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Europe on the eve of mass working class struggles

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The social counterrevolution in Europe is assuming dramatic forms. According to recent reports, 26 million people within the European Union are without work, six million alone in Spain and five million in France. In Spain and Greece, the official unemployment rate is 27 percent, while among young people it is approaching 60 percent.

In Germany, the official unemployment rate is only 7 percent, but this ignores the ever-growing low-wage sector created by the Hartz laws. Out of a total of 42 million people who are employed, just 29 million are covered by social insurance. The remainder hold down precarious jobs, with 4 million people earning less than €7 per hour.

Today, the divisions within Europe are more profound than in the days of the Berlin Wall and the “Iron Curtain.” An ever-growing gulf between rich and poor is opening up across the continent. The number of people unable to pay their rent or afford the cost of education is growing daily, while a small and obscenely rich minority imposes its will on society.

A criminal financial elite dictates policy. Taxpayer funds totaling €1.6 trillion have been handed over to ailing banks and the resulting state debt is being financed at the expense of the population in the form of sweeping cuts in social programs, education and pensions.

Against the background of the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, the European Union is showing its true face. It is not an embodiment of the “unity of Europe,” as the propagandists of the establishment political parties claim, but rather a dictatorship of finance capital over Europe. It serves not, as initially intended, to integrate and restrain German imperialism within a European confederation, but instead functions directly and openly as the instrument of the largest and most powerful banks and corporations, many of which are based in Germany.

The German government utilizes the euro and the European Central Bank (ECB) to direct capital flows to Germany, plundering and dominating weaker countries in Europe. It forces elected governments to resign and replaces them with technocratic governments of its choosing. It sets aside parliamentary decisions and overrides legal norms.

The diktats from Brussels and Berlin have destroyed social welfare systems, deprived millions of pensioners of hard-earned savings, and driven countless families into poverty and misery. Seventy years ago, the Nazis and the Wehrmacht terrorized Europe. Today it is the European Union’s “troika” and Deutsche Bank.

Under these conditions, social tensions are intensifying. Dissatisfaction and outrage are growing apace. Given the never-ending stream of social attacks, broad layers of the population are losing all confidence in the economic viability and moral validity of capitalism. The bourgeois media now openly debate how long it will take until Europe “goes up in flames.”

In Greece, Spain and Portugal, popular resistance has been dissipated by means of one-day general strikes and protests in which the unions and pseudo-left organizations ensure that the mobilizations remain ineffective and never challenge incumbent governments or the European Union.

The interests of workers, young people, the unemployed and pensioners can find no expression in the official political life of Europe. Under the surface, however, an enormous social and political storm is brewing.

In response, the political parties are closing ranks. Whether they call themselves conservative, liberal, social democratic, green or left, all of the established parties support the EU’s austerity drive or attempt to divert popular opposition along right-wing, chauvinist channels.

The unions are integrating themselves ever more openly into the state apparatus. They defend the “national interest” of their own ruling class and serve as business contractors to impose mass layoffs and cuts in wages and benefits.

At GM-Opel, IG Metall has taken on the task of organizing the closure of the plant in Bochum and suppressing any resistance. The master plan for the first closure of a German auto plant since

World War II was drawn up at IG Metall headquarters. The union then worked to push it through, getting it ratified at every German Opel plant except Bochum.

The Bochum workers have been systematically isolated by IG Metall. The local union officials at the plant function as factory police to stifle any independent movement of the workforce.

The German public service union Verdi is pursuing a similar course at Lufthansa. All across Europe, workers are seeking a way to break out of the bureaucratic straitjacket of the trade unions.

The ruling class is reacting to mounting social tensions as it did 80 years ago, with attacks on democratic rights and the strengthening of the state apparatus at home and militarism abroad. Democratic elections have degenerated into a meaningless farce.

Regardless of the will of the voters, government policy is determined by the financial markets. In February, voters in Italy gave a massive thumbs down to the austerity policies of the Monti government, only to be saddled, following two months of closed-door political haggling, with a grand coalition government pledged to pursue exactly the same course.

In Germany, business interests will determine the policy of the next government, regardless who wins the election in September.

All over Europe, state apparatuses are being strengthened and state surveillance intensified. In Germany, the Federal Constitutional Court has largely abolished the separation of the police and intelligence agencies and legitimized combat missions by the military within the country's borders. Its role model is the United States, which, since the September 11 attacks has built up a powerful spying and police apparatus in the form of the Department of Homeland Security.

A particularly pernicious role in the maintenance of the bourgeois order and the political oppression of workers is being played by supposedly "left" parties and their pseudo-left hangers-on, such as SYRIZA in Greece, the French Parti de Gauche (Left Party), Communist Refoundation in Italy, and the Left Party in Germany.

They all defend the European Union, the most important instrument of social counterrevolution in Europe. When these parties obtain positions in government, they cut social spending and strengthen the state apparatus.

During its ten-year reign at the side of the Social Democratic Party in the Berlin Senate, the Left Party was responsible not only for massive social attacks, but also for strengthening the state's Police Act. In Brandenburg, where the Left Party has held the post of finance minister for three years, it has played the leading role in imposing austerity and slashing 8,000 public service jobs.

The reactionary policies of these parties have deep objective roots. They speak for wealthy social strata that benefit materially from the attacks on the working class and the intensification of its exploitation. Regardless of their “leftist” labels, they are right-wing bourgeois parties that are hostile to the working class.

The adaptation to the reactionary nationalist anti-euro course of the Alternative for Germany party by Left Party leaders Oscar Lafontaine and Sarah Wagenknecht makes clear the political kinship of these two organizations.

Given the extreme social and political crisis, the construction of a new revolutionary leadership of the working class becomes a matter of great urgency. This task can be carried out only on the programmatic foundations of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which places at the center of its program the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.