

# WHAT IS LEFT OF LENINISM? NEW EUROPEAN LEFT PARTIES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Today, the socialist left in Europe confronts a situation markedly different from most of the twentieth century. The social democratic parties, while maintaining significant electoral support among workers in most of Europe, are no longer parties of even pro-working-class *reform*. Most have adapted 'social liberal' politics, combining residual rhetoric about social justice with the implementation of a neoliberal economic and social programme of privatization, austerity and attacks on organized labour. The communist parties, with few exceptions, have either disappeared or are of marginal electoral and political weight. They were unable to survive either the collapse of the bureaucratic regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, or over four decades as the junior partners in electoral alliances with a rightward moving social democracy. The European socialist left that has survived is attempting to create new forms of organization. While some of these parties have labeled themselves 'anti-capitalist' and others 'anti-neoliberal', almost all of these parties describe themselves as both 'post-social democratic' and 'post-Leninist'.<sup>1</sup> Striving to create forms of working-class and popular political representation for a new era, many in these parties claim to be transcending the historic divide in the post-1917 socialist movement.

This essay seeks to lay the historical foundation for a better understanding of the extent to which these parties have actually moved beyond the main currents of twentieth century socialism. We start with a reexamination of the theory and history of pre-First-World-War social democracy, and examine what Leninism represented in relation to it. We then trace the rise and decline of the 'Leninist' organizations, the communist parties from 1923 through the 1990s. Next, we assess the unsuccessful attempts to 'hot-house' new Leninist organizations by relatively small groups of students and intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, we analyze how the two most significant new

anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal political formations in Europe – the Italian Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) and the German Left Party, *Die Linke* – came to face the same strategic issues that confronted socialists before 1914, and reproduced not only the political debates but also the same practical contradictions that Leninism had sought to resolve politically and organizationally. Our analysis leads us to the conclusion that Leninism cannot be reduced to the post-1923 caricature of ‘democratic centralism’. Instead, the enduring legacy of Leninism remains the goal of constructing an *independent* organization of anti-capitalist organizers and activists who attempt to project a *political* alternative to the forces of official reformism not only in elections, but in mass, extra-parliamentary social struggles.

#### THE WORLD OF MASS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES, 1890–1914

In Britain, France, Italy and Germany, relatively small socialist parties – often with parliamentary representation – and unions composed mostly of skilled workers had survived both the ‘long depression’ of the 1870s and 1880s and the intense repression of the left and workers’ organizations in the wake of the Paris Commune of 1871.<sup>2</sup> The long period of capitalist growth from 1890 to 1914 set the stage for the growth of truly mass workers’ parties and unions in most of Europe. The emergence of metal working industries (steel, machine making, automobiles, shipbuilding, etc.) and the development of electrical and chemical power increased the size and weight of the industrial working class. While profits remained relatively high, capitalists unleashed an intense campaign to destroy the power of skilled industrial workers, speed up production and depress wages. Workers across the industrial world responded to capital’s offensive in three major waves of industrial struggle.<sup>3</sup>

The first wave of mass industrial struggles came in the 1890s, as dockers, miners, and railway workers established beachheads for industrial unionism in their workplaces. Tens of thousands of new adherents joined socialist political organizations across Europe – the largest being the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). A decade of relative class peace in Europe ended abruptly in 1905–07. Massive metal worker and miners’ strikes in France led to the establishment of General Confederation of Labour (CGT), under syndicalist leadership, and to the unification of the various socialist electoral groups into the French Section of the Workers’ International in 1906. Strikes in Germany produced a new wave of growth for the SPD and unions. The last wave of prewar industrial struggles came between 1912 and 1914. Attempts of employers to generalize ‘scientific management’ (Taylorism) in the machine making, steel, auto, and shipbuilding industry sparked massive

struggles against speed-up and deskilling. Led by skilled industrial workers, these strikes coincided with struggles over war preparations across Europe. While the established leaders of the unions and socialist parties were, at best, lukewarm in their embrace of worker militancy, renewed industrial struggles resulted in the growth of union membership and electoral support for the socialist parties.

The discontinuity of these – like all working-class struggles under capitalism – produced *two socially and politically distinct groups* that came together in an uneasy alliance in prewar social democracy.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, the mass struggles before 1914 generated hundreds of thousands of radical and revolutionary workplace leaders. These mostly well-paid skilled metal workers led countless battles over their economic interests, as well as political struggles for democratic and social rights – often against the wishes of the social democratic leaders of their unions and parties. This ‘militant minority’, the actual *workers’ vanguard*, was the mass audience for the revolutionary, left wing of social democracy – Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, and, before 1914, Kautsky.

On the other hand, the stabilization of parliamentary institutions, the spread of suffrage among working-class men and growing trade union legalization allowed the consolidation of a layer of full-time party, parliamentary and union officials. With the support of the less active segments of the working class (the mass of social democratic voters and party and union members), these officials sought a ‘place at the table’ of capitalist society. Committed to normalizing class relations through parliamentary reforms and institutionalized collective bargaining, these officials were the social base of *reformist* politics in the prewar socialist movement. As understood here, reformism was (and is) *not* the struggle for reform, but the substitution of electoral campaigns and routinized bargaining/grievance procedure for mass social disruption through strikes, demonstrations and the like.<sup>5</sup>

The reformist bureaucrats dominated the official practice of the parties and unions in most of Europe before the First World War. However, each wave of mass strikes brought the conflicts between these officials and the more radical and militant ranks of their organizations into the open, precipitating the classic debates on socialist strategy in the prewar era. The struggles of the 1890s, and the subsequent consolidation of industrial unions and of socialist parties across Europe in a period of capitalist prosperity, produced the ‘revisionism’ debate of 1899–1900. Eduard Bernstein challenged predictions of capitalist stagnation and decline, giving a theoretical gloss to the union and party officials’ day-to-day practice and bolstering those social democrats who supported the French socialist Millerand’s entering

a capitalist dominated government as minister of commerce and labour.<sup>6</sup> Arrayed against Bernstein and his allies were the most prominent theorists of German social democracy, Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg. Kautsky, prophetically, argued that ‘Millerandism’ would lead socialists to take responsibility for pro-capitalist policies – policies that involved attacks on workers’ wages, hours, working conditions and political rights.<sup>7</sup> Luxemburg argued that the inherent instability of capitalist accumulation made mass struggles necessary to win and defend all temporary gains for workers under capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

The tumultuous struggles of 1905–07, in particular the first Russian Revolution, sparked the ‘mass strike’ debates. Since the 1880s, socialist parties in Europe had pursued what Engels called the ‘tried and tested tactic’ of building mass parties that contested parliamentary elections and organized trade unions, cooperatives and various working-class cultural institutions.<sup>9</sup> For Luxemburg and other left-wing social democrats the 1905 revolution in Russia, despite its defeat, pointed the way forward.<sup>10</sup> Workers’ struggles that began over immediate workplace issues could be generalized across workplaces and industries into massive *political* strikes that could not only win immediate political reforms, but, in certain circumstances, pose the question of political power. Advocates of the mass strike in Germany argued that party and union militants should seize the opportunity presented by the debates on the reform of voting laws in Prussia to organize not only a one day demonstration strike, but to agitate in workplaces for continued and generalized strike action for universal suffrage. The leadership of the SPD and socialist-led German unions, with the support of an increasingly conservative Kautsky, rejected the call for the mass strike.<sup>11</sup> Believing that such tumultuous struggles could threaten their ‘place at the table’ in parliament and collective bargaining, the party and union officials argued that the ‘twin pillars of social democracy’ – the party and unions – were independent ‘equal partners’ in the workers’ movement, with the party restricting itself to election campaigns and socialist education, while the union officials directed the day-to-day workplace struggle.

The prewar strike wave shaped the debates on the immanent inter-imperialist war that wracked the socialist movement between 1912 and 1914.<sup>12</sup> A growing layer of worker militants, radicalized by the experience of recent struggles, supported those in the left wing of social democracy that pressed for preparing the movement for *revolutionary* opposition to the coming war. Luxemburg, Lenin and others argued that war between capitalist states was the inevitable result of dynamics of early-twentieth-century capitalism, and believed the war would provide opportunities for massive, *revolutionary*

working-class struggle. The ‘centre’ and right of the socialist movement rejected militant, extra-parliamentary opposition to war preparations. Kautsky and the ‘Marxist centre’ argued that capitalist development would actually lessen inter-capitalist political and military rivalry, as imperialist competition gave way to ‘ultra-imperialism’. The increasingly pragmatic union and party officials convinced themselves that support for their national capitalist classes in wartime would strengthen social democracy.

The Russian social democratic movement took a different path from the rest of Europe. The Russian socialists – both Bolsheviks and Menshevik – were the products of the same waves of mass workers’ struggles that shaped the socialist movement in Western Europe.<sup>13</sup> In the mid-1890s, mass strikes in the Russian metalworking, textiles, mining, and railroads created a layer of radical workers, whose ‘merger’ with Marxist students and intellectuals allowed the launching of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party in 1903. As the Russo-Japanese War exacerbated social tensions, mass strikes in the major Russian cities led to the 1905 revolution, where the first workers’ councils (soviets) pointed to the possibility of a worker-led democratic revolution against Tsarist autocracy, producing sharpened strategic differences between the differing wings of Russian social democracy. Tsarist Russia also experienced massive, illegal strikes among metal, oil and textiles workers in the two years before the First World War. While both wings of Russian social democracy grew in these years, the Bolsheviks emerged as the main underground organization among worker leaders in the larger industrial plants.

The debates in the Russian socialist movement before the First World War mirrored those in the rest of social democracy. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were *mainstream, left-wing, European, prewar social democrats*. As Lars Lih has demonstrated, Lenin was a devoted *Kautskyian* before 1914.<sup>14</sup> *What Is To Be Done?*, generally presented as a blueprint for a ‘party of the new type’, was a call for creating a classical socialist party under ‘Russian conditions’. Lenin embraced Kautsky’s vision in the *Erfurt Program* of a ‘merger of socialism with the workers’ movement’. Lenin believed that he was engaged in building a party like the SPD under Tsarist absolutism, a party of ‘conscious workers’ that democratically determined its perspectives and activities, and expected its members to implement these decisions in a disciplined and centralized manner. Nor was Lenin and the Bolsheviks’ strategy for Russia – a workers-led revolution to create the conditions for democracy and capitalism that would spark socialist revolutions in the West – fundamentally different from that advocated by Kautsky, Luxemburg and Trotsky.<sup>15</sup> On the issues of the relationship of parliamentary activity and mass struggle, and the coming war,

Lenin was firmly in the mainstream of the left of European socialism. In fact, he broke with Kautsky politically much later than Luxemburg, when Kautsky *reneged* on his prewar commitments to revolutionary opposition to the First World War.

While Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not develop a distinct *theory* of socialist organization before the Russian Revolution, the *social foundations* of their organizational *practice* was *fundamentally* different from that of western socialist parties.<sup>16</sup> The difference was not, as the ‘textbook’ interpretation of Lenin claims, on matters of the relationship of intellectuals and workers or internal party democracy. Lenin understood ‘democratic centralism’ as the authority of democratically elected party congresses *alone* to make decisions binding on all party committees and members.<sup>17</sup> Instead the differences flow from the social and political conditions the Bolsheviks faced. Put simply, it was *impossible* to build a ‘party like the SPD under Russian conditions’. Tsarist absolutism short-circuited the stabilization of parliamentary institutions and trade union legality, thus limiting the development of the layer of full-time party and union officials that was the social foundation of reformism in the West.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the Bolsheviks built a party of *revolutionary* worker leaders, independent of and capable of politically contesting the forces of capitalist liberalism and working-class reformism. As Donny Gluckstein argued, ‘the Bolshevik party has been built upon a tradition of workplace activity that made it unique’ in pre-war socialism – a party of the *militant minority* of revolutionary minded worker leaders.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the Bolsheviks, *in practice*, rejected the ‘twin pillars of social democracy’ – the independence of the union officialdom from the political party. Those Russian social democrats that were more sympathetic to reformism, in particular many Mensheviks, enjoyed the support of skilled workers in small-scale industries (printing, etc.). However, they were unable to establish their dominance in movement because of the absence of parliamentary institutions and legal trade unions in Russia.

The First World War ended the unstable social democratic alliance between reformist union and party officials and militant rank-and-file workers. While the party-union officials, with the support of the passive majority of workers, rallied to the ‘defence’ of their national capitalist states, radical and revolutionary workers attempted to continue the class struggle during wartime and prepare for revolutionary upsurges in the near future. While the antiwar wing of the socialist movement was initially small and isolated, wartime struggles over inflation, deskilling, speed-up and food shortages strengthened them and deepened the crisis of the European socialist parties. In Russia alone, where the ‘militant minority’ was organized independently

and the forces of reform were socially weak, did the war lead to a successful revolution. The victory of the Bolshevik-led revolution of 1917 produced an attempt to create new, revolutionary parties – communist parties – that organized the revolutionary minority of the working class independently of the forces of official reform.

#### THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTIES, 1919-91

The communist parties (CPs) launched by the Communist International (Comintern or CI) in 1919 sought to overcome the contradictions that paralyzed prewar social democracy. At the centre of their project were parties free of the forces of ‘opportunism’ – independent organizations of revolutionary worker activists and leaders. Such parties rejected the ‘twin pillars’ of social democracy, where the party would focus on elections and the unions on workplace struggles. The communist parties sought to organize political interventions not merely in the realm of elections and socialist education, but primarily in extra-electoral struggles – strikes, demonstrations and other forms of social disruption. Such parties would, through joint action around immediate working- class and popular struggles, contest with the forces of official reformism for the leadership of the working class.

Initially, the communist parties attracted a small portion of the ‘militant minority’ that had been the social base of the left wing of prewar European socialism. The infant CPs organized, for the most part, *youth* – the unemployed, veterans, ex-students and young workers with little experience of workplace and political struggles. These young rebels gravitated toward the politics of ‘left communism’ – abstention from elections, boycotting the existing trade unions and refusing common action with social democratic workers. The majority of the antiwar, radical wing of the prewar socialist movement remained loyal to the left wing of social democracy – the left wing of the French and Italian parties and the Independent Social Democrats in Germany. It was only in 1920-21 that the European communists became mass parties as a result of a series of splits of radicalized industrial workers with the left of social democracy. These mass parties rejected the politics of ‘left communism’ and embraced the strategy of common action with social democratic workers and their leaders against capital and the state (‘united front’).<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the Comintern actually undermined the development of the non-Russian parties. In 1921-22 the CI leadership, in particular the Russians around Zinoviev, feared a reversal of the Russian Revolution in the wake of the Kronstadt rebellion and the concessions to private capital involved

in the New Economic Policy. Hoping to ‘hot-house’ revolutions in the West, the CI began to dictate tactics to the European parties. The disastrous *Marzaktion* in Germany in 1921, where the German communists launched a ‘revolutionary offensive’, resulted in the defection of many worker leaders and the purge of those western communist leaders (Paul Levi in particular) who objected to the Comintern’s adventurism.<sup>21</sup> The defeat of the German Revolution of 1923, at least in part the result of the German communists’ tactical dependence on the Comintern leadership, ended the hopes for a short-term victory of workers’ revolution outside of Russia. The defeat of revolution in the West facilitated, on the one hand, the consolidation of bureaucratic and authoritarian rule in the USSR; and, on the other, the growing subordination of the communist parties to the twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy. The organizational transformation of the communist parties facilitated this political subordination.

‘Leninism’ as a distinct organizational theory and practice was invented during the ‘Bolshevization’ campaign of 1924–25. The rational core of the Leninist organizational practice before 1923 was the rejection of a division of labour between the party and unions and the construction of an organization of revolutionary worker activists *independently* of the labour and parliamentary officialdom capable of contesting the latter’s leadership of the workers’ movement. The communist parties sought to unite the ‘militant minority’ so it would be capable of taking political initiatives in the labour and social movements autonomously of the forces of official reformism. After 1923, the Comintern leadership imposed what the twentieth-century left has come to know as ‘Leninist norms of organization’ – cells at a local level operating under the direction of an unaccountable ‘democratic centralist’ leadership, bans on internal tendencies and factions, defining ‘cadre’ in terms of political and organizational loyalty to the party leadership, an extremely narrow political and organizational ‘homogeneity’, and the like. In the wake of these organizational changes, rank-and-file worker communists lost whatever control they may have exercised over the policies, action and leadership of their organizations.<sup>22</sup>

The disastrous consequences of the zigs and zags of Comintern policy, following the shifting goals of Soviet foreign policy, are generally well known.<sup>23</sup> The ‘Third Period’ strategy, that revived the ‘left communist’ hostility to common action with social democratic workers and their leaders, led to the capitulation, without any resistance, of the German labour movement to Hitler. The adaptation of the ‘Popular Front’ strategy after 1935, with its emphasis on electoral-political alliances with social democrats and ‘democratic’ capitalists facilitated the defeats of mass, potentially

revolutionary workers' struggles in France and Spain. Moreover, the shift to the Popular Front strategy at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern had a *lasting* political and *social* impact on the communist parties in Europe.

After 1935, the communist parties, even while retaining the Comintern's organizational norms, adapted the political strategy of social democracy – alliances with capitalist and middle class liberals in defense of the institutions of the democratic capitalist state, and seeking reforms through parliamentary activity and routine collective bargaining rather than mass, militant struggles. The 'gradual process of social democratization' of the western parties not only transformed their *politics* but their *social composition* as well. Beginning in the late 1930s, the communist parties became highly centralized organizations led by a section of the trade union and parliamentary officialdom. Put simply, the communist parties after 1935 progressively abandoned the independent organization of the 'militant minority' in their struggle against capital and the forces of official reformism. Instead, the post-Popular Front communist parties reproduced pre-1914 social democracy's alliance of radical workplace leaders and increasingly conservative union and party officials. However, the communist parties lacked the democratic internal life that allowed left-wing social democrats to challenge the reformist officialdom before the First World War, while rank-and-file communists' belief that the Soviet Union was the 'socialist fatherland' cemented their loyalty to their party leaders.

After the Second World War, the communists became the leadership of the main union federations in both Italy and France. Thousands of worker militants joined these parties convinced that they were leading the struggle against capital and for socialism, which they equated with the regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. However, party membership in these decades also became the path to a full-time career in the union officialdom. Daniel Singer describes the process in postwar France:

Communist authority [in the CGT] is not seriously challenged because, whatever the theory, in practice decisions come down from the apex of the pyramid, in the union as in the party. The leaders must naturally take into account the mood of the rank and file, though the hierarchical structure provides distorted channels for its expression. Advancement on the union ladder is more dependent on approval from above than on support from below – hardly a system to encourage critical minds. The absence of genuine and open debate has made it easier to impose a line from the top. In the end the cumbersome CGT machine added its own dead weight to that of the party's bureaucratic establishment.<sup>24</sup>

In those countries where they remained relatively small, as in Britain, the communist parties also became organizations of *both* radical workplace leaders and full and part-time workplace officials. British communist militants in the 1950s and 1960s vacillated between leading militant industrial struggles and the pursuit of alliances with ‘left-wing’ union leaders in the Labour Party.<sup>25</sup> The electoral success of the communist parties, especially in France and Italy, where they enjoyed substantial parliamentary representation and administered local and regional governments, consolidated a layer of full-time party-governmental officials.

Ernest Mandel argued that ‘the virtually permanent installation of the apparatuses of the Communist parties within the machinery of the bourgeois democratic state ... or in the unions’ facilitated the integration of the communist parties, both leadership and active membership, into the existing capitalist order.<sup>26</sup> Put simply, the European communist parties, while retaining loyalty to the USSR on issues of foreign policy and maintaining the old Comintern organization norms, had reproduced both the political practice and social composition of pre-1914 social democracy. On the one hand, communist workers through the 1960s lived a ‘double reality’ – leading often militant day-to-day workplace struggles, while remaining loyal to the shifting political orientations of the Soviet and national party leader whom they believed embodied the struggle for socialism. On the other, communist union officials rejected social democracy’s corporatist income policies and the ideology of ‘labour management’ cooperation that justified them, while sacrificing workplace and political struggles in pursuit of ‘anti-monopoly coalition’ with ‘progressive capitalists’. As long as the capitalist world economy was experiencing high profits and unprecedented growth, the communists were able to ‘deliver the goods’ in the form of higher wages and expanded social welfare, maintaining the loyalty of most workplace activists.

As the slowing of global economic growth impelled capitalists across the industrial world to attack working conditions in the mid-1960s, the long-term effects of the social democratization of the communist parties on the militant minority of the working class became evident. In France and Italy, where their comrades led national unions committed to routine bargaining and grievance handling, communist shop stewards and local officers increasingly opposed unofficial job actions and wildcat strikes against speed-up and attempts to further deskill industrial workers. In Britain, the communists’ pursuit of a long-term alliance with ‘left’ union officials led them to attempt to restrain rank-and-file militancy against the wage and labour policies of the Labour Party, in the hope of integrating ‘income

policies' into some form of state economic planning.<sup>27</sup>

Even before the mass upheavals of 1968–74, the communist parties' ranks were becoming an obstacle to militant workers' struggles against capital. The result was a profound *disorganization* of the 'militant minority' of worker leaders who had been the social base for revolutionary and radical politics in the European working classes before the 1930s. Put another way, the communists' role in derailing mass workers' struggles during the upsurge of 1968–75 into routine bargaining and electoral politics was rooted in their nearly forty year long political and social transformation.<sup>28</sup> The creeping social democratization of the western European communist parties, sped up by their pursuit of electoral alliance with mainstream social democracy (France) or liberal capitalists (Italy), culminated in the advent of Eurocommunism in the mid to late 1970s. While marking a temporary break with the twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy, Eurocommunism deepened the formal reformist politics of the western communist parties.

The deepening global capitalist economic crisis and capital's embrace of monetarist and neoliberal economic policies after 1979 effectively ended the possibility of winning reforms through parliamentary activity and routine collective bargaining. As Mandel argued in 1978, the global capitalist crisis 'drastically narrows the room for ... the ... bourgeoisie ... to grant reforms. Today, what is on the agenda everywhere is not reform but austerity. ... Any reformist orientation is a policy designed to *administer the crisis* and not to make "profound transformations"'.<sup>29</sup> Faced with growing resistance from capital and calls for cooperation in restoring profitability, European social democracy abandoned the struggle for reform.<sup>30</sup>

After nearly two decades of pursuing electoral coalitions with the rightward moving social democracy, including administering neoliberal austerity as part of governments with these parties in France and Italy, the communist parties were struggling to maintain their distinctive political identity in the early 1990s. The collapse of the 'socialist bloc' in 1989–91 sealed the fate of the communist parties in the West. The Italian communists formally abandoned any reference to socialism, communism or working-class politics as they transformed themselves into a liberal capitalist party, the Democratic Left (PS), which transmuted into the Democratic Party (PD) in 2007 after merging with the remnants of Christian Democracy.<sup>31</sup> The French, Spanish and Portuguese parties experienced a sharp decline in electoral support and membership; while others, like the British party, simply disappeared.

## THE POST-SECOND WORLD WAR REVOLUTIONARY LEFT

The attempts to build revolutionary political organizations to the left of the communist and social democratic parties, despite promising beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s, were in crisis by the 1980s and 1990s. A new left was born across Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the one hand, the Soviet invasion of Hungary dashed the hopes for internal reform of the ‘socialist fatherland’ inspired by Khrushchev’s revelations of Stalin’s repression. On the other, the failure of both social democrats and communists to build effective movements against renewed imperialist aggression – in particular the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Suez and the bloody French colonial war in Algeria – radicalized large layers of students and working-class youth across Europe. By the late 1960s, most of the European new left gravitated toward the small organizations that attempted to maintain a socialist alternative to the left of social democracy and orthodox communism. Various currents of Maoism and Trotskyism gained support from students and some young workers across Europe.<sup>32</sup>

The renewal of militant workplace struggles across Europe between 1968 and 1975, with near revolutionary upsurges in France in May-June 1968 and Portugal in 1974-75, convinced youthful revolutionaries that it would be possible to transform their relatively small organizations into mass revolutionary parties in a matter of years. Many on the new revolutionary left believed that the traditional workers’ organizations’ attempts to push the new wave of struggles into routine collective bargaining and parliamentary politics, especially in a period of global crisis that limited the willingness of capital to grant reforms, would create a massive layer of workers who would be searching for an alternative to their reformism. Put another way, most youthful radicals believed that they were in the midst of a new recomposition of the workers’ movement – equivalent to that between social democracy and communism in the wake of the First World War and Russian Revolution. Armed with an organizational blueprint for new revolutionary parties derived from the post-1923 communist parties, the new revolutionaries believed that the revival of mass revolutionary organizations in Europe was once again on the agenda.

In the midst of mass strikes that shook governments across Europe and forced capital and the state to make concessions to labour in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the hopes of young revolutionaries seemed to be realistic. Organizations to the left of social democracy and the communist parties grew rapidly. In northern Europe – Germany and Scandinavia – thousands of students and young workers flocked to organizations that identified with Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In southern Europe and

Britain, organizations from the Trotskyist tradition won thousands of new adherents among students and worker activists. In Italy, massive workers' struggles and an increasingly conservative Communist Party fuelled the growth of a specifically Italian far left – groups that fused elements of Maoism with native 'left communist' traditions.<sup>33</sup>

Few of these attempts at hot-housing new revolutionary parties in capitalist Europe survived the decline of mass working-class struggles after the global recession of 1974–75 and the resurgence of the traditional workers' organizations. Maoism as a small mass political current disappeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s across Europe. The Italian far left also went into sharp decline, with elements engaging in individual terror against state personnel and prominent capitalists, while others regrouped in *Democrazia Proletaria* in 1978. Most of the organizations that identified with Trotskyism also experienced sharp declines in membership and influence in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>34</sup>

Only two small but substantive organizations of the European revolutionary left were able to survive the downturn with some base among militant workers. The British International Socialists (IS) had attracted several hundred militant shop stewards in the metalworking industries (automobile, machine making), many of them former members of the Communist Party, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These shop stewards were the backbone of rank-and-file networks in several British unions that were capable of leading unofficial strikes and challenging the official, pro-Labour Party leaderships of their unions. As the IS relaunched itself as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1977, the leadership of the new party decided that many of these worker leaders were 'conservative' compared to a new generation of young workers. By the late 1970s, many, if not most, of these radical and revolutionary shop floor leaders were either purged from or left the SWP. Despite these losses, the SWP was able to recruit many younger workers through its leadership of the 'Anti-Nazi League', which successfully confronted British neo-fascist groups in mass demonstrations.<sup>35</sup> In the 1990s, the SWP played a central role in organizing the 'anti-capitalist' global justice movement in Britain and in the movements against the wars in Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In continental Europe, the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) also survived the general collapse of the revolutionary left of the 1960s and 1970s. Descended from the Revolutionary Communist Youth, a left-wing split from the French communist youth organization and the most important revolutionary organization among students in May-June 1968, the LCR was able to win several hundred young workers among bank employees, teachers, nurses, train and bus drivers, postal and telecommunication workers,

and (to a lesser extent) auto and steel workers.<sup>36</sup> While suffering a decline in membership and influence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the LCR was able to maintain a significant cadre among both white and blue-collar public sector workers. LCR militants were central to building ‘class struggle’ currents in the social democrat dominated Democratic Confederation of Labour and in launching the independent Solidarity, Unity, Democracy unions in the 1980s. With the revival of mass workers’ struggles in the 1990s, the LCR played an essential role in the extended public sector workers’ strikes of 1995 and in the launching of the ‘alter globalization’ (global justice) movement. By the 2002 its charismatic spokesperson, the postal worker Olivier Besancenot outpolled the French Communist Party in the first round of the presidential elections.

Despite the survival of these two small but still significant revolutionary organizations, the ‘party building’ projects of the 1960s and 1970s had failed to achieve their stated goal – the creation of new, mass revolutionary workers’ organizations capable, like the early communist parties, of challenging the reformist organizations for political leadership of workers in Europe. There were many reasons for the failure to build mass revolutionary organizations. Clearly, the collapse of worker militancy in the wake of the 1974 world recession, the restabilization of capitalist politics, the resurgence of reformist politics and organizations, the stultifying effects of adapting post-1923 ‘Leninist organizational norms’ which promoted splits over tactical issues, and their own unrealistic expectations all contributed to the decline of the new revolutionary left.<sup>37</sup> However, the early communists had survived similar challenges in the 1920s. *The ultimate limit for the party building projects in the 1970s was the reduced size and relative political and organizational weakness of the militant minorities of workers in capitalist Europe.* Decades of routine collective bargaining and parliamentary-electoral politics combined with a highly centralized and bureaucratic internal life had transformed the bulk of the rank and file of the communist parties into supporters of the forces of official reformism – the labour and party-parliamentary officialdom. Put another way, the massive layer of radical and revolutionary worker leaders who became the ranks of the communist parties after 1920 had been disorganized and/or transformed politically and socially from the 1930s onwards. The weakness of this independent layer of worker leaders doomed all of the attempts to recompose the workers’ movements in Europe and launch new revolutionary organizations in the 1970s.

## THE NEW LEFT PARTIES IN EUROPE

The parallel crises of social democracy and mainstream communism on the one hand, and of the revolutionary left on the other, created space for the emergence of new left political parties and alliances in Europe. While the crisis of the traditional workers' organizations led to anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal splits from social democracy and communism, the crisis of the party-building projects of the 1970s forced substantial portions of the revolutionary left to reassess their projects. Important elements of formerly Maoist organizations and significant currents within Trotskyism concluded that their attempts to quickly transform relatively small organizations of students and workers into mass revolutionary parties had reached a dead end, and new political forms and alliances were a necessary step in the recomposition of the socialist left.<sup>38</sup>

The development of these new left parties has been extremely uneven.<sup>39</sup> The two most prominent and initially promising developments occurred in Italy and Germany. In Italy, a substantial minority of Communist officials and activists rejected the transformation of the PCI into the DS and launched the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) in 1991.<sup>40</sup> The new party brought together diverse social elements from old school elected officials and union leaders to militant shop stewards and global justice activists. Initially, the PRC appeared to be reproducing the PCI's relationship to independent mobilizations – supporting the union officialdom's attempts to channel them into electoral activity and routine bargaining. However, the 1994 struggles against the first Berlusconi government's pension reform shifted the PRC's relationship to mass struggle, with the party aligning itself with rank-and-file militants who organized union officials' attempts to derail the movement. By the early 2000s, the PRC assumed leadership of the global justice and antiwar movements in Italy, promoted unofficial, wildcat strikes among auto and public transport workers, and attempted to radicalize the union mobilizations in defense of constitutional provisions against unfair dismissal.<sup>41</sup>

The PRC, according to its leadership, was an attempt to refound the communist project of the abolition of capitalism.<sup>42</sup> However, a significant layer of the party leadership and theorists remained anti-neoliberals, rather than anti-capitalists. More importantly, the PRC's ostensibly 'anti-capitalist' programme did not immunize the PRC from the attraction of entering government coalitions with social liberals. The quest for office led to a marked shift in the PRC's relationship to mass struggles and opposition to imperialist wars. As they sought an electoral alliance and government coalition with the social liberals of the DS and *Margherita*, the PRC abandoned opposition

to the union officials' acquiescence to concessions and austerity.<sup>43</sup> While the PRC had led antiwar mobilizations against the NATO bombing of Serbia and the US-UK wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the PRC followed its social liberal allies in the *Unione* government in slowing the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the dispatching of military forces to Afghanistan and Lebanon.<sup>44</sup>

In 2007, after the fusion of the DS and *Margherita* to form the new Democratic Party (PD), the PRC joined the 'Olive Tree' coalition in the hope of stopping the re-election of the right-wing Berlusconi government in the 2008 general election. The Prodi/*Unione*'s pursuit of 'a moderate liberal course akin to that of European Social Democracy and Bill Clinton's Democrats', led to an electoral disaster.<sup>45</sup> With no clear, anti-capitalist *left* opposition to the Prodi government's policies of war and austerity, the right filled the political vacuum and Berlusconi was swept back into office. The PRC paid a heavy price, losing all of its parliamentary representation in the rout of the electoral left.<sup>46</sup> As Luke March pointed out, the incoherent 'double game of government participation combined with mobilizations against government measures they dislike ... jeopardized party unity and [led to] serious losses in the following elections'.<sup>47</sup>

In Germany, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) was constructed in the 1990s out of the remnants of the old ruling party of the German Democratic Republic by an alliance between those whose careers in the party and state were cut short by German unification with intellectuals and activists oriented to western Marxism. The early 2000s saw the formation of the Electoral Alternative for Social Justice (WASG) – 'a collection of trade-union-oriented left-wing intellectuals, academics, publicists and left-wing representatives of IG Metall with decades of SPD membership', who were disgusted by the SPD's embrace of the neo-liberal 'Agenda 2010', and sought to return to German social democracy's tradition of Keynesian reformism. Together the WASG and PDS launched *Die Linke* – the Left Party in 2007.<sup>48</sup>

In the initial 'programmatic guidelines' adopted by the unified party at its founding, *Die Linke* has remained within a clearly 'anti-neoliberal' framework.<sup>49</sup> Activists associated with the 'Anti-Capitalist Left' current in the party have argued for a clearer politics of social transformation and resistance. While some of these militants believe that the 2010 programme marked a distinct shift in a more anti-capitalist direction, they acknowledge that *Die Linke* remains committed to a reform of 'unbridled ... financial market capitalism'. Put simply, *Die Linke* remains 'anti-neoliberal' and seeks a return to traditional social democratic economic regulation and extensive

social welfare provisions.<sup>50</sup>

The issue of entering coalition governments, at the local, state or federal level, with the SPD or the equally social liberal Greens, posed challenges to *Die Linke* even before the party was founded. Many on the left wing of WASG opposed fusion with the PDS because of its participation in a coalition government in Berlin, which had administered social service austerity.<sup>51</sup> *Die Linke* remains divided between what Nachtwey calls ‘office seekers’ and ‘policy seekers’.<sup>52</sup> The ‘office seekers’, mostly former members of the PDS, are primarily interested in obtaining office and support entering coalition governments with the SPD and Greens to push the social liberals to the left and defend and extend economic regulation and social welfare.<sup>53</sup> The ‘policy seekers’, the anti-capitalist left and some of the former WASG leaders and activists, are primarily interested in building a political alternative to neoliberalism, whether administered by conservative or social liberal governments.

*Die Linke*’s electoral success, especially at the state level, has made the question of entering coalitions with the neoliberal left a recurring issue. In 2008, *Die Linke* made substantial gains in the traditionally SPD strongholds of Hesse and Lower Saxony, leading the SPD and Greens to invite the party to join coalition governments. *Die Linke* refused to enter the coalitions, maintaining their independence when the social liberals initiated new cuts in social services and public employment. In 2009, *Die Linke* joined an SPD government in Brandenburg and became complicit in the lay-off of nearly 20 per cent of the state’s 55,000 public sector workers.<sup>54</sup> In North Rhine-Westphalia, *Die Linke* made substantial gains in the 2010 election, leading the SPD and Greens to invite them to jointly govern the state. However, the anti-capitalist left that leads *Die Linke* in North Rhine-Westphalia refused and initially played an important role in building extra-parliamentary mobilizations against the SPD-Greens austerity measures.<sup>55</sup> However, their focus on parliamentary activity may have contributed to loss of support to the SPD and the Internet privacy ‘Pirate Party’ in May 2012.<sup>56</sup> In any case the tensions are now so severe inside the party that there is increased talk, even from some elements in the leadership, of a split.<sup>57</sup>

*Die Linke*, like the PRC before it, has grappled with the issues of the relationship of parliamentary and routine trade union activity to social movements and workers’ struggles. Both rank-and-file activists and union officials, in particular from the metal workers (IG-Metall) and public sector (Verdi) unions, are members of *Die Linke*. However, the party defines politics primarily as elections, leaving matters of workplace organization and mobilization to the official leaders of the unions.<sup>58</sup> The party’s electoral-

parliamentary orientation to politics is manifested in its organizational structure, with almost all branches organized on the basis of electoral districts.<sup>59</sup> The emergence of the ‘Working Group on Workplaces and Trade Unions’ in 2008, an organization of *Die Linke* members in the unions and works councils, opened the possibility of party members collectively discussing and acting in the unions and workplaces.<sup>60</sup> However, there is no clear evidence that *Die Linke* militants, as such, rather than individuals, participate in the trade union left formations agitating for nationalization of key industries, a shortened work week and mobilizations against austerity.<sup>61</sup>

Despite their claims to be ‘post-social democratic’ and ‘post-Leninist’, both Germany’s *Die Linke* and the Italian PRC reproduced the social and political contradictions of classical, pre-First World War socialism, which pre-1935 Leninism attempted to resolve through the organization of the ‘militant minority’ of the working class independently of the forces of official reformism. These parties brought together party and union officials and radicalized worker and social movement activists, and are grappling with *the same strategic and political debates that plagued classical social democracy* – the contradictions of entering capitalist governments, the relationship of electoral and routine trade union activity and mass, extra-parliamentary struggles, and the issues of war and peace. On the one hand, they seemed to have the potential of becoming new forms of working-class political representation, combining an electoral alternative to social liberalism with the organization of a ‘militant minority’ in the workplaces and social movements. On the other, these new formations contained the seeds of a new social liberalism – party-union officials committed to parliamentary manoeuvring and routine bargaining in a political context of an employers’ offensive and austerity drive. Despite the purported programmatic differences – the PRC’s ‘anti-capitalism’ and *Die Linke*’s ‘anti-neoliberalism’ – both parties proved unable to consistently resist the lure of participation in government coalitions with the social liberals with the resulting embrace of austerity at home and imperialist wars abroad. Neither party has transcended the pre-1914 social democratic ‘twin pillars’ organizational norm where the party focused on electoral politics, while the union officialdom directed the day-to-day class struggle in the workplace and beyond.

In the other large states of Europe, the building of new left parties remains stalled. In Britain, the efforts to build alternatives to Labour – the Socialist Alliance and RESPECT – failed to attract a substantial following among Labour Party members or voters and fell victim to sectarian squabbling. In France, the New Capitalist Party, launched primarily by the LCR, has yet to make a significant breakthrough in terms of either membership or

electoral support and is facing a severe crisis in the aftermath of the April 2012 presidential elections in which the Left Front Alliance of Communists and left social democrats became the dominant force to the left of social liberalism.

Ultimately, two factors will shape the future of these new political formations. The first, and most crucial, is the outcome of extra-parliamentary struggles over austerity and privatization, which will shape the political consciousness and confidence of party militants and broad sectors of the working-class and popular movements. The second is the relative strength within these parties of the ‘militant minority’ of workplace and movement activists and the conscious anti-capitalist left, on one side, and, the forces of official reformism on the other. If the experience of the Italian PRC is indicative, battles over formal programme (‘anti-capitalist’ v. ‘anti-neoliberal’) and official leadership positions (including nomination for elected office) within these parties will *not* be decisive. Instead, the key will be the revival of the *rational core of Leninism* – the transcendence of the division of labour between party and unions and movements through the organization of radical and revolutionary activists who attempt to contest the forces of official reformism over the conduct of mass struggle. Put another way, whether the ‘militant minority’ can transform these parties into organizations contesting the direction of *all* struggles, electoral and extra-electoral, or whether the union-party officialdom can maintain the division between ‘politics’ (elections) and ‘economics’ (union struggles) will determine the future of these parties.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the editors of *The Socialist Register*, (Greg Albo, Vivek Chibber and Leo Panitch) and Samuel Farber, Andrew Sernatinger and David Camfield for comments on an earlier draft of this essay. Special thanks to Kit Wainer for comments on an earlier version of this essay and our ongoing conversations on the history of socialist organization.

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- 2 In the US, the continuous geographic migration of both capital and labour across the North American continent short-circuited the emergence of significant socialist minorities. Anti-socialist business unionists dominated the surviving unions – mostly in the locally based construction trades and intra-urban transport – tying the unions to one or another capitalist party in the US. See Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, chapters 1 and 2 for an analysis of the geographic expansion of capitalist

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- 3 Our discussion of the relationship of mass workers' struggles and the rise of mass socialist politics in western Europe, and the emerging tensions between social democratic party and union officials and rank-and-file worker activists, is drawn from: Dick Geary, *European Labour Protest, 1848-1939*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981, chapters 1-3; D. Geary, ed., *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914*, New York: Berg, 1989; Harvey Mitchell, 'Labour and the Origins of Social Democracy in Britain, France, and Germany, 1890-1914', in H. Mitchell and P. Stearns, *Workers & Protest: The European Labour Movement, the Working Classes and the Origins of Social Democracy, 1890-1914*, Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1971; Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France 1900-1939*, New York: Berghann Books, 2010, chapters 1-5; Mary Nolan, *Social Democracy and Society: Working-Class Radicalism in Dusseldorf, 1890-1920*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy: The Development of the Great Schism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955, chapters I-X.
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