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For Solidarity Within the European Left

Paris in autumn 2007: The global economic and financial continues to advance. The members of the Left Group of the European Parliament (GUE/NGL), in Paris for study days on the occasion of French EU-Presidency, are tensely listening to the scenarios one of Sarkozy's advisors is laying out. What will happen if certain political decisions made by EU and member-state leaders regarding strategies for fighting the global and European financial and economic crisis are made or not made?

That was five years ago. By now there are signs that the "darkest scenarios" outlined then are the most probable ones: the crumbling of the EU or its survival through authoritarian rule, its downsizing and a widening gap between the "centre and the periphery"; a greater amount of "different speeds", and wider differences among them, is no mere imaginary construct. Dismantling of social and political-democratic achievements, growing social and political repression, a rise of political, ideological and religious fundamentalism and the rising tide of violence against "foreigners" have become realities.

They are also an expression of the structural social-policy defensive predicament of the left which is only hesitatingly and half-heartedly trying to adopt the EU-level as a political challenge and area of action.

Many still do not sufficiently understand the dramatic consequences of either the collapse or the oppressive preservation of the EU and the Eurozone. There are not few who even hope for collapse and think the left might profit from it. If that were the case, we would also be strong enough to turn the EU into a democratic and solidary protagonist able to solve social, ecological and global problems sustainably and equitably. But we are not – despite or perhaps because of the scourge of "imperialist interests and antagonisms" and the reduction of the EU to an alliance of the most reactionary political forces.

We were not even strong enough to mobilise a sufficient number of voters in the last European elections to send a strong and interventionist left to the European Parliament, which could be heard and felt! There the left now is represented by the numerically smallest parliamentary group – even smaller than the EFD, the group of nationalists and right extremists.

The EU at a crossroads

In the past, the renunciation of war and fascism, the achievements of the Soviet Union and of communists in destroying the German fascist war machinery the completely honourable motivation for millions of people in Eastern Europe to build a social model alternative to capitalism. It was both tragic and fateful that this model took the form of Stalinism, administered to them by the Soviet rulers and their allies. That subsequent generations would not accept this as a model to be preserved does not speak against the motives but against the parties then in power. There is much to indicate that people wanted to identify with the socialist experiment, to actively participate in the search and in the experiments and wanted to dedicate their hearts, minds and creativity to that end. But in order to do so they were asked to accept the notion that an elite knew what was

good for them and what was possible and necessary to do in the global conflict with capitalism.

The unattractiveness of “state socialism” and its failure were and still are taken by many leftists in the West to be the reason for their own weakness and problems. This is certainly understandable. But if that were the only reason then the various “third paths” ought to have been more successful. And how do “state socialism” and its failure explain the arrogance and inability of some Western leftists to act democratically in their own organisations and to live up to the idea of a democratic left mode of existence in their societies? Not even repression in our societies can sufficiently explain why leftists in their everyday political lives are hardly able to come up with and put forward different scenarios for social development; or why they all too rarely invite interested people to seek possibilities of joint action in order to live more democratically and solidaristically and more socially and ecologically. If they did so, then the elites would not be able so effectively to preach “there is no alternative”.

The European Union could be threatened by a fate comparable to that of state socialism. Many people are losing hope that the EU can help solve their problems and improve their lives. Old “national or ethnicity-based” conflicts, or new ones, threaten to break out or re-emerge. This would result in the EU eventually losing its *raison d’être*. It was founded based on the economic and competitive interests of leading capitalist elites. The old Federal Republic of Germany was to be integrated into a western alliance, political stability to be guaranteed and a bulwark created against the new Soviet, Eastern European model. In the end, the EU and its predecessors have also helped to preserve peace in Europe and keep down nationalist tendencies and moods. The latter was also in the interest of popular majorities, struck a positive chord among them and contributed to their identification with the contradictory project, which always meant suffering and oppression to millions of people in the global South.

Ever more EU citizens think that the EU, and, in particular, its economically most powerful member states, have been a major cause of the global crises and that the crises in their countries as well as in the Eurozone are home-made.

Up to the 1990s, the growth model followed by the EU seemed more or less to guarantee social equilibrium. But, on the one hand, it is destructive both socially and ecologically and, on the other hand, the rulers use the crisis as a pretext to revoke the social consensus on the grounds that it is “much too expensive”. Their goal is to do away with the European social welfare state models. Why should citizens more passionately defend the Euro and the EU than the European social welfare state models? Why shouldn’t the European welfare state models be reformed and expanded as well as integrated into a model of economic development that would be both socially and ecologically sustainable?

And why should people stand up in defence of parliamentary democracies if the citizens’ vote only minimally influences the “course of things”? If large parts of the populations see that social and ecological standards, democratic rights of participation and decision-making count for very little, that the national parliaments and the European Parliament they elected or tolerated hardly play any role in the process of restructuring the EU, why should they have confidence in parliamentary democracy? Why should they want a parliament of the Eurozone established by the will of their governments? Why should

they want the replacement of the European Union method by a union à la Merkel, the forced splitting of the EU into a Eurozone and a non-Eurozone, into a core Europe and a periphery for the sake of “global competitiveness”?

This disfavour need not necessarily manifest itself in political activism and even less in action inspired by the ideas of emancipation and solidarity.

It should be a cause for concern that among the governing regimes the voices are multiplying of those who want the “German model” under German or German-French leadership as the foundation for a further development of the EU, which means that the German Agenda 2010 with Hartz IV, precarisation, low-wage work, workfare, raising of the retirement age and much more will be implemented. This process already began a long time ago. The open method of political coordination has paved the way for economic and economic-policy leadership to bring employment and social policies into line with global competitiveness. By appealing to “solidarity”, the hardships to which people are exposed at the less competitive locations are now being used as arguments for an aggressively neoliberal update of Agenda 2010. This incidentally is being pushed also by those forces whose economy is most closely associated with Germany and where economic integration is most advanced.

German citizens are aware of their socially privileged situation in the EU, with most of them preferring to remain with the current state of affairs. Comparing themselves to others they also put up with social cutbacks and maintain an alliance with the rulers. If interests continue to clash within and between EU countries, it will become even more difficult for the left to create solidarity and seek just solutions to global problems. The “left” is also heterogeneous socially and politically, and they live in countries in which election results determine what is possible through parliaments and administrative policy. These are intended to maintain the status quo and reproduce contrasts of interest in such a way that people of the “social lower” and the “social middle classes” do not form alliances. But most of all they are directed against international solidarity among the populations. However, leftists have to struggle to use these possibilities in order to make other types of social development possible. They will only succeed in this if they mobilise all their intellectual and organisational capacities for co-operation aimed at finding solutions.

Four Challenges

Success presupposes that the left accepts four challenges. The following sequence does not denote an order of priority, because it is about simultaneity, equal importance and interdependencies:

- 1) Finding, defending, using and expanding the spaces for political action. This is, on the one hand, a question of dealing with objective contradictions and on the other a question of defending and making use of democratic achievements such as rights and standards. These questions are related to our capacity for solidarity based cooperation.
- 2) Positioning ourselves consciously within the tradition of European movements of enlightenment, civil rights and human rights; becoming aware ourselves and raising others' awareness that progressive movements such as the labour, feminist, anti-fascist, anti-racist and anti-colonial movements came into existence as international movements; that in Europe being LEFT simultaneously means acting as EUROPEANS AND in SOLIDARITY with the victims of oppression and of colonial and aggressive

policies.

3) The sustainable improvement of people's social and ecological living conditions. The living conditions and rights of the most vulnerable in our own societies, in the EU and in the world must come into political focus. Again this is about simultaneity, i.e., not to think and act in favour of the poor of one's own country first and those starving elsewhere in the world later, but at the same time!

4) Following the vision of a society of free and equal people who live in solidarity and feel responsible for ecology, the left needs to rely on acting protagonists and address politically "passive" citizens as potential actors too.

How is the left in Europe prepared for these problems, developments and challenges? What resources do they have at their disposal and how do they make use of them? Who do they see as the protagonists of the necessary social transformation; what can they do to influence balances of power; how do they intervene and how convincing are their alternatives when it comes to fighting the crisis, not least that of the EU and of the Euro? To what extent is there a really existing and acting EU left, going beyond a mere Party of the European Left?

To stop being in the social and political defensive, the left has to create new political alliances. This presupposes the capacity to work together. Ultimately, local, regional, European and global developments must be monitored, development opportunities and spaces of action analysed, and there must be intervention into processes of social transformation.

Cooperation among left parties and their parliamentary groups and their party and party-related educational institutions is an elementary precondition of the requisite learning processes, towards strategic capacity and growing political effectiveness. The Party of the European Left, the left group in the European Parliament and the *transform!* network already are expressions of the capacity of leftists to cooperate at the same time as being an opportunity for acquiring more skills and for gaining social and political influence. These three international associations bear a special responsibility for the development of the left and its ability to build alliances.

The function of the left confederal group in the European Parliament, GUE/NGL, consists principally of using the room for manoeuvre of parliamentary action in order to strengthen the role of the European Parliament in confronting the other European institutions. It must try to lend parliamentary weight to proposals emerging in close cooperation with the social, ecological, peace and democracy movements. Another aspect of its role is to intensify communication and cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament.

The Role of GUE/NGL

Everybody involved knows that GUE/NGL represents a broad spectrum of left parties in the EU. Its strength consists precisely in the fact that there is no other cooperative project between left parties of comparably great differences in the self-definition of those involved, of so dramatically different political experiences and political cultures. At the same time this is also the source of the GUE/NGL's greatest weakness. So far, the parties represented in it hardly show any sizeable wish for an increase in the European

cooperation and integration of the left. The parties' executive boards struggle to see themselves as simultaneously local, regional, national, European and global actors. Yet, if parties wanted to learn how to be actors of this type, they would be doing everything to preserve the GUE/NGL, shape and use it as an opportunity for the European integration of the left. They would only nominate candidates for the European Parliament with a capacity to communicate and cooperate.

This means that the parties have to sit together at the same table, ultimately also in order to define what "confederation" can and should be under present-day conditions. This means dealing anew with the Lisbon Treaty which it was necessary and right to reject. After all, it was this treaty which gave more rights and assigned more tasks and legislative responsibility to the European Parliament. Here we need to exploit and exhaust all the scope for action that it provides! In this light, it is politically irresponsible to take a position such as "what counts is the Bundestag election – the European elections are of little importance", which informed Die LINKE's last European election campaign.

The joint process of dialogue on political strategies should not lead to a subordination of some parties to others, to a loss of diversity. It must become possible to develop more of common left policies in the European Union and in Europe together with all those interested and to the benefit of popular majorities.

In my opinion, the Left is able, on the basis of the four challenges listed above, discuss their points of difference and their contradictions, can vigorously debate and argue and at the same time jointly develop and realise common policies.

It is quite unrealistic to expect of the GUE/NGL, in the way it is now structured, that it can unite its members' different inherited approaches to politics, i.e. that it can overcome the barriers and differences existing between the different political cultures. This is not the task of the candidates nominated by their parties who are expected to act according to election programmes adopted by the parties. Some parties want to view the European Parliament only as a provider of additional resources for their national agendas and political struggles. The heterogeneity of beliefs held by the parties represented in GUE/NGL with regard to the EU and the struggle against the EU crisis can be illustrated in comparing four delegations, these not even representing the parties whose positions are furthest apart: Vänsterpartiet (Sweden), Bloco Esquerda (Portugal), KSCM (Czech Republic) and Folkebevægelsen mod EU (Denmark). All four parties, of course, oppose the authoritarian austerity measures and the neoliberal policies of the EU. But our Swedish friends would like to return to sovereign nation states and demand of the EU to take responsibility for an orderly dissolution of the Eurozone. Bloco wants the opposite. The comrades advocate more EU communitarisation and democratisation, direct financing of states by the European Central Bank, cancellation of debts and an increase of the EU budget in favour of more social equilibrium inside the EU. The KSCM advocates socialism of the 21st century, but in what to their mind is the real tradition of Marx, Engels and Lenin. In their analysis they presume a capitalism in "its ongoing death agony" and consequently demand the uniting of all communist forces in Europe and the world. The resolution accepted at the last party congress of the KPCM takes the crisis of the European Union as its starting point, but mainly discusses domestic issues, relating them to Europe-wide issues under the heading of "protection of national interests".

Our Danish friends who in the last elections conducted a very EU-critical campaign also withhold their consent in the European Parliament to any common revenue policies of the EU. They strictly reject any joint creation of revenue through a financial-transaction tax for the EU budget. For them this also goes for the appropriation of resources for more development cooperation between the EU and the globally poorest countries. The revenues are to flow into the national budgets, then to be decided and controlled by national parliaments.

These questions alone, as well as party positions in the debates over the role of the European Central Bank, the communitarisation of national debts, the forming of a banking and financial union, the transferral of formerly national budget sovereignty to the EU level or the holding of referendums on further European integration show that there is still an enormous need for explanation.

Behind all those different positions and debates there lie deep differences in the assessment of social and political power relations on both the national and the EU level as well as in the conception of ways to transform them. This leads me to the question: Is it enough for the left in Europe just to focus on the current resistance to the shifting of the burden of the crisis onto the shoulders of the most vulnerable, taking part in demonstrations and protests against the austerity policies, alongside precarious workers, the core working class, the unemployed, socially marginalised and excluded people?

In my opinion it is not enough, because history shows that people become active if this activism is connected to the hope for a better life, a better society. This means that we need to collectively work at formulating a common vision of a democratic, social, ecological and peaceful Europe. This will only work if we say "Yes!" to the question: Does the left want a deeper European integration, are they aiming at more and closer cooperation as a solution to the problems of society, the environment and of humankind, and for these purposes do they want a European federation oriented toward human rights?

The *transform! europe* network, consisting as it does of 22 European and left research and educational institutions from 16 countries, can do a lot to help develop a left capacity to learn cooperation and thus to "see" in a European way and develop a European left politics.

Thus the representatives of the European left parties in the EP need communication within and between the foundations as well as within and with *transform!* They need impulses, protected spaces for discussion, moderation and mediation, consultation, new knowledge, insights, experience and training.