

European and US Working Class Politics: Right, Left and Neutered

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The deepening economic crises in Europe and the United States are provoking contrasting socio-political responses from the working and middle classes. In Europe, especially among the Mediterranean countries (Greece , Spain , Portugal and Italy) unemployed youth, workers and lower middle class public employees have organized a series of general strikes, occupations of public plazas and other forms of direct action. At the same time, the middle class, private-sector employees and small business people have turned to the “hard right” and elected, or are on the verge of electing, reactionary prime ministers in Portugal, Spain, Greece and perhaps even in Italy. In other words, the deepening crises has polarized Southern Europe: strengthening the institutional power of the hard right while increasing the strength of the extra-parliamentary left in mobilizing ‘street power’.

In contrast, in Northern and Central Europe the hard right and neo-fascist movements have made significant inroads among workers and the lower middle class at the expense of the traditional center-left and center-right parties[1]. The relative stability, affluence and stable employment of the Nordic working class has been accompanied by increasing support for racist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic parties.[2]

In the case of the United States , with a few notable exceptions, the working class has remained a passive spectator in the face of the right turn of the Democratic Party and the hard right’s capture of the Republican Party. There are no left wing street politics in the US , unlike Southern Europe , and only a passive rejection and repudiation of the hard right policies of Congress and the White House.

Rather than solidarity, the economic crisis highlights working class fragmentation, disunity and internal polarization.

The Right/Left Polarizations

One of the key reasons for the growth of right wing appeals to Northern European workers is the demise of working class-based ideology, parties and leaders. The Labor and Social Democratic Parties have initiated and administered neoliberal programs while promoting multi-national corporation-led export strategies. They have embraced regressive tax ‘breaks’ for big business; they have participated in imperialist wars of aggression (Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya); they have embraced the so-called “war on terror” mostly against Moslem countries while tolerating the growth of the neo-fascist, far-right Islamophobes who practice “direct action” to expel immigrants in Europe. The European governing parties of the center-left (social democratic and labor) and the center-right(Sarkozy, Cameron and Merkle) have been outspoken in their assault on

“multiculturalism” code-word for Moslim immigrant rights. Their tolerance and exploitation of Islamophobia serves as a cheap vote getter among their xenophobic electorate and as a justification for their involvement in US-Israeli wars of aggression in the Middle East and South Asia . As a result the “mainstream” regimes have weakened working class solidarity with immigrant workers and undermined any concerted effort by the state and civil society to actively counteract the neo-fascist racists who ply a more virulent version of Islamophobia embracing the Zionist ideologues’ vision of ethnic cleansing.

The trade unions have lost membership due especially to the growth of ‘contingent or temporary workers’ who are especially susceptible to far-right appeals. Equally important, trade unions no longer engage in political education aimed at strengthening class solidarity among all workers. While in Northern Europe wages may increase, the trade unions’ collaboration with the corporate elite has left workers vulnerable to anti-immigrant and Islamophobic propaganda. In this context a perverse “class struggle” pits the unorganized workers against those “below”, the immigrants. The neo-fascists gain by promoting and exploiting cultural and chauvinist beliefs which trade unions and social democratic parties no longer actively combat through worker education and class struggle. In other words, the neo-liberal practice and ideology of the “center-left” parties and unions undermine class political identities and open the door for right wing penetration and influence. This is especially evident when center-left and trade union leaders no longer bother to consult or debate policies with their members: They impose policies from above, providing the ‘far right’ with a formidable weapon to attack the ‘elitist nature’ of the center-left political system.

In contrast, in Southern Europe the profound economic crisis, due in large part to the harsh conditions imposed by Northern and Western European bankers and their local center-left and right-wing politicians, has strengthened and sharpened class consciousness and politics. Right-wing appeals to anti-immigrant and anti-Moslem politics has little resonance among Southern European workers in the face of skyrocketing unemployment and brutal wage and pension cuts.

Northern European workers have allied with the right, and their own politicians and bankers, in demanding the imposition of greater austerity measures against Southern European countries, buying into the racist ideology that Mediterranean workers are lazy, irresponsible and on permanent vacation. In fact, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish workers work a more days per year, enjoy less vacation time and much less secure pensions. The same racist sentiments pitting Northern workers against immigrants also promote chauvinist stereotypes against militant Southern European workers and fuel right-wing sympathies.

Creditor Northern European bankers and political leaders squeeze their own working and middle class taxpayers in order to bail-out their counterparts among the Southern European debtor elites, who, in turn, agree to squeeze their workers and public employees to meet the debt payment demands of the North. The Northern workers in the imperial countries have been convinced that their living standards are threatened by the irresponsible and indebted South, and not by the speculative activity and irresponsible lending of their own bankers. In the South, the workers have to shoulder the double exploitation of the Northern European creditors as well as their own local elites; hence they have greater class awareness of the in justice of the imperial and local capitalist system.

To the degree that Northern workers make common cause with their own creditor ruling

class and shift their resentments toward workers abroad and immigrants below, they become vulnerable to right wing appeals. They openly express resentment against striking Greek, Spanish or Portuguese workers', whose militant struggles might disrupt their planned vacations to the Mediterranean islands and seashore resorts. The ideological battle which should pit the workers of Northern Europe against their own state creditors and speculator financial elite is transformed into hostility toward Southern European workers and immigrants. Overseas bailouts, imperial wars and cuts in social programs lead to greater competition over shrinking social expenditures and conflict between employed and unemployed, 'native' and 'immigrant' workers'.

International workers' solidarity has been severely weakened and replaced, in some cases, by the proliferation of international far-right networks propagating virulent anti-immigrant (and anti-socialist) propaganda and, as in the case of the massacre of almost 70 left-wing youth, mostly teenage, activists of the Norwegian Labor Party, poses a direct murderous threat to progressive supporters of immigrant rights. The extreme-right began its assault on immigrants and Moslems and has now moved against the local left and progressive movements which support them. This has taken on an even more complex dimension with the marriage of rabid pro-Israel, Zionist ideologues (mostly based in the US) and the neo-fascist Islamophobes attacking supporters of Palestinian rights, an issue repeatedly stressed by the Norwegian fascist mass murderer, Anders Behring Breivik. The problem is that the 'respectable' liberal, social democratic and conservative parties, in their electioneering, have pandered to the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim appeals of the far-right in order to attract workers rather than embarking on far-reaching class reforms which would lessen inequalities, financing them via increases in progressive taxes and greater public investments to unify all workers (local and immigrant) against capital.

Lacking working class solidarity, the sons and daughters of immigrants, especially the disproportionately unemployed young workers, engage in forms of direct action such as the pillage of local business, confrontations with the police and general mayhem, as was evident in the nationwide riots in England in the "hot August" of 2011. The demise of working class politics thus has produced violent right-wing extremism, racial-immigrant riots and pillage. The labor elite are spectators, confined to condemning extremism and violence, calling for investigations, but without any semblance of self-criticism or any programs for changing the socio-economic structures that produce the right turn and violence among workers and the unemployed.

The United States : The Rise of the Right

Unlike Europe , the extreme right is at home within the US established order. Brutal anti-immigration policies have led to the expulsion of nearly 1 million undocumented workers or family members in the first three years of the Obama regime (a three-fold increase over the George W. Bush years). The Tea Party has elected Congress members in the Republican Party who promote massive cuts in the social safety net with the collaboration of the White House. The mass media, Congress, the White House, mass-based Christian fundamentalist politicians and leading Zionist personalities and organizations actively promote Islamophobia and lead virulent campaigns against Moslems by fanning public insecurity. The US 'establishment' has pre-empted the racist agenda of the far-right in Europe . The far-right has turned its guns directly on the social programs of the poor, the working class and public employees (especially school teachers).

Moreover, their assault on debt financing and public expenditures has led to conflicts with

sectors of the capitalist class, who are dependent on the State. In the course of the recent Congressional 'debate' over raising the debt ceiling, Wall Street joined in a selective struggle against the far-right: calling for "compromise" involving social cuts and tax reforms while supporting their anti-public union offensive.

Unlike in Europe, the mass of the US working class and poor are passive. They have been neutered: neither engaging in the street riots of England, nor taking the sharp right turn of their Northern European counterparts, nor participating in militant workers' strikes of Southern Europe. The US trade unions, with the exception of the public employees union in Wisconsin, have been totally absent from any of the big confrontations. The American trade union bosses concentrate on lobbying the corporate Democratic Party and are incapable of mobilizing their shrinking membership.

The Tea Party, unlike its Northern European counterparts, does not attract many workers because of their virulent attacks on popular public programs, like Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment insurance and especially Social Security - all of programs most likely to benefit American workers and their families. On the other hand, the economic crisis in the US has not led to Mediterranean-style mass action because American trade unions either don't exist (93% of the private sector is not unionized) or are compromised to the point of paralysis.

So far the US working class is a spectator to the rise of the extreme right, because its organized leaders have tied their fortunes to the Democratic Party, which, in turn, has adopted significant parts of the far right's agenda.

Conclusion

The US, in contrast to Europe, is experiencing a peaceful transition from neo-liberalism to far-right politics, where the working and middle class are passive victims rather than active combatants for either the left or the right. In Europe, the current crisis reveals a deep polarization between the radical left turn of workers in the South and the growing shift to the far right among workers in Northern Europe. The ideal of international worker solidarity is being replaced, at best, by regional solidarity among the workers of Southern Europe and, at worst, by a network of rightist parties in the Northern European countries. With the decline of international solidarity, chauvinist and racist tendencies are rampant in the North, while in the South workers' movements are joining with a broad range of social movements, including the unemployed, students, small business people and pensioners.

While the electoral right is capitalizing on the disenchantment with the center-left in Southern Europe, they still face formidable resistance from the extra-parliamentary workers and social movements. In contrast, in Northern Europe and the US, the far-right faces no such conscious opposition - in the streets or in the workplace. In these regions only the breakdown of the economic system or a prolonged severe economic recession combined with devastating cuts of basic social programs and protections may set in motion a revival of working class movements and hopefully, it will be from the class-conscious left and not from the far right.

Notes

[1] According to a study of workers support for far right wing parties in Western Europe, "workers have become their core clientele". See Daniel Oesch "Explaining Workers' Support

for Right-wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria , Belgium , France , Norway , and Switzerland ” International Political Science Review 2008: 29; pp. 350 -373.

[2] While some of the motivations of the workers vary, the far-right wing parties are the beneficiaries.

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