

Heinz Bierbaum on Left Politics in a Shifting World Order

Tauqueer Ali Sabri (TAS): I am Tauqueer Ali Sabri, Project Manager at the New Delhi office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

Today, we have with us our distinguished guest from Berlin, Dr. Heinz Bierbaum. He is a sociologist and economist, and has been the chairman of the executive board of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation since 2022. Before this role, he occupied the position of the president of the European Left. Our conversation will be around global challenges for Left politics. Welcome, Dr. Heinz.

The challenges around the world are huge. The changing geopolitics, war, wealth and inequality among the people.

So, how is the global Left looking to tackle these challenges?

Heinz Bierbaum (HB): Thank you very much for inviting me. I think it's a very important question because we are really facing profound geopolitical changes, and we have wars and military conflicts all over the world. This is a big challenge for the Left. And I think it's very important that the Left acts internationally.

We need cooperation, we need solidarity between the Left forces. And I think we should fight for an international policy based on cooperation and not on confrontation. And of course, there are big issues linked to these changes. And I think one thing is the question of peace, because we have wars not only in Ukraine and the Middle East but all over the world. And therefore, for us, the commitment of the Left to disarmament and peace is very important.

TAS: Thank you. So my next question to you is regarding the digitisation and new forms of economy where production and distribution are being handled by third parties, which we call the gig economy, and in this case, the workers' rights are being denied throughout the world. And this also looks like a new kind of subjugation, or I would say the kind of continuation of the slavery system. So how can the Left respond to this profound challenge where the working class, and particularly the worker who are working outside their home, are facing?

HB: You're right, the way we work is changing a lot due to digitalisation, but also new forms, for example, platform workers. And they don't always have the normal labour rights, and therefore, the Left should fight for equal labour rights for all forms of workers. And therefore the working class, the composition of the working class is changing. We have to take this into consideration, but we need labour rights for all of them. We need the right to be a part of the union, the trade unions. It's very important, very often. Trade unions are not very welcome in this area, and we have to do quite the opposite. We have to unionise those workers.

TAS: Yes, thanks a lot for navigating this question. My next question to you is regarding democracy and democratic values, and how the ethos of democracy is declining. At the same time, new forms of government, particularly the far right, are rising not only in the form of protest but also coming into government in many countries. So how is the Left ready to challenge those on the far right, who are not only found in protest but are also getting into mainstream?

HB: Democracy, the question of democracy is a really big issue. It's a big challenge now because we have a lot of authoritarian tendencies.

We have a decline of democracy, and the Left has to defend democracy. I think that's a basic need for the Left, and we have to fight against the far right. We have to fight for a society of the many and not only for the few. I think that's very important, and basic democratic rights have to be defended by the Left.

TAS: Thank you. So my next question to you is linked to the far right. So how can the far right be stopped in terms of getting traction within the working class? Historically, the workers and working class and factory workers belong to the Left, but now many of them are turning toward the right. So, how can the Left take some steps to take those groups into their fold?

HB: The rise of the far right is perhaps the biggest challenge for the Left. Also, for defending democracy because right-wing forces are against democracy, and we have to organise protests against the far right. We had this in Germany, in other countries, in Europe, all over the world and very often you talk about the need to have a firewall against the far right. But I think that's not enough. We need now alternative policy, a more convincing policy, focusing on the social problems, on the social issues. It was one of the advantages of the electoral campaign of the German Left, and achieving this success was by focusing on social issues. I think that's very important. We have to fight also for a human migration policy because migrants are used by the far right, and their policy is based on exclusion, and our policy has to be based on integration. Therefore, we need another policy focusing on the social needs of the everyday life of the people and, of course, also defending minorities, protecting migrants.

TAS: My next question is related to migration. Migration has historically been very useful for this human civilisation. Most of the cities, most of the things have been built through migration, the people who migrated from one place to the other. But in these contemporary times, migration has become an issue of confrontation and is contested by many far-right groups. So, how as the Left in Germany and globally one can tackle this issue of migration without any confrontation?

HB: As I said before, we need the human migration policy.

Migration could be an advantage and not a disadvantage, and it's misused by the far right. Therefore, we need to defend the right of asylum, for example, it's very important. We are a society with different people, with different ethnic, but we are all human beings and that should be recognised. That is the far right not recognising.

TAS: Yes, we also often see a kind of racial discrimination happening across the world against migrants. We have been seeing this in South Asia and also in Germany, Europe and America. So, how are you looking at this discrimination spreading against migrants?

HB: I think that's a very fundamental error to misuse the migrants as those who are responsible for the problems we are facing, for the social problems. It's true, quite the contrary, quite the opposite, because we need migrants also to work for our wealth, and therefore we have to be a society recognising the rights of everybody, and therefore the migrants can be with a good migration policy an advantage and not a disadvantage. They are not those who are responsible for the social problems we are facing. This is the politics of many governments, responsible for those problems, and therefore we have to fight for a social policy, and we have to fight to defend the rights of human beings, and we have to defend the rights, therefore, of the migrants.

TAS: My next question to you is regarding ecology and climate justice in the current capitalist mode of production. Unequal distribution is one of the major factors where the destruction of the ecology and climate justice is happening. The answer is social and ecological transformation. So, how and what is the road map for the Left to achieve social and ecological transformation?

HB: We have to recognise that the ecological transformation of the economy and industry is one of the biggest challenges we are facing. The far right is ignoring the climate crisis, but we know every day the effects of the climate crisis and therefore we have to question how we produce, how we consume and therefore the social ecological transformation is necessary. We as Left talk about social ecological transformation because our approach of transformation is to combine ecological and social needs. It's a good demand by the international labour movement for a just transition. They call it just transition, taking into consideration also the social needs, not only the ecological needs. I think without social justice, there will be no ecological transformation and without ecological transformation, there will be no social justice and we have to add, I think it's also linked to the question of peace. It's very important because war is the biggest environmental catastrophe.

TAS: Thank you. My question is just linked to this – energy transformation and energy is one of the most important points to lead life in Germany. Most of the cases like the coal mining is also in Germany. Coal workers are one of the major issues taken up by the Left in Germany. How is the Left looking at these mining workers?

HB: I think we have to deal with the needs of the coal workers because they are not responsible for the problem. We have to change our energy policy and reduce coal mining, but also to create new jobs in other sectors.

For example, I will take the example of the automotive industry. It's quite clear that it's one of the needs to reduce the number of vehicles, but we have to create new jobs more in the transport system, in railways, in public transport and so on. And therefore also concerning the energy, we have to reduce coal mining and we have to intensify renewable energies, wind, photovoltaic and so on. And therefore I think it's very important that we, as Left, propose also jobs in other socially useful sectors.

TAS: So my last segment of the question is related to the German election and particularly around the youth and women. So many congratulations on the victory of the German Left in the recent election.

The voice of youth is very important, or was important in this election. So, can you give some insights on how the youth have ignited this whole campaign in the recent election in Germany?

HB: It's true that the success of the Left in the German elections is due to the activities of young people. Young people wanted to do something against the far right. And the rise of the far right was one of the motives for the reasons why the young people were so active in this campaign. And also the joint vote between the Christian Democrats and the far right, the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), was a push in this direction that the youth was very active in our electoral campaign. It was really amazing and we are now the first party concerning the young people. And that's the good news. And the bad news is that the second place is the far right. But you can see that the youth is not unpolitical.

The youth is very active in particular against the far right and for a more social society.

TAS: Yes, thank you. My next question is linked to this last question: how can one retain the youth energy with the Left? We often see in India and also globally that youth on campuses are linked to social movements. They put their energy, they are at the forefront of getting justice, but after some time, they take a different path. So, is there any policy or any strategy where the Left can channelise the bias of youth or harness the energy of youth in a sustainable way?

HB: It's a very big question because there is no recipe for that. And it's a challenge for us to keep the activity of the youth also afterwards. Not only in electoral campaigns, but making policy. And therefore, we have to integrate them into our political activities. This is also a matter of political education. And this foundation, like the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, is a big challenge, and it's our main task to organise political education.

TAS: Thank you, Dr Heinz Bierbaum, for sharing your insights and thank you, listeners, for tuning into Indian Ocean. Don't forget to follow us on Spotify for more conversation on South Asian politics and movement. Until next time, stay inspired and stay revolutionary.