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South Africa

Another Left Is Possible

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One hundred and twenty delegates gathered at Wits University from 14 to 17 December 2023 to launch Zabalaza for Socialism (ZASO, Zabalaza means Struggle), an eco-socialist, feminist and anti-racist organization. Activists who had regrouped in Dialogues for an Anti-Capitalist Future — after the political degeneration of the “NUMSA Moment” (an opportunity for broad left regroupment following the expulsion of NUMSA [the leftwing National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa] from COSATU [the Congress of South African Trade Union], and NUMSA’s decision to explore the building of a movement for socialism with other left forces) — took the bold step to launch a revolutionary organization. The majority of delegates came from various trade unions and social movements ensuring ZASO has a strong base in the popular movement. ZASO was strengthened by the involvement of a number of scholar activists with a long history in left politics. The founding statement of ZASO is [here](#).

The launch of ZASO takes place at a very difficult moment for the fragmented left in South Africa. On the eve of celebrating 30 years of democracy, the country is falling apart under the impact of austerity, privatization and other neoliberal policies as well as systemic corruption. On 29 May National and Provincial elections are due to take place with no credible left-wing party on the ballot. - *Brian Ashley*

Gilbert Achcar was invited to give the keynote speech to the conference, we publish his contribution below.

Climate change, wars, genocides, economic turbulence: the world in which we presently live is worrying and the future looks quite bleak indeed, far from the hopes that existed at the turn of the century. This sorry state of the world is in large part the result of decisions made in the last decade of the past century. It is indeed in the 1990s that the present global conditions were determined – during the “unipolar moment” that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the United States was very much aware of its ability to shape the international environment.

During those years, Washington opted for the perpetuation of its global dominance at the cost of world peace. This was to be achieved by maintaining the United States’ permanent readiness for war and renewing the allegiance of its Cold War allies in Europe and East Asia (whom Zbigniew Brzezinski famously called its “vassals”) by stoking again past tensions with Russia and China. Washington treated these two countries as potential enemies although neither of them represented any longer a systemic challenge to global capitalism, which they had both integrated into. This fundamental policy adopted by Washington in the 1990s led to what I have described since then as the New Cold War.

The economic corollary of this policy was unbridled neoliberalism, including the toughening of the neoliberal diktats of international financial institutions, the culmination of the imperialism of free trade with the foundation of the World Trade Organization, and the “shock therapy” fostered by Washington and its allies in post-Soviet Russia. This went along with a benign neglect of the dangers of climate change – not out of ignorance (Al Gore was Bill Clinton’s vice-president during those fateful years) but rather deliberately, by ranking it low among the priorities involved in running the unipolar imperium. U.S. imperial hubris reached its peak with the presidency of George W. Bush and the wars that his administration launched in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Unbridled neoliberalism produced the most important crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression of the interwar years of the twentieth century. The Great Recession of the late 2000s led to massive state intervention using

public funds to bail out the banking system. Unlike what many believed then, this crisis did not usher in the end of neoliberalism; on the contrary, it led to a renewed neoliberal onslaught. The same is true of the next gigantic economic crisis, the 2020 Great Lockdown provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic. That is because paradigm shifts in applied economics are not manifestations of an intellectual process but primarily the reflection of shifts in the balance of social forces.

This balance has remained until now largely in favour of global capitalism at the expense of global labour. It was worsened by the two successive economic crises, along with the rise of unemployment and/or the expansion of working poverty, both of which further weakened working class resistance and unionization. France, “the land where, more than anywhere else, historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision” (Friedrich Engels, 1885), recently illustrated this adverse shift in the balance of social forces. The pensions reform, which has been a key objective pursued by French capitalism for a few decades, was defeated in 1995 by the most important surge in class struggle that France has seen since 1968. The reform was finally enforced in 2023 in spite of stubborn resistance by the French labour movement.

The social consequences of the economic crisis of the late 2000s fed a sociopolitical radicalization in two opposite directions. It catalysed, on the one hand, a rise of progressive resistance struggles during the following decade. The global wave of revolts spectacularly inaugurated by the Arab Spring in 2011 was followed by subsequent mobilizations in countries such as Spain, Greece and even the United States itself. A second global wave of revolts in 2019 included a Second Arab Spring and struggle upsurges from East Asia to Latin America before getting eventually choked off by Covid-19. This progressive radicalization found a political translation in the rise of mass-based anti-neoliberal currents in various countries, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain and, most unexpectedly, Jeremy Corbyn’s accession to the leadership of the British Labour Party in 2015-2020 and Bernie Sander’s amazing presidential campaign in 2016, as well as the electoral surge in France of the movement led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon in 2017-2022 and a new wave of progressive governmental changes in Latin America – in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Brazil.

This progressive wave was, however, counterbalanced by a trend of reactionary radicalization whose initial rise was observed since the onset of the neoliberal onslaught. While the political “centre” has kept shifting rightward ever since, the far right surged globally with the onset of neofascistic governments in several countries, including major powers such as India under Narendra Modi, Russia under Vladimir Putin, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and in the United States itself under Donald Trump. These developments confirmed what Samuel Huntington had identified as a “reverse wave” in the global process of political democratization. The reversal included the increasingly authoritarian course on which China set under Xi Jinping, who became the country’s “paramount leader” in 2012.

The overall global balance has clearly tilted in favour of the reactionary radicalization. This is not a product of objective conditions alone, but also, and very much so, a product of the left’s own shortcomings and failure. Indeed, the new left-wing surge of recent years has reproduced many of the problems that marred the twentieth century’s left. These problems include well-known flaws such as electoralism along with self-limitation when in government or when it becomes within reach, bureaucratism, caudillismo and machismo, and neo-campism, which – unlike the old campism that consisted in a systematic alignment behind the so-called “socialist camp” – consists in knee-jerk support for, or lack of critique of, whoever is antagonized by Washington and its Western allies, in conformity with the dictum according to which “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”.

The leftwing radicalization has thus been marred by serious limitations. Fundamentally, the left has not managed to reinvent itself, with few exceptions consisting in new forms of struggle invented by mass movements springing into action among the new generation, such as Black Lives Matter in the United States and the Resistance Committees in Sudan. On the other hand, most of the far right did reinvent itself in the guise of neofascism: it learned the lessons of the failure of twentieth-century fascism and adapted to what it takes to be accepted by the present-day capitalist order and approved by big business. For that purpose, it has ardently espoused neoliberalism and proclaimed its

adherence to procedural democracy while gradually emptying it of content once in power by way of authoritarian curtailment of political freedoms and suppression of basic conditions of political competition. This reinvented far right has been rising globally at the expense of both the neoliberal mainstream and the left, building up on the social resentment created by neoliberalism and channelling it above all into scapegoating migrants.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, launched by a Putin regime that has been ever more drifting to the far right, provided a major boost to the Western imperialist alliance under U.S. hegemony. It renewed the original rationale for this alliance, portrayed as one of "democracies" against authoritarianism, with the hypocrisy and multiple standards that were already familiar during the Cold War. It also allowed a major expansion of NATO to happen with the adherence of Finland and Sweden to the alliance, and it triggered a massive increase of military expenditure globally to the great benefit of arms producers.

Whereas Biden thus managed to reverse the deleterious effect of the Trump presidency on transatlantic relations, he basically continued his predecessor's foreign policy in two major respects: Firstly, Biden continued Trump's provocative stance on China, with the difference that he tried to disguise the mercantilist animus of U.S. imperialism against the rise of China's economic power by pretending here again to uphold "democracy" against China's autocratic drift under Xi. Secondly, Biden carried forward Trump's blatantly pro-Israel stance despite the lack of affinities between his administration and Israel's far-right's government. He thus focused on expanding the "normalization" of relations between Gulf oil monarchies and Israel by deploying intensive efforts to get the Saudi kingdom to join the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in establishing an open relationship with the Zionist state. On the other hand, the Biden administration did not revert any of Trump's pro-Israel moves, nor did it try to hold back the Israeli far right from further expanding its settler-colonial encroachment on the Palestinian West Bank.

This policy laid the ground for the Biden administration's uninhibited endorsement of the genocidal war waged by Israel in Gaza since 7 October 2023, a war that has become indeed the first U.S.-Israeli joint war. By supporting the stated goal of "eradicating Hamas", a mass organization that has been ruling the Gaza Strip since 2007, the Biden administration and most of its Western allies have de facto greenlighted the ongoing crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Israeli armed forces: the massacre of a huge number of civilians, including a very high proportion of children, the displacement of the vast majority of the population in what amounts to a massive instance of "ethnic cleansing", the destruction of the vast majority of dwellings so as to make it impossible for the population to return to the areas it was displaced from.

This first open condonation by Western governments of an openly genocidal war waged by a far-right government since the Second World War has hugely discredited Western liberalism and exposed its racist worldview. It has allowed a qualitative shift in the banalization of the European far right, not least through a joint condemnation of a purported "new antisemitism" that has become a thin veil for the joint Islamophobic manifestation of traditional antisemites and neocolonial white supremacists. As a matter of fact, the Western governments' reaction to the Israeli onslaught on Gaza has given a major impetus to the global rightward drift.

At the same time, the growing worldwide indignation towards the genocidal massacre of Palestinians, including growing protest within the United States itself, is a further indication of the persistence of a significant potential, especially among the youth, in support of progressive causes, such as opposition to imperialist and colonial wars, to racism in all its forms, to gender oppression, to the continuous neoliberal dismantlement of all social gains achieved in the previous century, to capitalism itself, which is increasingly deprived by neoliberalism of the elements of social justice that softened it for a few decades, and, last but not least, to the ever more criminal benign neglect of governments in the face of climate change and its dreadful consequences.

Capturing this potential and channelling it into organized forms that could tremendously enhance its effectiveness and confer a new credibility and hopefulness on the fight to change the world require a reinvention of socialist

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anticapitalism, fully absorbing the lessons of the defeats of the twentieth century's Left and liquidating the unsettled accounts of its huge historical bankruptcy. In sum, in order to be able to convince at large that "another world is possible" – the central slogan of the global justice movement since the turn of the century – it is imperative to first show in deeds, and not only in words, that another Left is possible. It is therefore highly urgent for the Left to reinvent itself.

13 December 2023

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