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Another Future Through Social Resistance

Report on 'Le Autre Futur' Summit, Paris

Lucien van der Walt

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2000

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Contents

<i>Context:</i>	5
<i>The conference:</i>	7
<i>Activities:</i>	8
<i>Issues discussed at the conference:</i>	10
<i>May Day 2000: our resistance must be as global as capitalism:</i>	12
<i>Closing: Reflecting on May Day Y2K:</i>	13

We can challenge the 21st century!
We can challenge global capitalism!
Thank you!

- In Malawi, police attacked a demonstration on May 15 against the impact of IMF and World Bank policies. Placards had slogans such as “SAPs [Structural Adjustment Policies] kill the poor man”;
- In early May, workers in Nigeria secured passage of a massive increase in the minimum wage stipulated by law (the level of minimum wages had not changed since 1981);
- In Ivory Coast, teachers ended a week-long strike for higher wages on Monday in victory;
- 100, 000 workers went on strike in Algeria on 21 May against plans to privatise state industries. The unions want to save jobs by improving the efficiency of the public sector enterprises rather than selling them on the market;
- The Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions and its party, the reformist and contested Movement for Democratic Change, is under fierce attack from the incumbent ZANU-PF government in the run up to elections;

And here, South Africa? COSATU is being pushed back, but it is not defeated: the march of 60,000 workers in the Gauteng regional action against job loss in mid-April and the turnout of 4 million people in support of the general strike of May 10 showed the power of the SA working class — and of the unions — remains.

And September 26 is set to be the next international day of action (‘S26’) against capitalism, protesting the IMF / WB meeting in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

So, it seems, we can close with the inspiration of events like the Paris conference, which is echoed in a May Day manifesto by anarchists in Ankara, Turkey:

In 2000, I was able to attend an exciting international summit — anarchist and syndicalist — in Paris, France. I had been at an academic conference in the Netherlands (“Revolutionary Syndicalism and African workers in South Africa: a preliminary account of the Industrial Workers of Africa, 1917–1921”, at the ESSHC) and working in the archives of the amazing International Institute of Social History. So, I planned the trip so I could return via France to South Africa. The event in Paris was the April / May 2000 “Le Autre Futur” summit hosted by the National anarcho-syndicalist Confederation of Labour-France (“Paris”/ “Vignoles”, hereafter CNT-F). This brought together a number of formations, internationally, mainly the bigger revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalist unions, like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) from the United States, the anarcho-syndicalist Unicobas from Italy, and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) of Spain etc.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were the years of a growing “anti-globalisation” movement, and I presented a report on the Paris event as part of a panel at the then-Workers Library and Museum in Johannesburg. Around this time, I had also helped arrange a display of images around the world on May Day 2000, at the Workers Library.

Anyway, here the talk is:

Context:

The last two years have seen the rapid of an international, and internationalist, anti-capitalist movement. This has been developed at two main levels:

FIRST: International days of action against highly visible symbols of globalisation and capitalism. These have become

increasingly radical and openly anti-capitalist. The three biggest Global days Against Capitalism have been

- November 30, 1999: mass protests against the WTO meeting in Seattle USA, leading to major riots, 500 arrests, a ban on protests in the entire city for a week by the police. This was matched by solidarity protests across the world, in countries ranging from India to Czechoslovakia;
- April 16/17, Washington, D.C.: protests against the IMF/ World Bank Summits: did not repeat violent clashes on same scale as the Seattle events, but provided a very important point of solidarity for groups from across the world; also for a regroupment and mobilisation of revolutionary forces- for example, there was a contingent called the Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Bloc of more than a 1000 people;
- May Day 2000 – but more about this later...

SECOND: The formation of international networks against various aspects of international capitalism. These have taken a variety of forms, ranging from trade union networks – such as the recent SIGTUR [Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights] congress, bringing together trade unionists from South Africa, East Asia and Australia, held last year in SA – to campaigns against the enormous foreign debts owed by poorer countries – for example, Jubilee 2000 – to international struggles against privatisation.

The conference I want to talk about was organised around the theme “For Another Future through Social Resistance” (24 April – 1 May). It combined both of these features:

- It aimed at networking radical independent – anarcho-syndicalist, revolutionary syndicalist especially – union movements from across the world;

- 15, 000 marched in Maputo, Mozambique, organised by the Confederation of Free and Independent Trade Unions, raising demands for job security (8000 have lost their jobs in the public sector in 1999), a minimum wage, and labour courts;
- 30, 000 marched in Luanda, Angola, demanding the end of the civil war and better salaries;
- In Kenya, official government sponsored Labour Day celebrations in Nairobi ended in disarray as workers walked out *en masse* from Uhuru Park in protest against the Labour Minister’s announcement of a six percent wage increase – an amount the workers considered unacceptable. The unions had expected an 11 percent increase.

The struggles represented by May Day are not the end of the story, or even the whole story. Everywhere the class struggle is picking up, and needs to be consolidated, as the Paris congress affirmed, in combative and class-conscious mass movements that can place ordinary people – not parties, not politicians, not the far right whether religious or secular – in control of the basic means of life and decision-making:

- In Brazil, the Landless Workers Movement has organised 30, 000 workers to invade land and government buildings in 22 of the country’s 26 provinces;
- An estimated 20 million Indian workers struck on the 11 May against the Hindu nationalist government’s march towards neo-liberalism- closed the finance sector, the coalmines, industry, sections of air and rail, and even sections of agriculture. Workers were also protesting against hikes in kerosene and cooking gas prices as government subsidies to these goods are cut;

- In Helsinki, Finland, there was a march titled “For Humanity, Against Capitalism” demanding work and income, freedom of movement and international solidarity, and resistance to genetic engineering;
- 15, 000 workers demonstrated in Istanbul in Turkey;
- 15, 000 demonstrated in Moscow;
- Several hundred thousand gathered in Sao Paulo in Brazil to protest against low wages and high unemployment;
- 20, 000 workers and students marched in Ecuador’s capital, Quito, protesting government plans to phase out the local currency in favour of the US dollar;
- In London, Britain, anarchist anti-capitalist protestors clashed with police and damaged property;
- In Belgrade, ex-Yugoslavia, more than 10,000 marched;
- In Krakow, Poland, several people, including two policemen, were hurt and 14 anarchists detained in clashes with police. The clashes began when police tried to stop a protest march on a local jail where a militant has been jailed for defending himself against a vigilante attack. Clashes between right-wingers and leftists broke out in the cities of Warsaw and Gdansk;
- In Berlin, a march against capitalism and imperialism erupted into violence, with more than 100 police injured in clashes with a 10, 000 strong crowd of leftists and anarchists. There were 36 arrests, and police used water cannons, tear gas and batons against the crowd. Running battles also broke out between anarchists and Nazis;
- Across Japan, an estimated 1,7 million workers joined May-day meetings;

- It aimed at mobilising up a large presence for May Day 2000, “May Day Y2K,” which was to be a major focus of opposition to capitalism and neo-liberalism.

The conference:

The conference centred on a week of action, discussion, planning, and education, from 25 April to 1 May 2000.

According to the call for the conference,

“At the beginning of the new millennium, capitalism imposed its economic model on the whole planet by absorbing the third world and the so-called communist bloc. This total domination is associated with a tremendous increase in inequalities, with fortunes made on the one side ... and, on the other side, shameless exploitation and impoverishment ...

But the hope of the powerful that this was a definitive victory, the so-called ‘end of history’, is contradicted by rising criticism and social struggle ...

Its time to build another future. A future without exploitation, without domination, an emancipated future for free and equal men and women.”

The conference was hosted by the CNT, the National Confederation of Labour, a radical independent trade union federation in France that aims at the replacement of capitalism with workers self-management of the economy through the trade unions. It is a revolutionary, or anarcho-syndicalist, union movement. It is based especially in areas such as rail, education, and construction.

Activities:

The conference included an enormous amount of activities, including

- A radical movie festival, held in cinemas in Paris: more than 300 hours of projection, with more than 100 films (both fiction and documentary);
- Workers theatre in 12 different theatres around the city;
- Music festivals in concert halls and dozens of alternative or associative bars;
- Daily debates in union halls on issues such as gay rights, radical unionism;
- Sessions on the history of the revolutionary workers' movement;
- Planning meetings for further international coordination of resistance;
- An international public gathering on the 30 April, attended by union representatives from nearly 15 countries who aligned themselves with the aims of the conference organisers;
- A big May Day show of strength at the rallies on the day in Paris

There were unions and organisations present from:

- Sweden – the Central Organisation of Swedish Workers, or SAC;
- France – the CNT;

present in the National Confederation of Labour-led contingent was a group from the Landless Workers Movement / MST in Brazil. “Guests of honour” included a brass band from National Union of Mineworkers in Britain, and a Brazilian rumba band! Also present were many people from France’s minority communities. The CNT is clearly writing a wave of confidence and strength.

Closing: Reflecting on May Day Y2K:

In closing, it is important to reflect on May Day 2000 as an important stage in the development of an international working class movement against capitalist globalisation. In a number of countries, May Day 2000 was used as a focus of anti-capitalist action, education, and struggle. That said, there were a very wide of perspectives framing these actions, reflecting the turmoil in labour: the old is not yet dead, like the big social democratic formations, and the new (or revived) like the anarcho-syndicalists, have a way to go to win back a mass base.

Some of the big events of May Day 2000, which did not appear in the local capitalist media, despite the fact that tens of millions of workers participated and include:

- In Rome, the COBAS unions and the Italian Syndicalist Union and other groups, including the reformed Communist party and antiracist groups, attracted 60, 000 people to their May day rally (however, the three largest mainstream unions cancelled their May Day celebrations so as not to interfere with the Jubilee celebrations of the Catholic Church);
- In Bangladesh the National Garment Workers Federation and the Domestic Workers Association held a rally in defence of workers rights;

union rights and to fight and oppose any attack on workers conditions

- *The revolutionary unions:* this obviously raises the issue of how such struggles should be waged. From the anarcho-syndicalist perspective, a reconfigured trade union movement is the key to the struggle for another future. It would be fair to say that the majority of the unions present, many founded over the last 15 years, were radical and revolutionary. Representing several hundred thousand workers at the conference, they placed no faith in political parties to bail workers out, no faith in elections to solve the problems facing the working class. Instead, their emphasis was on using mass action, rather than voting action; to building solidarity and struggle rather than election campaigns; these unions did not, in general, faith in political parties to solve workers' problems. Instead of seeing local governments as the friends of the workers, these unions saw them quite clearly as protectors of the wealthy, as part of the problem, not the solution. The understanding was that the revolutionary trade union movement was the structure that could centralise and organise workers struggles against the capitalist system, independent of political parties, whether styled as vanguards or not.

May Day 2000: our resistance must be as global as capitalism:

The conference ended with a large rally on May Day 2000 that brought together a contingent of 6,000 people under the banners of the French CNT revolutionary trade union. This contingent was the second biggest union presence at the May Day march in Paris, which had about 20,000 people in total. Also

- Siberia – the Siberian Revolutionary Confederation of Labour;
- Italy – there were two groups: the Italian Syndicalist Union and the United Committees of the Base, or UNI-COBAS;
- Spain – the General Confederation of Labour, or CGT;
- Morocco – the Democratic Confederation of Labour;
- Ireland- the Workers Solidarity Movement;
- Ukraine – the Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-syndicalists, or RKAS;
- The United States – the Industrial Workers of the World, the “wobblies”;
- Germany – the Free Workers Union;
- Belgium – the Independent Workers Confederation;
- Britain – the Hull Syndicalists.

Several other unions that identified with the congress but had difficulties attending included:

- The Landless Workers Movement – or MST – in Brazil - its arrival was delayed by the large-scale protests against the 500 years anniversary of the Brazilian state. However, the MST did arrive by May Day and marched with the CNT congress' contingent on May Day;
- The National Garment Workers Federation, Bangladesh, who government refused to issue visas to attend;
- Sections in the Korean Congress of Trade Unions;

- Burkina Faso in West Africa, whose main labour federation also supported the congress but could not succeed in making necessary arrangements to attend.

Also present were comrades from:

- Venezuela;
- Tunisia.

Greetings were also sent by a range of organisations and individuals, including Ken Loach, director of labour films such as *Land and Freedom* and *Brassed Off*.

[All of these unions listed in the first part are anarcho-syndicalist, or revolutionary syndicalist; the MST, NGWF, Burkina Faso are linking with the anarcho-syndicalist front but are not specifically anarcho-syndicalist ; the comrades from Venezuela and Tunisia are anarcho-syndicalist.]

Issues discussed at the conference:

These covered a range of areas, but included

- *Women's rights;*
- *Struggles against dictatorship and religious fundamentalism:* the Moroccan comrades, for example, discussed their struggle for free union activity and against the repression by the government and church sectors; the Swedish comrades discussed the recent struggle surrounding the assassination of one of their activists, Bjorn Soderberg, who was shot in the head by fascists linked to the far-right Aryan Brotherhood. The ensuing demonstrations were the largest against the far right since 1945.

- *International workers solidarity:* A key issue was struggle against the imperialist war against the former Yugoslavia in early 1999, which devastated the country more than the German invasion in World War Two. Two actions this war stand out, these being a general strike in Italy against the war initiated by the COBAS unions; and worker-to-worker aid, in the form of food convoys driven by workers to fellow workers in the bombed countries, such as those organised by the Central Workers Organisation/ SAC, Sweden. A second important dimension has been the struggle against racism and for the rights of immigrants in Europe: both the Swedish Central Workers Organisation and the French CNT has a large membership amongst these minorities. For example, in April, the Swedes organised a strike by taxi drivers in Stockholm, most of whom are immigrants from places such as Somalia.
- *Fighting globalisation and capitalism:* The key issues facing workers in countries across the world are actually quite similar, and we may summarise them as the neo-liberal agenda which includes: 1. casualisation and subcontracting of jobs; 2. large scale retrenchments; 3. privatisation; and 4. cuts in social welfare services. The understanding put forward was that the so-called issue of globalisation, of neo-liberalism, could not be divorced from the capitalist system. The struggle was not to fix the IMF and World Bank, but to destroy them, not to boost local industry in the face of global competition, but to globalise the struggles of the working class world wide, building international unity to fight capitalism worldwide. That is, the perspective was not to “buy French” but to fight to defend workers everywhere, to fight for an international living wage and international