



Strategy Seminar 2021:

# **The European Left in the 20s. Is there a strategy?**

**Selected contributions of the speakers.**

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## Is there a strategy?

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## Introduction

*By Angelina Giannopoulou, Facilitator of Transform! Europe of the programme "European Integration and Left Strategy" (Greece)*

Transform! Europe and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation have established a cooperation of strategic importance since 2015 when the first Strategy Seminar of the foundations took place in Berlin. This annual event aims to serve as a space of timely debates for the left in Europe bringing together academics, politicians, social movements' activists and civil society actors from a broad spectrum of fields and socio-political networks. This year's seminar, under the title "The European Left in the 20s. Is there a strategy?", was organized on 25-26 October 2021 combining physical and online participation. Thirty people participated in the event contributing with speeches, commentaries, studies and a short-film presentation, 26 of them on site and 4 online.

The point of departure for our discussion was the need for an analysis of the current political and social developments, the weakness and the unclear programmatic proposals of the left, especially those involving European integration. Our aim was to deepen our understanding of the specific obstacles and the difficulties around the left's transnational organisation and cooperation, and, to improve the capacity of our forces for political action. The first priority was to discuss and develop proposals for practical implementation right now. The cardinal challenge was and, still, is how the European left can effectively intervene and promote a policy change in the face of the social, economic, and political consequences of the corona pandemic and the limited capacity, or better willingness, for action of the European Union.

The pandemic crisis accelerated global developments that were already underway. These developments are complex and highly contradictory. The digitalisation of labour, education, cultural expression, and human interaction in general is being pushed forward, creating new forms of subjectification. At the same time, exactly which activities and paid and unpaid work are really essential to our world and its reproduction became more visible than ever, although this recognition has not been resulted in a concrete improvement of material and working conditions.

Capitalism is launching a new war against people throughout the globe. Extreme price gouging is occurring everywhere, which will make electricity, food, and essential goods unaffordable for millions of European citizens, with the working class suffering another round of harsh austerity, impoverishment, and insecurity. In addition, the Green Deal has so far amounted to nothing but a vague promise on behalf of the European institutions, which have not presented any plan for a genuine just transition that has labour at its core. The climate crisis combined with the new major transformations of labour could be a time bomb for the planet and the working classes.

European integration is undergoing its most serious crisis to date, with the EU unable to react and act as a collective subject. Instead of solidarity and unity, each country is on its own. Will the remains of the EU after the crisis be a completely decomposed entity competing with diverse and complex global powers? What would the role of the EU be in a world of authoritarian regimes? And is authoritarian capitalism destroying the EU or actually transforming it?

At what point would the left have to intervene? We seem to lack a united strategic response and are not able yet to set and project our own common agenda. What should the political left be and what will the principal features of this path be? Who could be our partners at present, and what possibilities exist for alliances? How can we build common projects at the European level? What would the radical left's strategy be today to change the balance of powers and set an agenda that serves the interests of the working classes and defends peace, freedom, and security for the people as well as the preservation of the natural environment?

In the opening of the event we presented an overview of the current political landscape in Europe summarised as "The ruins of the pandemic and a European Union without a compass". During the two days, we hosted two sessions of political debates (1. Democracy, democratic rights, and the rule of law: Authoritarian phases in European countries, 2. Labour: The Great Transformation), one book presentation of a recently published volume about the radical left

parties in Europe (Radical in Diversity. Europe's Left 2010-2020", Merlin Press, 2021), two original studies of our network (1. The question of ecology and the climate for the left, 2. Meeting the Left: An overview of the discourse of left-wing leaders and personalities in Europe), a screening of a short-film based on a series of web interviews Transform Europe conducted during 2020, and a round table with two pillars, one on the European organising of the radical left and one on the left experiences in government (insights from Spain and Finland).

Walter Baier, member of the board of Transform unfolded a critical assessment of the current state of affairs in the EU based on strategical questions. He tackled topics such as the economic architecture of the EU and its compliance or not with the legal framework and the political institutions of the union. The question of nationalisms and their rapid growth, as well as the political battle over the self-determination and the democratic integration that could help preventing social contradictions were also some of the axes of this introduction. Danae Koltsida, director of Nicos Poulantzas Institute, together with Cornelia Hildebrandt, Transform's co-president, presented the freshly released publication "Radical in Diversity: Europe's Left (2010-2020)", as the editors of the volume. Their presentation was followed by a critical commentary by Luis Ramiro, political scientist, specialised on the research of the radical left parties in Europe. The "Meeting the Left" series of web-interviews of Transform! Europe bore fruits in the form of one study conducted and presented by Angelina Giannopoulou, facilitator of Transform. The study "Do we speak the same language? An overview of the discourse of left-wing leaders and personalities in Europe" digs into the views, positions, strategic proposals, and concerns of left-wing politicians from a critical and comparative angle and tries to designate convergences, divergences, common language and / or differential discourses upon the same topics. "Meeting the Left" short film was screened by Roberto Morea who facilitated the whole process of its production and release. The first day of the event closed with the study of Espaces Marx, member organisation of Transform! in Paris. The study "The question of ecology and the climate for the left" was analysed by Pablo Livigni, researcher at Espaces Marx and PhD candidate, and three commentators reflected upon its findings, as well the strategic question arose from it. Eva Mildstred Enoksen, member of the leadership of Red-Green Alliance in Copenhagen, Steffen Lehndorff, a

research fellow at the institute "Arbeit und Qualifikation" at the University of Duisburg-Essen, and Pawel Jaworski, collaborator of the think-tank Naprzód in Poland, opened the debate on the relation between the political left and the contemporary environmental movements.

The second day hosted our two big panels with a variety of speakers, coming from different regions and fields of political interest and expertise. The session "Democracy, democratic rights, and the rule of law: Authoritarian phases in European countries" welcomed contributions by Eszter Bartha from Hungary, a Marie Curie research fellow at the Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Tina Tomšič, member of the programme committee of the Inštitut 8. marec in Slovenia, René Jokisch, advisor on European affairs in the parliamentary group of DIE LINKE in Germany, and Ugo Palheta, sociologist and associate professor at the University of Lille, and co-director of the review "Contretemps" in France. Gavin Rae, a sociologist and a founding member of the think-tank Naprzód in Poland, moderated a discussion that covered topics from the institutionalised islamophobia and the process of fascisation in liberal democracies, to the role of the German Court of Justice to the European architecture, and from the debate on the Orban/Janša governance to the need of a contemporary antifascist workers' movement in Europe. The panel "Labour: The Great Transformation" presented three speakers who spoke upon all the critical questions of the labour transformations today. Uberisation, industry 4.0 and new models of workers coopeatives were themes brought up by Sarah de Heusch, a public affairs officer at the Smart Cooperative in Belgium, Leila Chaibi, member of the European Parliament for La France Insoumise, and Matteo Gaddi, member of the board of Punto Rosso Cultural Association and of the scientific committee of Claudio Sabbattini Foundation in Italy. They all put some light into different aspects of the organisation of labour nowadays, both from an analytical and a strategical point of view.

Our seminar concluded after a session dedicated to strategic questions for the radical left in Europe with inputs of Heinz Bierbaum, the president of the Party of the European Left and Vincenzo Colaprice, the spokesperson of the European Left Youth Network and head of the international department of Giovani Comunisti in Italy. This session was followed by insights on the experiences of radical left parties in government, namely in Finland and in Spain. Dan

Koivulaakso, state secretary at the Ministry of Education in Finland and Marga Ferre, co-president of Transform from Spain presented the programmatic agreements their parties have entered to, as well as the challenges of a left-wing party in government faces.

The seminar was recorded and some of the speeches will be published in our Youtube channel and our website. This e-dossier presents selected contributions from our speakers in the form of written articles and serves as an insight of the debate we had during our meeting.



## Europe, the EU, and the European Left

*By Walter Baier, Economist, Member of the Board of Transform! Europe (Austria)*

We can discern four distinct historical periods of upswing of Europe's socialist left:

The formative period of the labour movement during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary upswing in the wake of the First World War, the period of antifascism from 1935 to 1950, and finally Eurocommunism and the fall of the dictatorships in Southern Europe.

Despite the defeats and crisis of the movements which followed, a pattern suggests itself; perhaps even a rule: Every upswing of the socialist left presupposed a capacity to grasp the major feature of a certain period and relate to it politically.

Thus, I start with the observation that the socialist left today, at least in Europe lacks a grand design. I am not talking about a narrative, although we must admit that every successful social movement requires a comprehensive interpretation of the present, but rather about an analytical framework that makes it possible to integrate the various policies and struggles into a meaningful framework.

One of the strategic blind spots of many radical socialist parties in Europe is the lack of awareness of the extent to which national politics are conditioned by transnational European processes.

It is obvious that a debate on national versus integration policies cannot take place without some basic framework.

Admittedly, this question is complex. Independently of any possible theoretical approach, in practice socialist parties are operating within a nation-state framework, which means that they compete with other political forces for state power, something that always involves defending democratic self-determination – all the more so as virtually all social and political progress achieved in welfare and labour rights have been won and institutionalised nationally. To abolish or at least to minimise this progress has become the goal of the EU, if not already contained in the Single European Act then at the latest with the Maastricht treaty.

On the other hand, we must try to gauge, *sine ira et studio*, what the notion of self-determination can mean what during a global civilisational crisis like the one we are now undergoing. To be clear, the question is not whether nations are still relevant; they are, simply because they objectively exist; in question rather is what self-determination actually means and how it effectively and democratically can be exercised under the current historical circumstances.

### POLITICAL WILL AND HEGEMONY

There is a strange contradiction here. On the question of what must be done in coping with the climate crisis most of the scientific communities as well as most ordinary people agree.

What is missing, however, is the capacity to form a political will to implement the policies, on which apparently everybody agrees, within the existing institutional framework. Obviously, this applies at both the national and the international level.

Of course, we need to defend liberal democracy in the face of the onslaught of the fascist nationalist right. However, in this situation of an unprecedented crisis in which a collective societal effort is required, the liberal notion of democracy, which provides only for individual rights, seems to have reached its limits.

Popular democracy epitomised by universal suffrage, not won by the liberals but by the labour movement, goes beyond liberal democracy, by enabling the working classes to articulate their collective interests and strive for the hegemony of their goals and values.

This means that democracy and national self-determination cannot be measured only in abstract terms of constitutional and international law. Our measure must be the extent to which they provide the necessary means and spaces for forming a new political will embodying a societal consensus about the direction and the content of the transformation.

As already pointed out, this concerns both the national and the European level. Coping with the climate crisis will require huge investments, steering the investments in new forms, profoundly changing the distributional relations, and changing the property order.

And even this is not enough. If the societies of the North are prepared to participate peacefully in the process of global transformation, they must not only change their mode of production and their consumption patterns; they must also embrace the idea of a global redistribution of resources and life opportunities. This will involve not only socio-economic changes but also a major cultural and mental adaptation of the populace to a new global reality. Thus, we are talking about political leadership and cultural hegemony.

What does the rise of China have in common with the military defeat of the West in Afghanistan? If not judging through the lens of ideology, by which one easily loses sight of the real process, both are the proof that the global transformation is already underway and that the question, also for the socialist left, is how to relate to it.

China's rise should not be seen as an episode in the circle of the rise and fall of the empires. It rather demonstrates that the process of decolonialisation, interrupted in the 1990s, has recovered its momentum, leading to the end of the global dominance of Western imperialism, independently of whether one likes the ideological form or the political leadership this process assumes in different countries and regions.

If this diagnosis is close to the truth, then the socialist left could not limit itself to demands and programmes of action to protect the popular classes from falling prey to the global transformation; rather, at the same time, it needs a political vision of how Europe could assume a protagonist and constructive role within it.

Nobody can sincerely believe that any single member state of the EU is fit to cope with this challenge alone, since even the larger ones are only middle-sized countries in comparison to China, India, the US, Pakistan, Indonesia, or Nigeria

Thus, the standalone model of the nation-state can only exist within the pseudo-alternative presented by nationalists and right-wing populists. More serious is the question of

whether the socialist left can rely on the problem-solving capacity of the cooperation between governments, which still has preponderance in the institutional logic of the EU.

Has this system delivered during the pandemic?

Obviously it has not; instead, it has exposed the sharp contradictions of the EU treaties, which assign social and health policies to the nation-states at the same time as they imposed financial austerity on them after the meltdown of 2007.

The suspending of the Stability and Growth Pact in spring 2020 was necessary and sensible. Still, its reactivation in 2024 hangs like a sword of Damocles over economic recovery. The possible compromise between the new German government under Scholz and French president Macron to exempt green public investment from the restrictions of the Fiscal Pact, if realised, proves both the pragmatic learning capacity of the system and the necessity of its fundamental change. Otherwise, the beast of austerity will hibernate in its cave.

Moreover, providing for non-repayable transfers to the countries hit hardest by the crisis and their partial financing through joint European borrowing were good moves. Yet, in view of the dimensions of the problems ahead, the EU is still far away from what today's German chancellor, the then minister of finance, called its Hamilton moment.

## DECONSTRUCTING LIBERAL MYTHS

So, if the standalone model of nation-states was not realistic, and if, as it turned out, the intergovernmental method of today's EU did not deliver, what additional option would be available?

To open such a debate, it is important to deconstruct a few liberal myths.

The first myth is the United States of Europe. What would that be? Could the EU declare itself a republic and endeavour to expand to the East, looking for its last frontier at the Urals? After a series of debacles – Transnistria, Georgia, Ukraine, and the again growing tensions in Bosnia – we should know better.

Like it or not, security and peace in Europe can only be achieved in coexistence with Russia. Seen from the US perspective, this might not be a matter of primary concern. From a European perspective it is. This means that real strategic autonomy needs a security architecture emancipated from the US and NATO encompassing both EU-member states and states which for the predictable future will not become members of the EU.

Hence, pan-European frameworks, like the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to which all states of the continent belong, and which have been overshadowed in public awareness by the European Union, are still relevant, and so are regional bodies like the Nordic Council or the European Danube Commission, which brings together the eleven riparian states of the Danube.

Recognising that the EU and Europe are different things is not only a matter of real politics; it could also help to correct the biased understanding of integration. Imagine if the member states of the OSCE concluded an agreement on transforming Europe into a nuclear-weapon-free zone, like Latin America is. Would not that be a huge boost in European integration, and is not it worth fighting for?

For this, European integration must not be conceived as a one-size-fits-all solution under the aegis of the EU but requires a complex system of organisations and institutions with variable compositions and objectives.

The second myth to challenge: European integration can only be constructed on the debris of the nation-states! Why should this be so? The socialist left has always recognised the principle of national self-determination. This also implies accepting diversity in relation to the EU. That which might be a possible path, for example, for Norway, because of its intensive trade links with the UK and its wealth of natural resources, is not necessarily applicable to Ireland. Hence, recognising the right to stay outside the EU or even leave it, does not, from a progressive internationalist standpoint, necessarily imply fighting for the EU's destruction. It could even converge with the struggle for democratic change in the EU.

## AN EMPTY SIGNIFIER

National self-determination as such is no more than an empty signifier, so abstract that it is even usable for the nationalist right when not contextualised in a realistic view of actual economic and political power relations. The very same right claimed for Denmark is a qualitatively completely different thing than it is for France. 'Austria First' can be regarded as a joke, while 'Germany First' would be a nightmare, all the more that it historically coincided with the former.

In terms of real politics, despite the growth of disintegrative tendencies, the disorderly breakup of the EU is an improbable scenario, at least under conditions of peace. More probable and to a certain extent already factual is a continuous paralysis of the institutions, which prove increasingly incapable of addressing the urgent social, ecological, and health problems on the agenda.

In this context the confrontational debate on the primacy of European law over national constitutional law or its subordination to the latter, currently debated in the cases of Poland and Hungary, has become a central issue regarding the future of integration.

Without the slightest sympathy for the two right-wing governments, one must admit that Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki had a point in his speech in Strasbourg, on 19 October, in alluding to the *ultra vires* ruling of the German Constitutional court from March of last year. In it the Court upheld the complaint of an AfD politician against the Public Sector Purchase Programme (PSPP) of the European Central Bank and arrogated the right to judge on the legitimacy and adequacy of policies enacted by European institutions.

So what? Does primacy of or subordination of national law depend on what issues are dealt with, or does the proverb apply: *Quod licet Jovi not licet bovi?* (What is permissible for Jupiter may not be permissible to the bull). And can a union of states in the 21<sup>st</sup> century be built on such premises?

In such a tense situation, the socialist left is in danger of ending in a lose-lose-scenario. While a breakup would inevitably revitalise the traditional imperialist rivalries which



have drenched Europe's soil with blood, the paralysis of the institution would fuel the nationalist populist right.

To reasonably ponder this we must deconstruct a third myth, which is the notion that the model of European unification à la Monet, Schuman, and De Gasperi was meant to unite Europe. Spinelli is wrongly invoked here. Anyone who reads the Ventotene Manifesto can easily discover that what its authors had in mind was not just a federalist but a socialist Europe, something which at the time it was written in 1941 was a bold but by no means unrealistic idea.

By contrast, the European Coal and Steel Community, which placed the German and French steel industries under joint administration, did not aim at uniting but splitting Europe to contain socialism in the East and save capitalism in the West, which is why it is historically connected with the division of Germany and founding of NATO. If in accordance with the wish of the US, the Franco-German antagonism was to be diffused, then areas at the centre of their centuries-long rivalry had to be included, i.e., the Benelux countries and Italy. This is the prosaic way in which the six really came together.

When Spinelli, 35 years after the Ventotene Manifesto, authored his draft for the *Treaty Establishing the European Union*, which was adopted by the European Parliament, he accepted this situation and shifted the focus to the emerging conflict between radical market economy and a socially and politically embedded capitalism. Nevertheless, and despite all water he had to mix into the wine to garner a majority his draft contained a revolutionary principle, as it granted the right of proposing amendments to the European treaty or even its comprehensive reform to the freely elected parliament.

We know that the initiative was defeated. The outcome was, to Spinelli's great disappointment, the Single European Act, which paved the way to what later became neoliberalism, fortified by the treaties of Maastricht and Lisbon.

## DEMOCRACY AND NATIONALITY

Today's EU appears as a strange hybrid: on the one hand, it is a free-trade zone with a common currency coupled with to a court of justice and a bureaucracy at its service; and on

the other hand, it has a parliament, which is still weak, as it disposes of the capacity neither to govern the markets nor to control the bureaucracy.

This system of dividing the legislative competence between a body composed of executives, the European Council, and a Parliament without the right of legislative initiative and budget prerogative, resembles not a classical two-chamber-system but rather an enlightened absolutism.

Hence, any re-foundation of Europe, based on a radical democratic vision, requires in the first place that the European Parliament becomes the centre of decision-making in those affairs for which the EU has authority. In it, the key factor would be the intervention of political parties at the European level. This also has short-term practical implications. While the national parties of the Party of the European Left need to upgrade the visibility of their umbrella party, the latter should demand the right of the parties on the European level to present unified European lists at the EP elections.

Europe is by no means done with the so called 'national question' which the growing nationalisms demonstrate. On the contrary, as the crisis has intensified, nationalisms have increasingly become the projection screens for social problems. This not only concerns integration but also the cohesion of individual European states.

One can learn from Austro-Marxism, especially from Otto Bauer, that nationalism cannot be fought with abstract appeals to an international class consciousness, which must be created and, in any event, once it exists be defended continuously, but only with a radical democratisation of the relations between nations based on the right to self-determination. At present, this requires first an effective and clear division of competences between national and European institutions.

A complication of national relations lies in the fact that they are not adequately reflected in the current system of states and the EU. This applies not only to those peoples who demand self-determination within existing states but also to new national minorities that have emerged because of migration, which are distributed among several states and are forming larger populations than those of smaller EU member states. And this raises the question of cultural,

religious, and national representation of these minorities on the European level, which if not addressed politically will become a floodgate for the far right as well as religious and ethical fundamentalisms.

The Good Friday Agreement in Ireland, now undermined by Brexit, has proven the usefulness of the European framework to reach agreements on national issues.

Hence the problem: universal suffrage on the European level would not be enough to produce democratic integration which could help prevent social contradictions from being transformed into national ones; it also requires the representation of peoples and nations as subjects of law, which would be materialised in a second legislative chamber made up of delegates of the national parliaments and of the representative bodies of national minorities

Here again, and even from a national point of view, abolishing the predominance of the European Council of Heads of State and Government turns out to be the major prerequisite for both democracy and integration.

The crisis that has gripped European integration extends from healthcare to ecology, from industrial policy to social systems. It can only be understood within this complexity. Its core, however, is political!

In the final analysis, the question is: What is the political and institutional framework in which the European peoples want to decide their future.

If the socialist left does not want itself to fall victim to the crisis of European integration, it must face up to this question.

## France: The authoritarian turn and the antifascism we need

*By Ugo Palheta, Sociologist, Associate Professor at the University of Lille and co-director of the review Contretemps (France)*

I'd like to begin with the question of the authoritarian turn in France. Of course, one of the first things that comes to mind right now when we think about authoritarianism, is the Covid-19 crisis and how it changed many things in our daily lives. Governments dealt with the crisis by very authoritarian means but, more generally, in some countries and especially in France, they also used the health crisis to shift toward a more authoritarian form of political domination. It is not a simple and mechanical effect of the virus itself, because we can quite easily imagine more democratic – and more efficient – ways of fighting such a virus, but most governments reacted in a very repressive and paternalistic way.

But the authoritarian turn did not begin in France with the Covid crisis. It was already underway since at least 2016 when the big social movement against a labour market reform faced violent repression, or obviously in 2018-2019 when we saw the most brutal repression of any social movement in France for decades, namely that of the Yellow Vests movement: 25 people lost eyes due to flash-ball shots from the police; 5 people lost a hand because of grenades thrown by the police; 1,000 people have been jailed due to their participation in the movement; 1,200 people have been given a suspended sentence; more than 12,000 people have been in police custody during the months of the movement for their participation in it. These are figures unprecedented in the last 60 years of France's history.

This therefore is the most visible element of the authoritarian turn – an intensified repression of social movements. But it articulates with years of regression in civil liberties. In France, since 2015 we have largely lived in a state of emergency, which gave new arbitrary powers to the police, to the administration, and to the executive. It was first justified by the terrorist attacks of November of 2015, but it stayed in place until 2017. And when Macron ended it, he actually translated into common law some of the key measures that were included in the state of emergency, especially those regarding the powers of the police, which have been constantly expanded by governments over the last twenty years. With the pandemic, we went back to a state of emergency, and after the terrible murder of a teacher by a jihadist terrorist, the government passed two different laws:

one, dubbed 'global security', which increased police powers further still and included private security agencies; and the other law. Which directly targeted Islam and Muslims.

Another element of this acceleration of authoritarianism is the fact that the rule of law in France is not something that is simply under threat; it is already partly denied to minorities, especially to immigrants, Muslims, Romani people, people living in poor neighbourhoods (who are mostly Blacks and Arabs), etc. It has to be stressed that authoritarianism has increased together with a politics of racism, especially Islamophobia, which hasn't merely been a means of propaganda for far-right forces but has been constantly used and implemented by governments over the last 20 years.

Of course, Islamophobia is not specific to France: we have seen Islamophobic movements like Pegida in Germany, we have seen the success of Islamophobic ideologues like Oriana Fallaci in Italy, etc. What seems specific here to France is the degree of institutionalisation of Islamophobia: in the name of a very strange understanding of 'secularism', the rights of Muslims have already been reduced and with the new law the state is trying to control the religious practices of imams and limit the right to free speech; for instance, if an imam says that there is institutional Islamophobia in France, he will be accused of 'separatism' and his mosque could be closed. And last but not least, with a completely spurious justification the government has prohibited the main organisation struggling against Islamophobia: the CCIF (Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France), which was actually the biggest antiracist organisation in France, with more than 10,000 members.

My second point is that authoritarianism should not be perceived only as a specific feature of Macron's policies, because this authoritarian trend began with Sarkozy almost twenty years ago. But the paradox is that a government that was supposed to be left, François Hollande's, went much further in that direction. It is therefore not about the political personality of Sarkozy, Hollande, or Macron; what is involved here is a general politics of the ruling class in France, and if we want to delve more deeply in order to understand the situation, we need to see the hardening of the

state as an expression of the deepening of social contradictions, which appear to be specifically intense in France.

In short, I would say that, as far as the capitalist class is concerned, there is a contradiction between capital's extreme domination of workplaces and the destabilisation of its political rule. This contradiction is a direct effect of the capitalist offensive that we usually call 'neoliberalism':

- on the one side, neoliberal policies enacted by governments for the last 40 years have made it very difficult for workers to fight specifically in their workplaces, especially in the private sector and especially through strikes, which is still the specific weapon workers have to defend their interests;
- on the other side, neoliberalism has broken the social compromise on which the active popular consent to the political order was founded, and then it had the effect of weakening political parties in many countries, and especially in France where market-driven policies are very much contested.

In France, this political destabilisation of the ruling class has peaked in the last ten years, as both dominant parties, right-wing and centre-left, which represented 60 to 70% percent of voters, fell to 25% in the last Presidential election and then to 15% in the last European election. This indicates a deep crisis of political representation and I would speak of a crisis of hegemony or at least of 'hegemonic instability' (to use Poulantzas's term), which means that the capitalist class still exploits economically and dominates politically, especially in the absence of any left alternative, but its capacity to win the active consent of a majority of people has declined dramatically.

On the side of the working-class, in France, while there has been mass social struggles since 2016, there are at least three problems that would emphasise:

- first, these struggles are strong enough to disturb the French capitalist class, which is politically weakened (leading it to turn to more authoritarian methods), but these struggles are not strong enough now to win defensive battles against pro-capitalist reforms and, all the less, to crystallise through a political left alternative or at least to push towards the building of a left alternative.
- second, the other difficulty is that there are still obstacles to building alliances between social movements, even if there has been some progress at this level (for

instance the leader of the main French trade union has participated in demonstrations against police brutality and also against Islamophobia, which would have been impossible only ten years ago).

- third, another problem is that we have seen the emergence of a new radical activist generation, which, however, finds it difficult to build an organic relationship to the masses. A good example of this is at the universities where there is a layer of radical activists, from my experience larger than 15 years ago, but which has not been able to build mass movements in universities in the last ten years.

I would like to conclude by stressing the double necessity for the left to bring antifascism back into the core of its agenda, but also to take seriously the need to update antifascism. My point is that we need more antifascism, for quite obvious reasons, and this antifascism will necessarily have something to do with interwar antifascism, but if we want it to be effective, we cannot simply use the old forms – neither workerist nor anarchist. We need to think collectively about what an antifascism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century would look like.

I will single out a few points in this regard:

First point: The main reasons for the rise of the far right do not mainly concern the specific capacities of the far-right itself but rather have to do with mainstream politics, that is, with the policies that have been implemented in the last decades and with the increasing shift of the right-wing and the socialist party in the direction of the far right, thus lending increasing legitimacy to far-right propaganda, especially on three questions: immigration, Islamophobia, and security. This should not come as a surprise because fascism has always been the complex product of, on the one hand, the development of far-right movements and ideas, which is the obvious aspect, and, on the other hand, of a reactionary radicalisation of sections of the ruling class, which allowed the fascists to come to power by legal means, at least in Italy and Germany. If the capitalist class has to choose between the rule of law and the law of value, they will choose the latter, that is, the pursuit of the accumulation of capital by any means necessary.

This then means that antifascism cannot be only about fighting the far right. An antifascism that would only be a defence of democracy against the far-right threat or a street-level fight against fascist thugs would be extremely inadequate in facing the deep-lying neo-fascist dynamics.

Thus, antifascism has to link this struggle organically to actual struggles against the authoritarian and racist politics of the ruling class, especially when the latter radicalises as we are now experiencing in France. Otherwise, it is unlikely that antifascism will be able to attract the most oppressed segments of the working class, because a lot of non-white people, for instance, say: 'I haven't been brutalised by fascist thugs, but I have been controlled, humiliated, or brutalised by the police.' And it is true that the police killed many more non-white people than the far-right did in the last decades in France: two journalists have demonstrated that there has been approximately 750 people who have died after a police intervention in the last 40 years, mostly young Black or Arab males from poor neighbourhoods.

Second point: Racism in the form of Islamophobia is obviously one of the pillars of far-right electoral and ideological successes in Western Europe, but also a motive for fascist terrorist attacks against not only Muslims but also against Jews and left activists, because in the conspiratorial form of Islamophobia, the Jews and the left are presented as those who use immigration and Muslims to destroy the Nation, the West, the traditional values and identities, and so on.

Islamophobia has also largely been used by centrist governments to justify not only states of emergency but also military intervention in the Global South, especially in the French case. So my, actually very simple, point which has been very complicated for the French left to deal with in practice in the last 20 years, is: At least in Western Europe, the struggle against Islamophobia – and more generally against racism – is absolutely central for antifascism and is necessary if we want antifascism to be rooted among racially oppressed minorities.

Third point: Globalisation has been one of the major ways for the capitalist class to put an end to the cycle of popular struggles of the 1970s, to weaken workers' movements and other form of collective solidarity, and to undo some of the most important working-class gains. The intensified competition between workers and between social systems explains, at least in large part, the apparent contradiction between a world which is more connected than ever before and the historic crisis of internationalism, between an economy more globalised than ever before and the rise of xenophobia and racism. It is obvious that the European Union has been the main political instrument of globalisation

in Europe, constructing a legal architecture adapted to its implementation. So my point here is to say that antifascism in Europe faces the complex task of defining itself against capitalist globalisation, and against the European Union, which feeds xenophobia by pitting workers in competition against other workers, but also the task of reviving concrete international solidarities. This is more a question than an answer but we need to address this question.

Fourth point: The rise of the far-right is not mostly a reaction to workers' combativeness, and a fortiori to a revolutionary dynamics, one which does not appear to be on the agenda for the near future. Instead, it is more a delusional and pathological expression of the absence of a left alternative in the context of the weakening and defeats of workers' movements, but also in the context of a systemic and multidimensional crisis. The only period of time when antifascism was a mass movement rooted in the working-class was when it was connected to working-class organisations and an alternative socialist project.

My last point is that the ecological crisis has already begun to intensify the systemic contradictions of capitalism and will increasingly do so in the coming years and decades. It will provide new justifications for governments to impose more authoritarian measures and feed xenophobic neo-Malthusian propaganda around over-population and appeals to criminalise immigration from the Global South even more.

Most of the far right has already seen the political profit they can reap by putting forward nationalist and racist greenwashing. If closing borders is enough to face the ecological crisis, if the Nation is the solution, you don't have to address the question of capitalist productivity and politically concrete alternatives. We know that this is stupid, but it still can be effective propaganda. So if the left does not emerge as an alternative with a powerful counter-hegemonic narrative, integrating ecological priorities, the far right will necessarily take advantage of the situation by promoting xenophobic and imperialist 'solutions'.

On the side of antifascism, this means that we should be very careful about attempts from the far right to ideologically infiltrate the environmental movement, and more generally it means that we have to antifascism with ecological perspectives, and reciprocally feed ecology with antifascist perspectives. This is what we should start to do now.



## Hungarian autocracy from a historical perspective

*By Eszter Bartha, Marie Curie Research Fellow at Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Technical University of Dresden (Hungary)*

Populism and especially right-wing populism has been addressed at various levels in the burgeoning literature. The increased scholarly interest devoted to this subject is, of course, inseparable from the rise of radical right-wing political parties, which achieved notable successes at the parliamentary elections throughout Europe; in some Eastern European countries such as Poland and Hungary, they even pose a realistic and objective threat to the political order of liberal democracy. While the Polish and Hungarian developments show certain important parallels, the following discussion addresses the Hungarian case in more detail.

The Hungarian political party FIDESZ, which under the leadership of the charismatic politician Viktor Orbán, succeeded in radically transforming the Hungarian political arena, has a rather adventurous history. After its electoral defeat in 1994, Orbán converted FIDESZ – which was originally established as a liberal party that mainly sought to win over young voters – into a right-wing political party with the express goal of uniting all right-wing political forces in one camp, under the umbrella of FIDESZ. The first Orbán government (1998-2002) already showed signs of right-wing radicalisation, bringing back many elements from the interwar period (the Horthy era), most notably its ‘Christian-nationalistic’ ideology. In the interwar period, this ideological mix was characterised by the political commitment of the contemporary Hungarian elite to revanchism, far right-wing nationalism, chauvinism, and pronounced patriarchalism.

This policy led eventually to Hungary’s political alliance with Nazi Germany and the tragic role of Hungarian military forces in the genocide of the Jewish population in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and the war crimes committed against other ethnicities in the occupied areas. The Holocaust in Hungary cannot be adequately understood outside of this wider political and social context, whose roots lay in the Christian-nationalist ideology, as it was called, which developed after Horthy came to power (after the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet Republic), the massive use of terror against the ‘reds’, and the signing of the Treaty of Trianon, which severely reduced the area

of the Kingdom of Hungary. Thus, Christian-nationalist thought provided the ideological basis of the conviction held by the political elite that the grave social and economic problems of the ‘reduced’ or ‘mutilated’ Hungary (which, in reality, was traceable to the peripheral development of the Eastern European region) could be solved by the reclaiming or outright reconquest of the lost territories and the dispossession of the Jewish population.

While the character of Horthy’s regime has been widely disputed in the Hungarian literature, there is an overall agreement that even if not outright fascism, it can still be termed an authoritarian-conservative-right wing regime, which was inherently hostile to democracy, the labour movement, and the Jewish population.

While – partly thanks to the Kádár nostalgia – the first Orbán-government was defeated in the parliamentary elections of 2002, in 2010, FIDESZ was able to return to power with a two-thirds parliamentary majority. In power for the past 12 years, Orbán has not only restored the legitimacy of the Christian-nationalistic ideology of the interwar era, which had led to the tragedy of the Holocaust and the death of over one million people in the territory of ‘historical’ Hungary, but has effectively used this ideological mix for the legitimation of his autocratic regime. There is an ongoing debate in the Hungarian political literature on the character of the Orbán regime. He himself has labelled his regime ‘illiberal’, which unambiguously indicates his contempt for liberal democracies. Even if parliamentary elections are held every four years, the electoral system favours FIDESZ, so much so that its victory is almost ‘guaranteed’ – as long as Orbán can continue to win over the ‘masses’ through material concessions.

To understand – at least partly – the key to his success, we should go back to the Kádár regime. After the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (which was widely supported by the working class), Kádár had to consolidate his political power. The most effective means was his ‘standard-of-living’ policy, which promised ever increasing levels of consumption to the working people through pay in-

creases, affordable state housing, rising consumption, the support of working-class culture and education, the training of working-class leaders, etc. This policy laid the basis for Hungary's 'Goulash Communism', which made Hungary one of the most attractive socialist countries in Eastern Europe. The economic problems of the late 1970s and 1980s, which seriously undermined the standard-of-living policy, discredited the idea of a good socialism in the eye of many people. The Communist propaganda, which sought to exaggerate Western unemployment and the exploitation of the Western working people, proved ineffective in a world in which the shelves of the Western supermarkets were full of consumer goods that could not be bought in the East.

The weakening of the Soviet Union and the increasing dissatisfaction of the workers sealed the fate of state socialism in Hungary. People turned with renewed hopes to Western capitalism; politicians also widely propagated the success of 'catch-up' development under capitalist conditions. What workers understood by the term 'catching up' was to achieve the Western levels of consumption that they enviously observed from the East. The reality turned out to be different. Critical Western thinkers such as Peter Gowan argued that Western capital transformed Eastern Europe into a 'laboratory' of neoliberalism, which, 'in the old times' was called imperialism.

The laboratory of neoliberalism proved an apt description. While in the 1990s, Hungary attracted the highest levels of FDI, the period proved to be an era of stagnation or even material decline for great masses of the people. The collapse of traditional industries resulted in unusually high levels of unemployment and massive impoverishment. On the other side, technocracy and the financial elite profited greatly – and unfairly, in the eyes of most people – from privatisation and mass-scale liberalisation. Workers – or former workers – became increasingly disappointed with the neoliberal elites, whom they saw as active supporters of globalisation and multinational capital, which they blamed for the destruction of their factories and the loss of their workplaces.

Between 2002 and 2004 I interviewed 40 current and former workers of a socialist factory, which in the Kádár era was considered a flagship of the town's industry. The project investigated, by way of life-history interviews, how workers had experienced the transformation of the world

of work and work-related institutions and communities. Hungarian workers would typically formulate 'narratives of decline' with respect to the privatisation of the factory, their standard of living, cohesion within work-based communities, and the general loss of the security they experienced under socialism (first and foremost universal employment). These experiences greatly undermined their feeling of security and increased the attractiveness of political messages that promised the return of a strong welfare state.

Albeit the objective material circumstances and the material reward of the work were different in a multinational company, where new interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2020, interestingly, exploitation was also addressed at three levels. The first was the wage gap between the workers and the technocrats in the factory, which the skilled workers considered to be unfairly high. Further, the wage differential was also seen as downgrading the skills of which the workers were evidently proud. This further alienated them from the technocrats and other university-graduate managers who allegedly received high wages from the profits that the workers produced:

“ *Many engineers think that they are gods, and often they lack elementary technological knowledge and culture. The working class is undervalued and the management and the engineers are greatly over-rewarded. I don't envy money from anybody but then the expectations should be equally different.* Károly, 42, skilled worker

The social distance between managers and workers was also criticised in the interviews, and this distance further nourished the workers' resentment and mistrust of managers:

“ *There are managers who think that you are only a worker, your job is to work eight hours a day and bring profit to the company. Our job is to discipline these people and tell them that their disproportionately high income comes from the workers' wage work on whom they look down on.* István, 54, skilled worker

The second level at which the issue of exploitation was addressed in the interviews has an international dimension and has to do with the huge wage differential between the money paid by the Hungarian factory and the German wage level earned at the mother company. All workers

mentioned that this difference was all the more unjust as they were expected to work harder for much less money than their German counterparts. Most of them were familiar with the German conditions because they had worked in Germany or had visited the mother company. While they recognised that their own wages were higher than the Hungarian average, most would argue that the money was not enough compared to their expectations. Some told us they would even consider emigration in the hope of higher wages.

The third level involved the neoliberal order, in which the 'West' colonised the 'East'. Similarly to the previous project, many workers explicitly argued that 'globalisation' in fact meant the downgrading of Hungarian industry and that Western capital 'consciously' destroyed the Hungarian factories to get rid of the competition and conquer the Hungarian market. They felt they were defenceless against global capital, and that is why they urged a return to a stronger entity that could more efficiently protect them.

“ *I don't think selling the whole country was such good idea. We had a milling industry, a meat industry, shoe factories, we sold everything to the foreigners, and now we are buying agricultural products from abroad. Why do we produce cars when this is an agricultural country? Why do we produce grape for the Austrians? Why not wheat for Hungarians? This is what annoys me about the regime change. This can only be solved like it was in World War II. To destroy everything and to reconstruct everything. Otherwise I don't see a way out. Tamás, 32, skilled worker*

The question arises: Why could the right-wing-conservative-illiberal party FIDESZ benefit from these perceptions of multiple exploitations, and why was the left – or even the radical left – left behind?

My tentative answer is that while on the surface, Orbán 'stole' many elements from the Kádár regime (standard-of-living policy, the protection of the 'little man'), in effect he set out to destroy not only the liberal democratic order but also the (albeit weak) labour movement in Hungary. Hungarian authors (most notably Attila Antal and Gábor Scheiring) sharply criticised what they called the alliance of Orbán and multinational capital, arguing that, un-

der the guise of illiberalism Orbán's autocracy in fact allied itself with big capital. This was completely the opposite of what the Kádár regime did – regardless of how we evaluate the socialist era or Goulash Communism.

The second important difference is the liberalisation of such common goods as education and healthcare. While the Kádár regime invested a great deal in the development of these fields, Orbán de facto privatised education and healthcare – while from the state one gets only a minimal education, it is only the private schools (or, increasingly, church schools) which prepare students for successful higher education.

I blame the failure of the radical left to benefit from the perceptions of exploitation on the educational system, which was consciously converted into strongly anti-communist institutions. While in the previous survey, workers still had fond memories of socialism (for example, they spoke, with a sense of loss, of the brigade movement, the old socialist communities, the job and living security, the different ties that people used to have), twenty years later the interview partners all spoke negatively of the previous regime. They even complained about the high social inequalities under state socialism – when in fact, after 1989 these indicators rose sharply. It is no longer 'fashionable' to harbour socialist sentiments, and education plays a very important role in the forging of a collective memory.

Following the lead of the Hungarian historian Tamás Krausz we can actually speak of the 'falsification of history' – which has been going on since 1989, first with the support of liberal elites, who, having gotten rid of the Marxist heritage, invested in theories of the working class becoming middle class, and later in the above-mentioned Horthy-renaissance. The interwar slogans of independence from the Western world, which had been seen as immensely hostile to Hungary (or rather, Hungarian imperial aspirations in the Carpathian Basin), have gained new social and political meaning after the 1990s, when – as we have seen – many losers of the regime change blamed neoliberalism – imposed on Hungary by Western capital and the neoliberal local political elite, whom they linked with the nomenklatura and the political left – for the impoverishment of their families or surroundings. Orbán's anti-Western and 'anti-EU' propaganda was very successful in exploiting these feelings of being 'left behind'.

I would add that there was another crucial factor that explains the weakness of the radical left in Hungary. Alongside the Marxist-Leninist legitimating ideology, all class theories have also been discredited as liberal intellectuals preferred to build bourgeois democracies rather than a more equal society that both Western and Eastern leftists supported after the liberation from the tutelage of the Communist parties. The new neoliberal order fragmented and destroyed any form of class consciousness – which the increase of materialism had in any case already weakened under Hungary's Goulash Communism. Workers are now 'operators' (or more pejoratively 'biorobots'), and most enterprises are openly hostile to trade unions. Workers are willing to make more and more concessions to global capital to save their workplaces, since there is always the threat that production will move further to the East in the search for ever cheaper labour power.

In this economic and political context, the siren voices of the 'old-fashioned' patriotism and nationalism that we once thought belonged to the dustbin of history, appeal to more and more workers searching for an 'imagined' community. Given the scale at which the term *class* has been consciously discredited both by the neoliberals and right and far-right wing forces, we cannot expect workers to embrace a new Marxist language and a Marxist practice that could be adequately used against the expansion and exploitation of global capital. Nation and nationality are attractive catchwords that the tabloid press – and of course, Orbán – are very much keen to propagate in order to replace the old ideology based on socialist values and the commonwealth with a language and practice of exclusion. But as I argued above, there is nothing novel in this – it is a remix of the ideology of the Horthy regime.

And of course, it is always easy to find the 'weaker' scapegoats. In the Horthy era they were the Jews; now the main target are the Roma people, who were particularly hard hit by the loss of traditional industries and long-term unemployment (often through generations). Concepts of 'deservingness' (Chris Hann, Don Kalb) aptly describe the language of exclusion, which distinguishes the 'deserving' ethnic Hungarian majority from the 'unworthy' Roma people. This nationalistic-ethnicised discourse strongly appeals to factory workers, where skill, vocation, and hard work are central to the workers' sense of identity. While the managers and engineers were criticised for receiving unduly high

salaries at the expense of the workers, the interview partners would often directly contrast the image of the decent worker with that of the 'unworthy', lazy Roma, who live on crime and/or social welfare subsidies. According to Margit Feischmidt, there is a strong relationship between Hungarian nationalism and anti-Roma attitudes. Indeed, many of the respondents argued that Roma people were 'unable' to integrate into Hungarian society and that their culture made them markedly different from Hungarians in a negative sense ('they are too lazy to work', 'they produce too many children only to get social subsidies', 'they steal from ethnic Hungarians', and, in general, live at the expense of the society of working people). These stereotypes were frequently voiced both in the group discussions and in the interviews – in fact, we can say that the anti-Roma discourse constituted a significant part of the interviews.

“ I think that Jobbik and the gypsies are good friends because Jobbik would not be in Parliament if it were not for the gypsies. I have my opinion of the gypsies because I never heard that a gypsy had suffered an electric shock because he wanted to cultivate a garden but only because he wanted to steal from peasants who had installed an electric wire. Zsolt, 40, skilled worker

'Gypsy criminality', which was a favourite topic of the far-right wing political party Jobbik at the time of interviewing, has been frequently evoked to justify anti-Roma feelings and the generally held view that the Roma people cannot be integrated into the majority society for cultural reasons.

“ There are moments when you would shoot if you only had a machine gun. In Olaszliszka, I would have attacked – well, not shoot perhaps, but I would have beaten up the gypsies. What a gypsy kid learns first is to count the social subsidy coming to him. They give birth to 86 children because they make a living out of making babies. It is not that they do not love children but they are a source of income for them. Sometimes you need fear [...]. It is enough that Jobbik is in Parliament and the Hungarian Guard is in the background so that they will not steal the old woman's last pennies [...]. There is no window which they would not break, and they steal everything. Jobbik

*is needed, I only don't want them to govern the country. Mihály, 35, skilled worker*

One can indeed argue that the world of these workers is divided into the hard-working employed and the unemployed and the latter – instead of eliciting sympathy and solidarity – serve as scapegoat for the high taxes and as violator of the moral order on which people get rewarded on the basis of their work.

It is certainly one of the facets of this attitude that by engaging in anti-Roma discourse, workers demonstrate their respectability as wage earners.

“ *In my opinion there is a small part who do not need to be integrated because they live normally. The rest is hopeless [...] Their culture is such that they don't want to live normally, you can tell by looking at a 5-year-old kid that this culture is stronger than any other influence, they don't know what work is, they don't know that you have to work, they just live off the state like parasites, from the social subsidies they receive, and they make deliberate efforts to give birth to sick children because that means more money... Géza, 37, skilled worker*

Nonetheless, the issue of the restoration of moral order and safety is why Jobbik is attractive to them, as expressed by the interview partners:

“ *What is the good thing about Jobbik? They are young, they say what people want to hear. They bring order. Taxation equals dictatorship. The American model. I would also strengthen public safety, there is no public safety in Hungary, things have become so loose... Károly, 42, skilled worker, trade union leader*

For others, the benefits of rural life and a closed economy promoted by Jobbik is interconnected with the hoped-for solution for Roma unemployment and welfare dependency:

“ *And now the third generation of gypsies is growing up who are dangerous to Hungarian society. And as despair, unemployment and the loss of perspective increases, gypsy criminality increases, too. This is a social issue. An economic, social and political issue, and no one does anything. The solu-*

*tion? We are not forced to buy Western and Slovak and other products. We can also produce our own food. Krone Zucker Vienna. Why do we need sugar from Vienna when we used to be one of the largest sugar producers in Europe? All gypsies could find work in agriculture if it were restored. István, 54, skilled worker*

While in the previous research, openly racist arguments were used less frequently (and were targeted mainly at 'Jewish' capital), in this research, anti-Roma feelings were openly discussed. This clearly shows the extent to which socialist values lost their relevance in Hungarian society: people did not refrain from using an openly ethnicised language because school education, the popular media, and the sensationalist tabloid press all convey the message that such language and openly racist attitudes are *accepted* social norms for the ethnic Hungarian majority.

The interviews cited above were conducted in 2016-2017. Since then, the political party Jobbik underwent a transformation, and it renounced its openly racist view of the Roma people. Jobbik even became one of the parties of the united opposition that hopes to beat FIDESZ at the upcoming elections in the spring of 2022.

While Orbán is careful enough not to use an openly racist language and 'limits' himself to the propagation of anti-Western, anti-EU, and anti-migrant discourses (as he counts on the votes of the Roma people), the ideological mix that he borrowed from the Horthy era certainly places him on the autocratic end of the political scale. By undermining the overall weak labour movement in Hungary and legitimating the exclusive language of a far-right patriotism and nationalism, which had already led to the tragedy of millions of Hungarian citizens, Orbán revived the old ghosts, which kept on haunting the imagination of the old (prewar) and new (post-1989) Hungarian elite. The criminalisation of the left and the outright falsification of history forge a false consciousness, which renders people particularly susceptible to the siren voices of the far right and especially that of ethnicisation and chauvinism. The revival of Christian-nationalist ideas unambiguously means a retreat to a past, which was characterised by a semi-feudal social structure, both a tolerated and a persecuted political left (for example, the Communist Party was banned), gross social and material inequities, the inheritance of privileg-



es, and a caste system. This is a rather scary scenario for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – even for a country that has ‘traditionally’ been part of the semi-periphery.

What is to be done for the left? In my view, the radical left ‘scores’ much better intellectually than organisationally and politically in Hungary. The journal *Eszmélet* (Consciousness) has preserved the Marxist heritage since 1989, and sought to develop its own paradigm for the interpretation of state socialism and its variants throughout Eastern Europe. The Hungarian journal *Fordulat* mainly addresses a young, university-educated audience. The online journal *Mérce* must also be mentioned as a forum for the new left.

Given the objective circumstances, the most important goal is a (however partial) ‘reconquest’ of education and a re-reading of the falsified history through more objective lenses. Hungarian collective memory has been systematically transformed in the past 30 years to ‘match’ the neo-liberal order and later, Orbán’s autocracy. Communism and socialism – and in general, the left – have been effectively criminalised and the rich Marxist heritage has been eradicated from the ‘mainstream’ scholarly literature and the state-sponsored collective memory.

In this situation, it is all the more important to preserve the forums that are still left for the left, and try to ‘reconquer’ the collective consciousness – even if at the beginning in only small circles. Organisationally, *Eszmélet* has offered not only an intellectual but also a communal social forum for the radical left – and, as we have once learnt from history, for the kind of self-governing society we aim at, the building of the new structures should start from below, at the grassroots.

## Democracy, democratic rights, and the rule of law – Authoritarian phases in European countries: The question of the German Constitutional Court

By René Jokisch, Advisor on European Affairs, Parliamentary Group DIE LINKE in the Bundestag (Germany)

### 1. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE RULE OF LAW AND DEMOCRACY FOR THE STRATEGY OF THE LEFT IN EUROPE

Questions of democracy and the rule of law in Europe present major challenges for the strategy of the left in Europe. They start with the basic question of the nature of the beast, the 'European Union': How are the different aspects of the European Union connected, and what is the focus of our strategy? There is of course the common market at the core of the Union. Then there is a space of common rules regulating that market, the relations of the institutions and the Member States, and the practical lives of the people. And, not least, the Union constitutes a political space, albeit heavily drawing on the national governments, but nonetheless making possible a debate from a common European perspective.

In this framework we face different fundamental questions.

1. Do we see the rule of law as an absolute principle or rather as an instrument in the conflict between different interest (between classes, national capital, etc.)? We should have in mind the dialectic of bourgeois law, its inherent violence and power but also the civilising and progressive potential, without falling into the traps of liberal idealism. As a rhetorical question: Do we all hail the Treaty of Lisbon and the Stability and Growth Pact and wait for unanimity for any change? Or do we see conflict, transgression, and creative interpretation as legitimate forms of manoeuvre for the left? How do we approach the limited competences of the Union that might in one area hamper progressive policy and in another area protect national standards from competition, and finally set the framework of national and European statehood?
2. Democracy is a fundamental principle for the left, but what do we make of the question of sovereignty? We should be aware of the absolutist foundations of the notion and the limitations on sovereignty in the modern world. What is our position on national sovereignty? The

real democratic influence of the nationally constituted people and the legitimacy of the structures and decisions of the national state apparatus are debatable. On the other hand, it is obvious that in the political system of the European Union there is no popular sovereignty: Member States are the subjects that constitute the Union and give it the limited competences stipulated in the treaties. There is no democratic control by a sovereign European people. Therefore, conflicts between democratic choices in the Member States and European rule are fundamentally political. We all remember the discussion following the Greek referendum in 2015 after the financial crisis and the associated discussion of a forced exclusion of Greece from the EU – against the will of its people and without any basis in the treaties. While the title of our workshop focuses on authoritarian phases in Member States, I would argue that left strategy also needs a clear vision of the authoritarian aspects and potential of the EU.

After the judgement of Poland's Constitutional Tribunal these Grexit discussions are now mirrored by discussion of a judicial Polexit, either implicit, or through the necessary reaction from the other members. However, the notion of authoritarian *phases* in Member States points to the assumption of a rather quick end of authoritarian regimes, one not based on evidence in political science and which blinds us to the question on how the EU may be willing and able to integrate authoritarian countries.

3. Here we get to the core of the problem of the rule-of-law question: Common sense instinct imagines the European Union as a state, merely a bigger one – ignoring its very limited competence in relation to its Member States. In the financial crisis the rules of the common market and common currency came up against their limits, and Member States were finally willing to break the rules of the treaties, undertaking a gigantic bailout (indirectly saving German and French banks) to preserve economic integration. This transgression was only a first step, followed by a later formal change of the treaties.

With the bailout and the Troika, Member States were challenging the democratic right of the Greek state, but also of the other national parliaments which had no effective control over their governments. In the end the conflict – between a Greek Syriza-led parliament insisting on sovereignty and the sovereign German parliament insisting on the treaties and prohibiting a bailout – could have endangered not only Greece's and the EU's finance and economy but also the membership of Greece and the whole European common currency and possibly the common market.

Likewise, the obvious anti-democratic governments in Hungary and Poland pose a real threat to the European Union. Not because of the conflict with democratic values or violation of human rights of foreign or European citizens, but because of their attack on the rule of law, which in the end undermines the legal basis for the common market. If courts in Member States cannot be trusted to enforce possessory titles and economic contracts and freedoms then the whole common market is in peril. But contrary to the financial and economic crisis, there the spillover effect is quite limited, for the development has no immediate effect on the judicial systems of the other Member States, nor is there a perceived necessity of support from the EU to keep the system running in Poland and Hungary. But in the long term there is the problem for a common market without common rules of property for capitalists.

This has been overlooked by proposals to respond to the lack of European competence and instruments in the area of the national judicial systems by simply differentiating the EU 27 into a core of circa 12 to 15 supposedly stable democracies and pushing the other countries into constituting a second circle of mere economic integration. This would profoundly change the European polity as result of a conflict of power in and between Member States, downgrading eastern Europeans as rule takers without formal political integration in decision-making. But how could this economic serfdom of a peripheral economic base in relation to an imperial centre be protected, when the rule of law is challenged? The conflict around economic rights (for capitalists) provided the first moments in which the European Commission began to act against Hungary.

After indicating these problems I would like now to return to the main question: is there a strategy of the European

left for Europe and the debate on the rule of law in the coming years? I am very grateful to transform! europe for promoting a strategic debate on this issue in which I propose considering what the different possible goals would be: Do we want to prioritise the preservation of the common market, the adherence to the rule of law, or the maintenance of the membership of all states and its people?

## 2. THE CASE OF GERMANY AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

Contrary to the public debate in Germany and in Europe, the decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) on the PSPP programme (Public Sector Purchase Programme) of the European Central Bank (ECB) did not, from a historical perspective, come as a big surprise: It stands in a long line of the Court's opinions that complemented the dogma of openness to European integration of the German constitution with sufficiently restricting reservations safeguarding the principle of national sovereignty: The delegation of sovereign rights to the European level was based in the Constitution but could not be unconditional. Otherwise, this delegation could lead to changing essential parts of the Constitution by European legal acts that would contradict the eternity clause preserving the identity of the Constitution and the democratic state with the rule of law and fundamental rights.

After the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in 1964 introduced its claim of the primacy of European community law over national (constitutional) law simply in the context of a case decision, the German court in 1974 took the position that it was obliged to accept challenges against the implementation by German authorities of European legislation due to the lack of European safeguards for the protection of fundamental rights. As long as there was no adequate protection the German court would test legal acts on the basis of the German fundamental rights. However, in a search for compromise it would always ask the ECJ beforehand about the case and it would not rule on the invalidity of the act in the whole of Europe but only on its applicability in Germany. In 1986 the time had come for the court to reconsider and rule that there was sufficient protection of fundamental rights that were not identical but comparable to the German Constitution and sufficient in judicial principle. As long as this would continue to be the case,

the Court would in general not accept complaints against acts of German institutions based on European acts. The ECJ would be the correct address and the only court to issue judgements on European acts. However, there is one exception: a complaint based on the German Constitution would be admissible so long as the applicant argues that the ECJ in general does not accept, or is unwilling to protect, fundamental rights.

These decisions became known as 'Solange I' and 'Solange II' ('so lange' is German for 'so long as'). And with the case against the PSPP-Programme the time had come. The German court accepted the complaint and gave the ECJ the opportunity to state its view first. But this decision by the ECJ was the straw that broke the camel's back. The problem was not that the ECJ did not see any violations of the proportionality principle but that it did not bother to check if there could be a violation.<sup>1</sup> So the FCC for the first time in decades ruled that the German institutions could in principle not participate in the ECB programme, because the ECB and the ECJ acted without legally basing themselves in the treaties, breaching their limits of competence, acting *ultra vires*, i.e., beyond their powers.

However, the FCC gave everybody enough time to sort out the problem, and the ECB was able to provide some reasoning for a proportionality that satisfied the Parliament and the Court. The conflict was again resolved, until the decision of the Commission to start an infringement procedure against Germany brought it back to life.

The Commission argued that Germany would be violating the principle of primacy of European Union law, the exclusive competence of the ECJ to declare EU legal acts as void and the principle of sincere cooperation between the Union and the Member States. It is worth noting that contrary to the Commission's accusation the FCC did not declare a European act to be void; it only decided that German institutions could not take part in this European *ultra vires* act. Furthermore, it is interesting that the Court did ask the ECJ for its opinion and only after the ECJ did not fulfil its role the FCC decided that it had to act itself. The Commission's position is that the FCC would then, in the event of similar difference, have to ask the ECJ ad infinitum to reconsider its

position, and thus the FCC could never itself act and rule on acts of German institutions in the European framework to guarantee the protection of constitutional principles. This position is obviously contrary to the constitutional framework of European integration the FCC has developed in the last 50 years.

### 3. KACZYŃSKI'S AND ORBÁN'S MISUNDERSTANDING AND INSTRUMENTALISATION OF THE GERMAN JUDGEMENT

The German judgement was immediately seen in the context of the European conflict with Hungary and Poland; the Commission's rather surprising escalation of the conflict was explained as necessary and in line with the principle of equal treatment of the Member States. More importantly, the judgement itself was misinterpreted by authoritarian leaders and their liberal critics as providing a precedent case and pretext for the Polish and Hungarian contestation of the ECJ and the Union's rule-of-law mechanisms. However, the left should not adopt this superficial point of view that would not only discredit the FCC but blind ourselves to the fundamental political and judicial nature of the conflict:

There are many differences in the line of argument, the political process, and the political context, and we should be aware of them. The FCC did not attack the competence of the ECJ in principle. The FCC, rather than arguing against control by the ECJ, demanded more control by it! Only when this European control was not deployed it deemed it necessary to act nationally as an absolute exceptional case. Furthermore, and in contrast to Poland, this FCC decision was not asked for by the government nor was it politically supported by the government against European primacy. Last but not least, the FCC is not itself a party to a conflict of rule of law in the national arena and between the national and European political level.

1. However, the FCC judgement indeed indicates a crucial point in the general debate that can be interpreted as supporting the case of Poland and Hungary. It reminds us of the judicial basis of the European Union, which is too often seen simply as a political arena just like every

<sup>1</sup> This present text is not the place to offer a critique of the hardcore ordo-liberal argumentation of the FCC about the aim, economic effect, and ensuing legality of the ECB measures.

other. But, on the contrary, the principle of conferral as a fundamental principle of European Union law makes it very special. According to this principle, the EU is a union of its Member States, and all its competences are voluntarily conferred on it by its Member States. The Union has no competences in its own right, and thus any areas of policy not explicitly agreed in treaties by all Member States remain in the jurisdiction of the Member States. Any new competence one might wish to transfer from Member States to the Union requires the active approval of all Member States.

The principle of primacy of European Law and of the ECJ gives the ECJ the right to rule on questions of the Treaty. But if afterwards a constitutional court sees a violation of its fundamental state structures from the constitutional point of view it must be able to react by ruling for its national institutions. It is worth remembering that the FCC ruled that Germany could not ratify the Treaty of Lisbon before a concomitant law would be in effect that regulates parliamentary prerogatives and the government would voice reservations about possibly overreaching competences of the treaties. The German PStP ruling against the ECJ and against the claim of absolute European primacy put a new spin on the fundamental question of national constitutional space and European space, one that is now playing out in the completely different context of the rule-of-law debate.

2. The question of rule of law in the European treaties should be focussed on the question of what competence the EU has in matters of rule of law. The complexity of the situation needs to be appreciated and simplistic answers avoided. It is worth noting that the ECJ never ruled on the systemic state of the rule of law in Poland in a case as such, but rather made its decision *en passant*. It started by ruling in cases where the ECJ had a clear competence, for instance, regarding non-discrimination in the case of forced early retirements of judges. In other cases, the ECJ derived its competence from the rather peculiar paragraph of Article 19 of the Treaty on European Union that mainly defines the role of the ECJ and, at the same time, states that 'Member States shall provide remedies sufficient to ensure effective legal protection *in the fields covered by Union law*'. It is obvious that this clause is not intended to serve as basis for a systemic rule-of-law control by the ECJ. The argument of the vio-

lation of Article 19 is strong in the case of the Polish disciplinary chamber that can sanction a lower court that is seeking a preliminary ruling from the ECJ. However, basing judgements regarding the selection of judges, the transfer of judges, and early retirement on Article 19 is questionable, to say the least.

However, the Commission can initiate infringement procedures against Member States for violations of the treaties. But this is not applicable for the general rule of law in Member States, which is given a specific framework in the treaties: *lex specialis derogat legi generali* (a law governing a specific matter overrides a law governing a general matter within the same factual situation). The foundations of the Union in Article 2 can hardly be read as an obligation for Member States, and a decision of the Council based on Article 7 is the only area where the Member States agreed to endow the Union with a competence to act on systemic violation of the rule of law in Member States.

Thus, the answer is essentially simple: There is no other way of reacting to systematic violations of the rule of law in Member States other than through Article 7. Last year's whole discussion about the need for new instruments represents a rather helpless or naïve attempt to put pressure on Poland and Hungary, or a distraction from the fact that the EU as a Union cannot act, because all these new instruments are judicially blocked by the existing order of competences. The treaties can only be changed through a unanimous decision to give the EU new competences to act. For many years now, this need for treaty change was repeatedly confirmed by the Commission and the Council in discussions about the rule of law. However, this has been increasingly ignored and gives rise to general questions of the attitude toward the rule of law with regard to the treaties of the European Union themselves:

The standard mainstream argument emphasises that sanctions under Article 7 are possible only after the Council unanimously determines the existence of a serious and persistent breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2. Indeed, this decision is impossible as long as Hungary and Poland can obstruct any decisions.

However, the fact that there are earlier steps under Article 7 is generally not mentioned in the debate: With a four-fifths majority decision the Council can determine that there is



a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2. However, not even this obvious risk has ever been determined. It has not even been voted on because there was no clear majority for this move against Hungary or Poland. Even the Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the European Parliament, when discussing possible new mechanisms in 2019, argued that any new financial restriction would at least have to be based on the determination of a risk by Article 7 (1).

Furthermore, the discussions about the Multiannual Financial Framework and the new mechanism provide further confirmation of the described legal restriction on European mechanisms reacting to rule-of-law violations. In the end, the new mechanism is not constructed as a sanction against a violation but as an instrument to safeguard the financial interest of the EU against corruption. It can therefore only be activated in this very narrow sense, and even the most obvious coup against an independent judiciary is not an issue for this mechanism, as long as the use of EU money is clean. This is of evident importance because OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office) and other institutions are attesting Poland's good governance of European money, while Hungary is notoriously corrupt in the exploiting of European money.

Finally, to enable a decision on the EU budget the Member States agreed on this very limited mechanism of financial oversight – that is, not a rule-of-law-mechanism – only under the condition that it will not be used before the ECJ rules on its compatibility with the treaties. As expected, a legal challenge was immediately launched by Hungary and Poland.

If this ECJ judgement we are all waiting for does not endorse the position of Orbán and Kaczyński, the battle over who in the end decides on the competences of the EU will come to a conclusion. Indeed, the judgement of the FCC with its primordial grounding of European competence in the national constitutions would support the right of the Polish judiciary to rule on the ECJ decision subsequently.

That this Polish judiciary is itself an instrument of the government in the attack against the independent judiciary in Poland cannot be a legal argument for the general questions of competences of the EU.

#### 4. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE AUTHORITARIAN WAVE IN MEMBER STATES AND IN THE EU

We are faced with two problems: There is the incapacity of the EU to react to violations of the rule of law because of insufficient legal competences, and there is the insufficient political will of the governments due to economic and political concerns. Both problems should be addressed in a strategy debate carried out by Europe's left.

I would argue that the left should avoid a strategic orientation to and dependence on the European Union in its struggle against authoritarian forces and governments in the Member States. Otherwise the left risks simply joining the national neoliberal camp, as we saw in the public mobilisation in Poland with Donald Tusk as political leader who remains a neoliberal reformer and destroyer of the social state. If it clings to this orientation to the EU the left could be trapped in the more general political debate on European integration, preventing any initiative to forge a third pole of critique of both the authoritarian nationalism of the PiS and the neoliberal European integrationism of the PO (Civic Platform). A conflict staged on the pro-European and anti-European stage might benefit all political camps except the left.

Tusk is not only the former prime minister but also former president of the European Council and since 2019 president of the conservative European People's Party (EPP). The EPP that was never able to expel Orbán's Fidesz from its ranks points up the risks the left would take if it depends on European mainstream partners for its struggle against the extreme right. The big parties, especially German parties with vested economic interest in Hungary, particularly in car manufacturing, have always protected Orbán. Even when Orbán attacked the conservative mainstream in his 2020 memorandum to the EPP and explicitly declared he would fight for the political hegemony of the EPP with his open right-nationalist approach, no reaction followed.

This underscores the uncertain nature of the EU. I am not convinced that the hegemonic forces and ruling classes are willing to challenge undemocratic regimes when this would put the single market at risk. At her last European Council Summit, Chancellor Merkel again played a moderating role in trying to head off any political consequence.

We could even be facing a completely changing EU. There is a real possibility that the European Union could further tilt to the right after taking up most of the far-right demands and concepts in the so called migration crisis. Orbán and Kaczyński do not want to get rid of the Union; they want to build it in their own way. The Slovenian President Janša has successfully copied the political model of Orbán and has been accepted as President of the European Council without much ado. In many other countries there are strong right-wing parties and personalities capable of coming to power: Salvini in Italy could become Prime Minister in the next political turmoil; in France Marine Le Pen is not the only right-wing figure arguing for a different European path. To much surprised reaction, the EU Brexit negotiator is now running for president of France on a platform advocating a stop to all migration for three years and a referendum to reclaim sovereignty from the EU and challenge the competence of the courts. The EU is not the stable political partner in terms of the rule of law and democracy that it might appear to be. A growing extreme right might end up using the Union and its legal instruments for its purposes and against the left.

Returning to the actual balance of power: If the left were to really lean into the line of the most aggressive pro-European zealots against Poland and Hungary – are we really prepared to walk the walk? Despite knowing that there is no way to exclude countries from the Union, there can however still be political clashes and consequences.

What would the cutting of financial support mean for Polish society, for the pro-European cities and municipalities profiting from EU-subsidies, for large-scale agrarian production? What about the financial support to initiate the ecological transformation of the economy and the transition in the energy sector away from coal? Do we call for Polish miners not to profit from a European transition fund? The obvious solution – that is, to hand money directly from Brussels to the recipients – is unfortunately not possible for the greater portion of the money, and any change would also be principally obstructed by other Member States.

Do we call for the consequences in the sphere of economic cooperation that would inevitably also hit the working class? How do we approach a European Union that is stalled by political conflict, maybe even to the brink of collapse? And do we really want to play into the hands of Macron,

who in his Sorbonne speech proposed a differentiation of the European Union in concentric circles, reducing eastern Europeans to second class citizens?

I think this kind of thinking ignores the complexity of the European Union and plays into the hands of the extreme right. It can help them to consolidate their national power, mobilise the electorate, and might in the long run also help them on the European level: When righteous Europeans claim to play hardball and have to cave in later, the authoritarian strong man is the winner.

We should also think about the general European picture, when the public debate in Europe is about conflicts between the European and national levels, instead of the much-needed cooperation and reform of the European Union to give national governments the ability to act to deal with our social and ecological challenges.

The new project of the Next Generation EU might be of more interest for the left than debates over values. The dialectic of progressive European funding and repressive conditions, whether these concern the rule of law or neo-liberal reforms of the labour market and the pension systems, could be interesting for the left and the future of the EU. We should try to play on the internal conflicts of different political and capital factions and of national states to look for possibilities to make a difference. As a final remark I want to bring to your attention that the FCC in its judgement on the Treaty of Lisbon pointed out that the degree of integration reached by now in the European Union is already at the limits compatible with national democratic sovereignty. According to the FCC a giant leap in European integration could only come into force if a German Constitution were to be approved in a national referendum.

## The question of ecology and the climate: Four home-made obstacles for the left to live up to its responsibility

By Steffen Lehdorff, Research Fellow, Institut "Arbeit und Qualifikation" at the University of Duisburg-Essen (Germany)

Given the fundamental importance of the climate crisis for the living conditions of humanity in the near future, it may come as a surprise that left parties in Germany and some other EU countries are not known to be at the forefront of climate action. Surprising — at least for those who believe that fighting for decent living conditions of the vast majority of society is part of the essence of being on the left.

My impression is that parts of the left lack a determination to tackle climate change due to some home-made obstacles.

### 1 FUNDAMENTAL VS. TACTICAL APPROACH

The most superficial barrier is a tactical one. It can be summed up in the sentence, 'climate action does not pay off in elections, it's mainly good for the Greens.'

If this were the guiding principle for left political approaches in general, then Germany's left should have not fought for the introduction of a statutory minimum wage some ten to fifteen years ago, for, after all, it proved beneficial for the Social Democrats in the recent elections.

There can only be one basic guideline for a left approach to politics and policy: To take societal problems seriously and act responsibly. It is only on this basis that left parties can develop a profile that — at least in the longer run — is also attractive to voters.

### 2 'ECOLOGY VS. CLASS': AN ARTIFICIAL CONTRADICTION

The second barrier is very similar to the first, but it sounds less tactical or superficial. It springs from the idea that the core values of the left are rooted in class interests. Strangely enough, those who see this as a 'unique selling point' for left parties are not aware of the fact that most of the carbon emissions are caused by middle and higher income groups, both worldwide and within our countries. Unfortunately, however, everybody will be affected. In fact, poor

people in the Global South will be the hardest hit. And in developed capitalist countries, it may be that the less affluent will have to pay the most for decarbonisation.

True, a broader social base of climate action may unfold its effectiveness only in the future, when the impacts of climate change will be an everyday experience also in Europe. Hence the question: Who are the agents of change today? Looking at movements like Fridays for Future, it is obvious that activism is still a generational and not a class issue. What is more, most of them are middle-class activists. Incidentally, this was also true for the '68 movements. And similarly to what happened more than 50 years ago, what we can see today is that these young-generation, middle-class movements can bring about a substantial change in the mainstream public. How this change is transformed into *political* change is — and this is true of other actors — a matter of political parties. The left can decide whether or not it is an important actor in these conflicts. And they definitely are conflicts.

What is more, major parts of these young-generation, middle-class movements are very interested in working with the trade unions. For example, in many German cities, Fridays for Future initiated joint actions with the service sector union ver.di in the recent campaign for higher wages in public transport. This means that the supposed contradiction 'ecology vs. class' misses the experience of the actual movements. It is a dead end.

### 3 THE FLIRTATION WITH POPULISM

However, the lack of an everyday experience of climate change *at present* leads to a real problem. It opens the space for a policy gap between the short- and medium-term interest in social security of parts of the working class on the one hand, and medium- to long-term living — or survival — conditions of society as a whole. This policy gap opens the door for right-wing and far-right populism.

Some on the left give the impression that they are open to playing with the idea of the left fishing for support amongst followers of the far-right in climate issues. However, this temptation is based on not seeing that the alleged contrast between environmental and social security issues is *politically created*. The responsible left response to this political gap is to develop or support a way out of this dilemma. The way out is a way *forward* towards concrete and practical programmes for socio-ecological transformation. That is, the crucial challenge is to fight for *positive* alternatives to a fear-driven defence of unsustainable jobs and unsustainable living conditions in the present. Taking this challenge seriously is neither compatible with populism nor with a limitation to mere protest or propaganda.

#### 4 SUSTAINABILITY ONLY BEYOND CAPITALISM?

Probably the most difficult barrier to overcome is the tendency of some on the left to replace politics with enlightenment or propaganda. From a Marxist perspective, we can take it for granted that climate change has been caused by the ‘consumption of nature’ within the logic of capitalism. Against this background, there may be much truth in the widespread conviction on the left that ‘capitalism has to be overcome to save the planet’.

However, if this conviction leads to the conclusion that, for example, programmes like a ‘Green New Deal’ are nothing more than a ‘greenwashing of capitalism’, the result will be political sectarianism. It is a flight from reality that for some on the left may seem more comfortable than politics.

To begin with, one should not underestimate the adaptability of capitalism. If we look at impacts of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century labour movement, such as the welfare states in developed capitalist countries (however imperfect they are), one might even conclude that labour has saved and improved capitalism. True, the climate crisis may mark a difference. On this fundamental question, there are good reasons to reflect on the limits of capitalism’s adaptability due to its inherent logic of ‘consuming nature’. Nevertheless, these limits have to be explored and ex-

perienced *in practice*. The practical test will be a process of socio-ecological transformation. This transformation can only *begin* with a reform dynamic *within* capitalism. Thus, from a left perspective, the most urgent need is to promote large concrete reform projects that aim at a socio-ecological transformation. They might become symbols of change, with societal and political impacts comparable to the flagship projects of the New Deal of the 1930s — which is what makes it so sensible to use the term ‘Green New Deal’ not just as an advertising slogan but to actually learn from the experience of the policy approach of those years.<sup>2\*</sup>

The details of a ‘Green New Deal’, if understood as a socio-ecological transformation, are extremely complex, to say the least. This requires the left to get down to business. If it does not live up to its responsibility, the left will not be an essential driver of the societal reform dynamic that is necessary for a social-ecological transformation. This would be a great pity — not only for the left.

2 \*For more on this point please see [https://www.vsa-verlag.de/uploads/media/VSA\\_Lehndorff\\_New\\_Deal\\_means\\_being\\_prepared\\_for\\_conflict\\_Web.pdf](https://www.vsa-verlag.de/uploads/media/VSA_Lehndorff_New_Deal_means_being_prepared_for_conflict_Web.pdf)

## Industry 4.0: Transformation of Industrial Structure and Working Conditions

By Matteo Gaddi, Member of Board of Punto Rosso Cultural Association and of the Scientific Committee of Claudio Sabbattini Foundation (Italy)

Our approach to the issue of technology is very clear: technology is not neutral; on the contrary, it is heavily affected by current social relations. The concept can be clarified with Raniero Panzieri's words:

“*The development of technology entirely takes place within the capitalist process; and again 'The capitalist use of machines is not [...] the simple distortion or deviation from an objective development, inherently rational; rather, it determines technological development'; and 'The capitalist development of technology implies, through the various stages of rationalisation and increasingly refined forms of integration, an increasing capitalist control.'*<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, as David Noble has said:

“*technology is not an autonomous force affecting human events from outside, but rather the result of a social process [...] [Its] social effects are actually originated by the same social causes which determined its existence'. Noble emphasises that 'The technology of production is thus twice determined by the social relations of production: first, it is designed and deployed according to the ideology and social power of those who make such decisions; and second, its actual use in production is determined by the realities of the shop-floor struggles between classes.'*<sup>4</sup>

In this way, it is possible to avoid apologetic or 'neutral' readings of technological changes and to place them within the reality of social relations.

From the methodological point of view, we studied the effects of Industry 4.0 on work through the tool of the Workers' Enquiry, involving workers and trade union delegates from about 100 companies in Italy.

To understand the impact of Industry 4.0, that is, its consequences on labour conditions, we must start by sketching the nature and characteristics of European industrial structure.

European industrial structure is characterised by the following features:

- it is fragmented (each production stage is realised by different plants/firms);
- it is geographically dispersed. These plants/firms can be located in different countries; this is possible because in the EU there is freedom of capital movements and freedom of establishment for enterprises. Relocations of production stages are aimed at to achieving lower labour costs, lower social standards, and so on.

The European industrial structure is also characterised by just-in-time production, which implies a tight flow of materials and production processes: production – from suppliers to final assembly – must be closely coordinated and synchronised.

One example of these integrated and dispersed production chains is represented by the automotive industry: each car is made up of circa 15,000 parts and components; the automotive production chain is dispersed throughout all Europe, and the implementation of production processes is strictly determined by market demand (just-in-time).

The distribution of both carmaker plants and supplier plants are closely linked: for example Germany's carmakers are mostly sourced by suppliers of parts/components located in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia; Hungary, and so on.

Thus, while on the one hand we have a fragmented/dispersed production chain, on the other hand firms need

3 Raniero Panzieri, 'Sull'uso capitalistico delle macchine nel neocapitalismo', *Quaderni Rossi* 1/1961.

4 David F. Noble, 'Social choice in machine design', in Andrew Zimbalist (ed.), *Case Studies on the Labor Process*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979, pp. 100-134.

to strongly coordinate and synchronise their production processes. This is an apparent contradiction between these two opposite poles: Industry 4.0, as we will see in a moment, can provide a positive answer to this challenge, but at the cost of strong consequences for labour conditions.

In short, we have:

- a new structural division of labour across countries within Europe;
- a network of suppliers segmented in hierarchically ordered tiers;
- an integrated (even if geographically dispersed) and transnational European industrial structure, to the extent that some authors have introduced the concept of 'Factory Europe';
- suppliers under the authority of the firms located at the head of the corresponding chain. The latter impose on the former output planning (quantity); pace and speed of production; production and labour organisation;
- a generally very high degree of integration within firms' networks, to the extent that boundaries between different companies are blurred, and new corporate-governance models emerge.

Integrated processes imply the necessity of homogeneity between internal organisation and supply relations. Production programmes, dictated by market demand, have a direct influence on the modulation of workloads in each single plant in charge of each production stage, irrespectively of whether they are external suppliers or departments of the same company. Moreover, in order to face

fluctuations of any kind within the effective flow of materials inside production processes, a mechanism of feedback does exist: this mechanism connects each event with upstream operations.

Industry 4.0 technologies permit fine tuning of these aspects, making integration and coordination, and hence externalisations, much easier.

In fact, the main goals of Industry 4.0, as defined within the German Project *Recommendations for implementing the strategic initiative Industrie 4.0* (2013, Forschungsunion and Acatech),<sup>5</sup> are the networking of parts of the same produc-

tion chain, even if they are located in different plants or countries; and the total end-to-end digital integration of different stages of production chains.

More specifically, we can speak of:

- 1) **Horizontal integration through value networks.** The different parts of the same production chain (different factories, suppliers, and subcontractors, external designers or external advisors, management and planning, marketing and sales, and so on, up to aftermarket services such as repair and maintenance, but also different kinds of customer services, etc.) are strongly integrated;
- 2) **end-to-end digital integration of engineering across the entire value chain;**
- 3) **vertical integration and networked manufacturing systems:** within the same plant, the different stages/functions (R&D, order plan, design, planning of production, manufacturing, logistics, etc.) are strongly integrated and communicate with each other in real time.

A key tool to create smart factories (or, better, smart chains) is the Internet of Things (IoT), which are embedded devices (with internet address/protocol) to make possible the interaction/communication between machinery, human beings, products, parts, and components (M2M, M2H, M2P, H2P, etc).

This generates the so-called CPSs (cyber-physical systems): within them the physical and virtual world are melded, and thus machinery, human beings, and products communicate with each other as in a social network. A CPS is realized both by material components (sensors, RFDI, bar code scanner, smart machinery, etc) and by software tools (systems/management software such as SAP/ERP, MES and so on) that plan and operate the management of resources and schedule production processes.

CPSs generate a massive amount of data (Big Data), which are used in real time by firms; detailed monitoring of business models will play a key role in documenting processing steps and system statuses to demonstrate whether contractual and regulatory conditions are complied with. The individual steps of business processes will be tracked at any time and the use of data also feeds back on the entire production chain: Digitalized Horizontal Integration makes

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.din.de/blob/76902/e8cac883f42bf28536e7e8165993f1fd/recommendations-for-implementing-industry-4-0-data.pdf>.



possible a flexible and reconfigurable manufacturing system within business.

We can now try to assess the consequences of the phenomena we just described on labour conditions; more specifically, we are going to consider three distinct but closely connected aspects.

First of all, consequences on employment levels:

A broad literature exists that warns of huge technological unemployment that will follow the adoption of Industry 4.0 technologies. According to these estimates, thousands of jobs are likely to be lost due to automation in the near future. However, technological unemployment has been a concern for about 60 (or more) years, and it is an inherent phenomenon of capitalist economies. In our fieldwork we were able to conduct a series of interviews with both workers and managers of companies operating in various sectors, but the sense of a serious risk of technological unemployment does not emerge from them. Rather, we think that the major risks comes from CPSs, since these systems make it much easier to offshore production stages, especially abroad, in search of lower wages and social standards.

In other words, industry 4.0 is going to make the division of labour within Europe increasingly asymmetrical, and exploitation of labour much easier.

The mere threat of relocation is enough to create competition between workers of different countries and to provide political justification for the reduction of wages and flexibilisation (i.e., precarisation) of labour. Delocalisation of production processes will be much easier because of the increased power of control and coordination made possible by Industry 4.0.

Another element that can affect employment levels is the close intertwining of technological and organisational innovations. Industry 4.0 is, in fact, closely intertwined with the organisational transformations of lean production. The objective of lean production is more (production) with less (workers), i.e., to increase the productivity of companies through a major increase in the exploitation of labour.

Industry 4.0 enables a reduction of working times in a way that harms workers. It involves an intensification of the pace of work and a decrease of time available for each operation.

Technologies supported these new business models, making a different organisation of labour possible by reducing operation times. Order fulfilment times became stricter, strongly influencing working times and schedules. For this reason, a series of software tools acquired greater relevance.

In the vast majority of cases, companies unilaterally define work schedules and working times. These labour organisation models – supported by Industry 4.0 technologies – enable: (i) compliance of supplies deliveries to planning defined by the company at the head of a production chain (OEMs); (ii) the synchronisation of production stages (internal and external); and (iii) management of the high degree of variability of workloads and product mix. Work orders have a barcode that embeds cycle times, often based on machine times. In this way, working times are presented by companies as ‘objective’ and, as such, not subject to bargaining. The same applies to machines or robots that operate on the basis of embedded software.

Our research shows that digital technologies play a decisive role in compressing working times and therefore in reducing expectation times (one of the main pillars of lean production); this translates into a sharp intensification of work; applied to machinery and plants, 4.0 technologies contribute to reducing reset times by increasing productivity, determining considerable intensification of work rhythms by eliminating the porosity of work time (the so-called micro-breaks for workers).

Starting from the general production planning tools (usually ERP – Enterprise Resource Planning) and its scheduling by times and workstations (usually through the MES, – Manufacturing Execution System), it is possible to extract the electronic Kanbans in the form of orders that are sent to the monitors of the workstation. Once the requests of the electronic Kanban have been answered, the recording systems, also via PC, allow immediate visibility of the process in order to enable the company’s management to monitor it in real time and to intervene immediately in terms of synchronisation adjustments.

A central element is the respect of the assigned times. In this sense, takt time is the time within which a unit of product must be created and which essentially determines the pace of production.

Real time control of takt time becomes possible thanks to devices that record production at any time and immediately upload this into the company's information systems and compares it with the programming. In this way, the takt time sets working time in all lines and workstations, imposing rhythms and working systems to reach the standards.

Finally, all data are immediately uploaded, collected, and analysed by ERP/MES. Companies, via these control systems, can compare internal costs with costs charged by potential external suppliers. They create competition between internal and external workers and put much pressure on their employees. This is the issue of power of control over workers.

CPSs enable the continuous monitoring in real time of the whole production process. Data – collected by devices everywhere – are uploaded to the network (CPS) in real time, and – again in real time, and even remotely – are analysed and processed for feedbacks on production processes. This means that firms can continuously control workers' performance. This continuous monitoring, in its turn, generates a flow of data that are immediately uploaded to the network and hence available to any node.

Moreover, production processes are going to be planned machine-to-machine (M2M), or machine to-product (M2P), or product-to-product (P2P): this implies that the role of workers will radically change. In most cases they could become a mere appendix to machines. The question is: will labour organisation be collectively bargaining or will labour conditions be decided by companies' software – or other similar tools?

Finally, there is the issue of the quality of jobs. The risk is that of deskilling, which can affect high-level positions too, since software and algorithms can perform a great many design activities, for example. In other words, technologies can pull knowledge and best practices out of workers' know-how.

We can therefore draw up some recommendations' for the political and trade-union left.

It is necessary to build strong forms of coordination at the level of the whole chain (in particular bringing together workers that are based in different countries but are in-

involved in the same production chain) to define common goals and initiatives.

We need to enlarge the competences of the EWC – European Workers Councils (not only in terms of information and consultation, but also collective bargaining): moreover, the EWC must become an elected body, that is, elected by all the workers they represent.

We need mandatory TCAs (Transnational Company Agreements): the European Parliament is debating the *optional* legal framework, but the character of optionality is not useful for constraining multinationals. Moreover, TCAs can apply not only to the plants that are members of a multinational group, but to the chain as a whole.

We need Economic Democracy and social dialogue to carry out the debate about strategic investments possible, with worker participation.

Finally, from the point of view of work organisation, the following issues need to be tackled: employment effects; the pace of work and working times; working hours; systems for the control of working performance; consequences, in terms of workers' health/safety, of new technologies, externalisations, procurements, etc.; and productivity and the distribution of wealth generated.

## How can the European Left become more visible?

*By Heinz Bierbaum, President of the Party of the European Left*

The European Left (EL – Party of the European Left) is not well known. Despite all efforts it has been difficult to give it visibility, and its political influence is very limited. The Party of the European Left is not a real party but is a coordinating organisation that works mainly through its member parties. At the same time, the EL must also act independently and develop its own political agenda. This is all the more necessary as people's working and living conditions are increasingly determined by European regulations, with the European dimension becoming increasingly more important.

The question is, how can the EL become more visible, be better known, and gain more political weight. For this, activities in three areas are necessary:

- strengthening its political profile;
- improving communication and launching campaigns;
- expanding cooperation with other forces.

### POLITICAL PROFILE

In EL congresses a political document is always adopted in which the party's main political positions and activities are outlined. This document serves as a platform and starting point for further political activities. On this basis, for instance, the EL has worked out and published an important political document dealing with the corona crisis and defining its position on it. Activities in five areas are required: Protecting the people, a new economic and social policy confronting a profound social-ecological transformation, the defence of democracy, peace and disarmament, and international solidarity. It was intended as a platform for a Europe-wide campaign, which, however, was only insufficiently taken up by the member parties.

The Conference on the Future of Europe launched by the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament was taken as an opportunity to present the EL's vision with regard to future European development. This document was widely discussed in the General Assembly in October and the process is still underway. Another example is the position paper on COP 26 in Glasgow in which the EL presents its view of the climate crisis and how to combat it.

Summarising, I'd like to say that there have been considerable efforts to strengthen the EL's political profile, with tangible results. The quality of political debate within the EL has improved. Notwithstanding the differing political positions of the member parties, especially regarding the European Union, the EL was able to develop and to present common positions.

### COMMUNICATION AND CAMPAIGNS

To improve the EL's visibility good communication is indispensable. In the last two years we improved this considerably, even if there is still room for improvement, especially in terms of the website. There was a marked increase in the number of press releases and statements: for some time now we have been publishing an EL-Newsletter on a regular basis; and we have launched an online magazine, *Quistioni*, in English, French, and Spanish. Unfortunately, its readership is small – which again shows how much the EL's effectiveness depends on the activities of its national member and observer parties.

The most important instruments for the visibility of the EL are its campaigns, but here we see a serious deficit. There have so far not been many Europe-wide campaigns. An exception is the campaign for free and universal access to Covid-19 vaccines. The EL supports the European Citizen's Initiative 'Right2Cure' and the campaign 'No profit on Pandemic', and the LEFT (the parliamentary group formerly known as GUE/NGL to which EL belongs) scored a concrete success in getting the European Parliament to vote for a waiver of Covid-19 vaccine patents.

We must launch more campaigns. One such European campaign could be a campaign to abolish the Stability and Growth Pact, which was only suspended to combat the pandemic and its dramatic economic and social consequences. Another could be dedicated to a more just tax policy. And social rights would be a good focus for a European campaign, which could be linked to the ETUC's campaign 'Stand up for the Social Pillar'. In this regard we could

focus on the demand for a Social Progress Protocol with binding social rights as a part of the European Treaties.

## COOPERATION

The question of campaigns is closely related to the need for expanding cooperation with other left, ecological, and progressive forces: parties, trade-unions, and civil and social movements. The European Forum, which took place for the fifth time in 2021, is a platform for such a dialogue and for joint action among the left, ecological, and progressive forces. We must admit, however, that this has not been as broad as it should be. It is mainly focused on the Left, inside and outside of the EL. So far we have not been able to integrate significant parts of the Greens, the Socialists, or the Social Democrats. Thus we must rethink this Forum.

Within the European Parliament, the relationship with the LEFT has improved, and this is decisive for influencing European politics.

Progress has been achieved in terms of relations with the trade unions. We now have good cooperation especially with ETUC and IndustriAll, but also with other European confederations. And in this connection I would like to mention TUNE (Trade Unionists Network Europe), a grassroots organisation of European trade unionists linked to the EL.

From an international point of view the cooperation with the "Foro de São Paulo" is very important.

The EL is present in European and international events such as the Counter Social Summit in May in Porto, the Anti-NATO summit in June in Brussels, the World Peace Congress, which took place in mid-October 2021 in Barcelona, or the COP 26 which took place in November 2021 in Glasgow.



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