

Crisis and social movements, notes for discussion

Friday 12 February 2010, by [EGIREUN Josu](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2009).

I - On October 15th 2008, when the crisis had reached its most critical point, a series of meetings were held by the Asia-Europe People's Forum in Beijing. They were hosted by the Transnational Institute and Focus on the Global South. These meetings ended with the "Beijing Declaration" (which is a document that includes proposed measures on the financial sector, tax reform, public spending and investment, international trade and finance, environment, agriculture and industry). The objective was to move forward on "proposals for discussion, development and action". [1]

The initial idea was that the crisis provided an unequalled opportunity to attract people through concrete action to support ideas that we had been developing for many years and whose objectives were anchored in the WSF Charter of principles: "interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism".

After one year, and a lot of mobilisation in France, Italy, Greece...the different initiatives that had been set up - including the "Cross-Network Space on the Global Crises" and the successive declarations - showed themselves to be incapable in this crisis of organising mobilisation against employers' or governmental policies, as well as the political and strategic weakness of the movement.

II - The origins of this weakness is the fact that the central objective was to get the system to "work properly" again, rather than to formulate alternative. The most highly developed logic of this position can be found in Peter Whal's text *With realistic radicalism: Which approach to the upcoming era of reforms* [Con radicalismo realista : cuál es el enfoque para la próxima era de reformas]. He is one of the key people involved in the "Cross Network Space on the Global Crises". [2]

According to Peter Whal, what has happened does not mean the end of capitalism as such, but rather of a certain kind of capitalism. He concludes by stating that the central line of movements at present should involve "seizing the opportunity to influence the fundamental reform process in order to achieve a New Deal". This is the sum total of a "radical realism". It is difficult to see how these two concepts can fit together, and they lead to policies that are neither realistic nor radical in nature.

This is because firstly, the neoliberal policies are not genuinely undermined by the elite, and because we are not on the road to a New Deal (there are margins for manoeuvre in the system are very limited; the determining factor is the balance of power and not the crisis) and secondly because the "radical" proposals are limited to financial regulation; nevertheless, finance is indeed the mirror in which the systemic crisis is reflected.

The radical nature of this type of proposal does not even come close to one of the elementary conclusions of F. Houtard as formulated in the Commission for the reform of the monetary and financial system in the General Assembly of the United Nations: production should be geared to the values of use and not to values of exchange.

And as they are anchored in the capitalist system, they stop at the line of private property (which is sacrosanct and untouchable) and the social control of production and finance. "Radical realism" is therefore confined to "cleansing" measures introduced by the system and for the system. [3]

This "radicalism" is indeed far from the radicalism of the altermondialist movement that is based on a break with the logic of the market economy, the appropriation of the private sector and encouraging mobilisation around social transformation. Nor does this radicalism provide a reply to the three fundamental questions posed by the crisis:

- What decisions need to be taken (as far as the crisis, production, distribution, consumption, social crisis, energy, environment are concerned)?
- Who is taking the decisions? (What powers have citizens, workers, peasants and indigenous communities...)? and
- Where are the decisions being taken? (In institutions with no democratic control, such as the WTO, IMF or G-20... or by using mechanisms of participatory direct democracy?)

III - Apart from this reality, there is also the reality of the mobilisations that we have seen in recent months: the first general strikes in Greece, France and Italy..and of the struggle against the closure of companies and laying off of employees. These have been difficult, radical struggles, with factories occupied, employers sequestered... There have also been some that have been long, that died out, isolated, disorganised due to union strategies aimed more at achieving political consensus, social dialogue with employers and the government, rather than at confronting the crisis.

With the faith of those converted to economic competitiveness as the means of overcoming the crisis, thus singing from the same song-sheet as the employers and successive governments, the trade union movement (ICU and ECU) are still following a path that has only succeeded in weakening the balance of power of the worker's and trade union movement's confrontation with capitalism over the last thirty years, that of social dialogue.

This policy has produced almost no results, and in the current crisis it has shown its inability to link a co-ordinated response to the process of job conversion proposed by employers (with factory closures and/or laying off of personnel) in the multinationals (the automobile and steel sectors etc...) or in encouraging mobilisation to fight the steep increase in unemployment and the organised destruction of social services by the governmental policies that have been introduced.

The Via Campesina is one of the movements that stand out by their ideas and their strategy to fight the crisis. They have correctly analysed the systemic root causes of the crisis - not only from an economic standpoint, but also in terms of the environment and food dimensions) and they are working to build alliances everywhere throughout the world. Sadly, they are often alone to follow this road.

IV - The crisis, over and above the recovery of financial markets or the increase in GDP, will remain, and its social impacts will become increasingly acute as time goes on. And one year after its appearance, the balance of power with employers and governments has not improved.

In this context, the Social Fora - that should be useful in helping to co-ordinate the response and organisation of movements - as was the case in protesting against the war in Iraq) appear to be paralysed. The energy that is needed to reach a broad consensus is often detrimental to the development of significant mobilisation; this leads to precarious commitments that have no real impact in terms of mobilisation. The low level of mobilisation on March 28th 2009, in spite of the

radical attitudes expressed during the WSF in Belém, proves the point.

What is most worrying is the low level of participation in the major events, such as the 12th of December in Copenhagen, by many collectives that are involved in the Social Fora. This all raises some questions:

1. Firstly, as to the usefulness of broad consensus and precarious commitments to mobilisation when it takes on a vital importance in responding to the crisis, and
2. The need to create a new dynamic in the Fora - and elsewhere - for the Assembly of Social Movements whose aim is to "jointly organise efficient actions" to fight the crisis.

V - Mobilisations such as that of 12th December in Copenhagen demonstrate the ability to mobilise. There is also an on-going struggle against the aggression of employers and governments. The problem is that these struggles have little connection with the policies of the trade union Confederations or the NGOs that monopolise the Fora, and they are also very distant from initiatives such as the "Cross Network Space on the Global Crises".

The question is not to renounce on the possibilities provided by these spaces for discussion and political exchange. But achieving "another world" certainly does mean holding in-depth discussion between those who consider that the alternative is that of "influencing" the face of "new capitalism" and those who favour a break with capitalism. But more than anything else, it means becoming aware that dealing with the crisis involves more than discussion, dialogue and political or ideological confrontation of ideas.

More than anything we need a space for jointly co-ordinating actions and struggles:

- Mobilisations that will genuinely undermine the logic of capitalism: is it really possible to save jobs while respecting private property? And to protect social gains while saving the profits of the banking sector, shareholders and multinationals? And to stop the destruction of agricultural economies and save 20% of the world's population from hunger while protecting the profits of agribusinesses?..

- Mobilisations that will take place not only against the Summit meetings such as Copenhagen, but that will be in solidarity with struggles against the attacks of employers and governments. Initiatives that will overcome the isolation of struggle in companies and the public sector and help them to converge.

How can we succeed in doing this? That is the really urgent question we now need to discuss.

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P.S.

* From the Social Movements' International Newsletter n° 1, January 2010. English translation by Judith Hitchman, France, 18-01-2010.

Footnotes

[1] See [The global economic crisis: An historic opportunity for transformation](#)

[2] See [With Realistic Radicalism: Which approach to the upcoming era of reforms?](#)

[3] See [Intervention at the panel on the Financial Crisis](#)