

Fascism: yesterday and today...

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The rise of fascist front parties across Europe is a symptom of a deepening social crisis. How do these parties relate to 'classic' pre-war fascism? How do they differ from established conservative parties? Clare Heath argues that the right answer to these questions is crucial to smashing the renewed threat of fascism.

To fight and win, you need to know what your enemy really is. Too many on the left don't. Take, for example, the Italian correspondent of the influential British anti-fascist magazine Searchlight. He informed its readers that the Italian government:

... can now be characterised as a fascist government which holds office but which has not yet been able to translate its rule into effective power. Essentially, the government is a coin with three heads, representing three distinctive and peculiarly Italian fascist trends. They are the fascism of P2's creations, Berlusconi and Forza Italia, based on latterday monopoly capitalism and marinated in anticommunist poison; the fascism of Umberto Bossi and the Liga Nord (sic), founded on narrow, regional xenophobia with delusions of northern Italian ethnic superiority; and the MSI/AN variant.¹

This is dangerous nonsense. It leads directly to the ludicrous notion that while the entire Berlusconi regime was fascist, it had 'not yet succeeded' in really establishing its power. Yet the Freedom Alliance government, reactionary as it was, made no attempt to supplement its neo-liberal austerity programme with the physical annihilation of, or even the proscription of, the working class movement.

Such a sloppy understanding of fascism confuses and disorients the working class movement. We must be able to distinguish between fascism and other forms of right wing and racist movements if we are to appraise the nature of the threat posed by any given right-wing movement, the dynamics of its development, and the tasks facing those who aim to defeat it.

Fascism is distinguished from other reactionary parties by the radically different manner by which it seeks to change the relationship between the classes in capitalist society in order to safeguard the rule of the bourgeoisie.

It is a party of civil war against the working class both in its methods and in its objectives. To achieve power fascism, as distinct from other reactionary parties, sets out to terrorise and then physically smash the proletarian organisations by organised direct action.

For this it requires an extra-parliamentary mass movement. Fascism is a party that has to be visible on the streets. It appeals primarily to the desperate layers of capitalist society: the petit bourgeoisie, caught between the major classes, jealous of the bourgeoisie and fearful of the working class; the lumpen proletariat, outside the organisations of the working class, prey to every poisonous prejudice bourgeois society emits and eager to blame its miserable lot on the nearest scapegoats to hand. Out of this social

rabble fascism builds its mass movement.

And from this movement it constructs the fighting squads it needs for its war on the workers' organisations. Normal bourgeois democratic parties leave the physical war against the left strictly to the state. Not so for fascism. It does the job itself with its own militia. Likewise with its racism; it does not restrict itself to calls for state racism, deportation and the removal of civil rights. It takes direct action to terrorise immigrant populations.

As well as utilising different methods in its struggle for power, fascism has a different fundamental objective. It aims to install a dictatorship which abolishes workers' democratic rights. It seeks to annihilate the political and trade union organisations of the left. Under such a dictatorship, according to Trotsky:

? . . . the proletariat is reduced to an amorphous state, . . . a system of administration is created which penetrates deeply into the masses and . . . serves to frustrate the independent crystallisation of the proletariat?.

This latter feature enables fascism to transcend the normal type of military dictatorship. The traditional dictatorship may be effective against the workers' legal organisations, electoral parties and trade unions but is usually ineffective against illegal revolutionary parties of the Bolshevik type.

Fascism aims to crush just this form of proletarian organisation by demoralising the masses. By penetrating workplaces and housing estates with fascist mass organisations that can hunt down revolutionary agitators and organisers.

To win and sustain mass support fascism requires an ideology of open civil war against minority layers intended as the first victims: the immigrants; the 'reds'; gays and lesbians; the Jews. In addition, it needs a conspiracy theory to explain the parliamentary state's official hostility to the fascist parties. They have to 'explain' the social ills which are the real cause of the rage and despair of their mass base. Hence the need for 'International Finance' and the 'Jewish-Masonic Conspiracy'. Such demagoguery must also be of a verbally 'anti-establishment' character. It must centre on supposedly 'non-class' (in reality bourgeois) ideologies and institutions such as 'nation', 'race', 'family' to provide the appearance of a unity of interests among its supporters.

Hysterical nationalism and racism have constituted the principal, but not the only, components of fascist ideology. Other 'non-class' ideologies, such as religion, have also formed the basis for fascist movements. The clerical fascists in pre-war France and Spain, the Islamist fascists in Algeria and Israeli fascists such as the Kach movement, are examples. In terms of ideology fascism does not invent any of these elements. Rather, it combines them in such a way as to serve its counter-revolutionary aims and methods.

It would be foolish to designate a party as fascist simply because it embraced one or several extreme reactionary policies, such as immigration controls, anti-union laws or religious intolerance. History has seen numerous non-fascist formations which promote virulent chauvinism, racism, anti-semitism, and hostility to civil liberties and the parliamentary system.

Under what conditions can fascism exist as a mass formation and have a real possibility of being summoned to power by the bourgeoisie? This requires a deep and thoroughgoing social crisis, a period marked by revolutionary and pre-revolutionary conditions which the workers' movement has proved unable to resolve by seizing power itself. The bourgeoisie will turn to fascism, as Trotsky said:

? . . . at the moment that the normal police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together

with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium.³

The bourgeoisie is a tiny minority of the population even in those countries where its rule is most stable. In normal times, the capitalists' preferred method of rule in developed countries is parliamentary democracy. Under this regime the bourgeois class is able to rely upon the labour and trade union bureaucracy to guarantee the consent of the proletariat for its own exploitation and avoid the need for permanent, costly and dysfunctional repression.

But in periods of social crisis, when social consensus completely breaks down, the bourgeoisie may no longer be able to afford the luxury of democracy. Under conditions of an aggravated economic and social crisis, the state itself may lack the stability and inner strength required to liquidate or attenuate the democratic rights of the working class and crush its organisations.

The normal instruments of coercion at the disposal of the state—the army and police—may be unable to carry out the effective suppression of a movement numbering millions. Under such circumstances the particular function performed by a mass fascist movement can become the sole remaining option for the bourgeoisie.

Even in such circumstances fascism is far from being the sole alternative available to the bourgeoisie. Bonapartism, in which a determined section of the bourgeoisie and its state superstructure, step forward with a strongman at their head, will be the first option. The introduction of a military-police regime based on an abrogation of democratic rights will invariably be justified on grounds of preserving social order or the national interest.

It is for this reason that, in a political or social crisis, fascism is not the first choice for the bourgeoisie but an option of last resort. As Trotsky observed in 1934:

Fascism is a specific means of mobilising and organising the petit-bourgeoisie in the social interests of finance capital . . . The political mobilisation of the petit-bourgeoisie against the proletariat, however, is inconceivable without that social demagogy which means playing with fire for the big bourgeoisie. The danger to order of the unleashed petit-bourgeois reaction has just been confirmed by the recent events in Germany. That is why, while supporting and actively financing reactionary banditry, in the form of one of its wings, the French bourgeoisie seeks not to push matters to the point of the political victory of fascism, aiming only at the establishment of a strong power which, in the last analysis, is to discipline the two extreme camps.⁴

In western Europe after the second world war bourgeois democracy was triumphant. The long economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s strengthened it. Given the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini and the subsequent revelations about the holocaust any resurrection of mass fascist parties in their fully fledged 1920s/1930s form was impossible.

This left the surviving post war fascist cadres three choices. They could abandon their creed and re-enter mainstream bourgeois politics. Or they could rest content to live the more or less clandestine life of a Nazi sect. Finally, they could seek to adapt their fascist project to the new circumstances, that is, recognise that the road to rebuilding mass fascist parties capable of contesting for power lay through the construction of what we call fascist front parties.

Fascism's road to power was blocked by stable bourgeois democratic rule. Its road to the masses was blocked by the broad anti-fascist consciousness cultivated and spread by the Allied victors.

To recreate the conditions for growth some fascists maintained a hard core organisation committed to the

key elements of fascist strategy. But they strictly subordinated most of the 'normal' fascist tactics to the need to win popularity within bourgeois democracy. They did this by creating fronts from within which they could rebuild their strength. They sought out allies on the far right and incorporated them into the leadership and membership of the new fronts.

The fascist front parties concentrated on active racism which had a popular resonance as capitalism began to experience economic difficulties in the 1970s and 1980s. But these parties were more than racist. Indeed, even the character of their racism is indicative of the fascist character of their inner core and cadres.

Bourgeois racism relies on a range of state measures in order to deal with the 'immigrant' or 'black' question. This state racism hypocritically conceals itself behind a veneer of 'equality'. The fascist front parties and the fascists are not at all concerned about concealing their racism. They are open and unashamed about it. Their policy of compulsory repatriation has immediate results in the form of a guerrilla war between their cadres and the immigrant communities. An aspect of their fascist character 'terror' is subordinated in relation to the working class as a whole, but is continued in their attacks on the black and immigrant communities.

Moreover, the policies preached by the fascist front parties consciously encourage unorganised supporters to carry out freelance terror against racial minorities. And this plays a role in mustering mass support for the fascist front parties. This is not the way normal bourgeois politicians use racism 'to build up a passive voting base. The fascist front parties use extreme racism in elections in order to locate and eventually win troops for the future.

Nor is it the case that the fascists and fascist front parties wish to become junior partners in right wing bourgeois governments. Their preoccupation with elections reflects the fact that electioneering, in the context of a durable bourgeois democracy, provides them with the best platform for garnering support. With this support two things become possible for them. First, they can claim the cloak of respectability, especially if they can win seats in parliament and the municipalities. They can then claim all the electoral rights and immunities which democracy accords the people's representatives. Secondly, the pressure placed on established bourgeois parties by their electoral triumphs pushes bourgeois politics to the right creating a climate more favourable to their politics.

For the fascist front parties electioneering and the suppression of many of the normal practices of fascism is not mere vote catching. It is part of an overall strategy of recreating the conditions in which they can eventually transform themselves into open fascist parties.

However, success along this road gives rise to serious problems for these parties as we can see in the recent history of the Jean Marie Le Pen's Front Nationale (FN) in France and Gianfranco Fini's Movimento Sociale Italiano-Alleanza Nazionale (MSI-AN) in Italy.

The temptations of office are considerable to the councillors or deputies who have become accustomed to the comforts of 'normal' political life. And when the respectable bourgeois parties seek them out as electoral bloc, or even as governmental coalition, partners the former invariably insist that they deny or renounce their fascist past; they demand avowals of devotion to democracy and a renunciation of violence.

These parties are inevitably subject to instability as the tensions between their parliamentary tactics and their fascist core mount. In particular, the change of period heralded by the fall of Stalinism and the acute social problems arising from the deepening crises of capitalism, are discrediting established bourgeois parties and institutions, opening up possibilities for 'new' electoral bourgeois parties as well as renewed

opportunities for 'street politics'. The MSI and FN, for example, have both encountered serious internal difficulties and divisions over the last two years.

The polarisation of both right wing populist and open fascist wings threatens the integrity of the whole fascist front project. How will the conflict be resolved? This depends on the way in which the developments in the world, and especially the European, economy impact upon each particular country between now and the end of the century.

We believe that Europe in particular has entered into a new period of instability. We do not think that fascism can come to power secretly, by conspiracy, behind the backs of the masses. It cannot come to power simply by winning an election in its fascist front form and then cast its cloak aside to reveal the full Nazi regalia beneath. But neither is there room for the complacent view that fascist fronts, with considerable electoral support, will break up of their own accord because of their contradictions.

The mass fascist front parties must be challenged and confronted directly by the entire working class movement. However strong the FN and AN may be in terms of membership and electoral support, they are dwarfed in size, in social power and cohesion by the organisations of the working class.

The social layers that look to fascism and the far-right, and which fascism looks to for its mass base, are primarily the petit-bourgeoisie and the lumpen-proletarian poor. Even sections of the least class conscious workers will also turn to the far right when they grow disillusioned with the feebleness of the reformist working class parties.

They are attracted by the appearance of strength that the fascists consciously cultivate. Direct physical confrontation of fascist and fascist front parties will undermine this attraction. Every noisy fascist march that goes unchallenged, every clandestine attack on union offices or immigrants that goes unanswered will encourage the fascists and their supporters still further.

Mass mobilisations of workers and youth must be organised against every fascist and far right manifestation; the working class organisations must prepare organised defence of the movement and of all minorities under attack as the first step towards forging a fighting organisation capable of repelling and dissolving the fascists own fighting squads.

Hidebound by legalism, the leaders of the unions and the social democratic parties fail to organise even the most elementary challenge to the mass organisations of the right.

But a responsive anti-fascism, based solely on countering the activity of the fascists, will not be enough. Fascist front parties such as the FN and the AN are growing precisely because of discontent with the political status quo in countries in which economic crisis has led to savage attacks on the living standards of the working class and the lower sections of the petit-bourgeoisie. The French Socialist and Communist parties in France have contributed to the growth of the far-right by participating directly in government attacks at a national and local level.

If the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) in Italy props up the new Dini administration of 'independent' financiers and industrialists in Rome, it too can expect to suffer the same treatment at the hands of the electorate.

Unless the workers' movement can force its political parties to launch an effective challenge to austerity, unemployment and cuts, it will appear as a defender of a political establishment and economic order which millions know is not working.

No doubt many on the reformist left would balk at the suggestion that the workers' parties should refuse to form coalitions with the liberal right 'to keep out the fascists'. And indeed, if the PDS withdrew support from Dini, would this not increase the prospects of the fascist front parties entering the coalitions in their place?

But this popular front approach which pleads for alliances with 'progressive' capitalists conveniently ignores the cause for the rise of far right and fascist parties: the mounting crisis of the capitalist system itself, the lasting effects of the recent European recession and the instability inherent in the new world order after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

Just as the fascist front parties themselves have developed as a response by fascism to the relative stability of post-war democratic institutions in the advanced European capitalist states, so the change of period and the opening of a new period of instability carries with it the prospect of titanic struggles opening up in Europe over the coming two decades.

As the stability of the capitalist order is weakened, so the necessity for the fascists to carry through an adaptation to bourgeois democratic institutions will also be reversed.

Discontent with the democratic capitalist order will be channelled into one of two outcomes.

Either the working class will reconstitute a political leadership which aims consciously at the overthrow of the capitalist system—a revolutionary communist party and International; or the counter-revolutionary forces of the far right will reconstitute themselves on a basis capable of mounting a serious and sustained attempt to crush the labour movement and take power.

It is not enough for the workers' movement to observe that the fascists' time has not yet come. The task is to ensure that it never does.

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