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# Fascism: how it develops and how to fight back

written by Sam Marcy  
August 24, 2020



Aug. 11, 2017, a coalition of far-right, white supremacist organizations descended on the city of Charlottesville, Va., to hold a rally claiming to “Unite the Right.” The next day, they were met by an anti-fascist coalition that far outnumbered them. The “Unite the Right” rally was cancelled.

*With the 2020 elections fast approaching, the workers’ and progressive movements in the U.S. are debating the best tactics to fight the Donald Trump regime and the growth of violent white-supremacist, neofascist groups. As a contribution to this urgent discussion, Struggle-La Lucha is publishing excerpts from two articles by Sam Marcy, a leading Marxist thinker and fighter of the second half of the 20th*

*century, about the nature of fascism and how to fight it.*

*From [“The specter of fascism,”](#) originally published in December 1993.*

## **Bourgeois democracy won in struggle**

Bourgeois democracy is not a gift from the ruling class. It was won in struggle. A capitalist democracy, whether in Britain or France or other countries, is the result of working-class struggles that have forced the bourgeoisie to grant democratic rights.

For all too long there were no rights for the masses in this country. Only property-owning white men could vote. Native people had no rights. In a great section of the U.S., there was chattel slavery. Even after abolition, Black people had no rights at all for many years. Women couldn't vote.

It was only in 1971 that every citizen at least 18 years old was legally enfranchised, although registration is still made difficult enough to discourage many.

So this democracy we have was earned in the course of struggle, including a bloody civil war. Bourgeois politicians, however, give the impression that it is part of the “benefits of capitalism.”

But capitalism and democracy are not synonymous. Democracy is a form of state, as is fascism. The essence of a capitalist state is the rule of the bourgeoisie. Capitalism as a system can exist without capitalist democracy.

The working-class movement can thrive and advance if it utilizes capitalist democracy to its own advantage in the struggle to bring about a socialist revolution.

This introduction is necessary because the bourgeoisie never refers to the real significance of the struggle between bourgeois democracy and fascism. They always give the impression that they are in the forefront of the struggle against fascism and

are the proponents of democracy.

There is nothing the bourgeoisie likes so much as to cover themselves with sugary, unctuous phrases about democracy as long as it seems to serve their ends — and as long as the workers don't use that democracy for their own class interests, but only to advance this or that capitalist politician.

Full-scale fascism means the complete abolition of capitalist democracy. That has happened several times in the 20th century. The experiences in some of the countries of Europe give us object lessons in what fascism is.

### **Lessons of fascism in Europe**

The earliest form of fascism took place in Italy. Later, it took over in Germany and then in Spain.

Why did it come first in those countries? It is often explained as due to the development of a dictatorial mentality in certain individual leaders.

It is said that in Italy it was all Mussolini's fault; that in Germany it was Hitler; and that Franco brought about fascism in Spain. The emphasis is always on the individual and not on the social basis for the rise of that individual.

We do not deny the role of the individual in history. But we ask ourselves why it is that in these particular countries, individuals were able to turn a bourgeois democracy into a fascist dictatorship.

Is it because they were unusual and extraordinary people? Why didn't they do something else? Why didn't they bring about a greater democracy — a socialist democracy? As individuals, how did they build a following strong enough to take power?

The individual becomes important, most of all, if he or she is a representative of a class.

Some capitalist historians will say fascism came as a result of a deep economic crisis. That is true, but it is not the whole truth. Poverty is deeply embedded in so many countries, but that does not necessarily bring a fascist dictatorship. The worst economic crisis that ever took place was in the United States, and it did not bring about a fascist dictatorship. Some fascist groupings did arise, but on the whole, fascism did not take hold here.

But it did in three leading capitalist countries: Germany, Italy and Spain.

What was their common social and political denominator?

### **What turns the bourgeoisie into fascists**

The first prerequisite of classical fascism is the existence of a revolutionary mood in the working class.

In Italy, Spain and Germany there was a revolutionary situation. The working class was on the edge of a socialist revolution. That is what impelled the bourgeoisie to support a fascist dictatorship in its most brutal and complete form.

In these three capitalist countries, the working class had learned to use capitalist democracy to defend its own interests to some extent. There were entrenched elected representatives of workers' parties. They controlled a number of cities and states, were in the legislatures and sometimes in the federal government.

Wherever you went in Europe, socialists and communists had some part in the capitalist state. The workers' movement was strong and seemed unvanquishable.

Under the democratic form of the capitalist state, the workers' movement had

reached a stage in its development where it had become a threat to the very existence of capitalist rule. Even Frederick Engels thought at one point at the end of the 19th century that the workers' movement would take over in Germany. It was the general understanding that as a result of parliamentary means the workers' movement would ultimately rule.

But that turned out to be an illusion.

The ruling class could not easily overcome the great achievements of the working class by mere elections. Even if they could win absolute majorities in a few elections, they could not fundamentally change the class position of the working class. So much had been won that it would take a military struggle to change it. That is where fascism came in.

The bourgeoisie in a number of European countries turned in an utterly different direction. Instead of being the patron saint of bourgeois democracy, they slowly and gradually gravitated toward a violent break with that tradition.

They began to instigate movements for the overthrow of capitalist democracy altogether, as a means to abolish the gains of the workers, and revamp and redesign the form of class rule. Their objective was to develop on a world scale and become the most aggressive group of capitalist countries in order to redivide the colonies in their favor.

### **Personality of leaders not decisive**

The development of fascism didn't have anything to do with the psychological bent of leaders. It didn't have anything to do with an aversion to liberty, free speech and the like.

It had to do with the necessity to sustain the rule of a particular class over another class, to sustain capitalism when it is very much under siege from the workers.

The enormous strength of the workers' organizations on the European arena had frightened the bourgeoisie. The confidence of the workers' movement was such that they were openly speaking not only about the overthrow of the bourgeoisie but also how they would soon govern over society. It was just a matter of time before the ruling class would be out of business.

When a ruling class sees its most substantial interests under siege, it doesn't care much about democracy, freedom or anything else. It is ready to stake its all on retaining its system, even to the point of the loss of millions of lives. It will think of its class interests above all and will throw overboard everything it has taught about democracy, freedom, god or whatever — in the interest of retaining its class position.

This is how the fascist movements developed. Not as an automatic, anti-democratic tendency, but because of the ruling class's organic need to save its class interests and system.

### **What led to Mussolini's takeover**

The first to go over was Italy. The working class was strong in Italy. Even the monarchy did not stand in the way of the workers' organizing. When it did, it was soundly trounced. The workers' movement was also reaching out to the peasants.

In the years immediately after the Russian Revolution, the Italian masses tried to take it all. They organized general strikes and tried to take over all of industry by occupying the plants. They wanted to make short shrift of the slow, eventual growth of the working class — particularly in a country that was not the richest and whose colonies did not bring in the kind of superprofits that Britain, for example, enjoyed.

Under those circumstances, the ruling class instigated the development of fascism by sponsoring Mussolini to open a violent struggle against the working class.



Bourgeois historians write a lot about Mussolini. But they will not tell you how the ruling class conducted itself, what the bankers and industrialists did. What were they doing while the workers were making gains?

Even if Mussolini had organized the fascist coup d'état on his own, his subsequent stay in power shows support by the ruling class in Italy and by the imperialists as a whole. His march on Rome to “rescue Italy from Bolshevism” and his Black Shirts would have been a temporary thing with no importance had big capital not supported him.

So the first characteristic in the development of a fascist regime of the classical type is the existence of a revolutionary situation caused by the rise of a workers' movement. This in turn causes the capitalist ruling class to abandon capitalist democracy and turn to naked force and violence in the struggle to retain its rule.

True, a fascist dictatorship means that even the bourgeoisie has to give up certain of its rights. Nonetheless, the results of fascism everywhere were to strengthen the ruling class as against the working class.

In Italy, this classical form of fascism existed from 1922 all the way up to the end of World War II, when the workers overthrew Mussolini as a result of their own independent efforts.

## **Fascism in Spain**

In Spain, fascism took a different route. The revolutionary working class developed very rapidly in the 1930s — threatening not only the monarchy but the capitalist system, which was still tied in with all the ancient feudal institutions.

Spain seemed to be the country par excellence where feudal institutions could exist within the womb of capitalist society. It seemed as if the working class was more removed from Marxism than in Italy, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. But this



theory vanished into thin air when the workers' movement went on revolutionary strikes and threatened to topple not only the monarchy but also the capitalist institutions.

There is a legend in the U.S. that the whole struggle in Spain was between democracy and fascism. That is not true. It was between the revolutionary working class and the capitalist class. The bourgeoisie masked itself in a democratic form late in the day.

The existence of an armed and revolutionary working class in Spain compelled the ruling class to appeal to the military. Not being able to convince the entire military to stage a counterrevolutionary insurrection, they got one of the leading militarists — Francisco Franco — to lead an open, violent, counterrevolutionary assault on the workers' movement in 1936. He openly denounced bourgeois democracy as responsible for all the evils in Spain. He got the support of the Catholic hierarchy.

Armed to the teeth, Franco began a bloody extermination of the workers' organizations: the communists, socialists and anarchists.

Fascism was brought about in Spain as retaliation against the workers' movement for daring to take destiny in its own hands. Before the workers could succeed, the bourgeoisie intervened militarily, with no resistance from England, France or the U.S.

### **Why German fascism was so destructive**

In Germany, it was the same, only more dramatic and more destructive.

The workers' movement in Germany was the strongest and most educated in all the world at that time. So many great Marxists had come from there: Marx and Engels, Mehring, Kautsky, Liebknecht and others.

It was the land where socialism seemed to have originated, where the soil seemed ready for a takeover by the socialists and communists.

But that was not to happen, especially given the existence of a world ruling class with its eye sharply focused on the situation. Germany was the center of Europe. A revolution there would change the basis for capitalist society.

I am not unmindful of the policy of the communist parties in these countries; not unmindful of the fear of the Communist Party leadership under Stalin of supporting the German revolution; not unmindful of the politics of the Kremlin at the time and how it dealt with the various situations. That is a history of the struggle between the policy of accommodation and conciliation of the Soviet leadership under Stalin versus the revolutionary program of Trotsky.

In Germany, the bourgeoisie had on its side not only the army and police but outside military organizations that they began to build out of fear that they couldn't rely on the military. The communists and left socialists in the workers' movement began to counter this by building up their own military formations. They all were preparing for what was sure to come: a showdown between the two antagonistic classes.

That is all a matter of documentation. Everyone knew. I remember reading the papers every day at the time to find out about the street struggles in Germany between the communists and the fascists — counting how many the workers won and the Nazis lost, faithfully hoping that the day of reckoning would come.

The Social-Democratic Party was numerically the strongest working-class party. Its electoral strength was enormous. It had not only won seats in the Reichstag (parliament), but had majorities in a number of the smaller cities and strong representation in the larger cities. The Nazis aimed their guns at both socialists and communists.

The workers' parties failed to recognize that the hour of the struggle for power was coming closer and closer, and that electoral gains or losses would not be decisive. The struggle could not be resolved by so-called democratic or constitutional means. Both sides of the barricades were being armed: the workers on the one side and the Nazi goons supported by the ruling class on the other. The question was which side would be ready to strike first.

Trotsky urged the revolutionary workers to be on guard and prepare for insurrection. He also urged the Soviet Union to open up military maneuvers on its Western front and to give courage and support to the communists and the workers' movement.

None of this happened. The Nazis struck first, preparing a frame-up with the Reichstag fire. This demoralized the leadership and paralyzed the working class so that it could not take up arms.

There was a complete failure of leadership by the most developed, most serious, most loved working-class party at the time. It went down to defeat — and that changed the international situation, leading to a bloody war.

*From ["Marxism and mass action: Strategies for the struggle ahead,"](#) published in December 1994*

## **What to do next**

The art of revolutionary politics is knowing what to do next. It is okay to theorize about fascism or the strength of the right wing. But our organization differs from a debating society. We must take a firm, indeed revolutionary, stance.

Individuals can change, but the ruling class's trend is toward repression, solidifying in the most undemocratic way possible its control over the resources of the country and indeed of the globe. U.S. imperialism is on the march everywhere. The

devastating results fall on the backs of the workers at home as well.

What do we do? We know the right wing is moving, and that there is only a thin difference between the right and the ultraright.

One of the great lessons of the 1930s was Leon Trotsky's writings on the question of how to fight fascism. He stressed how important it is not to overlook what is happening, how it is possible to lose the historic moment and allow the ruling class to be victorious.

He delineated in a dramatic and readable way [the steps that led to the victory of fascism in Germany](#).

In the U.S. at that time there were only the beginnings of fascist groupings. No sooner did the wave of reaction sweeping Europe reach these shores than the great sit-down strikes among the workers wiped them out completely.

They were never able to get a foothold among the workers. The myriad of small fascist groups were washed away by the upsurge of the working class.

That is the surest way to end any fascist attempt to establish itself as a political force over the working class.

There's been no experience here with fascism on a mass scale. So we are basically looking at a theoretical and ideological discussion.

Our task is not to wait until things happen, in which case you can be absolutely sure the liberal bourgeoisie as well as certain sections of the big bourgeoisie will get into it. Right now, the working class is either indifferent or apathetic in this great struggle.

The possibility for the growth of neofascism, if you can call it that, and for political

reaction generally is in the soil because monopoly is growing. The contradiction between the forms of capitalist production and the forms of capitalist distribution grows wider and wider.

The struggle among the imperialist nations grows sharper. There is no tendency toward political equilibrium there.

None of the small countries that were actual colonies and became independent has shown any move toward economic independence. They would like to do it but cannot because of the monstrous growth and position of the big banks and corporations over the entire planet.

### **Opportunity for a mass struggle**

We can go to the masses and promote tremendous activity to challenge the capitalist class. We needn't be fearful about going beyond the legal limits that the bourgeoisie constrains us to. On a picket line, you never know when you're going to get arrested, but you don't say, "Don't have the picket line." That kind of talk leads to failure. ...

In the 1930s, the Communist Party and other organizations were very conscious of the growth of fascism. But to a large extent they were trying to win the big bourgeoisie to support the struggle against it.

There is nothing wrong with asking them to support the struggle against fascism, but it's another thing to expect it from them. We have to explain this to the most oppressed and persecuted people, in the Black and Native and Latino districts. Fascism should not be an after-dinner conversation with bourgeois liberals. ...

Marxism is as Marxism does. It is not merely an exposition of the tendencies in capitalist society that inevitably lead it to destruction. It is also a means for arming the workers and oppressed people on how to proceed in the next period.

Are we mainly directing our attention to the program of the right-wing Republicans? No. We shouldn't leave the other Republicans and the Democrats off the hook.

To make it very clear, our struggle against the right wing is an extension of our general program and not some new development on our part. We are going to conduct a revolutionary and working-class struggle in the way we have conducted them before, with greater emphasis on developing an initiative in the struggle against the right wing and the neofascist tendencies that may spring up now and then.

