

# Is Fascism on the Ballot?

*By Gareth O'Neil*

It has become fashionable among news networks and political commentators of both parties to stress that this election will be a decisive one for American democracy and that whether or not you completely agree with whichever candidate they are trying to sell you, you will need to put aside your disagreements and vote in order to save American democracy. The supporters of Kamela Harris and the Democrats will tell you that our democracy is jeopardized by the “fascistic” Donald Trump whose followers unleashed the infamous January 6th riots in 2021, while the supporters of Trump and the Republicans could rant to you for hours about the “woke radical socialist” agenda of the Democrats which will bring the end of American values and the freedoms we enjoy. In fact, this kind of campaigning, a back-and-forth of fascism-mongering and red-baiting, has been the modus operandi of the two parties for decades. But while it feels like we hear every election year that the fate of our democracy or freedom hangs in the balance and it is up to voters to stave off the would-be despots by making the “right” choice in November, very little has actually been done to explain exactly what fascism is or how bourgeois democracy perishes.

There is, of course, no merit to the accusations of Trump and his supporters that Harris and the Democratic Party are socialists. We could cite a million and one instances of Harris siding with the American bourgeoisie against the working class to demonstrate where her class loyalties really lay, not to mention her support for the murderous Israeli state that is at this very moment massacring innocent Palestinians in their thousands. But the claim that Trump is himself a fascist and that this election will be the decisive election that determines whether or not America slips under fascism, America’s very own 1932, is often taken up by the publications and organizations that at least claim to be communist and or represent the interests of workers in addition to the bourgeois press and, as such, this thinking tends to determine the general line of these organizations.

When speaking of the failures of the communist movement and those many groups that call themselves communist, past and present, it is difficult to point to one single thing that is responsible for their

failure and the elaboration of such a topic would take many articles, but one aspect that is endemic of the universal degeneration of the communist movement and observable in all of the self-described “communist” parties in the United States today is the misuse of the word “fascism”. Intentional or not, the consequence of this has been the weakening of the movement against fascism, capitulation among the various self-described “communist” parties to capital, and the weakening of the communist movement overall. This trend in America was started by Earl Browder and his followers in the CPUSA who distorted the line of the Communist International adopted at its Seventh Congress to justify collaboration with the bourgeoisie and the liquidation of the CPUSA itself, and then was continued in a more camouflaged form by William Z. Foster after Browder’s expulsion from the party in 1945. Since then, it has been the norm for not only the CPUSA but basically every other self-described “communist” party to refer to every reactionary measure by the bourgeoisie and every particularly reactionary presidential candidate as fascist, something the Seventh Congress of the Comintern actually warned against.

This is not to say a fascist danger does not exist in the United States today. One definitely does exist and the threat will continue to grow as American capitalism comes nearer and nearer to crisis. But the misuse of the word “fascism” and its disastrous consequences must be fought against in order firstly to utilize correct tactics against the *real* fascist danger, and secondly to overcome the atmosphere of capitulation before the bourgeoisie that has long gripped the communist movement. To begin to overcome this problem, it is necessary to understand how fascism historically came to power and the scientific analysis of fascism which was given in its most complete form at the Seventh Comintern Congress.

### **What is Fascism?**

Since the end of World War II, countless definitions of fascism have emerged — so many, in fact, that there is now a whole Wikipedia page dedicated to them — in an attempt to explain the monstrous fascist regimes. These definitions typically fall short, either only expounding one aspect of fascism such as rabid xenophobia and racism or attempting to cover up the class character of fascism and thereby treat it as something hostile to workers and bourgeois alike. What happens when fascism is either watered down

to a totalitarian ultranationalist regime or a regime that is just evil for the sake of evil is that the social aspect which leads to fascism taking power is overlooked as well as the purposes which fascism serves. When fascism is addressed in this way, it almost always leads to misunderstanding how and why fascism takes power and thereby undermines the struggle against fascism.

During World War I, an imperialist war waged by the imperialist countries of more or less the same or similar political system to redivide the colonies, Lenin wrote that Europe could “**be thrown back for several decades**”<sup>[1]</sup> if the proletariat in Europe remained impotent and a Napoleonic kind of victory came out of the war and that, under such circumstances, it would be entirely possible for a progressive national war to be waged by the bourgeois-democratic capitalist states against those states that were “thrown back” politically, Lenin continuing: “**to picture world history as advancing smoothly and steadily without sometimes taking gigantic strides backward is undialectical, unscientific and theoretically wrong**”. By this, Lenin meant that it would be possible for certain states to fall back under the political conditions of reactionary medievalism which would fundamentally be a step back from bourgeois democracy, making bourgeois democracy progressive by contrast. When Lenin wrote these words, fascism had not yet come to power and only some of the ideas that would become common to fascism had been elaborated, as such, it was impossible for him to predict and explain with absolute certainty the peculiarities of fascism. But, nevertheless, he was able to explain how future fascism would contrast with bourgeois democracy and the conditions that would enable it to develop while never negating the objective class character of fascism.

In December of 1933, just months after Hitler had taken power in Germany, the Thirteenth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, analyzing fascism in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere, finally put forward the first coherent definition of fascism: “fascism is the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital”<sup>[2]</sup> and after analyzing the differences between Italian fascism and Hitlerite fascism in Germany along with the actions of fascism since 1933, the final definition of fascism was given by Georgi Dimitrov at the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1937: “**Fascism is the power of finance capital itself. It is the organization of terrorist vengeance**

**against the working class and the revolutionary section of the peasantry and intelligentsia. In foreign policy, fascism is jingoism in its crudest form, fomenting bestial hatred of other nations.”<sup>[3]</sup>**

From this definition, it is made clear firstly whose interests fascism represents. Fascism is not treated simply as a uniquely evil phenomenon whose evil transcends class lines as liberals tend to portray it, rather fascism is recognized as an extension of bourgeois rule, serving the interests of the bourgeoisie. It is secondly made clear how fascism differs from bourgeois democracy, being the “organization of terrorist vengeance” against those who would threaten the power of the bourgeoisie, this aspect being the throwing back anticipated by Lenin. This definition does not hark on one or a few isolated characteristics of fascism but rather is an explanation of its social basis which led historically to such atrocities as those of the Holocaust, its uniqueness from bourgeois democracy, and its aim (vengeance on, or rather, the prevention of the seizure of power by the working class). This is what lends this definition its scientific character as compared to other definitions that treat fascism and its characteristics idealistically in a vacuum. For this reason, any analysis of the fascist danger or the history of fascism should proceed from the scientific definition given by Dimitrov.

### **History is the Best Teacher**

In understanding how fascism can take power, history proves as always to be the greatest teacher of all. To give a complete history of fascism would far exceed the scope of this article<sup>[4]</sup> and we can only confine ourselves to a brief overview but we feel that even this brief overview will be sufficient to demonstrate how fascism takes power.

The end of World War I brought in its wake revolution in several countries inspired by the successful Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia in 1917, even among the victorious imperialist countries the danger of socialist revolution was still felt by the bourgeoisie. In France, Britain, and America, despite the mass strike movement against the aid being sent to the reactionary White Guards fighting Soviet power in Russia, revolution was averted by way of police violence and the then-lack of a vanguard party to lead the workers in overthrowing the bourgeoisie. Italy, however, was among the most economically underdeveloped imperialist countries and had found itself on the verge of crisis even before World War I. When the war came to a close and the more than five million soldiers mobilized

for the conflict began to return to civilian life, they returned to a life marked by greater unemployment than they'd ever before seen and dramatic wage decreases leaving them utterly destitute. Faced with such a state of affairs, Italian workers in their thousands rallied to the Socialist Party which had opposed the imperialist war.

In many cities like Turin and Labin, the increasingly radical workers established workers' militias and began to create workers' councils in the factories and mines to replace the authority of the bosses. It certainly would have seemed that Italy was heading toward socialist revolution like Russia but for one problem: Italy lacked a vanguard party to lead the workers and organize their revolutionary efforts. The Socialist Party, although it had taken a correct line of opposing World War I, was still infested by reformists who wavered and capitulated before the bourgeoisie and, moreover, these elements controlled the Confederation of Labor, one of the largest trade unions in the country, and the parliamentary machinery of the party hindering the working of the revolutionaries in the party. Despite the calls of the Comintern for the revolutionary section of the party to break with the reformists, the creation of a revolutionary party in Italy free of the reformists would not be completed until after the revolutionary wave in Italy had passed.

The workers failing to seize power in Italy, due primarily to the reformists in the Socialist Party, allowed the bourgeoisie to regroup its forces and organize its own counter-attack against the working class. Bourgeois democracy in Italy had shown its cracks and the workers had come too close to seizing power for the comfort of the bourgeoisie, it was necessary to whip the workers back into line with a new system of terroristic repression. The bourgeoisie found its worthy savior in Benito Mussolini and his "National Fascist Party" whose immediate predecessor had won only four thousand votes in the 1919 general elections. Gangs of fascist thugs denoted by their distinct black uniforms now roamed Italy freely breaking up strikes, beating, and sometimes even killing workers and communists while the police turned a blind eye and sometimes even assisted in these actions. But while the fascists set to work terrorizing the working class, they also put forward a program of "organized capitalism", "profit sharing", and "holding the bourgeoisie accountable", all talking points learned from the reformist wing of the Socialist Party to try to trick the workers. In the sphere of economics, the fascists had essentially adopted the positions of reformism or social

democracy, leading Stalin to in 1924 characterize the social democrats as **“the moderate wing of fascism”**.<sup>[5]</sup>

The fascists in Italy had effectively been given control of the country by the bourgeoisie in 1922, staging a grand march on Rome with their paramilitary which the fascists would attempt to portray as the great fascist revolution that would bring to an end class struggle in Italy. Having been given power by the bourgeoisie and with the approval of the King himself, the fascists would replace the parliament of the Kingdom of Italy with the so-called “Grand Council of Fascism” which in all but name had taken any authority the parliament held. In the field of labor, workers and their employers were declared to be brothers in a noble cause for the good of Italy now and class struggle was said to have been abolished through the banning of strikes, trade unions, and the implementation of a system of “syndicates” which on paper would allow for grievances between workers and employers to be overcome peacefully but, in practice, was a vehicle for the fascist state to keep workers passive and clamp down on the side of employers whenever grievances emerged.

Nevertheless, although fascism in Italy was undeniably brutal, ranging from its repression of workers and communists at home to the wars of conquest it pursued and the colonial repressions carried out in Libya, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, it remained in a more or less underdeveloped form compared to what was to come, owing to its coming to fruition during the period of capitalist stabilization that immediately followed WWI, never quite breaking with its social democratic facades. It would not be until the global crisis of capitalism that came with the Great Depression that the most developed form of fascism would come to the fore manifested in Nazism in Germany. German Nazism, as opposed to Italian fascism which had come to power earlier, assumed a much more openly reactionary variety, championing the most bestial racial policies and revanchism, a feature that would be shared with the other fascist movements that rose to prominence at the time like the Iron Guard in Romania and Arrow Cross in Hungary. For this reason Dimitrov characterized Nazism as **“the most reactionary variety of fascism”** which **“has the effrontery to call itself National-Socialism, though it has nothing in common with socialism.”**<sup>[6]</sup>

The process of fascism taking power in Germany was much more protracted in Germany than in Italy or elsewhere since social democracy had managed to stifle the attempts by the German

working class to seize power in 1918 and 1919, relying on the fascistic paramilitary known as the Freikorps (many members of which would later become leading Nazis) to repress the German workers and managing to keep things together with a mixture of police violence directed at workers' organizations and social democratic promises about "organized capitalism".

Nazism in Germany all but became a dead name after a failed attempt to take power from the social democrats in 1923 until the near total collapse of the German economy amid the Great Depression. Between the huge reparations imposed on Germany by the victors after World War I which forced German workers to effectively work a double shift, pushing them to ruin, and now a global economic crisis setting in, the situation for German capitalism became more and more precarious. Social democracy more and more was showing its inability to keep a hold of things as workers now more than ever were turning to the Communist Party and things appeared to be heading towards revolution. Meanwhile, the German bourgeoisie would need to redivide the colonies back in its favor, regaining what had been lost as a consequence of its defeat in WWI. All of this created the conditions for Nazism to take power which saw its policy of revanchism, expansionism, racial supremacy, and anti-communism openly expounded in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*

It was only the Communist Party that put up any real resistance to Nazism, first fighting the Nazi paramilitary (the Brownshirts) in the streets with the Red Front before the social democrat government had banned the Red Front (while leaving the Brownshirts unrestricted). And then, when Heinrich Brüning used a loophole in the constitution to allow himself to remain in power, suspending elections and effectively giving himself dictatorial power, the social democrats came out in support of the reactionary once again, arguing that Brüning's dictatorship was a better alternative to the communists take power. The social democrats ignored every appeal by the communists for a united front against the Brüning regime and to stop the Nazis from entering the government and, after Brüning had resigned in 1932 over personal differences in his cabinet, the social democrats decided to throw their support behind Hindenburg, the reactionary WWI general. Hindenburg would end up giving the post of Chancellor and allow the Nazis to enter the government legally. With the communists effectively deprived of any means of fighting back despite their growing size and the Nazis now in the government

thanks to Brüning, Hindenburg, and the social democrats, the Nazis could finally establish their dictatorship legally, setting fire to the Reichstag and blaming it on the communists to justify a series of emergency measures that would put them in control of the country. It was that easy for Nazism to take control, all more or less legally.

Before the Nazi dictatorship could be fully put into place, the communists made one last appeal to the social democrats for a joint demonstration and resistance against the Nazi takeover, but the social democrats replied that Hitler and the Nazis had done everything legally and so their regime must be respected. In fact, the social democrats would end up supporting the creation of the “German Labor Front” later in 1933, an organization which basically maximized the control of employers over the working class, and making a joint declaration with the Nazi Party on the 1st of May in support of the draconian anti-worker policies of the Nazis.

This story can be told many times more<sup>[7]</sup> — in Hungary where a fascist regime was established by Miklos Horthy after the Romanian invasion to crush the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, in Romania where fears about growing communist and progressive influence led to the appointment of fascists to key government positions so extreme that they would eventually have to be removed and replaced by more “mild” fascists in the military, and so on — but it tells something about the hows and whys of fascism.

### **Can It Happen Here?**

Fascism, as history has shown, comes about under a particular set of circumstances when capitalism is facing a serious crisis, when the seizure of power by the working class appears more and more likely and the bourgeoisie finds itself in an increasingly precarious position. It does not spring out of the blue, seriously threatening in every election or every year to take power as some might say, although small fascist organizations undoubtedly continue to exist and should be fought against.

Fascism has definitely been on the rise in the past years in America as American capitalism heads towards another crisis and the likelihood of another large war grows since capital could find fascism a wonderful salvation should the coming crisis create a certain unrest among workers or there be mass pushback against the next war, which, considering the public response to the wars waged in recent years in the Middle East, is likely. This is because fascism, with its



use of the most terroristic methods of repression, rhetoric about class collaboration and “organized capitalism” or “holding the profiteers accountable”, and finding new “enemies” in the form of other races, nationalities, religions, etc. to try to incite workers against each other, can manage to pacify the workers by effectively criminalizing any attempts by workers to air their grievances and campaign openly for their interests as is typically allowed for in at least some form under bourgeois democracy, by trying to buy them off with the same kinds of promises that social democracy offers, and stoking hysteria about this or that group of people that “threaten the country”. One way or another, fascism seeks to pacify the working class and this is why the bourgeoisie turns to fascism whenever it feels threatened.

In America, a kind of homegrown fascism has been birthed that mixes the politics and symbolism of the American Revolution, the Confederate States, and Protestant Christianity (even if most fascists just use “Christian” broadly in their rhetoric), recognizing that appeals to Nazism and other past models with all their publicized atrocities which many Americans had family members who fought against in WWII only isolate them (although this does not stop some from showing up to protests with swastika flags or a few fringe groups calling themselves Nazis).

The homegrown American fascism which is still developing and growing and does not yet seem to have a single unifying party plays well off the populism, appeals to religion, and more reactionary proposals of people like Donald Trump but to say that Trump is a fascist himself, one would have to say that Bruning or Hindenburg were also fascists. In many ways, Trump is the most reactionary candidate to be on the ballot in years. Project 2025 reasonably has made many people fear for the future of bourgeois democracy in America. But amid widespread pushback, Trump, lacking any sort of concrete program to cling to, has stepped back from certain unpopular positions and has tried to distance himself from Project 2025. He is still susceptible to the same fears about votes and approval ratings that have followed the last presidents and forced them to contort their views on a dime. For characters like Hitler, Mussolini, Horthy, and Antonescu, on the other hand, such fears did not exist since they were appointed by the bourgeoisie rather than elected.

And herein lies the big thing with the coming election, when we are told that American democracy depends on this election and that

fascism is at the gates. If Trump really were a fascist, the question of the election would not exist at all. Trump would have been handed power through some emergency measures, his followers on January 6th would have kept him in power and pushed through the creation of a fascist regime. If we want to make comparisons to pre-war Germany as many liberals are fond of doing, Trump is not America's Hitler but more likely America's Hindenburg.

But this does not mean that the threat of fascism comes solely from Trump whose rhetoric fascism often plays off of. On the contrary, while Trump's talking points often play into the hands of fascism, fascism would still face a significant threat of resistance among the population which is still widely armed and able to acquire weapons, which still have many organizations creating some level of unity. Against this especially stands Harris and the Democratic Party who for years now have championed harsher restrictions on gun ownership if not the total ban of it, who have used the Taft-Hartley Law to crack down on strikes and trade unions, and have allowed the persecutions of political advocates of national minorities to go ahead. Trump may well popularize fascism, but it is Harris and the Democrats who will allow fascism to establish its regime with much greater ease.

Fascism in Germany would have had a much harder time establishing its regime if the social democrats had not outlawed the Red Front and restricted the activities of the communists and workers' groups. Any kind of disarming of workers or breaking up of their organizations, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem now, only makes it easier for fascism to take power. If Harris were to get her way, win the elections this year, and push through her changes on gun control and continue to push down on workers' organizations, then rather than fascism being defeated, it would have just been made easier for fascism to assert its control when it finally is called to power by the bourgeoisie.

Hence to argue that Harris will stop fascism in America can only weaken the anti-fascist movement in the future. The greatest assurance the American working class can have against fascism, rather, is to build a strong Bolshevik Party to lead the struggles of the working class, and defend the means we have to fight fascism now such as the rights to organize openly and the right to bear arms. Fascism has never been stopped by "capitalism with a human face" and it will not be stopped by that now. Only the preparation for the

greatest possible resistance against fascism can stop fascism.

Notes:

- [1] Lenin, "The Pamphlet By Junius," Collected Works, Vol. 19, p. 203, International Publishers 1942.
- [2] Thirteenth Plenum of the E.C.C.I.: Theses and Decisions, p. 3-4, Workers Library Publishers 1934.
- [3] Georgi Dimitroff, *The United Front: The Struggle Against Fascism and War*, p. 11, International Publishers 1938.
- [4] For more on the analysis and history of fascism see "Against the Semi-Trotskyite Caricature of Marxism" to be printed by the Bolshevik Core of the U.S. in *Bolshevik Revolution* No. 1.
- [5] Stalin, "Concerning the International Situation", Works, Vol. 6, p. 294, Foreign Languages Publishing House 1953.
- [6] Dimitroff, Op. Cit., p. 10-11.
- [7] In fact, it was originally intended to go into more detail about the regimes and seizures of power by the fascists on the eve of WWII but the article would have become much too long.

