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Needed: a new international for a just transition and against fascism

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ABSTRACT

We urgently need a new global solidarity movement, but it will not be shaped like the old ones, with failing solidarity when it is most needed or at the service of anti-imperialist regimes. What we need, urgently, is a global movement for a just transition, combining social and environmental justice, as well as a strong movement against re-emerging fascism, in North and South.

KEYWORDS

Social movement; social and environmental justice; system change

Samir Amin, a leading scholar and co-founder of the world-systems tradition, died on August 12, 2018. Just before his death, he published, along with close allies, a call for ‘workers and the people’ to establish a ‘fifth international’ [<https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/letter-intent-inaugural-meeting-international-workers-and-peoples>] to coordinate support to progressive movements. To honor Samir Amin’s invaluable contribution to world-systems scholarship, we are pleased to present readers with a selection of essays responding to Amin’s final message for today’s anti-systemic movements. This forum is being co-published between Globalizations [<https://www.tandfonline.com/rglo>], the Journal of World-Systems Research [<http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/75>] and Pambazuka News [<https://www.pambazuka.org/>]. Additional essays and commentary can be found in these outlets.

Some years ago, during the Greek crisis, I was asked to speak on ‘solidarity’ for a European audience. I started to explain where the concept came from and how and why it is necessarily based on reciprocity. This is what makes it different from charity, a unilateral gift inevitably leading to a demand for gratitude. Solidarity, on the contrary, is always at least bilateral and based on mutual respect.

This is the reason why all demands and programmes for solidarity among workers and peoples all over the world are always met with a lot of sympathy. Isn’t it obvious that whenever Greek workers are in trouble, workers from other countries in the European Union come to their help? Is it not as obvious that whenever people have serious problems, because of a natural catastrophe, for instance, people from other countries in the world try to assist? And in that same logic, is it not self-evident that victims of one same system, workers in capitalism, victims of exploitation of their labour force and of their environment, forge solidarity links to fight that one and only enemy?

Well, it is not. History tells us about the many failures of the left in trying to shape global organisations and struggles. Even in the recent past, most attempts for long-term transnational solidarity have bitterly failed, and there are lessons to learn from it.

In this contribution, I would like to look at some of the reasons for these failures and examine some of the conditions that will have to be met if we want to start what is now called a 'new international', as was proposed by the late Samir Amin. This will require some serious and honest self-criticism and a downright rejection of all romanticism and naive utopianism. The world is what it is, and people are what they are, all different even if they have common demands. In other words, we have to look for solutions beyond the easy slogans and assumptions.

Knowledge and perspectives

It is stating the obvious to say that knowledge about the world is not uniformly spread across this world. People in wealthy countries with more or less decent media may get every day their portion of world news, but that certainly does not mean they know what precisely is going on in Egypt, Myanmar or Venezuela. People in poorer countries, and certainly people with limited education, may not even have heard of Myanmar or Venezuela. And even in the best of circumstances, one has to admit that knowledge and interest in world happenings is limited indeed. An earthquake in Haiti may speak to all and open the purse for help, but a coup in Venezuela is much harder to convince people in France or India that they have to react. Not only do they not know Venezuelan history, they may also believe that if people go hungry, one should be grateful to the United States if it is ready to give so-called humanitarian aid.

These are very simple examples, but they clearly show that it is not so easy to organise solidarity. Surely, popular education programmes can help. But just imagine what happens when people learn their aid to Haiti was not well spent or has not arrived at all ... with the next earth quake, help will diminish.

It is, then, in the first place a lack of knowledge and a lack of awareness that we are all humans, part of a single interdependent humankind that binds us together. When seeing a homeless hungry child in Africa on television, there is no one in Europe or America to think, this might happen to my child tomorrow, let us help ...

One might think this solidarity is easier to organise when circumstances are more comparable, let us say amongst workers exploited by a brutal capitalist and neoliberal system? Well, again, it is not.

Workers in rich countries of the North know very well that their working conditions are far better than those of their colleagues in the South, and they will gladly support their trade unions when actions are set up to go and support unions in the South. At least, that was the case before the huge wave of globalization in the 1990s. When factories threaten to move to the East or to the South, workers more often than not agree with lowering wages or extending working time than with a move to give their colleagues in the South more jobs. In fact, solidarity did only flourish as long as workers in the North did not have to pay for it themselves. Even within Europe, we have seen many cases of strikes against company relocations where workers of the receiving European country refused to show any solidarity with the workers of the sending country, within the same company. Fortunately, this is not a general rule nor is it a way of criticizing workers, because after all, what is at stake is their livelihood, their jobs.

But as was brilliantly explained by the Belgian philosopher Jaap Kruithof, many years ago, the fact remains that in most cases, workers will more easily show their solidarity with their capitalist bosses than with workers in the South that might take their jobs. This is a very sad but understandable reality. Working conditions between the North and the South have become so hugely different, and profit-making often so easy in the South, that bosses have a ready-made tool in their hands – relocation – to blackmail their workers. The unity of workers, North and South, then, is not a given.

Add to this the difficulty of showing solidarity. Textile production has almost completely moved to the South, and we know how difficult the working conditions of mainly women in these factories are. Just think of the horrible accident in Rana Plaza, Bangladesh, some years ago. Trade unions in the North have set up a campaign to fight for 'clean clothes', which is fine. But it is no easy job to convince consumers in the North to not buy the 'made in Bangladesh'. Nor is it easy to make trade agreements that easily sanction countries in breach with ILO conventions. Today, we know that solidarity from abroad can only help when there is already a strong activism inside the country. That is why the cooperation between trade unions is so very important, though difficult as well.

A third difficulty is to define the agents of solidarity. Again, it is easy to state a global class struggle is going on, and workers are losing. But we now also want a broader struggle of 'people', all those who are not workers. It is a small step away from Marx and back to Flora Tristan, who insisted on organising all lower classes, women and men, workers and beggars and crippled ones. Sounds like a good idea, though we might wonder if the lower classes are the major agents of change in today's world.

What is confirmed once again in the current movement of the 'yellow jackets' in France is that anti-capitalism is as much in the hands of the right as it is in the hands of the left. Most progressive forces, in large parts of the world, can be found also in the urban middle classes and even in the top wealthy class. The anti-capitalist lower class and the left are no longer coterminous, even if they are the major victims of capitalism and neoliberalism. Who then to organise? Do we want to shape 'a people', as the French philosopher Chantal Mouffe proposes, or do we want to reject populism and work with progressive forces only? In my understanding, if a solidarity movement has to shape a better world, it will not be enough to look at the lower classes.

Ideological problems

Early 2019 The Economist published an interesting article on 'millennial socialism'. What it showed was that many young people easily speak of and organise for socialism, but their socialism is far from that of their parents and grand-parents. They do want public services, tax justice and more equality in society, but they do not dream of a planned economy. They do speak of capitalism, but their dreams are less to abolish capitalism than to start with the protection of the environment and the fight against climate change. They certainly want to limit the power of corporations but seem less likely to try and nationalise them. In other words, not only should we reflect on who to organise but also with what objective? Metanarratives and totalising analyses about 'capitalism' have been very useful, but they have also paralysed whole generations who did not know where to start and who rejected all intermediate, 'reformist' steps. In other words, anti-capitalism and socialism may look different in the future. The difficult task of defining a clear and feasible objective is certainly not made easier by the lack of successful socialist models to follow.

Secondly, in spite of thirty years of globalisation, the North South divide has not gone away, though the world has changed. Geo-politically speaking, there is still a totally powerless South with countries who have no real voice at the international level, excluded from the UN Security Council and with hardly any votes in the Bretton Woods institutions. However, Asian countries, and most importantly China are on the rise and are close to dethrone the US, Europe and Japan, the countries Samir Amin puts in 'the triad'. Hegemonic countries rarely let this happen without a war, and the near future does look rather grim when we look at the new arms race and the struggles at corporate level, such as with Huawei. What it means for our desired 'international' is that we need a very careful analysis of the new emerging powers, since they risk to not necessarily only bring improvements. Global political categories are changing, Trump's US is not the open liberal country

it claims to be, while capitalist China or oil-dependent Venezuela are not on their way to become liberal democracies. Again, a 'new international against imperialism and capitalism' will require delicate choices.

Finally, and as has already been pointed at, the left right divide is still as lively as ever, in spite of all attempts to ignore it. Yes, wealthy countries and more and more middle-income countries have large middle classes, but these are threatened. While old divides as between workers and capitalists may be waning – many of the ultra-rich also living on wages –, new ones between urban and rural populations, migrants and natives, young and old, anti-globalists and cosmopolites are rising. The left and progressive forces can no longer be identified within the lower classes alone. It means that all attempts at global organisation will require careful analysis and in fact a very different kind of organisation.

Beyond slogans

Finally, what we will have to learn is ... to learn. We have no socialist models to follow and social movements of the recent past have not been very successful. Clearly, there are some very good NGOs, working on the environment, on tax justice, on food and rural problems, but they remain one issue groups. We have not succeeded in bringing them together. We have international trade union organisations, which do very useful work at the level of our international institutions but are limited in terms of organising solidarity.

The World Social Forum (WSF) has been a failure, for political and organisational reasons. The European Social Forum and the Forum of the Americas have failed because of intra-left-wing bickering. Occupy, Nuits Debout, Indignados and other 'yellow jackets' have slowly disappeared, mostly because of their lack of organisation. The new slogan today is 'horizontalism', away from 'old-fashioned' vertical and hierarchical movements, with which more often than not trade unions and political parties are identified.

However, as I have been a close witness in the WSF of how this 'horizontalism' can be used to mask real power relations, and how a lack of transparency and accountability help to foster distrust, I can only warn for these 'easy' and 'new' solutions. A lack of clear rules and responsibilities inevitably will harm the possibilities for clear political analyses and hinder the identification of concrete objectives. The WSF has ended up as a totally apolitical gathering, without any direction or steering. Or, to sum up, it has become a toothless tiger.

Conclusion

The lack of awareness of our single humankind, the lack of concrete solidarity with workers that are perceived as competitors, the difficulty of identifying the current agents of change on the one hand, the shifting North South and left right divides and the difficult definition of a socialist objective are all serious obstacles for a 'new international', however broad we define it. Add to this the failures of the recent social movements for lack of organisation, and one can see how very difficult it will be to build something new.

However, not all hope is lost, and we do need a new international. We are indeed living in the autumn of capitalism, and the 'revolt of peoples' is, once again, on the agenda. But the way Samir Amin describes it cannot be the solution for the future. Surely, there still are 'dominated peripheries' and the Venezuelan people is experiencing right now what 'imperialism' means. But the struggles of the future will necessarily have to be global or regional struggles. It is difficult to see what the victory

of the yellow jackets in France could mean, or what the fall of right-wing populist regimes in Central Europe would bring in terms of 'another world'. As Heikki Patomäki states, we are fundamentally connected and interdependent. We need to look beyond our borders and open them. I am not sure this is what Samir Amin also wanted to achieve. His project was still rooted in the movement of Bandung, of national development and of 'solidarity' movements at the service of these national regimes. This is what is happening now with the 'ALBA movement' and the 'International assembly' organised in Caracas.

Many current progressive movements are turning inwards, working mainly at the local level, exulting the power of 'municipalism' and the new 'commons'. This may be very useful but the risk, then, is that too much attention goes to individual successes and structural solutions remain out of sight. It can lead to a simple and heroic though useless collective withdrawal from society, such as happened with the neo-zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. They are autonomous, they reject modernity and development, but continue to live in extreme poverty.

New initiatives are being taken: a transnational political movement with one single progressive programme in Europe, Diem25, the result of Yanis Varoufakis' failure as minister of finance in Greece; an 'agora of inhabitants', a first gathering to reflect on a legal status for humankind and make all people 'citizens of the world', an initiative of Riccardo Petrella; a World Social Forum on Health and Social Protection, with a clear political input and the ambition to reach out to movements working on the environment, democracy or development; Heikki Patomäki's promotion of a global political party ...

A new international is needed indeed, but it will not just be 'anti-imperialist' or be geared towards 'de-linking'. On the contrary, it will try to link countries and people as well as different issues: from social justice to climate justice, from democracy to just trade and tax justice. It will have to be, literally, alter-globalist.

What we need, then, is a movement for a 'just transition', linking social and environmental justice, necessarily based on democracy. And what we also need, urgently, is a strong global movement against re-emerging fascism, in North and South.

If each movement can identify its primary and secondary objectives, a common ground can certainly be found, not on abstract solidarities, but on concrete action and campaigning points. The second thing movements will have to learn is to articulate their struggles at the local, national, regional and global levels. This is not easy but extremely important.

Most of all, what movements will have to learn if they want to mobilize young people, is that 'anti-capitalism' cannot be the over-arching slogan, in spite of the on-going class war. Looking at the 'millennial socialists', working on tax or social justice and other concrete demands, it is obvious that with what I have called in the past 'obstinate coherency' one does change the system. Objectives need to be very concrete and have to be perceived as perfectly feasible. Campaign issues have to be interconnected, since no single campaign will be able to overthrow the system.

Finally, all movements will have to be political, which means they have to be emancipatory and transformative, geared towards the full realisation of individual and collective human rights for all, and, in the end, system change. There is one slogan that remains valid throughout: freedom, equality and solidarity, the keywords of the Enlightenment, with respect for universalism and diversity, the major victories of modernity. In spite of modernity's failure, having separated humankind and nature in its thinking, its basic philosophy remains valid and has to be defended if we also want to fight fascism.

Being political also means not to reject professional politics, but adding to it, extending it, shaping a global public sphere, making all individuals and movements indeed citizens of the world. This is

not traditional socialism, we will not have to go in search of ideological purity while getting lost between left and right, but of tolerant, progressive forces, able and willing to cooperate and search for common objectives. This may – hopefully – lead to a more fruitful strategy for the immediate future, making an end to our losing all of our too fragmented struggles.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Francine Mestrum has a PhD in social sciences and worked at the European institutions and several Belgian universities. Her research concerns the social dimension of globalisation, poverty, inequality, social protection, public services and gender. She is an active member of the International Council of the World Social Forum and of the International Organising Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum. She is the author of several books (in Dutch, French and English) on development, poverty, inequality and social commons. She is the founder of the global network of Global Social Justice and currently works on a project for social commons. www.socialcommons.eu