DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 19.02.2026 | Claes-Mikael Ståhl

What progressives must relearn

Freedom is not the absence of constraints, but the collective capacity to shape what comes next

Across Europe, right-wing populists have moved from the margins to the centre of political life. They win elections, shape public debate, and increasingly determine what is considered politically possible. We progressives tend to explain this rise in familiar terms: economic dislocation, cultural backlash, social media, or disinformation. All of these matter. But none, on its own, explains why populist movements generate such loyalty — or why their appeal persists even when their promises fail.

To understand this moment, and to move forward, we must confront a deeper problem. Politics is not only about values and ideas, or about material interests. It is also about emotions, identity and meaning. For too long, it seems, we progressives, including the trade union movement, have underestimated this aspect of politics.

Filling the void

Right-wing populists do not succeed because they offer credible solutions. They succeed because they offer a morally relevant story at a time when too many people feel democracy has become distant, procedural, and unresponsive. They speak in terms of belonging and betrayal, order and decline, protection and pride. As pointed out by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, populists win because they offer meaning and identity. This moral 'clarity' is, as we know, deeply deceptive — but it is powerful.

Populists claim to speak for 'the people.' This is not merely an appeal to popular sovereignty. It is an exclusionary claim to a moral monopoly, a closed order promising meaning and identity. Those who disagree are not treated as political opponents, but as illegitimate: unpatriotic, corrupt, or alien. This is why right-wing populists, when in power, so often attack trade unions, courts, the media and civil society. Pluralism is not a complication to be managed; it is the enemy to be eliminated.
Yet populism does not arise in a vacuum. Ours is a world of permanent

online connectedness combined with isolation and fragmentation, and a growing erosion of shared meaning. Populism feeds on lived experience — and on a sense that progressive politics has failed to integrate those experiences into a convincing democratic project with gravitational force and emotional resonance.

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Over recent decades, too many political decisions were presented as unavoidable — dictated by markets or expert consensus. Social compromises were reframed as constraints. Workers were told to adapt, while the institutions that once provided security, voice and recognition eroded. Democracy came to be experienced less as collective self-government and more as administration. This is the 'void' the political scientist Peter Mair identified early on.

Right-wing populists have filled this void with moralisation over the last decade. They offered identity where there was abstraction, loyalty where there was distance, and anger where there was resignation. They promised dignity but only for a narrowly defined group they called 'the real people.' They promised freedom — mainly freedom from democratic constraints. And they promised protection, while dismantling the very institutions that make protection durable: public health systems and education, collective bargaining rights, and free media.

We progressives, by contrast, increasingly relied on a narrower moral language. We spoke, rightly, of solidarity, equality and rights. But too often we did so in ways that sounded procedural rather than empowering, and moralising rather than engaging. We defended institutions, but did not sufficiently reshape and strengthen them.

This is where trade unions matter — not as one actor among many, but as democratic institutions in their own right.

Freedom through rules

Historically, trade unions translated social conflict into shared rules. We made solidarity tangible by organising it. Our presence at workplaces contributes to both identity and meaning. We gave authority legitimacy by embedding it in collective decision-making. In doing so, we embodied an understanding of democracy that populism now seeks to erase: that freedom is not the absence of rules, but the capacity to shape rules together.

Let us be clear: the modern state, with its public services, schools and hospitals, represents both positive and negative freedom, not oppression, as far-right leaders so often claim.

This insight, freedom through rules, has deep roots in democratic theory. The political theorist Harold Laski's pluralism insisted that democracy cannot be reduced to a single sovereign will, but must be sustained by a rich ecology of autonomous institutions – trade unions, civil society organisations and social movements – through which citizens exercise real power. These institutions also generate meaning and identity. Populism rejects this tradition. It seeks to collapse society into one voice, one leader, one people.

We must rebuild solidarity as a shared framework for navigating change, not merely as a moral sentiment.

Historically, trade unions did not treat democracy as an abstraction or a moral aspiration. We treated it as a practice oriented toward the future. We translated conflict into rules, solidarity into organisation, and power into accountable authority. In doing so, we embodied a lesson that progressive politics appears, at times, to have forgotten: that freedom is not the absence of constraints, but the collective capacity to shape what comes next.

If we are to counter populism, we must recover a future-oriented democracy, one that reconnects identity, meaning and lived experience.

This means moving beyond defending democracy as a set of procedures and rebuilding it as a lived experience with visible consequences. Participation must be tangible, meaningful and forward-looking. Trade unions can show what this looks like. Collective bargaining, workplace representation and social dialogue are not static arrangements; they are mechanisms through which people can influence how economic and social change unfolds. When people experience that the future is something they can help govern, authoritarian promises of decisive leadership lose their appeal.

We must rebuild solidarity as a shared framework for navigating change, not merely as a moral sentiment. In our diverse and rapidly transforming societies, solidarity cannot rest on nostalgia or words alone. It must be institutional. This is a lesson unions have long understood. It was in the solidaristic wage-bargaining system in Sweden that I learned to practise solidarity not as an idea, but as a practical craft in cross-sector collective bargaining. Our future labour legislation and collective bargaining must

not only protect what exists; they must shape digital, green and social transitions in fair ways. And this logic must extend far beyond the labour market.

We progressives must reclaim the language of authority and order without closing the future. Democratic authority is not about freezing society in place; it is about governing change and transitions. Any trade unionist involved in negotiations understands this intuitively. Rules agreed collectively create predictability and trust — stable preconditions for adaptation rather than obstacles to it. Progressive politics must articulate more clearly that an open future requires strong, legitimate institutions — not permanent disruption or authoritarian personal power.

Our early trade unionists who marched for 'bread and roses' understood that politics must feed both material needs and the human search for meaning.

Populists thrive where people perceive the future as closed and stacked against the, a dynamic illustrated in recent research by the Hans Böckler Stiftung. Where change feels imposed rather than shaped, democratic commitment erodes. Restoring it requires institutions that allow citizens to experience change through democracy.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we progressives must offer hope without illusion. Populism promises certainty by closing off alternatives and denying complexity. Democratic hope is different. It accepts conflict, uncertainty and pluralism, but insists that these challenges can be managed collectively and fairly. Trade unions demonstrate this every day through negotiation, compromise and cooperation. Progressive politics should draw confidence from this.

Our early trade unionists who marched for 'bread and roses' understood that politics must feed both material needs and the human search for meaning. Their insight was not sentimental; it was strategic. Where security and dignity meet, democratic loyalty grows. Where they separate, resentment festers. If we are to restore confidence in democracy's future, we must once again ensure that it delivers both bread and roses – sustenance and significance – through institutions people can trust and shape together.

There are many challenges for progressive politics today. Trade unions matter as proof that pluralism can work: that organised interests, negotiated rules and shared authority can produce both dignity and direction. Without renewing this institutional foundation, progressives will struggle to counter populism's false promise of unity and to defend

democracy as an open, shared project. In simple terms: democracy must once again become a future people believe in and can shape together.



Claes-Mikael Ståhl

Claes-Mikael Ståhl is the Deputy General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation.