

Europe: Reactionary Working Class? “Could it be that the Left have failed their constituencies”

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Large parts of the western working class now seem to gather around right populists, demagogues, and racists. They vote for reactionary and fascistoid political parties. They helped to vote the UK out of the EU and to make Trump president of the world's superpower number one, and they vote so massively for the far right political parties that the latter have government power in sight throughout several of Europe's most populous countries.

21st Century Protest

Since working people traditionally are expected to vote for the left, this creates unrest, insecurity, and confusion among experts, as well as commentators and mainstream politicians – particularly in the labour movement. There is no lack of condemnation and moralizing to those who go to the far right. An increasing number of commentators, however, are now beginning to suspect that the march of large groups of workers toward the far right can be an expression of protest against the prevailing social development. Not all have received the benefits from the globalization success story, they say.

Nonetheless, many politicians and activists on the left have great difficulties orienting themselves in this new political terrain. People who otherwise would have been for Britain's withdrawal from the current authoritarian, neoliberal EU, for example, have told me that they voted to stay under the current conditions in order “not to be made cannon fodder for the racists and anti-immigration forces in the Brexit camp.” Thus, they left it to the far right to voice the necessary opposition to the anti-social, anti-union policies of the EU.

Maybe it would have been more important and more helpful if the left had taken a somewhat more self-critical look at their own role and their own policies. Could it be that they have failed their constituencies – that left parties are not seen as usable tools to defend the interests of those who have the least power and the least wealth in today's society? Perhaps there has been too much identity politics and very little class politics. Can it even be that the left's social analysis fails to grasp the essence of the current economic and political development?

The Employer Offensive

What most people on the left can agree on is that the situation is serious, even dramatic. Let us therefore take a closer look at the current state of affairs. In our European surroundings, the level of unionization has almost halved over the last 30 years, and labour rights, labour laws, and collective agreements have systematically deteriorated and/or been completely abolished. Most things are worse than it is here in Norway, but that does not mean that we are unaffected by this development. Much is going in the wrong direction here, too, even if it unfolds more slowly than in most of the rest of Europe. There is no doubt that Norway is still at the upper deck of the global welfare ship, but much indicates that it is the upper deck of Titanic.

In short, we can summarize that the inequalities in society are increasing also with us, and more authoritarian relations are emerging at the workplaces, including through the Americanization of organizational and management models, as the public Work Research Institute has so well documented. Wage growth for those at the bottom of the ladder has stagnated. A newsletter published by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) summarized this development quite well in a recent article based on a new report from the independent research institute Fafo:

"If the trends continue as they are today, Norway will soon have as great inequalities as Germany and Great Britain. A new Fafo report shows that Norway is no longer a country of low inequalities. Norway is changing rapidly, and the lowest-paid are the losers. Wages of the lowest paid in the private sector has virtually stood still since 2008 (...) fewer and fewer of those with the lowest wages have a collective agreement." (11/09/2016)

At the same time, we experience more and more offensive and aggressive employers, who, among other things, orient themselves away from the employer's responsibility through outsourcing and the increasing use of temporary agency workers – and thus weaken trade unions. Furthermore, employers strongly benefit from the evermore anti-trade union policies of the EU/EEA and their courts, which contribute strongly to undermining trade union rights. In the persistent battle for control of the work process, work is increasingly emptied of content in many parts of the labour market. It is becoming more and more fragmented and standardized, employees are being subjected to increased monitoring, control, and management – and the work intensity is increasing. Professor Sten Gellerstedt has documented this well for Sweden, while Eurofound has documented a sharp increase in routine work in Denmark (cited in *Ugebrevet A4*, 31/10/2016), and there are good reasons to believe that the situation is about the same here in Norway:

"Danes carry out about 30 per cent more routine work than we did 20 years ago. (...) Interestingly, routine work increases the most in types of jobs which are not traditionally associated with routine. In particular, it is managers, professionals and office workers who now get more and more routine work."

In addition, the welfare-to-work ideology contributes strongly to shifting attention from organizational structures and power relations to individualization – with moralizing, suspicion, and a brutal sanctions regime against individuals. Developments in the world of work have thus been reversed for a great many workers in our society.

Of course, the basis for this development is to be found in the economic crisis. Capitalism is experiencing its deepest crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and capital owners have changed their strategy to regain profitability. Neoliberalism became their political/ideological response to the crisis, but there is nothing which so far suggests that they will overcome the internal contradictions of capitalism in this way. Unrestrained financial speculation is just one of the serious effects of this crisis development. Neoliberalism itself as well as financial speculation are thus both

effects of the capitalist crisis, not the reasons for it, as many people claim. And globalization, which many claim “has come to be,” and that trade unions only “have to adapt,” are nothing but the result of capital’s strategy and offensive to meet the crisis.

Why Workers Turn to the Right

In Europe, it becomes more and more clear that important goals of this policy include getting rid of the welfare states and defeating the trade unions. In any case, this is what is taking place – under the political leadership of the real existing European Union Institutions. That millions upon millions of workers worldwide become “losers” in this process of globalization should not surprise anyone. Nor that they will eventually react with mistrust, rage, and blind rebellion. That part of the working class – lacking left political parties with analyses, policies, and strategies to address and meet the crisis and offensive of capitalist force – are attracted by the extreme right’s verbal anti-elitism and anti-establishment rhetoric, is possible to understand against this background.

To understand, however, is not the same as to accept, let alone support. That some people on the left allow themselves to be dazzled by the apparently worker-friendly policies of many of the new parties on the far right, even wanting to ally with them, is thus a dangerous development. There is nothing new in our history that the extreme right pander to “the little man in society.” It also happened during the emergence of fascism in the 1930s. Then, as now, there were also people on the left, though not many, who switched sides in a blind belief that “national socialism” was a form of socialism, and not the diametrically opposite, as history so clearly proved to us.

What is important to understand is why many of the most exploited and powerless in our society are attracted by far right anti-elitist rhetoric. We need to gain insight into the reasons why this happens. In trying to understand this, we have to have in mind how power relations at the workplaces have shifted dramatically in favour of the employers, how the brutalization of work increases, and how insecurity increases for large groups of employees. This will be decisive if we want to develop an interest-based policy that responds to these challenges.

The reality is that worker’s exploitation and their increasing powerlessness and subordination now hardly have a voice in public debate. Labour parties have mainly cut the connection with their old constituencies. Rather than picking up the discontent generated in a more brutal labour market and politicizing and channelling it into an organized interest-based struggle, middle class left parties offer little else than moralizing and contempt. Thus, they do little else than to push large groups of workers into the arms of the far-right parties, who support all the discontent and do their best to channel people’s rage against other social groups (immigrants, Muslims, gays, people of colour, etc.) rather than against the real causes of their problems.

Of course, we have to fight against this development, but the fight will not be won through moralizing and contempt. If the left is not able to anchor the struggle against capitalism and its crisis in people’s everyday experiences at the workplace, they will lose the battle for the soul and heart of the working class. If we want to avoid such a development in Norway, we also must stop talking about “the Nordic Model” as if nothing has happened – as if it were intact – as if the mutual cooperation, respect, and codetermination between the classes were existing truisms in today’s society. In large parts of the leadership of the trade union and labour movement, the Nordic Model of cooperation between labour and capital has been elevated to a general phenomenon which is “to the benefit of both parties” – completely decoupled from the power relations that develop at the workplaces and in society. It is seen as a higher form of rationality and surrounded by a rhetoric of common interests that more and more workers have trouble recognizing.

Even if the exploited masses hardly have any organized voice in public debate today, we still happen to get small drips in the media about another reality at the workplaces. Like when the newspaper *Dagbladet* (20/03/2016), under the title “We cry every day at work,” published an article about the ISS staff who clean the rooms at the Oslo Plaza hotel under extremely harsh conditions. Or when we are presented with an increasing number of anonymous articles in newspapers from employees within different public institutions which inform us about the existence of ever more authoritarian control regimes à la New Public Management, which destroys the work environment and removes whatever might be left of job satisfaction.

Among those who experience such conditions in today’s labour market, their experiences are obviously a long way from the message the leader of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions presented at the Annual Conference of the employers’ association last year:

“We have agreed on which challenges we face. And despite different approaches, we agree on many of the solutions as well. And we are certainly agreed that these challenges will be solved better in cooperation than in conflict. (...) We have the same goals [emphasis added]. Namely sustainable Norwegian working life. (...) As in the 1990s we cannot avoid what you like to call moderation. We call it collective rationality, and it must apply to everybody.” (LO. no - 07/01/2016.)

If it had been the case that social dialogue and tripartite cooperation was in favour of “both parties” in the current situation, shouldn’t we then have expected that employers wanted to establish good relations of cooperation and participation in areas where trade unions are weak, such as in hotels and restaurant, in shops, in cleaning, etc.? The opposite appears to be the case. Rather, it appears that the social partnership ideology, which emerged in the wake of the class compromise, has contributed to a depoliticization and deradicalization of the trade union and labour movement, while employers are increasingly attacking labour laws and agreements which they previously accepted in the spirit of the class compromise. [Ed.: see LeftStreamed No. 154]

The Necessity of Mass Mobilization

In summary, the balance of power at the workplaces has shifted dramatically – from labour to capital, from trade unions and democratic bodies to multinational companies and financial institutions. Over a few decades, capitalist interests managed to abolish the main regulations that made the welfare state and the Nordic Model possible – the international monetary cooperation, capital control, investment control, and other market regulations. In this situation, the social partnership ideology (i.e. emphasis of common interests as an ideology rather than the increasing conflict of interests which is unfolding in the real world) constitutes a barrier to trade union and political struggle.

The main challenge of the left today is to organize resistance against this development. Only in this way can right-wing populism and right-wing radicalism be pushed back. Once again, we must be able to construct a heaven over our struggle – i.e. perspectives and visions of a better society, a society with a radical redistribution of wealth, where exploitation ends and where human needs form the basis for social development. If so, it is not sufficient to use statements, protests, and appeals to a tripartite cooperation that is constantly drained of content. It is all about power – economic and political power. This will require massive social mobilization in the way that trade unions built their strength to conquer power and influence at the beginning of the last century.

Are we prepared for that?

Asbjørn Wahl, 16 March

P.S.

* "Reactionary Working Class?". The Bullet, Socialist Project E-bulletin 1383, March 16, 2017:
<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/1383.php>

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