

Stop the destruction of social gains! March separately, strike together!

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In every country in Europe, working people are being hit by drastic and very similar austerity measures and plans inflicted by the various capitalist governments. Obviously people in other continents are not exempt from the effects of the deep crisis of capitalism, but it is here in Europe that it assumes its most significant and vicious dimensions. This is the cradle of capitalism and therefore of the workers' movement. With the support of all working people, this movement succeeded in the past in winning significant rights and advantages in more than a century of bitter, stubborn struggle. The crisis is far from over, however those in government spin it. The determined frontal attacks on the gains and rights workers have won will grow in number and ferocity, so it is very important to know what they really represent and where they come from.

Thirty (not so) glorious years

These attacks by the capitalist class did not just start with the current crisis. In fact the material, social, political and cultural rights working people enjoy are incompatible with capitalism-imperialism (the overall period since the beginning of the twentieth century, when finance capital merged with industrial capital), particularly in its current state of senile decrepitude. They were never freely given, but all of them were won from the system by force in heroic struggles by working people over many years, during and after World War II, but also well before then. At that point that the balance of forces, internationally and within almost every country, swung clearly in favour of the working class. Terrified by underlying support for the powerful revolutionary wave in Europe, the destitute capitalists were only able to defuse the revolution with ready help from the leaders of parties which called themselves socialist and communist. But they did have to pay a price for this, and so there started the series of measures

and reforms which culminated in what became known as “welfare states” or “social market economy” (in Germany) and the so-called “thirty glorious years”. But the rot had already set in even then.

The capitalist class and their governments could not have granted these reforms and advantages to working people on a permanent basis, even if they had wanted to. They certainly did not want to let working people keep that fraction of an expanding mass of profits which in any case was squeezed out of them in the first place, and in the end they could not allow it to go on, especially since, as time went by, although the total amount grew, the rate of return was shrinking by the minute. To put it in capitalist economic language, the return on investments or the profits on capital were no longer enough. Marx and his followers describe this as the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. At its root was above all the progressive shrinkage of the world market for expensive western capitalist goods.

From this flowed two major consequences which were to shape the course of capitalist-imperialism and the behaviour of its major protagonists. It was not totally transformed, but it would be correct to say that its features were altered in a significant and historical way. The first change was that it became a system that not only could not carry any more reforms for the better, but actually had to do away with and destroy the reforms and advantages which it had been forced to concede under pressure in the past.

The second was to do with its structure. The emergence of the imperialist phase at the beginning of the twentieth century had already meant “... the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this ‘finance capital’ of a financial oligarchy”. This now went a lot further. In fact, in attempting to overcome market saturation and the declining substance of profit, this marriage of convenience between industrial capital and finance capital gave birth to a legitimate but monstrously deformed offspring — the uncontested hegemony of finance capital. Inevitably this artificial, overblown, distorted and ill-proportioned substitute for real profits mutated into an insatiable parasite sucking the life-blood of the whole of society.

But please note carefully: well before it could infect every pore of society, the capitalist class – both mother and father of this formation – did everything they could to take back and revoke the reforms and

concessions they had been forced to make earlier. At first they did not dare take on a full, general, global offensive against all these concessions, because they felt too weak. The working class and working people in general rightly continued to think that the right to sickness insurance, to a decent pension, to full employment and proper care, to free education — in short, the whole system and network of rights, assistance and protection — were an essential part of their wages that capital had already taken a big enough cut out of. Quite rightly, they took these things as a legitimate “social wage”, which was theirs by right.

This was far, far more than the increasingly insatiable capitalist class were ready to tolerate. But however desperately they wanted to launch an open frontal attack on these rights and concessions, their ardour was cooled by congenital cowardice in the face of the organised strength of working people and moderated by instinctive cunning at side-stepping such confrontations.

Consequently, in the first phase of its war on the rights and concessions working people had gained, in the 1960s and 1970s, the capitalist class mainly concentrated their fire on real wages and working conditions. They made constant and repeated attempts to claw back the inroads that the “social wage” made into their profits, doing what they could to increase the productivity and intensity of labour and nibble away at wages. But powerful strike actions drawing in their wake not only wider categories of working people but even top union leaders blocked these attempts and a succession of partial struggles restored the real value of wages by force.

In the course of those “thirty (not so) glorious years”, for example, working people in Britain twice brought down governments through the sheer scale of their struggles — once the Labourite Wilson and once the Tory Heath. In France, at the same time, working people engaged in a series of struggles including a remarkable national miners’ strike. They then united in 1968 in a long general strike and inflicted a resounding setback on De Gaulle, who had been precisely given the job of smashing their resistance and taking back their “social wage”.

Nor should we forget the German working class and working people as a whole. Already bled white by Hitlers’ counter-revolutionary

dictatorship and the years of total war, they were were both divided and tied down in the late 1940s in the four zones of military occupation. Thus the previously powerful German working class, with its pivotal role at the heart of Europe, was quarantined and was kept off the scene. And just to make sure, working people in Germany were also stigmatised by the vile insinuation that they were collectively responsible for Hitler.

The reactionary and extended occupation regime was followed by the long drawn-out trauma of the country's surgical separation into two with the assistance and complicity of Stalin. This veritable act of vivisection was only compensated for, and above all partially masked, by the efforts of the whole of international capital during the cold war to present the western part of Germany as a shop-window for their prosperity.

For many a long year capital was forced to put up with paying this whole "social wage". It not only made frequent unsuccessful attempts to make up for this in other areas (real wages, productivity, etc.) but it never stopped doing everything it could to weaken working people and to prepare the conditions for launching a general assault on their rights and gains. Step by step, exploiting every opportunity and helped by the complacent and often complicit leaders of the workers' movement, the capitalist class nibbled away unceasingly at the scope and extent of the advantages working people had gained. But above all they acted to reduce their strength and ability to resist by corrupting and suborning the general staffs of their organisations.

It continued the already long process of domesticating the trade unions, and also of breaking up their unity using rival and competing leaders. Working people's right to defend themselves was, little by little, patiently reduced and increasingly strictly regulated, so that strikes and demonstrations — not to mention other forms of direct action — were confined and fettered in a rigid and repressive legal straightjacket.

For all this, European capitalist class were not able to take back all the concessions they had been forced to give. But, more and more threatened by their shrinking profit margins and their international position, they were forced to take drastic steps to take back the reforms and improvements they had previously conceded. At the

same time they tilted the structure of their system towards something that looked more lucrative: the supremacy, not to say dictatorship, of finance and its bastard child, speculation.

Capital's frontal attack – and the fall of the USSR

The global offensive was unleashed by Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US. Thatcher soon faced a formidable miners' strike, and even though they were left in the lurch by the bureaucracies of the other unions, the miners stood up to the government's offensive as long as they could. Their defeat was the signal for a general offensive right across Europe. It was the beginning of a great general frontal attack on working people's gains, an attack whose origins, however, lay much earlier. Absolutely do not forget that the capitalist classes had spent years carefully honing their weapons for this great offensive.

It is also important to emphasize that the continent-wide scope of this offensive was supported by strong, allegedly socialist, parties led by François Mitterrand in France, Gerhard Schröder in Germany and Tony Blair in the UK, ably assisted by bureaucrats at the helm of so-called Communist Parties.

The bourgeoisie's "European" project was consistent with the trend towards the concentration of capital and offered the means and the tools to consolidate and boost this offensive. So the general attack on the rights and gains of working people known as "neo-liberalism" was centred on the "European" institutions in Brussels, Strasbourg and Frankfurt. Each section of the European bourgeoisie gained at least three advantages from this. The first was unquestionably that this allowed them to shelter their own anti-working class offensive behind the attractive screen of building a united Europe. The second advantage resulted from the fact that it appeared as if policy and measures directed against the interests of working people came from a centre in Brussels and each individual country was merely carrying them out. This appearance implied that nobody in any particular country was to blame, so that nobody in a given country could be held to account. The third and last advantage rested on the fact that this centre, detached from any real political and social life, is so profoundly anti-democratic and the majority of its members so anonymous, that any struggle against it is impractical, not to say impossible, within the normal framework of democratic politics. Its

chiefs and their staff are parachuted in anonymously, unelected and without apparent qualifications.

It is a monstrous distended bureaucracy which abuses the idea and the conception of Europe, while in reality it is nothing but a scurrilous parasite incapable of anything, let alone creating a European entity. On the contrary, this overblown, very expensive and useless organism is an agent of the capitalist class' main and most pressing objective and acts solely to organise, regulate and supervise its overall offensive and to destroy systematically the rights and gains working people have won.

Shortly after the concerted attack on working people's rights intensified in this way, a historical event of considerable importance gave a new and extra boost to the capitalist class and their offensive. At the same time, it both directly and indirectly reduced working people's resistance. There is no doubt that the collapse of the Soviet Union stiffened up the capitalists, consolidated their positions and increased their confidence.

Quite apart from what anyone thought about the fall of the USSR, and despite the disastrous role of the bureaucracy which was both its manager and its grave-digger, the whole world working class and working people everywhere lost an advanced post and a precious base for their goals of emancipation. For how long we do not know, the relationship of forces has tilted clearly to the advantage of the capitalist class and to the detriment of working people.

All of capital and its devoted supporters, in a spate of blissful satisfaction and smug presumption, crowed their overweening self-satisfaction and arrogance to all and sundry. The summit of this brainless presumption came when one of their intoxicated "thinkers" even proclaimed the end of history. In any case, what followed clearly brought further, stronger, cynical and shameless attacks on the part of capital and its supporters and a confused and chaotic retreat on the part of workers forced onto the defensive. Over the last twenty years or so workers have continued to retreat more and more markedly. Some of their big organisations, following leaders already integrated into the system, have identified themselves with the temporary victors, while others have melted like butter in the sun or simply vanished.

Unions, too, which used to be official defenders of working people have, under the leadership of inveterate bureaucrats, publicly become “social partners” of vengeful capital. Even the sinister warning creaks of a system in temporary – but nevertheless alarming – crisis did nothing to disturb these good folks’ deep content.

Shock therapy disguised as “reforms”

In this state of manufactured euphoria, bumptious capital nevertheless went on reducing, cutting and one by one taking away the advantages working people had won, limiting, circumscribing and reducing slimming down their reforms. All these good people were brutally aroused from their pleasant reverie by the alarm bells of the latest great crisis. We are right in it now, but there is no point going into detail about that here.

Everybody knows perfectly well that to lessen the negative impact on them and to get out of the crisis, the capitalist class and their system – as is their nature – are doing everything they possibly can to put the whole burden of dealing with and “solving” the crisis onto the backs of working people. However, what is less clear to a lot of people — because it is hidden — is the fact that the crisis is being used as a pretext to ratchet up out of all proportion the scale and force of capital’s murderous offensive which is bearing down on the people of Europe like a tornado.

Shamelessly, governments of every type are presenting the destructive attacks they inflict as “reforms”. This viciously abuses the traditional attachment working people have to genuine past reforms which actually tangibly improved their lives. Sadly, the unanimous din from the opinion-formers means this pernicious deception has contaminated the whole of society. More seriously, the general staffs of the left parties and of the unions use the same dishonest terminology, whose purpose is precisely to camouflage the dismantling and destruction of the very same genuine reforms in the near and distant past. That is how the “Troika” — who have assumed right of attorney over Greece’s financial affairs — commands and supervises the stripping and deprivation of the working people of their gains and rights while all the time presenting this destruction as “one-off structural reform” for the “benefit” of the Greek people. As we all know, language and choice of words are never innocent.

Here “disaster capitalism” is applying the “shock doctrine” used more or less all over the world as described by the journalist Naomi Klein. Her book has never been refuted and no-one has proved it wrong. (While we are on this subject, there is no doubt at all that her accusations are true and supported by a mass of proven facts. What you can hold against her is that she presents this whole scandalous and revolting situation as an excrescence, a deviation within a healthy capitalist system, whereas it is its essence in its present phase of decline, naturally woven into the very fabric of its existence.) What is happening in Greece – and this is just the prelude – gives us a foretaste of the determination of the capitalist class and their acolytes to squeeze the very last halfpenny out of a people who they have (most democratically) quarantined so that they can be offered up to the tender mercies of “the markets”, i.e. to capitalists usurious to the marrow of their bones.

For Europe’s working class and millions of working people, the most important thing to understand is that what is happening is no accident or passing whim not some passing attitude on the part of capitalism arising just from this particular crisis. Get your head round this: you should expect absolutely nothing from the capitalist system and its servants. They themselves all say that their society is incapable and ill-suited to satisfy the needs of working people. They keep repeating the mantra that working people are to blame for “living beyond their means”, but this merely recognises and confirms that their system really is not able to guarantee the advantages and rights people rely on. That really is “beyond their means”. Indeed, thinly-veiling an implied threat of punishment, they have decided to dismantle and end all the previous social gains for once and for all in order to bend working people into the narrow straitjacket of their moribund system’s stunted “means”.

An historical turning point

We are at an historic moment. In the past the capitalist class have launched successive attacks aimed at reducing the gains working people had made, culminating in a general offensive by Thatcher and co. which exploited the weaknesses of the workers’ movement, and now the capitalist system is using the crisis to develop a final all-out

assault on working people. It is not just another skirmish or even a partial or isolated confrontation, such as we have often seen in the past, nor even their subsequent extension and development into a general offensive.

It is a new stage over and above that, where the ferocity, extent and depth of the blows struck and our capitalist opponents' resolute firmness of purpose absolutely all reveal their determination to go to the very end. One further proof of this implacable determination is their peculiar insistence on ravaging gains even beyond the point where the attacks deliberately reduce, indeed annihilate, any resources that offer a potential way out of the crisis. Now it is the turn of Italian working people to sit in the hot seat – others are not far behind ...

In such a threatening situation, you can only welcome the fact that people get angry when faced with so much deceit and malice and express that anger publicly. There are more and more of them all over the world, an obvious sign – following the spectacular and uncompleted risings by a series of peoples in North Africa and the Middle East – of a reawakening of working people that it still groping for a way forward.

All of these expressions of anger and protest in place of resignation and fatalism are in themselves precious as the first signs of incipient consciousness of the threatening reality. But bearing in mind the enormity of what is at stake, the global extent of the conflict and the enemy's unyielding determination, passive indignation and verbal protest are helpless. Those in power, by the way, simply see them as public disorders, at worst annoying, or maybe as street entertainment. Annoyed or amused, they are not going to change by one iota their destructive plans. You really need to do a lot more. In this respect you have to salute the Portuguese working people whose powerful general strike has shown us how to fight. There is no doubt that Greek working people, who have been savagely attacked by capital, will find a path to the kind of vigorous struggle they have always waged over the years. There is also no doubt that other European countries will follow the same path.

The response must be international

Anyone who will not put up with cuts and measures that destroy their

rights and advantages, nor with present and future austerity plans, and want to opposing them, needs to get their heads round the idea that this struggle goes far beyond national boundaries. Capital's frontal attack is international, even if it is carried out on national soil and tailored to fit each specific national set of circumstances.

The enemy is everywhere the same. Consequently struggles confined within the framework of one or another nation, fragmented and isolated from the others, are deprived of the strength needed to repel attacks that are international in nature and to force into retreat an adversary who is also completely international. Solidarity and links between the various movements in different countries are important but inadequate on their own. We absolutely must field against these degrading plans and actions a movement that is both organically international and also struggles on an international scale. Obviously none of that precludes movements and struggles in each individual country, which provide the base and the framework necessary for any international action.

What lends an organically international character to a movement of struggle and its action, and what forges its fighting potential, is without doubt its international nature, since that is the only way it can measure up to the international character of the plans, actions and offensive of an adversary who is attacking the social position and conditions of life of working people all over the globe, even if what he does varies considerably country by country and continent by continent. Despite the distances that separate them and the great divergence between their respective positions and conditions, that is what solidly unites, for example, working peoples engaged in partial battles who have recently revolted in the Middle East and North Africa. And that is why there are signs that the working people of Europe are stretching out a fraternal hand to their natural allies, the revolutionary working people of Egypt and Syria engaged in their own bloody struggles.

“Anti-globalisation” a blind alley

Nevertheless, it is necessary to reject calls for an “anti-globalisation” struggle. To characterise the current world economic and political system as “globalisation” is just wrong. The bourgeoisie and its ideol-

ogists have invented and introduced this mystifying term to hide behind its eminently **geographical** character the present phase of their **economic** and **social** system, which is that well known capitalism-imperialism that is now in a state of advanced senility.

As for capitalism, in its distant and still vigorous youth Marx and Engels described “globalisation” in the Communist Manifesto: “Modern industry has established the world market ...” “The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country...” “In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.”

These notions and concepts of capitalism and its globalisation have long since formed part of the elementary knowledge of the whole of humanity. We are still dealing with the same old system. The changes are only quantitative and moreover are connected with an enormous worsening of its defects.

So it is no surprise that those who have risen to the poisoned bourgeois bait and support “anti-globalisation” are inextricably trapped in confusion. It is very hard for them to shake off the accusation of a bad dose of protectionism, since that is actually the reactionary nationalist and historically outmoded antidote to the world market, with its largely interconnected and interdependent parts.

All the noise about “de-globalisation” takes us straight into a dead end alongside the confused and backward-looking prophets of antiproductivity, when there are officially a billion people in the world suffering from starvation, not to mention other millions condemned to vegetate in poverty. We should reject capitalist “productivity” spurred on by greed for profit, but we should also fight to expand production to meet the immense unsatisfied needs of humanity.

It is understandable that the first steps of those who want to struggle against the actions of capital should lead them to embrace “anti globalisation” or “antiproductivity”, but these first steps lead into a blind alley scarcely different from that of the “indignant ones”. These are a one-way street to confusion and disillusionment.

The capitalist class cannot unify Europe

The situation we are in in Europe pits us above all and immediately against a section of the European capitalist class more or less gathered together into a deeply contradictory, unstable and muddled conglomerate called “Europe” or more precisely European Union. And it is through this body with its monstrously swollen head that it hopes to impose its outrageous plans to wipe out the social advances working people have won. That objective is its central pre-occupation and determines what it does. From this point of view and for that aim, the governments of the European countries, varied as they are, act as its arms and executive agents, even those which appear to keep their distance.

That is why the movement against the attacks and attempts to dismantle and destroy working people’s rights needs to be organically international, very concretely european-wide, and not simply an occasional adding together of those arising in each country. While reinforcing these, the European movement as a whole needs to concentrate its fire on the capitalists class’s self-proclaimed centres (Brussels, Strasbourg, Frankfurt) and on its planned dirty deeds and manoeuvres.

But it is highly important to understand that a continent-wide movement to defend working people cannot be anti-European. On the contrary, it is the capitalist class that struts around in stolen “European” clothes to hide their concerted attack behind fine phrases about Europe. To tell the truth, this exploitative and oppressive class with its train of servile politicians is absolutely incapable of unifying Europe. The birth of this class was all mixed up with the birth of the nations with which its entire life is bound up.

Two catastrophic world wars testify to this, obviously from the negative side. And since it was only the appearance of this class way back in time that gave birth to nations, so too only its disappearance will signal that they will also die away. The several decades of the European venture provide adequate proof that the capitalist class is quite incapable of unifying Europe but at the same time stolidly determined and able to attack and demolish the gains and rights working people have won.

The colossal level of indebtedness, or rather specifically the way the

debts are configured in Europe, is one of the main aspects of the current world crisis which has clearly put into relief these two “European” faces of the capitalist class. Instead of bringing them together on the road to a greater European integration, it has laid bare the divisions between countries, even their extreme separation. At the same time as successive capitalist governments have let domestic inequalities build up and grow to a monstrous level, their “European” agents have reproduced and reinforced these many and varied inequalities in their stunted “Europe”.

They have already divided Europe into several more or less concentric circles. There is the outer circle of poor, untouchable pariahs waiting for their masters – usually their former imperialist rulers — to save them by letting them into a second circle of the chosen elect. They are tossed around according to the whim of the lords of Europe, the banks and their packs of condescending politicians. In the circle of the chosen elect, there are two more circles: that of the countries which are doubly elect because they possess the single currency and the others, looked down on with pity, who have not yet tasted that bitter fruit. Even though they have caught the same disease of debt, small and large, from Poland to the UK, they are not fettered directly to the calamitous consequences of an artificial currency. (Of course, their working people undergo the same frontal attack by capital on their gains. On this there is no country that is different, inside or outside Europe.)

And then, behind the deceptive veil of the European “Union”, within an already pretty restricted inner circle, the policy of destroying social rights and gains in order to save the capitalists has increased and enlarged the inequalities between countries. That artificial pseudo-currency the euro has powerfully contributed to extending and increasing these inequalities. The monetary aspect of the crisis has revealed and at the same time deepened not just a “simple” growth in inequality but a veritable fissure between these supposedly “united” countries. The leaders of the “more equal” ones and their entourage speak insultingly and contemptuously about certain “less equal” countries like Greece, Portugal, Italy, etc. which these arrogant leaders disdainfully describe as the “periphery” of Europe, echoing the contemptuous and fearful French mantra about the “dangerous *banlieue*”.

Today even this — only yesterday broad and compact — camp of close-knit European insiders has fairly well broken apart. Confronted with a veritable rout in which the concentric circles of a pseudo-Europe are gradually shrinking and tending openly and cynically to be reduced to the so-called “German-French axis”, “pro-European” politicians and journalists speak and write openly about the possibility of the euro collapsing while their “Europe” falls apart. It is worth repeating that their artificial money, conceived in the feverish imagination of monetarist dogma and being born under the magic wand of voluntarism, is before our very eyes colliding with the realities of a fragmented Europe and will inevitably break apart on them.

Glimpsing this abyss, some economists, more lucid than the mass of politicians and other “experts”, foresee a much narrower grouping of countries as the only way to furnish a more or less realistic and adequate base for a euro which is being tossed about in the air like a shuttlecock. But one can also see clearly the obvious fear leaders have of taking this route, one more proof that the capitalist class are by their very nature incapable of unifying Europe. The euro is an artificial currency condemned to disappear, and its collapse will lead to that of the capitalists’ counterfeit Europe.

Of course those capitalist class and their leaders will never acknowledge that their European (misad)venture is a fiasco. After all, for better or for worse, it is in line with the move towards greater concentration of capital and guarantees it a wider unrestricted market. But most of all, rickety and deformed as this scaffolding is, it provides a framework, a way and a cover (and now also as a pretext) for organising, pursuing and carrying out its frontal attack on the rights and gains workers have achieved, which is ultimately essential if they are to keep their dilapidated system going. On Europe, the sharper the contradiction becomes between reality and the capitalist class’s obstinacy, the heavier the burden they will put on the backs of working people.

Dream of a “social” Europe or fight for a working peoples’ Europe

So what is needed to fight this general and frontal attack by the bourgeoisie is a broad movement of working people. While they camouflage that attack behind the pretence of dealing with the crisis, that is actually the concrete form in which the attack is taking place. You

can see that clearly in Greece, Ireland, Portugal and a succession of other countries. Italy is next on the execution block. Given the nature and extent of these attacks, the movement against them cannot but be international and, more concretely, European.

Every single one of the great organisations traditionally supposed to defend and promote the interests of working people stops at the borders of its own country, despite the well-known fact that they have sister organisations in every country in Europe. They do have some sort of European or even international centres, but what stands out is these zombie bodies' total and absolute lack of any European-wide platform or programme.

What most of them do is mimic the capitalist class's attitude on Europe, including its general offensive disguised behind a fig-leaf of "reforms". At most, they embroider lovely little designs to set themselves apart, but always on a canvas provided by the capitalists. What they absolutely will not ever do is work out and put forward a coherent programme for Europe, different from, and opposed to, the one currently in force. Not to mention the essential pre-condition for such a programme, i.e. a critical global analysis of the capitalist class's programme.

At most, the leaders of these organisations will from time to time humbly petition the "competent authorities" to give Europe a social dimension by introducing a series of social norms among the other conditions and criteria of their "European project". In this connection it is brutally revealing that these norms and social rights have been deliberately set aside and have simply disappeared from all plans for "Europe". These lamentable Don Quixotes never say a word about that and make fools of themselves when they occasionally flaunt themselves as champions of social rights. It never occurs to them to put forward social demands of their own.

Obviously it is extremely important to defend the gains workers have made in each country because the general offensive to dismantle them often takes a particular form depending on specific national conditions. But if it stays at this national level, the movement to defend them will be delayed and ultimately defeated. We must both strengthen them and unify them into a European movement right from the out-

set. But such a continent-wide movement cannot be limited to just defending social gains, which at the end of the day is a *negative* objective.

The only way it can attain the stature it needs is if it has a *positive* goal to aim for. To put it another way, it is not enough to be *against* something, you have to be fighting *for* something. The banner of this movement must therefore say what it stands for, i.e the construction of a “working people’s Europe”. Only a struggle with a clear and open orientation on that scale will be in a position to parry and defeat the capitalist class’s frontal attack on working people’s rights, an attack embodied in their their pseudo-Europe with all its destructive plans.

It would be pretentious and premature to try to work out in advance a detailed and complete programme for the movement towards a working people’s Europe, but we should state some aims and demands which flow from the concrete current situation, as well as some of the principles and methods which ought to guide its activity and help it bear fruit.

Main central demand

First of all there is the crisis of this bankers’ Europe which currently centres on the colossal levels of debt faced by all the countries in the euro zone (and the rest!), causing intractable quibbling and haggling in search of a “solution” which looks more and more like squaring the circle. (Unless, of course, they can impose massive impoverishment on working people under conditions of totalitarian oppression.) The Greek leader Papandreou made a feeble attempt to escape this implacable vice by suggesting that the Greek people should be consulted over what to do about the debts in a referendum.

The moment he said this, all the leaders of Europe and their entourages rose in protest as one man, violently and angrily, as if stung by a scorpion. What impertinence! How dare he ask the people what they thought, when those in charge have already decided to squeeze them and their rights even harder! This vain effort tore away the mask and showed the true face of their runt “Europe”.

On the one hand this was one more confirmation that they will never be able to pay back the gigantic debts (which at the same time sheds light on the cynical, off-hand, way these leaders trample democracy

underfoot). On the other, it exposed how profound the crisis – or rather death agony — of the euro actually is. How significant that not a single one of all the “socialists” who are up to their necks in this “Europe” and its euro stood up for their “comrade” Papandreou.

What is more, the plan to salvage creditor capital (and definitely not the Greek people!), born amid so many protracted and painful labours, also required a good dollop of help from – that same capital. Whether the banks are willing to repeat the experience is more than doubtful. Attempts to consolidate the much-touted European fund to help states meet their debts are certainly not welcomed with open arms in every quarter and are in fact in a bit of a sorry state.

The queue of potential victims – Italy, Spain and then France – is coming into sharper focus. The billions that have to be paid back are joined each day by further billions as the usurious interest rate keeps going up, set and raised arbitrarily at the insatiable whim of finance capital, or — to use the oracular, antiseptic language of the spin doctors – “the needs of the markets”. They make old Shylock look a mere beginner.

The sorcerer’s apprentices of modern “Europe” are at least partly responsible for setting up this reality, but they cannot contain the infernal mechanism which is at one and the same time their servant and their master. Desperately trying to get a grip on a situation which slips through their fingers and threatens to carry them away in their turn like Papandreou or Berlusconi, they have opened fire on the ratings agencies.

These are unquestionably parasites on the system which have the juicy job of informing finance capital how profitable their investments are, using a continuous grading system. Their ratings are scanned as anxiously as the class dunces read their end of term reports. Because the agencies have recently handed downgrades even to their star European pupils in view of their poor economic performance, these former teachers’ pets have turned on them furiously and used some rather bad language over the loss of their cherished triple-A ratings. Just like the ancient Romans who had the messenger who brought bad news put to death.

The steady and yet disproportionate growth in the already monumental weight of debt actually reflects the real economic

situation. That, and the quite bleak prospects for the future mean that it will never be possible to pay the debts back. The few more clear-sighted economists and journalists point out that the main reason for the debts is that economic growth is slowing down considerably, if not just marking time. Consequently they point out that the way forward is a series of measures to improve and increase this growth. And they are right – on paper. Growth is not an isolated, separate economic phenomenon which you can stimulate and increase at will. In capitalism, it depends exclusively on the ability of domestic and export markets to absorb the goods produced.

Without going into detail, suffice it to say that these markets are more or less saturated, resulting in chronic over-production. In any case, for a long time now markets have been inaccessible to European (and American) goods which are too expensive and (with the exception of Germany) of inferior quality. That is the actual fact hiding behind the insistent calls by a handful of economists and even fewer politicians for production in Europe to be made more competitive.

To put it in simple everyday language, they must produce goods at a better price and of a better quality, etc., if they are to sell them against ever tougher competition from the massive quantities of goods at unbeatable prices appearing from the so-called “emerging” countries, made possible by the shameless super-exploitation of their workers.

Of course capital and its economic and political managers, as ever, see a way out of their serious situation, but it is *their* “way out” in line with their system, starting with a savage determination that their debts will be paid in full, come what may. Next they try to improve their economic competitiveness, i.e. cut their production costs. This is exactly what they are doing with their continuous attacks – not to say a veritable grand offensive — on the rights and advantages working people have gained, achievements which are now definitively incompatible with this reduction in production costs, and therefore with their system as a whole.

But they do not stop there. In the next wave they will take direct aim at real wages, and this has already started in places. Do not forget that the German capitalists consolidated their industrial competitiveness by drastically squeezing incomes across the board through a

wage freeze “agreed” by compliant trade unions, and this has been going on for years!

Don't pay the debts!

All this means that for a prolonged period the crisis is going to get worse and consequently we must expect a redoubled and sharper offensive against working people on all fronts. This means there can only be one serious response: we must propose a *general refusal* to pay back these debts which are growing all the time as the interest goes up. This should be the first demand of the Europe-wide workers' movement in connection with their call for “a working people's Europe”.

At the same time it builds a barrier against further destruction of workers' rights. The series of harsh austerity plans inevitably threatens human civilisation as a whole, a terrible sacrifice on the hideous altar of capitalism in decline.

Historical regression of this sort would not be confined to economic and social conditions; gloom would also spread across political life, and to an extent it already has. No-one should forget that in a similarly tortured situation fascism conquered power in Germany, having already triumphed in Italy. It is no accident that it is already making giant strides in several European countries on the same basis of capitalist convulsions and taking advantage of the same dereliction of their most elementary duties by workers' official leaders. If workers and their representatives remain inactive and turn their backs on this struggle to defend themselves boldly and unite their forces at a European level, there is no doubt that new Hitlers and new Mussolinis will take their place.

The worrying progress they are already making in a growing number of countries goes hand in hand with no less disturbing retreats by the workers' movement. The only effective way to fight these shades of barbarism was and is an energetic united struggle to defend the rights workers have gained and to transform a Europe shrouded in shadows into a free “working people's Europe”.

While it would be silly and pointless to try to work out a complete scheme of detailed demands for such a Europe-wide workers movement in advance, it does seem necessary to put forward a few important points and principles to guide its activity.

Against a stunted “Europe” and its banks

The central target is European policy, summed up and concentrated in the offensive described above, and Europe’s anti-democratic central institutions. The Europe-wide workers’ movement is directed against this policy which is profoundly anti-democratic in every way. The movement will be aimed directly against these so-called European institutions whose establishment, character and methods, in line with their policy, are not merely anti-democratic but brutally opposed to democracy. These tyrannical organs are veiled in an anonymity from behind which they issue and impose binding decrees without appeal, squandering vast sums of money in the process. Swarms of idle parasites gravitate around the innumerable pressure groups, wooing and winning support for this or that group of capitalists. In the name of elementary democracy, the Europe-wide workers’ movement will fight these anti-democratic monsters, spectres of a long-vanished feudal rule. The Europe-wide workers’ movement should loudly insist that the whole lot of these autocratic, parasitic and enormously expensive bodies should be abolished. And while we are about it, it will fight to establish democratic bodies based on the mass participation of workers and all working people.

Everything about the problems under discussion shows very clearly that this Europe-wide movement will have to have a working-class character. It also means that that this has to be laid down clearly and unequivocally. This stands out when it comes sketching even in outline the aims, programme and method of such a movement. As the partial mobilisations have so far have emphasised, the Europe-wide workers’ movement must beyond doubt be directed against the main threat, i.e. finance capital and its institutions, which are already exploiting the crisis to unleash a large-scale offensive. It is therefore clear that, from the start, the movement must aim to undermine the very basis for this evil offensive.

The conviction arises naturally that in doing so it is impossible to disentangle social and economic troubles in general, and the refusal to repay the debts in particular, from the circumstances and position of the banks. Consequently one of the very first demands will be to end banking secrecy which, by the way, will remain a pious wish unless it is accompanied by nationalisation under workers’ control of the principal banks.

That is the natural, logical and concrete way to strike a real blow at the source of their power, as opposed to the endless chatter and demagogic fantasies, devoid of both content and consequences, around “regulation” of finance capital and its movement. It is also the only serious way to strike a definite blow against the pressure towards impoverishment. Only a radical step like this, under the watchful supervision of workers, would provide at the same time an indispensable basis for and a means to manage credit vigourously and healthily and get an effective grip on the arbitrary, irregular movement of interest rates. Such steps are also important in defending the many thousand small, often family, firms which are being held up and mugged by capital. They are the natural allies of working people and their movement in this struggle. What is downright culpable is the almost total silence on these basic questions emanating from the big “Left” organisations. In this they have absolutely turned their backs on their own – not too distant – past.

Renew the trade unions

To even get off the ground, never mind flourish, a Europe-wide workers’ movement absolutely must be allied to the trade unions. Actually there is much more at stake here. The situation now is marked by the general merciless offensive of capital on the one hand and the successive retreats and political and organisational disarmament of the working class and all working people on the other, so the trade unions are a particularly important force and tool in the latter’s hands.

After all, the sole and original reason for unions is to rally working people together, represent them and defend their interests. They are probably the only levers that actually exist in every country and internationally which can give a decisive boost to their movement, unifying and strengthening them. That is precisely why, ever since they first came into being, capital has always done whatever it could to destroy and ban them, or to co-opt them and make them their own servants.

They have long since succeeded in shepherding unions, through their leaderships, into a sort of “peaceful co-existence” or even class collaboration, sometimes masked or hidden, but suspended and interrupted outright in times of heightened class-struggle. From this point of view, the characteristic trait of recent decades, while capital has

been preparing and launching a general offensive, has been the way these trade union leaderships have turned openly and publicly into auxiliary detachments of capital, or, as they themselves put it bluntly, “social partners”.

One disastrous consequence of this attack on the innermost core, the most fundamental being of trade unionism, and the kind of behaviour it gives rise to, has been a considerable fall in membership. Massive desertions by workers and working people in general express a lack of trust in trade unions and have reached alarming proportions in every country. One of the most urgent tasks facing the European workers’ movement is to put this into reverse and take back the unions – from top to bottom.

The mass of workers who did stay on in their unions did not follow the same path as the trade union bureaucracies, of class collaboration codified and emphasised by their conversion into “social partners”. This stopped the rot from spreading too far and prevented the unions from becoming fully integrated into the state. Despite losses, they have actually maintained their independence and thus their ability to get back into the fight.

On this basis, workers and all working people can and should get back into their unions. In any case, the unions belong to them and not any particular individual, least of all the trade union bureaucrats who put at risk the the very existence of unions, whose main justification after all is that they stand up to capital. The decisive argument in this re-conquest of the unions by workers is this: without these organisations and their mobilising capacity, it would be very difficult, not to say practically impossible, to develop a powerful Europe-wide movement of workers.

However, it goes without saying that this campaign to take back the unions means that they must at the same time be turned back into organisations of struggle against capital’s offensive. To do this, a platform of union-organised workers must urgently express in words the need to break with class collaboration (“social partnership”) in order to achieve independence from bosses and government.

Combative actions, not carnivals

Merely deciding to go for that sort of independence, or just talking or

writing ringing declarations about it, will not bring it. It will only take concrete shape through involvement in real, resolute struggle against capital's offensive and all its manifestations. Such a struggle is fundamentally different from all the pretend and pseudo-actions used as a pretext by the leaderships of the "social partner" unions, first and foremost because it completely denounces capital's offensive and condemns it from every angle. That means clearly-defined and precise workers' demands rather than the kind of puerile gestures requesting "realistic negotiations" which trade union bureaucrats often indulge in. It also requires serious actions and combative, determined demonstrations instead of the happy-go-lucky clownish carnival-like processions used to lull working people into a false sense of security.

A particularly important criterion in this involvement is its international – above all Europe-wide — scope and character. Trade unions have significant links and even an apparatus at an international and European level. The acutely painful situation we are in means that these entirely bureaucratized links and offices must be turned boldly into (or replaced by) pillars of continent-wide struggle against capital's offensive and the machinery for it concentrated in Brussels, Frankfurt and Strasbourg. A series of actions in these centres and across Europe should replace the very occasional European rallies disguised as tame village fêtes.

This shows why there is no way the great mass of working people will be able to re-conquer the trade unions without re-establishing complete workers' democracy within them. Besides freedom of discussion, the main test (success criteria) for such democracy is freedom for tendencies and factions to express their views including the right to organise an opposition.

This internal democracy is vitally necessary and the only way to work out the best orientation, achieve the necessary flexibility and make sure that the most appropriate slogans are selected. It is the best guarantee against the deadly snares of capitulation through unprincipled opportunism or marginalisation in sectarian sterility. Of course it is also the only way to give the unions back to working people and make the necessary changes to them.

A Europe-wide workers' movement can only exist and develop

through the involvement of a multitude of political, trade union, cultural, etc. organisations and movements in the various countries. In the nature of things, these organisations function on the basis of a very broad spectrum of different conceptions and programmes and a variety of attachments and affiliations. What will unite them and assemble them into a single movement – besides their working-class character – will be their determination to fight back against capital's attacks on the rights working people have won and the gains they have made. In a situation like this, there is only one way to achieve and guarantee on the one hand the unity and integrity of the movement and on the other the freedom and independence of each of its components. That is the historically-proven method of the international workers' movement, the united workers' front. Almost 100 years ago Lenin, one of the great leaders of this movement, summed it up succinctly in the words: "March separately – Strike together!"

This is the only effective way for our broad and diverse movement to achieve its common goal.

