

# Athens ESF: Reject the building of a new reformism

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The Florence preparatory meeting for the Athens ESF saw a marked disagreement between the French and the Italian delegates over how to fight back against the EU constitution. Two competing proposals and plans of action were put forward, but neither would be adequate to finally defeat the EU superstate project. Around 180 delegates came together in Florence on 12-13th November to discuss the 'Charter for Another Europe'. The meeting marked an attempt to develop a statement of principles 'for another Europe'.

The first attempt, the European Petition, emerged from a conference held in Paris on 13-14th August, the central idea of which is to get over a million signatures for the petition. The French organisers headed by Elizabeth Gauthier of the Parti Communiste Française (PCF) and Michel Rousseau of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), see this as an alternative to the European Constitutional project and to the Lisbon Agenda.

Neither the Paris nor the Florence assemblies were officially part of the European Social Forum, but the participants were much the same, with one notable absentee - the International Socialist Tendency (IST) and its largest section the Socialist Workers Party. Discuss programme? We don't do programmes!

The most recent European Preparatory Assemblies - in Athens (February), Prague (May) and Istanbul (September) and the next one, which will take place in Vienna in January - are supposed to review and update the action calls issued at the ESF, via the semi-detached Assembly of Social Movements. But they generally get bogged down in organisational wrangling and tedious discussion of 'methodology', rarely discussing action. Nor have these meetings made any progress in defining what the ESF stands for, despite deciding this was a crucial question after the London ESF in October 2004. To meet this crying need, 'the French' and 'the Italians', who form fairly homogeneous blocs, came up with their counterposed projects, petition and charter.

The Charter for Another Europe is the project of the Italians. Though there was a sizeable delegation from France and smaller numbers from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, and even Russia, the great majority of delegates were from Italian parties and trade unions: Rifondazione Comunista (hosts), Democratic Socialists and Arci, the Italian Social Forums, the main trade union federation CGIL, and the more radical unions COBAS and SinCobas.

Many of the foreign delegates represented post-Stalinist political parties now united in the European Left Party, which had its first congress in Athens on 29-30th October. The 'big four' in the ELP are Rifondazione Comunista of Italy, the Parti Communiste Français, the Linkspartei of Germany and the Greek Synaspismos.

**Between Utopia and Reformism**

The discussion was broken down into seven areas of discussion:

- ? peace and security
- ? Europe in the world
- ? citizenship, equality and difference
- ? workers and social rights
- ? democracy and participation
- ? for another economy: common goods and environment
- ? for another economy: social common goods

Two presenters, usually from different countries, introduced each topic. The process will then continue at the Preparatory Assembly in Vienna and during the run up to the Athens? ESF. Here assemblies will be held, within the ESF programme, on each of the above areas. Then a large general assembly will be asked to approve the ?Charter of Athens for Another Europe?.

The moves toward developing some sort of programmatic alternative for the ?social movements? to counterpose to neoliberalism, came from a meeting of intellectuals, activists and trade unionists at the World Social Forum which issued a short manifesto that they called the ?Consensus of Porto Alegre?. However its extreme moderation failed to excite the activists in Porto Alegre. They were far more attracted to the left populist rhetoric of Hugo Chavez, who has called for a more explicitly anti-imperialist and even socialist initiative at the WSF-Americas to be held in Caracas at the end of January.

The fact that Rifondazione and the PCF have come up with these projects testifies to their sense that the disaffection of many social democratic workers, caused by neoliberal attacks of ?their parties? in power (Jospin, Schroeder, Lula, Blair), is opening up a space that the post-Stalinist parties want to take advantage of: an ambition shared with the ?Trotskyists? of the Fourth International and the IST.

The Charter for Another Europe, whatever its final form, like the Consensus of Porto Alegre, will be a very timid, reformist document, hidden in a cloud of universal rights and post-modern verbiage. It will not be anticapitalist, or explicitly socialist; it will fail to mention the working class as the protagonist of social transformation, but rely on election victories by the sections of the European Left, in alliance with ?repentant? neoliberals like Romano Prodi of the Ulivo or Laurent Fabius of the left wing French Socialist Party. However in Florence this electoralism remained strictly implicit.

The assembly greeted with silence any revolutionary ideas. A fog of post-modern utopianism, occasionally pierced by suggestions to reform or even support this or that existing institution (the United Nations, the International Criminal Court) characterised the debate. If the proposals for reforms were criticised, it was from generally the standpoint that such measures might detract from the beautiful ideal Europe of our dreams.

In the opening session Rafaella Bollini of Arci proposed a set of ?universal values? such as peace, human and democratic rights, social justice, freedom. The question is to whom are these values universal? To our rulers and exploiters? Obviously not. To the hierarchy of the churches, mosques, temples and synagogues? Plainly not.

Rafaella demanded we support the right of human beings to resist oppression, but only by ?using means, which don?t produce additional repression and violation of universal rights? peaceful means and excluding in principle the use of military force.? She supported the International Criminal Court ?as a first step?. But who will appear before any court or go to jail without force? Law and rights are meaningless without compulsion.

When a classless and stateless society has been created then 'rights' too will disappear. Universal human values are impossible, however, in a world divided into antagonistic classes.

Alessandra Meozzi, a leader of the Fiom-Cgil, talked of a Europe which must set out to transcend national identities – even Europeanism. This cosmopolitanism must, she said, be social and cultural: a Europe of women, peasants, workers and the excluded. This led her to depreciate the right of nations to self-determination. She pointed to the terrible destruction of the Balkan wars, inflicted in the name of nationalism, as though it was not the denial of these rights that had caused the Croatian and Bosnian wars.

Another Italian speaker, Lidia Menapace, genially suggested that maybe oppressed nations should go straight for cosmopolitanism and 'human' solidarity without passing through the divisive stage of forming independent states. Naturally the Basque and Catalan representatives – nationalities who have never enjoyed the right to self-determination – strongly objected to this. Leo Gabriel – in terms reminiscent of Otto Bauer's Austro-Marxist solution to the national question – suggested wide ranging autonomy for nations and cultures but not separation.

Many debates like this followed between those arguing for a reformed EU and others arguing for an unspecified 'alternative Europe' from Cap Finisterre to the Urals. The latter probably had a slender majority, although it is hard to make such assertions given that, like the rest of the ESF process, resolutions, amendments and votes were not taken. Against all norms of working class democracy, the drafters of the final document will be free to pick and mix, accept or reject from the pot pourri of ideas thrown out at the assembly.

A debate that continued throughout was on the structure the charter should take. Some reformists, for instance the Greek euro-communist party Synaspismos, wanted a programme of concrete demands. Others, notably sections of the Italian movement, argued for an alternative 'vision' of a new Europe based upon a series of social and political rights, thus dodging the million dollar question – how exactly do you get to this other Europe?

The motivations for such avoidance varied. Gianfranco Benzi from the Cgil clearly felt the ESF had no place to tell trade union leaders what to do and say. Others, like Rafaela Bollini, put forward a highly postmodern justification that rejected 'totalising' notions like class and socialism. Winning consensus should be the primary task of the charter, she said.

This may lead to the 'construction' of Europe's first postmodern political manifesto that sidelines the importance of working class identity and refuses to fight for the goal of a classless society – providing left cover for a process that could lead to the creation of new popular frontist alliances of the left and the bosses.

Already there are moves in this direction. Rifondazione voted at their last congress to support a new Ulivo coalition government. This comes just years after leader Fausto Bertinotti declared, in this very city, that Rifondazione had learned the lessons of this disastrous experiment and would not repeat this mistake. He received thunderous applause from the huge audience.

In Germany Oscar Lafontaine of the Linkspartei has spoken of the 'dream ticket' of a red-red government with the SPD. In France, the deep divisions in Socialist Party over the Constitution vote has led to talk of a new left stretching from reconstituted Socialists, the PCF and the LCR.

Can coalitions offer an alternative? The answer is plainly no.

Europe's bosses are aggressively determined to pursue the Lisbon agenda. This is driven by their

competition with USA. Any coalition government will find itself caught, as in a vice, between a neoliberal programme and the aspirations of the workers that put them in power. The masses will be demobilised from taking militant action in the belief that 'their' government will pursue their interests.

Of course, these proposals are not new or 'post' anything but the regurgitation of an old fashioned popular front. In the 1930s, Communist Parties in France and Spain stood at the head of radical mass movements demanding fundamental change, coupled with a militant working class fightback against fascism. Instead of struggling for power, the Communists argued for coalitions with ruling class parties. In Spain the consequence was fascist dictatorship, while in France the events culminated in the Second World War.

The historical link is no surprise. Two weeks earlier the European Left Party they had their annual conference in Athens, and reports indicate that discussion focused on self congratulation rather than serious discussion about the class struggle and the role of the left. The ELP, like the trade union bureaucracy, sees the Athens ESF and the charter as a think tank for policy proposals, the creation of a penumbra of social movements around them and extremely limited co-ordination of protest actions.

It is urgently necessary to fight for a more radical approach.

The last few months have seen several general strikes (two in Belgium alone), the mass youth rebellion of the French suburbs and the continuation of the neoliberal drive.

Yet the Florence Assembly passed a grossly inadequate declaration on the French riots, which did not solidarise with the 'rioters', or call for mass action to defend them against the French state. The ESF leadership has persistently avoided calling even a day of action Europe wide against the social cuts.

Certainly the ESF does need to agree a radical programme of mass action to defeat the neo-liberal reforms across Europe, the rallying of workers to demands that extend social welfare provision, nationalise industry under working class control and fight for a revolution against the Europe of the bosses to establish a socialist Europe of the workers. This will be the aim of the revolutionary charter for another Europe that the League for the Fifth International will be proposing to the Athens ESF.

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