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Broad left parties

The challenge of broad left parties in 2025

- Features -

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The 2008 crash and resulting politicisation saw the rise of broad left parties in many countries. However in most cases, this wave has crashed, and the tide has turned, posing new challenges for these projects and for revolutionaries operating within them. In this opinion piece, Cian Prendiville reflects on these questions and attempts to plot a way forward.

Over the last few years, I have gotten to attend left-wing conferences in Brazil, Britain, Denmark and the US (as well as, of course, Ireland). I've also met with socialist activists with experience in broad left parties in Argentina, Germany, Spain, France, Greece and beyond. Each situation is different, each project has its own unique culture, their own strengths and weaknesses. But across the board, in almost every conversation I had, there was a common thread: the initial momentum of these projects, fueled often by a naive optimism as well as a genuine uptick in class struggle, has given way to a more difficult reality.

Within the space of a couple of years we saw the betrayals of Syriza (Greece), the defeat of Corbyn (Britain), the collapse of Podemos (Spanish state), the failure of Sanders (USA) and the splitting of the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA, France). A drift to the right in society, and a decrease of mass left-wing movements (with some notable exceptions) has added to the difficulties facing socialist organisers. In general, the once shiny-and-new left parties have stagnated and had to adopt a much more defensive posture, trying to minimise losses rather than consolidate new victories, and often being squeezed by larger, less radical parties and far-right populists.

Adaptation

The reality of political organising, however, is that temporary setbacks or challenges do not simply pass over parties like the changing of the seasons. Instead, organisations and different wings of the one organisation, attempt to adapt, consciously or unconsciously, to the new environment.

A so-called 'conservative left', previously discussed as a peculiarity of Eastern European politics, has emerged in Western Europe now as well, with the likes of Sarah Wagenknecht in Germany or George Galloway in Britain adopting right-wing talking points on issues of oppression, throwing some of the most oppressed members of our class under the bus, in an attempt to maintain links with more conservative parts of their electoral base. In what I (apologetically) must call a 'dialectical process', the likes of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez in the US has moved in the opposite direction but for similar reasons, doubling down on a more liberal, progressive and gentrified electoral base, and softening her cough (to say the least) when it comes to the criticisms of corporate Democrats which launched her 'career'.

The return of Lula to Brazilian politics, and the rise of Melenchon in France, has posed a different challenge for the broad socialist Party of Socialism and Liberty (PSOL, Brazil) and the NPA. While this led to a split in the NPA over how to relate to Melenchon's left-populist La France Insoumise, PSOL so far, has avoided a formal split. However, the majority of the party has drifted to a less independent and critical position towards the Lula government, while the left have accused some on the right of the party of attempting to copy, not confront capitalist politics by allowing some members to join the government, and promoting one of PSOL's public representatives as 'Lula's heir'.

This is part of another aspect of this attempt to 'adapt', both to harder political terrain and the resulting increased internal debate by adopting more 'traditional' establishment-like structures and presentation. This shift away from

socialist democratic principles can seem both more media-friendly and more organisationally straightforward. Unifying a political project around an individual rather than a political programme which can be debated, amended or overturned is certainly attractive for that individual and those closest to them, but should sound alarm bells for socialists. This is not just a case on the 'conservative left' (e.g. Wagenknecht, Galloway), where it is readily ridiculed and critiqued by the socialist left, but is also the case somewhat with more progressive and impressive leftwing figures (e.g. Melenchon, Corbyn).

This is not to say the only 'danger' is the slow drift to the right. Others can 'adapt' to this new situation by embracing the isolation, retreating from mass work and broad left projects and instead focusing solely on recruitment to their individual sect. With a large layer of radicalised and politicised young people, frustrated with the conservatism of older generations and righteously impatient for change, there is definitely a basis for such recruitment. Sect-building may be a dead-end strategy for revolutionaries, but just like adaptation and opportunism, it is always going to be a pressure and draw.

What do we do?

It would be very nice to have a simple conclusion to hammer home at the end of this article. "The new left is dead - join RISE and build the revolution" or even "We cannot continue in the old ways - build a new left for a new period" would be both more clickable and more inspiring, but alas, I am no guru, and have no panacea. I think I have, however, learned some lessons from discussions with others, and also my own experiences over the recent years in PBP and with RISE, in particular working with the successful campaign to re-elect Paul Murphy, and win two council seats for People Before Profit in Dublin South West. While not particularly 'exciting' I have at least managed to condense some lessons into three buzzwords with strained alliteration:

Persistence -

Building a political base for socialism in the working class is hard. Building a mass workers' party is even harder. But there is no alternative. There is no shortcut to socialism. When there are mass movements, it is easier, but even without those we must continue to seek out opportunities, in communities or workplaces, where we can carve out such a base through consistent campaigning. This 'grind' can also dull our politics, as we have seen in Ireland with left-wing councillors or TDs who over time became almost indistinguishable from mere localist independents. To counter that, we must politicise our base, building deeper connections with key supporters and always connecting the dots between our current campaigning and our socialist vision.

Principles -

The pressure of 'today' is constant but we must keep our eyes on the prize. It is always easier 'today' to be opportunist, to leave the arguing for socialism, the challenging reformism, the confronting the far-right to 'tomorrow'. Democratic debate, organisational transparency and political education will always seem like a nuisance, or unnecessary luxury to the leadership of 'today'. But revolutionaries must be the voice of tomorrow. We must base ourselves not on the line of least resistance, or the most convenient next step, but on socialist principles, which are about distilling the experiences and insights of the past and the predictions for the future. These principles tell us that, ultimately, the best way to resist the pressures of opportunism is through an educated, politicised and empowered membership, with full transparency and strict control over the leadership and elected representatives. They tell us that, racism, transphobia, or for that matter climate denialism or productivism cannot be 'placated' or ignored, but must be challenged if we are to build a mass socialist alternative strong enough to actually win.

Preparation -

While there may be challenges in terms of building mass movements or mass political alternatives at the moment, we should see this period as one of preparation for when those opportunities arise again. The previous waves of struggle and left-ward politicisation were not an anomaly. Capitalism is a crisis-ridden system, while for a time they may be able to divide, distract or even placate sections of the working class, the system will always produce external shocks, political oversteps or rising expectations which bring wider sections of ordinary people into conflict with the government and the bosses. This will provide greater opportunities to strengthen the socialist left, in some cases grow existing broad left parties, in others transform them or perhaps in yet other cases build new ones. While broad left parties may drift right, restrict democracy, or frustratingly fail to seize the opportunities that are available, the truth is this is also part of the painful process. Of course, you shouldn't simply bash your head off a wall of opportunism and bureaucracy if it seems like a dead end for the time being. Sometimes, it may be correct to focus on other projects where there is greater potential than inside the broad left party. At other times, like in the case of Podemos or Syiza, the broad left will cross a line of principle and a split is unavoidable. However, purity through splits is an illusion. Reformism and bureaucratism (or for that matter ultraleftism and sectarianism) do not come from nowhere, there is no magic spell to stop them rearing their head. There is no shortcut here either, instead we must ensure we build strong revolutionary currents inside the broad left, develop new revolutionaries and consistently, and patiently, combat the pressures of opportunism and ultraleftism.

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