

Can the European fascists take power in the 1990s?

Workers Solidarity Movement

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The growth of the far-right throughout Europe in the last few years has alarmed many who thought fascism died with Hitler. It also has given rise to a debate on the left over the nature of fascism, one that has spilled over into the letters pages of Workers Solidarity. The debate continues with Andrew Flood discussing some of the historical features of fascism and the importance of racism as the central plank of fascism to-day.

In order to explain the rise of fascism to-day it is useful to look at the rise of fascism historically. On the left, fascism is often presented as something that arose to head off imminent revolution. There is some truth in this as in both Italy and Germany fascism appeared in a period of great social upheaval. Germany saw workers' risings in 1918 and 1923. In Italy the years from the end of the war to the early twenties were known as the Red Years and saw waves of land and factory occupations.

Although the prototypes of the fascist organisations came into existence at this time they were not significant in defeating these uprisings. They were defeated instead through a combination of the conventional forces of the state and the intervention of the social-democrats, turning protest away from an attempt to fundamentally change society into one of gaining a "fairer" version of capitalism. Significant reforms were won including higher wages, the eight hour day and breaking up of some of the larger landlords' estates. In both Italy and Germany the workers had set up factory councils. Rather than going for a head on confrontation with these bodies the bosses legalised them and converted them into toothless consultative bodies.

The bosses were not altogether happy with this because such reforms were paid for in part out of their profits. Heavy industry in particular with its much heavier ratio of fixed costs in the shape of machinery resented this. The state however represented the interests of the capitalists as a whole, and light industry preferred the stable conditions created by the policy of class collaboration rather than a confrontational approach. Therefore the state was unwilling to launch the serious attacks on the workers' organisations that heavy industry demanded.

Fascism and big business

The heavy industrialists were the first to turn to fascism to help them win back their profits. Initially this was by financing and arming the variety of fascist gangs that had arisen after the war. In Italy in particular the industrialists funded an army of fascists composed of alienated war veterans, adventurists and petty criminals that would arrive in a particular locality and set about smashing the local union organisation and whatever socialist organisations existed. At the time only the anarchists were willing to physically fight the fascists but the fascist tactic of smashing the left on an area by area basis meant they, on their own, lacked the strength to stop the fascists. Armed anarchist resistance to fascism was to continue throughout Europe until 1945.

This fascist tactic of swamping areas was only possible because these gangs were funded by the industrialists while those fighting against them were workers who could not leave their jobs for long periods of time to concentrate where ever the fascists were. Later on the main unions would also, sometimes, hold demonstrations against fascism but more often than not these were broken up by fascists, sometimes even though the fascists were heavily outnumbered. Most of the left shied away from any physical confrontation, preferring to relay on the social democrats and the liberals to protect them through the state.

The fascists served other purposes for heavy industry as well. Their focus on “the nation” and rearming suited the industrialists. Heavy industry was the main supplier for the war industry and during re-armament massive profits were made by the industrialists. Re-armament essentially served to provide massive state subsidies and guaranteed profits for the bosses. To achieve this goal and to drive down wages and conditions heavy industry supported fascism in its drive for power. The importance of this financial support was explained by Hitler when in 1934 he invited his audience to consider what it had meant in the elections for the Nazis to have a thousand cars put at their disposal.

Did the difference between heavy industry and light industry mean that the light industrialists were natural anti-fascists. Their business were not so capital intensive as heavy industry so they did not have the same need to drive down wages as recession could be controlled by laying off a section of the workforce. They supported social partnership with the social democrats and the trade unions. To a large extent a militaristic expansion did not favour their needs and because they would, at least in part, have to pay for it.

We need a revolution

However as fascism grew and gained mass support it became obvious it was going to come to power. The only thing that could have stopped it would have been a revolution. The light industrialists, when faced with a choice of losing their power through a workers’ revolution or the more minor disadvantages of fascism, were obviously going to make one choice. In any case fascism did promise them lower wages and the destruction of workplace organisation. This went some way towards making up for its potential disadvantages.

Fascism’s mass base was built around the middle class, which in both Italy and Germany had been impoverished. After the war very high inflation served both to drive down their earnings and reduce drastically the real value of their income. They lacked the organisation of the workers so it was not unusual for them to be paid less than manual workers. In this situation they could have been won over to socialism but socialism has been very much discredited by the combination of the degeneration of the Russian revolution under Lenin and the repeated betrayals of the social democrats in power.

The same was true for the peasantry. Agricultural prices had plummeted in the post war years. The left for the most part made no attempt to influence the peasantry, influenced primarily by the concept that peasants could play no progressive role. Indeed the Russian revolution was attacked at the Italian Socialist Party conference for having given the land to the peasants. In these circumstances it was the fascists rather than the socialists who gained support in rural areas. In Germany the big landowners were able to use fascism to get the peasants to form a block with them, calling for higher food prices.

Fascism also recruited from other sources but it was singularly unsuccessful in recruiting any sort of working class base. In the German factory council election of 1931 the fascists achieved only 5% of the vote. In the partial elections of 1933 they achieved only 3% and this with Hitler in power. In Italy the fascist unions were only built by waiting for the fascists gangs to arrive in an area and then firing anyone who was not a member of the fascist union. The gangs would fill the employers need for labour and smash any resistance. Eventually the workers would be starved

into joining the fascist unions. Despite the odds against them it would sometimes take months before a majority of the workers would submit.

Fascism Today

Today it would appear the far right are on the march again. If election figures alone were anything to go by they are 2/3rds of the way to power in France and about 1/3 in Germany (Hitler never got more than 33% of the vote). Is there really an imminent threat of the Fascists taking power? In fact these figures serve to highlight not only the real danger of modern day fascism but also the differences between the situation in the twenties and thirties and that which exists today.

Two different threats need to be distinguished when we talk about fascism. The first threat is the threat to individuals of being set upon and maimed or killed by fascist thugs. This clearly exists today in almost every European country. Since the early eighties an average of two racist murders have occurred a week in France. Racist attacks in Germany last year became a regular feature on all the worlds news services. Attacks on leftists have also become far more common throughout Europe in the last few years.

The second threat is different, this is the threat of fascism on the road to power, where the right wing attempts to smash all opposition by physical means. European fascism has not yet entered this phase. It does not have the backing of any sizeable section of the ruling class. Its attacks to date are designed by the leaders of the fascist organisations to win it more support. The concentration on racism rather than attacks on workplace organisation is not primarily due to the fascists hiding their true colours. As yet big business has not called upon the fascists to play their historic role of smashing potential opposition to austerity measures.

There are few reports of fascists attacking pickets or breaking up the premises of unions. Direct attacks by fascists on the left have increased but are still very much fewer than the number of attacks on immigrants. This is not to say there are none, the bomb attack on the office of the Danish section of the International Socialists in which one of their members was killed or the physical attacks by FN supporters on anti-fascist demonstrations show such activity is occurring. Leftists have been killed in Germany by fascists and in Britain physical attacks on the left have become more common.

There was the recent daytime attack on the anarchist Freedom Bookshop in London's Whitechapel by the neo-nazi C18 gang (the 1 and 8 refers to the letters of the alphabet, A & H or Adolph Hitler) and the attempt to burn down another anarchist bookshop, the 121 Centre in Brixton. It is, however, a secondary feature of the activities of fascists to-day.

London Arrests

As yet there is little evidence for any substantial link between the fascists and sections of the ruling class. This is also the reason why the police can sometimes choose to move in force against the fascists. The recent arrest of some 300 fascists trying to attack the Bloody Sunday march in London is a case in point. This is not to say the cops are an ally in the fight against fascism, just that at the moment the cops and the state have no great enthusiasm for the fascist groups. The fascists have little support from any section of the ruling class so any support they get from the police is restricted to that engendered by a set of common prejudices they share.

There is no doubt though that the fascists in Germany have the passive if not active support of the cops a lot of the time. At Rostock the local police failed to do anything to protect the immigrants or prevent fascists from arriving at the town. Considerable numbers of anti-fascists were arrested in Rostock however.

Yet the German polices response when sections of the left use physical force as a weapon is much more spectacular. In the 70's the terrorist Red Army Fraction (RAF) killed a much smaller number of people than the fascists have killed in Germany. This activity was enough for the German state to ban members of left organisations from any state employment, hounding tens of thousands out of their jobs. It saw waves of arrests and torture in police custody. It saw the murder of three of the leading members of the RAF in jail by the state. The German far right has not received anything like the same sort of treatment. They do have the support of at least a small section of the ruling class.

Fascism or racism?

The concentration by the fascists on racism also explains why their supporters include many workers this time around. When all the mainstream political parties are blaming unemployment and poor housing on immigration the fascists are able to say, look we are fighting to get you jobs by driving out these foreigners. This is why many on the left see the far-right as being ultra-racists rather than fascists. At the moment the fight against the manifestations of racism is more important, but this can not be artificially divided from the fight against the far-right parties. This separation also comes out of a analysis of fascism that sees it as something which can only arise in opposition to the existence of a large militant socialist movement. Essentially in this analysis fascism is a tool the bosses use only when there is a working class movement heading in a revolutionary direction.

Before World War Two fascism did not arise to head off an imminent revolution in either Germany or Italy. It arose because the bosses needed to squeeze the working class a lot harder than the democratic capitalist state was capable of. Wage cuts were so savage under fascism that wages in Germany, for instance, did not reach the 1931 level until 1956. Including cuts in the social wage, new taxes and direct wage cuts workers lost at least 50% of their pay. In fact a large part of the German "economic miracle" after World War Two was due to the fact that post-war German bosses were left both with the physical legacy of the capital created under fascism but also a level of wages and conditions much lower then the rest of Europe.

At the moment capitalism is in a deep crisis and it would appear that neither social partnership as practised in Ireland or the "free market" economics of the Thatcherites can pull it out. This does not mean that the bosses will necessarily turn to fascism in the near future, it does however mean that it would be dangerous to rule out this possibility. It has been argued that the unions are very weak and the bosses would not need to resort to such measure to drive down wages. As against this wages in most European countries have not yet fallen in real terms.

Attempts by the bosses to actually cut back wages have been met with limited resistance like the metal workers' strike in Germany or the miners' marches in Britain. Some workers, like the tube workers in London, have taken action outside the official structure of their unions. The actual level of resistance to substantial real cuts is unmeasured, the bosses could decide the current states are incapable of enforcing their will.

Soft racists

The current status of the European far-right as a primarily racist rather than fascist movement does effect the way we fight it. It is the official racism of the governments and opposition parties that has made the far right acceptable. Yet many of their campaigns built by the left to-day have sought to include soft racists in the fight against the hard racists. This is a mistake for three reasons. Firstly it means those sections of the population subject to racism will just see the left as not offering any real alternative. Secondly it makes the fascists' racist agenda itself more acceptable although it aims to make their methods less so. Thirdly, it's wrong to give any respectability or comfort to racism.

The racists have succeeded in creating a consensus throughout Europe that runs from the far right to the soft left. Immigration is identified as the key to the problem affecting workers' conditions. The difference between the fascists fire-bombing houses and the French Socialist Party deporting immigrants is, in the final analysis, one of tactics and not one of principle. The fascists may well lose support to the more moderate racists if these 'moderates' succeed in slowing immigration. This demonstrates how it is not the fascists setting the terms of debate but rather the mainstream parties. There is a need to win what remains of the activists in social democratic parties to a more serious anti-fascism but this can not be effectively done through alliances with the leaderships of these organisations.

All of the larger far left groupings in Europe do not seem to be serious about fighting the rise of fascism. Many of the anti-fascist organisations that have been set up are no more than the crudest of recruiting fronts for various Leninist parties. Some like the Anti-Nazi League and 'Youth against Racism in Europe' do not even have a real branch structure or meetings. They operate entirely as a wing of the Party, propagating a somewhat watered down version of the full line with the aim of identifying potential recruits. Outside involvement is confined to big name speakers.

This is very much a repeat of the tactics used by both the Communist Parties and the social democrats in the early thirties (albeit from a different political angle). They tended to identify the other left groups as a more serious threat to themselves than the fascists, the Communist Parties going so far as to characterise the social democrats as "social-fascists". Later when the depth of the threat had been realised alliances with "progressive" elements of the bourgeoisie were ranked as being more important than any physical opposition to the fascists. Indeed it was feared that any physical confrontation might drive away liberal supporters.

Controlling the Anti-Fascists?

What is needed is an open campaign that will fight against fascism as part of a broader campaign against racism. Physical confrontation, and physical defence and mobilisation of their victims, will have to form a key part of this. What we can expect is unfortunately somewhat different to this. The bulk of the left is so demoralised by the events of the last few years that all of the large organisations are afraid of involving their members outside the immediate role of paper sellers.

It was the refusal of the left in the 20's and 30's to recognise a common enemy and work against it that helped fascism into power. The struggle for the control of the anti-fascists became more

important than the struggle against fascism. Cute phrases about history repeating itself can not sufficiently describe the horror that will come about if the same mistake is made again.

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