

The split in the European Left Party: Between reformism and populism

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Clashes in the European Left Party, ELP, led to a split at the beginning of July. Although the conflict had been smouldering for years, the split still came as a shock to the vast majority of the approximately 500,000 members. They were not allowed to discuss it, let alone decide.

The trigger was certainly an important question for the whole of the left in Europe. It was about the austerity policy implemented by the Greek Syriza government and the former top candidate of the ELP in the European elections in 2014, Alexis Tsipras. The French Parti de Gauche, PdG, and the movement La France Insoumise (Indomitable France) FI, under the leadership of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, had long criticised the implementation of EU dictates, the restrictions on the right to strike and cuts in pensions and demanded the exclusion of Syriza from the EL.

On July 1, the PdG party conference drew the consequences and left the EL. It characterised the government in Athens as defending the austerity policy to, "the point where the right to strike has been attacked, pensions have been drastically reduced, entire sectors of the economy have been privatised - all measures against which our parties are fighting in each of our countries. Any ambivalence towards this policy, any implementation of this policy by one member party of the EL disregards the anti-austerity positions of the other member parties". (Resolution of the PdG, quoted from Neues Deutschland, 4 July 2018)

Coming just a year before the next European elections, this decision has significantly weakened the ELP. Shortly afterwards, Podemos from Spain, Bloco de Esquerda, the Bloc of the Left, from Portugal, the Red-Green Alliance from Denmark, the Swedish Vänsterpartiet, Left Party, and the Finnish Left Party followed suit. Moreover, DiEM 25, the rather left-liberal, postmodernist project around the former Greek finance minister Varoufakis, also seems to be planning to run for the European elections, so that three different "left" alliances could stand in 2019.

The new European "list" is to bear the name "Maintenant le Peuple" (MLP, Now the People) and stand for a "democratic revolution" in Europe, "stripping off the straitjacket of European treaties" and supports the so-called "Plan B" project, which de facto demands withdrawal from the EU or wants to raise this as a left demand.

A split to the left?

Of course, the rejection of the austerity policy and above all its implementation by a workers' party is an understandable reason to leave the ELP. In any case, it seems more "radical" and "left" than unbreakable "loyalty" to Syriza. However, it is also surprising that submission to bourgeois rule is regarded as a reason for exclusion. Heretically one could even suggest that it seems to be a basic requirement for recognition as

a "left-wing party" in the EU. The German Left Party, represented by the current EL chairman, Gregor Gysi, acts as a good coalition partner of the SPD and the Greens at state level, and even discusses coalitions with the CDU in East Germany.

Mélenchon himself, when still in alliance with the French Communist Party, agreed to the state of emergency imposed under Hollande to save the Republic and military interventions in Mali. At the same time, he firmly rejects open borders for migrants and believes that the "independence" of imperialist France is endangered. FI is a populist, nationalist movement. While Mélenchon rightly attacks Syriza for surrendering to the dictates of German imperialism, the EU and the IMF, in the light of his own chauvinist and pro-imperialist policy, which is even more state-supporting than that of Syriza, his criticism is both ambiguous and deceitful.

This is all the more true of the Danish and Swedish Confederations who have supported every minority government. The Vänsterpartiet supported a minority government led by the Social Democrats from 1998 to 2006 and since 2014. In Denmark, the Single List - The Red-Green Party supported the Thorning-Schmidt government of Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Socialist People's Party from 2011 to 2015. In Portugal, the left-wing bloc has also supported a reformist-led government since 2015. And Podemos is known to support the Sanchez government in Spain.

For Mélenchon and his wing of the former ELP, left-wing politics means a left-nationalist, Keynesian-oriented programme. Although this is more intransigent with regard to the "austerity policy", it goes hand in hand with a straightforward strengthening of their "own" bourgeois state. The fact that the "defence" of the European Left Party against criticism by Mélanchon and Co. itself can hardly be surpassed for cynicism, changes nothing.

At a conference of temporary employment agencies in Germany, ELP chairman Gysi praised the integration of refugees through temporary work as a "start to the solution" - just a taste of the pro-capitalist, reformist character of the ELP.

In a riposte to the criticism from the French PdG, a member of the Syriza government team points out that since the OXI 2015 there has unfortunately been very little European support for Greece, so that they ultimately had no other choice. It is true that there was too little solidarity with the Greek people. However, the Syriza government forgets that its policies themselves have undermined this solidarity and that support for the wage-earners after 2015 would have been support for resistance against this "left" government. It is downright grotesque to pretend that one's own surrender was "alternativeless".

Swing to the right

The defeat in Greece undoubtedly strengthened the shift to the right in Europe and, thus, the turn towards a nation-state orientation by a large part of the European Left Party, including the Syriza critics around Mélenchon.

The shift to the right and the rise of reactionary, right-wing populist parties and movements directed against the EU, which celebrated great success in the European elections in 2014, did not only change the balance of power in Europe. It resulted in major debates among the (left) reformist parties as to whether the demand for withdrawal from the EU should be taken up. All agreed that the EU mainly serves capital by the creation of the single European market. However, the majority of the ELP that Gysi represents continue to argue that the EU could be reformed in order to then enforce some "redistribution", some more "social standards". Other reformists, such as Oskar Lafontaine or Mélenchon advocate leaving the EU because they believe that the nation state offers a better battleground than Brussels.

Typically, the struggle for a socialist Europe or for an anti-capitalist orientation was not even under discussion, although some of the parties profess to aspire to this. Thus, even those parties that claim to be to the "left" of parties such as the SPD, PS or Labour, themselves fall back to the same level or show no signs of being "left". This discussion and its current "interim result" even lags behind the "European Social Forum", which at least advocated a "different Europe" and offered the opportunity to discuss a socialist and anti-capitalist perspective.

Populism as an alternative?

The current debate must be seen in this context. Mélenchon and MLP want to claim the mantle of "No to Europe", want to stir up "Now the People" against the EU. The reference to the "people" instead of the working class is no coincidence. Part of the wing of the European Left Party that has split off around Mélenchon, has represented a left-wing populist orientation for years. This was particularly clear in the case of Podemos. The advance of the Right has reinforced this former wing of the ELP in arguing that right-wing populism could only be defeated by a "left-popular" or left-populist alternative. For them, "traditional" left, by which they mean both left-reformism and the radical left, would be unable to relate to the "feelings" and fears of the masses - not only the working class, but the "people" in general, and would "isolate" itself with unworldly and insane demands such as for freedom of movement.

In Germany, Lafontaine and the Left Party faction leader Sarah Wagenknecht's # stand up "movement" is the "popular" equivalent of Mélenchon. It is quite possible that she could jump on the bandwagon of the European elections in 2019, with FI as the role model. The rise of such ideas in the "heartlands" of the reformist and "bourgeois" trade union bureaucracies and parties can also be explained in economic/social terms. For example, FI could inherit the disintegrating PS, a thoroughly tempting national perspective, as the "left-wing" administrator of the republic.

Despite all the justified criticism of Syriza, the MLP "people's movement" is an accommodation to the "shift to the right". The crisis of the EU is to be solved by a return to the nation-state, to the system of "balancing" between the classes and a moderate commitment to one's "own" nation, which patriotism would supposedly represent, not by a common, transnational class struggle. The reactionary nature of this policy is most evident on the issue of migration. The class brothers and sisters who are being held at the borders while fleeing war and poverty have just had bad luck. The division of wage earners into domestic and foreigners is given a "left" face.

However, MLP is not only a national, but also a right-wing, split from the EL in a different sense, even if the criticism of Syriza gives a left-wing impression. Above all, Melenchon and his FI want to move away from the "classical" workers' party, a party that is based socially and organically on a certain class and appears in bourgeois society as that class' political arm. Like Podemos, FI sees itself as a left-wing populist "movement". As with the German #aufstehen, Stand Up, the term "party" is avoided. Everything should reflect the "people" as "broadly" as possible. In response to the shift to the right and the rise of right-wing populism, the "popular front" is already being practised, in an attempt to relate to the "social", "national" and domestic market-oriented parts of the bourgeoisie.

Two sides

So we have before us two tendencies of reformism. Both share the view that a policy of gradual reform and improvement in alliance with "democratic" or "progressive" bourgeois forces is the only "realistic" strategy today. Some, however, see the EU as the best arena for reform, while others see salvation in the nation state. This is why they target different potential "allies" in the bourgeois camp. The second difference is the social basis and the type of party that would be "appropriate" today.

What both have in common, however, is that they underestimate the severity of the capitalist crisis since 2008 and the struggle for a new division of the world. The crisis is currently leading to open trade conflicts between leading powers or emerging blocs such as the US, China and the EU. The redistribution curve does not point downwards, but upwards.

Today, any reformist or populist "redistribution policies" would meet with the fierce resistance of capital. Right-wing populism often plays a leading role here, combining neo-liberalism with extreme racism. Capital and its political henchmen, including the right-wing populist figures, are preparing the next attacks on the working class. No major power, no company, wants to be at a disadvantage in this acute crisis. Bigger projects for all capital players are another neoliberal attempt to privatise public goods and the "introduction" of "Industry 4.0", both of which will bring further attacks. Behind all this lurk the risks on the stock exchanges, the national debts, the "toxic" securities, the massive accumulation of speculative capital, which point towards the next deep financial crisis in the next 2-3 years. Whoever wants to stop the austerity policy and enforce redistribution, must therefore lead the class struggle with mass strikes, mass mobilisations, occupations, organised pickets and self-defence committees.

What Europe needs

Europe's "left" is currently marked by two inadequate and wrong approaches to the 2019 elections. Either we should hope for regulatory policies from the EU Commission with some investment and justice, or we should simply leave this EU, because we hope to achieve better "solutions/successes" with "our" capitalism in the nation state. Neither strategy relies on the fighting power of the European working class, although these parties and their trade union wings are themselves the product the class' existing strength. The real source of their own strength is neglected; instead, new illusions in parliamentarism and democracy institutional reform are spread at the national level. By accommodating to them in this way, the reformist and populist left threatens to lose out to the right-wing populists - and thus to lead the working class into the next defeat.

What is needed, on the other hand, is a programme of European class struggle, a programme directed against the right-wing shift, racism and nationalism. All of the various European capital groups can only have a reactionary perspective of the EU. This might mean division into competing blocs, a "two-speed" EU, that is, a centre and a special economic zone, or a bloc that is then led by Germany and France.

In the crisis of the EU, such "alternatives" must be countered by a revolutionary policy of mass mobilisations, Europe-wide general strikes and internationalism. The capitalist EU can be challenged with a socialist and anti-capitalist programme, the class must make the struggle for the future of Europe its struggle. Central to this is the prospect of beating the combined national bourgeoisies in the class struggle, such a possibility is wasted by the retreat to the nation state.

Certainly the slogan "United Socialist States from Europe" seems rather remote at the moment, but this is the only realistic alternative against the rise of nationalism, racism, right-wing populism and ultimately fascism for the European working class. We need not mention here what fascism has historically done in Europe, we need only point out the daily deaths in the Mediterranean, we have an obligation to fight Fortress Europe.

If we in Europe can mobilise the workers' movement against wage dumping, against the competition of different wage and reproduction costs and for the urgently needed solidarity amongst ourselves, then refugees will be able to develop a consciousness and a practice as part of a European class. When the protests against the debt crisis brought several hundreds of thousands onto the streets or, in earlier times, when the ESF was able to mobilise millions against the imperialists' wars, it became clear what an

enormous force lies in the coordinated actions of the workers' movement. Any European production chain can be brought to a standstill in no time, European coordinated strikes pose a strategic threat to capital, and a general European strike could in itself raise the question of power.

For these goals, and with these methods, we must develop revolutionary politics and win comrades-in-arms to stop the shift to the right, including within the workers' movement. The struggle for the socialist states of Europe, as well as the concrete anti-fascist and anti-racist struggle, are the basis for a revolutionary policy in this period.

The united front against reaction, capital and fascism and for the common social and economic struggle - this must have a European perspective, then the proletariat can stop, and overcome, reactionary decay. A mere withdrawal from the EU, as suggested by Mélenchon, will not help us, even if the "people" are invoked. The class has to fight on the terrain set by capital and for that it needs a programme, that is the decisive question of our time!

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