

# The Left and Europe

By Anthony Coughlan

The political Left, whether social democratic, communist or Trotskyist, has always found the European Union problematic. This is because supranational EU “integration” poses the issue of national independence and national democracy so acutely, which many on the Left find embarrassing. They prefer to concentrate on economic issues, for, on political ones like national independence, they fear being found on the same side as the Right. Their political sectarianism makes that hard for them to cope with.

The EU shifts a myriad of government functions from the national level, where they have traditionally been under the control of democratically elected parliaments and governments, to the supranational, where the bureaucrats of the EU Commission have the monopoly of legislative initiative and where technocracy rules. Should the Left oppose or support this process?

The classical socialist position is clear. It is that Leftwingers should eschew “economism” and should seek to give a lead on democratic political questions as well as economic ones. They thereby put themselves in the best position to win political hegemony in their respective countries and to implement left wing economic measures in due course when their peoples desire these.

Marx and Engels took it for granted that socialism could only be achieved in independent national States. In the Communist Manifesto of 1848 they wrote: “Though not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie.” They supported Irish independence from Britain.

Engels wrote to his friend Kugelman: "There are two oppressed peoples in Europe, the Irish and the Poles, who are never more international than when they are most national."

Their Irish follower, James Connolly, showed by his political practice in allying himself with the radical democrats of the IRB in the 1916 Easter Rising that he regarded the establishment of a fully independent Irish State as the prerequisite of being able to achieve the socialist measures that he advocated. While awaiting execution he speculated on how the international socialist press would interpret the Dublin rebellion: "They will never understand why I am here. They will all forget I am an Irishman."

Outside Europe the proposition that the Left should be the foremost advocates of national sovereignty would be taken as self-evident. The strength of communism in Asian countries like China and Vietnam rests on its identification with nationalism. The appeal of the Left in Latin America is largely based on its opposition to Yankee imperialism. Only in Europe do so many Left wingers regard the defence of national independence in face of EU integration as "right-wing" and therefore by definition reactionary.

This is primarily due to the fact that the main countries of Western Europe – France, Germany, Britain, Spain, Italy etc. – were all imperial powers in their day and historically their mainstream Labour Movements identified with that imperialism and its colonial accompaniments. With honourable if marginal exceptions, the national Labour Movements in these countries supported their respective national bourgeoisies in going to war with one another in World Wars 1 and 2.

In the second half of the 20th century transnational capital became predominant over national capital in the advanced industrial world. In Europe continental social democrats now shifted to backing European-based transnational capital in supporting its main political project, the construction of a

supranational power, the EU/Eurozone, in which the classical principles of capitalist laissez faire – free movement of goods, services, capital and labour – would for the first time in history have the force of constitutional law.

In Britain and Ireland, Labour initially dissented. The political tradition in Britain is that all the main issues of national policy are decided inside the Tory Party, with the rest of society having bit parts. Joining the EEC became the central goal of Conservative policy from 1961. The Labour Left originally opposed this, as indeed in this country the Irish Labour Party opposed Irish membership of the EEC in our 1972 Accession referendum. Under Michael Foot's leadership British Labour advocated the UK's withdrawal from the EEC in the 1983 general election.

Then in 1988, with Margaret Thatcher in Downing Street, Commission President Jacques Delors, a French socialist, wooed the British TUC at Blackpool and Ireland's ICTU at Malahide and promised them labour-friendly legislation from Brussels which they would never get at home. The Trade Union leaders embraced "social Europe" and much of the Labour Left followed them, in some cases becoming missionaries for the grand "project". As the downside of the EU/Eurozone became clear in recent years, Euroscepticism began to grow on the political Right. Now some on the Left are starting to follow the Right in that too, in Southern Europe and maybe in Britain.

In France and Italy the central role of communists in the war-time Resistance and their consequent appeal to national sentiment gave these countries mass communist parties for three decades after World War 2. A key factor in the subsequent decline of these parties was their embrace of the EC/EU in the 1970s and 1980s as one of the tenets of "Eurocommunism".

In France this volte-face was necessary to allow Communist Ministers join Francois Mitterand's socialist government in

1981. I recall the labour historian Desmond Greaves remarking at the time; "This will revive fascism in France." That was before anyone had heard of le Pen. The French Communist Party, which had one-quarter of the seats in France's National Assembly in 1956, has 2% there today. Many former French working class communist voters now vote for the National Front.

Left wingers in the Trotskyist tradition tend to be upholders of EU supranationalism as "objectively progressive", while stigmatising concern for national independence as nationalism and "rightwing". This goes back to Trotsky's famous dispute with Stalin in the 1920s over whether it was possible to build socialism in one country – that being Stalin's view – or whether it required a more general transformation, world revolution, as Trotsky thought. The EU is assumed to provide a more favourable field for socialism because it is at once bigger and it is trans-national, although it is hard to see how socialist-type restrictions on capital can come from a body one of whose constitutional principles is free movement of capital.

The EU institutions and their national extensions are populated with people who were on the Trotskyist Left in their youth and who feel no qualms at the EU's assaults on national democracy. Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Portuguese Commission President José Manuel Barroso are among those with such a background who have advanced supranationalism. Left-sounding arguments for the EU go down well in circles where "socialism" is no way a realistic danger, but where "nationalism" very much is – that is, the nationalism which resists losing national independence and democracy. Leftist rhetoric, radical-sounding, has helped grease many a lucrative EU career path.

Leftist Europhilia of this kind has been influential in the ideological collapse of Greece's Syriza, which made its

leadership adopt policies the opposite of what they were elected on. While loud against “austerity” Messrs Tsipris, Varoufakis and Tsakalotos continually proclaimed themselves believers in the EU, which they seemed to think could be transformed into a force for cross-national solidarity and Euro-Keynesianism by dint of rhetorical argument.

When it came to the crunch they lacked the courage to go for a “Grexit”, a repudiation of Greece’s mountainous debts and a devaluation of a restored drachma. Yet only such a policy can revive Greece’s lost competitiveness, stimulate its home demand and bring back economic growth, for Greece’s third bailout will not work.

The dissenters in Syriza are now advocating such a course, as are the Greek communists and others. The Syriza collapse is educational for Leftwingers everywhere. It illustrates the old truth that the establishment or re-establishment of national independence – which means a State having its own currency and with it control of either its interest rate or its exchange rate – must be central to any meaningful campaign against neoliberalism and banker-imposed austerity, not to mind “socialism”, however one might define that.

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