

Note: The Workers International Network (WIN) is just what it calls itself – a network – of socialists from around the world. We hold periodic conferences to assess the major world developments. The following is a summary of the WIN conference held in Paris over the weekend of Nov. 10-11. For more information on WIN, see: <http://oaklandsocialist.com/category/workers-international-network/>

Session #1: Europe Introduction

Although much of the class struggle has shifted to Asia, the fact that Europe was the original cradle for the capitalist mode of production and also for the revolutionary workers movement, with its good and bad traditions, is of course also essential.

The EU and the eurozone are not homogeneous blocs. There are no economic and political unification, ending the national borders, but there actually was a thrust which tends to overcome these boundaries especially concerning the movement of goods and capital, and sometimes much less concerning the people.

There are the dominant countries and dominated countries. In particular the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) are suppliers of cheap labor, and subcontracting industries, mainly for the German capital, and produce a poor migration, for instance of the Roma (“Gypsies”).

Germany tends to dominate industrially, UK financially. The strength of French capitalism had been agriculture (as well as being a nuclear power), but even in agriculture Germany is tending to overtake France.

EU Institutions

The EU institutions such as the EU Commission and the European parliament do play a role, but they cannot replace the role of the individual states.

With the crisis in 2008 the Commission in connection with the ECB in Frankfurt and the IMF, the three forming a "troika" in which conflicts abound, dictated austerity plans to the South zone and to Ireland, in the interest of recovery at the lowest cost, which is more difficult, of the so called public debt.

For some time the Commission serves as an alibi for national governments to organize attacks, the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 being an essential step in this direction.

These institutions contribute to an oligarchic drift without acquiring any form of supra-national legitimacy.

Euro

Until 2009 the euro area was an area of economic convergence is that it relied on the predictions of increasing unification of the continent despite evidence accumulated political crisis especially in 2005 with the failure of the French and Dutch referendums showing a growing opposition in the companies concerned.

But since 2009, there has instead acute divergence illustrated by the differing national interest rates and the crisis of public debt. The financial crisis and increased competition have on the front of the stage the fact that there is no way for the abolition of national states or economic relations between them rulers.

So we have a wave of devastating austerity cures throughout the Mediterranean area, and a better resistance of the German capital who had drastically lowered wages in the early 2000s (Harz Plan, implemented by the SPD which was arguably a turning point in the history of the party that could, compare to that of Blairism for LP).

These policies have of course the aim to preserve the euro area, and therefore the rule of German and French imperialism, mainly German, with France having under Sarkozy then in Holland, a policy designed to maintain a low differential of rates basic interests (those of public debt securities) compared to Germany. This leads to a growing tension in France and it raises important discussions.

Leave the Euro?

So far, the call for leaving the euro area is only defended by the National Front. From a working class standpoint, this question must be connected to the needs of workers, the sliding scale of wages, to break with the payment of the alleged debt.

The debate began in the Militant bulletin editorial board on the opportunity to raise this slogan. So far we focused on the refusal of the public debt and did not want to highlight the issue of the currency itself, knowing that in the euro or franc capitalism the masses are plundered and exploited.

But increasing currents in society realize that the productive capital in France is sacrificed to financial capital and are led to the question of leaving the euro. This subject is taboo but latent in the UMP. It is often posed as an issue for interclass alliances in defense of national sovereignty. It is clear that the debate we have leads to adopt this slogan we will do it with a class perspective.

Regional Movement in France

We also have a broader historical and theoretical discussion in the background of the previous discussion: We approach it as a democratic issue, linked to the requirement of a government that truly represents the world of work: if it is sovereign, it must not have taboos in regard to European treaties or concerning the repayment of the so called public debt.

Today we have in the region of Brittany a major revolt against taxes and plant closures: the movement of the Red Caps. For us it's a movement with a regional and cultural aspect, but mainly announcing a national crisis.

But in this respect, France is rather a special case, with a national cohesion coming from the outcome of the revolutions of the past and conveyed in various social and institutional gains (as the secular state). Other European countries see back national issues that tend to dislocate the existing states and who are related, in part, with European economic pressures: this is particularly the case of Flanders over Belgium (which is not a nation state) of northern Italy, Catalonia.

Perspectives for EU & eurozone & question of support for withdraw from either

Despite predictions, EU & euro still exist, but could be withdrawals in future; not support withdraw from.

Entry into EU different in different countries; Portugal, Spain & Greece: Entry after downfall of dictatorship. Therefore associated with democratic rights; Britain seen differently, but EU requires certain degree of social services. If Britain were to leave, would increase loss of social services.

Issues not strictly economic. Global immigration crisis; EU not shielded from.

Discussion

Scottish Independence

There was a discussion on the upcoming referendum on Scottish independence. There was unanimous agreement for the right of the Scottish people to have independence, if that is what they choose. There were some differences over whether independence should be the position of socialists. Some felt that it was a tactical issue and also noted that there were no socialist groups opposing independence. That it is not a tactical but a principled issue was also expressed, and that the concern should be for the maximum possible unity of the working class.

It was also noted that there may be a tendency to defend independence on the basis that an independent Scotland will be able to attract investment. This can merge into the argument that the Scottish working class is "competitive" with other workers as Tommy Sheridan argued in the past. Socialists must vigorously guard against any line of thought which in any way can lead in that direction.

Economy, Austerity & Finance

The degree to which public services have been privatized and also cut was discussed. The idea was raised that socialists should oppose deficits and borrowing and instead call for taxing the rich.

Session 2: Left & Right Introduction

Rise of right seen in context of attacks on working class in general and role of Social Democrats, who are lead 13 of EU governments and are in coalition in 5 others. Thus, workers can see no difference between social democrats and traditional capitalist parties. Up to 2008, SD governments in lead of neo-liberal "reforms". Since then, in forefront of austerity measures.

The mass unemployment and attacks on wages combines with the mass immigration to give basis to right wing anti-immigrant movement.

Likely right wing populist governments in Norway, Switzerland, Poland and others. Possible Tory/UKIP coalition government in Britain. But this is different from far right dictatorships or fascism, for which there is no perspective. Even in Greece, support for Golden Dawn has declined significantly, with 60% now saying they see them as a criminal organization. A Golden Dawn government is not in the offing.

More likely will be a Syriza government, but Syriza has moved towards a position of being the party most able to manage capitalism, which means that they, too, would likely carry out some measure of austerity. In that case, support for Syriza could collapse and the disappearance of this party would be possible.

While rise of racism serious, note the effects of the counter culture movement and the US civil rights campaign of the '60s. Racism no longer as deeply held as before.

The Trotskyist forces have made several attempts at building a united left, most notably in France with the MPA. That attempt was on too narrow of a base and did not survive. In Britain, there was one disastrous attempt after another, starting with the Socialist Alliance. In Ireland, there was the attempt at the United Left Alliance, which collapsed due to sectarianism of various groups. On the other hand, we have seen broader left parties arise, such as Syriza in Greece and Die Linke in Germany. In the case of Syriza, the closer it gets to real power, the closer it seems to move towards reformism.

One point to be considered regarding unity of the left is that a program cannot be imposed from outside but must spring from the experiences of the movement itself.

Discussion

Program

There was considerable discussion on how a program is raised within the movement. Trotsky was quoted to the effect that the sectarian writes program to distinguish him or herself from movement rather than seeing a program as springing from the movement itself.

It was also raised that this does not imply simple pragmatism or spontaneity, that socialists have to balance between seeing how a program springs from movement and what we as socialists bring to movement.

It was also pointed out that what program we bring is not fixed for all times, that changed conditions necessitate a change in the program. The example was given of the household tax campaign in Ireland. Initially, the socialist left was united in calling for non-payment. That was under the conditions whereby the householder had to bring the tax to the tax office. At a later point, the government shifted to starting to deduct unpaid taxes from unemployment insurance payments and other such payments. At that point, comrades called for making these deductions as difficult as possible but advocated dropping the call for non-payment since it was no longer an option.

Role of Old Parties vs. New Formations

Die Linke & Syriza arose in particular circumstances which will not necessarily be repeated elsewhere.

The call for unions to break with Labour was discussed with the question raised: What is the alternative – simple noninvolvement in politics? There was also some discussion on the role of the Unite leadership regarding the Labour Party. It was raised that this leadership is not really trying to reclaim the LP, so much as trying to push Miliband (the LP leader) slightly to left.

The issue of new left formations such as Left Unity in Britain was discussed. It was proposed that such formations and parties, if they are to be significant, will not simply arise out of existing left groups; they must be based on new layers; Left Unity, e.g., must not be simple rerun of Socialist Alliance, but must draw in those who are actually suffering from the austerity measures.

Collapse of support for Hollande in France was also noted.

Perspectives for Right

No perspectives for fascism; far right parties, nationalist parties (UKIP in Britain, National Front in France, etc.) are not fascist.

Session 3: Social Movements Introduction

How movements originate and develop is very different in this period.

In some towns in Syria (e.g. Taftanaz) as well as in Egypt, for instance, we saw classic examples of the movement developing their own committees of struggle which tended to become classic workers councils. In Taftanaz (and probably elsewhere), these committees took on such tasks as the distribution of basic goods as well as controlling prices. They explicitly saw themselves as a tool of the “poor”.

In other words, these were examples of a mass movement tending to form workers' councils in the classic form. However, in both Egypt and Syria the movement was diverted, in Egypt by political means and in Syria by a diversion into a military battle. In both cases, the immediate tendency towards forming workers' councils was also suppressed.

Women's Self Defense Groups

However, in Egypt a new potential arose in an unexpected way. During the course of the push back by capitalist forces (first the Islamic fundamentalists and then elements of the old regime), mass attacks were carried out against women in the form of mass sexual assaults. The women responded by starting to organize and arm themselves. They formed armed self-defense committees. So the question is whether these committees could have been expanded, whether they could have taken on increased tasks such as defense of workers in the work place, etc. In other words, could these armed women's defense committees (which reportedly also included some men) have broadened out to be a new basis for workers' councils?

If so, this is a completely new way in which a revolution and its essential bodies could develop, and it gives us reason to recall the warning of Engels in writing about the United States. He wrote that the movement always looks different from how it ought to have looked in the eyes of those who helped to originate it.

Occupy Movement and Working Class

That is most certainly true as far as the last big social protest movement in the United States – the Occupy movement of 2011. This movement was dismissed by many socialists as not being a working class movement, but how many broad social movements are in their origins? Was the movement against the Vietnam War? Was the US civil rights movement? In fact, such movements as the mass rebellion in France in 1968 that some thought was going to bring down French capitalism did not originate as a working class movement.

Especially in the case of Occupy Oakland, it was alive and exciting and attracted thousands of Oakland's youth. This video (<http://oaklandsocialist.com/2013/09/26/video-occupy-oakland-an-insiders-view/>) will give some of the flavor of it. Some of the protest signs that people brought said a lot. There were two in particular, in both cases made by young black women. One said “The people have awoken and are not going back to sleep.” The other said “Silent no more.” Another young woman had a sign that simply said, “I never liked capitalism in the first place.”

And the fact is that it did make a big impression on working class Oakland, quite a few of whom came out to participate in the “general strike.”

“Intervening”

Regarding the question of not “intervening” (vs. simply participating) with ready made programs and slogans: That would have been a complete failure, but the way it was organized really gave space for anybody with some good ideas to play a role, at least in the beginning.

Normally we think of building a movement around a clear program, but Occupy was built with just the opposite approach: They ruled out having any demands (meaning any clear program) or any elected leadership. This meant that in the early stages there was a real space for anybody with some real ideas to play a role. As things developed, this opening became a vacuum that was filled by the union hierarchy, their left hangers-on, and some of the anarchists who, for the first time, got a whiff of real influence and power. And in reality, these anarchists did come into the movement with a program. That program was “mobilize, mobilize, mobilize;” create constant disruption with no pause to stop and reflect. Since no movement can continue like that, it eventually died out.

But the main point is that no socialist a year earlier would have ever thought that a movement would streak onto the scene in the form that Occupy did.

Two final points:

Environment

First, no socialist conference should be held without considering the issue of capitalism's destruction of the environment. One principle issue that is being thrust forward is that of hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”), a process in which wells are

drilled sometimes miles deep and water and toxic compounds are pumped into the well to fracture the surrounding shale rock and thus set free natural gas or oil. This process is poisoning the water supplies, polluting the air, and disrupting the lives of those living around the fracked wells. However, since it is usually done in rural or semi-rural areas, it means that socialists often tend to ignore this issue (as well as tending to underestimate the importance of environmental destruction in general). Another key environmental issue is that of the ongoing disaster at Fukushima. The human mind is inherently conservative, and we tend to think of the present situation lasting indefinitely. However, some are saying that if worst comes to worst there, and if the fuel rods burn up, then it is not ruled out that the West Coast of North America would become uninhabitable. That is how serious some are taking the situation there.

Program

A final point should be considered: We have recoiled at the methods of most of the left – how they enter into any movement with a ready-made program, often simply mechanically transferred from something that Trotsky wrote 75 years ago (“The Transitional Program”). They have no thought to figuring out what is the actual state of affairs in this particular struggle, what are the relations of forces, how people are actually organized, what direction they are taking. They have no interest in actually *listening* to others. There is no need as they have nothing to learn, or so they think.

As we have stressed, in every movement there are thousands, millions of conversations taking place about what is happening, what is the way forward, etc. We want to listen to and participate in those conversations.

But we must not throw out the baby with the bath water. Marxists also have something to add. Perhaps it could be explained by saying that, in our own small way, we also want to bring in the “conversations” of the past struggles as well as of the ongoing struggles in other parts of the world.

Discussion

Issues

Around what sorts of issues will new movements develop? It's difficult to predict. Some possibilities are around work place closures and privatization as well as union disputes.

However, we must be aware of issues that aren't around the immediate economic issues. For instance, in the protests against the George Zimmerman verdict in the US we noted a tendency for a wide layer of black youth (as well as older people) to get involved who had not been previously involved. Another example is the national question, which has re-arisen recently in Northern Ireland. In this regard, there was some discussion on how Left Unity would take up the question if they started to build there (and Left Unity has attracted some interest from some in Northern Ireland). It was felt that this would have to be worked out by those involved in Left Unity in Northern Ireland.

There was also a fairly extensive discussion on the Kshama Sawant campaign. There was general agreement that the overwhelming emphasis was the success of this campaign, how it was helping put socialism in the public discourse. It was a small but significant blow to the monopoly that US big business holds in US politics. It was also helping correct the imbalance of the Occupy movement.

There are also some questions to be considered. How does one build a broader socialist campaign without compromising revolutionary principles? This is not something that can be definitively answered from afar, but it has to be kept in mind.