

Fascism as a symptom of the failure of revolutionary leadership on the Left (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

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"We may set it down as a historical law: fascism was able to conquer only in those countries where the conservative labor parties prevented the proletariat from utilizing the revolutionary situation and seizing power." – Leon Trotsky, "Bonapartism, Fascism, and War", 1940

To defeat fascism, we must understand it accurately as a phenomenon. What is fascism? It is not mere authoritarianism or dictatorship, as authoritarian regimes and organizations existed throughout history without being called fascist. The name originated in Italy, its paradigmatic examples being Mussolini, the Nazis and Franco. Fascism is a symptom of capitalism, and needs to be understood as such. History has shown that fascism is what happens when we have a potentially revolutionary situation on the one hand, and the absence of a revolutionary Left to take advantage of it on the other. Let us examine what this means concretely.

A potentially revolutionary situation is a situation where capitalist society is in deep crisis, economic, political, and cultural, leading to mass discontents with it. Such was the case in Europe during WW1 and its aftermath. During that period, and during such periods in general, the bourgeoisie cannot continue its class rule using its usual combination of democratic illusions and the repressive state apparatus of the police and the bureaucracy. To keep power, it is forced to turn to fascism. Fascism is a mode of managing the discontents of the masses caused by capitalist crises when said discontents can no longer be managed by the bourgeois state in its pseudo-liberal form: "The historic function of fascism is to smash the working class, destroy its organizations, and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery." [1]

How is fascism a mode of managing discontents caused by capitalist crises? The fascists as a political force organize sections of society that have been brought to despair by capitalism, namely, the petty bourgeoisie and sections of the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat. It organizes these sections of society into a counterrevolutionary paramilitary force that is meant to violently repress and destroy the working class movement for socialism and/or channel it to nationalist ends. It is thus itself a mass movement, albeit a counterrevolutionary one. In the cases of Italy, Germany and Spain, fascism succeeded in this task by using violence and taking state power. The fascist state is the form the bourgeois state takes when it cannot rule through the illusion of democracy and liberalism. Like any bourgeois state, it serves capital, with the difference that it exerts more direct social control over the

working class and the rest of the people, preventing any working class independence. It abolishes both proletarian and bourgeois-democratic institutions.

The mass character of fascism is a significant characteristic, suggesting that it is the inverse of the mass movement for socialism. Its populist demagoguery tends to be a combination of nationalism and vulgar 'socialism' directed against establishment elites. Historically, the social basis of fascism were the petit-bourgeoisie, i.e., small business owners and rich peasants who in times of crises were desperate to avoid proletarianization, but it attracted people of all the oppressed classes and can have a working-class basis as well. Significantly, Mussolini was a former socialist in the working-class movement. Fascism provides the masses with the illusion of stability in times of crisis and diverts their disaffection away from big capital and against imaginary domestic and international threats such as immigrants or the working-class movement.[2] "If the Communist Party is the *party of revolutionary hope*, then fascism, as a mass movement, is the *party of counterrevolutionary despair*." [3]

Fascism as a mass movement is predicated on the failure of the Left to provide a way forward for the masses during periods of deep capitalist crisis. In all three cases of Italy, Germany and Spain it rose after failed socialist revolutions during which the social democrats betrayed the workers and played a conservative role while the communists appeared unprepared to lead the workers. In potentially revolutionary situations of mass social discontent, if the Left fails to provide adequate leadership and earn the trust of the masses by delivering on its promises, the disillusioned masses turn to the fascists. If there is no revolutionary Left to cultivate class consciousness in the direction of abolishing capitalism as what is responsible for the workers' woes, the working class itself may turn to fascism. As Trotsky put it: "In all the countries where fascism became victorious, we had, before the growth of fascism and its victory, a wave of radicalism of the masses - of the workers and the poorer peasants and farmers, and of the petty bourgeois class... There are no exceptions to this rule - fascism comes only when the working class shows complete incapacity to take into its own hands the fate of society." [4]

Cypriot leftists should ask themselves: do the conditions for fascism becoming a mass movement exist in Cyprus today? The answer is: not all of them. On the one hand, it is indeed the case that global capitalism is in deep crisis that threatens the very survival of the planet, and economic and social conditions in Cyprus have been worsening for years, breeding discontent. On the other hand, the revolutionary Left in Cyprus is too small, weak and scattered to address, gain the trust and lead the workers and the rest of the disaffected masses against capital and its state. AKEL on its part pacifies the workers in the interests of capital. Consequently, in Cyprus the authoritarian bourgeois state can still contain discontents via the police and the illusion of democracy, without needing a fascist movement to support it. ELAM is a party with fascist characteristics, but in the current conditions it appears more likely that it will become part of the nationalist right-wing establishment than lead a fascist mass movement.

Small groups of fascists exist, and the Left, the workers and the oppressed minorities must defend themselves against them. The government cannot be relied on to protect us. However, it should trouble us that the masses continue to have illusions in the bourgeois state and are cynical with regards to the possibility of radical change. We should also pay attention to the fact that across the globe, capitalist and state actors characterize any and all right-wing populist discontents as fascist, utilizing the threat to fascism to be used to scare people and the Left to support the neoliberal status quo. Moreover, in the wake of Covid, the Ukraine war and the protracted crisis of neoliberalism, the global ruling class is bolstering the authoritarian apparatus of the state, ushering a regime of heightened surveillance and censorship. The case of Kenan Ayaz is indicative of this trend.

Any anti-fascism in the present ought to recognize that the primary authoritarian danger we currently face is the increasingly repressive bourgeois state, which will alternately use both fascism and the threat of fascism to sustain itself. We should strive to build a revolutionary Left that will pose a threat to capital and its state, earning the trust of the masses in the process and precluding the rise of a fascist mass movement.

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[1] Leon Trotsky, Fascism: What it is and how to fight it, Pathfinder, 2021, p.34.

[2] Ibid. p. 33-4.

[3] Ibid. p. 18.

[4] Ibid. p. 49-50.

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