

TUC report
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The rise of the far right

Executive summary and recommended areas for action

Executive summary

The far right is often treated as a fringe issue, dismissed as isolated groups lurking at the margins of politics and society. However, not only has the far right grown in strength but its ideas and influence have been mainstreamed and are now reflected in mainstream political discourse. Narratives of division, exclusion and blame have been normalised and appear all too frequently across society, in political debate, in the media and in our workplaces.

Throughout our history, trade unions have been at the forefront of the struggle against the far right and its attempts to divide working people. However, in order to effectively combat the far-right threat we find ourselves facing today, we need to understand it has mainstreamed its messages, worked across international boundaries and used online spaces to organise, recruit and promote its ideologies. A trade union analysis must also take into account the structural factors that have led to the growth of the far right.

We do not just have our rich history of fighting the far right to draw upon. There are examples of the union movement across the world leading progressive coalitions and effectively combatting the current threat that we face. We need to learn from and build on this work and vitally, just as the far right has gained strength from cooperating across national borders, our response must also be firmly rooted in internationalism and solidarity.

Growth and mainstreaming

The 'far right' umbrella today encompasses a variety of parties, movements, networks and communities (online and offline), which have followed different historical trajectories and can differ in policy and agenda.

Although the biological racism of old is still very much with us, especially in the form of white supremacist organisations and networks, increasingly the far right has adopted what is known as 'nativism' or 'ethnic nationalism'. This ideology holds that non-native (or 'alien') forces – people, institutions or ideas – pose a fundamental threat to the native population or native culture.

The reasons for the far right's re-emergence are varied. However, one important factor has been the process of 'mainstreaming' that has legitimised and normalised far-right parties and ideas. This is not only a result of the far right rebranding itself for electoral purposes but also traditional centrist parties embracing radical right-wing rhetoric and policies for reasons of political expediency. It is through this process that far-right parties have become acceptable government coalition partners or been able to influence government policy on questions such as immigration.

Structural factors driving the re-emergence of the far right

Structural factors are of particular relevance to a trade union understanding of the far right's re-emergence. Growing economic insecurity, increasing inequality and alienation from 'politics as usual' have fuelled widespread disaffection and anti-establishment

sentiments. Attacks on trade unions and the absence of a perceived alternative to austerity or effective action to tackle inequality have helped the far right present its solutions as a more plausible-sounding alternative.

Role of media and online platforms

Sections of the media at different times and to different extents have played an important role in the mainstreaming process by platforming key right-wing personalities, trivialising the threat of the far right, setting the agenda for example through elevating in the public imagination the perceived threat posed by immigration and adopting more reactionary positions on a range of social issues.

In parallel to this, there has been a rapid proliferation of online 'content creators', networks, groups and subcultures, which operate primarily through alternative websites and social media. These are proving to be increasingly sophisticated, disciplined and effective processes of radicalisation, cultivating a new generation of militants who are carrying far-right ideologies and narratives into the real world.

Internationalisation

The past few decades have seen the growing internationalisation of the far right, in terms of mobilisation, shared narratives, targets, strategies, organisational networks and financing. Global networking supported by online organising has accelerated the far right's expansion across borders and generated opportunities and mechanisms for amplifying and growing far-right ideology.

Far-right parties have gained ground in parallel with the mobilisation of right-wing extremists on the streets. These parties, among them fascists, are the second- or third-strongest electoral forces in many European countries. Some are in government as minority coalition partners, and others are close to breaking through the attempts of some mainstream political parties to keep the far right out of government.

More significantly, the far right has also taken power at a national level in several countries. In the case studies explored in this report (Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil and Colombia), we see a pattern of convergence between neoliberalism, far-right rhetoric and increasing authoritarianism. These examples can be understood as variants of a wider phenomenon that can be observed in different parts of the globe, western Europe included.

The far right may continue to grow and radicalise, especially given the opportunities presented by multiple economic and political crises. But its rise is not a foregone conclusion: trade unions in a number of countries have been instrumental in organising to push back the far right and work with progressive social forces around a transformative political vision; in the UK and around the world, workers are mobilising to counter the far right and build unity. In order to strengthen our efforts we have highlighted recommended areas for action that will build solidarity and workers' power, develop a clear counter narrative and raise awareness, build our evidence base and tackle the far right online.

Recommended areas for action

Building solidarity and workers' power

1. Throughout history trade unions have been at the forefront of the struggle against the far right and its attempts to divide working people using narratives of hate and blame. Drawing on our core values of unity, equality and solidarity, we will strengthen existing links and build new networks, rooted in workplaces. International solidarity between working people has led to concrete wins.

It is crucial that as the economic crisis hits our members, we don't retreat to looking inward only within national borders and that we continue to build strong global relationships and build workers' power where unions face repression and authoritarian practices. This needs to be the foundation on which we build our work to jointly combat the far right.

2. We must identify strategies to leverage our industrial power and engage employers in tackling the influence of the far right in the workplace:

The TUC, Unite, the DGB and IG Metall are developing a programme for working with companies that have sites in the UK and Germany, aimed at developing a model for practical workplace-based action to counter the far right. We will ensure the learning from this pilot is shared widely.

3. Unions recognise that, while the workplace is our starting point, we must connect our struggles to the wider community and build solidarity and develop a collective narrative to counter the far right:

Unions need to explore a range of strategies including: supporting online community organising where ideas can be shared; developing industrial campaigns to overcome division and exploitation in workplaces; and producing and sharing content.

4. Unions recognise that the far right targets its hate at specific groups including LGBT+, ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and refugees, women and trade unionists. In order to effectively combat this, we need to be clear as a movement that, in line with our core value of equality, we stand with all workers and oppose all forms of hate without exception:

Trade union organisations should actively encourage members to stand in solidarity with all working people against the far right and ensure there are relevant rules on domestic and international affiliations that reject sympathising with far-right groups and any organisations that promote discriminatory narratives.

5. The TUC has recognised that the rise of the far right is an international phenomenon and consequently the urgent need to further strengthen international links and the sharing of learning across international borders, and this should include building networks with the broader anti-racist and anti-fascist movement internationally.

Building a narrative, raising awareness

6. Raising political awareness among workers and communities must be a priority for the union movement in building a compelling narrative to counter the far right. Sustained political education among representatives, activists, members and communities should continue to:

- address the history of our movement and our fundamental values
- connect our daily struggles to the structural problems created by neoliberalism, which have systematically undermined institutions that support workers' rights
- challenge far-right narratives for example on migration, through constructive and challenging debate
- link history and theory to the practice of our concrete struggles in workplaces and communities in building a more equal and democratic society.

7. Combatting the far right is a political question that requires a political answer. Just as the far right has grown in the absence of a progressive alternative to neoliberalism, as the case studies show, it has been successfully pushed back where anti-racist and anti-fascist efforts have been closely linked to the struggle against neoliberalism and austerity. In practical terms this has involved building solidarity networks on the ground to connect the disparate social forces engaged in the struggle against racism, the far right and around various material concerns:

We must continue to articulate a hopeful political narrative that shows how workers' lives can be improved in key aspects such as better jobs, pay, public services and housing. Given the pandemic and economic crisis that impact on members' jobs and lives, it is a key moment for the union movement to outline an inspiring vision for recovery.

Building our evidence base for action

8. There is limited information about the penetration of far-right organisations and narratives in UK workplaces and trade union membership. The programme of research currently being pursued by the DGB offers a methodological template and useful lessons for undertaking a similar exercise in the UK, which can subsequently inform trade union strategies.

9. It was beyond the scope of this report to undertake a comprehensive examination of trade union responses to the far right internationally. However, this is an important piece of work that would be useful in identifying the most effective strategies currently being employed and innovative responses to the constantly evolving threat of the far right.

10. It could be useful to undertake a wider analysis of the growth of the far right internationally and highlight other important case studies, for example in Asia, Africa and other regions.

Tackling the far right online

11. The role of social media and 'big tech' companies in amplifying far-right narratives demands closer attention from trade unions, both to understand this phenomenon and to formulate an effective response including lobbying for stronger regulation.

12. We need to build upon work that is mapping the influence of far-right narratives and networks online. By analysing key influencers, recurring narratives, geographic and demographic data, we can identify strategies designed to pull people away from the influence of the right.

13. The UK lacks the type of progressive media that can match the capacity of the far right. Trade unions should consider their strategy to challenge far-right narratives and corporate power and promote a vision of a different world.