

L i b e r a t i o n

JOURNAL OF LIBERATION, FORMERLY THE MOVEMENT FOR COLONIAL FREEDOM



UN World Refugee Week—2017!

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Peace, Displacement and Mobilisation in Columbia

Refugee Conference in Macedonia—A Report

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Formerly, the Movement for Colonial Freedom, Liberation was founded in 1954 as the Movement for Colonial Freedom. Today, Liberation campaigns for Peace, Economic Justice, Equality and Human Rights.

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UN World Refugee Week - 2017

Ilayda Nijhar

This year Refugee Week took place 19th- 25th June, World Refugee Day fell on June 20th. The purpose of Refugee Week is: to promote and develop awareness within different communities of the struggles refugees currently face, to advocate an all-embracing society while also encouraging a more open and positive attitude towards refugees to decrease the antipathy they experience. The importance and necessity of Refugee Week is essential at a time where refugees and migrants alike face some of today's hardest challenges, including war, conflict, political strife, religious persecution and environmental destruction.

According to UNHCR Refugee Agency figures, 33,972 people are forced to flee their homes daily due to the risk of persecution or conflict. This large cohort includes child refugees, many of whom are forced to flee without the accompaniment of their parents or any other relative. The safety of these children has remained an issue throughout many European states with measures put in place to ensure their security. Yet not enough has been done to protect these children and the Refugee Crisis looms large. The troubled situation has only worsened since 2015 with thousands of refugees dying due to the harsh and inhumane conditions through which they are forced to flee their homes. There is no doubt that European nations have collectively failed to reach a comprehensive and resolute agreement to address these concerns.

Under pressure, the UK Government attempted to address the issue of 90,000 unaccompanied child refugees through the Dubs Amendment Scheme but failed to go beyond rhetoric and is facing legal action. Although some may argue that the European states have helped the situation, Turkey, albeit a non-European state, has been on the front line of the unfolding refugee crisis with an unprecedented number taking refuge within its borders.

With over three million refugees currently in Turkey, President Erdogan has been outspoken about the feeble efforts made by the European Union (EU) address the unfolding crisis. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Erdogan has continuously clashed over the EU refugee policies and demanded more dedicated commitment to the EU refugee action plan. The necessity of Refugee Week is more vital because it raises the alarming consequences of failing to recognise the importance of the crisis.

With all the tragic difficulties which go hand-in-hand with the refugee crisis, perhaps the most alarming of all is how it impacts the psychology of the refugees. Suicide has become an increasing cause for concern among the refugees, trapped in particular detention centres across Eastern Europe. The levels of suicide and physical self-harm continue to increase at an alarming rate due to the slow pace of EU settlement agreements and legal procedures.

The reality remains that if we do not act swiftly, these tragic occurrences will increase with much of the blame shouldered by the wider political community. It is simply not enough for Governments to state they are saddened by each incident yet fail to

develop more inclusive immigration policies. The very fact that we leave forlorn orphaned children in the hands of smugglers and human traffickers who use their vulnerability to their advantage only further stresses the importance of raising awareness of this critical situation.

Yet only recently we have become aware of movements to prevent the safe passage of these refugees. Far-right groups across Europe have come together to hinder rescue boats for refugees in the Mediterranean. This anti-humanitarian campaign has successfully raised £56,489 within three weeks which has funded death boats to block the sea passage of large numbers of refugees. These latest developments are nothing short of murder; cruelly taking away the chance of a new life from those who wish to escape from death and torture. We are better than this. Let us not let the hatred of a few snatch away the lives of innocent people who merely seek to start a secure and safer life. Let us celebrate and embrace Refugee Week and make World Refugee Day one of hope and promise for all those who face some of the harshest challenges of our modern globalised world.

Ilayda Nijhar is currently going into her third year as a Russian and Politics student at Queen Mary, University of London. She regularly writes about Russian affairs both international and domestic alongside current global affairs with a focus on Human Rights and racial injustices.

Trump redirects his scope: Tehran in the cross-hairs!

Jane Green

Since the visit of US President Donald Trump to Saudi Arabia, the policy of the United States towards Iran has started to become clearer. Jane Green, of the Committee for the Defence of the Iranian People's Rights (CODIR), assesses the implications for the Iranian people, the dynamics of Middle East politics and the wider threat to world peace.

On 21st May Donald Trump delivered what was billed as a "speech to the Muslim world" from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on his first international trip as President. It is significant that Trump should choose the Saudi dictatorship as his first port of call when going overseas. It is more significant that, in a speech that pitched the fight against terrorism as a struggle between good and evil, Trump should play to the Saudi gallery and cast Iran as the regional bad guy.

Trump opened his tirade against Iran with the following assessment: "Starving terrorists of their territory, their funding, and the false allure of their craven ideology, will be the basis for defeating them."

But no discussion of stamping out this threat would be complete without mentioning the government that gives terrorists all three - safe harbour, financial backing, and the social standing needed for recruitment. It is a regime that is responsible for so much instability in the region. I am speaking of course of Iran."

Trump went on to condemn Iran's role in supporting President Assad in Syria, though no mention of the illegal NATO intervention in that country was made. Nor did the role of the Saudi dictatorship in fuelling ISIS get any airtime from Trump.

Instead Trump pressed on to play the populist card, appealing to the needs of the Iranian people, stating: "The Iranian regime's longest-suffering victims are its own people. Iran has a rich history and culture, but the people of Iran have endured hardship and despair under their leaders' reckless pursuit of conflict and terror."

Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve."

The sudden conversion of the United States to be the defender of the Iranian people is one which will come as a surprise to solidarity organisations and human rights activists across the world. CODIR, along with others, have been fighting a long battle to persuade Western leaders to condemn the human rights record of the Islamic Republic and to allow free and independent trade union and political activity.

Trump however is clearly shedding crocodile tears over the fate of the Iranian people. Even the 5+1 nuclear deal, negotiated before Trump came to office, did not place any obligation upon

the Iranian government to clean up its act on human rights. Given that Trump is on record as saying that the deal is too soft on Iran, any change he initiates is unlikely to be in the direction of improving the lot of the ordinary people of Iran.

Only three weeks after Trump's Riyadh speech, under questioning at a House Foreign Affairs Committee, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, threw more fuel on the fire when asked about US policy towards Iran, stating,

"Well our Iranian policy is under development. It's not yet been delivered to the President, but I would tell you that we certainly recognize Iran's continued destabilizing presence in the region, their payment of foreign fighters, their export of militia forces to Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen, their support for Hezbollah. And we are taking action to respond to Iran's hegemony. Additional sanctions actions have been put in place against individuals and others."

More alarmingly Tillerson went on to explicitly call for regime change in Iran, indicating that the US would directly support such action, stating,

"Our policy towards Iran is to push back on this hegemony, contain their ability to develop obviously nuclear weapons, and to work toward support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government. Those elements are there, certainly as we know."

CODIR has been vehement in its opposition to the Iranian government for over thirty years. We have opposed the imprisonment, torture and execution of political activists, women and trade unionists consistently over that period. However, at no time have we ever suggested that the fate of Iran should be in the hands of anyone other than the Iranian people themselves.



Source: SODIR

Tillerson's position potentially puts Iran in the position of becoming another Syria, with the West justifying intervention to support 'democratic forces' in order to destabilise the regime. There is no doubt that the Iranian regime is deeply unpopular. President Hassan Rouhani is clinging to the hope that the 5+1 deal can be salvaged and a less onerous sanctions regime

can help reboot the economy. His recent re-election campaign was largely based around needing another four years to finish what he had started.

In Rouhani's propaganda, this was sold as Iran continuing to open up to the West and getting the crippling economic sanctions lifted. In the eyes of many Iranian people, it simply meant four more years of poverty and lack of democratic rights, hardly a prospect to be welcomed. While there is opposition to the regime in Iran it is doubtful that it is opposition which the United States is likely to support.

It is not implausible to anticipate a scenario in which some manufactured 'Free Iran Army' could become the conduit for Western funding and arms, to attempt to bring down the present regime, while the real opposition inside Iran would find themselves having to fight on two fronts. It may sound far-fetched but the so-called Free Syrian Army could be the template.

Whatever method is finally decided upon, the main objective of US policy is to weaken Iran as a force in the Middle East, effectively bolstering the position of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world and ensuring that the Saudis, along with Israel, remain the eyes and ears of the US in the region.

As NATO led Western interventions in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Syria have shown, US policy to date has been nothing more than a recipe for destabilisation and uncertainty in the region. The political vacuum created by US interventions has been the breeding ground for the development of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS and a range of warring militia.

There is no doubt that the present regime in Iran is implicated in supporting a range of forces including Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilisation Front in Syria and Houthi rebels in Yemen. The proxy battles in the region are being fought between the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the self-styled mainstay of Shi'a Islam, and the dictatorship in Saudi Arabia as the self-styled saviour of Sunni Islam.

Islamic State claimed the terrorist attack in Tehran on 7th June, which killed 12 people. Iran's Revolutionary Guards were quick to lay the blame on Saudi Arabia. Coming so close to the Trump speech in Riyadh it was clearly timed to increase regional tension.

From the point of view of human rights and democracy, it is only possible to take a position of a plague on both the Iranian and Saudi houses. Neither the theocratic dictatorship of Iran, nor the Saudi regime, acts in the interests of their own people or those of the wider region.

The US State Department has recently released a long awaited "retrospective" volume of documents on the 1953 coup in Iran, which led to the overthrow of Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. For decades, neither the US nor the British government would acknowledge its part in Mosaddeq's overthrow. Until now this has been justified on various spurious grounds including protecting intelligence sources and methods, bowing

to British government requests and, more recently, avoiding stirring up Iranian hard-line elements who might seek to undercut the nuclear deal Iran signed with the United States and other P5+1 members in 2015.



Source: CODIR

The current document release confirms what Iranian democrats have known for decades, that the US and British intelligence services have form when it comes to interfering in the internal affairs of Iran. The recent statements of both the US President and the Secretary of State indicate that history may be in danger of repeating itself.

Those fighting for peace, democracy and human rights inside Iran undoubtedly need our support. Through CODIR and other international bodies we will continue to give that support. However, like the Iranian people, we must remain vigilant against outside interference and be prepared to support the real opposition in Iran, not just the opposition of Donald Trump's choice.

Jane Green is National Officer of CODIR (Committee for the defence of the Iranian People).

For further information on CODIR's news and views please visit www.codir.net

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- **Working Class Movement Library**
- **SOAS Library**

TRANSFORMING KENYAN HEALTHCARE

Dan Thea

The Swahili words “afya”, (health); “dawa”, (medicine); “dactari” and “hospitali”, (it’s easy to guess the last two words!), sum up one of the major problems that face the Kenyan people. They point to the challenge of healthcare which confronts the country. What are Kenyans doing about it? Not many of them seem to be crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach the British National HealthService!

Since 2013 the Kenyan healthcare system has been in transformation, with the twin goals of hugely raising the range and quality of the services provided, on the one hand; and decentralising service-delivery from the prevailing provision by the national government, to a mainly decentralised provision by each of the 47 counties created under the 2010 constitution, on the other. This decentralisation of the provision of healthcare service was in common with the government services generally, as provided for in the hugely more democratic constitution.

Contrary to the widely held fear that the national government would seek to hold on to the services due to be transferred, it in fact swiftly transferred them; to the delight of the country and in particular the County Governments. People were eager to have these services provided locally; and by the more easily reachable, and hopefully responsive and accountable, County Governments, each headed by a Governor.

The County Governments were similarly delighted that these services came under their control; complete with the accompanying authority and resources; including the funds, personnel and authority. Consequently, within less than five years, the position of Governor has become the most coveted nationally, next to that of the President.

The national government went a stage further and developed a programme whereby each county was provided with at least two top-level ‘referral’ hospitals; which were duly provided with the necessary modern medical equipment and the requisite personnel. The medical kit included such items as X-rays, dialysis machines, ICUs and ICT scans. In addition specialist hospitals, such as those for cancer, were due for construction, to serve groups of counties. Indeed, India, for example, offered to help build a large specialist cancer/oncology hospital in Nairobi, to serve not only Kenya, but the Eastern Africa region. More recently, to great surprise, President Kenyatta announced that Hungary is to fund a cancer hospital at Nyeri, to serve the counties of the central Mt Kenya region. The two hospitals are only promises so far but they are encouraging.

Of course, these developments did not come about without suspicion, debate and argument; particularly between the two levels of government. One of the most heated debates was about the acquisition of the above mentioned medical equipment. The national government had moved to acquire the equipment; on a lease basis; with the supplier remaining the owner, and responsible for its functioning, maintenance and

replacement as necessary at all times. The idea was to ensure that the equipment would be available and functional at all the times; with financial penalties when it was not.

The County Governments strongly objected to this approach; insisting on the funds being handed over to them; so that each one of them would undertake the acquisition. The heated debate lasted a long time, eventually the national government got its way, and there has hardly been a whimper since.

Besides the county-level hospitals there are the really big, national hospitals, directly controlled by the national government, including the Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi at the centre of the country, and the Moi National Hospital in Eldoret in the west. Additionally, as in many other countries, Kenya has a substantial number of non-state hospitals, including those owned by religious organisations. Some are highly rated. As elsewhere, the Kenyan rich and the establishment choose to patronise these posh hospitals, rather than share the public ones with the masses. Compared with UK’s National Health Service, the equivalent National Hospital Insurance Fund, (NHIF) is rather basic; although it does cover Chemotherapy for cancer, kidney transplants, MRI and outpatient services. In early 2017 the scheme had only 6.5 million “principal” contributors, representing about 24 million of the 48.5 million Kenyans.

In early 2017 Kenya recruited 500 medical officer-level doctors from Tanzania, on three year contracts to work in public hospitals, paid at par with their Kenyan counterparts, on the basis that doctor qualifications in the East African Community are ‘rationalised’. They had not been in employment in Tanzania; this explains why Tanzania accepted the proposal. It is noteworthy too that in fact Kenya has a much better/higher doctor-to-population ratio than Tanzania. In an equal world, it would have been Kenya sending doctors to Tanzania!

Another issue was that the Kenyan doctors’ trade union claimed that there were 1,400 doctors in Kenya out of work! The government refuted this, pointing out that on successfully completing their studies each internee doctor is offered employment in the public health service. Additionally, it was pointed out that 757 internee doctors were due to complete their studies and start work.

Here now comes the most unexpected source of additional doctors. Just as Kenya was at long last installing a resident ambassador in Havana, to match the Cuban one long established in Nairobi, the countries agreed that Cuba would send to Kenya 500 medical specialists. Not ordinary medics but specialists. To treat patients but further, to assist in the further training Kenyan colleagues, as I understand the matter. This should bring the total number of newly available doctors to 3,157!

But... What? Cubans? Communist Cubans! Is the 'regime' pulling our ears? First Kenyatta brings in the (Communist) Chinese, now involved in so much of Kenyan infrastructure development. Now his Jubilee Party is hobnobbing with the Communist Party of China. Announcing that CPC is due to attend JP's re-foundation as "a national mass party" at a conference in September 2017, to be reciprocated by a return 'study' trip by JP to China!

Just a few years after signing a Memorandum of Understanding on development partnership with 'Red' China, to brazenly embrace 'Communist' Cuba! What will Uncle Sam, and the 'West' generally, make of it?

Perhaps it is all quite simple, really. Who today questions that China is a political, an economic and a military superpower; or that in the medical field Cuba is 'up there' with the best? It may be that after drinking all that Kenyan tea; and reading the tea leaves, the Kenyan leadership has seen the light!

Working with China appears to be supporting the Kenyan goal on overall national development; and, logically, one wonders if co-operation with Cuba in the healthcare field would not significantly enhance Kenyan effort to achieve, nay surpass, its "sustainable" national healthcare goals!

In considering national healthcare we should really not limit our thoughts to doctors but also include pharmaceuticals. Cuba is not only a superpower with respect to doctors. Cuba is also, together with India, progressively becoming a major 'player' in pharmaceuticals. Kenya greatly needs both medics and medicine in its on-going development endeavour in healthcare.

The Kenyan healthcare service seems to be riddled with frustrating contradictions though. In May 2017 this was demonstrated by a senior official of the principal national hospital, the Kenyatta National, at a conference, when he is quoted as pointing out that "Kenyans are spending a lot of money airlifting renal patients to India, yet Kenya has some of the best renal specialists." Health data also show that while about 10,000 Kenyans travel abroad for specialist medical treatment, 5,000 foreigners travel to Kenya for similar purposes. I told you!

In response to the above situation the Vision2030 Secretariat has undertaken to establish an online information portal on the available, but under-utilized, state-of-the-art medical equipment and specialists at various hospitals. It is one thing to have the requisite resources, but quite another to make full and proper use of them! In its ambitious healthcare development effort, Kenya may be encouraged by its own recent experience. Only a couple of years ago, the country took up the challenge of meeting the United Nation's recommendation of a country having a set ratio of the number of police officers to the population. It has already beaten this ratio! Why should it not do the same with the ratio of doctors to the population; that of nurses...

In the Kenyan university education field the very top priority is given to medicine; including in admission to the top universities. Indeed the country's top-rated University of Nairobi scooped 102 of the top 144 new university entrants in 2017; with many

of them, including the very top student, choosing to study medicine. This is just a tiny indication that the country could quite quickly attain the World Health Organisation's recommended of doctors to population ratio.

Given the prioritisation of healthcare in the national development agenda, including achieving WHO's and other United Nations sustainable goals, principally with the cooperation of other countries of the 'Global South' such as China, India, and Cuba; why should Kenyans not be optimistic about achieving their set goal of establishing an advanced healthcare system, primarily for themselves; but also aiming to fully establish the country as the 'regional medical tourism destination'?

Dan Thea is a regular contributor to Liberation journal, writing mainly on Africa.

Peace, Displacement and Mobilisation in Colombia

Cherilyn Elston

Despite the historic advances towards peace in Colombia, thousands of people continue to be displaced by violence. On World Refugee Day the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) revealed that between January and May 2017 there were 42 mass displacements in the country, totalling 7,371 people. Worryingly, this figure indicates that the 2017 figures will be higher than those registered for 2016, when 13,864 Colombians were newly displaced from their homes.

Over 7 million people have been displaced in Colombia during its long-running armed conflict. Although the country has the highest number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the world - more than Syria and Iraq - this aspect of the conflict has failed to receive much international attention. The UNHCR have called this "Colombia's invisible crisis". Millions have been forced to flee their land as part of a war strategy adopted by: armed groups, large landowners and drug traffickers to take control of valuable territory and geostrategic corridors. This has been termed by some as a "reverse agrarian reform", concentrating an estimated 20 million hectares of land in the hands of only one percent of the population.

their approximately 7,000 troops to 26 transition zones, where they are laying down arms. 60% of the FARC's weapons are now in the hands of the UN and complete disarmament is expected to be finalised by the end of June. By 1st August the UN will have removed all arms from the transition zones which will become zones to train and reincorporate FARC members into civilian society.

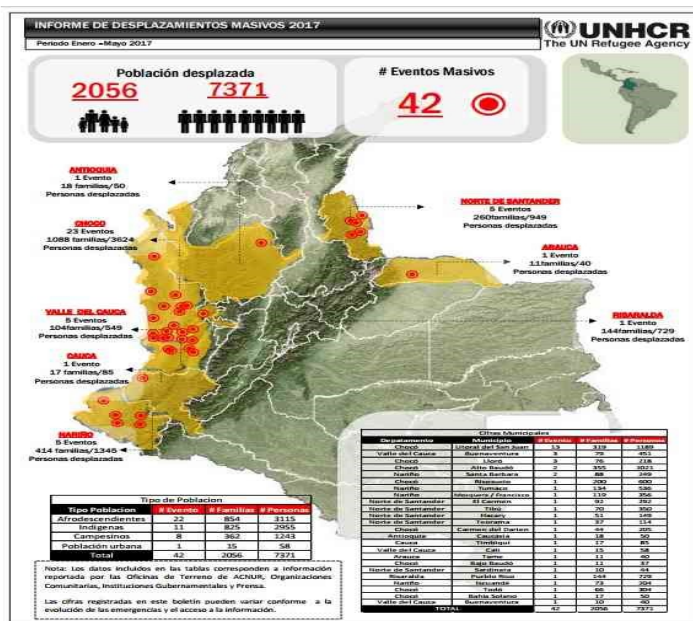
Whilst the disarmament process has suffered logistical delays, reaching full disarmament will be a huge step towards consolidating a lasting and stable peace in the country. Pablo Catatumbo, a member of the FARC secretariat, affirmed that this demonstrated the FARC's commitment to peace: "With this act, the FARC-EP wishes to show Colombia and the rest of the world that we leave war behind to begin writing a new chapter of peace".

Notwithstanding these historic advances, continued displacement is not the only issue challenging the consolidation of peace in Colombia. In May the peace process was thrown into crisis when the Colombian Constitutional Court decided to partially retract its approval of the "fast track". This was a special legislative mechanism that allowed the Colombian Congress to quickly pass the necessary laws to implement the peace deal.

Although the Court had approved the mechanism last December, in a shock decision on 17th May, the judges ruled that fast track was unconstitutional as it allowed Congress to vote on the laws to implement the accords in blocks. Stating that this contravened the separation of powers, the Court ruled that Congress will now have to vote on the laws article by article. This will considerably slow the implementation of the peace deal, which has already suffered major delays, and permit potential amendments to the peace agreements.

Whilst the ruling will not affect laws already passed through the fast track process, such as the amnesty bill, it will have a huge impact on the considerable amount of legislation that still needs to be passed. This includes complex issues relating to rural and electoral reform and security guarantees. The special peace justice system, which has already been passed by Congress, still needs a statutory law to be fully legalised. Even with the fast track Congress has been painfully slow at passing the necessary laws to implement the agreements.

The ruling, which took many by surprise, came as a result of a suit filed by the opposition senator Iván Duque who has been



Source: UNHCR

According to the UNHCR the recent displacement since the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP in December 2016 is due to the territorial struggle amongst armed groups for areas previously controlled by the FARC. At the start of this year the FARC moved

one of the main critics of the peace process alongside his colleagues in the right-wing Democratic Centre party, led by former president Alvaro Uribe. As the implementation of the peace accords has progressed, its right-wing opponents have ramped up their attacks against the process and the FARC. With presidential elections in 2018 and therefore the end of the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos, there are huge questions over who will make up the next government, especially as it is unlikely that the peace accords will be fully implemented by 2018.

For the FARC the minimum that must be achieved before that date includes: complete amnesty, electoral and political reform, the implementation of the special unit to investigate criminal organisations and the rehabilitation of marginalised territories that have been historically abandoned by the state. This last point, with the implementation of the agreement on comprehensive rural reform, will be key to preventing the continued displacement mentioned above. The peace agreement promises to distribute 3 million hectares of land to landless peasant farmers as well as create mechanisms to resolve conflicts over land rights.



Source: Oriol Segon Torra

A further key point to prevent the rise in IDPs and violence against communities is the implementation of security guarantees. The Colombian government has begun to pass laws to create a comprehensive security system. On 16th June an elite squad of the Colombian police, agreed in the final peace deal, was created to tackle the presence of paramilitary groups in the country and FARC members have begun to be trained by the National Protection Unit to become bodyguards. Whilst this is a step forward, there is real fear amongst social and political activists about the continued attacks by paramilitary organisations and the failure of the Colombian state to take effective action against them. At least 30 political activists, trade unionists and social leaders have been assassinated so far this year; in addition four members of the FARC have been killed, some of whom

had just been pardoned under the Amnesty Law. As the FARC begins the process of establishing a political party after disarmament, the systematic rise in killings has created extreme concerns about the possibility of another political genocide in the country. During the 1980s and 1990s 4,000 members of the Patriotic Union, which was created after a previous peace process, were assassinated.

Justice for Colombia, the British trade union campaign on Colombia, has been campaigning on these issues and raising human rights concerns to both the Colombian and British governments. Of particular concern is the safety of the trade union leader Huber Ballesteros, who was released from prison in January 2017 after serving 40 months in jail without being convicted of any crime. Since his release he has received seven death threats from paramilitary groups, including threats against his partner and daughter, warning him to stop his trade union and peace activism. It is crucial that the international community does all it can to call for the protection of social leaders in Colombia, who are crucial to the success of the peace deal.

This is not to say that there has been no good news from Colombia. On 20 June David Ravelo, the prominent human rights defender who had campaigned for years against paramilitary violence, was released from prison after seven years behind bars. Based on the false testimony of an ex-paramilitary he had been condemned to 18 years in jail for a crime he didn't commit. Justice for Colombia has formed part of an international campaign demanding his release over the last seven years. His case will now be reviewed in the new transitional justice courts, which will be set up as part of the peace process; demonstrating the significance of the peace accords for social and political activists who have suffered gross injustices at the hands of the Colombian state.

The peace process provides an historic opportunity to lay the foundations for a truly democratic Colombia, in which the rights to political opposition are respected. In the last few months we have seen huge social mobilisations in Colombia with: half a million public sector workers taking to the streets to protest for better pay and working conditions, teachers across the country participating in a month-long strike calling for greater investment in public schools, and a mass civic strike across Colombia's pacific coast over the state's historic neglect of this predominantly Afro-Colombian region. Despite the typically vicious and violent repression of these strikes by the government, these mobilisations represent the power of ordinary Colombians calling for a just and more equitable society, and for peace with social justice.

This article was written for liberation By Cherilyn Elston, Programme Assistant, Justice for Colombia.

Refugee Conference in Macedonia — April 2017

Cianan Whelan

On April this year Liberation sponsored Cianan Whelan, a freelance research assistant at Liberation, to travel to Macedonia to participate at a Refugee conference there. The following is a brief report from the conference.

In response to the ongoing refugee crisis, a European Union committee was brought together to allow NGOs from European countries to share good practise and network to promote a stronger and more unified approach to the crisis.

We gathered in Macedonia, for a joint staff training as part of the project KA2. This is the Strategic Partnership for Adult Education – Migrants Not Excluded (MINE). It is a long term partnership between nine European partners, supported by the European Commission, through the Erasmus+ programme.

It involved a six-day experiential training and learning experience looking at first support/hotspots, language teaching, arts for learning and non-formal education. Best practices were shared by Greek, German and Lithuanian organisations. As part of the seminar, the group also visited the refugee camp in Tabanovce. Besides defining and sharing good practices in integrating refugees from other countries, the participants also listened to activists.

The next step was joint staff training in Greece, to continue to collect good practices and to assess their applicability.

There were representatives from Portugal, Italy, Lithuania, Germany, UK, Belgium, Greece and Macedonia.

Nishaharan Vaithilingam, Talal Karim and I attended on behalf of the UK and Liberation. Nishaharan and I also represented our respective charities who work with refugees and asylum seekers. We flew from Heathrow to Istanbul and then on to Skopje, the capital city of Macedonia, and thence to Kumanovo where the training venue, Etno Selo, was located.

The refugee crisis

Each participant shared their differing accounts of what the refugees in their country were going through and what their approach was to support them. Here in the UK we are mostly shielded from refugees showing up on our coast or our borders unannounced. Refugees are usually brought to our country in a controlled manner through referrals from refugee agencies across Europe. Many have recently come from Calais or via Calais. This is due to our geographical location making our coast far harder to reach than the rest of Europe. In Macedonia, Greece and Italy refugees are washing up on their shores and groups of thousands of refugees are walking into their country, via make-shift routes or train lines. Their objective is to look for an opportunity of a peaceful prosperous life. The main countries the ref-

ugees travelled from were Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire.

The Macedonian NGOs passionately described crunch points where thousands of refugees, men women and children, fleeing torture, murder and imprisonment, would all arrive at the refugee camps. They had travelled for weeks or months, pushing their hands through the fence, pleading for food and water in desperate search for basic human necessities. The scene sounded like biblical stories of Moses walking his people across vast lands to reach safety but this was a very real 21st century reality for many refugees and the support workers trying to help them.

Our trip coincidentally coincided with a far-right group taking over the national parliament. This was as a result of an Albanian immigrant being elected as the House Speaker. Politicians were attacked in a brutal and powerful display of force. This did, however, not seem to speak for a consensus amongst the Macedonian electorate as the government, a supposed manifestation of the peoples will, was happy for refugees to stay. It is, in fact, the refugees who want to use Macedonia as a transit country on their route to Germany (predominantly) where many of the refugees' family and friends live but also where they feel they have the greatest chance of prosperity and being welcomed.

Shared practises

Workshops were run by the German, Lithuanian and Greek NGOs. The Lithuanians run theatre workshops in refugee camps to lift morale, develop coping skills and to create closer ties between refugees who are often from different nations. There was a range of activities including games where two individuals have to sustain eye contact with each other for two minutes. At first, there were nervous giggles but as you continue to hold eye contact you can feel your connection with the other individual increase drastically. After the exercise, I felt I was far more comfortable connecting with the rest of the group. It was clear that this would be beneficial to refugees polarised from others in their new home within the context of dealing with post-trauma symptoms.

The Greeks, a quite remarkable group of individuals started their involvement when three of them drove to the border camps with basic resources as soon as they were informed of the crisis. This D.I.Y approach, spending much of their own money along the way, was especially inspiring. They are now a much larger group whose work is even more far reaching. They shared trust exercises where participants are blindfolded and led over the complicated terrain with no verbal communication allowed. The German group gave a presentation on how their system works when refugees arrive in their country. The German systems and procedures seemed particularly efficient and effective.

Smugglers

The Macedonian staff gave us presentations on the current situation in Macedonia with regard to refugees' attempts to get to Europe through Macedonia predominantly via Serbia. They explained the Catch 22 moment the refugees found themselves in forcing them to pay smugglers to guide them through borders and hide them from domestic police. The fact the smugglers were the only ones offering the service was one of the awful realities of the situation. The smugglers are usually also drug traffickers because they have the knowledge of how to pass through a border illegally and have the audacity to try. Without them, the refugees' situation could be arguably worse as they would be stranded. However, their treatment of the refugees is inhumane.

Workers told stories of groups of over 50 refugees being kept in two rooms and being forced to sleep while standing up. In an attempt to have bargaining power with the smugglers, they leave money with the smugglers associates which will have a lock combination on it. When they have reached their location and the smugglers have upheld their side of the bargain, they then tell them the code and release the money. However, often smugglers used violence to acquire the money prematurely. Many of the refugees who had run out of money or whose money had been stolen were then forced to work. On many occasions, they were held for months on end before they were guided, by the smugglers, over the border and onwards to Europe. Some were used as slave labour guiding other refugees to earn their keep. Many were never actually given safe passage by the smugglers in the end, but instead were sold false promises. Accounts of child sexual exploitation and sexual assault of refugee woman were also articulated.

The lack of state provision as the refugees were labelled as illegal was strongly challenged by all at the conference. The Macedonians staff preferred the term 'irregular' to illegal, as they felt their illegal status was the root cause of the crisis. We agreed, that an individual who is forced to flee their country, with no other option, must be offered compassionate asylum and provisions by the state in order to stop them from turning to the black market as this ultimately funds the black market further and leaves them open to ransom by extremely opportunistic criminals.

The refugee camps

We visited a refugee detention camp in Tabnovce and were greeted by the camp leader who proceeded to give us a tour. Located on the outskirts of the town it is isolated from Macedonians which seemed counter-intuitive to the narrative which asserts that refugees are not welcome due to issues of polarisation. From what I could observe the camp was run exceptionally well. The cafeteria area, classrooms, play areas and living areas were all housed in renovated shipping containers. Although not ideal, they did seem functional and the staff had made great strides to make the place look aesthetically pleasing and inviting. The support workers were unbelievably attentive to the refugees and seemed to have a great rapport with them. If I

were religious I would call it 'God's work'. They understood that if they made the camp enjoyable for the kids, they can make their experience at the camp not traumatic or expose them to even more hardship. Potentially this could help them be less scarred in their adolescence.

Inevitably, a negative transference of energy from the parents to the children occurs. The families are detained, cannot leave the camp and almost always, their leaving date is uncertain, giving them no target to aim for, further adding to the distressful situation. Staff do all they can at Tabnovce but when over a thousand refugees turn up to their gates at one time, satisfying all the refugees needs becomes near impossible on their limited budget. NGO workers, due to a lack of state provisions for refugees, also work with amazing local Macedonian volunteers who had balconies looking over the train tracks where refugees walk. The volunteers take food donations and then distribute the food to all those they see.

A teenager from Afghanistan who I spoke to, was symbolic of the failure of the European Union bureaucracy, communication and management of the situation. He undertook the ordeal of smuggling himself from Afghanistan to Europe, fleeing unimaginable circumstances but now his only wish was to return to home to Afghanistan. Listening to him tell me this information made my body shudder at the thought of my comfy suburban life in West London.

The UK and West's role in the crisis

The UK government's lack of compassion and desire to accept refugees was condemned at the conference. It was particularly embarrassing for our nation when the efforts of others were discussed. When one compares Germany's response to the UK's, the disparity in the figures of how many we have each accepted, is quite astounding. The actual cost to each constituency of taking more refugees is miniscule. It would represent an honourable sacrifice for our country. If one can even call it a sacrifice when taking into account the immense human capital and diversity of culture these individuals would offer our country in return. If the public services of one of the richest countries in the world cannot handle this small intake of refugees then anti-austerity and redistributive economic alternatives must be explored.

As the plight of the refugees was discussed further at the conference predictably the discourse came back to western foreign policy. Organisations working with refugees understand they are like firefighters facing infinite flames, helpless in tackling the core source, the lack of effective international diplomacy.

Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, unsurprisingly, made up the dominant demographic of the refugees. Afghanistan has been under near constant siege since the First Anglo-Afghan war in 1839. Violence and destabilisation were brought to their shores by France, Russia, America and the UK. Iraq, Libya and Syria were all destabilised by western powers also. In addition, American economic sanctions killed 500,000 Iraqis while indiscriminate bombings kill one member of ISIS for every two hundred

civilians. When I saw the reality of the refugee crisis with my own eyes, it reinforced my opinion that western intervention in these nations has been misguided. Leaders with poor human rights records must be removed via international political pressure and in an organic way by individuals of the host nation. To remove leaders with such destabilising tactics, leaving power vacuums amongst other implications, can never be an option. When attempting to eradicate ISIS we must be empathetic to how we would feel if Syria bombed an entire apartment block in one of our towns, to take out one bad individual.

Conclusion

This was an exceptional and hugely beneficial conference to

attend. From it, I hope stronger European ties can be created to deal with this ongoing crisis in unity (despite Brexit). The compassion and desire to help all shown by the individuals I met at Etno Selo is representative of the human nature I hope we can replicate in our policy and narratives influencing our societies.

Cianan Whelan is a freelance Research Assistant at Liberation

BOOK REVIEW: Utopia for realists and how we can get there

By Rutger Bregman. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Reviewed by James Grayson

Bregman's fourth book was recently translated into English. It is aimed at the American market. He is interested in more equitable societies and has chosen to demonstrate the validity of a number of initially unlikely propositions. Perhaps the most attractive is from the field of International Development? The proposal is to cease major projects, usually supervised by outsiders in four by fours and substitute simple payments. This has the benefit of avoiding distortions to local markets and dumping. The USA spend is of the order of 1% of Gross Domestic product; the recently redefined UK one is approximately 0.7%

His major proposal is a guaranteed universal income. This was tested in a Swiss referendum as recently as 2016.

Paying street sleepers a modest income tends to re-integrate them into society and avoids massive welfare infrastructures. (In 2009 terms £400,000 in benefits compared with £39,000 in grants in London!) The basic thesis is that over time society has become massively better resourced whereas concepts of poverty are relative. Western economies are well resourced and can afford to be generous but the political implications may be dire!

Free housing in Utah reduced state expenditure from \$16,670 pa to \$11,000, in 2008 per claimant. Vice-President Nixon considered during 1969 introducing a guaranteed minimum income for a family of four of \$1,600pa.

Bregman rails about the methodology for calculating Gross Domestic Product; by doing so he neatly illustrates some

of the absurdities of the calculation.

Mills and Keynes predicted a much shorter working week for the future. The latter anticipated 15 hours per week by 2030. Henry Ford learned that by introducing a five day working week in 1926 (40 hours) the productivity of his staff increased. Kellogg introduced a six hour working day during 1930.

There are interesting thoughts about industrial dilution. During the 20th century this encompassed women taking up work and immigration which, in the UK was encouraged by UK Conservative governments after the Second World War. Talent was drained from other economies to such an extent that the National Health Service and education would be very different should they cease to be able to call upon immigrants. Both the UK and the USA have benefitted enormously from the talents and skills of refugees, perhaps the Manhattan Project furnishes an example?

Politics can be used to maintain the status quo but also to introduce ideas which initially seem inevitable but become the norm, an example could be the abolition of slavery or the aim to offer universal healthcare. Bregman draws our attention to the Overton window which sets out a series of degrees of acceptability: unthinkable, radical, acceptable, popular, policy, sensible. Successful practitioners include President Trump and Foreign Secretary Johnson.

The illustrations require effort but it will be repaid. This is not a call to arms; it is a call for agitation.

Refugees and war

Lindsey German

The recent election in Britain was the fourth to take place since the country has been at war. The consequences of those wars and interventions, which began 16 years ago under the rubric of the War on Terror, have been death, disaster, displacement and devastation for millions. Yet any serious discussion of the failure of the interventions has been almost totally absent.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn tried his best. He made two very serious speeches on foreign policy – one near the beginning of the campaign, the second after the terrible Manchester bombing attack which were met with the mixture of: abuse, disdain and refusal to address the facts that we have come to expect from successive governments. Instead what passed for debate on these questions during the election amounted to denunciations of Corbyn's alleged support for terrorism, all based on innuendo or even blatant lies, and demands that he commit to 'press the button' which would start a nuclear war that would kill millions of people.



Source: Belfast Telegraph

It is unsurprising that most politicians and their supporters take this approach. The last thing that they want is any truthful and honest accounting about the interventions launched since 2001 in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. They have cost the lives of more than a million people and have left these countries: wrecked, desperately poor and unstable, with a growing threat of terrorism and ongoing problems for millions of people.

They would like us to forget the consequences of these wars, but that is not going to happen.

The effects of war are often seen as immediate and horrific. We watch high tech bombing on the houses of the poor in cities such as Mosul or Aleppo. We see people fleeing the scenes. But all too often the news moves on to some other, more immediate, disaster. Yet the legacies of war are long term and sometimes even more horrific for the survivors than the immediate dangers of bombing or fighting. And they are legacies which those who take us into wars of intervention prefer to ignore or downplay.

It was estimated in 2011 that there were 10.1 million people who were war refugees or displaced persons in just three countries: Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These are people living in terrible conditions, in camps or squatting in buildings, their physical and mental health suffering, and their children unable to have a proper education. They are largely forgotten by the people who spend so much time and money justifying the wars.

When they try to leave their own countries or immediately adjacent ones and reach Europe or the US, they are treated appallingly, subject to racist abuse and deprivation, living in camps or substandard accommodation, and likely to be deported back to their war-torn countries which have been deemed 'safe'.

It is hard for most of us to imagine what it is like to live in conditions where war and terrorist attacks still continue, where there is no infrastructure and little civil society, and where the sheer hopelessness of life overwhelms so many. This is what our government's policy over Iraq did. The war and invasion in 2003 had catastrophic consequences. The UNHCR reported in 2007 that over 4 million Iraqis had been uprooted. By 2010 there were an estimated 3.5 million refugees, displaced persons and others who had no proper home. That amounts to over 10% of the population. We should consider what it would be like in Britain to have 6 million people in such a position.

This doesn't take into account other questions such as the dramatic rise in infant mortality, illnesses caused by the use of white phosphorus and depleted uranium and the effects on children's development and wellbeing of war and displacement.

The refugee crisis – and most of this crisis stays in the poorer parts of the world – is made by the warmongers. Wars create refugees. People flee wars for very good reasons. When we are told war is necessary, we are never told of the human collateral damage, which is immense.

The Stop the War Coalition was formed to oppose the war on terror. We have always argued that this war would make the world a more dangerous place. Yet the imperial powers continue in the face of obvious failure. They are finding less and less support for these wars. Opinion polls regularly show majorities against wars, the most recent showing a large majority which connected terror attacks here with the wars abroad.

We continue to campaign against these and future interventions. Part of this is to demand justice for those who have suffered, which is why we also support the rights of refugees. If there is money from our governments for war, there should be money for its victims.

This article was written for Liberation by Lindsey German, Stop the War Coalition.

Guyana's Amerindian land titling rights under threat

Gail Teixeira

Guyana has been internationally recognized for increasing the amount of land owned by Amerindian (Indigenous) communities from 6.5% to 14% of its land mass in less than a decade. The Amerindian ("first people") population is the fastest growing ethnic group in Guyana increasing in size from 5% to 10% in less than 20 years.

Successive People's Progressive Party Civic (PPP/C) Administrations (1992-2015), addressed a large number of Amerindian land issues under the 2006 Amerindian Act. As of May 2015, 103 Amerindian communities were awarded Absolute (and Forever) grants of community titles. Fifteen (15) applications for extensions were pending and 6 were awaiting title. Noteworthy is that Guyana's Amerindian Act 2006 is not based on the concept of ancestral lands but on traditionally occupied lands, a much simpler benchmark for the issuance of communal land titles.

The recent appointment by His Excellency President David Granger of a Commission of Inquiry into Lands, ostensibly to address Amerindian lands and lands of the Freed Africans and any other lands, on March 10, 2017 is as ill -advised as it is troubling.

The resort to this approach by the government demonstrates gross disrespect and disregard for the history and recent developments of Amerindian/Indigenous land rights as well as a lack of understanding of the distinct nature of Amerindian lands, which is based on collective ownership.

The presence of Amerindians consistently living in vast stretches of land now known as Guyana goes back 7000 -11,000 years ago. This fact has contributed to the sanctity of Guyana's borders with Brazil. The Amerindian peoples have been acknowledged as the protectors of our forests and environment as well as de facto protectors of our country's borders.

Most noteworthy is the disregard of the specific inclusion in Guyana's Constitution of Amerindian/indigenous land rights and other articles which protect their rights and land. Guyana has also endorsed several international human rights instruments including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Most importantly, it disregards the Amerindian Act of 2006 which clearly sets out a process of addressing Amerindian lands and Amerindian land claims, both for communities without any legally recognized lands and those seeking extensions.

Furthermore, the regime established this Commission without any consultation with the elected representatives of the Amerindian villages in Guyana and without the inclusion of Amerindian elected representatives on the Commission.

In contrast to the present government's approach to land titling, it might be of interest to look at Guyana's model of addressing Amerindian land claims which was developed by the previous P.P.P/C. governments (October 1992-May 2015).

Having promised to address Amerindian land rights, the PPP/C government devised and put in place a new Amerindian land policy early in the 1990s. By 2001, the PPPC administration had approved a process of widespread consultation on the creation of a new Amerindian Act. Following more than three years of consultation across the length and breadth of Guyana, all agreed that "...the only way that Amerindian communities would be able to have their land rights addressed and protected was through a process that is transparent and fair. They clearly recognised that policies, unlike law, can be changed at the whims and fancies of Government."

The draft bill was scrutinized by consultation with Amerindian communities, civil society and state agencies. The Bill was then submitted to Parliament and sent to a Parliamentary Special Select Committee where it was again examined in further detail inclusive of hearings with civil society. The Amerindian Act was unanimously approved in October 2006.

The first indication that Amerindian land rights were being questioned came from one of the new Presidential Advisers, Mr. Eric Phillips in a series of letters written to the media in March and April 2016. He repeated his arguments in 2017 that the Amerindians already had too much land and posited that Afro-Guyanese, who were exploited and brought as slaves before some of the now existing Amerindian groups, had none.

This was followed by a Ministerial Adviser, on April 4, 2017 who publicly stated that, "there can be no discussion on Amerindian lands that is not an integrated discussion on land as we are all Guyanese and why must there be a separate treatment of Amerindian lands"!!

At no time did the government dissociate itself from these public pronouncements.

In setting up this Commission of Inquiry, the government has deliberately ignored the existence of the Amerindian Act and in particular, Section VI of the Amerindian Act which is dedicated

to addressing granting of lands to Amerindian communities, those without land titles, and, also granting of extensions to those requesting additional lands. This is a very important section of the Act as it is the community/village that will interact directly with the Government and negotiate a mutually agreed settlement. It is the Minister with responsibility for Amerindian/indigenous affairs that is given statutory responsibilities to protect their rights and is empowered to address land claims through the Amerindian Act, not a Commission.

Any difficulties encountered from time to time have less to do with the Act itself and more to do with situations where land was previously given out for mining and forestry concessions, or to private persons long years ago, for example, which now conflict with a given community's application for land. In short, there is no need for a Commission of Inquiry as the Act is adequate and has been used effectively and successfully with regards to Amerindian land rights.

In the light of the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on Lands, and its sweeping terms of reference, actions of the government towards Amerindian land rights and other rights since taking office, expose an objective which is sinister:

In July 2015, the government terminated 1,972 Amerindian community service officers, the largest single termination of employees by the state since the early 1980s!

Within 2 months of taking office the government closed down the Amerindian Land Titling Unit, at the Office of the President, and terminated all the staff, The Unit did not function for almost a year. Consequentially, pending demarcations and surveying also ground to a halt. Those communities which applied for land or extensions prior to the May 2015 general and regional elections are deeply worried, more so now with the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry;

Funds designated to support the Amerindian Community Development Plans and projects approved under the Guyana/Norway Agreement since 2014 have been stymied over the last 23 months in violation of the said Agreement;

The Hinterland Household Solar Electrification Project which provided solar units to 13,170 households in Amerindian communities has also been halted;

The One Laptop Per Family (OLTPF) has been dismantled and the allocation of laptops to one hundred (100) ICT hubs in Amerindian communities has also fallen by the way side.

The principal of "Free Prior and Informed Consent" enshrined in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has

been honoured in the breach repeatedly as is the case with the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on Lands;

The government is anxious to amend the Amerindian Act and appears reluctant to meet with the Amerindian communities and their elected councils as was done with the creation of the Amerindian Act.

Thus, it would not be an unfair deduction that it appears as if the Amerindian Act stands in the way of a grander design of the government, and, the Commission of Inquiry is its first maneuver.

The National Toshias Council, the sole legitimate representatives of all the elected leaders of the Amerindian villages in Guyana, with five Amerindian non-governmental organizations, protested the imposition of the Commission of Inquiry into Amerindian land titling in April 2017 and called for its revocation.

The Parliamentary Opposition's request to the Speaker for an Adjournment Motion on a Definite Matter of Urgent Public Importance to discuss the Commission and to call for its revocation on April 13, 2017 was considered "not urgent".

The Parliamentary Opposition submitted another motion again calling for the revocation of the Commission of Inquiry on April 25, 2017. The motion was allowed by the Speaker after he radically amended the motion. The debate took place on May 8th, 2017 and June 16th, 2017 where it was defeated by the one seat majority of the APNU+AFC Coalition Government benches.

The issue of land and the terms of reference of this Commission of Inquiry are of such complexity and so fraught with controversy that we believe that it will foster greater ethnic insecurities and undermine national unity in a multi-ethnic society for decades to come.

There is nothing to stop the government if it wishes to address the issues of the lands purchased by Freed Africans when slavery was abolished but this must not be comingled with the Amerindian land titling rights. The latter has been a success story which has corrected great injustices imposed on Amerindian peoples, over hundreds of years.

This article was written for Liberation by Gail Teixeira, Guyanese M.P., PPP Chief Whip.

The Macron experiment: how long will his pro-European project last

Tom Gill

“Sauver les meubles”. “Salvage what you can” was likely on the lips of many a party worker in June’s parliamentary elections. Or more precisely that mad week between the first and second round votes as France’s traditional left and right parties scrambled to regroup in the face of Macron’s political tornado. It was far too little too late, after taking the Elysee Palace in May, Macron then stormed the National Assembly. His 350 (out 577) seats dwarfed the 137 for Francois Fillon’s Republicans and 44 for Benoît Hamon’s Socialists’.

Macron’s lightning victory to potentially unchecked political power has invited comparisons with all powerful leaders of the Hexagon’s past. Is he the Sun King, the most supreme of all Europe’s absolute monarchs? Or perhaps like another King Louis, XVI, who faced a revolt of the masses and lost his head. What’s for sure, despite his shock success, Macron fell short of predictions of a more overwhelming majority. Abstention rates hit a record 42%. If some describe the state of affairs as a democratic revolution others see it as a “democratic emergency”. A dramatic situation where the former banker and socialist minister may have all the levers of formal power but lacks backing on the streets.

Perhaps that’s why Macron is trying modesty. Unfortunately for him, his ambitions are large. His sell to the electorate was to bring France and Europe back from the brink, after Britain voted to exit the EU and Euroscepticism appeared to overwhelm even Europe’s founding member and long-time motor. His resounding defeat of Marine Le Pen in Presidential elections in May appeared to put paid to a Gallic rejection of the EU dream. The Front National secured just 8 seats, half her own modest target of 15. But for how long?

The youthful, energetic Macron has been declared France’s answer to Tony Blair, the ‘Third Way’ Labour leader who joined US president George Bush in the invasion of Iraq and was “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich” (in the words of his powerful minister Peter Mandelson). Like Blair, and other more recent European iterations of the pro-European centre-left, Macron pretends he’s reaching beyond the traditional left / right split in politics. He talks of “reforms” – code for rolling back of genuine reforms of capitalism secured by ordinary people and the Left in decades of struggle, from the ‘bloated’ public sector and welfare state to ‘rigid’ labour markets. Rather than workers, it is business interests that must be championed. Gone is the Gaullist defence of ‘difference’. The most pro-European

French leader ever seems ready to embrace the federalist dream.

What marks Macron out from the likes of Blair and Italy’s Matteo Renzi (both of whom sought to change traditional parties from within) was his invention of a brand new movement La Republique en Marche, to pursue his neo-liberal project. Against forecasts that he’d soon be facing difficulties “cohabiting” with a parliamentary majority of one of France’s two major parties, in the space of just a few months he converted a vehicle to make him President into a party that overtook them at the ballot box.

The other big change in this electoral cycle was the dramatic collapse of the Socialist vote. After five dire years in office under President Francois Hollande, the electorate has been unforgiving. Hollande made big promises to deliver jobs and defend the 99% against the rich and the greedy bankers. Instead unemployment rose on his watch (only in recent months falling to close to the levels when he was elected in May 2012) while he quietly dropped plans to reign in France’s financial sector (responsible, among many crimes and misdemeanours for a big chunk of Greece’s unsustainable debt) as well as his 75-percent tax on earnings over 1 million euros. Hollande also promised to defend French interests against an austerity-crazed Germany swaggering over the Continent. Instead of cultivating a possible pro-growth alliance of the weaker Mediterranean EU members, notably Greece and Italy, he buckled under pressure from Chancellor Angela Merkel, deluding himself that France was an equal partner in the famed Franco-German European motor.

The Socialists have been punished before for earlier betrayals – notably Francois Mitterrand in the 1980s, and recovered, but they have never been punished so thoroughly. The fate of Pasok – the dominant party in Greece from the time it emerged from the generals - stares them in the face. Macron saw this too. So if he got lucky with a scandal in Fillon’s Republican camp, he already had a precise plan to deal with the socialists: like a vampire he would draw strength from a party that was bleeding to death. Macron was a protégé of Hollande but, in appearance at least, he stabbed him in the back. The policies he is pursuing are just a rebranding of the least progressive elements of the last socialist administration, such as Hollande’s bid – opposed with varying success in the streets - to reduce labour standards and cut business taxes (leading to a huge hole in the public finances).

For appearances' sake, a youthful, apparent outsider was needed, and candidates with no political experience. Macron's plan – backed by many in the establishment, including within the Socialist and Republican parties – was as Tancredi in the Leopard puts it: "For things to remain the same, everything must change".

What of Jean Luc Melenchon and his France Insoumise (Unbowed France) movement and the more traditional left flank of the socialists, the communists (PCF)? Parties committed to genuine, radical reforms. As in 2012, Melenchon brought a message of hope with his brilliant oratory, mass meetings and clever use of digital technology. This time, he also effectively tapped into youth culture (Jeremy Corbyn's campaign in Britain perhaps learned a thing or two from him). Melenchon was pipped for 3rd place by Fillon, with 20% of the vote.

In the parliamentary elections, winner takes all (in the second round, run-offs, at least), and France Insoumise and the PCF failed to co-operate, except in a minority of localities. This was partly down to frictions caused by a battle for hegemony over the radical left (similarly playing out in Spain between upstart Podemos and the Communist-led United Left) with Melenchon seen as the more assertive of the two. There was the added complication that the Socialists under new leader Hamon had moved much closer politically to their left flank, again raising the question of co-operation locally. In the end, France Insoumise and the PCF combined won 3 million votes and 27 seats, enjoying the funds and prominence that comes with a parliamentary group. Nevertheless they remain a marginal parliamentary force and remain behind the Socialists in terms of seats.

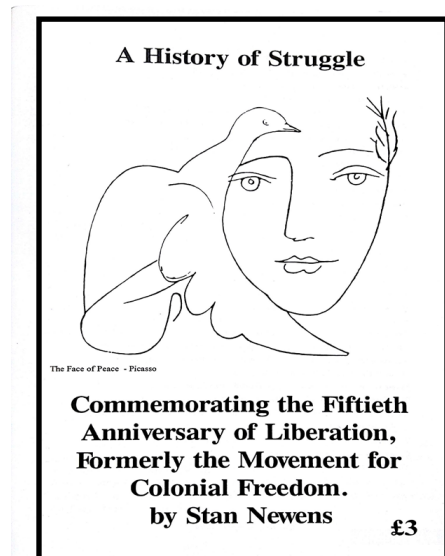
Melenchon and PCF under leader Pierre Laurent will do what they can to oppose Macron in parliament, but the real resistance will be on the streets. The unions are already gearing up to resist Macron as he seeks to impose his hire and fire labour legislation, move France's collective bargaining on wages and working time from the industry (where unions are stronger), to the company level (where they are weaker) and cap severance packages awarded by industrial tribunals (to cut costs to business). In this and other battles organised labour is likely to find allies within society, as they did last year against similar attacks on workers, with the youth-led nocturnal protest movement known as La Nuit Debout (or "Up All Night").

As for the wider pro-European rival Macron seems to herald, how long that will last remains to be seen. Macron has been lucky that Europe's single currency zone economy has seen somewhat of a recovery recently. Under the terms of Eurozone membership France, like other southern members, is permanently locked into a low-growth, low investment, low-

skills vicious circle where country-level interest rates and currency flexibility (to cut borrowing costs and regain export competitiveness) is banned, public spending is severely squeezed (hitting schools and hospitals) and workers (sacrificing wages and working conditions) required to bear all the (downward) adjustment. In France austerity rules and Macron is condemned, like Hollande before him, to crisis management.

Le Pen gained 10.6 million votes in the Presidential elections on the back of calls for a referendum on EU and Euro membership, as well as her politics of law and order and proposed anti-immigrant clampdown. Even her much diminished three million score in parliamentary elections showed she has as much support as the radical left, whose position as critical supporters of Europe has not convinced, leading former communist voters in blue collar heartlands to switch to the far right movement. There's been little Left Exit, or Lexit debate, in France, even though regaining political and economic sovereignty would be popular. The risks of ducking the issue are huge. When Macron falters, do we really want Le Pen at the guillotine?

Tom Gill has worked in Italy as a political and economics correspondent and writes on European affairs for The Morning Star and Counterpunch, he blogs at www.revolting-europe.com



OUR POSTPONED AGM

Readers of our Mayday issue were asked to note the date of our then forthcoming AGM, which we'd planned for June 10th. Our then strong and stable Prime Minister subsequently and unexpectedly called a General Election, which she was obviously going to win by a large majority, but which took place two days before our big day.

In the circumstances we felt that we had to postpone as everybody would be bereft of hope following Labour's expected humiliation.

We've not yet fixed a new date for our AGM, but are watching for signals from Number 10.

We are thinking about a Saturday in the first half of September or in October. All will be revealed in the next issue of the Journal. In any event, it will be in our usual venue of the St Pancras Church Hall, Lancing Street, NW1 1NA. Two minutes from Euston Station.



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