at certain important aspects of the rebellion in a different light". Of course the comrades from "Survie" not only bravely condemn the intervention, but are also well-known for having brought together a mass of precious facts in relation to this part of Africa. But in the indignation which informs their timely and correct condemnation of the intervention, we believe they erred in losing sight, behind the inflated bubble of religious fanatics, of precisely these movements and their national and social base. But that is precisely the direction in which to look for the key to the situation, and a way out, and not at all the "armies" of corrupt regimes or their UN protectors. The "Survie" comrades talk about French intervention as "significant pressure on the Malian authorities" as if the latter actually existed independently of the former. They also say France "must respect UN resolutions as soon as possible".

But in the first place, rather than acting as “pressure”, French intervention is **necessary to save** these “authorities”. And not only the Malian authorities, but all the rest in the region, too! The comrades should not just see French (state) authorities, but also those of these countries, these African states, as the agents and representatives of a quite definite social class – the bourgeoisie. With the significant difference that the latter do not exist and act on behalf of their own bourgeoisie, since even the feeble shreds of that native class are merely a subaltern appendix of the metropolitan (and world) bourgeoisie. These states, therefore, exist and act as the local organ of the latter, even though they are endowed with the fig-leaf of independence.

From the 1980s onwards, when the capitalist-imperialist system started moving over to so-called ultra-liberalism, this remarkably intensified the exploitation of these countries and revived all the traditions of struggle, and their direct and indirect heirs started moving. The great liberating risings of 2011 which journalists called “Arab revolutions” are also manifestations of these struggles, at the same time acting as a significant precursor to the European and world revolution that is gestating. The outstanding role of the UGTT union in the Tunisian revolution and the overthrow of the regime – even though it was itself contaminated by the latter – is well known. Less well known, perhaps, is the decisive action the Egyptian working class developed in its revolution, organising strikes and renewing its unions. Today its sporadic but incessant struggles constitute a significant element in defending and advancing that revolution. As for the UGTT, we can all see its decisive participation in the current mobilisation.

While the “Arab spring” is an integral component of the European revolution currently gestating and undeniably contributed to the still stuttering awakening of young people in Europe, it also lived on in the convulsive but still

disorganised movements of the despoiled and deracinated masses of that region, of which islamist movements form a large but unfortunately distorted and adulterated part. Be that as it may, certain ancient and modern political movements and organisations have raised their heads again, often inspired by the European workers' movement of former days, but also by their own old traditions, and – closer to home – by the revolutionary overturns of 2011.

“A people which oppresses another cannot emancipate itself”(Engels)

For centuries the immense Sahara and the Sahel regions of north and west Africa have constantly been disturbed by movements and rebellions of this or that nation or ethnic group living there. Its artificial division into separate countries by colonial powers only served, in the majority of cases, to reinforce national oppression by devastating and wrenching apart ethnic or national units. During independence, some of these peoples, like the Kabyles in Algeria and their Berber relatives, the Touareg in Mali (and more or less everywhere) hoped to achieve national recognition in return for their participation in the anti-colonial struggle. But right from the outset, all of the newly independent states, based on the primacy of the dominant ethnic group (or tribe), refused to allow any concessions at all, still less any form of autonomy, to ethnic or national minorities. This serious defect left a profound scar on the democratic awakening of the bourgeois revolutions which shook these countries, even those who ventured furthest into a kind of proto-socialism. We do not have the space here to examine all these national movements in detail. Nevertheless the most important ones must be mentioned.

Categorically turned down by the new Algerian government, the Kabyle people started a prolonged struggle for autonomy. Not only was this refused from the very start, but the Kabyle people suffered repeated bloody repressions and a national

oppression which continues to this very day.

Far away from there, in another region steeped in prolonged national-ethnic struggle, Casamance in Senegal has battled against oppression. The region has been demanding autonomy ever since Senegal achieved independence. However, despite L.Senghor's evasive promises, it has not been forthcoming. The region went into open armed struggle in the early 1980s, when Senegal was trying to ward off a massive debt crisis (almost 2 million dollars). The cultivation of ground nuts appeared to offer a way out, but when the government assigned land to colonists from the north for this, the inhabitants of Casamance, traditionally rice-growers, revolted. Ever since, cease-fires have alternated with fresh confrontations and the conflict has persisted, particularly since the Senegalese state, exactly like all the others also in its constantly growing poverty, has shown itself less and less able to resolve the situation and has even imposed further burdens on the region.

When one considers the vast Sahara and Sahel territory from the point of view of the many different peoples inhabiting it, what becomes evident is a profound interweaving of the social degradation of the peoples – often linked to sudden changes in their mode of life also imposed by the neglect of nature – and the subordinate or even oppressed character of their ethnic or national lives. History teaches us that those who try to separate them from social difficulties, or with more reason to oppose them, have paid a high price.

For a long time now the nomadic Saharoui of the western Sahara have undergone a veritable calvary. While they struggled for autonomy, Franco's Spain would not allow them any rights. In 1975, following a call by King Hassan of Morocco, hundreds of thousands joined a "green march" to invade what they thought was "Moroccan Sahara". In reaction to this the Polisario Front, founded in 1973 by young Saharoui students, proclaimed the "Democratic Arab Saharoui Republic" under Algerian

protection. The Algerian and Moroccan armies have confronted each other in a rivalry that has nothing to do with the interests of any peoples whatsoever. Algeria has protected the new Saharoui republic since Spain left in 1976, whereas she has never allowed Kabylia or the Touareg movement the slightest degree of autonomy.

Following a cease-fire in 1991, Morocco has controlled 80% of this territory, leaving 20% to the Polisario Front. But despotic King Hassan has installed a 2,500km (!) security belt called the "Moroccan Wall". (This is the nth "wall" built to contain some people to disfigure the world and bring the powerful into disrepute!) As for the new Saharoui Republic, what with recognition by a few countries and rejection by the majority of others – including the UN! – it has no legal existence at all.

The Touregs' problem is even more complex. Because of the arbitrary and fantastic division of this great region by the great colonial powers, the almost 2 million Touareg find themselves artificially split up between five different countries. They are just one of many peoples who, carved up between several countries, have no right to a legal existence and are often persecuted. When discussing them, one inevitably thinks of the Kurds or the Palestinians in the Middle East. If you want a shameful image of imperialist reality dragged down to the level of simple banality, then look no further. The Basques divided up between the north of Spain and the south of France might have a thing or two to say about this, or the Irish, with the north of their country still under the iron heel of Britain.

On the other hand, the break-up of several multi-national countries and the revival of virulent national feelings also testify to the growing contradiction between capitalism-imperialism and the facts of national existence. (To say nothing of the inability of the Stalinist bureaucracy to solve this problem in the former USSR and its criminal role in the

break-up of several multi-national states it used to govern, like Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia).

Be that as it may, the Touareg people were among the losers in the post-war anti-imperialist wave of liberation. In a way, their fate contains just about all the problems of the national question in this part of the world in compressed form: – the capitalist nature of the states in which they live and the role played in this by religion, particularly Islam.

It is really remarkable that even the leaders of the first wave of bourgeois-democratic revolution just could not grasp this problem at all. And so as early as 1963 Modibo Keita severely repressed and Touareg revolt in Mali. He was helped by his Algerian colleague Ben Bella, who handed over to him the Touareg leaders who had fled to Algeria. One Touareg author wrote: "The thousands of deaths caused by repression were met with general indifference".

But we lack the space here to tell the full story of the many rebellions by this people, their lengthy negotiations with this or that state in the region, and the massacres and flights of thousands of their members which punctuate the life of these states which have degenerated into vassals of imperialism.

As a result of general economic decline and collapse and the consequent successive setbacks to the Touaregs' national struggles, they toughened up their behaviour and adopted a more radical attitude. All states in the area felt the effects of imperialist super-exploitation, but the Touareg people suffered it twice over (and they were not alone in that). Besides the dismantlement of services, there was no investment to assuage sufferings which were made greater by massive unemployment exacerbated as the introduction of lorries and the severity and frequency of drought put an end to caravans. Hundreds of thousands of them fled Mali and lived under extremely precarious conditions in Niger, Mauretania, Algeria,

Burkin-Faso, etc.

As we know, after the overthrow of Ghadaffi, who enlisted many of them among his “protectors”, a significant number of these armed men returned to Mali. But this detachment did not start the armed struggle of the already strongly-radicalised Touregs. All they did was to contribute a considerable force to a movement which had been present for a long time but, hardened by serial disappointments, was only waiting for the right opportunity. The extreme fragility of the Malian state, made worse army Captain Sanogo’s attempted coup fell apart, furnished the signal and the opportunity for attack. The “Azawad Liberation Movement”, formed some months previously, allied itself with armed islamist groups to bulk out its numbers. And so they were able quite rapidly to pulverise the Malian army and occupy the north of the country as far as the River Niger.

Of course this was a mistake, but a very understandable one, as the Touareg movement was very contaminated by its own islamist faction. Mistake though it is, this movement as a whole should not be confused with its islamist faction “Ansar Eddine”, even if the latter has undoubtedly pushed the movement a long way in a radical direction. But it should never under any circumstances be identified with it, as French imperialism and its lackeys strive to do.

Contrary to all the claims of the propaganda machine, political islam – even the most radical kind – is not a recent foreign import to Africa. Even in the nineteenth century, locally-based islamists inspired great anti-colonial struggles. Exploited peoples sought refuge and consolation against all kinds of oppression in religion. Since Engels wrote *The Peasant War in Germany* we have known that religion serves to encourage and stimulate the resistance and struggle of oppressed classes when they are still insufficiently developed or – we may add – when their elder sister, the world working class, is on the back foot constantly.

If Islamism has in recent years – sometimes aggressively–taken the place of secular leaderships of social and national movements, it is a consequence of the considerable weakening and retreat of the international workers' movement. Over the last fifty years or so, the emphatic way social democratic parties have gone over from being supporters of the bourgeoisie to being its direct and settled political representatives has been one of the most outstanding features of this historic collapse. The other is the destruction of the Soviet Union and the dominant role played by the Stalinist bureaucracy played within it, followed by workers massively deserting communist parties and their inevitable retreat. A whole series of communist and non-communist parties and groups which used to lead social and national struggles have been marginalised across the world as a result. In their place, religious islamist movements have emerged from Afghanistan to Morocco, by way of Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, etc.

Obviously this “opium of the people” works like any other drug. While bringing temporary consolation and relief, it cannot cure the ailment but poisons the organism even further. The muslim religion (like any other) brings no improvements but on the contrary preserves the backward and desperate situation working people are in, as we see very clearly in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Tunisia, too. Moreover, this religion contain within itself, as the cloud carries the thunderstorm, its radical Salafist wing with its medieval customs. The people of Tunisia have recently started to struggle even more powerfully against this “opium”, as have the people of Egypt. We should also note that there has recently been a significant internal split in the Touareg salafist group “Ansar Eddine”.

The situation is bound to get worse

Only recently forced to accept cuts in its material resources, the French army has become trapped in an inextricable tangle of intertwined difficulties which it cannot overcome. It is no coincidence that Hollande's European and American allies have

very parsimoniously calibrated their own symbolic rather than real “contributions”. They obviously have a better grasp of the implications and extent of their devastating setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are more than happy to let the French bourgeoisie and its puppet Hollande have the more than dubious glory of pulling their shared chestnuts out of the fire. In fact the French “Socialist” Party has suddenly revealed itself to be the advance-guard not just of its “own” bourgeoisie but of world imperialism as a whole. Only recently the US vice-president conferred a metaphorical knighthood on Hollande, confirming him in this role with a lordly “well done!”

Obviously the forward patrols of world imperialism didn’t have a clue what they were getting into. Incredible but true: neither the army nor its political bosses had any idea of what a simmering cauldron they were involving themselves in. Hollande kept saying they only wanted to stay in Mali a few days, then various unpleasant experiences made them change that to “... an indefinite period”. It was brought home to these ardent interventionists that they would have to re-make the state and army, not just in Mali, but more or less across the whole region – a massive task far beyond the capacity of the French state.

The colossal expenditure such an undertaking entails massively exceeds the meagre resources of a French bourgeoisie mired in persistent crisis. There will be a growing contradiction between the no-doubt long-term financial cost of these involvements and their categorical refusal to allow even the slightest relief of the ever-increasing burdens placed on working people. Obviously, the latter will not tolerate the government making them bear not just the cost of the crisis, but also of the considerable expense of patching up the system oppressing their African brothers. If you believe the French Ministry of Defense (and their figures are almost certainly an under-estimate) the cost of the army alone up to 5 February

2013 is 60 million euros.

This will hardly scratch the monumental cost required by a situation of total breakdown. Everything has had to be re-created: all the machinery of administration, not to mention the health and education systems – all far beyond the reach of a French exchequer swamped and riddled by debt.

As for the army itself, it is quite unable to tackle even such priorities as safeguarding the civilian population. Journalists report several massive lynchings perpetrated by the depraved Malian army, protected by its French army “big brother”.

These facts demonstrate not only the hatred and lust for revenge the country's ruling strata cherish for all Arabo-Berber peoples, but also the appalling values and moral standards of the French army, which must have looked demurely away while these lynchings were being committed, as it did a few years earlier in Rwanda, so as not to notice the massacre of the Tutsi people. And as the Dutch UN Battalion did in former Yugoslavia, which let General Mladic's soldiers execute 7000 Bosnians in the town of Srebrenica without lifting a finger. Such are the execrable political and ethical standards of both these armies and the UN, swathed in hypocritical high-flown phrases.

There is not the slightest doubt that this intervention will get even more catastrophically bogged down than that in Afghanistan. The inevitable consequence will be that the situation in Europe and internationally will get even worse, with the recrudescence of an even fiercer international class struggle. For what is happening in and around Mali and concretely also in the mobilisation of working people in Tunisia and Egypt prefigures not only a considerable deterioration in their conditions of life but also, and above all, the mobilisation and emergence on the scene of masses of working people, broadening their activity and toughening up

their struggle.

But when one reads the statements of those groups and parties which oppose French intervention, one is struck by their purely declamatory character. Of course given the massive number of dupes, the very fact that they condemn it at all is commendable, and we stand with them. But even when they resolutely condemn the military intervention, they confine themselves to verbal protest. To put it another way, almost all of these organisations (Communist Party, Left Party, Left Front, New Anti-Capitalist Party, etc.) adopt a position more or less clearly *opposed* to military intervention but steer well clear of stating the orientation or outcome they are *for*. I.e., these political formations adopt the profoundly negative attitude of rejection. At most, these comrades add a generalisation devoid of meaning, i.e. that what is needed is to solve the (economic, social, national) problems these countries face. This great general truth is hardly brilliant in its originality, so much so that even the government has given up repeating it.

We need a clear orientation!

To tell the truth, most of these organisations and groups do point to what they think is a way forward. They say – indeed, often demand – that military intervention must be left to African states – Mali and her neighbours, under UN patronage. It is quite obvious that they think this would be a suitable solution since (and this is how shallow their thinking is) it would be a better fit with the African ethnic image and the sacrosanct authority of the UN. They are completely unperturbed by the fact that Hollande and his government have spent long months trying to achieve precisely that arrangement.

Such a “solution” amounts more or less to re-establishing the status-quo, i.e. the situation preceding the debacle of the Malian state and army. But trying to apply it without the

French army is simply a bad joke, since the preceding state of affairs was precisely what brought about that debacle and ended up with the present disastrous situation. The French army intervened precisely in order to save the apparatus of the Malian state from complete collapse. Despite appearances, it was not directed against those Islamic terrorists. That pretext was blown up by propaganda to keep everybody happy. In truth they did it to shore up a native administrative apparatus in mortal danger – as it happened, from the islamist attack. The delight the population of Mali showed and which was obligingly filmed by French TV was less at the arrival of a foreign French army than at getting rid of a cruel medieval dictatorship. To present it as enthusiasm for the arrival of a foreign army is to indulge in the same degree of mystification as the attempt to interpret the vote *against* Sarkozy as support *for* the plans of the Socialist Party.

So the French army stands there nakedly exposed as the only cement that can hold this feeble state together, or any of the others that share the same congenital weaknesses. In that sense it is not only the chief factor in that African Union, but also the only one that can put up any opposition and organise any resistance to its ineluctable decomposition. It is high time for the parties and groups and their leaders who speak in the name of the working class to break with the backward and grotesque way of thinking which takes African states as if they were an emanation of their peoples and formed a group by its nature independent of imperialism. Whereas in reality they form a quite specific – subaltern but essential – part of the mechanism of imperialism's world system, officially run by the omni-substitute, the UN.

The clear regression in these states in relation to fundamental problems of African society is the logical consequence and obvious indication of the manifest setback to the attempt by the bourgeoisie – even what were at first its most radical elements – to solve elementary tasks of the

bourgeois revolution. The way these regimes are currently decomposing is a striking proof from the negative side of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution; specifically, that in our imperialist epoch the bourgeoisie of any country at all – even a backward one – is organically incapable of solving the tasks posed by such a revolution. Every orientation towards a so-called popular front, every policy of alliance with a wing of the bourgeoisie, has led to setbacks. That is the cruel lesson of events.

Thus, in the absence of a clear orientation towards the theory of permanent revolution and its application in order to mobilise the workers of the whole region, a catastrophic situation has got even worse even quicker. Indeed the choice put forward in the past by Rosa Luxemburg and taken up later by Trotsky: Either the working class succeeds in overthrowing capitalism and opening the road to socialism, or humanity will fall back into barbarism – is today an immediate practical question.

In this respect, this part of Africa at least (like the Middle East) is a little ahead of Europe. That continent, too, is from now on confronted with the same direct choice. It is only the many and various reserves at her disposal which still retard the explosive maturing of the same historical dilemma, as well as the general lack of preparedness on the part of the workers' movement.

The working class in the region of Africa under discussion already has several political organisations, even if they are still weak and enjoy only minority support. But that can change quickly, not to mention the unions which, like the UGTT in Tunisia and in the big cities in the region, are sometimes powerful.

Without going into detail, there are a fair number and variety of organisations which described themselves as Marxist and/or working-class, and they have the capacity to work together for

a united struggle in the region. The first pre-condition for such a struggle and for their own development is undoubtedly their ability to take fully into account the orientation offered by the permanent revolution and on that basis work out and apply democratic slogans for revolutionary change.

Revolutionary and working class organisations in Europe can and should do everything they can to help clarify this essential issue. That way they will be able to find their way back to their proper role, making the link with their history and tradition of supporting brothers and sisters in Africa. A precious contribution to this would be to adapt and develop the Fourth International's Transitional Programme, the only one to express concretely the orientation of permanent revolution. Although it needs changing in places, as a whole it remains valid. It is the one and only path to solving weighty problems which can at the same time correct wrong orientations and go beyond passive contemplation of events when African activists need clear and active support.[/threecolumns]

Sarkozy back in political activity and Beefing up the bonapartism! Warning of a real danger! by Balazs Nagy

[threecolumns]Not long ago, Nicolas Sarkozy was unceremoniously bundled out of office. Now he's back on TV in all his pomp and glory. France's second channel (chaine 2) is supposed to be a public enterprise run by the state, or successive governments, but in any case at taxpayers' expense.

Now it gives Sarkozy the red carpet treatment. The way they transformed him from a duplicitous agent of the bourgeoisie into a messianic liberator was amazing and shockingly servile. One faithful retainer, Yves Jégo, was moved to comment in astonishment, and with some justice: "It can't be right to give 45 minutes on a current affairs TV show to a Presidential contender" (*Le Monde*, 23 September 2014).

Now, it was Sarkozy who appointed the boss of this channel, and the current President, Hollande, was daft enough to keep him in the job. This man virtually prostrated himself in front of Sarkozy, and the simpering nonentity who conducted the interview like a willing stooge more or less got down on all fours. It may not make much sense, but that's the way things go in this general political climate.

Trials and tribulations of post-war Bonapartism in France

The government of the so-called Socialist Party and its associates – what a lot of people still call "the Left", is visibly on its last legs. It is too closely tied to moribund capitalism, too definitively compromised in the twilight decadence which drags all down in its gloomy wake.

But, debilitated as it is by this decline, the bourgeoisie still has to do something about the fact that its social-democratic servant is bankrupt and too weak now to face the growing perils. This is what explains the growing strength of fascist organisations and the disproportionate extension of their influence right across the old capitalist countries. But Trotsky warned that between social democracy and fascism there is a whole spectrum of intermediate regimes which the bourgeoisie can use to replace their failed social-democratic business managers without going straight over to fascism, with all the burdens and risks that brings. Fascism is an option they keep on a back burner, ready for use as a last resort, but at the moment they are hoping to get by without it, especially since the memory of the traumas it inflicted is

still very much alive. But, above all, the ruling class lives in hope that the virtual vivisection that has been performed on the world working class means they can take refuge in less rigid intermediate regimes which might avoid the brutal shock of fascism. (Indeed, the changes the working class has undergone, the way it has been scattered and physically weakened, and its theoretical and political arms changed and perverted, plus a series of retreats and serious defeats, have disarmed the working class and considerably weakened it in action.)

Under these conditions the capitalists think that, for the moment, a bonapartist regime is the most appropriate political form in which they can secure their position. But even in modern France such a political system is nothing new. The French bourgeoisie originally created this type of regime. They have often had to face bold challenges to their power, and are all the more inclined to rely on this particular crutch because it can easily be used as a massive club. But the bourgeoisie had no easy job trying to dust it off after World War II. De Gaulle had everything it takes to do the job and solidly established the Fifth Republic as the prototype of modern-day bonapartism, but in the end even he got the boot in the aftermath of the powerful 1968 general strike. While he himself paid the price for trying capital's strong-arm tactics on the working class, the Fifth Republic itself survived the onslaught of the oppressed thanks to the connivance of Stalinists and reformists.

You don't need to look very hard at France's political history since De Gaulle's humiliating fall from grace to see that French bonapartism, in the shape of the Fifth Republic, has followed a particularly chequered and contradictory path. None of the heirs to the Fifth Republic's bonapartist institutions has had anything like what De Gaulle had in terms of means, inclination and courage to destroy working-class gains in an open frontal assault. Every single one of them, without

exception, has been steeped in the tepid pseudo-democracy of the Fourth Republic, imbued with the long tradition of flabby pacifism, compromise and unprincipled shilly-shallying as a way of evading or bypassing conflicts and difficulties. The majority of them are impregnated to the very marrow of their bones in the spirit of this bourgeois democracy, whose pillar and vital principle is precisely the *class collaboration* guaranteed by opportunist workers' leaders.

But above all they were terrified by very lively recollections of the 1968 general strike, especially since, as irremediably civilian bourgeois, their links with the armed forces have been ad hoc and ambiguous. Mitterrand and later others went on the attack, directly and across the board, on the gains working people have made, but it was under the influence of the general international turn to so-called neo-liberal policies, and it was done tangentially and with many reservations and in the shape of a sustained war of attrition. While what they did was already unbearable for the working class, it has still not been enough to satisfy the bourgeoisie.

So the reason why today's bourgeois politicians and ideologues bitterly reproach their predecessors for not thoroughly dismantling all the working class's previous achievements and taming that class is explained by the figures who embodied the Fifth Republic after De Gaulle. All his Presidential successors have liked to dress in the bonapartist lion's clothes, but have turned out to be pretty toothless in practice, even though they were quite prepared to get their claws into working people.

Hollande's political incoherence makes him look like a marionette with its strings cut

None of the civilian bonapartist Presidents of France have had what it takes to carry out the mission conferred on them by virtue of their office, but the last in line, Hollande has

without doubt been the least competent for the job. Of course, his limited abilities, narrow mind-set and penchant for double-talk all mean he finds it hard to take the job on properly, but he is no more stupid or short-sighted than any of the others. Events have gone completely over his head because, as head of the Fifth Republic he has had to strain every nerve to reconcile the policy of class collaboration (normal in bourgeois democracy) with that of open confrontation between the classes (function of the Fifth Republic). And all the while, the stagnation of capitalism in its twilight prevents him from granting any concessions and insistently demands confrontation with the working class.

And so the wider conflict between these two choices faced by the bourgeoisie nowadays is concentrated in the person and policies of François Hollande. The outcome is the way real concessions are turned into broken promises in a series of pseudo-reforms on the one hand, and on the other the harsh daily reality of blows struck against working people, but which the bourgeoisie do not think are harsh enough. Hence the image presented of a government hanging in mid-air and pushed about by whatever wind is blowing at any particular time, as well as an irresistible sense of things finally falling apart.

When you look at the awful state social democracy's doctrine is in, what is most astonishing is that Hollande cannot somehow shake it off. Where he should give up on trying to square the circle between two bourgeois lines, one of which, class-collaboration, has already lost the battle to contain and calm class conflict, he has merely tried to alter the form within which he attempted to reconcile them. He did this by delegating a big part of his bonapartist task to that Socialist Party mini-Napoleon, Manuel Valls, a man whose own natural inclinations have already converted him from a shamefaced social democrat into a pocket Bonaparte. But despite what a lot of activists on the so-called far left expected, the obviously lame form of bonapartism affected by

the Socialist Party only served to intensify the obvious signs that the party itself is falling apart, testimony to the insurmountable difficulties involved in turning this party into a pliable instrument for a reinforced bonapartism without major internal shocks and crises. Every attempt along those lines will just drag it closer to ultimate decay.

This historic collapse of social democracy, which expresses both the increasing severity of capitalism's crisis and the bankruptcy of one of the counter-measures the bourgeoisie relied on, also gives Sarkozy a second chance. This simple fact exposes Hollande and co.'s social democracy as the midwife of fascism or, more likely, a more homogenous and resolute form of bonapartism.

Sarkozy's bid to be iron-fisted Bonaparte.

Sarkozy did not beat around the bush. He announced straight off that he was back on the scene as a serious candidate for the role of unbending Bonaparte saviour. He presented his political re-appearance as dispassionate obedience to the requirements of the situation, renouncing any personal ambition and explaining that he was responding to a higher, nay divine, call to help our suffering world. This marked reference to some quasi-mystical obligation as justification for his re-entry into politics and the clear-cut aspiration to be a supreme saviour are sure signs of a would-be Bonaparte. The odd journalist has noticed Sarkozy's occasional bonapartist tendencies, but none have pointed out that this re-appearance basically means he intends to set up a consistent and decisive bonapartist dictatorship.

Sarkozy's declared political project also exhibits all other elements of that sort of bonapartism. All the main ingredients of a pure and harsh bonapartism are present, alongside the insistent and repeated evocation of a supreme call to duty on the part of some divine providence.

First of all comes the claim to be acting for the benefit of society as a whole, above classes. Obviously he could not use the word "class" because he has banished it from his vocabulary, but he explicitly stated he wanted to abolish party differences as outdated leftovers and unite everybody behind his flag.

A whole raft of proposals accompanied and filled out this decision to jump over whatever democratic constraints the bourgeoisie itself has been forced to impose on society in order to channel class contradictions. And, in line with his wish to banish differences between parties, Sarkozy again spoke out against organisations which come between the various classes and the authorities, above all independent trades unions. Moreover, as a consistent bonapartist, he was for regular referendums where class votes are short-circuited by plebiscitary consultations with the "whole of society".

Needless to say, two essential ingredients of properly-established bonapartism were not omitted from his political plans. One is the intensification of overt nationalism, which Sarkozy expressed in his plan to end the Schengen Agreement guaranteeing free movement around the European Union. The other is his decision to establish a political apparatus in the exclusive service of his bonapartism by radically transforming the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) into a homogenous and docile body under his personal control.

And this last point raises the important question: Will this clearly-formulated plan for an integrated, coherent, vigorous and determined bonapartism actually get the upper hand? To answer that, we need to look above all at the working people who are immediately threatened and targeted by this plan.

Workers disarmed in the face of this bourgeois dictatorship

Problems like this usually go straight over the heads of revolutionary and socialist organisations – because of their

formalist and sectarian leaderships. To tell the truth, both their revolution and their socialism are no more than vague references to a rosy future; consequently they are quite separate from their day-to-day preoccupations and practical activities. That's why they see very little importance, or none at all, in the political and tactical changes the bourgeoisie introduce in the political form in which they try rescue their system as the crisis worsens. Even if some of them do draw attention to the danger of bonapartism, as the Lambertist organisation did over De Gaulle's accession, their politics have never gone beyond defending traditional bourgeois democracy. So their day-by-day struggle has been limited by that framework and their commitment to socialism remained at the level of propaganda – necessary, obviously, but restricted to the realm of ideas. Later they supported Mitterrand against De Gaulle's bonapartism in the name of this democracy. But as we know and Hollande has proved most recently, this democracy is no more than the antechamber to fascism or, specifically, bonapartism.

Whether or not these organisations actually mention bonapartism today, their slogans in general do not go beyond defending democracy as a whole against the attacks upon it. But the fact that the bourgeoisie is going over to bonapartism, even in a form masked and softened by remnants of democracy like the Fifth Republic, means that this system is already at a complete dead-end. So the concrete threat to toughen up the current "soft" bonapartism makes it even more vitally urgent to apply a bold and appropriate programme which can open up a *practical and concrete* path to socialism. Sarkozy taking the field to stiffen and toughen up the regime is a signal, a warning of the need to formulate such a programme for a socialist alternative publicly and put it into action. It is a challenge, a veritable tocsin calling all Marxists to reply in one voice, despite and independently of whether they belong to separate organisations, overcoming their divisions and clarifying what this alternative means

theoretically and practically.

The Left Front has virtually ceased to exist

Sadly, the Front de Gauche (Left Front) stands out for its complete absence from this particularly agitated political situation. What forces it had have already been dissipated by a succession of defeats in recent (municipal and European) elections, just when violent political crises have shaken the supposedly-socialist Parti Socialiste (but also the bourgeois UMP), exposing their internal contradictions and driving forward their decomposition (or explosion). The Left Front's main components, the Parti de Gauche (Left Party) and Parti Communiste (Communist Party) are following different political trajectories corresponding to each one's specific character.

Representing a petty-bourgeois layer of a workers' aristocracy ensconced in local government and the trade union leaderships, the Communist Party is throwing itself into variously-configured alliances, above all involving Hollande's disappointed elected representatives and officials. The aim of these parliamentary-style manoeuvres is to re-establish good old bourgeois democracy with "fair" class collaboration using the well-known political method of the popular front. And this at the very moment when the great majority of the bourgeoisie, in its insurmountable torments, has gone far beyond this stage, which is both outmoded and tailor-made to shore up its power. Now this reactionary orientation on the CP's part is dangerous because, outdated though it is, it can still mislead workers (as it did in the past) and channel their anger into an obvious setback. The CP may have willy-nilly had to abjure Stalin, but it would be a serious mistake to ignore that they have not got over their Stalinist conceptions.

The Left Party, meanwhile has been disappointed by its (predictably) poor election results and seems to have backed out of political life completely, just when politics have got agitated and offer a fertile field for determined intervention

by an organisation of workers. The party needs some inspiration to lift it from the demoralisation its defeats have caused, but they seem to be intimidated by how harshly reality has treated their rather broadly-drawn and inconsistent policies, and they have retreated into fantasy. Instead of a political programme, they have put forward a propagandist project for a Sixth Republic. But this demand has turned up all on its own, lacking both a head and a tail and completely detached from the concrete reality of struggles, about as appropriate in time and place as an ashtray on a motorcycle.

This demand is quite unexpected because it is on its own and, as it were, asexual. Nevertheless, at first sight it seems to be opposed both to Hollande's bastardised Fifth Republic and Sarkozy's project of consolidating this regime by reinforcing and accentuating its bonapartism. But if you look past the sentiments which animate it to what it concretely means as a demand, it turns out that this opposition is an illusory appearance, a mirage, and it does not really conflict with them at all. This Sixth Republic is not solidly located in a concrete programme for changing the whole of society; indeed, Melanchon scrupulously avoids any attempt to describe such a republic, so the vacuous nature of the project inevitably exposes it as an attempt to re-establish the old Fourth Republic. No amount of goodwill can change what this slogan ineluctably means. If it remains as it stands, this policy is condemned to rapid failure in this time of ever-intensifying class struggle.

(One cannot here pass over in silence Jean-Luc Melanchon's recent book: *L'Ere du Peuple* [The Age of the People] which marks a new stage in his theoretical and political regression. This is exposed by his explicit shift from being a declared representative of working people to the retrograde and dangerous mythology that exalts the people in general. At the same time he achieves a parallel conversion to a sort of

visceral environmentalism, that petit-bourgeois substitute for social struggles and lifebelt for capital. A fuller examination would exceed the scope of this article, but in view of its significance it will be undertaken shortly).

For all that, it would be a premature to reject the Left Party out of hand as a definitively lost cause where working people are concerned. Indeed, it is hard to believe that all its members and activists will blindly follow that sort of renunciation of the class struggle. It will take an internal struggle to decide the organisation's fate. But in the meantime this party, for now, like all the other far-left organisations, has shut itself out of the current political struggle in which the immediate stakes are capital's desire to reinforce its power using consistent bonapartism. The Left Party's general and summary denunciations of capitalism and/or its Fifth Republic are certainly not enough to make good the glaring shortcomings in their activity.

So an initial response to the question posed above, about whether Sarkozy's bonapartist project can succeed, is this: given the congenital and worsening maladies besetting the political organisations currently available to workers, as summarised above, they are hardly well-placed to prevent this big political shift, unless, of course, there is some unexpected outburst. So the answer depends on the outcome of the internal struggle currently underway between different political segments of the bourgeoisie distributed around the various bourgeois political parties (UMP, centrists, Front National, as well as the Socialist Party). They are in any case (with the temporary exception of the FN) ravaged by struggles between various factions precisely around problems relating to the profound need to transform the bourgeoisie's regime of political governance.

Bourgeois parties' deepening internal crises and conflicts

A relatively strong element in the UMP (to whom the various

centrist circles can be added) is lining up behind so-called moderate leaders such as Alain Juppé or François Fillon, who express and represent a wing of the bourgeoisie. This element is still attached to the very relative tranquillity of bourgeois democracy based on class collaboration and is alarmed by the uncertainties of a open, brutal social confrontation and the unforeseeable consequences of a fascist or even just a clearly more authoritarian regime. But their weakness from the point of view of the bourgeoisie arises from the situation itself, which is more and more conflictual and intolerant of any such compromise, and which they are no more fit to deal with than the Socialist Party is.

This segment of the political bourgeoisie is on the one hand taken aback by capital's need to beef up its power (which means they are impotent in the face of fascism) and on the other disarmed when it comes to breaking the resistance of working people (in particular by smashing the unions). It is true their leaders try to outdo one another in demanding even greater social destruction on their patrons' behalf than that announced and promised by Sarkozy, but this changes nothing fundamental in their position.

This is why, in order to remain in that body and/or advance their careers, more and more UMP leaders are rallying around Sarkozy, sometimes unexpectedly (Raffarin, De Villepin, Wauquiez, etc.). They are following or expressing the clear majority of the right both inside and outside the UMP who are massively opting for the tough solution to the crisis.

Analysis of the forces at work thus points to Sarkozy as the probable victor in a political competition already underway to provide weakening capitalism with a tougher and more stable government more able to bring it the support it needs.

But life is much richer and more varied than even the best analysis, based as it must be on the available data. Imponderables arising from the multiplicity of human

activities could shift and change the picture. However, such activities themselves do not fall from the skies, since they are already rooted in objective facts. We can point to some of them, even if it is impossible to predict precisely what the future will bring.

For a start, even if the bourgeoisie would like for the moment to avoid and spare itself the extra expenses (economic, social and political) incidental to fascism, and would be content just to toughen up its bonapartist regime, it is possible that their calculations could be upset by various factors within even their own ranks which might help the Front National to come to power.

It is also possible that the break-up and decomposition underway in the Socialist Party will provide another candidate for the role of Bonaparte in the person of Manuel Valls, politically converted and personally completely up for this job.

And who can tell with any certainty what the outcome of the various judicial inquiries underway, all threatening Sarkozy, will be. There is not adequate space here to describe in detail how widespread all the corruption among politicians is and explain what it means, nor how lenient bourgeois courts can be where politicians are concerned. However, it is not entirely out of the question that Sarkozy will be found guilty. That would smooth the path for another UMP candidate, or maybe someone from the Front National. In any case, the victor would be the one who offers the strongest guarantees to the bourgeoisie that he or she will tie working people down hand and foot and destroy the gains they have made in order to rescue exhausted capitalism in its death agony.

For the working-class solution!

Finally, and for that very reason, it is also possible that the masses of working people, including some of their

political organisations, will rise in salutary fashion and come on the stage to overturn these machinations and change the situation from top to bottom. That will be much more likely if the activists in these organisations get involved in a decisive and unified struggle for the resolute defence of working people against the bourgeoisie's many-sided attacks; that would really lay the basis for a rising of that sort, which would be concentrated, and increasingly confirmed, in the struggle between the intensified attacks and resistance on the part of trade unions. Hence the vital importance of working flat out to link these organisations to the *workers' unions* and the struggles they are involved in. In any case, such a link is a major requirement of Marxism, as well as a precise measure of all these organisations' real relationship to this revolutionary theory.

This theory clearly states that they have a duty, and one moreover, which the social context itself urgently requires, to offer a way out, a political programme for this resistance by the trade unions, and to organise to get it successfully on the road. The main axis of this policy necessarily must be to bring the unions to a break with the deceptive conception and rotten practice which demeans them to the level of "social partners" with the bourgeoisie. And at the same time bring them back onto the path of struggle for the emancipation of the working class. In the absence of such an opening, embodied in everyday practice, those organisations which claim to stand for working people and the revolution will fail in their elementary duty and, like a blunt and rusty knife, end up at the rubbish dump. That is the decisive choice today.

Balazs Nagy, November 2014[/threecolumns]

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On some lessons of the French municipal elections (March 2014)

[threecolumns]By *Balazs Nagy*, April 2014

The entire French press is unanimous. Whether left or right in their traditional political colouration – the difference is actually pretty superficial – they compare the so-called socialist party's resounding discomfiture in the municipal elections to Napoleons historic disaster on the Berezina River in Russia in 1812, the prelude to his ultimate defeat. For once the accuracy of their judgement is beyond dispute. So our first response is above all to see what we can learn. Its a perfectly straightforward and normal thing to do, although our conclusions differ noticeably from everyone else's.

First of all it is important to emphasise that elections change absolutely nothing in the fundamentals of the

capitalist social system or, therefore, in the overall situation. This view is sharply opposed to the popular belief carefully fostered by the usual politicians and organisations of the left. Even if elections do change that systems form or shape, they move within the framework it imposes and are an integral part of it. Whether municipal, parliamentary or European, they are just part of how the (most democratic!) system in place functions, while remaining profoundly bound to the way it moves and works.

How true this is has been more than adequately demonstrated, and two major and opposed schools of thought on the matter were in evidence during the elections. One body of opinion – an extremely heterogeneous one (especially if you include the right wingers) – traditionally asserts that elections really can bring about effective changes in the system. It has to be said, regretfully, that even a party such as the Front de Gauche (Left Front) and its component parts – which we see as actually standing on the side of working people, and as such on our side too – remains a prisoner to these blinkered electoral (parliamentary) politics. Its leaders, in effect, leave us to suppose mistakenly, or even themselves assert, that a strong showing (and all the more so outright victory) at the polls would enable them radically to change the capitalist social system.

Abstentions are a kind of vote

In contrast to these shallow parliamentary politics, another large and growing section of the population regularly and deliberately abstain. Although municipal elections supposedly affect people more directly, these latest ones saw record abstention levels of 36.6 per cent, particularly among young people.

Most bourgeois politicians and commentators get onto their moral high horse over this. They have the nerve to impugn such peoples republican credentials, and the audacity to accuse

them of helping the right wing. Here or there, the reproach is added that they make it impossible for the Left Front and/or its component parts to make consistent progress, and so change the system.

These abstentions, however, express a definite verdict on the existing capitalist system as a whole, fundamentally rejecting it and repudiating the absurd belief that voting can change the system. In this sense, they are right and we defend them against those republican paragons of (questionable) virtue, even though we think that abstaining is negative and sterile and therefore inadequate.

An accurate map showing the percentage of voters who abstained in the recent French municipal elections would clearly show another France living on the periphery of the cities in the proletarian banlieues. It is working-class France, including the unemployed, suffering under savage austerity. The bourgeois press was so bold as to reveal a tiny corner of its extent and significance. In Paris red belt there were 58.6 per cent abstentions in Ivry, 56.8 in Stains, 56.7 in Vitry-sur-Seine; then 56.7 per cent in Vaux-en-Velin in the outer suburbs of Lyon and 55.5 per cent in the disaster-stricken working-class town of Roubaix in the North. The figure is the same for Trappes in the outer suburbs of Paris, the biggest victims of galloping inequality. Bourgeois journalists and all the petit-bourgeois milieu editorialise about this in the abstract – wringing their hands over the losses suffered by the middle class! The working class and its fate simply disappear from these peoples preoccupations. This arises from a deliberate desire to minimise this dangerous class's importance, even to the point of denying its existence. So you can bet they will never draw up any such map because it would cast rather a pall over their chatter and somewhat upset their peace of mind.

On the importance of elections

Elections cannot change the capitalist system (as we can see in the daily more severe blows it inflicts on us), but political organisations would be making an unpardonable error if they concluded that there is no point in elections. In the first place, they are important because they quite faithfully reflect each party's impact and influence, providing a pretty accurate graphic image (including abstentions) of the level and nature of the populations political consciousness.

This political thermometer marked a general defeat for Hollande and his government and, in passing, wiped out all the myth-making that had gone before about municipal elections being all about strictly local issues: all those who in 2012 had expected this government to protect them against the attacks of capital, this time around voted against his party or abstained. That message is clear. In this sense the bourgeois way the newspaper Le Monde explains what this vote means is deliberately misleading. They write that Holland is now paying the bill for a poor start to his tenure because it was not sustained by a clear and clearly-articulated project. (Editorial on 1 April 2014). But the obviously bourgeois nature of his project was exactly what working people did understand and voted against. Nevertheless, in its usual convoluted way, the newspaper does express the bourgeoisies innermost concerns and its insistence that greater determination should be shown in serving that class. Their complaint expresses these requirements and their preferred response, which is to take matters directly in hand via their own traditional parties. In this they are encouraged by Hollande's own bourgeois proclivities. That explains the significance of the heightened profile of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), the Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI) and the Democratic Movement (MoDem), parties which express the bourgeoisies desire to press ahead with the destruction of social gains. We can be quite sure that Hollande will do everything he can to satisfy these expectations and will (if possible) become even more hostile

to what working people want.

The strength of the fascists (barely) conceals their bourgeoisie character

The considerable advance made by the National Front (FN) is almost entirely due to its demagogic propaganda which appears to defend the interests of workers and working people. But watch out! This tactic of appearing to defend working people is a well-established and well-known trick used by all extreme-right parties. In the 1920s Hitler developed the same stratagem, presenting himself as a defender of working people. He went so far as to call his party socialist, merely adding the adjective national. As for Mussolini, he came straight out of the Italian Socialist Party. As with all fascists, social demagogy was their most important weapon, and this is what the National Front has picked up on. But how demagogic this political line is, is revealed clearly by the fact that it does not attack the whole bourgeoisie and its social system. It only sets its sights on one of its political lines, the one currently in the foreground: Europe. It advocates a different line, i.e. the withdrawal into nationalism represented by the other, minority, section of the European bourgeoisie. So the FN attacks the bourgeoisies majority (European) policy, but not the bourgeoisie as a class which exploits other classes, nor its capitalist system. Far from it, it vigorously attacks immigrant workers, in other words the majority of the working class, and carries on alarmingly about workers gains, denouncing various benefits. It has derived great advantages not just from this lying demagogy, which continues to conceal its avowedly bourgeois nature, but also the fact that no single party has yet unmasked it as a bourgeois party. Normally, criticisms merely affect its anti-European stance and its racist and nationalist phobias, without touching on the bourgeois basis on which they grow like excrescences.

Why is the Left Front marking time?

Elections are also an opportunity for all those united around shared political aims to rally together so as to further extend their ranks. This is particularly true of all those who wish, on the basis of a programme, to make a step forward towards freeing working people from the yoke of the capitalist system. So the elections offered the Left Front a chance to develop. So how to explain that, despite the terrible crisis of capitalism and the fact that workers rejected this society, the Left Front did not just fall a long way back from its spectacular results in the presidential elections, but was clearly overtaken by all bourgeois parties, including the FN and the UMP?

This absurd situation is a consequence of the Left Fronts political ambiguity. While it makes it clear that it thoroughly opposes the French and European bourgeoisies recent austerity policies, it does not come out clearly against the capitalist system as such. It stays vague and enigmatic on this cardinal point which really does require some straight talking. This obscurity is revealed in the lack of a clearly working-class programme directed against capitalism as the social system at the root of all austerity. This lack of a programme and the fact they are locked into the normal bourgeois election framework have condemned them to limp along far behind the others. In short, their position does not measure up to the situation. How can you expect the Left Front to unmask the National Front as a bourgeois party if they equivocate over their own objectives? The municipal elections show that, under these conditions, the Left Front is condemned to mark time while the National Front has made considerable progress, including among discontented workers.

So the main lesson of the elections is obvious. They show ever more clearly that, instead of looking for scapegoats, the main task facing our Left Front is to make an objective assessment of its activity as a whole, above all its political programme,

Balazs Nagy, April 2014[/threecolumns]

New Valls government: A government of anti-working class struggle

[threecolumns]By *Balazs Nagy*, April 2014

The recent local government elections and the formation of a new government are a good opportunity, indeed a direct incentive, to say more about the mean, twisted and nasty way the Hollande team running the country think. Their politico-social reasoning is very simple, not to say simplistic. It is what you might call classical social-democratic thinking of a kind well-known over the last hundred years or more.

Resolute defenders of decadent capitalism

The main thing that really marks these people out, among all those who claim to be on the side of working people, is that they present capitalism as an eternal system whose existence you just have to accept. So according to this disgrace to the name of socialist, everything we do is necessarily limited and determined by the framework of capitalism and its general rules. But as a consolation to working people, according to this conception, the capitalist system can be put right, amended and improved, and our job is to contribute to that. This cheapskate philosophy which has long been selling the mission of liberating the working class for a mess of pottage still had some limited validity when, in return for this sell-out, the bourgeoisie was still able to concede various actual reforms. But imperialism is the period of capitalisms decline

– something which social democrats obstinately deny – in which, because it is exhausted, this system is organically unable to concede the slightest reform.

Now the present crisis has brutally revealed that this decline has got to the point where not only have reforms become impossible for this moribund system, but in order to survive it needs to attack and destroy previous reforms. This need is what explains its general offensive against existing reforms and its intransigent determination to fight that right through to the end.

But social democrats are incorrigible; they have not abandoned their grotesque fantasies, but adapted them precisely to the many-faceted requirements of this offensive on the part of a bourgeoisie with its back to the wall. For all Hollande's solemn oaths – and this sheds some light on the social democrats consummate duplicity – they then told us all the fibs about the need on the one hand to swell the coffers of international capital by paying back the debt, and on the other to help our own impoverished capitalist with yet more billions. Against all the evidence they still maintain the lie that thanks to this aid the grateful bourgeoisie will do everything it can to secure the well-being of working people. Even a few weeks ago Hollande was still handing out dozens of billions in line with this plan, but he and his ilk were the only ones (like all self-respecting social democrats) who still believed the incredible dream that in exchange the bourgeoisie would give unemployed people work. (Through these outrageous deceptions they hoped to justify making savings by drastically cutting expenditure on health, education, all welfare benefits, wages, right to a job and so forth, to the point of threatening their very existence.) Alongside this savage demolition of genuine previous reforms – and to show that they are true reformists carrying out actual reforms – they have flooded the country with a wave of so-called societal reforms – at the margins of and even outside of

social and economic life – such as same-sex marriage, electrical cars and so forth. The main function of these pretend reforms has invariably been to distract attention from the activity of destroying previous reforms.

The local government elections brought a stinging defeat to those who, in their arrogant and pretentious duplicity, thought that working people had swallowed this hogwash hook, line and sinker. They were sincerely and profoundly surprised when they saw the results. But to go from there to imagining that Hollande and co would revise their policies and adapt them to what working people want would be an absurd illusion. Far from it!

A build-up of losses and other miseries threaten workers.

The new government is not just a body committed carrying on Hollande and co.s bourgeois policy of robbing working people. In view of the preceding governments alleged dawdling in getting on with the job and also the bourgeoisies growing appetite, not to say bulimia, it is going to toughen up considerably. After 26 March, the employers body Medef trumpeted: A more ambitious trajectory than the 50 billion cut already announced is now absolutely imperative, (Le Monde, 30-31 March 2014). Then the headline on the same newspapers editorial of 1 April spelled out what the government has to do: Hold course! No wobbling, get on with it! And then Hollande's road map made it clear: The only responsible outcome is to set afoot and then roll out reforms aiming at securing an economic recovery. We all know the terrible reality hiding behind these anodyne words. The self-proclaimed leaders of the bourgeoisie in Brussels have also jumped at the chance to insist on greater rigour from the French government. And the commercial treaty being prepared between Europe and the US has up its sleeve further blows which will make any hopes of an economic recovery by France, already pretty well compromised, even more precarious.

Hollande reacted swiftly, obeying not indeed the wishes of the disappointed voters but the requirements of his real, bourgeois, bosses. He quickly established a new government team tightly organised around his closest social-democratic partners. His new prime minister, Valls, is ready-made to epitomise it, with his even more pronounced right-wing political orientation and aggressive character. It is no accident that he has long wanted to rid his party's name of the adjective socialist. So right from the start this team presents itself as an advanced detachment of a bourgeois attack formation. The odd reassuring and soothing phrase where required do not alter this truth. We shall have occasion later on to comment in greater detail on this new governments anti-worker offensive, the first elements of which, aiming to dismantle the social security system, we have just seen.

There certainly is a change, not to say a turn. Here is an end to the procrastination and shilly-shallying which, however much they suit Hollande's innate weakness, have become intolerable to the bourgeoisie and seem contrary to the nature of the new government. The presence of people with a left aura like Hamon and Montebourg has nothing to do with any real left. Much more, it signifies the end of equivocation or misunderstanding surrounding these careerists reputations. Indeed, if there is a real left in this party, apart from the usual fake-left loud-mouths like Lienemann and co., now would be the time to say so in opposition to the deployment of definite measures and attacks against workers gains. Above all, now is the time for all organisations who speak and act in workers interests to rally round the Left Front to prepare together a broad united front of all working people against the redoubled attacks by capital and its new government.

Balazs Nagy, April 2014[/threecolumns]