

Editorial: the state of the left

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EDITORIAL

The State of the Left

After the financial crisis of 2008 the left did not take control of the political agenda when they had the chance to argue for an alternative to short term risk-taking in finance, rewarded by bonuses for the rich and greedy, and tax avoidance. There could have been a programme for the people and for regulating and controlling capital. In the ensuing austerity period, however, the proper left stepped in on the back of issues raised by anti-austerity movements outside mainstream politics, and provided a firm left path that gained popular support: this proper left wants to terminate neoliberalism and free markets, to redistribute wealth and create a less ecologically disastrous economy. From the Indignados to Occupy to Greece a left alternative began to rise from below. It took party form in Syriza, Podemos, in the work of Sanders and Corbyn, in Portugal, and elsewhere. There has not been a proper left revival everywhere. Die Linke, for example, has not taken centre stage (though it increased its membership and share of the vote for a short period in 2009/10) as the proper left has in other places, maybe because austerity was less harsh in Germany.

This issue looks at the changing fortunes and state of the left, especially the rise of the proper left and the return of their ideas to the mainstream, after the financial crisis and austerity. Why an international remit rather than a UK focus for this issue? The financial crisis was experienced across Europe and our issue provides a synopsis and setting side by side of left responses across nation states. This can provide evidence on how either internationally-related or nationally specific the left is today and what international solidarity could mean. The contents of the issue are shaped in part by who was able to write for us and space limits. However, we aimed to go not just beyond the UK but also beyond Europe, although Europe is the main focus.

Post-austerity the proper left has surfed the wave of protest, using it to reassert its values. Roberto Pedretti in this issue says that the crisis of the left was partly caused by its acceptance of neoliberal responses to structural transformations. It was too electorally timid and ideologically convinced to reject neoliberalism. A change has come

with the rise of the proper left rejecting this paradigm. The proper left has made it possible, in some places, to talk about socialism again 30 years after 1989. Privatisation and neo-liberalism are no longer the default benchmark. David Landy discusses the challenge to this in the fight against water privatisation in Ireland. The alternatives – social ownership and egalitarianism – are part of the mainstream agenda again.

The discussion can be less now about whether socialism is dead and more how to link the traditional left agenda that has come back in with disarming the far right, mobilising support across social strata and demographic groups, engaging with questions raised in this issue not traditionally associated with left/right binaries, and how to implement left programmes and confront fierce opposition.

Is the proper left just the old left resurging? The articles on France, amongst others, discuss the left in relation to its traditional concerns but also ones newer for socialists to take on. Sectarianism is being overcome, the plural left combining, as discussed in the articles on Portugal and Pakistan. Dogmatism has shifted too. Responses in recent years have raised issues less central for the left in the past, for instance rethinking the forms social ownership could take and responding to new social formations like precarity and issues such

as migration, Europe, climate emergency, basic income and reducing the working week. These themes have often (if not always) been shunned by mainstream statist socialists because of the latter's emphasis on growth, work and rights in the workplace. But Charles Masquelier on Hamon in France and Lee-Anne Broadhead on Canada, for example, talk about engagement with such issues. Lee-Anne adds decolonisation, an important concern that could get more attention than it has done in this volume.

The new proper left has built on bottom-up popular participation. Mélenchon's proposed assembly and his and Corbyn's popular inputs into policy are discussed in this issue. Heather Mendick's article focuses on conflict between grassroots Corbyn supporters in the UK and the more centrist party elite. In the heavily privatised UK there has been a return to social ownership as something to be rolled forward, rather than privatisation and the market as the assumed approach. This includes old-style public ownership but also co-ops and local and regional social ownership. So, there is a devolved participatory element. Hamon's interest in co-ops is discussed by Charles Masquelier. These approaches are about popular rather than private control.

The proper left has risen out of social movements, Podemos in Spain an obvious example, or there has been a

movement basis within political parties. Heather Mendick discusses Momentum in the UK and our issue has articles on France, Canada and Greece that flag up the movement aspect within left parties. All of this is beyond just the party or state delivering socialism from above and beyond social ownership as just national state ownership.

Non-economic issues are important for many of the parties, religion (in Pakistan, Poland and Ireland, for instance), gender, and migration have become a central issue for many left parties. Cultural and 'identity' issues have become added to left/right economic and social ones. Some of the left have tried to counter the threat of the far right by riding the anti-immigration bandwagon, playing their part in whipping up racism and hatred: Mélenchon in France, some voices in Poland, and Aufstehen in Germany (the latter not covered in our issue but relevant here).

The role of Europe features in Corbyn's ambivalence on the Brexit process, the coup d'état by the Troika in Greece and Mélenchon's willingness to pull out of the EU. There is antagonism towards the EU on the left, for left as well as other reasons, as well as a more prevalent approach geared towards working within the EU. Europe is a neoliberal capitalist club, but is it to be changed from within or to be exited? The case of Syriza and Eunice Goes' article on

Portugal raise the question of how much socialist or social democratic policies can be followed within the European Union. Corbyn's position may have to do with political balancing but also his lifelong belief that membership of the EU is an obstruction to a democratic socialist government pursuing aims such as nationalisation and reversing privatisation. But which aspects of the EU are limiting for the left varies. For Eunice, in Portugal it is monetary union. Other constraints, she says, can be worked around. Eunice also raises the issue of inequalities in power between poorer and richer members of the EU.

The proper left, on the fringes just a few years ago, now has real electoral promise. Mélenchon's performance in the 2017 French election and Corbyn's in party leadership contests and the UK general election command attention. Podemos was leading in the polls soon after they were founded and have the possibility of being part of a Spanish left government at the time of writing. The anti-austerity Portuguese left is in power and Syriza won on an anti-austerity platform, although they have since compromised and lost power in the 2019 general election.

In demographic terms the rise of the precariat means that the left cannot be just about the working class. This insecure cross-class group is open to appeals from the firm left and far

right. The young and educated are also important to left support. This leads to a pluralism and populism of the left, in this context meaning popular support across social groups including but beyond the working class. So political power for the proper left seems possible and social alliances that can deliver electoral support are there to be mobilised. The issue now is less whether democratic socialism has support, but more whether that support can be mobilised to the extent it can edge past the right in elections and how opposition to the proper left can be overcome.

The proper left has succeeded in reviving democratic socialism and moving onto wider issues such as climate emergency and less work. There is a social base after austerity for a firm left politics in government. But there should be no illusions about the backlash the left in power will face, from the centre-left, the right, the media, international institutions and capital. Embeddedness in society and in popular movements willing to sustain the left will be vital.

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