

# What can we in the United States learn from the left in Europe and Brazil?

May 10, 2016



What can we in the United States learn from the left in Europe and Brazil?

During the last two weeks of April I visited three European countries speaking about Bernie Sanders and the American elections. I spoke in Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, and in French-speaking Switzerland, while in May I spoke in four Brazilian cities: Rio de Janeiro, the Rio suburb of Niteroi, Vitoria, and Fortaleza. In Paris I spoke to Ensemble, part of the Front de Gauche, in the suburb of Bagnolet. In Madrid and Barcelona, I spoke at meetings organized by the journal *Viento Sur* which is linked to Anticapitalistas, the leftwing of Podemos. In Switzerland, I spoke at the Spring University of solidaritiés Suisse, an independent, multi-tendency left wing group.

In Brazil my talks were sponsored by either the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL), which came out of a leftwing split from the Workers Party (PT) several years ago, or by Insurgencia, a Trotskyist (Fourth International) group active within PSOL. In addition to speaking before these groups, I also met and talked with local activists and leaders and sometimes with national leaders. And I visited union halls and strikes and spoke with union activists and also joined and participated in protest demonstrations around a variety of issues. While these are very different countries and even regions of the world, one can see some general similarities in the situation of the left in both Europe and Brazil.

In France, Spain, and in Brazil, the labor and socialist parties in power have been utterly discredited among many working people: the young, environmentalists, feminists, and other social activists. In France, François Hollande of the Socialist Party has not only imposed austerity policies on the country, but also, with the excuse of terrorist attacks, he has taken authoritarian measures, banning social protests. Environmentalists, labor unionists, and youthful activists have defied the proscription of demonstrations and taken to the street in the *Nuit debout* occupation of the Place de la Republic in Paris.

In Spain, the political duopoly of the conservative Partido Popular and the Socialist Party (PSOE) has been discredited, neither won 50 percent of the vote in the last election, and both were unable to form a government. Podemos, the new leftwing political party that came out of *los indignados*, also known as the *movimiento de las plazas*, is engaged in talks with the United Left (Izquierda Unida), a group that years ago came out of the old Spanish Communist Party. If they unite in an electoral coalition, Podemos-IU could displace the PSOE as a new, radical, and activist socialist party. In Catalunya, a region with its own national identity and political parties, the situation is the same,

though the party names are different.

In Brazil, the Workers Party (PT), a labor party that came out of the movement against the military dictatorship in the 1980s and which has held power now first under Lula and then under Dilma Rousseff for 13 years, has lost support both because of the austerity policies it has imposed, but also because of corrupt practices that it and all of the major Brazilian parties have been involved in, as revealed by a government investigation (*Lava Jato*). The far right has seized the opportunity to attack the PT and Dilma, calling for her impeachment. The radical left groups, such as Insurgencia and many others in PSOL want to defend democracy, but don't want to have to defend the PT government or Dilma. They want to build a genuine socialist alternative. The common element of these experiences are supposed labor or socialist parties that have either become corrupt, authoritarian, or pro-austerity or all three in varying degrees, leading to new, more radical left parties.

In France, Spain, and Brazil, there have been and continue to be attempts to found new broad left, radical socialist parties as an alternative to the Social Democrats. In France we have seen both the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and the Front de Gauche, in Spain Podemos, and in Brazil, PSOL. These efforts can be compared to those in the English-speaking nations where Jeremy Corbyn in the British Labor Party and Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party clearly represent a similar popular reaction among youth and sections of the labor movement to the conservative policies of Labor and the Democrats.

What is the role of the far left in these movements? Several—though not all—of the groups that invited me to speak have their roots in the Trotskyist tradition. The New Anti-Capitalist Party came out of a merger of former members of the French Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) with environmentalists and other social activists. Anticapitalistas was formed by people out of the Spanish Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), also Trotskyist. Ensemble in France, which participates in the Front de Gauche, has members who come from the Socialist and Communist Party, as well as from NPA and the Trotskyist left. Similarly, solidaritéS Suisse, though it has Trotskyist roots, has also incorporated those from other traditions.

These groups, if they were Trotskyist in origin, have by and large turned away from many of the characteristics once associated with Trotskyist organizations. At one time many of these groups held a dogmatic view of socialist ideology based almost exclusively on a very particular and narrow reading of Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky—though for a while they also included Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara among their revolutionary heroes. They worked to organize “vanguard parties” based on a supposedly “democratic centralist” model and often attempted to take control of and to dictate to labor unions and popular movements. Dominated by male leaders, they often had a machista culture. Those practices are no longer found among the groups for which I spoke and the people with whom I met and talked. The Fourth International identified with Ernest Mandel (1923-1995), has developed a more broad-minded view of revolutionary socialism, and so have most (but not all) of its affiliated organizations.

Today most of the far left groups that I visited, whether or not they are affiliated with the Fourth International, work to create organizations that have a more genuinely democratic character while at the same time attempting to create a dialogue with the unions and the movements with which they interact. There is no doubt that the practices of the feminist, environmental, indigenous, and poor peoples' movements have had a salutary effect on these organizations, leading to more democratic practices and a fuller understanding of the human condition and the struggles before us. The goal for most of these groups and their members is no longer to study the Marxist catechism and then teach it to others, but to develop on the basis of Marxist principles a critical and creative relationship to contemporary social movements and politics.

Anticapitalistas provides an interesting example of what this means in the actual building of a radical left organization. Starting in the 1980s with about 85 members, today they have more than 700, and the great challenge is to educate and train cadres. At one time, this would have meant reading “the classics” under the tutelage of one of the group’s leaders. They believe there is still value in reading those classics, but today they use articles in *Viento Sur* as the basis for discussion. These articles, mostly about the contemporary situation, raise questions that often have no “correct answer,” but rather require the discussants to collectively use the Marxist method to analyze a problem. The method is similar to that used by DSA with its involvement in the *Jacobin* reading groups. At the same time, Anticapitalistas finds that in dealing with the struggle in Podemos against Pablo Iglesias’ populist politics, it actually needs not only more cadres but a stronger organization.

There are, of course, still Stalinist, Maoist, and orthodox Trotskyist groups on the far left in the countries I visited, and some have a real social base in some movement or labor union organization. The United Socialist Workers Party (PSTU) of Brazil, followers of the Argentine Trotskyist Nahuel Moreno, for example, has a significant labor union base in industry. (The PSTU is not associated with the Fourth International.) So one cannot say that the more democratic groups that reject a substitutionist vanguardism necessarily have become dominant, though in some countries they are.

What conclusions do I draw from my admittedly short, shallow, and in many ways superficial experiences?. First, it seems to me clear that the Socialist Parties (or Social Democratic Parties) of Europe have clearly created governments that administer capitalist states, have neoliberal politics, and impose economic austerity and at times authoritarian measures. The Socialist Parties in these countries are no longer on the left in any meaningful sense. Second, in several instances activists are working to build new radical socialist parties out of upheavals such as the *indignados* and *Nuit debout*. Third, that many of the Fourth International parties and some others parties have made a fundamental break with the old method of functioning in the twentieth century and are at work to create new parties that are revolutionary socialist and internationalist, but also democratic groups committed to building independent labor and social movements. Finally, I think that those of us on the left in groups such as Solidarity and DSA or involved in the journal *New Politics* should recognize ourselves and our methods as part of this new left tendency and work to build networks of international solidarity with such groups. (Solidarity is a permanent observer at Fourth International meetings and has been for several years.)

\*Dan La Botz is a member of Solidarity and of the Democratic Socialists of America and a co-editor of *New Politics*.