

Think Piece

How can the European left deal with the threat posed by xenophobia?

Glyn Ford

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Discussion series: Europe

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European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso recently drew attention to the danger posed by the spread of xenophobia, nationalism and racism across Europe, particularly in light of the upcoming European elections, where xenophobic parties are likely to experience unprecedented electoral success across Europe under the guise of Euroscepticism.

Voters are frustrated with stagnating wages, growing unemployment and having to struggle to make ends meet as a result of the pan-European living standards crisis. Xenophobic parties are benefitting from this and enjoying growing public support as a form of protest vote.

Disaffected with conventional politicians who signed up to austerity, voters across Europe are looking for a radical alternative and, with encouragement from the right wing media, they are increasingly turning to xenophobic parties, when the real radical alternative should be being offered by the left.

For this reason, this paper was commissioned by Class ahead of the European elections, to examine how the European left could deal with the threat posed by xenophobia in countries across the continent.

Glyn Ford

Glyn Ford is a member of the Steering Committee of Unite Against Fascism and the former Chair of the European Parliament's Committee of Inquiry into the Growth of Racism and Fascism in Europe.

He was a Labour Member of the European Parliament from 1984 to 2009 and is a candidate in May's European Elections in South West England. He has recently published 'Our Europe, Not Theirs'.

Executive summary

Over the course of the last three decades, waves of xenophobia have spread across Europe at an alarming rate. Worryingly, this movement is increasingly present in mainstream politics, as it has adopted a more 'acceptable' face, in the form of organised political parties. This is not something we can afford to ignore and in light of the European elections next month and the General Election next year, the left needs to reengage its own core supporters before it is too late.

We have to be very clear. This is not 'English' exceptionalism. Rather, it is a manifestation of problems increasingly besetting the EU and beyond, as, paradoxically anti-EU parties also make a significant showing in Switzerland and Norway. The effect is the same across the continent, though, as these parties threaten to disrupt the post-war democratic consensus that saw xenophobic and ultra-nationalist forces banished and driven to the political margins of society.

The reality is that we are witnessing, step by step, the creeping progress across the electoral landscape of this fascist right and fascist 'lite' rhetoric, purported by national revolutionaries and xenophobic populist parties in Europe. Some of these parties are newly minted, while others are old enemies - some rebranded, some not - that have crawled back out from the dark corners of politics.

While these parties are of varying degrees of toxicity, they all pose a serious threat to the continued political effectiveness of the traditional left for two main reasons. This is firstly due to the fact that they privilege family, order, race and nation, and secondly as they make inroads into the left's old working-class base.

Despite the fact that these parties represent movements in different countries, there are a range of characteristics that, to varying degrees, they all share. Currently, they can all command the support of something between a third and a sixth of the electorate – and this may not be the ultimate ceiling, as they are increasingly trying to broaden their electoral appeal.

These parties also stand to gain electorally as, for short-term tactical reasons, some of the left see them as an 'opportunity' rather than a 'threat'. While these parties have so far taken a majority of their votes from the right – and the centre – a not insignificant

minority comes from the left and those that abandoned the ballot box years ago or never found it in the first place.

The left must not be complacent.

The main threat lies in the four main themes of the policies of these far-right parties: euroscepticism; anti-immigration; a cocktail of reactionary social policies; and a cynical exploitation of fear of crime and other insecurities. The new populist forces and the 'yellow' press of *The Mail*, *The Express* and *The Sun* mutually support each other as they thrive on myths and scare stories laying the blame for the economic crisis at the feet of Bulgarians, not the bankers. They alternate between leading and following – as both shape popular opinion through fear and loathing, rather than reason and argument.

It is important to remember that far-right movements did not spring from nowhere; they grew on fertile soil as a product of genuine concerns in communities under increasing social and financial stress. Yet these kernels of concern have been fanned into something close to mass hysteria by sections of the media, and by these parties themselves, as they outbid each other in bigotry, exaggeration and downright lies.

However, there are different dynamics in different countries. In Italy, there has been a continuity of extreme right-wing politics. In France, the Front National has been growing over 30 years, firstly under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen - despite his 'Holocaust Denial' and scepticism towards German atrocities in France during the occupation - and now with his daughter Marine Le Pen, as leader. Paradoxically, this extreme populism has yet to spread – in spite of economic hardship – to Spain and Portugal, which have perhaps been inoculated by their long periods of right-wing dictatorship. Although, in Germany, the newly-founded *Alternativ für Deutschland*, a strictly eurosceptic party, and Germany's neo-Nazis will win seats in May's European elections.

There are three tasks that represent a clear starting point for the left. First we must expose xenophobic parties for what they are, second we must address the concerns of their voters and thirdly we must mobilise those threatened by their policies and very existence in politics. The truth is that far-right policies will disproportionately hit those same working class voters who vote for them. If we take a closer look at UKIP, we soon discover that their politics are viciously anti-trade union as they claim that

unions are nothing more than parasites feeding off workers.

We need to expose their lies. UKIP has a long history of xenophobia, dating back to the leadership of Farage's predecessor, Lord Pearson. Their offensive remarks aren't confined to history either. The absurd claims made by Farage and UKIP officials at many different levels, at the end of last year that Britain was about to be swamped by a tidal wave of immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria was sheer hysteria. They promoted fear and loathing, but when it turned out not to be true nobody knew. But the fact that it's not true should not even be an issue. It simply shouldn't be relevant. Voters should have more in common with hard working Romanians and Bulgarians, looking to improve their standard of living by working in Britain, than they have with discredited bankers. The left needs to make these points long and loud. The key division across the EU is not race, sex or nation, but wealth.

This is not to say there aren't genuine concerns that must be addressed but criticism of the EU should be based on the system rather than on xenophobia. The reality is that predominately young, single temporary workers from other EU countries are less of a burden on the state than the indigenous population. The message should not be 'British Jobs for British Workers' but rather 'Decent Jobs for Workers in Britain'.

If we want to defeat the threat we have to organise. We have to set out a progressive vision for Britain's role within Europe, one that encourages tolerance, collectivism and solidarity to repair the damage done to social cohesion by divisive austerity policies. We have to reclaim the EU as our own issue, something worth fighting for, rather than letting those on the right use it to purport their small-minded values for electoral gain. Ultimately, we, on the left, have to introduce an alternative narrative, 'Our Europe, Not Theirs'.

How can the European left deal with the threat posed by xenophobia?

Over the course of the last three decades, waves of xenophobia have spread across Europe at an alarming rate. Worryingly, this movement is increasingly present in mainstream politics, as it has adopted a more 'acceptable' face, in the form of organised political parties. Rooted in right-wing rhetoric, which seeks to divide, these parties are growing from strength to strength, enjoying electoral success in the majority of European Union Member States. This is not something we can afford to ignore and in light of the European elections next month and the General Election next year, the left needs to reengage its own core supporters before it is too late.

After the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) gained almost 150 seats in last year's county council elections in England,¹ simple extrapolation convinced many that they would both come first in the upcoming European elections and possibly even pick up a handful of seats in the General Election. Only time will tell if these predictions are correct for the UK but it is equally important to remember that they are not travelling alone. Their counterparts will do as well in France, Holland, Poland and Greece. We have to be very clear. This is not 'English' exceptionalism. Rather, it is a manifestation of problems increasingly besetting the EU and beyond. It threatens to disrupt the post-war democratic consensus that saw xenophobic and ultra-nationalist forces banished and driven to the political margins of society. The end of the Cold War unlocked the ideological division between left and right. Such parties - the European dimension of which is discussed in more detail below - are increasingly symptomatic of political ills in nearly all Western-style democracies.

The reality is that we are witnessing, step by step, the creeping progress across the electoral landscape of this fascist right and fascist 'lite' rhetoric, purported by national revolutionaries and xenophobic populist parties in Europe. It is the arrival of the mad, the sad and the bad centre-stage in electoral politics. Some of these parties are newly minted, while others are old enemies - some rebranded, some not - that have crawled back out from the dark corners of politics. These parties formally range across the political spectrum and some are downright ideologically schizophrenic. Today no one with a progressive mind-set would have anything complementary to

say about Italy's Northern League or Austria's Freedom Party. Yet the former used to be part of the Green Group in the European Parliament and the latter a member party of the Liberal International. While these parties are of varying degrees of toxicity, they all pose a serious threat to the continued political effectiveness of the traditional left for two main reasons. This is firstly due to the fact that they privilege family, order, race and nation, and secondly as they make inroads into the left's old working-class base. The recent municipal elections in France demonstrated this perfectly as former bastions of the Communist and Socialist Parties in the housing estates of Marseilles have now increasingly gone over to the Front National, with an ex-Communist Party candidate even defecting and standing for the Front National.²

These parties have generally grown from nationalist – sometimes separatist – and extreme-right, fascist movements that were for a long time confined to the fringes of politics by twentieth century history, where they had been suffocated by the stand-off between socialism and labour on one side, and conservatism and Christian democracy, on the other. Forty years ago these mainstream forces had – depending on the national electoral system – virtual monopolies of position, whether under two labels, as in the UK, Germany and Greece, or many, as in Italy, France and Belgium. What has now changed is that populist radical parties are on the electoral map across Europe and are increasingly growing in strength in countries like Greece, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Hungary. This phenomenon is not solely limited to the EU either, as, paradoxically anti-EU parties also make a significant showing in Switzerland and Norway.

Despite the fact that these parties represent movements in different countries, there are a range of characteristics that, to varying degrees, they all share. They are generally right, and extreme-right, xenophobic, nationalist movements. They are authoritarian, only quasi-democratic in internal and external practices, often with charismatic leaders, and their distinguishing policies are anti-European, anti-immigrant, islamophobic and intolerant. They are anti-political – or rather anti-politician – thriving off public disenchantment with mainstream politicians and the democratic political process. This lack of trust in politicians, which was already low, has been exacerbated by the implementation of austerity programmes by political leaders across Europe, which have caused living standards to plummet. These parties can also be forceful and one subset marries the ballot box and battle for the streets – officially or unofficially. A few have even flirted with ballot box and bomb.

Currently, they can all command the support of something between a third and a sixth of the electorate – and this may not be the ultimate ceiling as these parties are increasingly trying to broaden their electoral appeal. Farage is aware of the domination of men amongst his supporters and spent time at UKIP's recent Conference advertising the women in their ranks in a bid to appeal to the female electorate, while Marine Le Pen's inheritance of her father's mantle in the French 'Front National' has allowed the party to break through its electoral glass ceiling.

These parties also stand to gain electorally as, for short-term tactical reasons, some on the left see them as an 'opportunity' rather than a 'threat'. There has been some premature and immature rejoicing about the prospect that support for UKIP and other parties to the right of the Conservative Party in Britain may siphon off enough votes from the Tories to deny them an absolute majority in the 2015 General Election. While these parties have so far taken a majority of their votes from the right – and the centre – a not insignificant minority comes from the left and those that abandoned the ballot box years ago, or never found it in the first place. For example, UKIP mobilises a cohort of voters whose socio-economic backgrounds should logically make them 'traditional' Labour supporters. They are Old Labour, the working class conservatives, and the ex-Tory working class. In summary, these voters are male, pale, stale and struggling - white, male pensioners in poverty. It is the organised face of rising reaction. But the left must not be complacent. This may be a Mitterrand moment. In 1985, Francois Mitterrand introduced proportional representation for the National Assembly elections allowing the Front National to come from nowhere and get 35 elected representatives at the election in March 1986.³ It was promptly abolished two months later⁴ but by then it was too late, the FN was embedded in French politics. Less than twenty years later and the recent municipal elections in France showed just how deeply entrenched the FN is as it won control of 12 towns.⁵ And this situation is not confined to France – xenophobic parties are proving similarly dangerous across Europe.

The main threat lies in the four main themes of the policies of these far-right parties: euroscepticism; anti-immigration; a cocktail of reactionary social policies; and a cynical exploitation of fear of crime and other insecurities. Their rising electoral support is dyeing the fabric of political debate not only on the right and the centre but also on the left as we triangulate our way to accommodate notions of church, order, family, nation and state. The new populist forces and the 'yellow' press of *The*

Mail, The Express and *The Sun* mutually support each other as they thrive on myths and scare stories laying the blame for the economic crisis at the feet of Bulgarians, not the bankers. They alternate between leading and following – as both shape popular opinion through fear and loathing, rather than reason and argument. They are united by their ideological opposition to Brussels and their portrayal of Europe as the problem rather than the solution, in part because of ignorance and arrogance about Europe. In addition the very remoteness of the EU's institutions makes it the ideal whipping boy for almost every malaise under, and in, *The Sun*.

It is important to remember that far-right movements did not spring from nowhere; they grew on fertile soil as a product of genuine concerns in communities under increasing social and financial stress. Yet these kernels of concern have been fanned into something close to mass hysteria by sections of the media, and by these parties themselves, as they outbid each other in bigotry, exaggeration and downright lies. This vicious circle threatens to spiral out of control into an upsurge in narrow-minded, bigoted, intolerant populism at best, and into a collapse of normal politics and civilised society, with the replacement being a focus on right-wing authoritarianism, at worst.

The populist right in Europe

There are different dynamics in different countries. These new and emerging parties evolve rapidly. In some cases they are absorbed into the mainstream as it becomes increasingly conservative, simultaneously spawning and spinning off newer and nastier parties further and further to the right; and sometimes they have toned down their rhetoric. Despite – or maybe because of – their populist agenda, their appeal takes in wide sections of the left’s former voters as well as those of the right. In Greece, the main extreme-right parties are composed of the viciously anti-immigrant Independent Greeks (ANEL) and Golden Dawn, whose leadership is currently under criminal investigation. Golden Dawn, in particular, is infamous for its ‘vigilante’ groups ‘protecting’ citizens on the streets of Greek cities from the immigrant threat – all too reminiscent of Germany in the 1930s and the Blackshirts’ persecution of the Jews.

In Italy, there has been a continuity of extreme right-wing politics. The Italian Social Movement (MSI) was an avowedly neo-fascist Party that in the mid-1990s rebranded itself as the post-fascist National Alliance (AN). Its main achievement was to glide towards the traditional right while not shedding its extreme right support. Detoxified it became part of the Italian right-wing majority: for the first time in the post-war Republic, extreme right-wing politicians got their hands on the levers of power. Its leader Gianfranco Fini was Deputy Prime Minister. In February 2013’s Italian elections, the ‘ex’-fascists were widely represented. Berlusconi’s coalition was a broad enough church to accommodate openly fascist ‘The Right’, while former AN founder Fini found himself in Mario Monti’s coalition. Even Beppe Grillo’s populist Five Star Movement was prepared to associate itself with CasaPound and its Holocaust deniers.

In France, the Front National has been growing over 30 years, firstly under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen - despite his ‘Holocaust Denial’ and scepticism towards German atrocities in France during the occupation - and now with his daughter Marine Le Pen, as leader. Her leadership has seen the Front National tone down its rhetoric and the loss of a few neo-fascist activists and members has been more than compensated by a sharp revival in its electoral fortunes. In the last French Presidential election, Marine's 17.9% was the FN’s best ever vote.⁶ This does not seem likely to change. The recent municipal elections showed that, if anything, they are gaining, not losing, momentum, which means potentially even greater electoral success can be expected in the upcoming European Elections. These tendencies are

also replicated to the same or lesser degree across the EU. In Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary – with 21% for Jobbik in this month’s legislative elections⁷ - the Netherlands and Romania, populist and extreme-right political parties have a defined presence in the national political landscape.

Paradoxically, this extreme populism has yet to spread – in spite of economic hardship – to Spain and Portugal, which have perhaps been inoculated by their long periods of right-wing dictatorship. Germany too, albeit with the benefit of a strong economic performance underpinning support for democratic politics, has so far been sheltered, at least nationally, from the rising populist tide. Nevertheless the newly-founded *Alternativ für Deutschland*, a strictly eurosceptic party, and Germany's neo-Nazis will win seats in May's European elections. In total, these parties might end up grabbing 120-140 seats out of 751.⁸ With the far-left Eurosceptics, they will make up more than 25% of the new European Parliament.⁹

What is to be done?

There are three tasks that represent a clear starting point for the left. First we must expose xenophobic parties for what they are, second we must address the concerns of their voters and thirdly we must mobilise those threatened by their policies and even their very existence in politics. In the same way that the likes of the extreme-right National Front and British National Party have had their electoral success - and street soldiers - kept under control by the mobilisation of anti-fascist organisations, the same kind of commitment, dedication and resources are required from lay activists as the threat intensifies.

The truth is that far-right policies will disproportionately hit those same working class voters who vote for them. If the current Coalition is burning a bonfire of traditional benefits to keep the bankers warm after the cold snap of the global financial crisis, those parties even further to the right would burn the house down. All public expenditure - save Defence – would be viciously slashed. It would be instructive to study and publicise the consequences in the 1990s when the Front National seized control of a series of municipalities in Provence - Orange, Marignane, Toulon and Vitrolles. The result was a mixture of austerity, bigotry and nepotism. The experience of these towns and cities successfully inoculated them against future Front National electoral successes, but the recent municipal elections gave them 12 new towns to practise on.¹⁰

If we take a closer look at UKIP, we soon discover that their politics are viciously anti-trade union as they claim that unions are nothing more than parasites feeding off workers. However in the past, many of UKIP's disgruntled working-class voters had closer, happier connections with their shop stewards as opposed to their MPs or local councillors. A worker under UKIP will be very much on his/her own. When powers over social legislation are repatriated from Brussels does anyone believe that the Tories and UKIP will not have a bonfire of these benefits paring back workplace rights, social protection and entitlements?

At the same time we need to expose their lies. UKIP has a long history of xenophobia, dating back to the leadership of Farage's predecessor, Lord Pearson, who claimed that some of "our people are strangers in their own land".⁸ More recently, Paul Wiffen, Chairman of London UKIP, has been heavily criticised for his unacceptable islamophobia, manifested in comments accusing Muslims of being "nutters who want to kill us and put us under medieval Sharia Law".¹¹ In 2012, UKIP

were compelled to remove Steve Moxon as a candidate after he spoke out in support of some of mass-murderer, Anders Behring Breivik's views on Islam¹² and similarly, the Chair of Oxford UKIP, Dr. Julia Gasper was forced to resign after a catalogue of offensive comments, including comparing the Koran to Mein Kampf¹³ and claiming some homosexuals prefer bestiality.¹⁴ These offensive remarks aren't confined to history either. The absurd claims made by Farage and UKIP officials at many different levels, at the end of last year that Britain was about to be swamped by a tidal wave of immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria was sheer hysteria. It promoted fear and loathing, but when it turned out not to be true nobody knew. *The Daily Mail*, which led the scaremongering with stories of the extra flights laid on and convoys of coaches ready to leave regularly making front page news, was not so upfront about its 'apology', hiding it in the depths of the paper. But the fact that it's not true should not even be an issue. It simply shouldn't be relevant. Voters should have more in common with hard working Romanians and Bulgarians, looking to improve their standard of living by working in Britain, than they have with discredited bankers. The left needs to make these points long and loud. The key division across the EU is not race, sex or nation, but wealth.

This is not to say there aren't genuine concerns that must be addressed but criticism of the EU should be based on the system rather than on xenophobia. The reality is that predominately young, single temporary workers from other EU countries are less of a burden on the state than the indigenous population. We cannot deny that the first wave of enlargement to the East did lead to some communities being put under undue stress. The necessary funds should have been provided from Central Government to the Local Authorities in question, to enable them to alleviate the situation. Equally if the EU - rightly - provides funds to more economically disadvantaged regions in an attempt to redress the balance, surely it's not beyond the wit of Brussels to provide central resources to areas carrying the adverse burdens of free movement. This is why it is vital for trade unions to recruit these workers. The message should not be 'British Jobs for British Workers' but rather 'Decent Jobs for Workers in Britain'.

We should also recognise that there is a mirror image of xenophobes out there - young and internationally minded, liberal thinking and socially open individuals. They don't see the relevance of traditional politics and politicians, but it is their lifestyle that bigots threaten as much as that of the working class. They have been

mobilised around opposition to the BNP and National Front - it was the Anti-Nazi League that ran with the 'NF No Fun' logo. If you want Government - local or national - back in your bedrooms, schools and theatres ignore the populist right. If you want to stop a new 'Section 28' go out and vote even if for the moment you want to hold your nose.

If we want to defeat the threat we have to organise. The Front National took off in France as it filled the vacuum on the streets left by the political class. We have a job to do. Don't moan, organise! The European elections are assumed to be a triumph for UKIP as it roots itself deep into English politics. Even now it's not too late to blunt Farage's victory and start the fight back against 'yesterday's' values against UKIP and others dressed in Eurosceptic clothes. We have to set out a progressive vision for Britain's role within Europe, one that encourages tolerance, collectivism and solidarity to repair the damage done to social cohesion by divisive austerity policies. We have to reclaim the EU as our own issue, something worth fighting for, rather than letting those on the right use it to purport their small-minded values for electoral gain. Ultimately, we, on the left, have to introduce an alternative narrative, 'Our Europe, Not Theirs'.

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128 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8TN
Email: info@classonline.org.uk
Phone: 020 7611 2569
Website: www.classonline.org.uk

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