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## Europe at the breaking point

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This weekend's Munich Security Conference, which brought together European and international officials, exposed deep and bitter divisions wracking European capitalism. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls' public attack on German Chancellor Angela Merkel's policy in the European refugee crisis, in which Valls demanded even more vicious attacks on refugees, was among the sharpest of a whole host of conflicts that erupted.

Having dismissed Merkel's policy as “unviable in the long run” the day before the summit, Valls said Paris was “not in favor” of her proposal to distribute throughout Europe hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing imperialist wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, on the basis of a quota system. “We need a very clear message that ‘Now, we don't take any more refugees,’” he declared.

Valls bluntly predicted that if refugees kept fleeing to Europe, the European Union (EU) would disintegrate politically and economically. Borders would keep going up in Europe to halt them, he said, and international trade within Europe and the Schengen accords on free movement between European countries would collapse, “with economic consequences we can only imagine.”

Not content to state his opposition to Merkel, Valls sought support among right-wing nationalist European politicians hostile to her policy. He first met with Horst Seehofer, the minister-president of Bavaria, whose Christian Social Union (CSU) is an outspoken critic of Merkel's

refugee policy. Valls then lunched on Saturday with Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, who the previous day had called Berlin's refugee policy "stupid."

After the summit ended, as British Prime Minister David Cameron traveled to Paris to discuss with President François Hollande the terms on which Britain would remain inside the EU, Valls warned that a British exit from the EU would mean an "irreversible dislocation" of Europe.

In less than 25 years, the entire European project announced in 1992 with the passage of the Maastricht Treaty establishing the EU has begun to collapse. At that time, shortly after the Stalinist bureaucracy had dissolved the USSR as part of the restoration of capitalism across Eastern Europe, apologists for capitalism claimed that the end of the communist danger would create unity in Europe. Far from being the cradle of peace, prosperity and unity, however, the EU is proving to be the midwife of a new eruption of chauvinism, austerity and war.

The deep and fast-growing fissures splitting the EU apart confirm Leon Trotsky's warning that it is impossible to unite Europe on a capitalist basis. "One of the basic reasons for the crisis in bourgeois society is the fact that the productive forces can no longer be reconciled with the framework of the national state," Trotsky wrote in *The Permanent Revolution*. "From this follows, on the one hand, imperialist wars, on the other, the utopia of a bourgeois United States of Europe."

The fate of millions of desperate refugees fleeing societies ravaged by decades of imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria has become the focus of intensifying geo-strategic and economic conflicts between the European powers. It is triggering clashes over borders, economic policy and conflicting interests in various parts of the world, particularly Eastern Europe, that are deeply rooted politically and historically in the bloody contradictions of European capitalism.

Anonymous German officials pointedly reminded *Le Monde* that they could retaliate to criticisms of German policy by objecting to the size of France's budget deficit, which violates EU rules. With European banks facing €1 trillion in bad loans and layoffs spreading throughout the EU, Berlin could press for bone-crunching austerity from Greece to Italy to France should the sell-off on financial markets trigger an economic collapse in Europe.

The unnamed German officials added that Valls' statement on refugees was "all the more unfriendly" in that it encouraged opposition to Berlin from Macedonia, Bulgaria and the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia) as they met Monday in Prague. There, the six Eastern European countries, traditional allies of Berlin that are economically closely integrated with Germany, opposed Merkel's quota proposal on refugees. Instead, they agreed to help Macedonia close its border with Greece to block the passage of refugees into the rest of Europe.

Even as NATO militarizes much of Eastern Europe in a reckless confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the power struggle between Berlin and Paris over refugee policy and influence in Eastern Europe is another ominous sign of a political breakdown. Since Berlin launched the re-militarization of its foreign policy in 2014, the European powers have announced plans to spend hundreds of billions more on their armed forces.

Now, as before World War I, when France cemented an anti-German alliance with Russia, and World War II, when its eastern ally against Germany was Poland, France is trying to counterbalance the rising economic and military weight of Germany by making political appeals to the East to oppose Berlin.

One of the greatest dangers facing working people is that the intensification of international conflict is accompanied by the deliberate stoking up of militarism and chauvinism to divide the working class, as starkly seen in the attacks on immigrants. As conflicts between the major European powers set Europe back onto a path of disintegration and war, the road to the unification of Europe passes through the struggle to unite the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of socialism in all of the countries of Europe.

In this fraught political context, anti-immigrant sentiment incited across Eastern Europe, in France, by parties ranging from Valls' Socialist Party to the neo-fascist National Front (FN), and in Germany, by the CSU and politicians like Thilo Sarrazin, is setting Europe on a course to disaster.

Under the impact of anti-German forces in France such as FN leader Marine Le Pen and Left Front leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, or anti-Greek sentiment stoked up by the entire German ruling elite, the anti-immigrant hysteria and militarism being promoted across Europe can explode once again into the hatred between European nations that repeatedly plunged the continent into war in the last century.