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## Europe between war, crisis and a winter that can be frozen



**Sources:** Rebellion [Image: Trade union mobilization in France. Photo CGT]

*A significant part of Europe became the third week of October a pressure cooker in which the soup of conflict began to heat up. At this rate, if the kitchen is kept on, the continent is heading towards a very tense stage due to the direct consequences of the war, including growing social tension.*

The European crisis is sustained and growing, aggravated by the increasingly visible impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on daily life. Exorbitant increases, especially in electricity, fuel and services, blow up family budgets and trigger union anger.

### French anger

In France, on Tuesday, October 18, an interprofessional day of protest was held. Only three days had passed since the massive mobilization called by the New Popular Ecologist

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and Social Union (NUPES), which in the legislative elections last June became the second most voted force. As usual, the battle of numbers complicates the balance: while organizers estimated the turnout on Tuesday at about 300,000 people, official spokesmen indicated a number three times lower.

The sectoral strike that began at the end of September in oil refineries, was extended on Tuesday 18 to other sectors, with partial impacts: public service, energy, urban transport, food industry, commerce and personnel of professional institutes. The two main demands were the demand for a wage increase and categorical opposition to workers in struggle being forced back to work. Crossing borders, on 8 and 9 October several hundred activists had demonstrated and blocked TotalEnergie facilities also in Belgium.

In the French oil industry, the union dispute continued even until Thursday 20. That day, three of the five centers still paralyzed were normalized after the strikers reached acceptable achievements. Fuel supplies at gas stations have been chaotic in France since late last month.

For the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) of France, "despite the enormous profits obtained by the oil companies, in particular Total and Exxon, they refuse to accept the demands of the workers." The CGT stresses that the claim is to recover the loss of wage power caused by inflation and ensure a better distribution of the wealth created by workers while paying billions of euros in dividends to shareholders.

It is estimated that in the first half of this year alone, TotalEnergies recorded more than 10,000 million dollars of profits. This petrochemical giant, based in France, has 105,000 workers in 130 countries. In 2021, it posted revenues of 184.7 billion dollars.

**Rome to the street**

In Italy, the main trade union centres in the country held a united demonstration in Rome on Saturday 22nd October in defence of "Health and Safety at Work". They argue that so far in 2022 there have been 600 deaths and 400,000 work accidents, as well as a very high number of business irregularities that disrespect compliance with basic clauses. For the organizers, "it is not only about numbers, but also about people's lives, their dignity and their rights."

This call, which according to several political analysts can heat up the engines of social protest, gave continuity to the massive union mobilization that the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL, its acronym in Italian) convened on October 8 in that capital, exactly one year after the attack by neo-Nazi groups against its headquarters and

less than two weeks after the electoral victory of the extreme right of *Fratelli d'Italia*. A result that put the trade union movement and progressive political forces in tension.

The two demands of this first protest after the recent Italian elections were the defense of a living minimum wage and the search for alternatives to the war between Russia and Ukraine. "Stop the war with negotiations, not with the shipment of weapons," was one of the slogans of the demonstration.

### **Switzerland wakes up**

In small Bellinzona, capital of the canton of Ticino, bordering Italy, construction workers blew the initial whistle for a process of mobilizations that will expand nationally in the coming weeks.

More than 2,000 five hundred people participated on Monday, October 17, in a march (in a city of just 40,000 inhabitants) that will continue with future demonstrations on November 1 in Basel; on the 7th and 8th in five other cities in French Switzerland, and on the 11th in Zurich, where a national day will be held.

What is at stake is the negotiation of a new Collective Bargaining Agreement with the construction employers. According to the UNIA union, the bosses insist on their reactionary conditions. It ignores the demands of the workers and seeks to negotiate eventual wage increases by imposing the deterioration of working conditions. For the Swiss union, the reality is paradoxical: in a country where it is being built more than ever, working conditions are getting worse every day. The employers seek to abolish all regulations relevant to working hours by imposing daily working days of up to 12 hours (not counting the transfer to the construction sites) and weeks of up to 58 hours. "This is an attack on the health and family life of construction workers," the union said.

The social unrest, with different faces and concrete demands, also manifested itself in the second week of October when the drivers of the public transport of Geneva paralyzed the service for 36 hours to demand – with relative success – a salary adjustment to compensate for the deterioration of the standard of living.

On 17th October the pilots of Eurowings, a subsidiary of Lufthansa in Germany, went on strike for three days at Switzerland's Zurich airport. As a result, most of the low-cost airline's flights to and from Zurich were cancelled. A day earlier, pilots at SWISS International Air Lines, another Lufthansa subsidiary, voted to strike if the company's

board of directors does not present an acceptable proposal on wages and working conditions in the coming days.

### **Unrest in other countries**

In Spain, unions in the railway sector are calling a strike by the Renfe (Red Nacional de Ferrocarriles Españoles) company for October 28 and partial stoppages on November 7 and 11. The protests are the result of the company's inaction to agree on the new collective agreement, say the promoters of this measure of force. The unions also demand that "the evident lack of personnel in all areas and groups of the company" be responded to by extending temporary contracts.

Some 15,000 people, according to official sources, mobilized on October 15 in Madrid to demand the updating of pensions and salaries according to the Consumer Price Index. Two of the main Spanish trade union federations (Comisiones Obreras and UGT), anticipated a day of national protest for November 3. Meanwhile, sectors of the anti-capitalist left organize meetings and debates in 40 cities to replicate in the peninsula the protests that are taking place in Belgium, France and Great Britain.

October has also woken up to anger in Britain, where further demonstrations are expected in the coming weeks. On October 1, several social protests overflowed the streets of the largest urban centers with precise demands ranging from wage increases to climate protection.

Additionally, various organizations – in particular the youth movement – have called for new mobilizations in different European cities in the coming weeks, retaking the initiative to win the streets in defense of the climate. Convinced that planetary civil society in general and European society in particular, must demand concrete results from the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, COP27 to be held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, from November 6 to 18.

Europe is pulsating. It mobilizes and protests against the dimension of the economic and social crisis. At the same time, the question of who will pay the main bill for the Ukraine-Russia war and the future reconstruction of Ukraine is beginning to gain strength among experts and analysts – and more tepidly among trade unions and social actors. In this conflict, in the very heart of Europe, nothing is free. The war-arms industry, the main beneficiary, sharpens the pencil and rubs its hands. European citizens, already sanctioned by the precipitous increase in fuel and energy prices, are beginning to raise their voices.

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