

Centre Left collapsing as Europe swings right

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The partial local elections in Britain on 1 May were a catastrophic defeat for Britain's Labour Party and a victory for the right wing Conservatives, who also won the race for the Mayor of London. Outside London the popular vote gave 44% to the Conservatives and only 24% to Labour.

The outcome was a damning indictment of the pro-war, anti-working class policies of Gordon Brown's Labour. Just days before the election the government was embroiled in a big fight with its own MPs over the abolition of the 10p in the pound low tax rate for exceptionally low-paid workers in order to fund tax reductions for the better off. Hitting the 5 million poorest people in Britain was not a good electoral strategy.

In addition the Labour government's popularity has been hit by its imposition of ultra-low pay rises for public servants in a situation of sharply rising inflation, and its general inability to defend living standards in the face of the economic crisis - a crisis that is hitting Britain particularly hard because of its close links to the US economy.

But the start of Labour's sharp decline in popularity was the decision of previous Prime Minister Tony Blair to give total support to the war drive launched by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11.

While there are special features that give Labour's decline a particularly savage twist, its new crisis is part of a right wing tide sweeping over Europe - at least at an electoral level.

In the past three years we have seen: the accession to power of the CSU/CDU right in Germany thanks to the capitulation of the centre left SPD, in the form of a coalition with Angela Merkel at its head; the election of an openly right-wing government in Portugal for the first time since 1975; the recent election of a new very right-wing Berlusconi government in Italy; the victory of the Sarkozy right wing alliance in France in 2007; a right-populist government in Denmark; and a right-wing anti-immigrant government in the Netherlands. Spain and Britain are the only countries where the pro-neoliberal 'centre-left' remains in power - and in Britain the 2010 general election seems certain to produce a Labour defeat.

Marxists need to analyse this situation carefully, without falling victim to simplistic alarmism. However it would be foolish to ignore the danger signs. As we enter a major economic crisis that will also be a major new attack on working class living standards, the aggressive neoliberal anti-immigrant right is on the offensive, sometimes with a fascist or hard-right component. The result in the election for the mayor of Rome, where an openly neo-fascist candidate won, is eloquent in that regard.

Responsibility of the social democratic centre left

Without doubt, this situation will lead to many new debates inside the European left and it is often the case that out of defeats activists can draw pessimistic right-wing conclusions, rather than class struggle militant conclusions. It is important to pin down where the responsibility lies.

The truth is that the centre left in power has done nothing to fundamentally address class inequalities, has done nothing to combat the racist assumptions of the anti-immigrant right and has done little to address the insecurity and unemployment affecting workers on much of the continent.

In Britain, which for most of the last decade has enjoyed high economic growth rates and low unemployment, the basic situation of most workers has not substantially improved, social inequality has vastly increased, the country has remained the least socially mobile in Europe and huge amounts of money have been wasted in pointless wars. Moreover, quickly rising inflation and the credit crunch is leading to increased numbers of people getting more than one job to stay afloat. For most people a Labour government has resulted in having to work harder, work longer, and be much more economically insecure. At the same time the situation of the rich and the ultra-rich has improved dramatically. Labour has paid the electoral prices as millions of voters stayed at home or switched to another party.

Social and Ideological Basis of Reaction

It's the same story everywhere. The 'centre-left', the neoliberal left, is discredited. The political space is opened up for an alternative, but overwhelmingly bourgeois or right-populist forces are better placed to fill that space than the class struggle, anti-capitalist left. There are several main reasons:

- * Neoliberal victories in the class struggle has pushed back the unions and made the workers movement a much less vital social and political pole in society, with inevitable negative consequences for the anti-capitalist left. For an anti-capitalist project to be credible it must possess a credible agency, not just in terms of organised political forces - although that is vital - but also in terms of social weight and dynamism. This is by far the most important factor in the weakness of the left today.
- * The capitalist mass media is more than ever concentrated in a few hands and more openly functions of a vector of reactionary mass mobilisation - the examples of the Evening Standard and Daily Mail in Britain, and the Berlusconi-owned TV and print media in Italy are major examples.
- * The reactionary mass media has a huge audience in the enraged urban petty bourgeoisie in several countries. This is a key base of anti-immigrant frenzy, especially in a time of growing economic crisis and insecurity. The suburban petty bourgeoisie was the key base of the pro-Boris Johnson (Conservative candidate for mayor) media campaign in London; they are a key base of Berlusconi and Northern League leader Bossi in Italy; and a key base of both Le Pen and Sarkozy in France. Of course, such a base can be used to make big inroads in more backward sections of the working class. In some important countries social changes in the nature of the workforce, especially the shifting of the industrial proletariat east and south on a world scale, has boosted the specific weight of the petty bourgeoisie and eroded unionism as the new office-based proletariat takes time to build traditions of organisation and struggle.
- * In some regions of the working class in Britain and other countries a part of the working class

affected by long-term unemployment has become demoralized and lumpenised. They are prey to the fascists and anti-immigrant demagoguery.

* The decline in the social weight of the organised working class and mass union struggles has facilitated the reactionary cultural offensive of the bourgeoisie and the right, particularly among young people. Ideologies of simple-minded hedonism, celebrity and personal career advancement have a strong grip, although it has to be said that among the youth the ecological crisis and the poverty crisis in third world countries, as well as the war, creates an important counterweight.

The profound ideological crisis created by these factors is illustrated most pathetically by the rehabilitation in sections of the Italian upper and middle classes of the morbid figure of Benito Mussolini, and the historical revisionism that puts the Communist partisans and the fascists of the second world war on the same moral level.

The poison of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim racism

It is striking how anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, racism is a unifying theme of reaction across Europe. Two things interact here: on the one hand there is the ideological frenzy of the 'war on terror' after 9/11, which permits a mainstream and 'respectable' (and right wing misogynist) author like Martin Amis in Britain to openly muse on why he hates Muslims. On the other is the different waves of immigration that have accompanied economic collapse and political crisis across the globalised neoliberal world.

Such waves of immigration have always occurred and are unstoppable, which is why the UK and the US have a Jewish population and why the United States has an American-Irish population (and why Australia has so many people of Irish extraction). Economic crisis and late 19th century ethnic cleansing in Russia and Eastern Europe helped shape the demographic map worldwide.

The same fundamental factors are at work from Mexico to Zimbabwe today. The balance sheet of Europe in the last 20 years is that attempts to operate within the anti-immigrant framework, but more 'humanely', don't work. In the UK successive attempts to 'get tough' on immigration by New Labour, have only opened the door to the Conservatives and the British National Party. The refusal of the centre left to take a clear stand against racism and in defense of immigrant rights has only encouraged the hard right, the harder right and the fascists.

Racism and reactionary nationalism of course is ingrained in sections of the population in the advanced capitalist countries. There is no easy fix on this other than the militant defense of immigrant communities and refugees. However the anti-war movement, much reduced but still kicking, is a vital element in the creation of a political atmosphere of human solidarity and defense of the oppressed.

Social struggles and the anti-capitalist left

How not to deal with the electoral advance of the right was vividly demonstrated by the debacle of the last two years of Communist Refoundation in Italy. Fausto Bertinotti dragged the party sharply right towards participation in the neoliberal centre-left coalition headed by Romano Prodi. This was a disaster, demonstrating the futility of trying to construct a left neoliberal governmental bulwark against the right neoliberals.

The consequence was the obliteration of Rifondazione representation in the Italian parliament in the

last elections and the nosedive of the 'Rainbow Left' alliance created by Rifondazione, now in the process of breaking up. If you participate in a left neoliberal government you get tainted by it, and in the Italian case by participation in the Afghanistan war and by anti-working class economic policies. After the elections Bertinotti commented that the Prodi government 'gave no help to the workers'. Which begs the question of why he didn't think that likely before he formed a governmental coalition with Prodi.

Rifondazione's right turn was a major blow against attempts to work towards a solution of the crisis of working class representation at a national political level. In Italy and elsewhere the struggle to create such an alternative remains a vital task. But it is now cast in a new economic, political and social situation. This is demonstrated by recent events in Britain.

Low pay rises and galloping inflation gave rise to the first national teachers strike in 20 years on 24 April. This overlapped with a strike by civil servants against low pay and neoliberal restructuring, and with the strike by workers at the Grangemouth oil refinery in Scotland against reforms to their pension system, a strike that seems to have been at least partially successful.

The likelihood is that this will be, in an uneven way, the pattern across Europe. In most countries there is no short-term likelihood of a government that will give workers a respite from the relentless attacks of savage neoliberalism; the choice will be, more and more, fight or capitulate.

Every economic crisis is an attack on the working class and in this new situation resentment against the Europe of the super rich and the comfortable, complacent world of the urban petty bourgeoisie will redouble - leading to strike waves and major social confrontations. It can be seen in outline in Britain, much more so in resistance to Sarkozy in France. Only that will create the basis for a renewal of the workers movement and the left.

At an ideological level however the militant left has to position itself at the intersection of anti-capitalism and green politics. Nowhere is this more true than over the world food crisis (see the excellent analysis of this by Ian Angus here). The rush to biofuels to feed the demands of environmentally lunatic gas-guzzling private cars in the US and elsewhere is a major factor intensifying the most basic crisis that the people of the third world can face - a lack of enough food for to sustain themselves. The same factors of profiteering and biofuels are sending food prices in the advanced countries through the roof, contributing to the difficulties of working people. As Ian Angus says, nothing more demonstrates the bankruptcy of capitalism.

Right wing electoral victories and economic crisis will propel new social struggles, but also deepening attacks on the unions, on workers as a whole and on immigrants and refugees.

It tells us where the anti-capitalist left has to position itself strategically. Yes, for the fight for new anti-capitalist parties; yes for economic and environmental justice worldwide. But above all in the thick of the coming economic and social battles, among the workers, youth and immigrant communities who will massively.

P.S.

* From Marxsite:

<http://www.marxsite.com/europeright.html>.