

Opposing Finland's Thatcherist Turn

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As the European Parliament elections this June draw nearer, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is conducting a series of interviews with left-wing parties and candidates from across the EU on the election campaign, their political programmes, and the challenges facing left-wing forces domestically and at a European level. The foundation's Duroyan Fertl spoke to Li Andersson, leader of the Finnish Left Alliance, Vasemmistoliitto, about her party's priorities in this super election year.

What are Vasemmistoliitto's key priorities in this European Parliament election campaign? What are your key campaign areas or flagship demands?

Our narrative in these elections revolves around reminding voters that the current situation in Finland is what happens when the conservative right wing teams up with the far right or populist right. We are seeing historic attacks against trade unions and workers at a national level, with extreme austerity cuts in social security and health care services, and backwards steps on climate and environmental policy. Our main message is that in the European elections we need to make sure this same development is not replicated on a European level, that this is what is at stake in the European elections.

The main issues we are talking about are workers' rights, and the need for the EU to pursue ambitious social and labour market policies. Much more could have been done in the past few years, of course, but what has come out of the EU has been fairly good, especially compared to what Finland's right-wing government is doing. We are also highlighting the need for the EU to focus on youth rights, youth unemployment, and the mental health crisis in the coming years. Of course, we are also talking about the need to continue with an ambitious climate and environmental policy.

These are all areas where a potential right-wing or far-right electoral victory would have the most damaging effect, so we are placing them at the heart of our main narrative in this election.

What do you see as the biggest challenges for the Left at a European level right now?

As well as climate and the rise of the far right, I would say that the return of austerity will be a huge challenge for the Left in Europe, one which previous European parliaments have already faced, and something the current parliament has voted in its final plenary in Strasbourg. Their vote means that when the next parliament is constituted, there will already be an institutionalized austerity framework in place. One of the big challenges the Left will face in the coming years will be to expose once again the problems arising from austerity, and the implications it will have for all of Europe in terms of being able to make investments, not only in social policy and the social sector, but also in the energy transition and renewables.

This work will be necessary, and I would hope that even from a right-wing point of view, some might realize the problems arising from a return to austerity at a moment when the EU faces stiff

competition from the United States and China. Even in the US, there has been a shift in economic policy allowing for a much more active role for the state through tax subsidies and public support. By returning to austere financial rules and frameworks for financial policy at this moment, the EU is shooting itself in its own foot.

Vasemmistoliitto participated in a recent meeting of European left-wing forces in Copenhagen. How does greater collaboration with other left forces at a European level feature in your outlook?

Well, the last time I was a candidate in the European elections was ten years ago, in 2014, at the height of the debate around austerity, with the euro crisis in Greece and everything that was going on around that. At that point, the Left received very good election results and you could really see how it was benefiting from the mass movements that had arisen in response to the crisis.

Despite this, I think the Left in general sometimes has kind of a tendency to assume that left cooperation means we all should sit down and produce a document where we have to agree on every single word, the placement of each comma, and so on. Personally, I think it is much more useful to share our ideas and policies, and our experiences in different countries, so that we can continue working on a national level in our own ways, but towards the same goals. In this way, we can all benefit.

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I think if we see a big win for the far right in the upcoming European elections, it will be even more important for the Left to focus on the big issues that concern us all. We need to work on how to share, and learn and benefit from, the work we are doing in our own countries on, say, economic policy, on building movements or organizing people. In particular, I think this will be a big issue in terms of environmental policy.

At least here in Finland, but I think this goes for all of Europe, the far right has been annoyingly good at blaming climate policy for increasing cost of living, or energy prices, where it's actually fossil fuels that is the big problem. I think we have a huge job ahead of us in turning that kind of framing around, and in continuing to pursue an ambitious climate and environmental policy.

Finland recently joined NATO, in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. What is Vasemmistoliitto's position towards NATO membership?

From a Finnish point of view, it is very important that on the Left that we are very clear in condemning Russia's war of aggression and that we are clear in our support of Ukraine, because it is a country that has been attacked in violation of international law. My party accepts that NATO membership is a fact, and one that was just decided. We are focusing on what we want Finland to do within NATO now that we are there, such as campaigning against nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, this is a heated debate — we currently have laws in Finland forbidding the import of all kinds of nuclear weapons, and we want to keep it that way, but right-wing forces are looking at ways to change that.

Our policy is also that Finland — and other countries — should work within NATO to ensure that it focuses on the idea of defence in Europe, and to oppose its engagement in operations outside of its own area, which we have witnessed so many times. Then, of course, there is a big discussion around military bases in Finland. We do not want any permanent military bases, but I think the challenge for

the Left is that Russia — which under Putin is an authoritarian state with a right-wing authoritarian leader — has forced those of us in Europe to think about issues of defence in a way that many European countries have not had to for a long time.

So you feel that the war in Ukraine has impacted the broader struggle against war and militarization?

Yes, and on the Left especially, we have been forced to take positions on issues that we wish we would not have had to. We all want peace, but in my opinion as long as Putin is in charge, and there is no big political shift in Russia, we cannot exclude the threat of traditional warfare in Europe. For as long as the war is ongoing in Ukraine, there is always a risk of escalation and that means that European countries not only have to support Ukraine — including with arms — but we also need to think about issues of defence. It is not something the left would have wanted, but we will see more investment in military spending in Europe because of the choices that Putin has made.

So, we are not opposed to countries spending more on the military right now, or making sure that we have a well-functioning system for defence in Europe. But we also need state leaders and countries to think about and work on de-escalation, and to strengthen diplomacy. We have to be supportive of Ukraine, but we also have to make sure that sanctions against Russia work, as an important non-military means to apply pressure, and we need to try to ensure there is an ongoing diplomatic process.

The EU and European countries also need to be more consistent in their application of international law. They have condemned Russia's war of aggression, and put sanctions on Russian leaders, but the EU should be much more outspoken in condemning Israel's war crimes in Gaza and the West Bank. Finland, and the EU, should support economic sanctions against Israel, and the initiative from Ireland and Spain around suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

There is a serious question facing European foreign security policy in coming years: What will we be? Will we be a force for good, consistently condemning violations of international law no matter who commits them? Or will the EU be part of a West with double standards on international law and human rights?

Coming back to the national level, the current Finnish government coalition includes the far-right Finns Party, or True Finns. How is this impacting the political debate in Finland, what challenges does it bring?

I think it is important to repeat that the Finnish situation is what we could have in Europe if the far right is successful in the European elections, and the EPP decides to cooperate with them. I think "Thatcherism" describes best what is ongoing here at the moment.

The leader of the True Finns is the Finance Minister, and her party is openly comparing her to Margaret Thatcher. We are seeing heavy austerity measures, cuts in public spending of 5.5 billion euro — a significant amount given the size of the Finnish economy. The government is trying to balance the budget in two government terms by making historic cuts in social security, making low-income earners and the unemployed pay, and cutting social and health care services.

Yet, while they are making heavy cuts to public services, such as elderly care and public health care, they are putting more money into private services. The only step they are taking on taxation is to raise the level of VAT — a regressive tax that hits low-income earners harder — giving Finland the highest level of value-added tax in Europe after Hungary. On top of this, they are making historic changes to labour market laws, restricting the right to strike, sympathy strikes and political strikes.

Political strikes could only last for 24 hours in the future. This will make Finland the only Nordic country to regulate such strikes by law, where the Nordic labour market model usually relies on the parties to regulate such things together.

The government is implementing many other structural changes in labour market laws, diminishing the power of collective agreements in many sectors, which will lead to a fall in the level of workers' organization. They are also making it easier to fire people, making the first day of sick leave unpaid — traditional right-wing policies that will make work more unfair, more unequal and will particularly impact low paid and insecure workers. They are also making decisions that will lead to increased emissions and will mean Finland is no longer on track to reach national climate goals. Finland is also one of the countries that voted against the EU Nature Restoration Law, and the government is taking other backwards steps on nature protection, cutting national funding for nature conservation and reservations.

What form is the social resistance taking against this wave of attacks? What approach is Vasemmistoliitto taking to win a greater audience for left-wing ideas domestically?

There has been a lot of social mobilizing, including the several weeks-long, historically long, political strikes by the Finnish trade unions. The strikes were directed against the government's attacks on workers' rights, new laws aiming to criminalize the biggest mobilization against the government's regressive agenda that has been seen so far, and which will break the whole Nordic labour market model, limiting the capacity for social mobilization in the future. NGOs and students are organizing more and more on the streets and in the campuses. For example, there has been an increase in occupations of universities and schools.

In Vasemmistoliitto, we have been focusing on issues that we know have broad popular support, such as families, support to low-income households, social services, and workers' rights, and also, of course, we are trying to push our alternative ideas for the Finnish economy, which is not doing well, with a 9-billion-euro public deficit.

The True Finns really seem to have shifted their voters' mindset in a much more right-wing direction, and it will be a long fight to reverse this.

Very few Finns are willing to discuss the reasons for this, namely that our tax revenue is going down — due, for example, to less income from environmental taxes as industry goes green. Rather than admitting this, and finding new sources of tax income, the government is using it to justify its attacks on the welfare state, which it claims is all of a sudden too big and unaffordable. On the left, we are calling for greater taxes on big capital and big companies. It is not easy to make taxation a popular topic, but we are working on it.

There is another reason for Finland's weak economic performance, which the government does not want to discuss as it is not a popular topic, and does not suit their agenda. Compared to other Nordic countries, Finland's population is growing old — we are one of the fastest-aging countries in Europe. For decades, Finland has had a very different, tighter immigration policy to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, and we are now seeing the consequences of this, with our biggest ever imbalance in the population pyramid.

Therefore, while we are mobilizing against the government's cuts, we are also presenting alternatives. While most of these relate to taxation, they are also connected to investing in education, health, and so on. Nonetheless, I think that Finns need to have an honest conversation around immigration, and the need for more — not less — immigrants coming to Finland.

Your party's polling looks good at the moment. Are you confident about the up-coming European elections?

We are confident about retaining our one MEP, but we are also definitely fighting for a second MEP, which would mean, I think, winning around 10 percent support. Of course, it depends on how many votes we are given on election day, but we are polling around 9 percent now, so it is not impossible. It is not easy, but it is not impossible either.

Our resistance to the government's agenda has led to a higher level of support for the Left than we got in the national elections, and the Social Democrats are also growing in support, but we cannot yet talk of a significant change. Surprisingly, supporters of the True Finns remain largely on board with what the government is doing, despite the social damage it causes. The True Finns really seem to have shifted their voters' mindset in a much more right-wing direction, and it will be a long fight to reverse this.

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