

Halting the March of Fascism in Europe*

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The coming to power of governments led by fascists is either a reality or a threat today over large parts of the world. In Europe at present there are several countries where fascists are leading governments; France was on the verge of being added to this list, in which case it would have been the second major European power, after Italy, to have a fascist government. Had this happened, it would have been an event of historic significance, for France would then have had a fascist government for the first time after the Vichy government under Marshall Petain that had notoriously collaborated with Hitler. For a country that had fought a heroic partisan struggle against the occupying Nazis and that always had a very strong Left and trade union movement, this would have been an utterly tragic turnaround. Not only has this been halted, but it is the New Popular Front that has emerged as the winner in the second and final round of French elections.

The emergence of fascism itself is by no means inexplicable. Fascism moves centre-stage in a period of crisis for capitalism when big capital enters into an alliance with fascist elements to ward off any threat to its hegemony by promoting the diversionary fascist discourse of hatred against some hapless minority. This was the case during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and this is happening now with neo-liberal capitalism having entered a prolonged period of stagnation and crisis. Just to cite one figure, the real gross disposable income per capita (that is, household income after taking into account government taxes and subsidies) in the European Area (consisting of 19 countries) in 2023 was just 6.4 per cent above its level in 2008. This itself was an insignificant increase. But two additional points must be noted here: first, the term “households” includes both rich and poor households, so that given the increase in income inequality that has occurred during this period, the per capita real disposable income of the bulk of the population would scarcely have increased; secondly, the depreciation of capital stock owned by small capitalists and small producers is not deducted from this figure of gross household income. The ratio of such depreciation to the gross household income for this group is likely to be higher today than in 2008 (since the capital-output ratio is higher today because of reduced capacity utilisation), so that the net household disposable income per capita for the bulk of the population would have increased very little for this reason as well. The basic anger among the people that fascism exploits arises because of the squeeze on their living standards that economic stagnation under neo-liberal capitalism effects.

The alliance between big business and fascist upstarts however occurs in diverse ways. To exploit people’s anger, the fascists often begin by taking an anti-big-business stance, which for instance is what Hitler had done. Even while doing so however, they are usually helped by some monopolists clandestinely, if not openly; but once they come to office, they completely expose themselves as partners of big capital and even carry out a bloody purge against their own supporters who remain loyal to the old anti-monopoly slogans.

India is an exception here: the fascistic elements in India, even as they were spreading hatred against a religious minority, had made no secret of their closeness to big capital, especially to some new monopoly capitalists. But French fascists had started

off with anti-monopoly noises. Marine Le Pen the French fascist leader professed to be so much against neo-liberalism that when Syriza in Greece, which had come to power promising a different course of action from earlier governments, ultimately succumbed to the pressures of finance capital, she called it a “betrayal”. But despite this apparently oppositional stance, her party was fully supported by the French media baron and billionaire investor Vincent Bollore; and on the eve of the French elections her party’s prime ministerial candidate Jordan Bardella had started withdrawing from their earlier professed positions which differed from those of finance capital in order to be more acceptable to it.

This is also what had happened in Italy. Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the fascists, had pretended to have a different programme from that of Mario Draghi her predecessor who had a straightforward neo-liberal agenda. But having come to power, Meloni backtracked on her earlier promises and became a faithful ally of finance capital.

An exactly similar backtracking occurs among European fascists on the issue of the Ukraine war. The European working class is clearly opposed to the war, and hurt by the inflation that the war has generated because of higher fuel prices arising from the sanctions against Russia; it wants a return to peace. To get workers’ support, the fascists initially express reservations about the war; but once they come to power they toe the line of US imperialism, exactly as the liberal bourgeois parties they replace had been doing. This is what Meloni did; and this is also what Bardella was doing in France just before the election, generally retreating from a professed pro-peace stand.

In short, fascism which spreads hatred against a minority group and divides the working class, also perpetrates a fraud on the working class. Its pretence of being different from liberal bourgeois political formations, whether on economic policy or on the war in Ukraine, is just a sham. On promoting Islamophobia, on promoting hostility towards immigrants, it is certainly on the extreme Right compared to liberal formations, but on issues of peace and war, and on economic policy it is absolutely no different from liberal formations, though it pretends to be so for currying favour with the working class.

The scope for such pretence arises because major segments of the Left abdicate their responsibility of representing working class interests and trail behind the bourgeoisie. In Germany, where the working class is hit hard by inflation because of western sanctions against Russia and is opposed to the Ukraine war, it is not just the Social Democrats but even parties on the Left that have lined up behind US imperialism; not surprisingly, the splinter from the Left led by Sahra Wagenknecht that is pro-peace is gathering greater support. Likewise, significant segments of the Left in Europe have become votaries of neo-liberalism and this helps the fascists in their project of misleading the working class. European fascism thus thrives because of the capitulation by major segments of the Left.

But this is where France has been different. The Left not only got together to form a New Popular Front, but got the Front to adopt an economic programme that clearly went beyond neo-liberalism. The growth of the French fascists had been facilitated earlier by the fact that the common desire to keep the fascists away from power had not been accompanied by any alternative economic agenda. This was exploited by Macron to remain in power and pursue a neo-liberal agenda even though it was getting increasingly detested by the working people. As Macron’s unpopularity grew,

the fascists became more and more acceptable to the people as the main voice speaking out against the detestable economic policies. This dialectic has been broken now, which highlights an important point.

During the second world war the only pertinent anti-fascist programme was ending the war; no alternative economic agenda was needed. A non-programme-based anti-fascist front which was effective during the war becomes counter-productive in the present conjuncture when we are not in the midst of an all-out war. A mere coming together of anti-fascist forces that does not set out an agenda for improving the lives of the people, that acquiesces completely in neo-liberalism and in imperialism-promoted local wars, has the paradoxical effect of boosting the fascists' chances over time, no matter how effective it may be in the very short-run.

Of course the capitulation of segments of the European Left has been occurring for long, from the time when a significant section of it acquiesced in the bombing of Yugoslavia. This tailing behind imperialism has now ripened into support for the imperialist project in Ukraine and also support for neo-liberalism, which allows the fascists to present themselves as votaries of peace and of liberation, at least until their alliance with monopoly capital becomes evident. France has shown that the adoption of an agenda by the Left that transcends neo-liberalism, is effective in cutting the ground from under the fascists' feet.

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