

The Rise of the European Right: Reaction to the Neoliberal Right

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The European parliamentary elections witnessed a major breakthrough for the right-wing parties throughout the region. The rise of the Right runs from the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom, the Baltic and Low countries, France, Central and Eastern Europe to the Mediterranean.

Most, if not all, of these emerging right-wing parties mark a sharp break with the ruling neo-liberal, Christian and Social Democratic parties who have presided over a decade of crisis.

The 'new Right' cannot be understood simply by attaching negative labels ('fascist', 'racist' and 'anti-Semitic'). The rise of the Right has to be placed in the context of the decay of political, social and economic institutions, the general and persistent decline of living standards and the disintegration of community bonds and class solidarity. The entire existing political edifice constructed by the neo-liberal parties bears deep responsibility for the systemic crisis and decay of everyday life. Moreover, this is how it is understood by a growing mass of working people who vote for the Right.

The so-called 'radical Left', usually defined as the political parties *to the left* of the governing Social Democratic parties, with the exception of SYRIZA in Greece, have failed to capitalize on the decline of the neo-liberal parties. There are several reasons that account for the lack of a right-left polarization. Most of the 'radical Left', in the final account, gave 'critical support' to one or another of the Labor or Social Democratic parties and reduced their 'distance' from the political-economic disasters that have followed. Secondly, the 'radical Left's' positions on some issues were irrelevant or offensive to many workers: namely, gay marriage and identity politics. Thirdly, the radical Left recruited prominent personalities from the discredited Labor and Social Democratic parties and thus raised suspicion that they are a 'new version' of past deceptions. Fourthly, the radical Left is strong on public demonstrations demanding 'structural changes' but lacks the 'grass roots' clientelistic organizations of the Right, which provide 'services', such as soup kitchens and clinics dealing with day-to-day problems.

While the Right pretends to be 'outside' the neo-liberal establishment challenging the assumption of broad powers by the Brussels elite, the Left is ambiguous: Its support for a 'social Europe' implies a commitment to reform a discredited and moribund structure. The Right proposes 'national capitalism' outside of Brussels; the Left proposes 'socialism within the European Union'. The Left parties, the older Communist parties and more recent groupings, like Syriza in Greece, have had mixed results. The former have generally stagnated or lost support despite the systemic crisis. The latter, like Syriza, have made impressive gains but failed to break the 30% barrier. Both lack electoral allies. As a result,

the immediate challenge to the neo-liberal status quo comes from the electoral new Right parties and on the left from the extra-parliamentary social movements and trade unions. In the immediate period, the crisis of the European Union is being played out between the neo-liberal establishment and the 'new Right'.

The Nature of the New Right

The 'new Right' has gained support largely because it has denounced the four pillars of the neo-liberal establishment: globalization, foreign financial control, executive rule by fiat (the Brussels troika) and the unregulated influx of cheap immigrant labor.

Nationalism, as embraced by the new Right, is tied to national capitalism: Local producers, retailers and farmers are counterpoised to free traders, mergers and acquisitions by international bankers and the giant multinationals. The 'new Right' has its audience among the provincial and small town business elite as well as workers devastated by plant closures and relocations.

The 'new Right's' nationalism is 'protectionist' – seeking tariff barriers and state regulations to protect industries and workers from 'unfair' competition from overseas conglomerates and low-wage immigrant labor.

The problem is that protectionism limits the imports of cheap consumer goods sold in many small retail shops and affordable to workers and the lower middle class. The Right 'dreams' of a corporatist model where national workers and industries bond to oppose liberal competitive capitalism and class struggle trade unions. As the class struggle declines, the 'tri partite' politics of the neo-liberal right is reconfigured by the New Right to include 'national' capital and a 'paternalistic state'.

In sum, the nationalism of the Right evokes a mythical past of harmony where national capital and labor unite under a common communal identity to confront big foreign capital and cheap immigrant labor.

Political Strategy: Electoral and Extra-Parliamentary Politics

Currently, the new Right is primarily oriented to electoral politics, especially as it gains mass support. They have increased their share of the electorate by combining mass mobilization and community organizing with electoral politics, especially in depressed areas. They have attracted middle class voters from the neo-liberal right and working class voters from the old Left. While some sectors of the Right, like the Golden Dawn in Greece, openly flaunt fascist symbols – flags and uniforms – as well as provoking street brawls, others pressure the governing neo-liberal right to adopt some of their demands especially regarding immigration and the 'deportation of illegals'. For the present, most of the new Right's focus is on advancing its agenda and gaining supporters through aggressive appeals within the constitutional order and by keeping the more violent sectors under control. Moreover, the current political climate is not conducive to open extra-parliamentary 'street fighting' where the new Right would be easily crushed. Most right-wing strategists believe the current context is conducive to the accumulation of forces via peaceful methods.

Conditions Facilitating the Growth of the Right

There are several structural factors contributing to the growth of the new Right in Europe:

First and foremost, there is a clear decline of democratic power and institutions resulting from the centralization of executive – legislative power in the hands of a self-appointed elite in Brussels. The new Right argues effectively that the European Union has become a profoundly authoritarian political institution disenfranchising voters and imposing harsh austerity programs without a popular mandate.

Secondly, national interests have been subordinated to benefit the financial elite identified as responsible for the harsh policies that have undermined living standards and devastated local industries. The new Right counterpoises ‘the nation’ to the Brussels ‘Troika’ – the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission.

Thirdly, ‘liberalization’ has eroded local industries and undermined communities and protective labor legislation. The Right denounces liberal immigration policies, which permit the large-scale inflow of cheap workers at a time of depression level unemployment. The crisis of capitalism combined with the large force of cheap immigrant labor forms the material basis for right-wing appeals to workers, especially those in precarious jobs or unemployed.

Right: Contradictions and the Double Discourse

The Right, while criticizing the neo-liberal state for unemployment, focuses mainly on the immigrants competing with nationals in the labor market rather than on the capitalists whose investment decisions determine levels of employment and unemployment.

The Right attacks the authoritarian nature of the European Union, but its own structures, ideology and history pre-figure a repressive state.

The Right rightly proposes to end foreign elite control of the economy, but its own vision of a ‘national state’, especially one linked to NATO, multi-national corporations and imperial wars, will provide no basis for ‘rebuilding the national economy’.

The Right speaks to the needs of the dispossessed and the need to ‘end austerity’ but it eschews the only effective mechanism for countering inequalities – class organization and class struggle. Its vision of the ‘collaboration between productive capital and labor’ is contradicted by the aggressive capitalist offensive to cut wages, social services, pensions and working conditions. The new Right targets immigrants as the cause of unemployment while obscuring the role of the capitalists who hire and fire, invest abroad, relocate firms and introduce technology to replace labor.

They focus the workers’ anger ‘downward’ against immigrants, instead of ‘upward’ toward the owners of the means of production, finance and distribution who ultimately manipulate the labor market.

In the meantime the radical Left’s mindless defense of unlimited immigration in the name of an abstract notion of ‘international workers solidarity’ exposes their arrogant liberal bias, as though they had never consulted real workers who have to compete with immigrants for scarce jobs under increasingly unfavorable conditions.

The radical Left, under the banner of ‘international solidarity’, has ignored the historical fact that ‘internationalism’ must be built on the strong national foundation of organized, employed workers.

The Left has allowed the new Right to exploit and manipulate powerful righteous nationalist causes. The radical Left has counterpoised 'nationalism' to socialism, rather than seeing them as intertwined, especially in the present context of an imperialist-dominated European Union.

The fight for national independence, the break-up of the European Union, is essential to the struggle for democracy and the deepening of the class struggle for jobs and social welfare. The class struggle is more powerful and effective on the familiar national terrain – rather than confronting distant overseers in Brussels.

The notion among many radical Left leaders to 'remake' the EU into a 'Social Europe', the idea that the EU could be converted into a 'European Union of Socialist States' simply prolongs the suffering of the workers and the subordination of nations to the non-elected bankers who run the EU. No one seriously believes that buying stocks in Deutsch Bank and joining its annual stockholders meetings would allow workers to 'transform' it into a 'People's Bank'. Yet the 'Bank of the Banks', the 'Troika', made up of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF, set all major policies for each member state of the European Union. Un-rectified and remaining captive of the 'Euro-metaphysic', the Left has abdicated its role in advancing the class struggle through the rebirth of the national struggle against the EU oligarchs.

Results and Perspectives

The Right is advancing rapidly, even if unevenly across Europe. Its support is not ephemeral but stable and cumulative *at least in the medium run*. The causes are 'structural' and result from the new Right's ability to exploit the socio-economic crisis of the neo-liberal right governments and to denounce authoritarian and anti-national policies of the unelected EU oligarchy.

The new Right's strength is in 'opposition'. Their protests resonate while they are distant from the command centers of the capitalist economy and state.

Are they capable of moving from protest to power? Shared power with the neo-liberals will obviously dilute and disaggregate their current social base.

The contradictions will deepen as the new Right moves from positions of 'opposition' to sharing power with the neo-liberal Right. The massive roundups and deportation of immigrant workers is not going to change capitalist employment policies or restore social services or improve living standards. Promoting 'national' capital over foreign through some corporatist union of capital and labor will not reduce class conflict. It is totally unrealistic to imagine 'national' capital rejecting its foreign partners in the interest of labor.

The divisions within the 'nationalist Right', between the overtly fascist and electoral corporatist sectors, will intensify. The accommodation with 'national' capital, democratic procedures and social inequalities will likely open the door to a new wave of class conflict which will expose the sham radicalism of the 'nationalist' right. A committed Left, embedded in the national terrain, proud of its national and class traditions, and capable of unifying workers across ethnic and religious 'identities' can regain supporters and re-emerge as the real alternative to the two faces of the Right – the neo-liberal and the 'nationalist' new Right. The prolonged economic crisis, declining living standards, unemployment and personal insecurity propelling rise of the nationalist Right can also lead to the emergence of a Left

deeply linked to national, class and community realities. The neo-liberals have no solutions to offer for the disasters and problems of their own making; the nationalists of the new Right have the wrong -reactionary - answer. Does the Left have the solution? Only by overthrowing the despotic imperial rule of Brussels can they begin to address the national-class issues.

In the absence of a Left alternative, the working class voters have opted for two alternatives: Massive voter abstention and strikes. In the recent EU election, 60% of the French electorate abstained, with abstention approaching 80% in working class neighborhoods. This pattern was repeated or even exceeded throughout the EU - hardly a mandate for the EU or for the 'new Right'. In the weeks and days before the vote, workers took to the streets. There were massive strikes of civil servants and shipyard workers, as well as workers from other sectors and mass demonstrations by the unemployed and popular classes opposing EU-imposed 'austerity' cuts in social services, health, education, pensions, factory closures and mass lay-offs. Widespread voter abstention and street demonstrations point to a huge proportion of the population rejecting both the neo-Liberal Right of the 'Troika' as well as the 'new Right'.

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