



Anti capitalist pamphlet: An introduction

Sat, 01/10/2005 - 17:00

A movement without a name? Its left wing - young fighters on the streets at the summit sieges of Seattle or Genoa - call it ANTICAPITALIST. Its right wing - the speakers in the vast tents of its Social Forums at Porto Alegre, Mumbai, Florence, Paris and now London, call it ALTERMONDIALISTE. Or, if you want something that sounds safe but you don't like ugly neologisms dreamed up in the offices of the French newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*, you can call it the GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT.

Whatever you call the 'movement of movements' it is suffering from an identity crisis - one which goes well beyond the choice of names. Speaking frankly it does not know where it is going. Does it want to 'fix or nix' the international financial institutions? Does it want to abolish capitalism or create a 'fair and equal' market? Does it want to take power from the hands of the warmongers? Or is any talk about 'taking power' just too twentieth century, too passé for words?

Many of the most influential people, who organise its counter-conferences and call its mobilisations, do not even see this as a problem. From the Attac campaign for a small tax on foreign exchange to the Zapatista guerrillas in Mexico., the key players tell us to 'rejoice' in what is simply a space, a forum, an agora. The cunning of history has led them to use the Greek and Latin words for - yes - a marketplace.

They warn sternly that this marketplace must not become the site of a struggle for power. There is no need or possibility to take decisions there. Strange - since all markets - apart from the cloud cuckoo-land one described in the books of neoliberal theorists - are always just that. The Roman and Athenian marketplaces were, moreover, the actual physical location of ancient democracy. And democracy is precisely a struggle for power between parties and classes.

In the market of ideas, too, some sellers are more equal than others. Those with a newspaper or a publishing house, those with an NGO, a trade union, a university department or a party with dozens of deputies can flood the bookstores, the airwaves, even cyberspace with their wares. So, even within the movement against corporate globalisation, is the free and equal exchange of 'solutions?', the 'many yeses?', that free or that equal? And is this free exchange all that we need?

For even if this post-modern polyphony of 'many yeses' were what it claims to be, with no attempt at harmonisation it will eventually become a mind-numbing cacophony, where no clear answer can be heard to the most urgent of all questions - what is to be done?

When factories are closing all over Europe, when real wages continue to sink in the USA, when sweatshops are wearing out their young workforces in a few years for less than a dollar a day, when hospitals, schools, public transport, electricity and water supply are being privatised and/or closed everywhere, this old question poses itself with greater and greater force. When activists from the trade unions, the antiwar movement, the organisations of the landless, the fighters against the threats posed by climate change and the rapid reduction of biodiversity sense the need for action, then continuing post-modern playground games will not do.

In fact, this confusion - not creative but (self-) destructive - is part of what revolutionary Marxists call a crisis of leadership. It is directly related to the long-term leadership crisis within the working class movement, the antiwar movement and all the movements of the oppressed. Indeed, since certain important forces in the workers' movement - the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), Rifondazione Comunista (RC) - are either actually sharing or preparing to share 'power' in coalitions with capitalist parties which cannot and will not do anything to solve all these problems, the old

debates - above all reform versus revolution - are not as outmoded as the intellectuals of the movement, such as Susan George, pretend.

This crisis is demonstrated in Brazil today. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (?Lula?) was cheered to the echo at the World Social Forum in January 2003. Like millions of Brazilian workers, the tens of thousands of activists from around the world believed that at last 'one of ours' had come to power and would show the world what an anti-neoliberal regime could do.

Indeed, Lula only became president thanks to a mass workers' party, the PT, strongly supported by the trade unions, the CUT, the organisation of the landless peasants, the MST, and the unemployed, the women's movement, the youth organisations, etc. But now he is doing the job of the IMF, paying the external debt, ruling in coalition with representatives of the neoliberal bourgeoisie, attacking the pensions and social rights of the working class which elected him. Faced with opposition within the PT, from deputies and senators who vote for the policies of the PT rather than those of its enemies, he is expelling them.

A similar crisis of leadership can be seen in the anti war movement, whose potential to stop the Iraq war from taking place was squandered by the trade union and reformist leaders. They used their influence to make 15 February not a launch pad for mass direct action to stop the war, but rather its end-point.

This crisis of leadership can be seen today in the resistance to the co-ordinated onslaught by the European bosses on workers' social gains - healthcare, education, pensions. In 2003 and 2004, huge strike waves, including one day general strikes, took place against these plans. They mobilised on the streets the forces which could have smashed this attack and would have enthusiastically welcomed such a call to action. But it never came.

The wave of struggle was in effect broken by the union leaders, the leaders of the CGT, the CGIL and IG Metall who, at the critical point, refused to call for all out indefinite action (i.e. a general strike). The reasons for this lie not just in bureaucratic cowardice but in their continued support for the Social Democratic and Labour parties, some of which are actually conducting these attacks. The results have been felt on the industrial battlefield too.

Defeats like that of IG Metall in 2003, in the battle to extend the 35 hour week to the eastern parts of Germany, have had a serious impact on the balance of forces between the classes, not only in Germany but potentially in Europe as a whole. After this defeat, globalising bosses like Peter Hardt of Volkswagen are forcing through the increase of the working week to 40 hours with no increase in pay in all new plants. No jobs will be created in Germany without this cut in pay. Otherwise investment will go to Portugal, Hungary or South Africa. And IG Metall is retreating under this onslaught.

It is not true, as many claim, that the anticapitalist movement has no leadership. It simply does not have a recognised, democratically chosen and accountable leadership. In fact, different forces have led it during the various stages of its development. Who this leadership is has changed as this movement has changed. An important early inspiration was the Zapatista movement and the solidarity movements that developed with it in the West. Those movements acted as midwives of what was to become 'anticapitalism'.

People's Global Action, an environmental initiative that turned towards anarchism, called a series of global days of action. In Britain, its major affiliate was Reclaim the Streets, while in Italy, the white overalls of Ya Basta! brought the PGA into public consciousness. The hugely successful actions held on 18 June 1999 brought financial districts across the world to a standstill. This phase of the movement - the summit sieges - would reach its zenith at Genoa in June 2001.

The question of capitalism, in its new aggressive, neoliberal, 'globalisation' phase, was now on the mainstream political agenda. The struggles of workers and the poor against its offensive were shifting and challenging the traditional forms of political representation. New forces were rapidly turning towards this movement, reacting to these changing political landscapes.

In Genoa, we saw Attac (a lobby group founded by the intellectual mandarins of Le Monde diplomatique, Bernard Cassen, Ignacio Ramonet, Jaques Nikonoff, campaigning for a 0.01% tax on financial speculation); Rifondazione Comunista (a mass Italian former Stalinist party), led by Fausto Bertinotti; the SWP (Britain's largest far left organisation); radical NGOs working in the global south; campaigns against Third World Debt (notably Jubilee 2000); not to mention a whole series of European trade unions and others besides.

Inevitably, most brought with them their pre-existing reformist prejudices and programmes. This left the anarchists, radical ecologists and populists in a quandary. How could the movement maintain its radicalism?

Their own prejudices - their utopian local 'solutions', their anti-hierarchical organising fetishes (affinity groups, consensus models), their tactics (non-violent direct action or symbolic trashing) - did not provide a political answer to reformism.

Instead of welcoming the participation of the mass organisations of the working class, which have the potential to mobilise millions into decisive action against the system, the anarchists withdrew in a sectarian huff.

Ideologically we have seen a similar move from left to right. At first, the movement was very radical but with a post-modern aversion to 'the grand narratives' of Marxism, Communism, Social Democracy. Under the influence of the Zapatistas, the PGA claimed it was a movement of 'many yeses but one no'. Nor did the PGA want to bring any political unity to this. After all, politics is about struggling for power.

The Zapatistas wanted to 'empower' the diverse 'people' and thus 'disempower' the centralised capitalist state: but without smashing it or replacing it with a radically different form of state. They showed the typical anarchist fear of authority, believing that it cannot be made accountable.

But politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The reformists, disguising themselves as 'social movements', simply occupied the vacated space. They took over the movement in 2001-2002, by focussing it on huge global and continental Social Forums. Attac is a prime example: most of its leaders come from the French Socialist and Communist parties. In Brazil, the PT similarly advanced its social front, the Brazilian NGOs, plus the non-political mass movements it led (the MST and the CUT). In Italy, Rifondazione Comunista performed a similar trick.

The famous Principles of Porto Alegre, which banned the participation of political parties and the making of decisions by the Social Forums, were imposed on the movement. Of course, there was no mass discussion, no democratic agreement to adopt them. The reformists and NGOs supported them because it protected them against criticism from more militant ideas and organisations. The autonomists and horizontals were delighted since it seemed to ban politics and leadership. Until the penny dropped that it was all simply a facade.

This political 'neutrality' as to what goals the movement should adopt was a great weakness, if what you wanted was worldwide co-ordinated action against capitalism, imperialism and war.

In fact, the crying need to go beyond mobilising against this or that gathering of the globalisers, or assembling for pseudo-academic talkfests, made itself felt more and more with every passing year. 60,000 activists came to Florence not just to discuss what common actions to take in the year ahead, not even how to slow down the advance of global capitalism, but also in order to discuss what should replace it, how to replace it, and who could replace it. In short, these vital questions opened up the issue of what strategy, what programme the movement needed.

Because Florence was the first ESF, the sheer intoxication of being 'tous ensemble' (all together) meant that even dyed-in-the-wool reformists spoke like revolutionary firebrands. Everyone was carried forward too by the urgency of doing everything possible to stop George Bush's war on Iraq.

This remains the burning question not only for this movement, but for the millions who struggle against capitalism and imperialism in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, for the militants of the Intifada, for the workers and youth in Iran, all of whom are threatened with being squeezed between the dead ends of political Islam and nationalism.

Inside the anti-capitalist movement, the neo-reformists of Attac, Bernard Cassen and Susan George, plus figures like George Monbiot in Britain, are now trying to impose on the movement their agenda for 'another world', for a capitalism with a human face. They are directly allied to the 'old' reformists too: with the Brazilian PT, ruling in a popular front with neoliberal bourgeois parties and using 'participatory budgets' to make the poor divide the limited cake for themselves rather than cancelling the foreign debt and seizing the wealth of the rich; with the Italian Rifondazione Comunista and with the French SP 'opposition' and CP leaders preparing to repeat the disastrous governments and coalitions of the 1990s.

Anticapitalists have to oppose any attempt to commit the movement to this sort of bourgeois political agenda. The workers who join in the Social Forums in countries like Italy, who are attracted to the movement because they are fed up with the dead end of reformism in the unions and social democracy, deserve and need something better than a 'new' logo for the same old reformism.

The reformists, but also a number of centrist tendencies (those forces who oscillate between reform and revolution), have also put forward manifestos, programmes and perspectives for the movement. Many of them give a detailed account, some a sharp critique, of the madness of global capitalism. But none give a revolutionary answer to this cruel and insane system. How can the working class smash it and replace it with a fundamentally different world? What kind of state do we have to replace the bourgeois state apparatus with, in order to build 'another world'?

Worst of all, even socialists like the International Socialist Tendency (the SWP) and Trotskyists of the Fourth International refuse to challenge reformists such as Cassen, meekly accepting the ban on parties. They hide behind a 'social movement' façade, either working within Attac itself or fronts like Globalise Resistance, rather than challenging the spurious authority of the Porto Alegre principles. Likewise, they accommodate to the spontaneism and libertarian structurelessness of the movement.

Faced with these awkward questions, these leaders of the left wing of the movement hide behind the lame excuse that the time is 'not ripe' for democracy or leadership. They argue that we cannot afford to 'drive away' the grandes dames and grands seigneurs of the movement - Susan George, Bernard Cassen, Chico Whitaker. Too much class politics, too much radicalism would risk a split, they say.

In her latest book, 'Another World is possible IF?', Susan George devotes a whole section to attacking what she calls the trap of the slogan 'One Solution - Revolution?'. Feigning a world-weary 'I've seen it all before' approach, she insists that class struggle is impossibly passé and that revolution is undesirable because of the suffering it would cause. But what of the suffering that capitalism causes with its famines and imperialist wars, its sweatshops and mass unemployment? Those who perished in revolutions are only a fraction of this ongoing holocaust.

No wonder that, on the streets of Europe and the world on 15 February 2003, millions showed no fear of these words. It is precisely when the masses take up the call for revolution that these leaders shake in their shoes. These leaders are frightened to break their links with the capitalist order with its comfortable editorial or professorial chairs and its trade union offices.

Does any anticapitalist fighter really believe that we can go forward with such leaders? That we can or should sacrifice our unity in action, the advance into battle which we need to make, just to keep the Bernard Cassens, Susan Georges or Chico Whitakers happy?

We don't need to arrange any artificial split from them. But neither do we need to fear a split with them. If we go forward determinedly, they will desert at once. What we do need to avoid is a split from decisive action, from the class struggle, from the revolutionary youth, workers and peasants. If the movement stands dithering in its present impasse then the ranks of the fighters will be divided. No way! Let's go forward.

Nearly seventy years ago, Leon Trotsky wrote that the crisis of mankind is essentially the crisis of working class leadership. The mass mobilisations of the last few years - magnificent and inspiring as they were and are - have not

been able to bring down the real Evil Empire of our times. The new anticapitalist movement, like the 'old' workers' movement, has developed its own form of the crisis of leadership, not least because it has borrowed a large number of its leaders from the workers' movement and its intellectual hangers on. Overcoming this is only possible if conscious revolutionaries fight for what is necessary, for a programme for working class power.

Likewise, as Europe's bosses seek to divert anger against their misrule onto migrants and racial minorities, the spectre of the Nazis and the Fascists threatens to rise again. Militant anti-racist and anti-fascist organisations are needed to counter the lies of the hate-mongers, and physically smash their would-be stormtroopers.

The trade unions remain crucial weapons in the anticapitalist struggle, capable of turning off the tap of profits at source, establishing workers' control over social production and planning that production for social need. The rank and file workers need their own movement, however, to wrest control of the unions from the bureaucratic class collaborators who currently control them.

A number of radical unions in Europe and around the world have joined in the movement from the outset but most of the bigger unions have been slow and hesitant. Yet, recently, in every militant struggle, the rank and file have sought to link up with the social movements - through social forums in Italy, co-ordinations in France, popular assemblies in Argentina, social assemblies in Germany. With every new upsurge in the movement, we need to develop these links into real action councils for our movement.

The major unions suffer from being tied to the Socialist and Labour parties that are implementing neoliberal measures and building up arsenals of mass destruction. We need new workers' parties, based on the unions and movements of the oppressed. Rather than seeking to rule for the capitalists, they should seek to implement anticapitalist measures and pave the way for a socialist society.

In short, the anticapitalist movement, the workers' movement, the movements of the racially and nationally oppressed, youth, women, all must be brought together to create a new International - a world party of socialist revolution. This will be the Fifth International, founded on the accumulated revolutionary communist heritage of the previous four workers' Internationals but learning too the lessons of their collapse, degeneration or betrayals.

The size of the current movement, the reshaping of the working class, the repulsive face of global capitalism and the impasse of reformism all mean that the new International can be a mass International from the very beginning. Whilst mobilising against privatisation and unemployment, social cuts and debt, environmental destruction and imperialist wars, it can debate out and at last decide on a new revolutionary strategy.

At the heart of such a strategy must be a determination to seize the wealth and property of the multinationals and the billionaires, so we can plan for the eradication of poverty and disease, and then build a classless society where want, coercion and war will be things of the past.

To achieve this, we will need to paralyse, split and disintegrate the repressive machinery of the state and replace it with the rule of democratic workers' councils and a workers' and popular militia. The parliamentarians of Attac and the existing workers' parties may set up an outcry about respect for 'parliamentary democracy' - but they and their reformist predecessors have never hesitated to use the police, the courts and even the army to crush our movement when their capitalist masters demanded it.

Even the Naomi Kleins and Luca Casarini will object to the 'authoritarianism' of such a suggestion, preferring a never-ending symbolic push and shove with the state forces. They fear the direct rule of the working masses and the armed people - we don't. And, if the great anticapitalist movement is not to sink back into the reformism of yesteryear, or be crushed by the state forces once it has talked itself into an isolated corner, then it must adopt a revolutionary programme and become an international revolutionary party to carry it out.

