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New parties of the left

# The Fourth International in the 21st century

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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**This is a presentation Alan Thornett made at an event in Mannheim marking 75 years of the FI, organised by the FI's German groups, in November 2013. Other speakers included Jan Malewski from the FI Bureau and Manos Skoufoglou from OKDE, the Greek section of the FI. At the end of the event he undertook to write up his speech so that the discussion that took place around it can continue. It is not a verbatim write up but it does follow the political line of his presentation and includes all the main points he made. A few points have been expanded for clarity.**

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak at this event. I have been asked to give a presentation on "the role of a revolutionary international in non-revolutionary times" – or as I would prefer to put it the role and priorities of the FI in the 21st century.

I want to address a number of key issues in this regard. There is the political character of the FI itself; there is the ecological crisis and the idea of ecosocialism; there is building broad parties, particularly but not only in Europe, and the role of Syriza in Greece; there is also the issue of feminism and feminisation, which I will address to the extent I am qualified, particularly in relation to the crisis of the SWP where it has played a major role. This crisis, by the way, is entirely unresolved and there could be further splits at the SWP conference next month.

If I have time I will also say something about the initiative by Ken Loach which is leading to the founding conference of Left Unity, in Britain, at the end of this month and also the opportunities for far left regroupment which have opened up.

Firstly, then, some remarks on the political character of the FI today. As Jan [1] said yesterday the FI today is growing quite fast, and we can be optimistic that this will continue. At every meeting of the International Committee (the leading body of the FI between world congresses) there are applications to join the FI, or to establish a formal relationship with it, from organisations from various strands and traditions of the far left. These have come from Asia and Latin America in particular and to a lesser extent from North America and Europe – from Greece for example.

This is at least partly due to the decisions taken in the 1990s to make the FI into a more pluralist, and open organisation – one which could embrace organisation from different parts of the Trotskyist tradition and beyond. This has allowed a far less dogmatic form of organisation to develop.

It has also been a product of the democratic structures of the FI which has been a long-term feature. As a result of this minority views in the FI (and on its elected bodies) are fully represented and vigorous political debates take place. In the FI the political orientation its sections is decided by the sections themselves and cannot be imposed at the international level. The FI can, and does, take a majority view on the strategic issues and the big political events, and will defend such views. But it cannot impose such decisions on the national sections.

This model of international organisation is increasingly attractive today not least because the other international far left organisations, the IST and the CWI, still have top-down where sections are denounced for or given instructions on issues of political orientation and even on tactical questions.

In fact the challenge for the FI today is not so much attracting new forces but generating the resources and the political capacity to organise and administer an expanded FI and develop a common line of approach.

# Ecosocialism

The decision of the last World Congress to place the ecological crisis at the centre of its priorities and define itself as ecosocialist was, in my view, hugely important for the FI and its future development. It has already been a significant factor in attracting new organisations towards the FI. In fact several of the new applicants already regarded themselves as ecosocialist.

Its true that the response of the sections to this decision has been uneven, with the most enthusiastic supporters being those in the front, for example the comrades in the Philippines and Bangladesh. But it is an ongoing process and ecosocialist ideas are getting stronger in the FI as a whole.

The situation is extremely urgent, however. The global temperature is rising; the ice caps are melting; the sea level is rising; the deserts are expanding and extreme weather events are becoming more frequent. We have just seen typhoon Haiyan devastate the Philippines, and this follows hurricanes Katrina in 2005 and Sandy in 2012 that hit New Orleans and New York. The crisis we face worldwide is ecological as well as economic.

But why does all this require us to become ecosocialists rather than simply taking ecological issues more seriously? Why are we 'socialist' no longer enough?

Ecosocialism is a declaration that we intend to build a new society based on ecological sustainability and social equality and the predominance of use value over exchange value. It is a signal that we reject the capitalist logic of insatiable growth, which is fuelled by the drive for profit.

It is recognition that the task today is not just to end capitalism and establish a socialist society but to establish an ecologically sustainable socialist society—that we do not want to see a revolution take place under conditions where the ecology of the planet has been destroyed in advance.

It is a declaration that the ecological issues will be central to our whole approach to the struggle for socialism and not an-add on extra. In any case if we are incapable of fighting to defend the environment before the transition to socialism how can we be equipped to defend it afterwards?

It is also because the ecological struggle will have to continue after capitalism is gone, and it will not be easy.

## Building broad parties

The FI and its sections have long been involved in building broad parties: the Left Block in Portugal, the Red Green Alliance in Denmark, the Socialist party in the Netherlands, Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, Die Linke here in Germany, Syriza in Greece, the SSP in Scotland, and the Socialist Alliance and then Respect in England.

When this was discussed at the last World Congress, however, I held a minority position. This was not on building broad parties as such, since I have been a strong supporter of such a policy. It was because the resolution in front of the congress called only for the building of broad "anti-capitalist" parties. To me this was too restrictive. Yes we should seek to build anti-capitalist parties where the conditions for such parties exist, but this is not always the case. We should also be for building radical left parties that don't meet such a criteria. Die Linke, for example, is not an anti-capitalist party but it is a major gain for the workers movement in Germany. Its political character reflects what is

possible in the German situation at this particular time.

Building broad parties, however, is crucial if the FI is to have the influence on the wider movement which is necessary and possible today. It means building parties that can start to fill the political space to the left of social democracy that is opened as it moves to the right.

Our class enemies are clear about this. They are not too concerned if we build small revolutionary groups which do good things but which have little influence beyond their own ranks – particularly today when the level of trade union struggle remains low. They do care, however, if we become an influential force in much bigger formations that can have a real influence on the course of events – and even challenge for government.

The most important recent example of the role of a broad party, in recent times, of course, is the rise of Syriza in Greece.

Syriza won a remarkable 27% of the vote in the June election and has maintained such support since. This means that it is effectively a radical left anti-austerity government in waiting. This is hugely important for the European left and the European workers movement. Syriza only failed to win the election because important sections of the Greek left stood against it in the election.

Many on the left (in Greece and elsewhere) claim that Syriza is moving sharply to the right. Some even claim that it is already the new PASOK. (FI supporters in Greece are divided. OKDE, the section, supports Antarsya, which stood against Syriza in the elections, and KOKKINO, a sympathising organisation, supports Syriza and are members of it).

I don't accept this criticism of Syriza. I would not argue that Syriza has made no mistakes or retreats since it found itself in this remarkable situation. But in my view it does not have an overall trajectory to the right. No doubt Syriza's leaders are daunted by the prospect of assuming government, but who on the left would not be? But that does not mean they are moving to the right. Certainly the Syriza conference in July – which comprised 3,500 delegates representing 35,000 members – did not reflect such a shift. In fact steps were taken to prepare the party for entry into government

Manos [\[2\]](#) will be speaking later, of course, and I am sure he will express a very different point of view.

It is also argued that Syriza is left reformist in character. I don't think this is very useful either. If left reformism is to be defined so broadly – as everything from the left in the British Labour Party (for example) to the leadership of Syriza – then does not have much value. I think Syriza has more the character of an anti-capitalist party – which I suspect is the way most of its members would describe it, and how they would see themselves.

Syriza is not a revolutionary party, of course, and has never claimed to be one – which is the factor that gives it its mass appeal in the current situation. It is a radical left party committed to an anti-austerity agenda.

There is, of course, a motive behind the insistence that Syriza is left reformist. This is in order to argue that left reformism is in the end reformism full stop and that as such it will inevitably betray if elected to office. Such a party, it is argued, can never open up a development beyond capitalism since the closer reformism gets to power the more it will adapt to the capitalist agenda.

I had an exchange with an SWP speaker (the SWP supports Antarsya in Greece of course) at the recent Historical Materialism conference in London who argued exactly this. When I asked him it would, therefore, be better if Syriza

lost the next election rather than winning he had a problem making up his mind.

I don't accept this assertion of inevitable betrayal. In fact I think there are conditions where a radical left party of this kind, seeking defend the interests of the working class, and with mass support, can open up such a development under the right conditions.

What is clear is that if Syriza were to implement even a small part of its programme on coming to office this would be totally unacceptable to the Greek bourgeoisie and the European elites. There would be a huge confrontation and it is far from clear which way it would go. Syriza's anti-austerity pledges alone are totally unacceptable to the elites. In fact under today's conditions in Greece just the rejection of the memorandum has become a transitional demand.

It is this that that has put the matter of a governmental alternative centre stage in Greece today. Syriza rose from 4% in the polls to 27% in the general election after it had made the call for a government of the left anti-austerity parties. This was the crucial factor. The struggle needed a new dynamic, which could only be could provided at governmental level. [3]

## Workers' government

The fact is that three years of hard fought class struggle in Greece did not resulted in the formation of soviets of workers' and soldiers' deputies and duel power on the streets. What it resulted in was mass support for an anti-austerity government of the left parties via a parliamentary majority.

So what do we say about it? That such a government would be a diversion from the real issue which is the formations of workers and soldiers councils? Of course not! We say that such a government would be a major gain for the working class and that we will fight to get it into office. We will then fight for it to take the struggle to the next stage.

This is far from a new debate, of course, and I am pleased that Jan mentioned it this in his presentation yesterday. It was discussed by the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922, after the revolutionary wave generated by the Russian revolution had receded and the Comintern had to come to terms with the that new struggles for power would not necessarily follow the soviet model.

What they discussed, therefore, was the united front, transitional demands, and the demand for a workers government. A government that comes to office by parliamentary means to represent the interests of the working class under conditions where capitalism, and the capitalist state, remains intact"where no social overturn has yet taken place. In other words it would be a transitional government.

The proposition advanced by the Comintern was that such a government"elected to office with capitalism still existing"could be the vehicle for developments beyond the limitations that capitalism, despite the restrictions which capitalism would attempt to impose on it, and irrespective of whether the leadership of such a government saw itself as playing such a role when it was elected to office.

Could Syriza do it in Greece today if it wins the next election? Who knows? Not even Syriza leadership knows this I suspect. It certainly won't happen unless Syriza is elected to office! In any case who on the left can guarantee that they would meet such a test if it came? Such a situation would be new territory for the European left.

Challenging capitalism in this way would not be easy, of course, but, there again, there is no easy way of challenging capitalism. Such a government would be faced with a stark choice. It could either take radical measures to defend itself and its mandate (i.e. move sharply to the left and challenge the capitalist institutions) or collapse and accept the conditions demanded by the elites. There is a strong leftwing current inside Syriza which would oppose such a collapse and a mass movement on the streets which would also oppose it.

To defend such a government under these conditions would not only require a mass movement in Greece it would also require the development of solidarity action across Europe, to prevent the isolation of the Greek struggle. It also implies the building of such parties across Europe that can be the driving force for such solidarity action. This is what makes this on building broad parties so important. [4]

*January 2nd 2014.*

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[1] Jan Malewski, member of the Bureau of the Fourth International and of the NPA in France.

[2] Manos Skoufoulou, leadng member of OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International.

[3] As I argued in the debate that followed, where was the struggle in Greece go after 25 or 26 general strikes, hundreds of demonstrations, mobilisations, occupations and huge social movements?

[4] At this point I ran out of time. I made a few quick remarks about the Ken Loach initiative, but I had to leave most of that and the issue of revolutionary regroupment (and the role of feminism within that) for the discussion which took place after Manos had spoken about the situation in Greece. Manos did indeed present a very different position to the one I have presented and there was a lively exchange. Hopefully Manos will continue the discussion in written form.