

# What is Authoritarian Populism and why should it be Combatted?

by Shawn Hattingh

**&**

# Lessons from the Historic Fight Against Fascism

by Wayne Price

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Notes

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## Notes



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# What is Authoritarian Populism and why should it be Combatted?

by Shawn Hattingh

Like maggots crawling out of a decaying carcass, authoritarian populist parties and politicians have emerged in many parts of the world over the last few years. All of these parties and politicians practice a vile form of politics based on hatred, crass stereotypes, blatant lying, spectacle, bigotry, anti-democracy, misogyny, racism, and militarism.

This brew of toxic politics has been served up as "anti-establishment" and in the interest of the common people by the strongmen that are at the heart of these authoritarian populist movements. In reality such politics are profoundly frightening – they point to the possibility of a future not of hope and greater egalitarianism, but decay, intolerance, enforced inequality through extreme violence and ethnic cleansing. They are, in many ways, the frightening side of identity politics.

## Prime Examples of Hatred

The prime examples of such authoritarian populist politicians, in Europe and North America include the likes of far right wing fanatics such as

Donald Trump in the United States (US), Marine Le Pen of Front Nationale in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Danish People's Party, Alternative for Germany, Golden Dawn in Greece and the League in Italy. All of these parties and politicians share a platform of white supremacy and islamophobia.

Their "anti-establishment" politics goes no further than blaming immigrants or minority groups for all problems. They claim to oppose the unfairness of free trade, yet deny that internal class rule lies at the heart of economic inequalities that are driving discontent. Likewise, few of these right-wing fanatics identify capitalism as the cause of people's misery. Given their deliberately shallow and crude analyses, for these politicians the solution is the ridiculous and racist notion of keeping immigrants out and for the return to some mythological past – which never existed – of a white Europe or North America in which prosperity reigns under capitalism.

While sharing racism, nationalism and a commitment to some form of capitalism, not all of the authoritarian populist parties and politicians in Europe and North America share exactly the same economic policies, at least on the surface. While all rail against the "establishment" and claim to be for the "common" people and even to be "anti-globalisation", some like Trump on a domestic front follow a rabid form of neo-liberalism that has involved huge tax cuts for corporations, which he falsely sells as a stimulus to encourage investment in production and to create jobs, along with slashing welfare for the working class. Yet others like the openly fascist Golden Dawn in Greece (who are not in power), rhetorically are proponents of bringing back welfare capitalism for ethnic Greeks.

Such politicians and parties are not just present in the heartlands of imperialism; they are also to be found in parts of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (this does not even include the long established authoritarian regimes in places such as Russia and China). In India there is Narendra Modi. He harks back to a mythical golden age when only Hindus were supposedly citizens and seeks to ultimately ethnically cleanse India of people that are part of religious minorities – such as Christians and Muslims – who he blames for the country's ills. In Brazil, the far right misogynist Jair Bolsonaro has vowed to kill progressive activists from the Landless People's Movement. He is also fanatically anti-immigrants having called people from Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean coming to Brazil the "the scum of humanity".

## Conclusion

Currently the United States as well as much of the world is threatened by a rise of right-wing authoritarianism. In the US, one of its two parties has swung far to the right. From its leadership around Donald Trump (even those who do not like him personally) to its core of big donors, the Republican Party is hard right-wing. Its deluded base is around 30 to 40 percent of the public, including a minority of people prepared to directly attack the government (as was done in the Capitol disruption). The Democratic Party is weak in opposition, being unable to provide real alternatives to the difficulties people face. (Price 2020)

The country is not immediately under threat of fascism or even a Republican coup. But continuing crises and disruptions - political, economic, climate, military, public health, or other - could crash the system. The alternatives, once again, could be some sort of fascism, or a libertarian socialist revolution. In that case, we would do well to review what can be learned from previous failures to defeat the rise of fascism.

unity with liberal, capitalist, parties. This was the “Popular Front.” An alliance with other workers’ parties could imply a class-against-class revolutionary struggle. But an alliance with liberal parties meant that they were committed to not going beyond the limits of capitalism, since the liberals would not accept that. This policy was implemented in the Spanish civil war and in French mass struggles - in both cases leading to the victory of fascists. (In Spain, the mainstream anarchists also joined in Popular Front governments with Social Democrats, Communists, and liberal bourgeois parties - against the opposition of some anarchists such as the Friends of Durruti Group.)

The other wrong lesson some take from this history is a focus on street fighting and direct confrontation. Both the Italian anarchists and Trotsky advocated direct conflicts with the fascists instead of relying on the courts or elections - and they were right. But the forces they called to fight the fascists were mass organisations, big political parties and labour unions. Fighting fascists is necessary but not as distinct from working to win over the majority of the population. Otherwise it becomes, as has been said, “vanguards against vanguards.”

The need to confront fascist rallies does not mean physically fighting against right-wing supporters of bourgeois democracy, such as conservatives. The issue, as I have said, is not and was not “free speech for fascists,” but the right of fascists and semi-fascists to terrorize, violently attack, and break up left wing demonstrations, radical bookstores, union pickets, and to lynch African-Americans, Asian-Americans, or LGBTQ people.

The radical left must not let the far right appear to be the defenders of “free speech.” As a political minority, the far-left depends on the widespread belief in free speech and association to defend itself from state repression. Anarchists and other anti-fascists must oppose all government repression of political viewpoints; they should oppose the efforts of Biden and other Democrats to create new “anti-domestic terrorism” laws. These will start with the far-right but soon be used against the left. Of course, the government will arrest people for violent actions (such as the Capitol invasion) but should not repress speech. Opposition to state repression of free speech and assembly does not prevent anti-fascists from organising self-defence against far-right aggression.

During his rise to power, Recep Erdogan in Turkey – an authoritarian Muslim fundamentalist and right wing nationalist – railed against the Kurdish minority blaming them for all tribulations in Turkey; while claiming that he would provide welfare for ethnic Turks should he become president. Once in power, however, he imposed further neo-liberalism. But the one frightening promise he did keep was to ethnically cleanse hundreds of Kurdish villages. As the economy declined, far from moving away from neo-liberal policies that were driving the crisis, he began to blame unnamed foreign powers for Turkey’s economic woes. In this Erdogan followed the long history of far right, authoritarian populist and fascist politicians scapegoating specific ethnic/race groups or immigrants.

In the Middle East and parts of Africa we have also seen the rise of the authoritarian Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This is a fascist movement based on religion that is misogynistic to its core. Thousands of people have been killed and raped by this movement on the basis of not fitting into ISIS’s view of religion. ISIS, like all of the above authoritarian politicians, grew out of a crisis – in its case it was birthed in the chaos of war and economic collapse in which the US played a central role.

## **Why the Rise of Authoritarian Populists Globally?**

The reality is that the rise of authoritarian populist politicians can largely be traced back to the worldwide crisis of capitalism that erupted in 2008. In the prelude to the crisis, established political parties around the world had imposed neo-liberal policies that set the stage for the crisis. In Europe, it was mostly the established social democratic parties that had imposed these policies. In the US it was both the Republicans and Democrats; and in many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America it was former liberation movements.

It is these policies that freed up financial capital, which then set the crisis off: through unregulated financial institutions and speculation on debt derivatives on a massive scale. Along with this, in most countries, neo-liberal policies that allowed corporations to shift to regions of the globe where wages were lower caused discontent amongst the working class who lost their jobs in the process. Sections of the ruling classes



in such cases did not blame themselves or neo-liberalism; they blamed the “other” and turned to racism to deflect attention – for example, against the “Chinese” or “Mexicans”. Adding to the working class’s misery, established parties then bailed out the very same corporations that were central to the crisis and made the poorest pay for it by ransacking social benefits. Since then, such established parties have been unable to resolve the capitalist crisis – all they have done is to protect the interests of their class, the ruling class, and shift the burden to the poor and workers.

The attack of neo-liberalism also restructured the working class on a global scale. There has been a weakening of the traditional organisations of the working class, such as trade unions. The working class has become more fragmented. Permanent lifelong jobs have largely disappeared, and there has been a rise in low paid and precarious work. In many countries unemployment has grown and the share of wages to gross domestic product has declined. Coupled to this, the ruling classes around the world have pushed the ideology of individualism and large sections of the working class have inculcated this. The consequences have been that progressive working class struggles have been weakened and it is in this context that authoritarian populism has been arising.

Since 2008, voters in numerous countries have been electing authoritarian populist politicians and have rejected established parties. Social democratic parties across Europe have shrunk; numerous established parties in countries like India have been ousted, and even in South Africa an established party such as the African National Congress (ANC) has lost significant support. Many voters are voting for so-called “anti-establishment” authoritarian parties and politicians to punish the established parties with some hope that such politicians will be messiahs that bring back a mythical golden age, fix the economy or at least keep out immigrants that they see as taking their jobs or encroaching on social benefits.

This has posed a problem for the ruling classes in countries such as France, Italy, Hungary, India, Philippines, Brazil, and to a lesser extent the US. This is because the established parties were the traditional parties of the ruling classes. Through these parties the ruling classes could govern through consent and push through their agenda whilst still getting sizeable sections of the working class to vote for these parties. With established parties collapsing, sections of the ruling classes have now turned to politically and financially supporting authoritarian populist politicians such as Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Erdogan and Rodrigo Duterte.

work out plans for a general strike. This was not a political merger but an alliance. “*March separately, strike together!*” Trotsky wrote. Over time he expected that the workers would compare the parties and chose the more militant and radical leaders. The committees might even become the basis for revolutionary workers’ councils (as the strike committees in Russia had become revolutionary soviets).

This never happened. The Social Democrats stuck to constitutional legality. The Communists denounced Trotsky as another fascist. Anarchist and other far-left groupings were too small to make a difference in time. In 1933 Hitler took full power. It was to take the combined efforts of Stalinist Russia, the British empire, and US imperialism to defeat the Nazis and Fascists. Not only the German and Italian workers but much of the world would “pay with tears of blood” for the failure of workers’ revolutions to prevent the rise of fascism.

## Lessons to be Learned and Un-learned

The most common reference I hear to the rise of fascism is from liberals. They denounce the sectarianism and isolation of the Communists in Germany (and implicitly in Italy) at the time. This becomes a rationale for voting for Democrats against the Republicans.

This would be relevant if they were calling on the labour unions and the organised African-American community as well as migrants, environmentalists, and women’s groups to strike and demonstrate against far-right Republicans, including right-wing “militias” and organised thugs. But voting for the Democrats means supporting a capitalist and imperialist party.

This view completely ignores the record of the German and Italian Social Democrats. They relied on the bourgeois-democratic parties and the state to protect them from fascism. The Germans endorsed a conservative capitalist figure for president. These policies led to defeat. Even in this extreme political situation of Germany, one of life or death, the strategy of supporting the “lesser evil” did not work.

It also ignores the further development of the Communist Parties. A few years after the victory of Hitler, in 1935, they jumped over their heads in a leap to the right. Not only did they now endorse alliances with Social Democrats (the former “social fascists”) but they now sought political



that did not have “revolutionary” (Communist) programs. It was declared that all political forces which did not subordinate themselves to the Communist Parties were not merely reformist but were “fascist.” Social Democrats were now officially “social fascists.” Liberals and conservatives were fascists. Every non-Communist was a fascist. Anarchists were “anarcho-fascists.” Obviously there was no point in allying with socialists or unionists against the fascists, since socialists and unionists were also fascists. They had re-created, if anything in a worse form, all of Bordiga’s errors.

Joseph Stalin declared, *“Fascism is the militant organisation of the bourgeoisie which bases itself on the active support of the Social Democracy. Objectively, Social Democracy is the moderate wing of fascism.... These organisations [fascists and Social Democrats] do not contradict but supplement one another. They are not antipodes [opposites] but twins.”* (Price 2007; p. 153)

Despite its pretences, the leadership of the Social Democratic party had no intention of really overthrowing capitalism and its state. It was reformist, not revolutionary. But it relied on elections to parliament, free speech, freedom of association, freedom to form labour unions, and other democratic rights. Without these bourgeois-democratic institutions and rights it would lose everything. The fascists intended to smash all these democratic forms and liberties while setting up a dictatorship. Both fascists and reformist socialists were supporters of capitalism, but they supported it in clashing ways.

Of those who tried to work out a revolutionary alternative to the programs of the Social Democrats and the Communists, it is worthwhile to note the views of Leon Trotsky - by then exiled from Russia by Stalin. He had few followers, especially in Germany at the time, probably less than the German anarchists or far-left Marxists. However, he left a record of political polemic which is useful to examine - although I am not a Trotskyist nor even a Marxist. (Trotsky 1971)

Trotsky proposed that the Communists and Social Democrats, their parties, unions, and other organisations, should form a fighting alliance - a united front. In every city and neighbourhood they would set up joint defence committees. They would defend each other from Nazi assaults. Mutual patrols would drive the Nazis from the streets. They would map out Nazi halls and headquarters and bring the fight to them. Committees in shops and offices would check how business was supporting the fascists. In case the Nazis took power regionally or nationally, they would

Sections of the ruling classes are now backing these authoritarian parties and politicians precisely because they scapegoat minorities and immigrants; while keeping class rule, capitalism and the state’s coercive power firmly in place. They are now seen by some within the ruling classes as the only means to keep capitalism going under its permanent conditions of crisis. The primary means of this is violence or the threat of violence. As such, they guarantee that they will violently maintain the interests of the ruling classes under the notion of defending tradition and order. It is precisely why authoritarian parties strengthen the repressive arms of the state, shut down debate and it is why sections of the ruling class are funding, backing, joining and founding such parties.

## **Authoritarianism in South Africa?**

South Africa has not been fully spared the rise in the popularity of authoritarianism. A study in 2017 by the University of Stellenbosch found although a minority of people felt some form or another of authoritarian government in South Africa could be a good way to run the country, the data showed that that minority is growing. In fact, it more than doubled from 1995 to 2013 and such sentiments were expressed by 46 percent of the sampled respondents in 2013. The legacy of apartheid has also ensured that racial and ethnic identities - rather than class and non-racialism - remain a dominant lens through which much of South African politics is practiced. The space is, therefore, unfortunately ripening for authoritarian populist politics to grow, and signs are it is already happening.

With capitalism ailing in South Africa, numerous small political parties have arisen on overtly authoritarian populist, xenophobic and/or racist platforms. These include the likes of the African Basic Movement, the People’s Revolutionary Movement, and Black First Land First. There are also a number of far right wing parties that are still based on the notion of white supremacy, including the ludicrous Cape Party that wants independence for the Western Cape in the name of protecting white and “coloured” interests.

While there is need to battle such parties, if an authoritarian populist party or politician ends up gaining very wide popularity or even power, their rise will probably not come from the quarters of these fringe parties (although this should not be ruled out). Rather it would most likely come

from one or the other of the two competing sections of the ruling class – one section being an aspirant black elite tied to the Jacob Zuma [former president] faction in the ANC and leaders of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF); the other section being white capitalists, their allies in the Democratic Alliance (DA) and a section of the ANC leadership opposed to Zuma and his cohorts. If it does, neither one of these broad factions would in the end claim to be far-right (to do so would be their political death knell in South Africa), but authoritarian populist they could most certainly be.

Part of the reason why the possibility exists of an authoritarian form of politics gaining dominance in South Africa lies in the deal that led to the 1994 elections. This deal saw the established capitalist class (a small section of the white population) dump the National Party and enter into an alliance with sections of the ANC leadership. In exchange for gaining state power, the capital of the largest corporations was left untouched and a few of the [black] elite in the ANC were incorporated through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and heading the state. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the ANC then drove through policies that favoured corporations and the wealthiest individuals (i.e., neo-liberalism), all whilst maintaining the majority of the working class' vote. That began to change gradually with the rise of the global capitalist crisis and the emergence of the Zuma faction (which included the likes of Julius Malema of the EFF), who were a part of the ANC leadership that had not benefitted from the BEE of the 1990s and early 2000s.

The rise of the Zuma faction, therefore, represented an aspirant black section of the ruling class that intended, and did, use its rise to power within the state to accumulate wealth. In the process it began stepping on the toes of the white section of the ruling class and their business interests. As a consequence, two sides of the ruling class have been engaged in a battle over the wealth and the future of the country. One of the results of the fallout however, was a decline in the ANC's popularity at the polls.

This posed a major threat to established white capital and their allies – now spearheaded by Cyril Ramaphosa – in the ANC leadership. In the process, they chose to back Ramaphosa's rise to the top of the ANC and the state, in the hope that this would revive the ANC's fortunes and deal a deathblow to the rival faction of the ruling class that backed Zuma. White capital, however, was and is not opposed to the Zuma faction because of corruption; white capitalists have a very long history of corruption,

as the Great Depression spread worldwide. There were two attempted workers' revolutions (both brutally defeated) and an ongoing class war between the workers and right-wing groups led by former officers. Again, the issue was not "free speech" but the violent aggression of the Nazis and other reactionary groupings. The right spread its Big Lie that the only reason Germany had lost the war was due to a "stab in the back," betrayal by Social Democrats and Jews. Class conflict and threats to profits caused big business to become willing to hire the Nazis to take over the government. They became the biggest single party in the Reichstag (parliament) but never won a majority.

On the left, the largest party was the Social Democratic Party. It was sometimes in the government and sometimes out, always relying on legality and parliamentary manoeuvring. When a revolution had broken out at the end of the war, the Social Democrats had allied with the right wing military to put it down with bloodshed (killing Rosa Luxemburg). The result was to replace the monarchy by the Weimar Republic, a limited bourgeois democracy but not a socialist revolution.

In the pivotal presidential election of 1932, the Social Democrats decided that it was all-important to keep Hitler out. So, they endorsed, as a "lesser evil," the conservative old general, Paul von Hindenberg. Their slogan was "Smash Hitler, Elect Hindenberg!" With socialist support, von Hindenberg won. But the economic and political crisis was not solved. After a period of manoeuvring and negotiating, President Hindenberg... appointed Hitler as Chancellor! The reformist socialists ended up with the "greater evil" after all.

The other left party was the Communists, smaller than the Social Democrats but still of significant size and influence. By the end of the 'twenties it had become completely subservient to the Russian government of Stalin. Independent thinkers, followers of the tradition of Luxemburg, Trotskyists, and far-left Marxists, had all been driven out. Whatever the Russian leadership (that is, Stalin) said, was it. This was true for all parties in the Communist International.

After the defeat in Italy, the Communist International had adopted a program of calling for united fronts of workers parties and unions to fight fascism. But by 1928 the CI abandoning that for a new, bizarre, program. It announced that revolution was immediately sweeping the world and that all parties should abandon all support for reforms in favour of imminent revolution (this was called the "Third Period"). They should quit all unions

("people's commandos"). Beside anarchists, these included supporters of the Socialist and Communist parties (the Communists having by now split off from the Socialists). They also included radical republicans (militant anti-monarchists). In a number of towns and cities, the Arditi del Popolo did drive out Mussolini's invading goons.

However, the Socialist Party leadership would not join such radical activities. Instead of organised self-defence, they demanded that the capitalist government pass laws to reign in the lawless Fascists. Some laws were passed, but were dead letters due to the sympathies for the Fascists of the police and courts. In August 1921, the Socialist Party actually negotiated a truce, a so-called Pact of Pacification, with the Fascists. This disarmed the Socialists but was ignored by the Fascists of course. Limiting themselves solely to legality and parliamentary politics, the Socialists were like lambs to the slaughter.

The Communist Party also did not support the Arditi del Popolo nor join any kind of united anti-fascist front. At the time, it was led by Amedeo Bordiga (then supported by Antonio Gramsci). Then and later, Bordiga was extremely authoritarian and super-sectarian. He did not believe that Communists should join a united front unless they could control it. He forbade members from joining the Arditi del Popolo or working with the anarchists. (Some years later Bordiga was expelled from the Communist International, not so much for his continued opposition to united fronts but for criticisms of Stalin. His views are still influential among some far-left Marxists.)

So both the Socialists and the Communists - each in their own way - sabotaged the possibility of a united front to fight Italian fascism. Without effective opposition, at the end of 1922, the Fascist Party took power. It had the blessings of the monarchy and the mainstream capitalist parties. Feeling their way through a period when they superficially maintained limited democratic institutions, the Fascists eventually established a totalitarian state - which would serve as a model for Hitler. As Malatesta had warned, the bourgeoisie made the Italian workers "pay with tears of blood."

## **The Fight Against the Rise of Nazism**

The rise to power of the Nazi Party is more well known in the US. After World War I, Germany suffered through hard times, which got worse

as it was key to colonialism and apartheid. Rather, white capital found Zuma's corruption too blatant and it was leading to the decline of the ANC's popularity. The Zuma faction - while not fundamentally opposing white capital - did to a degree also favour handing out contracts to black capitalists. This was beginning to impact on white capital's business interests with the state.

These are the reasons white capitalists generally backed Ramaphosa's faction to oust the Zuma and return to a status in which established companies were favoured when tenders were handed out. Along with this, it was a ploy to try and revive the ANC's popularity at the polls under a new leadership that would supposedly deal with blatant corruption. If this fails, however, white capital in alliance with sections of the ANC could turn to more overt authoritarian means to maintain power - in fact, signs of how this could happen have already been seen in events such as Marikana.

The scapegoating of immigrants frighteningly already forms part of the politics of this faction of the ruling class (it also forms part the politics of Zuma's faction too). Indeed, the largest parties in South Africa in the form of the ANC and DA already have significant numbers of members who have targeted immigrants, and both parties have leaders that have made overtly xenophobic statements blaming "foreigners" for unemployment and calling for greater control. In late March 2019 such forms of xenophobic electioneering by politicians in KwaZulu-Natal saw immigrants being attacked and their shops and houses looted. In parties such as the ANC, violent forms of authoritarianism already are a problem at the lower levels of the organisation, with rivals for positions being assassinated rather than engaged in debate.

The possible threat of full-blown authoritarianism does not just come from that section of the ruling class based around established capitalists, but also from remnants of the original Zuma faction within and outside the ANC. The faction fights within the ANC are far from over. Those backed by white capital currently have the upper hand; but this could easily change. When the Zuma faction gained control of the ANC there was already a creeping authoritarianism; should they (re)gain state power there is no reason to believe that their authoritarian politics would not continue. If challenged electorally and faced with the prospect of again losing their grip on power, this faction could easily turn to a renewed and even more virulent form of authoritarianism.

There are also the remnants of the Zuma faction that are outside of the ANC, most notably in the form of the EFF. While the EFF likes to claim economic freedom for the majority as its key objective, despite what many people believe it is not anti-capitalist nor opposed to rule by an elite – even according to its own documents. It rather favours a combination of private and state capitalism.

The reason for this is that the group of aspirant black elites that head the EFF wish to use state power to free up economic opportunities for themselves to accumulate wealth. As was clear from the conduct of EFF leader Julius Malema before the EFF was formed, this group were already engaged in this approach at the provincial and local levels within the ANC before their expulsion.

What the EFF does, however, do is that they opportunistically tap into the very justified frustration of the black working class (defined here as workers and the unemployed) – including their on-going experiences of racism and exploitation – to gain votes and a following. The fact that in South Africa the full liberation of the black working class was not achieved in 1994 as a result of the institutional (state) and economic (ownership) status quo being kept intact, meant the continuation of their impoverishment. The reality is that if the EFF came to state power, it would probably throw some crumbs to the black working class as its own form of populism, but it won't mean liberation.

At the heart of this is the fact that the EFF does not seek to genuinely end capitalism or expand democracy – it only wants another form of capitalism in which its leadership has power. This can be seen in the plans, contained in its 2019 election manifesto, to provide billions in support to black industrialists/capitalists and to make R2 trillion (about US\$143 billion) available for black asset managers to gain shares within companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

Indeed, authoritarianism already defines the politics of the party; it fetishes millenarianism and a militarised and male dominated hierarchy, all summed up by the title of Commander in Chief. In other words, the EFF is defined by a personality cult. In state power, those authoritarian tendencies and the tendencies to violently silence any opponents would be amplified. Their overt nationalism and race baiting of all Indians and all whites – often defined by crass stereotypes – is South Africa's own version of authoritarian populism; it is dangerous and needs to be combatted.

## The Fight Against the Rise of Italian Fascism

After the First World War, Italy (which had been on the winning side) was devastated by material and human destruction and economic crisis. There was much poverty and unemployment, and the ruin of middle layers. Earlier, in June 1914, a wave of working class insurrection had swept the country. After the war there were the “two red years” of 1919-1920. Centred in the industrialized north, the workers struck and occupied the factories, forming workers' councils. Italy teetered on the edge of a workers' revolution, but the leadership of the main union federation was Socialists. Unlike today, the Socialist Parties of that time claimed to be for a new, socialist, society, although in practice they compromised with the big industrialists. This is just what they did in Italy during the strike wave. The anarcho-syndicalists had played a major role in the occupations and were disgusted by the Socialists' sell-out. The well-known anarchist, Errico Malatesta, warned the workers and peasants, “*Complete the revolution quickly or the bourgeoisie sooner or later will make us pay with tears of blood for the fear that we have instilled in them today.*” (Pernicone 1993; p. 294) He could not have been more prescient.

Discharged soldiers, with no futures, formed the core of reactionary vigilante groups, often led by former officers. These were the “Arditi” (“commandos”). The most successful group was led by Benito Mussolini, who had previously been in the left-wing of the Socialist Party, sympathetic to the revolutionary syndicalists. Now he organised his forces into the Fascist Party, with subsidies from the rich. The Fascists roamed the country, focusing on specific towns or cities, one at a time, violently attacking union halls and left-wing gatherings, trashing left-wing newspaper offices, and beating and killing prominent radicals. (Riddell 2018) Note that the issue was never “free speech for fascists,” but that they committed physical crimes. They got away with these acts of aggression due to sympathetic police and judges.

Italian anarchists called for a united front against the Fascist gangs. (*Rivista Anarchica*, 1989) The anarchists (anarcho-syndicalists) were a significant minority, leading their own union federation, the *Unione Anarchica Italiana*. They called for unity in action of the left parties and their unions, to physically combat the Fascists, to defend workers' institutions, and to drive the Fascists off the streets. To the extent that they could, they carried out this strategy, with whomever would work with them. They supported the rank-and-file defence organisation, the “Arditi del Popolo”



Party (whose top leaders were imprisoned) decided that the US was going fascist and sent other leaders underground. They were wrong, the US remained a limited bourgeois democracy, mainly due to the unprecedented post-war prosperity. (By comparison, today's right-wing is expanding in the context of economic, health, climate, and ecological crises.)

Nor should we limit the term "fascist" to those movements which are precisely like Mussolini's Fascist Party or the Nazis. History repeats but never exactly. By "fascism," I mean a right-wing movement which aims at overturning capitalist democracy while maintaining capitalism. It ends elections (or has "elections" with only one party), bans independent newspapers or other media, outlaws oppositional speech, and imprisons or kills political opponents. Old-time military juntas or monarchies left people alone if they did not challenge the authorities. Fascism, instead, is "totalitarian." It demands public support from everyone. With all this, the fascist state will keep big business humming along, making more profits than ever, without unions to protect the workers. (I am not discussing the similarities and differences between fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism.)

Fascist ideologies and overt programs are varied, illogical, vague, and irrational. They usually are nationalist, mystical, nativist, and racist. To compete with the Socialist and Communist parties in 'twenties Germany, the fascists called themselves the National Socialist German Workers Party, that is, Socialist-Workers as well as National-German. Now, in the U.S.A., the far-right claims to be in the US tradition of loving "freedom," individualism, and "small government." Meanwhile they propose to ban women's right to choose abortions and to build up the police and military - not very libertarian or small-governmental.

To achieve power and then to maintain power, the fascists build popular movements, mostly of lower middle class (and upper working class) elements. This gives them a mass base, a force greater than that of a police or military coup. These movements use violence to break down the barriers of legality to which their liberal and conservative opponents cling. However, fascists are willing to also use legal manoeuvres. The Italian Fascists and the German Nazis had many representatives elected to their respective parliaments before they took power. Mussolini was officially appointed prime minister by the king. Hitler was named Chancellor by the elected President.

Given all of the above it is not beyond the realms of possibility that in some form or another, South Africa too could easily drift towards a fully-fledged authoritarianism; the warning signs are there. This would be especially the case if the capitalist crisis continues to deepen, since ruling classes and factions therein, have a history of turning towards authoritarian populist politicians during such crises.

The question though is how to combat it.

## **Resistance to Authoritarianism**

In most countries, resistance to the rise of authoritarian populism has occurred. For example, Antifa (Antifaschistische Aktion / Anti-Fascist Action) in Europe and North America has resisted the rise of the far right and fascism. In Brazil, formations such as the Landless People's Movement have protested and mobilised against Bolsonaro. These, however, have mostly been defensive; a reality that is directly related to the weakness of progressive working class struggles as a result of the onslaught of neo-liberalism. One area in the world where there has been an offensive struggle against authoritarian politics has been in the north of Syria. There activists – mainly, but not exclusively Kurdish people – have successfully fought against the authoritarian Assad regime and the fascist ISIS. These struggles though have not been to defend a parliamentary system, but rather to create a new and more directly democratic, egalitarian and feminist society under the name of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

Through this, a new system of direct democracy based around federated communes and councils has been created to run society from the bottom up – in other words to expand democracy into all spheres of life to combat the threat of authoritarianism. Much of the economy too has been socialised and democratised and is now largely based around democratic workers' co-operatives that produce to meet people's needs.

If we are going to successfully fight and defeat the rise of authoritarian populist politics, we are going to need a vision of creating a new society beyond the state, class rule and capitalism. It is these systems that authoritarian populism ultimately defends. The struggle in the north of Syria, while not without its own contradictions, is important as it give us a glimpse of what can be done. It also shows that South Africa too could

follow another path beyond the state and capitalist systems; a path that holds the promise of an egalitarian future as opposed to the current situation, or even worse a future of authoritarian populism.



# Lessons from the Historic Fight Against Fascism

by Wayne Price

## **Anarchists Against the Rise of Fascism**

*A review of the fight against the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany and its lessons for revolutionary anarchists today.*

In the United States and around the world, there has been a rise of right-wing authoritarianism, including fascist and semi-fascist forces. This has caused many to consider the history of European fascism and the fight against it in the 'twenties and 'thirties. Unfortunately, the lessons taken from that history are often dangerously wrong.

I will look at that history and what I think are the conclusions we should draw. But first I will discuss what "fascism" is. By "fascism" I do not mean just any sort of authoritarianism, any kind of political repression, or any politics I do not like. Bourgeois representative democracy (or "liberal democracy") may be quite repressive by itself. For example, the period after World War II, the 1950s, was called the "Golden Age of Capitalism." It was also the height of the anti-communist hysteria, McCarthyism, Hoover's FBI, the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Hollywood blacklist, the purge of Communists from the labour unions and schools, and Truman's government loyalty oaths. Meanwhile the US South had legal racial segregation, enforced by Klan. The US Communist

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