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The Global Threat from the Right: Labor's Trans-Atlantic Conversation

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The timing couldn't have been more apt: a trans-Atlantic conference on the rise of the right, just days after Donald Trump became the Republican Party's presumptive nominee. Leaders from the labor movement in ten nations gathered to strategize in the face of the new threat from the right. That threat's drivers are clear: a dangerous fear of immigrants coupled with an overwhelming sense of economic dislocation among working people.

But how much of today's populist right-wing turn is truly economic, and how much is more based in xenophobia and racism? U.S. progressives have been divided on this question. The New York Times's Paul Krugman, for instance, recently argued that Trump's rise isn't mainly about "economic anxiety," but is more driven by white resentment about race. In fact, Trump's supporters come from a broad economic spectrum; their median income is higher than that of the U.S., though lower than the Republican median income.



Participants in May 10 Panel on the Rise of the Right, including Karen Nussbaum (front), Plamen Dimitrov, President of CITUB (Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria), and Matthew Goodwin,

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University of Kent.

Yet the extent to which economic and racial / ethnic issues are deeply intertwined across the globe was center stage at the May 10 conference, co-sponsored by the AFL-CIO, Working America and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, a non-profit German foundation.

Participants in country after country described how the rising populist right is a reaction to the neoliberal policies that were the bulwark of the right wing for the last 30 years – – policies that the left elite also often embraced. Too few political and economic elite addressed the issues of dislocation by trade, the new “precarious” work and the shifting of the entire economic relationship.

Economic anxiety feeds the anti-immigrant sentiments. As Thorben Albrecht, State Secretary of the German Labor Ministry put it, the resentment against refugees grows in part from the fact that there has not been sufficient attention paid to housing, schools and jobs, even before the massive migration waves. It was a sentiment echoed by the AFL-CIO’s Policy Director Damon Silvers: “An ambitious economic agenda… has been kept off the political playing field by the hegemony of the neo-liberal agenda.”

“Don’t blame and shame workers,” urged Luca Visentini, the Italian who is now General Secretary of the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation). Rather, he argued that labor and the left must offer viable alternatives for tackling the systemic economic problems. It’s not enough to just be against austerity, he argued. We must understand that the people attracted to the right, especially young people, truly do not feel protected in the market.

So what is to be done?


Panelists discuss the rise of the right

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at a May 10 conference, including Antonia Bance (left), Thorben Albrecht, State Secretary, German Labor Ministry, Thea Lee, Deputy Chief of Staff, AFL-CIO, and Ingela Edlund, Second Vice-President, LO – Sweden.

In the immediate future, the conference participants discussed the need to have a new level of conversations with working people. Neither false promises nor moralizing will work; rather, labor must engage people on the issues that matter most to them. Karen Nussbaum, director of Working America, described talking with working people in Pennsylvania who were all over the map in their support of presidential candidates. She sees there an opening to talk with many people who may have been closed to a left-leaning message in the past.

Antonia Bance, head of Campaigns of Communications of the TUC (Trade Union Congress) in the UK, pointed with great hope to the recent election of Sadiq Khan as London's mayor. A British Muslim, he campaigned on improving public housing and transportation, and pushing back against extremism.

Sharan Burrow, the Australian who serves as General Secretary of the ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation), offered a long-term solution: building a new "global architecture" for labor that will hold corporations accountable and will demand a new level of economic sustainability, including on issues of climate.

The May 10 conference was primarily a North America / European conversation. What might global South trade unionists have brought to the conversation on the political push from the right? Perhaps an expanded conference will be next on labor's agenda.

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