

France: José Bové's perspective is a blind alley

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Over 250,000 people took part in the rally of opponents of globalisation—the “altermondialists”—from August 8 to 10 in the south of France. The rally’s slogan “The world is not a commodity” was aimed at the next summit of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) due to be held September 10-14 in Cancún, Mexico.

The rally in Le Larzac, a limestone plateau to the south of the Massif Central, was one of the largest in recent years. The number of participants surprised the organisers. When, in the afternoon of the second day, in spite of the heat wave and the summer holidays, the flood of arrivals seemed inexhaustible, the organisers decided to close off the access roads to the site as a safety measure and to prevent a possible shortage of water.

The event was organised by the anti-globalisation movement Attac, G10 Solidaires (a radical grouping of 10 SUD trade unions) and the Peasant Confederation, which had been set up originally in Le Larzac. Also participating were French Communist Party (PCF) and Green Party federations, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), the League of Human Rights, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, the Anarchist Federation, action committees of teachers and entertainment workers, several European small farmers’ confederations and “Via Campesina” (an international small farmers’ movement). In all, more than 150 associations and organisations were involved.

The rally was preceded in France by strikes and protests over several months, including indefinite strikes to defend pensions, the education system and the special unemployment scheme for short-term workers in the entertainment industry. Entertainment workers enlivened the rally with their acts; many had been involved in the strikes of recent weeks.

The fact that even after the end of the strike movement and protests, and despite their failure, so many people attended the rally shows that the political determination to fight the government’s attacks remains intact.

To get to the rally, many young participants had covered hundreds of kilometres by bicycle and in cars, often shared. Under the scorching sun, tens of thousands of people waited patiently to hear the speeches. Interesting discussions took place in forums on such topics as the war in Iraq, the government’s attacks on pensions, on democratic rights and the defence of the national education system and immigrants. The gathering, which had been conceived as a mass celebration, revealed by its seriousness and the assiduity of many participants the urgent need for a new political perspective in face of the growing disillusionment with the trade unions and the traditional left parties.

Members of the DAL (the Right to Housing) and militants of other organisations dismantled the Socialist Party (PS) stand. Jean-Claude Meunier, the secretary of the DAL federation, justified this action by

saying, “The PS has no place here, it carried out right-wing policies. What the government is doing today is the continuation of the Jospin government.”

Attac members had thrown the PS off the demonstration during the recent G8 summit at Evian.

Peasant Confederation stewards came to the aid of the PS to rebuild their stand: after all the Midi-Pyrénées Region, under the control of the PS and represented at the rally by the president of the regional council, had financed the gathering to the tune of 500,000 euros. However, the PS stand, the Communist Party (PCF) stand, and those of the Greens and the CGT trade union, which is close to the PCF, were little visited and those in charge of the discussions kept these organisations at arm’s length.

The speakers—representatives of Attac, the SUD trade unions and the Peasant Confederation—attempted to prevent any real discussion from taking place and any political balance sheet of the recent months being drawn. They propounded a crude activism, talking of “concrete forms of struggle” as a way to put pressure on the government and thus to make global capitalism more humane. They demanded the ignoring of all political disagreements, canvassing “ecological and social projects” along the same lines as the Peasant Confederation’s, which were presented as a brilliant example and as an alternative to the political parties.

José Bové, spokesperson for the Peasant Confederation (the product of a split from the FNSEA, the majority farmers’ union), was the main speaker and the star of the rally and his words were subsequently quoted in all the press. The daily *Libération* was headlined, “Bové, the number one oppositionist.”

His success was due less to the power of his ideas than to the obvious growing discontent with the old parties. Bové called on people to protest against the multinationals and to prepare for a month of September that was “not just hot but burning hot”.

“There must be demonstrations throughout the country, in front of the head offices of the multinationals,” he exclaimed. He challenged Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin (UMP) to have “the guts to set up a debate before the Cancún summit”.

Bové in no way rejects capitalism—the same goes for Attac—but fights against the domination of the international institutions which hold sway over world trade and which favour genetically modified crops that threaten the livelihoods of small farmers.

From an ideological point of view, his campaign for the defence of the French quality of foodstuffs against junk food—“la malbouffe” [bad food]—in McDonald’s, is comparable with the nationalist campaign the government is waging to safeguard the purity of the French language. On a political level, his fight against the WTO and

the hegemony of the American corporations adds up to supporting the big firms exporting French agricultural products to the detriment of their rivals in the global trade war. At base, his is a reactionary, nationalist perspective.

Bové's history is closely linked to Le Larzac. He left the region when he was a young philosophy student at Bordeaux and returned to support small farmers who, threatened with expropriation, were fighting against the extension of a military training camp. Together they occupied the expropriated farms and created a peasant action committee under the influence of Maoist and Christian groups. This struggle lasted from 1973 to 1981. When François Mitterrand of the Socialist Party came to power at that point, he dropped the army plan and yielded the farms to the farmers. Since that time Bové has been working his own farm, raising sheep and contributing to the production of Roquefort cheese in the region.

The obscurity into which José Bové and the Peasant Confederation sank was suddenly ended when, toward the end of the 1990s, a trade dispute came up between France and the United States. At that time, the European Union was boycotting hormone-treated beef imports from the US. The American government retaliated by raising the tariff on French cheese and wine products. At the time of the demonstrations against globalisation in Seattle in November 1999, Bové stood up as the defender of his Roquefort cheese to demonstrate the superiority of its French "quality" as opposed to American "malbouffe".

That same year he had taken part in the dismantling of a McDonald's restaurant being built in Millau, a small town below the Le Larzac plateau. When, in June 2002, the court found him guilty there was a return to the great days of Le Larzac: more than 60,000 campaigners took part in a campaign of solidarity with Bové.

Because of other criminal acts in relation to genetically modified crops, the peasant leader was later given a ten-month jail sentence. In June 2003, he was finally arrested at his farm amid a large police presence and detained in a prison near Montpellier. On July 14, President Jacques Chirac gave him a presidential remission of two months and on August 2 he was suddenly released, under certain conditions but just in time for the Le Larzac event.

It is no accident that Bové, in his speeches, directly addresses Raffarin: as the spokesperson for the Le Larzac peasants he has often sought common interests in discussions with influential politicians. In 1981 he met Pierre Mauroy (a PS minister under François Mitterrand), later Lionel Jospin (PS Prime Minister), and in 1999 the Gaullist Jacques Chirac.

Bové's campaign against the hegemony of the US corporations and his defence of the French nation-state make right-wing politicians look on him with favour. In 2000, he took part in a public debate with Charles Pasqua, the president of the right-wing RPF (Rassemblement pour la France) and former Minister of the Interior, on globalisation and the sovereignty of the nation-state. In the end, Pasqua vouchsafed for the legitimacy of his struggle.

After "Le Larzac 2003" many politicians attacked the gathering in the press. Jean-François Copé, the Raffarin government spokesperson, qualified the event as "the return of the organised far left" whose aim would be "to impede any reform and to paralyse French society". Bernard Kouchner, the former PS health minister, accused Bové of giving himself over to "dangerous populist, Poujadist lurches".

However, several politicians, even on the right, supported Bové. François Bayrou, the leader of the rightwing liberal UDF, declared that "a very important movement is being born".

Philippe Séguin, the former Gaullist minister and ex-president of the RPR (now the rightwing government party), volunteered himself as being able to deal with Bové. "What is as regrettable as it is dangerous, is that José Bové and his friends seem to have a monopoly on the thinking and the action about globalisation. People are all the more prepared to leave him with this monopoly." He regretted that those who could have been useful in the debate were absent. "Globalisation is a central issue which has been a preoccupation of mine for a long time," Séguin affirmed.

Many newspapers have reported that Bové has ruled out standing in the coming European elections, while also announcing that he would stand down as spokesperson of the Peasant Confederation in April 2004. This indicates that attempts may be made to nominate him as the common candidate of some left coalition of a Popular Front nature.

A number of local politicians have resigned from the PS. They expressed themselves on the forum of the *Politis* site, an Internet site close to Attac, appealing for the building of a new common "political force" as an alternative outside the traditional political parties.

The LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), a petty bourgeois radical party, is doing its utmost to confer upon the Le Larzac peasants leader, whom they have been supporting for years, indispensable left credentials. According to press statement issued on August 5: "Since 1973, the Le Larzac struggle has demonstrated how a handful of peasants could stymie the plans of the army and the state."

Alain Krivine, the chairperson of the LCR, in his August 12 personal analysis of Le Larzac 2003, did not make the slightest criticism of Bové's political perspective.

The future trajectory of Bové cannot be predicted with certainty. He may join some left centrist grouping or lend himself to being used by the right as an independent populist.

While many participants in the Le Larzac rally were seriously seeking a new political orientation, the perspectives put forward by the organisers end up in a blind alley. Bové's maxim—"Think globally, act locally"—is the opposite of a genuine internationalist programme whose aim is to unite the working class beyond national frontiers, to enable it to act as an independent force. It is small farmers and not workers who make up the base of his organisation.

"Let us resist! Other worlds are possible", was the slogan of Le Larzac 2003. It was formulated in such a general and vague way so as to reconcile the most disparate and contradictory political perspectives, including those that have nothing to do with socialism. This call for resistance can mean anything anyone wishes, as was typified by Jean-Emile Sanchez, the national secretary of Bové's peasant union, who declared at the rally: "The setting up of Roquefort committees, the creation of the direct sales group were acts of resistance. If I had not boosted the value of my lambs, I was dead economically."



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