

Fighting the rise of the far right in Europe

Mon, 30/03/1992 - 10:59

In April the racist Republikaner Party stunned Germany by attracting 11% of the vote in a state election. Here Mark Harrison looks critically at the left's response to the challenge posed by the growth of far right and fascist parties throughout Europe.

In the March 1992 regional elections France saw Le Pen's Front National (FN) gain 3.3 million votes. The Vlaams Blok in Belgium won 10.4% of the vote, and 12 seats in parliament, in the November 1991 elections as compared to 3% in 1987. In Germany the Republikaner continues to grow and is now backed by the owners of the multinational corporation, Muller. In Sweden the 'New Democracy' won 6.6% of the vote in September 1991 against a background of increased racist attacks on black people and immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Far right and even fascist parties are growing in Europe. But to date they have not met with an adequate response from the left, the trade unions and immigrant communities. Complacency is widespread. When moved to action the left has veered between pacifist, non-militant campaigns or physical clashes with the fascists and the police that have no perspective for involving the mass workers' organisations. If this situation is not changed the only thing guaranteed to happen is the further growth of state racism and fascist activity.

Capitalism's long post-war boom created a demand for extra, cheap labour. Countless vacancies, in the lowest paid sectors of the economy, had to be filled and each of the major European economies turned to their former colonies or spheres of influence to recruit workers. In Britain immigration from the Indian sub-continent and from the West Indies was encouraged. North Africans were brought to France, Turks and Yugoslavians to Germany, Austria and Scandinavia, South Moluccans and Surinamese to the Netherlands, Africans and Arabs to Belgium.

The immigrants were treated at best as second class citizens, at worst, as 'guest workers' deprived even of second class citizenship. Discrimination in the imperialist heartlands was institutionalised. Guest workers were deprived of the right to vote, the right to permanent residency, access to social benefits. Immigration controls ensured that those black people who did gain citizenship status, were identified by all white Europeans as a 'problem', as 'aliens' whose comings and goings had to be strictly policed. Once here they were condemned to low wages and herded into the decayed housing of the inner cities. Immigrant ghettos were born which in turn became targets for racist propaganda and police violence.

Police harassment of black communities was, and is, openly encouraged. Stereotypes were drummed into the heads of whites through racist television programmes, scare stories in the press and proclamations about the 'race issue' by politicians of all the official parties - conservative, liberal and social democratic. Racism, to one degree or another, was perpetuated as a means of dividing white workers from black and of subduing black workers and immigrants.

The moves towards 'Fortress Europe' accompanies greater economic and political integration within the

European Community (EC). The Schengen agreement on tight immigration controls around the borders of France, Germany and the Benelux countries legitimises the racist claim that immigrants and black people are 'the problem'; it also encourages white workers to look for racist answers to the problems they are facing.

In France unemployment has risen to three million under the Socialist government. So much has the climate changed in France that a steady 40% of the population consider themselves to be racist. This turning of racism into an everyday occurrence has been accompanied by an appalling level of racist killings, often at the hands of the police. On average, since the beginning of the 1980s there has been a racist murder every two weeks in France.

In Germany unification has meant the dole queue for thousands upon thousands. Everywhere the recession is causing governments to slash public spending programmes. Whites grow resentful of the 'aliens' in their midst because they are forced to compete with them for ever diminishing resources - fewer houses, fewer jobs, fewer services.

On the back of all this comes a series of racist measures by the governments of Britain, Germany, France, Belgium and the rest to arrest and reverse the flow of immigrant labour. Since 1989 the tearing down of the 'Iron Curtain' has further boosted the numbers wishing to take advantage of the west's much promoted labour markets. The EC countries have set in train a series of measures designed to prevent this.

In Britain the Tories were on the verge of introducing a racist Asylum Bill before the April general election was called. In France the then Socialist Party prime minister, Cresson, called for charter planes to be laid on by the government to deport immigrants. In Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries specific immigration laws have been rushed through.

In Spain the 300,000 immigrants drawn from semi-colonial countries are subject to more and more state racism. Alongside them exist half a million Gypsies who have long been a target for discrimination in schools, are expelled from towns and are increasingly subject to racist physical abuse.

State racism has strengthened across Europe and the agencies of the state are in many countries mainly responsible for the misery and physical insecurity of millions of black people. But the ideological respectability that the state has given to racist ideas has been a boon to fascism.

Apart from the spread of racist ideas fascism has also been aided by the collapse of Stalinism. Stalinism discredited Marxism. It had nothing in common with the values and goals of revolutionary Marxism. But it was identified as 'communism' in the eyes of the masses. Its death is seen by many as the death of communism. This has several effects, all advantageous to the fascists. In the first place, as has happened in eastern Germany, Poland and Romania, it has alienated thousands of youth to the point where they have turned to the 'radical' solutions offered them by the fascists. Also it has weakened the left in Europe's labour movements, putting them on the defensive, demoralising them, throwing their parties into crisis. This too helps the fascists.

Last but not least, the collapse of Stalinism has unleashed a bout of destructive nationalism and regionalism. In a world in which many nationalities feel betrayed, in a world of uncertainty and economic and political chaos, nationalism becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of the fascists. They will seek to capitalise on it as the Republikaner did shortly after the collapse of the Stalinist regime in the GDR, with their call for 'a conference of all patriotic forces in Germany'. With 'communism' discredited radical nationalism appears as an attractive alternative to those suffering the blows either of the restoration of capitalism or those suffering the effects of its economic crisis.

The fascists are gaining ground. They are not 'super racists' and are not content with electoral legitimacy. They engage in street battles and other attacks to achieve their objective of destroying the organisations of the trade unions, immigrant and black organisations and the political left. In Denmark on 16 March a Nazi group, De Nationale, blew up the Copenhagen headquarters of the far left International Socialist group, killing one member. In Britain the British National Party targets left meetings for physical attack. Fascists are not about to seize power anywhere but their numbers and activities are increasing.

A conscious part of their strategy for growth since the late 1970s has been the conscious attempt by fascists to capitalise on racism as a populist issue, as a means of building a mass base.

The National Front (NF) in Britain in the 1970s was a clear example of this. After successive power struggles John Tyndall and Martin Webster, both long standing hard-core Nazis, assumed control of the NF. They set out to transform the NF, and themselves, from a fascist sect into a mass, populist party with racism as the key up front policy.

In conditions of economic crisis, a Labour government busy betraying the workers whose votes had brought it to power, and the effects of unemployment, low pay and declining social services bringing the reality of the end of the post-war boom home to millions of workers, the NF used racism to bolster its vote in elections and win to its ranks thousands of supporters who were not hardened fascists.

But systematic anti-fascist activity by far left groups, drawing on sections of the then more combative labour movement exposed the fascist nature of the NF, scared off many of its soft-core supporters and halted its growth. It then fell victim to their leaders' internecine struggles and a turn to a harder racism by Thatcher and the Tories.

In France the FN was founded by hardened veterans of French fascism with the aim of building a mass, far right populist racist party which would hide its fascist project. They have succeeded. The FN's message is simple: there are too many immigrants. Anti-communism and homophobia are secondary ideological props. The FN shot from the obscurity of 1.5% of the vote when the 'socialist' Mitterrand came to power in 1981, to 14% in 1988, a position they maintained in the recent round of regional and local elections, recovering from a significant decline due to Le Pen's anti-Semitic support for Iraq in the Gulf War.

Already over the last period the FN's veneer of 'respectable' racism has been wearing increasingly thin. Openly fascist members of the FN have been convicted of bombing immigrant hostels. A series of violent attacks against leftists have taken place in Paris universities, in alliance with openly fascist groups. And in March an anti-FN march of several thousand in Chartres was attacked and dispersed by a well-organised hit-squad of fifty FN supporters. The fascist core of the FN are becoming more and more confident.

At a local level in various countries anti-fascists have scored a number of important victories. Despite the strength of the Vlaams Blok in Antwerp the Antwerp Anti-Fascist Front has conducted some exemplary activities to stop the fascists from getting a platform. At the end of October 1990 the AFF, together with immigrant youth (mainly Moluccans), successfully stopped the Vlaams Blok from marching through their own stronghold, Antwerp. In Norway the fascists have been met with demonstrations that have not shied away from giving battle. In Spain disparate initiatives in different regions have been organised by SOS Racism mainly concentrating on propaganda to nail the racists' lies.

In Sweden, following a frightening escalation of racist murders, a call by over sixty immigrant organisations for a general strike on 21 February this year met with a tremendous response. Though the strike was only for one hour, it won the (half-hearted) support of the Swedish LO (TUC) and brought much of the public sector to a halt. It is estimated that over one million workers and youth took part in some action or another

in workplaces and schools.

The renewed wave of anti-racist activity in France was given added impulse by a 100,000 strong Paris demonstration in January, the first for several years. The demo was notable for its massive hostility to the ruling Socialist Party, in particular over a recent decision to set up detention camps for immigrants at airports, which just happened to be on the FN's shopping list of fifty reactionary demands.

All of these successes are important. But if we look at the two principal centres of fascist growth ? France and Germany ? we encounter major problems in the anti-fascists' responses.

It should be well understood, with the experience of Hitler and Mussolini behind us, that fascists are emboldened by their opponents' weakness. When Le Pen's FN first rose to national prominence in 1984-85 there were a series of mass demonstrations and concerts to protest against racism. These were partly based upon a national network of anti-racist and anti-fascist committees, partly mobilised by SOS Racisme, a Socialist Party sponsored organisation launched in 1984 which responded to a growing wave of racist attacks by organising 500,000-strong rock concerts around the slogan of 'Hands off my mate'. SOS Racisme, by its refusal to engage in serious action against the fascists, was a real roadblock to doing something about the FN's growth.

The new round of anti-racism bears all the weaknesses of its predecessor, seven years ago. There are now three major anti-racist groups, all of them under the leadership of former or current members of the centrist left. Overall, SOS continues to act as an anti-racist cover for Mitterrand. Its Socialist Party leaders are either ex-members of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR ? French section of the United Secretariat Fourth International) or closet LCR supporters. They have pointedly refused to participate in any direct action against the FN, preferring to cultivate links with the bourgeois media get a good press.

SOS Racisme's vice president, Malik Boutih, told the magazine, Socialist Review, that SOS would not confront this year's FN demonstration on 1 May, something the FN have held since 1988. SOS are planning a demonstration on the other side of Paris after the FN march has finished. SOS Racisme is a roadblock to the workers' united front against fascism in France. It is imperative that the left organises to build a serious fighting alternative to it.

At present there are two other initiatives in France. The 'Manifeste contre le FN' was founded by Paris PS Deputy and ex-PCI leader Jean-Christophe Cambadélis last autumn. Cambadélis was a leader of the 1986 student movement. This is another PS-based organisation, and was equally responsible for the relative success of the January demonstration.

Cambadélis is prepared to use his PS members to get youth and PS supporters to protest against the FN, but he too steadfastly refuses to fight to stop the FN from meeting and demonstrating. He has given the FN a 'republican' blank cheque saying he will defend their right to meet as long as they pledge to respect the Constitution.

The third national grouping is both the smallest and the most left. Based on a petition signed by 250 anti-fascist intellectuals and journalists, the 'Appel des 250' is influenced by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and its fellow-travellers. It is torn between those, like members of Pouvoir Ouvrier active in this campaign, who wish to fight to stop the fascists from meeting and those, like the LCR, who argue that mere protest is sufficient. As with the other two organisations, it has no specific orientation to either the immigrant community or the labour movement.

Recent events illustrate the weakness of anti-racism and anti-fascism in France. On 18 March, when Le

Pen held his final meeting of the election campaign in Paris, the Appel organised a demonstration. SOS refused to participate. Met by indifference from the Stalinist Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and a shameful failure to mobilise even their own militants on the part of Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Parti Communiste Internationale (PCI), the demonstration was only a few thousand strong.

Several hundred LCR and anarchist youth tried to take on the CRS riot police, drafted in to protect the FN, but they predictably failed. The FN finished the night more confident than they began it. Worse, the LCR paper, Rouge, denounced the actions of their own youth in its next issue!

Various criminal excuses are put forward by the centrist left for their appalling line on the fascist menace. With a distinctly right centrist orientation ever since, and having lost all confidence in the working class, the LCR bleat that, 'Only the combination of a social and political crisis bringing 'new generations' into the struggle can reverse the course of things'. (International Viewpoint 20.1.92) This is backed up by right centrist theoretical analyses which argue that 'fascism isn't what it used to be': because the FN is not yet using its jackboots to smash up the unions we do not need to try and physically smash it.

The leaderships of LO and the PCI hide their own political cowardice behind different versions of the same lie. For LO, the key question is not that of fighting fascism but of destroying capitalism. Their refusal to participate in the 18 March demonstration is a classic example of their right centrist passivity. It should be noted, however, that this disdain does not extend to all its members and, on occasion, rank and file LO members, notably the youth, can be drawn into physical confrontation with the FN.

The PCI's excuse is even more right wing. For the democrats of the PCI the FN is an integral part of the Fifth Republic and the only way of destroying racism is by building their new front organisation, the Parti des Travailleurs and creating a democratic republic. These people have effectively written themselves out of history.

Last, but not least, there is the obstacle of the French Communist Party (PCF). Not only does the PCF play no role in actively combating Le Pen, its policies frequently aid the fascists. Last year the PCF issued a petition against illegal immigration and calling for strict application of the immigration laws. They are in favour of controlling this problem through immigration controls. Worse, they have perpetrated racist crimes. In Vitry in 1981 the Communist Mayor led a team of CP members to bulldoze an immigrant hostel and the party paper, Humanité, issued a free sheet under the headline, 'No to immigrant ghettos'. And while this event is a notorious example, there are countless lesser examples of their racist role in local government throughout the 1980s.

In Germany a different range of problems present themselves to the anti-fascist movement. Certainly there are many who, like SOS Racisme, look to the capitalist state's liberal wing to deal with the problem. Annette Kahane, who has special responsibility for 'foreigners' in Berlin's local government, has her eyes fixed on the police. She pleaded:

'The problems with the neo-Nazis and skinheads would not be so bad if the police investigated properly and did not ignore these incidents.'

The Co-ordination of Refugee Groups in Berlin likewise looks to the state. It is involved in a campaign with various liberal bourgeois elements and the church to win protection for refugees.

The SPD, which has responded to the rise of fascism in the same way as the Socialist Party in France, by constructing its own package of immigration control policies, refuses to countenance direct action against the fascists who have launched pogroms against immigrants in places like Hoyerswerda. These people

have learnt nothing from the destruction of their own party at Hitler's hands. Nor have the Stalinists, like the DKP and MLPD. They call on the state to ban the fascists. This is the state which, in West Germany, proscribed communists from jobs, which smashed student and worker demonstrations, which is at the forefront of constructing 'Fortress Europe'.

Faced with this useless bleating, echoed by the Greens, many German anti-fascist youth have turned to the 'autonomes' (autonomists) for a lead in the fight against the neo-Nazis. The autonomes have the merit of being prepared to confront the fascists. On countless occasions they have defended squats that the fascists have attacked. On demonstrations they have braved the riot police to get at the Nazis. But their domination of the anti-fascist movement will prove every bit as disastrous as that of the liberals they despise.

The autonomes are not a party or organisation. They are a heterogeneous, largely middle class, movement. Insofar as it is possible to speak about their politics, they are romantic left Stalinists and Maoists, in awe of guerilla groups like Sendero Luminoso of Peru.

The autonomes' left Stalinism, reminiscent of the fatal politics of the Stalinist Third Period which in Germany helped Hitler win power, leads many of them to reject any collaboration with other forces in the fight against fascism. Workers are dismissed as being 'bourgeoisified' and pro-imperialist because they choose not to share in the squatting lifestyle beloved of these sons and daughters of the well off. They are fiercely protective of their own divine right to lead the anti-fascist struggle.

This led them to obstruct the taking of decisions at an anti-fascist conference in Dresden last year despite the fact that it was one of the first positive initiatives to build united action against the new Nazis. Worst of all the autonomes' attitude to the working class means that they reject, from the very beginning, any attempt to mobilise the workers' organisations.

The rank and file of the SPD are dismissed as 'quasi-fascist'. IG Metall, the engineering union with 3.5 million members, called for opposition to the rise of racism and fascism. One of the union's executive members, Hans Sturm, called on his members to act against the fascists. Naturally we are disinclined to believe that this bureaucrat has in mind the building of workers' squads to help defend the immigrant hostels or the mobilisation of workers to tear into the neo-Nazi squads. Nevertheless, his call presented an opening for revolutionaries to address their demands to thousands of workers. It was an opening that could win recruits to militant anti-fascism, to a class perspective for dealing with the Nazi threat.

The comrades of the Gruppe Arbeitermacht (German section of the LRCI) seized upon this for precisely these purposes. Not so the autonomes. For them the involvement of workers in the anti-fascist struggle is taboo. For them any united actions with workers who may be reformist are 'verboten'. This is the real reason they walked out of the Dresden conference. It is the real reason that they will not venture beyond their own enclaves in the big cities. It is the reason that they refuse to participate in any united anti-fascist committees with other left tendencies. And it is a road to disaster.

Already thousands of black and immigrant workers are paying for the deepening of racism and the growth of fascism. They suffer increased racist attacks, increased harassment by the state, by racist hooligans and by fascist gangs. Many are paying with their lives. Action is urgent.

First, we need to fight every manifestation of state racism, every piece of reactionary legislation, every 'out of control' police operation, each new detention centre and all deportations. Throughout Europe we will struggle to commit ever wider forces to actively supporting black and immigrant self-defence, to smashing every immigration control in 'Fortress Europe'.

In Austria, the Gruppe ArbeiterInnenStandpunkt (ASt ? Austrian section of the LRCI) has played a leading role, and been able to mobilise thousands on demonstrations against the special racist laws introduced by the Austrian government to bar entry to refugees. In Vienna and Salzburg the ability of the ASt and other left wingers to mobilise youth and, most importantly, Turkish, Kurdish and Yugoslavian immigrant workers on the streets, stands in stark contrast to the campaigns of the liberals, Stalinists and Greens who have refused to campaign against immigration controls, who have denounced us as ?red terrorists? for disrupting the meeting of racists in Salzburg and who counterpose cultural festivals to a militant anti-racist struggle.

The workers? movement must also confront the danger of fascism head on. Fascism is not on the verge of power in France or Germany. It would be foolish and alarmist to suggest it is. But as we have made clear the ingredients for fascist growth are present in the European political and economic situation. And certain additional tactics are necessary against fascism, as well as the general ideological and propaganda war directed at racist and other reactionary ideas.

The LRCI?s British section, Workers Power, through its participation in Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), has scored a number of successes against the British National Party (BNP). AFA attracted 10,000 at an anti-racist carnival in September 1991, and mobilised 4,000 on a march through an area in East London that the fascist claim they control in November. It has engaged in a number of highly successful direct actions that have severely damaged the fascists? morale.

This work, always oriented to the working class, stands in stark contrast to the insipid campaign of the relaunched Anti-Nazi League, which is, second time round, a mere Socialist Workers Party front, and the popular frontist, pacifist lobbying campaign of the Anti-Racist Alliance, which has undertaken little action other than publicly attacking the Anti-Nazi League.

The new generation of anti-racist and anti-fascist fighters are at the front of every militant action taking place. They are the Algerian youth who fought the police in the South of France, they are amongst the thousands who have marched against the Nazis in Germany.

What the LRCI will do is direct these youth to the task of building workers? united front campaigns directed against racism and fascism as appropriate. We do so in recognition that fascism and the racism it thrives on, are products of capitalism, and only the working class has the power and the interest in destroying capitalism.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/fighting-rise-far-right-europe>