



THE FALSE CONCEPT OF POPULISM AND THE CHALLENGES FACING THE LEFT:

A CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICS IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC



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The art in this dossier, created by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, playfully highlights the fragility of the current political order. Each collage illustrates different forces that are attempting to either uphold or destabilise the pillars of western hegemony and the neoliberal consensus. Together, they point to the necessity of toppling these pillars and planting new seeds for a socialist future.

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Over the course of the past fifteen years, the concept of populism has made a remarkable comeback. In Europe and North America, the term is used to describe political forces that are outside the neoliberal consensus of political life. For almost fifty years, neoliberal political forces have promoted the idea that they will be the managers of the capitalist system, and that even when there is a change of government there will be no real change in the neoliberal consensus. In the 1990s, the neoliberal consensus was known as the Washington Consensus, at which time it referred to a set of free market policy prescriptions considered to be the standard reform package promoted for developing countries. Today, the term needs to be broadened to include a few key aspects, such as the need to accept capitalism as eternal, shrink the aspects of the state that provide social welfare and regulate business, expand the repressive apparatus of the state to prevent any challenge to the status quo, and acknowledge the centrality of the United States as the leader of the world system.

Already in the 1970s and 1980s, the parties that used to be social democratic (the left) and traditionally conservative (the right) had started to drift into the neoliberal pact. Upholding this new consensus frayed the traditional divisions among these groups and created the possibility for a technocratic future. These neoliberal forces, in other words, were not rooted in one party but in several parties, each of which was committed – despite their origins – to the terms of the neoliberal pact. For example, in the United States, the Democratic and Republican parties fully came to this neoliberal consensus in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Across Europe, the differences between the social democrats and the Christian

democrats became moot as they too adopted the neoliberal consensus as their own.

During the Third Great Depression, triggered in 2006 by the mortgage crisis in the United States and continuing into the present, new formations began to appear that challenged the neoliberal consensus and stood outside the neoliberal centre. These political forces, whether from the far right of a special type or of the North Atlantic electoral left, began to be called ‘populist’.¹ Though the term populist has, generally speaking, been used in a way that is misleading and vague since the nineteenth century, in political science it most often refers to anti-establishment politics. According to this definition, if the establishment today is the neoliberal centre, then certainly any challenge to it will be populist. This dossier attempts to provide a more accurate definition of the term and draw clear lines between the neoliberal pact, the far right of a special type, and the North Atlantic electoral left.





The Far Right of a Special Type

The first appearance of the term populism in our time was when forces of the far right of a special type began to appear across Europe, particularly in eastern Europe. An early example of this sort of political tendency emerged in Poland with the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), which was founded in 2001 by twin brothers Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński and then became the largest party in the country in the 2005 general election. The orientation of PiS was towards the Catholic Church and economic intervention by the state, a move in both directions – social and economic – against the kind of neoliberal consensus of the European Union (which had rooted itself in social liberalism, economic deregulation, and open markets). Eventually, the Kaczyński twins occupied prominent positions in public office, with Lech becoming the mayor of Warsaw (2002–2005) and then president of Poland (2005–2010) and his brother Jarosław serving as his prime minister (2006–2007). What had transpired in Poland rapidly spread through Hungary with Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party, which formed in 1988 initially as a centre-left force before drifting to the neoliberal centre and eventually moving to a socially conservative Hungarian nationalism, and through Austria, where Jörg Haider transformed the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) from its centrist posture to an anti-immigrant and socially conservative nationalism between 1986 and 2000.

This new phenomenon eventually spread across the rest of Europe, from Matteo Salvini’s Lega Party (Lega per Salvini Premier, LSP) in

Italy to Marine Le Pen's National Rally (Rassemblement national, RN) in France. These parties came together in the European Parliament and then separated into different political groups, such as the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (since 2009), Europe of Nations and Freedom (2015–2019), Identity and Democracy (2019–2024), and Patriots for Europe (since 2024), as well as Europe of Sovereign Nations (since 2024). This coming together and then breaking apart suggest both a general unanimity of opinion amongst these far-right parties of a special type, which differ in their approach to the European project (and the European Union) and to issues of social conservatism. What distinguished them from the neoliberal pact was principally their overt social conservatism, their commitment to some forms of economic nationalism, and their rhetorical scepticism about the European project.

However, once these political parties came into power, they did not break fundamentally with the neoliberal consensus, since most of them continued to adopt the policies of business deregulation, social austerity, and a commitment to the European market. These parties did not adopt strong policies of economic protectionism and social welfare in the European Parliament or in their own domestic parliaments, nor did they follow the British Eurosceptics into their own version of Brexit. When the European bureaucrats introduced new laws aimed at integrating the European market and addressing the need for more balanced budget policies, the parties of the far right of a special type went along willingly. If they claimed not to follow the neoliberal economic consensus, they certainly did not break with the Atlantic security arrangements that subordinated Europe to the overall policy agenda set by the United States since the end

of World War II. Despite their occasional doubts about the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), most of the countries governed by the far right of a special type had a comfortable role in the alliance. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) is a case in point.

In 2024, when Washington insisted that European countries spend at least 2% of their GDP on their militaries and contribute more towards NATO, 23 of NATO's 32 members pledged to reach or exceed that target (compared to just three members in 2014).² When the US wanted European countries to decrease economic ties with China in 2019 and when they wanted the Europeans to condemn Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European states, led by the far right, largely accepted these orders. In fact, in many European countries the far right of a special type went into alliance with neoliberal forces to form governments or absorbed former neoliberal politicians into their ranks. There was no real difference between these forces, at least when it came to economic and security policy. The major exception is Hungary's Orbán, whose 2024 presidency of the Council of the European Union has been marked by an attempt to halt the conflict in Ukraine and to prevent the expansion of NATO. The Orbán exception, however, has not impacted groups such as Meloni's FdI or Alice Weidel's Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), which have shown an unwavering commitment to NATO and its policies.

Why was the far right of a special type considered to be populist, given that it did not rupture with the neoliberal consensus? The neoliberal consensus drew an important distinction as having emerged

out of and being committed to liberalism, whereas the far right of a special type was decidedly 'anti-liberal'. This far right broke from social liberalism and from forms of mainstream libertarianism with their strongly conservative religiosity (anti-abortion, anti-feminism, homophobia, and transphobia) and overall traditionalism (their rootedness in the patriarchal nuclear family and in the Church, which transposed into a belief in the strong male leader in society). Yet, very little distinguished this far right of a special type from the neoliberal consensus in other illiberal aspects (including empowering security forces and attempts to curtail freedom of speech). The term 'populist' was used to distinguish this new right from liberals, whose liberalism, however, was no longer of a classic sort (freedom of speech and association) but was more clearly a liberalism of lifestyle and social choices for the middle class. The term 'populist' was, therefore, more of an election slogan than a serious category of political differentiation.

The clearest example of this form of electoral sloganeering can be seen in the United States. A close look at the political records of the Democratic and Republican parties shows a strong proximity of purpose and action. Though the two parties exhibit different styles and social choices, very little divides them when it comes to the neoliberal consensus – despite the rhetoric of economic nationalism that has now come to define the Republican Party, particularly under the leadership of Donald Trump. With the terms 'liberal' and 'fascist' highly charged on either side, it is beneficial for the Republicans to call the Democrats 'liberals' (which they have made a synonym for communist) and for the Democrats to call the Republicans, particularly Trump, 'fascists'. This terminology allows each side to drive

an electoral agenda, but neither term – used in this highly charged way – scientifically explains the political field to which they refer.

The word ‘fascist’ has taken on a moral charge, which is useful for electoral purposes, but not to properly understand the far right of a special type. This far right has not appeared, as fascism did a hundred years ago, to defeat working-class struggles and the communist movement, nor does it have any problem with the formal institutions of democracy. Both the Italian and German fascists wanted to suspend democratic and electoral systems and use the entire repressive apparatus of the state to decimate the workers’ movement and the communist institutions. No such threat currently faces capitalism in its Atlantic core. Rather than appear as a bulwark for capitalism against the forces of socialism, the far right of a special type appears to defend capitalism against its cannibalisation by the neoliberal pact and to ensure that capitalist institutions have a mass base amongst a population that has been disoriented by the impact of the Third Great Depression. This far right threatens to grab the economy by the throat and make it cough out jobs, but it cannot really force this to happen. The fact that the parties of the far right of a special type mention the crisis and do not deny it – as the parties of the neoliberal consensus do – is sufficient to garner support among enough people who at least see their pain being mirrored in the speeches of far-right politicians. That these parties do not act to change the actual conditions of everyday life will eventually be a burden for this political tendency, but not yet.

Because the neoliberal pact has so fully developed the state's repressive apparatus in order to discipline the outraged population, the far right of a special type can use the legal repressive apparatus to do its work for it; it does need to create an illegal force to do its bidding. It is true that the far right of a special type continues to use homeopathic doses of violence to demoralise the left and the workers' movement, but it also knows that if it unleashes too much violence, this will turn the middle class against it and perhaps lead sections of the middle class into the arms of the left. This far right of a special type speaks in the name of the people, but it does not build policies that help the people.

The Third Great Depression and the North Atlantic Electoral Left

In the early years of the Third Great Depression, a new kind of left-wing process began to assert itself on both sides of the Atlantic.³ In 2015, Jeremy Corbyn (born 1949), a long-time Member of Parliament for Islington North, contested and won the leadership of the Labour Party, and Senator Bernie Sanders (born 1941), a democratic socialist from Vermont, sought the Democratic Party presidential nomination for the 2016 US elections. Both the Labour Party and the Democratic Party have become illustrations of the forced march of social democratic politics to the neoliberal pact. Tony Blair's insistence that the Labour Party cut Clause IV of its constitution (for mass nationalisation, or 'common ownership' of private industry) and his commitment to weaken union power within the party mirrored Bill Clinton's emergence as the leader of the Democratic Party through the neoliberal Democratic Leadership Council, which erased any influence that unions and social movements had enjoyed within the party structure up to that point. By the time the Third Depression set in, neither the Labour Party nor the Democratic Party had the institutional space to properly debate a way out of the neoliberal pact. Sanders' campaign brought the debate to a party that refused to take him seriously, while Corbyn's leadership was constantly sabotaged by the neoliberal alliance within the Labour Party that saw to it that he not only lost the leadership but was ejected from the party on spurious grounds. The experience of Sanders and Corbyn underlined the fact that both parties, and any internal instruments for debate, had been completely absorbed

by the neoliberal pact; a departure toward anything outside that consensus would simply not be permitted. In the aftermath of Sanders's defeat in the presidential primary and Corbyn's removal from his post as party leader, there was no lasting mass formation left – only residues in the form of the Democratic Socialists of America and the UK's Momentum.

In other parts of Europe, politicians who had been part of establishment parties built large electoral instruments to the left of the neoliberal consensus: Syriza in Greece (2012), Podemos in Spain (2014), and La France insoumise in France (2016). These attempts at electoral power soon became known as 'left-wing populism', especially in 2015, when Syriza won power in the Greek elections and Podemos made gains in the regional and federal elections in Spain. Each of these formations was built around singular leaders: Alexis Tsipras (born 1974), who led Synaspismós or 'Coalition' into the Syriza (From the Roots) alliance; Pablo Iglesias (born 1978), who led Podemos (We Can); and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (born 1951), who left the Socialist Party and then formed La France insoumise (France Unbowed) out of a coalition of left and green forces. Syriza and Podemos, unlike La France insoumise, shot into the political firmament like meteors but then sputtered out as credible alternatives to neoliberalism. These two formations were rooted less in ideological clarity than in an electoral opportunity delivered to them by the rapid decline of living standards in Greece and Spain during the early years of the Third Great Depression. Without this clarity, they collapsed before the muscular certainties of the neoliberal centre in the European Union (EU). Neither Syriza nor Podemos could produce a firm political line that would oppose the austerity regime

of the European Central Bank (ECB). La France insoumise did not go into government, so it did not suffer the same fate; it is, however, likely that had Mélenchon prevailed in the 2017 presidential election (he came fourth with 19.6% of the vote), his government would have floundered before the EU bureaucrats in Brussels and the ECB financiers in Frankfurt.⁴

Each of these political formations emerged out of large-scale protest movements: the UK's National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts in 2010; the US's Occupy Wall Street in 2011; Greece's Indignant Citizens Movement in 2011; Spain's 15-M Movement and the Indignados or 'the Outraged' in 2011; and France's anti-austerity worker strikes in 2011, which morphed into the NuitDebout (Night on Our Feet) in 2016. The electoralism of the fronts that emerged to some extent captured the energy of these disparate movements, but they were unable to drive forward their political demands – nor did the movements dissolve into these electoral formations. For example, the strong anti-EU sentiment among the Indignados did not carry over to Syriza or Podemos; meanwhile, La France insoumise did not initiate the Mouvement des gilets jaunes (Yellow Vests Movement) in 2018, a protest movement that broke through the left-right divide in France. Studies of those who joined the Yellow Vests' protests showed that about a fifth were close to the far right of a special type and just under a fifth were close to La France insoumise, but only a negligible section had any faith in the neoliberal centre represented by President Emmanuel Macron.⁵ These mass protest movements wanted a decisive break from the politics of the neoliberal centre, which imposed austerity on the working class and sections of the professional middle class in these countries. However, the political

formations that emerged did not have the ideological clarity or the political strength to break from the neoliberal consensus.

Part of the electoral hesitation comes from the tendency of bourgeois liberal democracy to favour the middle class in the form of its electoral systems. Election day in most countries of the North Atlantic is not a holiday and, in most, voting is not compulsory. There is also an interesting religious divide regarding voting day: most countries that emerge from a Catholic tradition vote on Sunday, which is not the case for countries in the Protestant tradition. Furthermore, in almost no country is public transport free on election day. The lack of a holiday and free transport, as well as other barriers, make it difficult for the working class to vote in large numbers. This contributes to a large abstention rate amongst the working class (the natural base for socialists), hovering around 30% in Europe and 40% in the US in national elections over the past decades. Furthermore, there tends to be less voter participation in countries that have high rates of inequality and a larger percentage of the workforce in the fishing and agricultural sectors. Conversely, in countries that have higher average wages and more workers in the service sector, there is more voter participation.⁶ Since there are higher rates of abstention amongst the working class, there is a tendency for any political formation – particularly one that is against austerity but not necessarily for a working-class agenda – to build a programme aimed at the suffering middle class and lower middle-classes, which face serious challenges of precarity and clash with the traditions of their society. These issues began to define left formations in the North Atlantic that were rooted more in electoralism than in the longer-term culture of building working-class power.



The Category of ‘Populism’

The neoliberal pact created several conditions that paved the way for the rise of both the far right of a special type and of the North Atlantic left in its electoral incarnation. A brief assessment of these conditions will allow us to better understand the intimate relationship between the far right of a special type and the neoliberal pact, as well as the weakness of the North Atlantic left in its ability to break with neoliberalism:

1. **The Third Great Depression.** Because of the economic policies that favoured finance capital and that enforced the privatisation, commodification, and deregulation of the economy, there has been no exit from the credit crunch of 2006–2007 and no ability to grow the economies of the North Atlantic. Unwilling to contest the oligopolist power of finance and tech billionaires’ grip on society, the neoliberal pact enforced permanent austerity on the working class and the lower middle class. Precarious jobs with no future or possibility of career advancement became widespread, and the uberisation of working-class jobs became commonplace (especially in the service sector). Such working conditions weakened trade unions, which meant that pillars of the working class as a class began to disappear (such as trade union halls, community centres, and public institutions for study and healthcare). Between insecure working hours and shifts as well as the disappearance of the old institutions of the working class, combined with the arrival of the digital landscape for entertainment, a deep

atomisation of the population set in. A working class without the means to build its own institutions has great difficulty articulating its views in a complex, modern society, and, with the media increasingly monopolised and dominated by the neoliberal consensus, the views of the working class that did get articulated found no space in that mediascape.

2. **The technocracy.** Free from the challenge of genuine working-class politics, the neoliberal consensus began to erect the idea of technocracy as the ideal form of government. Regardless of election results, the neoliberal pact found a way to maintain their governments in power despite the lowered voting numbers and the fractured mandates. In some cases, such as in Italy, where there is a widely used term for this kind of government – *governo dei tecnici* (government of technocrats) – this has happened many times over the decades, most recently with Mario Draghi’s government of 2021–2022, and it has happened in France with the government of Prime Minister Michel Barnier starting in 2024. Traditional social democrats, who do not support austerity, have often been brought into coalition with the technocrats of the neoliberal pact to keep out the far right. In fact, such technocratic governments prepare the terrain for the rise of the far right of a special type since they delegitimise governmental institutions and democratic processes in the eyes of the working class and the lower end of the middle class. The experts that are brought into government are made up entirely of upper middle-class professionals loyal to neoliberal ideology. The journey of the traditional right and social democrats to form the neoliberal

pact marked a departure from a mass politics to a politics of elitism. There is a technocracy that is the opposite of a democracy, but which nonetheless uses the trappings of liberal democracy to exercise power. That is what has largely led to the defenestration of the democratic spirit.

3. **The technocratic solution.** For at least a generation, from the early 1990s to the start of the Third Great Depression in 2006–2007, the governments of the neoliberal pact refused to allow any policy debate that strayed outside their consensus. Mass participation in solving society's problems was simply not allowed. During the worst of the financial and credit crisis, and during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, mass public action to salve the effects of both events was nowhere to be seen in the North Atlantic. The message was to isolate at home until the technocrats came up with a vaccine, an option largely only available to the upper and middle classes, whose professional profile in many cases allowed for remote work. Meanwhile, in parts of the Global South such as Kerala (India), Vietnam, Cuba, Venezuela, and China, millions of volunteers – mostly from their respective communist parties – went from door to door to ensure that people who could not leave had all that they needed.⁷ When the slogan 'social distancing' became commonplace, the communist Chief Minister of Kerala Pinarayi Vijayan challenged it with a better slogan: 'physical distance, social unity'.⁸ This social fabric is unavailable in most parts of the North Atlantic, where the population has come to rely upon the state or the private sector to deliver goods and services. The demobilisation of the

population, which is another way to say the break-up of communities that had been rooted in the working class, became apparent during the pandemic. Part of the reason that there is less engagement in volunteerism and public service in Europe and the United States is that the population – faced with precarious working conditions and the austerity-driven difficulties of managing everyday life – largely relies on the idea the state – run by the technocrats and the private sector – will provide them with goods and services.

4. **No words for the working class.** In the 1990s, the language of class slowly vanished from public discourse in the Atlantic. In place of an overt class politics in social democratic spaces – and in many cases even in further left spaces – a binary was established between the language of class (seen as anachronistic) and the language of identity (which became the primary driving force for many social movements). This is a false binary, since various forms of class and identity were central to most political formations that emerged in the nineteenth century, which manifested itself, for instance, in struggles around national self-determination, minority rights, and women’s emancipation. Creating a binary between class and identity served to set aside the language of class, which was replaced in the social democratic remainder by a concern for inequality and allowed identity politics or the politics of recognition to become the main form of address in this neoliberal environment. When the far right of a special type appeared twenty years ago, it seemed to disrupt this binary: identity politics were key to the far right, which sought to enact a series of

reversals through a culture war on family and women's rights, but this far right also presumed to speak to the working class and the lower middle class by claiming that these sectors had been ignored by 'globalists'. The far right built new coalitions that included sections of the population that had abstained from voting in the past but whose numbers were considerable and could sway any election.⁹ This became clear with the rapid ascent of Donald Trump within the Republican Party, which he transformed, through this newly acquired base, into a party of the far right of a special type. It is because of this rhetorical pivot to the working class and the lower middle class that observers began to label these political forces as 'populist'.

5. **Pseudo-break from neoliberalism.** The devastation of the neoliberal landscape provided the parties of the far right of a special type with the opportunity to argue that the neoliberal pact of permanent austerity had failed and that they would be the instrument of the abandoned populations. This far right made a pseudo-break with the neoliberal consensus, at least rhetorically, by reviving an older language of economic nationalism and putting itself on the side of the 'people' and against the 'elites'.¹⁰ This far right drew on the language of anti-austerity to create a narrative that claimed that a robust anti-immigrant line would set the national economy back on course, since, it argued (against all facts), it was austerity that had generated a neoliberal pro-immigrant policy. This was a malicious use of the anti-austerity argument, but it did draw in a new constituency of precarious working-class voters, and it did propose a departure from the kind of globalisation agenda

driven by neoliberals. In practice, however, the far right of a special type was not prepared to affect any real rupture from the neoliberal consensus.

The term ‘populist’ – as used to describe the far right of a special type – is sufficient if it merely refers to a possible post-neoliberal politics that could cater to ‘the people’. But the concept is insufficient if it implies the possibility of a necessary rupture from the neoliberal consensus. The far right of a special type is theatrical with its anti-neoliberalism but unwilling to act on these gestures.



The Historicism of the Left

The left is made up of a variety of historical forces that are in motion within each different context to advance certain important principles, such as the convictions that:

1. capitalism is unable to solve the problems it has created and reproduced.
2. socialism is the necessary antidote to the blockage of history by capitalism.

The varieties of the left do not overlap with the forces of the far right of a special type, which are rooted in the capitalist system and deeply anti-communist and which emerge out of the most hideous sections of the right wing. To use the same category of populism to describe the left and the far right of a special type is a malicious political tactic used to delegitimise the left. The specific conjuncture in which the North Atlantic left has had to operate requires empirical and theoretical clarity.

The North Atlantic left – both the electoral and the non-electoral varieties – inherited significant challenges:

1. **The left in crisis.** After the fall of the Soviet Union, the North Atlantic electoral left went into a serious crisis. This led to various outcomes, including the demise of the Italian Communist Party in February 1991, one of the largest communist parties in the region. This crisis impacted both the communist left as

well as the various sectarian groups inspired by Leon Trotsky and by anarchism. Few parties could withstand the pressure of anti-communist triumphalism or the surrender and disintegration of the trade union movement. The left's weakness was rooted in its lack of ideological clarity about its role in society, its habits of sectarianism that could not sustain themselves in a context without the Soviet Union, and the departure of large number of cadres who no longer felt a compelling reason to be involved in a movement for socialism when it appeared as if socialism was no longer on the horizon. Nonetheless, a number of communist parties weathered the storm of the post-1991 period, such as the French Communist Party (PCF), the Greek Communist Party (KKE), the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB). In Germany, sections of communists and left social democrats came together in 2007 to create Die Linke (The Left), which drifted away from the class struggle but birthed the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht in 2024 (The Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance). Meanwhile, the German Communist Party (KPD) and its youth wing remain a small but effective force, and the Belgian Workers' Party (PTB) advanced significantly after 2008 through a 'renewal' process that allowed it to be both a mass electoral party and a cadre party. In Italy, the collapse of the large Communist Party (PCI) left shards of memory in the Rete dei Comunisti (Network of Communists), established in 1988, and in the younger Potere al Popolo! (Power to the People!), both small in the face of the far right of a special type. In many of these countries, the left has maintained a

presence in parliament but has not been able – on its own – to rupture the neoliberal consensus.

2. **Defending the system.** During the period of the neoliberal consensus, the social democrats of the North Atlantic drifted further from their liberal commitment to social welfare and relief, not only abandoning their historical mission but accepting further cuts on behalf of the wealthy and against the working class and the lower middle class. It is because of this abandonment by the social democrats that the left had to take on both the mission of defending social welfare and fighting to build the independent power of the working class to transcend the system, playing a complicated and confusing role of defending the welfare aspects of the system while fighting to transform it. Defending welfare was essential to provide relief to a working class that was being damaged by the neoliberal austerity regime. However, this did mean that the energies of the left, by and large, had to be shifted from an agenda of transformation to an agenda of defending the welfare side of the capitalist system. The North Atlantic electoral left came from an authentically anti-austerity political position but could only go so far as to promote social welfare policies to repair the broken state institutions that serviced the working class and lower middle class.
3. **The pitfalls of coalitions.** Increasingly, the old divisions between the various kinds of lefts have begun to fade away and there is a new tendency towards unities in struggles and in electoral blocs. This was apparent in France when La France insoumise and the French Communist Party (PCF) went into

an alliance for the 2024 parliamentary elections and when the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) worked with Podemos and then later with Sumar (Add Up), formed in 2022. These histories of alliance building go back a long way, as illustrated by the Portuguese Communist Party's participation in electoral platforms such as the United Peoples Alliance (1978–1987) and the Unitary Democratic Coalition (1987 to present). The difficulty in these coalitions has been the tendency for various left parties and social movements (from ecological groups to social justice groups) to drive the agenda of the coalition rather than assert the importance of fighting to transcend the present system. The role of social movements – vital in mobilising large numbers of people on different platforms and for different issues – has nonetheless been shaped by a non-governmental organisation logic of partial politics rather than an anti-capitalist framework, and, equally, by the weight of identity politics that abandons socialist politics and draws the platforms of these unities into liberalism. While these unities in action are important, in many cases they are premised on the left having to leave its most important principles at the door.

4. **The revival of anti-communism.** The deep roots of Cold War anti-communism remain alive and well on both sides of the North Atlantic, deployed as weapons to bludgeon anyone who tries to revive a discussion even along social democratic lines – such as to expand social welfare. The neoliberal centre and the far right of a special type are united in their commitment to the Cold War era military build-up and the

wars against national liberation struggles. For instance, as the North Atlantic left made gains in society with its commitment to end the US-Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, Cold War anti-communist forms of attack were revived to discipline anyone who stood for peace and against war, with the full weight falling on the left. That the far right of a special type is intimately linked to the neoliberal consensus on the use of Western military force is indicative of its proximity to the established systems of power. The left's break with the NATO mindset puts it in a unique position regarding the political field in the Western states.

Closing Remarks

With Donald Trump's return to the US presidency in January 2025, the far right of a special type has been emboldened across the North Atlantic. Several initiatives to coordinate the far right's politics, such as Steve Bannon's The Movement (founded in 2017) and the Madrid Forum (founded in 2020), have already created the foundation for joint actions across the Atlantic. But despite the jubilation, the contradictions set in place by the neoliberal pact will not allow the far right of a special type to act in a truly populist manner against the institutions of neoliberalism. For instance, despite widespread distress caused by the war in Ukraine and the dangers of escalation, it is unlikely that the far right of a special type will be able to settle into a normal relationship with Russia, and even more unlikely that it will be able to disrupt the Atlantic security arrangements rooted in NATO. The far right of a special type routinely overpromises, particularly when it comes to issues of economic misery. Neither its anti-immigration policies nor its tariff policies will increase the economic opportunities for the majority, particularly if these sharpen the break with countries in Asia, such as China and India. The eventual failure of the far right of a special type will provide a tremendous opportunity for the left – so long as the left is prepared to take up the charge.





Notes

- 1 For more on the 'far right of a special type', see Vijay Prashad, 'Ten Theses on the Far Right of a Special Type: The Thirty-Third Newsletter (2024)', Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, 15 August 2024, <https://thetricontinental.org/newsletterissue/ten-theses-on-the-far-right-of-a-special-type/>.
- 2 Fenella McGerty, 'NATO Defence Spending: A Bumper Year', International Institute for Security Studies, 8 July 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2024/07/nato-defence-spending-a-bumper-year/>.
- 3 For more on the Third Great Depression, see Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *The World in Economic Depression: A Marxist Analysis of Crisis*, notebook no. 4, 10 October 2023, <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-notebook-4-economic-crisis/>.
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