

# The far right today

Friday 21 April 2023, by [POST Charles](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2023).

**Hard-right politicians and fascist street gangs both pose growing threats to workers and the oppressed. The two groups are related—and connected, argues Charlie Post, but they aren't the same thing. The Left needs different tactics to combat each one. This is a revised version of a talk given at a New York City Tempest forum on March 19, 2023.**

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When we on the Left talk about the rise of the far right across the world in the past fifteen years, we often conflate two closely related, but different phenomena—the growth of an electoral right-wing populism and the growth and increased violence of actual fascist gangs. On the one hand, we have groupings like the “MAGA” Republicans in the U.S., the French National Rally, the Brothers of Italy, and the Liberal Party of Brazil. While both the National Rally and Brothers of Italy have roots in French and Italian fascism, these organizations operate primarily through the electoral arena and seek to win office in the existing state. On the other hand, there are the fascist organizations like the Proud Boys in the U.S., which may campaign for the far-right parties but focus their energy on violent attacks on working and oppressed people and seek to abolish the limited democratic institutions and rights that have been won under capitalism.

This confusion should not be surprising. Both the electoral far right and the fascist street fighters are the products of the same social and political crisis, and share similar political ideas and appeal to the same social groups. These similarities alone would be enough to confuse many. However, there has also been a significant blurring of the boundaries between the two components of the far right. The National Rally and Brothers of Italy have broken ties to their reactionary militias and distanced themselves from their fascist roots in pursuit of electoral legitimacy. However, there is a wing of the U.S. Republican Party that openly sympathizes with the fascist gangs and has attempted to defend their extra-legal violence, including the “beer-gut putsch” of January 6, 2021.

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The Left can ill afford to confuse the two components of the contemporary hard right. As the late Neil Davidson put it, the difference between the electoral far right and fascist groupings requires “different tactics which need to be deployed by the Left if it is to successfully oppose them both.” Confusion of the electoral far right and fascism can produce two equally problematic left strategies. The most common response is to focus on the electoral far right, often downplaying the danger of the right-wing street fighters, and to advocate a primarily electoral response—including the dead-end of supporting the Democrats and other “liberal” capitalist parties to defeat “fascism.”

The other response, which correctly understands the existential threat of fascism to the organizations of working and oppressed people, can often lead to advocating indiscriminate “no-platforming” and physical confrontations with both the fascist gangs and the electoral far right, which can isolate the radical Left and leave it open to capitalist state repression.

### **Common roots of the right**

Both the electoral appeal of right-wing populism and the attraction of fascist groupings flow from the social devastation wrought by the ongoing crisis of capitalism that began with the 2008 global recession, and from the failure of the traditional Left, labor and social movements to pose a social and political alternative.

We are all familiar with the social impact of the crisis—growing economic inequality and social precarity for the working-class majority, in particular those who are subject to racial, gender and sexual oppression; growing concentration of wealth at the expense of working people and small business people; widespread desperation taking the form of an epidemic of substance abuse; looming environmental disasters and mass displacement and migration of people across the globe.

In the face of this crisis, the traditional Left—including the leadership of the labor and social movements—embrace “lesser evilism” and subordinate themselves to the neoliberal politicians and their corporate backers who bear responsibility for the looming social catastrophe. While we have seen episodic struggles against capital based on solidarity among working people in the last decade, few lasting organizations and movements have emerged to sustain a radical, left-wing alternative. In the absence of strong solidaristic organizations, and the discrediting of the traditional “center” (both neoliberal and conservative) of capitalist politics, the electoral far right and fascist gangs fill the vacuum with their reactionary and ultimately false solutions.

The world-view—or what we Marxists like to call ideology—of the electoral far right and the fascists are also similar. Both claim to defend the “little man” against threats from both “above” and “below.” Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen, along with the Proud Boys, Sons of Odin, Oath Keepers and their ilk are hostile to both “globalist corporations” and “undeserving” racial minorities, “criminal” immigrants, “corrupt” unions and sexual and gender “deviants.” Both transnational corporations and unions, people of color, immigrants and Queer folks are squeezing “hard working”—white people. Antisemitism is deployed against the “cosmopolitan elites” who run corporations who have no “loyalty” to the American homeland, while racism, Islamophobia, anti-immigrant xenophobia and homophobia and transphobia target the non-white working class and poor.

*Photos of hard-right politicians Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Jair Bolsonaro, and Giorgia Meloni*

*are grouped in a square. They are cropped closely so their faces fill most of the space, and they all look angry or threatening.*

*Clockwise from upper left: Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Jair Bolsonaro, and Giorgia Meloni. Trump image by Gage Skidmore, Le Pen image © European Union 2015 - European Parliament, Bolsonaro image by Planácio do Panolto, Meloni image by Vox España.*

The social base of both the electoral right and fascism are also similar. The vast majority of Trump, Bolsonaro, LePen and Meloni voters, and the cadre and sympathizers of the revived fascist groups are drawn from the white suburban and exurban middle classes—small business people, low level managers and professionals who experienced falling living standards and growing economic precarity over the last fifteen years. Lacking the capacity for collective organization, like unions to defend themselves against capital, segments of the middle classes are drawn to claims that they are threatened from both above by transnational corporations and from below by organized workers, racial minorities and immigrants.

Both right-wing populism and fascism also draw support from older, white working and unemployed people. Like their fellow non-white and immigrant workers, they have seen their living standards decline in the face of the neoliberal capitalist offensive of the past forty years—and their situation became even more insecure since the recession. The weakness of class-against-class organizations—in particular unions—that can offer a collective defense against capital leads segments of the working class to attempt to defend themselves at the expense of other workers—women, people of color, immigrants, queer folks and Muslims. Today, many railroad workers and people in towns like East Palestine, Illinois are attracted to Trumpist Republicans and to fascist gangs, in response to the rail union leaders' acquiescence to the Biden administration's strike-breaking and indifference to the victims of the latest railroad disaster.

### **Politicians and street fighters**

Despite these similarities, the electoral right and fascist gangs differ fundamentally in the way they organize and build their power. Right-wing populism across the advanced capitalist world relies primarily on electoral politics. Trump, Bolsonaro, Le Pen, and Meloni seek to take power by winning a majority of an increasingly white and middle-class electorate. In power, whatever their desires, they do not ban opposition parties or disperse elected legislatures, but attempt to implement their policies "democratically." Only those who idealize capitalist democracy can see the implementation of authoritarian and repressive policies as some form of "creeping fascism." Even when the electoral right flirts with extra-legal action, like on January 6 in the U.S. or after Lula's reelection in Brazil earlier this year, the electoral right always bows to "legality."

In contrast, fascism is a social movement that recruits members and builds power through violence and terror. Fascist groups are street fighters who seek to physically intimidate their enemies. While fascists historically have contested elections and today will support far-right candidates, their ultimate goal is not to win elections and use the legislative institutions to implement their program. Instead, the fascists seek to destroy all the institutions of capitalist democracy—from elected legislatures to the most class collaborationist trade union. Although fascist groupings attempt to cover their goals with claims of defending democracy against "electoral fraud," as they did after the defeats of Trump and Bolsonaro, they have little or no use for democracy in any form.

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The conditions for a fascist seizure of power do not yet exist in the U.S. or any other capitalist society today. Handing power over to fascists has risks for the capitalist ruling class. On the one hand, fascists coming to power could provoke militant counter-mobilizations by the working class and oppressed. On the other, capitalists correctly view fascists as “unreliable” elements, whose agenda may not completely coincide with those of capitalists. Fascism has only come to power in periods of extreme emergency for capitalists, usually when working people and the Left have threatened to take power, but have failed to do so. Capital, unfortunately, has not faced any sustained challenge from the working class since the early 1970s. Capitalists in the U.S. and around the world are blocking right-wing populist regimes from implementing policies inimical to capital, and have no need to countenance fascism in this period.

While a fascist seizure of power is not an immediate threat, the social and political conditions for the renewed growth and confidence of fascist movements do exist. Economic stagnation and falling living conditions among broad sections of the middle and working classes, combined with the twin crises of traditional capitalist politics and of the organizations of working and oppressed people provide a fertile environment for the growth of fascist gangs. The electoral success of right-wing populists provides a “wind at their back” and encourages them to take to the streets and engage in acts of terror—from attempts at voter intimidation, to the mobilization of Canadian truckers against COVID protocols, to the willingness of elements of the electoral right to encourage the fascist gangs to “stand back and stand by” in the streets of Charlottesville, Washington DC and Brasilia. The growth of fascism is a real danger for the Left, working people and the oppressed. We need to stop them now, when they are still a marginal and despised movement.

### **Strategies for the Left**

The strategies for fighting the electoral right and fascism have some key elements in common. First and foremost, we need to build a militant movement against all manifestations of the capitalist crisis from attacks on unions to the defense of drag performers, from defending immigrants to stopping anti-abortion zealots, from police violence to social service cuts. Such organizing includes political exposure and contestation of the far right—including political education on the real roots of the social crisis and counter-demonstrating at the rallies of the far-right politics. Such movements, if they are not to suffer the fate of almost every mass struggle of the last century, will need to be independent of, and in fact in opposition to the Democratic Party and its defense of the neo-liberal status quo.

Fighting fascism requires specific strategies and tactics as well. Fascist groups need to be physically confronted whenever and wherever they attempt to show their faces. This is not a question of denying them “free speech”—but of demonstrating that their strategy of terrorizing and intimidating working and oppressed people will not go unchallenged. We should not look to the existing capitalist state, university administrators or others in authority to ban fascist meetings. On the one hand, the

police and the military cannot be relied upon to disperse fascists. There is plenty of evidence of fascist groupings among cops and non-commissioned military officers. On the other, the Left does not want the state and educational bureaucrats to have the power to restrict speech, assembly and the like. We will be the most likely targets of bans on “disruptive” or “controversial” organizations and speakers, not the fascists.

*The image on the left is a wide shot of a crowd on a sunny day in a park with large trees. Many are holding signs, but they are not readable because the shot is from behind, looking downhill toward the spot where a small group of fascists was to gather—not visible. The image on the right is a young man wearing a green T shirt that says “Boston rocks.” The shot is from behind, but the hand-decorated sign he holds up is readable. It says, “This AIN’T NAZI-TOWN. Below the lettering is a silhouetted figure tossing a swastika in a trash. Next to that is a “No KKK” symbol; the letters KKK are in black inside a red circle, with a red slash through the letters.*

It is the task of the Left to build mass mobilizations that will outnumber and, when possible, physically confront the fascists. Such confrontations cannot be the work of small groups of brave militants, but of hundreds and thousands of activists. Our model needs to be the successful anti-fascist actions like Cable Street in London in 1936, Madison Square Garden in New York in 1938, the Mutualite arena in Paris in 1973, Lewisham in London in 1977, and Boston in 2017. In these cases, the Left mobilized mass actions that included broader layers of people opposed to fascism to outnumber and physically disperse the fascists—or in the case of Boston, intimidated the fascists to the point where they disbanded their own tiny rally.

Anti-fascist mobilizations are not a “diversion” from “real organizing, diverting energy from reorganizing unions and building mass movements against cuts in social services, racist police murders, homophobia or transphobia. Clearly, the revival of a labor and social movement that can effectively defend working people against capital is essential to undermining the appeal of both right-wing populism and fascism among working-class people. However, our ability to begin to rebuild our own class and social organizations is threatened by an emboldened fascist right.

**Charlie Post**

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<https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/04/the-far-right-today/>