



France sounds the alarm

When four and a half million French voters mark the twentieth anniversary of the greatest strike in history by backing an openly fascist party, then it is time for the labour movement and the left throughout Europe to beat the alarm drums.

No fascist movement has had this sort of support since World War 2. Jean-Marie Le Pen's main plank in the presidential election on 24 April was hostility to France's two and a half million immigrant workers, most of whom come from North Africa; but his National Front comes forward as the embodiment of a comprehensively right-wing outlook on the world.

The stock exchange crash of 19 October last year has yet to register in the world's economy. We do not yet know what its repercussions will be, but a profound, or even catastrophic, slump is probable. The comparatively easy and civilised politics of consensus which governed the countries of Western Europe for most of the '50s and the '60s have already been strained by economic tensions since the mid-'70s. A big slump will wreck them. The French fascists' fourteen per cent of the vote is a tremendous base for extreme reaction at the beginning of what may well be a dramatic shift in Western politics.

There is an ominous parallel with Germany. In the election of September 1930 the Nazi Party got 18 per cent of the vote. The effects of the Wall Street crash of October 1929 had only just begun to hit Germany. Then unemployment rose from three million in 1930 to four million in 1931 and five million in 1932. In January 1933, less than two and a half years after his first electoral breakthrough, Adolf Hitler was Chancellor of Germany.

Now, of course, France in 1988 is not Germany in

1930; nor is Europe today the Europe of sixty years ago. In 1930 the world economy had still not recovered from the dislocation of the First World War. Germany had been the great loser of that war; it was smarting from defeat and from the effects of the brutal Versailles peace treaty, which stripped it of its colonies and areas of influence and forced it to pay huge reparations.

Western Europe today is within four years of planned internal free trade. Despite all its tensions, the world economy is still reducing tariffs, and keeping non-tariff barriers to trade under control. In Germany in 1930 the last revolutionary convulsion was only seven years in the past; in France today, it is twenty years in the past. By the end of 1930 Hitler's SA had 100,000 organised storm-troopers; Le Pen's base is still mostly electoral.

These are very important differences. Indeed, some people dismiss Le Pen's success as not signifying much. In France itself the Poujadists — a populist movement of the far right, albeit less clearly fascist than the National Front — won 11½ per cent of the vote in 1956. Many on the left saw a serious fascist threat in the rise of De Gaulle's RPF in the late '40s, and later his coming to power with a military coup in 1958. In Germany neo-fascists got up to ten per cent of the vote in the late 1960s. In Italy the neo-fascist MSI has had some alarming spurts of support. None of these successes for the far right has come to anything much.

But what if the stock market crash disrupts the economy fundamentally? There are no grounds for complacency. Yes, the differences between 1988 and 1930 are important; what there is in common is also important. Writing about the September 1930 election in Germany, Trotsky said this:

"In the past, we have observed (Italy, Germany) a

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sharp strengthening of fascism, victorious, or at least threatening, as the result of a spent or missed revolutionary situation, at the conclusion of a revolutionary crisis in which the proletarian vanguard revealed its inability to put itself at the head of the nation and change the fate of all its classes, the petty bourgeoisie included. This is precisely what gave fascism its peculiar strength in Italy.

But at present, the problem in Germany does not arise at the conclusion of a revolutionary crisis but just at its approach. From this, the leading Communist Party officials, optimists *ex officio*, draw the conclusion that fascism, having come 'too late', is doomed to inevitable and speedy defeat. These people do not want to learn anything.

Fascism comes 'too late' in relation to old revolutionary crisis. But it appears sufficiently early — at the dawn — in relation to the new revolutionary crisis. The fact that it gained the possibility of taking up such a powerful starting position on the eve of a revolutionary period, and not at its conclusion, is not the weak side of fascism but the weak side of Communism".

While the fascists have grown, the French Communist Party has declined. It had immense power after the war, when the armed workers it led could have stopped the bourgeoisie reconstructing their state. Instead the CP chose to help the bourgeoisie rebuild their state. It was in the government from 1944 to 1947. Then it was kicked out, and pushed into permanent opposition for the next 34 years. It sabotaged the revolutionary possibilities of the 1968 general strike. None of these things shattered its base, although after 1968 it was no longer able to stifle criticism on its left so effectively. It was its experience in government, with the Socialists in 1981-4, that undercut the CP. Its mystique as the party of serious opposition to the Establishment has not recovered from that. Sucked dry by Mitterrand, it was then flung away. The party which for over three decades usually got between 20 and 25 per cent of the vote is now down to seven per cent, half that of the fascists. Now it looks as if the National Front is the party of protest anti-Establishment voters as well as the hard-core Right.

Even if the economic consequences of the stock exchange crash are less than catastrophic, the fascist upsurge will pose a serious threat to the French labour movement. Disappointment and disillusionment with the Establishment and the official Left gave Le Pen his first electoral boost in 1983-4, when the Socialist-led Government turned sharply towards austerity and cuts. The 'cohabitation' of the Socialist president Mitterrand and the Gaullist prime minister Chirac between 1986 and 1988 swelled the fascist protest vote further. Now, after Mitterrand's presidential victory, a new Socialist-led Government is being formed, which will be far less inclined even than Neil Kinnock to tackle capitalism seriously. There will be more disillusionment, more despair, more fuel for the fascists.

Nor is it just a matter of France. The electoral success of the French far right will inevitably boost fascism throughout Europe. The success of the racist bigots in France will give oxygen to the forces of racial intolerance in countries like Britain.

Marxists have said repeatedly that the choice for the workers of the world is either socialism or barbarism. There has been much barbarism in Europe this century. For four decades it has been mainly in the Third World. In Vietnam and Cambodia, US imperialism rained napalm on the people. In Afghanistan, the USSR has done the same sort of thing for the last decade. Across the Third World, the advance of capitalism has driven millions of peasants off the land and left them to starve — while American farmers are paid not to produce

food, and Western Europe accumulates huge stockpiles.

For four decades, the choice of socialism or barbarism has receded for the working class in the metropolitan countries. We have lived under the constant threat of total barbarism — the destruction of civilisation through nuclear war — but from day to day there have been in-between choices. The looming prospect of the dislocation of the world economy on a scale not seen since the end of World War 2, and the rise of the racist barbarian Le Pen, show that the in-between choices may soon disappear.

Many times before workers have faced the choice of socialism or barbarism; their organisations have failed them, and they have paid the price in barbarism. The choice between socialism and barbarism was posed before 1914-18, when the ruling-class barbarians set a generation of the youth of Europe to slaughter each other in the trenches. The socialist leaders had long analysed and condemned the drive to war; but they failed to forestall it, and in 1914 they supported their 'own' ruling classes, betraying socialism.

The choice between socialism and barbarism was posed after World War 1, when workers throughout Europe rose in revolt against capitalism. But the revolutionaries failed to organise adequately in time, and the reformist socialists — the Kinnocks of that time — defended the Establishment, helping it to defeat the revolutionary workers and kill their leaders, like Rosa Luxemburg. Fascism triumphed in Italy.

The choice between socialism and barbarism was posed before Hitler rose to power. But the working-class parties of Germany would not unite to stop the fascists, and could not agree on a working-class programme for the reconstruction of society. The German Socialists had eight million voters, the German Communist Party six million, and both had strong militias able to beat the fascist stormtroopers off the streets of Berlin until after Hitler took state power. Yet they let him take power peacefully.

The result: a terrible strengthening of fascism throughout Europe; fascists taking power in Austria and Spain; and World War 2, with its tens of millions of dead in the battlefields, the bombed cities, and the death camps.

The choice between socialism and barbarism was posed clearly and sharply, in good time. To make the choice for socialism, and to defeat barbarism, demanded that the labour movement make itself fit to fight for power and fit to reorganise society.

The collapse of the old socialist movement at the outbreak of war in 1914 revealed that it had never done that. It had become no more than a movement fighting for improvements for the workers within the established system. After 1917 the new Communist Parties set out to reorganise the labour movement as a force for socialism. The rise to power of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Russia corrupted and destroyed those Communist Parties.

Between 1930 and 1933 Leon Trotsky warned the workers of Germany that they must win or go under. Today, knowing as we do what Hitler's victory meant, it is impossible to read what Trotsky wrote 60 years ago without emotion, and not only anger. Seeing the signs that the German Socialist and Stalinist leaders planned to submit to fascism peacefully, Trotsky wrote:

"Worker-Communists, you are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for anywhere; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste,

Back Benn and Heffer!

worker-Communists, you have very little time left!"

Trotsky was right. But the Trotskyist organisation was weak, and the reformists and Stalinists could marginalise, persecute and repress it. That has been the central experience of the Trotskyist movement throughout the years when barbarism reigned in Europe, and in those years when it has been mainly confined to the Third World: to know that the choice is socialism or barbarism, but to be unable to convince the mass of workers of what needs to be done.

The whole of modern history would be different if the internationalists had gained the leadership of the workers' movement in 1914; if the new Communist Parties had pushed the reformists aside and overthrown the bourgeoisie in 1919-23; or if the Trotskyists had eclipsed the Stalinists at the end of the 1920s. We may now be entering a new cycle of history in which the central question of modern times, socialism or barbarism, is again posed to the workers of France and other parts of Europe, immediately and urgently.

Once more, maybe, everything will depend on the strength of the internationalists, the revolutionaries, the fighters for workers' liberty — will we be strong enough to shape the course of history, or will we once again be prophets unarmed? We do not and cannot know how long or short the time-scales will be. But Le Pen's election triumph, in the shadow of a looming economic slump, should focus the minds of all serious socialists.

The labour movement is not now in any state — of collective mind or body — to secure the socialist alternative to barbarism. We need to regenerate and reorient the labour movement. We need to rearm and regroup the socialists. We may not have as much time to sort ourselves out as the professional optimists or the complacent sectarians among us thought. For sure, we do not have all the time in the world.

The decision by Tony Benn and Eric Heffer to contest the leadership is the best news in British Labour Party politics for many years.

Benn and Heffer summed up what it meant when they joined the seafarers' picket lines in Dover. The only time Neil Kinnock has been seen on a picket line in recent years was when his chauffeur drove him to a brief visit to a miners' picket at the end of their strike in 1985. Roy Hattersley has not even managed that.

There is now in British politics a whole series of big issues around which it would be possible for the labour movement to organise a powerful crusade to drive the Tories from office. The biggest indictment of the Kinnock-Hattersley 'leadership' is that they have failed to mobilise on those issues.

Registration for the poll tax is now under way in Scotland. About half the population of Britain — including many Tory voters — say they would support a campaign of refusing to pay this tax.

The social security cuts have outraged even many Tory supporters. The Education Reform Bill is going through Parliament. A poll last June showed 55 per cent in favour of its plan for schools to opt out of local authority control. By January 1988, only 18 per cent supported this idea. The huge waiting lists for council housing — in many areas, the waiting list means waiting forever — are proof that the Tories' plan to cut back council housing runs counter to the needs and wishes of millions.

Section 28 of the new Local Government Act, which threatens all facilities for lesbians and gays under the pretext of a ban on 'promoting homosexuality', has aroused the biggest demonstrations ever in Britain for lesbian and gay rights. There is widespread opposition to the Tories' attacks on civil liberties on many other fronts, especially their efforts to censor TV coverage which is politically embarrassing to them. Despite the attempts by union leaders to let the campaign peter out after 14 March, agitation against Health Service cuts is continuing.

The Ford workers' victory, the tenacious battle by the seafarers, and the strikes by and in support of the health workers (effectively defying Tory anti-union laws, and forcing the Tories to make concessions, at least on nurses' pay) show that trade union power is not finished.

Much has been written and said about the ideological grip of 'Thatcherism'. Many people on the left argue that socialist ideas in the British working class have swamped by the tide of market economics and dog-eat-dog consumerism.

There is no hard evidence for this. Detailed opinion surveys suggest that most people's attitudes have shifted, if anything, slightly to the *left* during the Thatcher years. Workers' confidence has been sapped by unemployment, by successive defeats, and by the feebleness of the labour movement's leadership. That lack of confidence explains the Tories' triumphs. But it is something that can change — and change quite rapidly in the right circumstances.

There is plenty of inflammable material to raise a fire of protest against the Tories — *given leadership*.

That is why everyone in the British labour movement who wants to fight the Tories must back Benn and Heffer.

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