

Class struggle in Europe

Tue, 31/12/2002 - 23:00

The decision of the Bush administration to attack Iraq alerted its strongest potential bloc of imperialist rivals ? the European Union ? to the dangers of an aggressive, unilateralist United States. The German and French leaderships of the EU were made painfully aware of what it still lacked rather than what it had achieved over the past period.

The US administration ? with the unstinting support of Tony Blair ? managed to divide the EU states into hostile camps and woo to its side many of the new states seeking accession. Donald Rumsfeld rubbed the noses of Chirac and Schröder in the mud by labelling them as the ?old Europe?. The ?new Europe? were the states that responded to the White House?s call for them to jump, with a cowardly ?how high sir??

The contrast between the relative economic potency of European capital and its abject political and military impotence was plain for all to see, once again. European firms are competing with US companies now in all major markets of the world. The euro has become the first currency with the potential to rival the US dollar as a ?world currency? But the war showed, even more clearly than the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, that the European Union will never be able to close the gap by relying on its economic development alone.

It has made the German and French bourgeoisies painfully aware that they have to focus on sorting out their problems on the ?home front? before they can dream of challenging for a joint pre-eminence with USA. But big questions face them. How to overcome the absence of economic homogeneity? How to overcome the lack of capital concentration on an EU level? How to develop a common world foreign policy ? How to overcome the EU?s chronic military weakness?

All these point to the need for a strategic attack on the European working class if European corporations are to raise their profit rates, undertake the necessary investment in cutting edge technology to catch up with the United States leading multinationals, and to drastically cut their social expenditure. Without the latter, any dreams of greater arms spending to enable the EU to intervene to protect its own interests without prior US approval are futile.

It is no accident that attacks on pension rights, health, social insurance, and education have been launched simultaneously throughout Europe. The EU institutions and entry negotiations by a string of applicant states are being used to attack social welfare provision. For example, the attacks on pensions in France, Austria and Italy coincided with a pension ?reform? in Croatia based on demands from the EU commission.

The EU launched its strategy of structural reform at the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000. Its aim was far-reaching ?reforms? in labour, product and capital markets aimed at imitating those in the USA.

The Broad Economic Policy Guidelines adopted there called for major reductions in taxation and cuts in the cost of social benefit systems. Labour markets had to be made ?flexible? by removing or reducing regulations, especially those on hiring and firing. It called for the encouragement of (poorly paid) part-time

jobs.

It called for changes in the wage bargaining system which would allow wage levels to respond to crises more quickly (i.e. fall). At the same time it demanded that countries, like Germany, with high unemployment benefits must substantially reduce them in order to provide 'an incentive to work'. It called for the de-regulation and integration of the continent's financial markets, so as to allow capital to flow where the returns are highest.

All these measures were aimed at boosting labour productivity (i.e. the rate of exploitation). In Europe, this is not only low but, compared to the United States, declining. According to the European Commission, it fell from 86 per cent of the US level in 1999 to 83 per cent in 2002.

Last, but not least, the Lisbon Strategy calls for the privatisation of utilities in telecommunications and transport and their breaking up existing monopolies. Though this is done in the name of consumer choice it inevitably leads to 'rationalisation', meaning job losses, closures, reductions in wages and rights at work.

This thoroughgoing neo-liberal attack on the European working class is not only imperative in order to increase exploitation rates to US levels but also in order to break the greater political identity and organisational independence of the working class relative to its North American comrades. The 'political backwardness' of the US working class is economically a prime advantage for US imperialism. The movement of capital there is much less 'impeded' by workplace and employment rights, by safeguards against redundancies, the right to strike and by the statutory protection of trade unions.

The European capitalists want to push 'their workers' into US-style conditions at all levels. That is why we can and must expect a period of intensified class struggle ahead.

Mass resistance in the EU

This Europe wide attack led to a series of militant responses from workers during the spring and early summer of 2003 but all of these campaigns ran into the problem of a labour movement whose political leaders (both those in power like Blair and Schröder, and those in opposition such as Bertinotti) who are totally convinced of the need to carry out these reforms. In addition, the unions have a top leadership unable to suggest any solution to the crisis and frightened of mobilising their own members.

The 'alternative leadership', left and centre-left trade union bureaucrats and left reformist and centrist political parties, showed that they have neither a real viable political alternative nor the courage to take on and defeat the right wing within the labour movement.

Mass mobilisations have continued throughout the year but some serious reverses have occurred, above all for the Italian workers, who have been the most militant sector of the European working class. In December 2002 the Fiat crisis ended in a defeat for the workers. The previous October more than 8,000 workers were threatened with being laid off for a year, and two plants closed, one near Milan (the old Alfa-Romeo factory) and the other in Termini Imerese (Sicily), An immediate counter-mobilisation took place, with the most militant workers being those in 'right-wing' Sicily, the bastion of the Alleanza Nazionale and Forza Italia.

On several occasions, they paralysed Palermo airport, the motorway and the railways and brought the city of Messina to a standstill, blocking all the ferries to and from the Italian mainland. The population of Sicily supported them.

Yet the leadership of the main trade union federations involved signally failed to organise a general strike

in support of this enormously popular struggle. The new leader of the CGIL Guglielmo Epifani, together with Fausto Bertinotti, the leader of Rifondazione Comunista, went no further than lame calls for the state to intervene; they refused to call for occupations to force nationalisation of the threatened factories.

By early December, a decision of the government and the Fiat bosses forced the acceptance of the lay-offs and closures. The unions were not even consulted.

This did not put an end to mass radicalisation however. On 15 February, three million marched against the plans of Bush and Blair to invade Iraq – a stance ruthlessly supported by Italy's prime minister Berlusconi. But this spring upsurge marked the high tide of the movement. By early summer the piazzas returned to the tourists. The movement had failed to defeat the government offensive against article 18 of the Labour Code, despite two general strikes. It had failed to stop the war.

In these conditions, Bertinotti led a turn to the ballot box; Rifondazione gathered signatures for a referendum to extend labour code protection to workers employed in companies with fewer than 15 employees. Concentrating all efforts on this proved to be democratic cul-de-sac, a fatal diversion from fighting to bring the mass movement to a head in an all-out general strike to oust Berlusconi, thus sweeping away all the government's attacks. The referendum on 15 June was a spectacular failure. The turnout – only 25.7 per cent of the electorate – was the lowest in Italian history. Bertinotti must take the main blame for this.

Not only Epifani and Bertinotti but the leader of the Disobedienti, Luca Cassarini, made the same protestations. 'We must not be provoked into a challenge for power: this will only provoke the right-wing forces to attack democracy.' This cowardly approach – redolent of Italian Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti in the post-war period, the Eurocommunists of the 1970s and the post-modernists of the 1980s and 1990s – has ensured Berlusconi's survival and his ability to press on with all his attacks this autumn.

Bertinotti implicitly accepts the democratic legitimacy of this right wing government. He has never called for the overthrow of Berlusconi. He has absolutely no perspective beyond the next elections – due officially in 2005. Meanwhile, he is working towards re-entering the Ulivo coalition (his 'new' strategy). This despite his words last year in Florence at the European Social Forum about the mistakes RC had made with its coalition policy. He is preparing to do it all over again.

In any case, his economic policy is warmed up social democratic Keynesianism. Whilst he repeats ad nauseam that 'another world is possible', he cannot say what that 'other world' is. Neither can Luca Casarini of the Disobedienti nor Agnoletto of the Italian Social Forum for that matter. The reformists of the right (Democratic Left) and the left, (Rifondazione) are both doing everything they can to avoid a head on fight with Berlusconi. While all three main trade union federations (CGIL, CISL and UIL) have called yet another four-hour general strike on 24 October they are hoping that the coalition government will simply collapse due to its own internal rows over pension reform.

They are hopeful too that Italy's bosses, the Confindustria, will tire of Berlusconi's buffooneries, given the manifest lack of respect shown him by most EU governments. Then, they hope, the Ulivo coalition will be called back to govern Italy. However, even then there is no likelihood of a fundamental change in policy away from the neo-liberal EU line, as Schröder's turnaround immediately after his re-election in Germany shows.

Of course, the working class masses still hate Berlusconi, even if they have lost confidence in the left. The local elections held in May-June 2003 provided no comfort for either Rifondazione or the governing right. Unfortunately, this only resulted in a strengthening of the 'Democratic Left' i.e. of the centre-right. The

right-wing coalition lost several city and provincial councils, including Rome, to the Ulivo coalition.

The possibility of bringing down the government is, nonetheless, a very real one. Berlusconi had to back off the 'reform' of Article 18 as a result of the mobilisation in the spring. On pensions, he faces ructions from his the coalition partners and cannot reach agreement on what to do. The unions are talking of a general strike if the government goes ahead with its 'reform'. Faced with serious pressure, the coalition may break up. After all, Berlusconi's first government collapsed in 1994 over precisely the pensions issue. Early elections can not be ruled out.

Repeated one day mobilisations unless they lead to escalation into all out action could lead workers to draw the wrong conclusion - that general strikes get nowhere. Indeed, if such mobilisations are limited to letting-off steam, they will eventually exhaust the participants. Because Epifani, Bertinotti and Casarini refuse to work towards an indefinite general strike the mobilisations are in danger of being wasted. It is far too soon to say that the missed opportunities after Genoa and around the Fiat strike have already demoralised the working class movement but further vacillations must, eventually, take their toll.

The most positive result would be if their recent experience stimulates the vanguard to re-evaluate their leaders. The reason for the problems is that the workers' leadership, including its left wing, persistently refuses to escalate the struggle into a decisive one - a general strike, run by local councils of action, involving factory occupations. Indeed, their chronic electoralism, democratic phrasemongering and cowardice in the face of the state, means that they repeatedly sabotage the spontaneous, inner logic of the class struggle.

Austria

In Austria, the determination of the right wing government of Wolfgang Schüssel to impose pension reform led to an explosion of working class anger and resistance. Schüssel tried to implement these changes over the heads of the union leaders, thus tearing up decades of 'social partnership'. This forced the leaders of Austria's trade union federation, OGB, to mobilise their members on a scale not witnessed for half a century.

On 6 May, half a million workers went on strike and on 13 May, 200,000 demonstrated in Vienna. The streets reverberated with demands for further action and even a general strike. But of course the official speakers dared not mention the words. Nevertheless, on 3 June, Austria did in fact come very close to a general strike. One million workers - every third wage earner in the country - took strike action.

Yet it was already clear that the union leaders were eager to ensure that the struggle should go no further, that the rank and file should not realise their enormous potential strength. This time there was no central mass demonstration organised. Thousands of workplace meetings and small public rallies took place but no real mobilisation on the streets. However, sensing the danger, the government opened negotiations and reduced and delayed the cuts.

The bureaucrats sold out a struggle that could have defeated this attack totally. Instead, the government is being allowed to take the first step - even if it is a smaller step than they originally planned - to destroying the state pension system, i.e. to full privatisation. However, the May-June-strikes have opened a new period in Austria. As the bourgeoisie returns to the attack, we can expect more such strikes in the future. The problem, as everywhere, is the crisis of leadership, how to defeat the OGB bureaucracy and democratise and revolutionise the organisations of the working class.

Germany

In Germany on Saturday 24 May, tens of thousand of trade unionists, amongst them many SPD members, marched against the attacks of 'their own' government. Shortly after the Schröder government was narrowly re-elected in 2002 it cynically announced a whole programme of neoliberal 'reforms' named agenda 2010.

These included severe cuts in unemployment benefits, attacks on health insurance and a weakening of safeguards against redundancies. Major demonstrations against these attacks erupted in May and June. This campaign was led by the builders' union, IG Bau, the engineering workers' union, IG Metall and public sector unions in Ver.di.

However, at the extraordinary SPD party Congress in Berlin, Schröder was able to outmanoeuvre and humiliate the opposition within the SPD and in its parliamentary fraction. The demonstration, and a rally outside it, was a flop. The reason for this fiasco was the political cowardice of the SPD left and the trade union leaders who oppose the government's plan. They oppose Schröder in words and even with the odd demonstration or warning strike but they are fearful of 'damaging' let alone bringing down the government.

They simply want a 'different', a more 'social' policy with a few more taxes on the rich and the withdrawal of the attacks on the unemployed; but they insist that Schröder must stay in office at all costs. He has them where he wants them. He need only threaten resignation to bring these yapping dogs to heel. This is why the union leaders exclude political strikes against the government.

For several years, the SPD has been losing members continuously (it is now down to 670,000). A growing number of unionists now talk openly of breaking with the SPD but, at the same time, the PDS, the second, smaller reformist party, is not benefiting from the SPD's crisis. Rather, it is in decline itself because of its involvement in the regional governments in the Eastern Länder which are also cutting social programmes.

This victory for Schröder really encouraged the bosses to counter-attack the next group of workers to take action. The struggle in East Germany for the equalisation of the working week started with IG Metall demanding a cut from the current 38-hour norm to 35 hours. Between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of workers affected voted for strike action. The strikes themselves were solid. The capitalists certainly had not expected that metal workers in East Germany would be able to keep the strike going for four weeks in Saxony and for two weeks in Brandenburg and East Berlin.

In the steel industry this powerful start led to the employers suing for peace. Unfortunately, despite this early climbdown by the employers, the union settled for a compromise that will see a phased reduction of the working week to 35 hours by 2009! However, what was to come in the campaign overall made that look like a triumph for the union.

The strike was bitterly opposed by the right wing of the IG Metall leadership and, more importantly, by the chairmen of the works councils in the large multi-national companies whose supplies of parts and materials were hit by the strike. These strike breakers sharply attacked the 'left' bureaucrats for initiating and supporting the strike.

In complete violation of the union's constitution, but with the backing of these right wing works' councils and trade union bureaucrats, the union's leader, Zwickel recommended that the strike be called off. The left and centre union leaders gave in to this 'accomplished fact' and vice-chairman Jürgen Peters took the 'political responsibility' for 'misjudging the situation'.

This was the worst self-inflicted defeat suffered by IG Metall for decades. It revealed the terrible lack of a powerful rank and file organisation in Germany's most militant union and the political disorientation of the

vanguard. Again, the crisis of leadership snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

In the autumn, Schröder returned to the attack. The German parliament passed into law one of the most savage cuts packages in the history of public health care: a reduction in spending of some 20 billion euros. This will be followed by bills trimming unemployment and welfare benefits.

His narrow overall parliamentary majority, and the existence of half a dozen Social Democratic rebels, means that he has to keep threatening resignation. 'I want to consciously tie my political fate to the implementation of these reforms,' Schröder said in a speech to the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin. 'If we don't do it by Christmas, I fear we will never do it.'

If the trade unions were to mobilise against these attacks they could undoubtedly be stopped. But the cowardly capitulation in the spring shows what these traitors are made of. Once again, the problem boiled down to a crisis of working class leadership. It shows how desperately the German workers need a new mass working class party, based on a revolutionary Marxist programme.

France

In France a major confrontation took place between workers and the Chirac-Raffarin government on the issue of pensions and the 'reform' of education (i.e. decentralisation as a first step to the intervention of private finance). The mobilisations were even larger than those of November-December 1995. This came on top of the antiwar mobilisations which culminated on 15 February and the huge mobilisations against the prospect of a Le Pen victory in the second round of the presidential elections last year.

Though the government artfully excluded them from the proposed pension reform the cheminots (the railworkers of the SNCF and the RATP) - the militant vanguard of the French workers - soon got involved. They could plainly see that they would be next if the scheme went through. This provoked a wave of increasingly radical actions around the country involving blockading stations, motorways and even whole towns.

Significantly, there were signs of private sector workers being drawn into the movement: Renault Cleon, Les Chantiers de l'Atlantique, Gaz de Lacq, Michelin.

The movement was initiated by action on 1 February and helped along by the mass antiwar actions on 15 February, plus lively May Day demonstrations. But, on 13 May the unions called a 24-hour general strike in which about 1.5 million workers took part, and protested in militant demonstrations round the country. More than 200,000 marched in Paris where the police used tear gas and water cannon against protestors in front of the parliament. After the 24-hour general strike, rail workers launched a series of rolling strikes. A further major day of action took place on 25 May.

On 3 June, public sector workers came out on strike - some of them on indefinite strike - to protest against the government's 'reform' of the pension system. Across the country there were scores of demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of workers. Among the strikers were railway workers, Paris metro drivers and transport staff in Marseille - none of whom were directly affected by the government's proposals,

As the schools' examination season loomed, many teachers took strike action against the plans to decentralise the education system. Some took strike action lasting for over two months, while receiving no strike pay. Young teachers, in particular, were at the forefront of strike action and militant demonstrations. The action was sustained by rank-and-file assemblies, coordinations and mobilisation committees. So called interpros, uniting different groups of workers, were set up in many localities.

They forced this struggle on the trade union officials but, in the end, were able to achieve only a partial delay of the 'decentralisation' project, which transfers the costs of public education from the national budget to that of the regions and municipalities.

Why was the government eventually able to defuse the situation? Because of the treachery or cowardice of the leaderships of the main union confederations and because the rank and file were not yet strong enough to stop the union leaders eventually signing the deal.

The most overt treachery came from the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT) which totally capitulated to the government the day after the magnificent 13 May mobilisation. The Confédération générale du travail (CGT) supported the mobilisations but did all it could to restrain its own militants on the rail and the post from undertaking rolling strike action after the days of action. On 7, 14 and 26 May, and 4 June they refused to sanction such actions. Many rank and file militants of these unions, plus those of, Force Ouvrière and the Fédération syndicale unitaire (FSU) the main teachers union, took the initiative themselves. Also the former SUD unions now grouped in a new federation Groupes des 10 Solidaires were important.

The degree of anger and determination and the scale of these mobilisations were unprecedented since May 1968. Moreover, the forces which mobilised this movement are neither exhausted nor defeated.

In France, alone of the countries surveyed, far left was a measurable influence in these events. This is in no small part a consequence of the strength of rank and file organisation and militant initiatives of the two sizeable 'Trotskyist' organisations the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO). In last year's presidential elections their candidates - the young postal worker militant Olivier Besancenot (LCR) and the veteran candidate Arlette Laguiller (LO), together scored 10.44 per cent of the popular vote. The LCR mobilised powerfully against racism and the threat posed by Le Pen but capitulated to 'republican' public opinion by advocating 'stopping Le Pen at the ballot box' in the second round, i.e. voting for the bourgeois candidate Chirac. However, Lutte Ouvrière's total passivity in the face of racism and Le Pen's Front Nationale is no less disgraceful.

During the spring strike wave the LCR's agitation for a general strike was correct and its dramatic growth since last May's electoral success in the first round of the presidentials is likely to continue. LO, as usual, avoided all general political slogans, rejecting the call for a general strike; it demonstrated once more that it is a thoroughly economic organisation.

If this year's protests failed to make a decisive breakthrough and, in that sense, was less effective than the movement of 1995, it is, nonetheless, far from over yet. Between 8-10 August 50,000 people gathered at a huge rally in the southern French countryside on the Larzac plateau. They openly debated how to ensure 'a hot autumn' for the right-wing government. The location of the European Social Forum in Paris in November could come at an exciting time, just as it did in Florence in 2002.

The problem remains, as in Germany and Austria, the crisis of leadership - both in the unions and on the far left. But the French movement has not yet hit the buffers. The autumn-winter of 2003-4 could very well see France once more the key to the struggle to repel the European Union's neo-liberal offensive.

Renew the leadership of the European workers' movement!

The mass strikes and demonstration of workers in Austria, France, Italy and Germany showed the abundant will to fight back of ordinary workers and their families. But it also showed the appalling weakness of the leadership of the workers' movement. However, the battles of spring 2003 were only the

first shots in a long war. Because the social gains of the working class extend to the lower strata of the professional classes and the traditional petty bourgeoisie, such battles can take on the dimensions of mass social struggles in the period ahead.

They will also take place against the background of US global aggression. This has already provoked bigger demonstrations in Europe than on any other continent. It has helped radicalise a whole new generation of youth and the more militant trade unions. In response to Washington's aggrandisement, the European bosses are forced to attack their own workers. This too will go on. The struggles of 2003 have also shown once again the rotten decayed character of the mass reformist workers' parties and the outright treachery, cowardice or sheer incompetence of the union leaders.

To be effective, the workers' movement must renew its leadership from top to bottom. It must start to play a leading ? not auxiliary ? role in these mass social movements and it must do so at a European level. That is why the European Social Forum presents such an opportunity. The struggles ahead need to be coordinated at a continental level. Yet, in the ESF, too, there is a crisis of leadership. Neo-reformist forces like Attac want to paralyse it or even pull it in behind the French and German governments in the futile hope they can be persuaded to act as anti-neoliberals and pacifists.

This struggle must be one of political mass direct action, not limiting itself to trade union protests. It must not concentrate on electoral shadow boxing or monster academic seminars. To wage this type of action requires building new forms of mass coordination. We need social forums where rank and file trade union delegates assemble alongside militant fighters against racism and imperialist war. Such a force can enable the masses to break the stranglehold of the union bureaucrats and the reformist parties.

We have entered into a prolonged pre-revolutionary period, that is, one with real potential for the development of revolutionary situations. This will be no automatic or spontaneous process. It will require overcoming the present crisis of leadership. But it is a period in which the international working class needs to prepare for the final overthrow of the system on a global scale. It can do so only by rallying the forces necessary to lead the masses within a new world party with sections in every country ? a new, Fifth International.

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