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Lessons from the Historic Fight Against Fascism

Anarchists Against the Rise of Fascism

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A review of the fight against the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany and its lessons for revolutionary anarchists today.

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will start with the far-right but soon be used against the left. Of course the government will arrest people for violent actions (such as the Capitol invasion) but should not repress speech. Opposition to state repression of free speech and assembly does not prevent anti-fascists from organizing self-defense against far-right aggression.

Conclusion

Currently the United States as well as much of the world is threatened by a rise of rightwing authoritarianism. In the US, one of its two parties has swung far to the right. From its leadership around Donald Trump (even those who do not like him personally) to its core of big donors, the Republican Party is hard rightwing. Its deluded base is around 30 to 40 percent of the public, including a minority of people prepared to directly attack the government (as was done in the Capitol disruption). The Democratic Party is weak in opposition, being unable to provide real alternatives to the difficulties people face. (Price 2020)

The country is not immediately under threat of fascism or even a Republican coup. But continuing crises and disruptions—political, economic, climate, military, public health, or other—could crash the system. The alternatives, once again, could be some sort of fascism, or a libertarian socialist revolution. In that case, we would do well to review what can be learned from previous failures to defeat the rise of fascism.

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Contents

The Fight Against the Rise of Italian Fascism	6
The Fight Against the Rise of Nazism	9
Lessons to be Learned and Un-learned	12
Conclusion	14
References	14

but they now sought political unity with liberal, capitalist, parties. This was the “Popular Front.” An alliance with other workers’ parties could imply a class-against-class revolutionary struggle. But an alliance with liberal parties meant that they were committed to not going beyond the limits of capitalism, since the liberals would not accept that. This policy was implemented in the Spanish civil war and in French mass struggles—in both cases leading to the victory of fascists. (In Spain, the mainstream anarchists also joined in Popular Front governments with Social Democrats, Communists, and liberal bourgeois parties—against the opposition of some anarchists such as the Friends of Durrutti Group.)

The other wrong lesson some take from this history is a focus on street fighting and direct confrontation. Both the Italian anarchists and Trotsky advocated direct conflicts with the fascists instead of relying on the courts or elections—and they were right. But the forces they called to fight the fascists were mass organizations, big political parties and labor unions. Fighting fascists is necessary but not as distinct from working to win over the majority of the population. Otherwise it becomes, as has been said, “vanguards against vanguards.”

The need to confront fascist rallies does not mean physically fighting against rightwing supporters of bourgeois democracy, such as conservatives. The issue, as I have said, is not and was not “free speech for fascists,” but the right of fascists and semi-fascists to terrorize, violently attack, and break up left wing demonstrations, radical bookstores, union pickets, and to lynch African-Americans, Asian-Americans, or LGBTQ people.

The radical left must not let the far right appear to be the defenders of “free speech.” As a political minority, the far-left depends on the wide-spread belief in free speech and association to defend itself from state repression. Anarchists and other anti-fascists must oppose all government repression of political viewpoints; they should oppose the efforts of Biden and other Democrats to create new “anti-domestic terrorism” laws. These

This never happened. The Social Democrats stuck to constitutional legality. The Communists denounced Trotsky as another fascist. Anarchist and other far-left groupings were too small to make a difference in time. In 1933 Hitler took full power. It was to take the combined efforts of Stalinist Russia, the British empire, and US imperialism to defeat the Nazis and Fascists. Not only the German and Italian workers but much of the world would “pay with tears of blood” for the failure of workers’ revolutions to prevent the rise of fascism.

Lessons to be Learned and Un-learned

The most common reference I hear to the rise of fascism is from liberals. They denounce the sectarianism and isolation of the Communists in Germany (and implicitly in Italy) at the time. This becomes a rationale for voting for Democrats against the Republicans.

This would be relevant if they were calling on the labor unions and the organized African-American community as well as migrants, environmentalists, and women’s groups to strike and demonstrate against far-right Republicans, including right-wing “militias” and organized thugs. But voting for the Democrats means supporting a capitalist and imperialist party.

This view completely ignores the record of the German and Italian Social Democrats. They relied on the bourgeois-democratic parties and the state to protect them from fascism. The Germans endorsed a conservative capitalist figure for president. These policies led to defeat. Even in this extreme political situation of Germany, one of life or death, the strategy of supporting the “lesser evil” did not work.

It also ignores the further development of the Communist Parties. A few years after the victory of Hitler, in 1935, they jumped over their heads in a leap to the right. Not only did they now endorse alliances with Social Democrats (the former “social fascists”)

In the United States and around the world, there has been a rise of right-wing authoritarianism, including fascist and semi-fascist forces. This has caused many to consider the history of European fascism and the fight against it in the ‘twenties and ‘thirties. Unfortunately, the lessons taken from that history are often dangerously wrong.

I will look at that history and what I think are the conclusions we should draw. But first I will discuss what “fascism” is. By “fascism” I do not mean just any sort of authoritarianism, any kind of political repression, or any politics I do not like. Bourgeois representative democracy (or “liberal democracy”) may be quite repressive by itself. For example, the period after World War II, the 1950s, was called the “Golden Age of Capitalism.” It was also the height of the anti-communist hysteria, McCarthyism, Hoover’s FBI, the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Hollywood blacklist, the purge of Communists from the labor unions and schools, and Truman’s government loyalty oaths. Meanwhile the US South had legal racial segregation, enforced by Klan. The US Communist Party (whose top leaders were imprisoned) decided that the US was going fascist and sent other leaders underground. They were wrong, the US remained a limited bourgeois democracy, mainly due to the unprecedented post-war prosperity. (By comparison, today’s rightwing is expanding in the context of economic, health, climate, and ecological crises.)

Nor should we limit the term “fascist” to those movements which are precisely like Mussolini’s Fascist Party or the Nazis. History repeats but never exactly. By “fascism,” I mean a rightwing movement which aims at overturning capitalist democracy while maintaining capitalism. It ends elections (or has “elections” with only one party), bans independent newspapers or other media, outlaws oppositional speech, and imprisons or kills political opponents. Old-time military juntas or monarchies left people alone if they did not challenge the authorities. Fascism, instead, is “totalitarian.” It demands public support from everyone. With

all this, the fascist state will keep big business humming along, making more profits than ever, without unions to protect the workers. (I am not discussing the similarities and differences between fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism.)

Fascist ideologies and overt programs are varied, illogical, vague, and irrational. They usually are nationalist, mystical, nativist, and racist. To compete with the Socialist and Communist parties in 'twenties Germany, the fascists called themselves the National Socialist German Workers Party, that is, Socialist-Workers as well as National-German. Now, in the U.S.A., the far-right claims to be in the US tradition of loving "freedom," individualism, and "small government." Meanwhile they propose to ban women's right to choose abortions and to build up the police and military—not very libertarian or small-governmental.

To achieve power and then to maintain power, the fascists build popular movements, mostly of lower middle class (and upper working class) elements. This gives them a mass base, a force greater than that of a police or military coup. These movements use violence to break down the barriers of legality to which their liberal and conservative opponents cling. However, fascists are willing to also use legal maneuvers. The Italian Fascists and the German Nazis had many representatives elected to their respective parliaments before they took power. Mussolini was officially appointed prime minister by the king. Hitler was named Chancellor by the elected President.

The Fight Against the Rise of Italian Fascism

After the First World War, Italy (which had been on the winning side) was devastated by material and human destruction and economic crisis. There was much poverty and unemployment, and the ruin of middle layers. Earlier, in June 1914, a wave of working class insurrection had swept the country. After the war there

Despite its pretenses, the leadership of the Social Democratic party had no intention of really overthrowing capitalism and its state. It was reformist, not revolutionary. But it relied on elections to parliament, free speech, freedom of association, freedom to form labor unions, and other democratic rights. Without these bourgeois-democratic institutions and rights it would lose everything. The fascists intended to smash all these democratic forms and liberties while setting up a dictatorship. Both fascists and reformist socialists were supporters of capitalism, but they supported it in clashing ways.

Of those who tried to work out a revolutionary alternative to the programs of the Social Democrats and the Communists, it is worthwhile to note the views of Leon Trotsky—by then exiled from Russia by Stalin. He had few followers, especially in Germany at the time, probably less than the German anarchists or far-left Marxists. However, he left a record of political polemic which is useful to examine—although I am not a Trotskyist nor even a Marxist. (Trotsky 1971)

Trotsky proposed that the Communists and Social Democrats, their parties, unions, and other organizations, should form a fighting alliance—a united front. In every city and neighborhood they would set up joint defense committees. They would defend each other from Nazi assaults. Mutual patrols would drive the Nazis from the streets. They would map out Nazi halls and headquarters and bring the fight to them. Committees in shops and offices would check how business was supporting the fascists. In case the Nazis took power regionally or nationally, they would work out plans for a general strike. This was not a political merger but an alliance. "*March separately, strike together!*" Trotsky wrote. Over time he expected that the workers would compare the parties and chose the more militant and radical leaders. The committees might even become the basis for revolutionary workers' councils (as the strike committees in Russia had become revolutionary soviets).

and political crisis was not solved. After a period of maneuvering and negotiating, President Hindenberg...appointed Hitler as Chancellor! The reformist socialists ended up with the “greater evil” after all.

The other left party was the Communists, smaller than the Social Democrats but still of significant size and influence. By the end of the ‘twenties it had become completely subservient to the Russian government of Stalin. Independent thinkers, followers of the tradition of Luxemburg, Trotskyists, and far-left Marxists, had all been driven out. Whatever the Russian leadership (that is, Stalin) said, was it. This was true for all parties in the Communist International.

After the defeat in Italy, the Communist International had adopted a program of calling for united fronts of workers parties and unions to fight fascism. But by 1928 the CI abandoning that for a new, bizarre, program. It announced that revolution was immediately sweeping the world and that all parties should abandon all support for reforms in favor of imminent revolution (this was called the “Third Period”). They should quit all unions that did not have “revolutionary” (Communist) programs. It was declared that all political forces which did not subordinate themselves to the Communist Parties were not merely reformist but were “fascist.” Social Democrats were now officially “social fascists.” Liberals and conservatives were fascists. Every non-Communist was a fascist. Anarchists were “anarcho-fascists.” Obviously there was no point in allying with socialists or unionists against the fascists, since socialists and unionists were also fascists. They had re-created, if anything in a worse form, all of Bordiga’s errors.

Joseph Stalin declared, “*Fascism is the militant organization of the bourgeoisie which bases itself on the active support of the Social Democracy. Objectively, Social Democracy is the moderate wing of fascism.... These organizations [fascists and Social Democrats] do not contradict but supplement one another. They are not antipodes [opposites] but twins.*” (Price 2007; p. 153)

were the “two red years” of 1919–1920. Centered in the industrialized north, the workers struck and occupied the factories, forming workers’ councils. Italy teetered on the edge of a workers’ revolution, but the leadership of the main union federation was Socialists. Unlike today, the Socialist Parties of that time claimed to be for a new, socialist, society, although in practice they compromised with the big industrialists. This is just what they did in Italy during the strike wave. The anarcho-syndicalists had played a major role in the occupations and were disgusted by the Socialists’ sell-out. The well-known anarchist, Errico Malatesta, warned the workers and peasants, “*Complete the revolution quickly or the bourgeoisie sooner or later will make us pay with tears of blood for the fear that we have instilled in them today.*” (Pernicone 1993; p. 294) He could not have been more prescient.

Discharged soldiers, with no futures, formed the core of reactionary vigilante groups, often led by former officers. These were the “Arditi” (“commandos”). The most successful group was led by Benito Mussolini, who had previously been in the left-wing of the Socialist Party, sympathetic to the revolutionary syndicalists. Now he organized his forces into the Fascist Party, with subsidies from the rich. The Fascists roamed the country, focusing on specific towns or cities, one at a time, violently attacking union halls and left-wing gatherings, trashing left-wing newspaper offices, and beating and killing prominent radicals. (Riddell 2018) Note that the issue was never “free speech for fascists,” but that they committed physical crimes. They got away with these acts of aggression due to sympathetic police and judges.

Italian anarchists called for a united front against the Fascist gangs. (Rivista Anarchica 1989) The anarchists (anarcho-syndicalists) were a significant minority, leading their own union federation, the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*. They called for unity in action of the left parties and their unions, to physically combat the Fascists, to defend workers’ institutions, and to drive the Fascists off the streets. To the extent that they could, they carried

out this strategy, with whomever would work with them. They supported the rank-and-file defense organization, the “Arditi del Popolo” (“people’s commandos”). Beside anarchists, these included supporters of the Socialist and Communist parties (the Communists having by now split off from the Socialists). They also included radical republicans (militant anti-monarchists). In a number of towns and cities, the Arditi del Popolo did drive out Mussolini’s invading goons.

However, the Socialist Party leadership would not join such radical activities. Instead of organized self-defense, they demanded that the capitalist government pass laws to reign in the lawless Fascists. Some laws were passed, but were dead letters due to the sympathies for the Fascists of the police and courts. In August 1921, the Socialist Party actually negotiated a truce, a so-called Pact of Pacification, with the Fascists. This disarmed the Socialists but was ignored by the Fascists of course. Limiting themselves solely to legality and parliamentary politics, the Socialists were like lambs to the slaughter.

The Communist Party also did not support the Arditi del Popolo nor join any kind of united anti-fascist front. At the time, it was led by Amedeo Bordiga (then supported by Antonio Gramsci). Then and later, Bordiga was extremely authoritarian and super-sectarian. He did not believe that Communists should join a united front unless they could control it. He forbade members from joining the Arditi del Popolo or working with the anarchists. (Some years later Bordiga was expelled from the Communist International, not so much for his continued opposition to united fronts but for criticisms of Stalin. His views are still influential among some far-left Marxists.)

So both the Socialists and the Communists—each in their own way—sabotaged the possibility of a united front to fight Italian fascism. Without effective opposition, at the end of 1922, the Fascist Party took power. It had the blessings of the monarchy and the mainstream capitalist parties. Feeling their way through a pe-

riod when they superficially maintained limited democratic institutions, the Fascists eventually established a totalitarian state—which would serve as a model for Hitler. As Malatesta had warned, the bourgeoisie made the Italian workers “pay with tears of blood.”

The Fight Against the Rise of Nazism

The rise to power of the Nazi Party is more well known in the US. After World War I, Germany suffered through hard times, which got worse as the Great Depression spread worldwide. There were two attempted workers’ revolutions (both brutally defeated) and an ongoing class war between the workers and rightwing groups led by former officers. Again, the issue was not “free speech” but the violent aggression of the Nazis and other reactionary groupings. The right spread its Big Lie that the only reason Germany had lost the war was due to a “stab in the back,” betrayal by Social Democrats and Jews. Class conflict and threats to profits caused big business to become willing to hire the Nazis to take over the government. They became the biggest single party in the Reichstag (parliament) but never won a majority.

On the left, the largest party was the Social Democratic Party. It was sometimes in the government and sometimes out, always relying on legality and parliamentary maneuvering. When a revolution had broken out at the end of the war, the Social Democrats had allied with the right wing military to put it down with bloodshed (killing Rosa Luxemburg). The result was to replace the monarchy by the Weimar Republic, a limited bourgeois democracy but not a socialist revolution.

In the pivotal presidential election of 1932, the Social Democrats decided that it was all-important to keep Hitler out. So they endorsed, as a “lesser evil,” the conservative old general, Paul von Hindenberg. Their slogan was “Smash Hitler, Elect Hindenberg!” With socialist support, von Hindenberg won. But the economic