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New Parties of the left

Will the real European Left stand up?

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Having followed with sympathy the emergence of Left Unity and the possibility of a new party of the Left being launched, I read with interest the two-part article by an anonymous figure, who may or may not be called Michael Ford, which may or may not be a pseudonym. I'm sure we'll find out. For the purposes of this article, I will refer to him as Ford. In any case, whoever wrote it, the aim of the article is clearly to try and discredit the perspective of building a new party to the left of Labour and validate that of working with/within the Labour Party to drive it to the left. There will undoubtedly be many replies to Ford from people who are directly involved in politics in Britain, which I am not at present. However, an important part of Ford's argument is to try and demonstrate that the political forces to the left of social democracy in Europe don't amount to much, either politically or in terms of their support. In doing so, frankly, he paints a picture which has little relation to reality. This is what I want to take up [\[1\]](#).

At the end of the first part of his article Ford writes: "The traditions of the British labour movement are in many respects worse than those in the countries listed. That can be debated, but they are unarguably enormously different." That is certainly true. The British labour movement has features which are unique in Europe. In particular, this is true of the Labour Party, in the sense of trade union affiliation and the role of the unions in the party. But is the difference absolute or only relative? If you compare Britain with France it looks pretty absolute. If the comparison is made with Northern Europe (Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands...), it is much less so. In those countries you have mass social-democratic parties which have historically had the loyalty of most of the working class and mass, unitary trade unions which have supported these parties. Quite a different picture to that of Southern Europe with mass communist parties and divided trade unions and where the (electoral) dominance of social democracy dates only from the 1970s. Nevertheless there are significant parties which are not only to the left of social democracy but are clearly anti-capitalist in both Northern and Southern Europe. They are stronger in the South than in the North, but that is to be expected.

Let us look at what is common to the whole of Europe. The first thing is that social democracy is now, and has been for some time, part of the neo-liberal consensus. Not without internal tensions, in some cases. The second thing is that as a result, globally and with ups and downs, but overall, it is losing support from its traditional supporters and a space is opening up to the left. Now a space is not the same as a vacuum, which as we know Nature abhors, and which will be filled automatically by something or other. The space to the left of social democracy consists of people, real living people who have had enough of parties which betray their hopes, which no longer defend them but attack them. As a result they may be open to a party or parties which offer another perspective, one that breaks with the neo-liberal consensus. Whether this possibility becomes reality, and to what extent, depends on politics – on political action, on the ability of anti-capitalist forces to come together and to offer political perspectives.

Of course the space to the left of social democracy has never been empty, nor is it now. There are the Communist parties or their successor parties; there are the various far-left groups, mostly Trotskyist; there are the Greens, which in some countries at least are to the left of social democracy.

First of all, let us look at the Communist parties, because the way in which Ford approaches them is the most at variance with reality. He writes: "Communist parties have disappeared or been reduced to the margins (with a few exceptions) and, in the case of many of the former ruling parties, openly converted to social-democracy and, hence, variants of neo-liberalism".

The second part of his statement is certainly true as regards most (but not all) of the former ruling parties in Eastern

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Europe. The first part is a strange thing to write in 2013, though Ford is not alone in holding this opinion. Ten, twelve or fifteen years ago I thought that the West European Communist Parties would either disappear, become social-democratized (or become satellites of social democracy) or subsist as diminishing and marginal “orthodox” sects. That is not the course events have taken. The only West European party to have simply gone over to social democracy (and indeed beyond it) was the Italian Communist Party, at the price of an important split. The only party to have simply dissolved is the British one. There is a series of parties which consider themselves orthodox but which in most countries are quite weak and marginal, with the notable exceptions of the Greek (KKE) and Portuguese (PCP) parties. Then there are those communist parties which are part of the Party of the European Left (EL).

This is the Euro-Left which is the main target of Ford’s criticism, so let us deal with that. In the first place, he writes at one point: “on the basis of this short summary [in which he covers Greece, France, Italy and Germany, M.S.] we can say that the euro-left is hardly decisive outside Greece, that it polls less than when it was explicitly Communist in times gone by...”. In times gone by...well, the times when it was enough to be explicitly Communist and to defend “Soviet socialism” have indeed gone by, and they’re not coming back. At another point, in relation to France, he writes: “the Left Front polls less than half of the vote secured a generation or so ago by the PCF”. You have to go back to 1978 to find the PCF polling more than 20 per cent in a national election. Since then, in that “generation or so” rather a lot has happened: the neo-liberal offensive, a change in the relationship of class forces within countries and on a global scale, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the ideological offensive, “the end of history”... That does not only affect the European Left. The Portuguese Communist Party, which is explicitly Communist (as, by the way, are the French, Spanish, Austrian, etc.) and not part of the EL, was getting 15-20 per cent in the 1970s and 80s and less than 10 per cent from the early 90s until 2011. Of course, not everything can be explained by the broad objective factors mentioned above. Political choices can make things better or worse. The PCF paid a certain price for its participation in the Jospin government from 1997-2002 and also from an ill-conceived presidential campaign in 2007. Conversely, it has benefited from its role in the 2005 referendum campaign, from its increasingly clear differentiation from the Socialist Party and from the strategy of the Left Front.

Now let us take up “hardly decisive outside Greece”. In fact, Greece is the most advanced point of a tendency towards the strengthening of parties to the left of social democracy which is also evident in other countries. In Denmark the Red-Green Alliance was formed in 1989 (not the best year to launch an anti-capitalist party, one might think) by the Danish Communist Party, the Danish section of the Fourth International, Left Socialists and Maoists. It has been in Parliament since 1994 and has patiently established itself as a political force over the years. It is now stronger than it has ever been ever been with over 10,000 members. At the last election in 2011 it won 6.7 per cent of the vote and 12 MPs. In the latest opinion poll it has 14.9 per cent, as against 16.1 per cent for the social-democrats who head the centre-left government. In Portugal the Left Bloc was formed in 1999 by forces from Trotskyist and Maoist backgrounds along with a current from the PCP. From there it grew rapidly and progressed at each election until 2011, when it suffered a serious setback in elections conducted under the shadow of the Troika, falling to just over 5 per cent. In the latest opinion poll the Bloc has 8.8 per cent and the PCP 12.1 per cent, a total of 21 per cent. Fortunately the PCP is not as sectarian as the KKE and there is some collaboration between it and the Left Bloc.

In Spain the Communist Party is the core of the United Left, which was established in 1986 in the continuity of the campaign against Spain joining NATO. Its record has been somewhat chequered over the years. However in the last period IU has progressed in the national elections in 2011 and in regional elections and currently stands at around 16 per cent in the opinion polls. This is not an automatic result of the crisis; it is the result of a clear positioning to the left of social democracy on the one hand, presence in all the movements of resistance to austerity and other a willingness to work with the new social movements, not always without problems.

Concerning France, it might have seemed, in the 1990s, under the stewardship of Robert Hue and with the PCF’s participation in the Jospin government from 1997-2002, that the PCF was destined to become a satellite of the Socialist Party (PS) and/or to disintegrate. However that is not what happened – although Hue and a few followers

subsequently left the PCF and now constitute a small group which is precisely a satellite of the PS. Through a process of political clarification that was not always easy, under Marie-George Buffet as national secretary from 2001-2010, succeeded by Pierre Laurent, the party began to be rebuilt, with a clear differentiation from the Socialist Party and readiness to work with other forces on the left. This was first clearly seen in the campaign against the proposed European constitution in 2005. It was crystallized with the formation of the Left Front in 2009. With this orientation the PCF halted its decline and began to recruit from 2005 onwards. In the 2012 elections not only did Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon get 11 per cent in the presidential election (the best vote for a candidate to the left of the PS since 1981), but the results of the legislative elections, where most of the candidates were PCF, were in 90 per cent of constituencies superior to 2007. The Left Front has progressed in each election where it has stood (European 2009, regional 2010, local 2011, presidential and legislative 2012). It now involves nine organizations, including not only the PCF and the Left Party, formed by Mélenchon when he left the PS in 2008, but three organizations from an LCR-NPA background.

And of course it is not just about elections; on May 5 a demonstration called by the Left Front mobilized well over a hundred thousand people – a massive expression of protest against the austerity policies of Hollande.

A final word on the PCF: I attended its 36th congress in February as an observer. To put it very succinctly, what I did not see was a party that was in crisis, aging, shrunken, without a strategy and thinking of nothing else but how to get into government. In other words, not what has been the staple fare of commentaries in the bourgeois press and by some on the left for quite a few years now. What I did see was a party full of confidence, with many young people, whose discussions centred on how to organize the fightback against Hollande's policies and build a political alternative. Of the delegates, 20 per cent were under 30 and 30 per cent had joined in the last five years. And of course three-quarters of them were wage-earners.

The examples above show the reality and the potential of forces to the left of social democracy in Europe. But there also some problems. Since its breakthroughs in the 2005 and 2009 federal elections and in regional elections in the West, Die Linke has experienced difficulties and setbacks. In the first place there are objective reasons. At the present time a large part of the German working class is enjoying prosperity and is not so open to the discourse of the Left. There are also problems of integrating the components of Die Linke in the East and the West. In the East the PDS was one of only two former ruling parties in the Soviet bloc not to embrace the process of capitalist restoration (the other was what is now the CPBM in the Czech Republic). As a result it has a solid base of support over 20 per cent in several Lander and a network of local councilors. In the West the forces coming from the SPD and the radical Left had to start pretty much from scratch, with the exception of Oskar Lafontaine's base in the Saar. As things stand now, however, the situation is difficult but certainly not catastrophic and unless there is a very big upset Die Linke will keep its parliamentary group. In Italy the situation is much worse. The participation of the PRC in the Prodi government from 2006-08 cost it much of its electoral support, including, but not only, because of its backing for sending Italian troops to Afghanistan. In 2008 it lost all its parliamentary representation, split almost 50-50 and has since then been in difficulties, waging an unsuccessful campaign in what was admittedly a very difficult election in February. It must also be said that none of the three left groups which split from Rifondazione in 2006-08 has since made any impact. It will not be easy to rebuild the Left in Italy, but Rifondazione remains the starting-point.

The case of Greece and Syriza merits a few remarks. Since Syriza made its electoral breakthrough in 2012, everyone on the left in Europe has had to sit up and take notice. But Syriza did not fall from the sky. Its central component, Synaspismos, is a product of a complex process of splits and realignments in the Greek communist movement that began in 1968. And the Syriza coalition (now in the process of becoming a party), which was created in 2004, and drew in currents from Eurocommunism, Trotskyism and Maoism, was the result of a political choice by Syriza; Nor was the success of Syriza a mechanical effect of the crisis. It was the result of a political orientation that combined an absolute refusal of austerity and the diktats of the Troika and the proposal to other forces on the left to form a government of the Left – a proposal refused by both the Democratic Left and the KKE.

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How does Ford characterize the European Left politically? “The euro-Left parties stand to the left of contemporary social democracy in advocating more radical measures, in varying degrees, to tackle the economic crisis. They are, on the other hand, constitutional and electoral parties – they do not aim at revolution. Their measure is electoral support which they seek to secure through advocating pro-welfare and egalitarian policies which broadly mitigate the effects of the slump on the working-class. Their ultimate aim may be a socialist society (although this is not always clear), but it is to be attained primarily by parliamentary means. Broadly they disown the record of socialism and revolutionary politics in the twentieth century”. And elsewhere “they are explicitly reformist”. And, pride of place for this one, “the summit of the ambitions of the Left parties Europe-wide at present is to secure enough parliamentary seats to be considered a coalition partner in a government which would be dominated by the “old” social democratic parties”. Firstly, of all, broadly, in my experience, these parties do not disown the record of socialism and revolutionary politics in the twentieth century. They may interpret it more or less critically, and not all in the same way, and often not exactly as I would, but they certainly do not disown it. Perhaps Ford means that they do not agree with his version of that record, which on the basis of various references in his document, seems to be rather neo-Stalinist. Secondly, concerning the “summit of their ambitions”. Perhaps Ford would like to explain why Syriza refused to consider a governmental alliance with any pro-memorandum party, including PASOK; why the RGA only gives critical support to the Danish centre-left government from the outside but did not join it; why, above all, the PCF voted last year, on its National Council, in a special conference and by an internal referendum, not to take part in the present SP-led government (the referendum of the membership produced a vote of nearly 95 per cent against participation). Of course, in the recent past the PCF (in 1997-2002) and the PRC in Italy have participated in such governments. Those were not in my opinion positive experiences. More importantly, it seems clear that they are now considered by most members of the parties concerned as not to be repeated, though it would be foolish to rule out any governmental alliance with social-democrats under any circumstances. It would, however, be more true today to say that the ambition of the parties of the EL is to change the balance of forces on the left, to replace social democracy as the dominant force. Thirdly, the objective of going beyond capitalism and of a socialist society is not in doubt. Let us see what the French Communist Party says about it:

“To those who speak of moralizing capitalism in order better to keep it, we say that the enterprise is vain and that the manoeuvre will not work. Money has no conscience. Capitalism is incapable of offering any other perspective than the enslavement of the vast majority of human beings. To those who call on us to be reasonable and who propose to regulate capitalism, we say that it is an illusory goal. Without the will to take power from the financial markets and the big capitalists, experience has shown that there is no significant result. There is a contradiction that is increasingly unbearable between capitalism and social progress, between capitalism and democracy, between capitalism and cultural development, between capitalism and ecology, between capitalism and peace. That is why we talk about revolution. A social, citizens’, peaceful, democratic revolution, and not the taking of power by a minority. A process of credible and ambitious change, aiming to break with the logic of the system. That is why we speak of communism, a communism for a new generation”. (Extract from the political resolution of the 36th congress of the PCF, February 2013, my translation).

(I have quoted this because it is particularly clear, coming from one of the main parties of the European Left. But the aim of replacing capitalism rather than reforming it is shared by other parties, formulated more or less clearly).

Now you can, if you wish, say that the PCF is reformist. But on the basis of the above, you can hardly accuse it of being simply in favour of a modified form of capitalism. And as for reformism...Perhaps Ford has a very clear idea about the demarcation between reform and revolution in Europe today. Quite a few other people think they have. I think things are rather more complicated than that. There is the small detail that there has never been a socialist revolution in an advanced capitalist country with a more or less long tradition of bourgeois democracy. Never, nowhere. The strategy and tactics for making one will have to be developed in the course of the struggle and they will be very different from Russia in 1917, not to mention China, Vietnam, Cuba, Yugoslavia. They will certainly involve a combination of mass mobilizations and battles on the electoral terrain and in parliamentary institutions. That will involve in particular winning a majority in elections based on universal suffrage, and not only once. In fact it is difficult to see a revolutionary process that does not involve a left alliance winning an election. All of that will be the subject of

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debates based on experience, and no one has a blueprint. Rather than establishing an a priori cleavage between reformists and revolutionaries it is better to look at what anti-capitalist measures a left government should take and how, how to mobilize support for them, how to counter economic sabotage and political pressures from the Right, etc. Not to mention what kind of a post-capitalist society we envisage.

Of course there are other forces on the left in Europe apart from the EL. But it is there that there is a dynamic and an opposition to neo-liberal capitalism that presents an alternative on a European level and seeks to build a European social and political front.

Apart from the “orthodox” Communist parties I have mentioned, there are far-left organizations which remain outside broad fronts and coalitions like Syriza, the United Left and the Left Front. They tend to be somewhat marginalized as a result but continue to play a role. The NPA, after a promising start, paid a heavy price for not having understood the dynamic of the Left Front. But it still has some forces and is not, under its present leadership, opposed to common actions with the Left Front, as on the May 5 demonstration.

To conclude, just a few words on Britain. The failure of attempts to create a new force to the left of Labour are well-known. But the potential is there, as was clearly shown by the success of the SSP before the train wreck of the Sheridan affair. Not only electoral success, but trade union support and even affiliation. And there are reasons for past failures. Arthur Scargill will go down in history as a courageous and principled working-class leader. But the failure of the SLP, which had real potential, was essentially due to his sectarian and Stalinist conception of how to organize the party. As for the Socialist Alliance-Respect sequence, both the SWP and the Socialist Party played extremely negative roles, as they also did, in alliance for once, in the crisis of the SSP. As for TUSC, it's not a party, it's not meant to be one, it's meant to not be one, and it fulfils that role perfectly.

Ford says that “if the new Left Party succeeds, it will certainly represent a sociological first”. Maybe it will. It wouldn't be the first win against the odds. Who would have bet on the success of a disparate collection of leftists in Denmark or Portugal? Or that Syriza would go from 4 per cent to 27 per cent in a few months? And you have to start with what you have. No new Arthur Scargill is on the horizon. Nor is any split from Labour. Leaving aside the Greens, there are three left organizations with memberships in four figures, say between 1,000 and 2,000 – the CPB, the SWP and the SP. None of them is likely to play a positive role in building a new party, to put it mildly. So if you have a few thousand signatures and eighty or a hundred local groups, that's what you start with. Or you could give up and join the Labour Party. But I'll leave the argument against that to others.

This article also appears at leftunity.org

[1] For an overview of the new parties of the Left in Europe and a detailed look at several of them, see Kate Hudson, *The New European Left*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.