

The crisis of the European Union and the tasks of the working class

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The European Union faces the deepest crisis in its entire history. At the beginning of the century, it set itself the goal of becoming the 'most dynamic' economic power in the world. The Lisbon Agenda and the European Constitution were intended to push forward the deeper economic, social and political integration of the continent.

That would have completed what German and French imperialism set out to achieve after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the eastward expansion of the EU and the introduction of the Euro, that is, to establish a European Union which, under their rule and hegemony, could be a viable challenger to the US and other rivals in the struggle for global dominance.

Instead, since the financial crisis of 2007/2008 and the subsequent global recession, the European Union has itself become a centre of global turmoil. German imperialism was able to force the cost of the crisis onto the weaker European states, particularly in Southern Europe. The whole Euro-regime turned into a mechanism that increased the unevenness between the countries of the Union. The 'debt crisis' of southern Europe allowed German imperialism and its closer allies to turn Greece into an EU protectorate and, to a large extent, to impose its politics on countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal.

The crisis, however, also revealed the weaknesses of the EU and its dominant power. The policy adopted to rescue the large monopolies and finance capital in the European heartlands and the current austerity imposed not only on Southern Europe but also on France, will increase the inner tensions.

The so-called 'refugee crisis', that is the short-lived ability of refugees fleeing wars and poverty to seek safety in Europe, high-lighted the growing inner contradictions of the EU. It clearly revealed that it is still far from being a supra-state. It also made it clear that, whilst Germany is clearly the strongest, dominant imperialist power, its ability to impose its politics on the European Union as a whole is limited.

Whilst the deal struck with Turkey will be presented by Merkel and the German government as a 'victory' for their position, it actually demonstrated the ability of the smaller countries to obstruct the solution that the German government and key figures in the EU wanted to impose.

Likewise, the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East have also shown that the EU cannot play the unified and active role in foreign affairs that Germany, in particular, intended. In Ukraine, the US was able to utilise the internal conflict to open a 'new cold war' and thereby force its European 'allies', most importantly Germany, to end their 'strategic alliance' with Russia, at least for the time being. On the other hand, in the Middle East, Russia emerged as the key power in the Syrian conflict.

Now, with the possibility of a British Brexit, another crisis is looming on the horizon of the EU. Whilst some

years ago a functioning German-French axis might indeed have been glad to get rid of British imperialism as a pro-US obstacle, now, Britain's exit would be considered a catastrophe by finance capital in Europe and the key imperialist governments.

Divisions within the states and ruling classes

Whilst the European Union and the Euro may well 'survive' today's challenges, it is clear that the accumulated crises, obstacles and failures, and the continued falling back of the EU and its leading powers behind the US and China, are forcing the ruling classes and the bourgeois leaders of Germany, France and Britain, in particular, to reconsider their European and global strategies.

Relations between these three imperialist powers are the key to the question whether and how European capitalist integration can proceed. In the days of Kohl/Mitterand or Schröder/Chirac, the German-French axis was the 'motor of Europe'. It had a common objective and functioned as a 'core' of the EU. Today, this 'axis' is in trouble. Britain, on the other hand, is reconsidering its own position vis a vis the US and the European Union.

This means that we are witnessing not only a struggle between national states and ruling classes over the future of Europe, but also a struggle within the ruling classes and between different factions of capital over their future direction. In the current crisis period, in their struggle to re-organise Europe and re-divide the world, the capitalists themselves face a political crisis, a crisis of their historic strategies.

In the last instance, this reflects the bourgeoisies' inability to unite Europe. The EU and the Euro are themselves a result of the development of the productive forces beyond the national boundaries. Of course, important factions of capital and imperialist strategists in all major states (and large parts of the elite in weaker semi-colonies) are still sticking to the EU. They are well aware that the breakdown of the Eurozone or the Union would be likely to weaken their position on the world market even more.

At the same time, the national interests of the ruling classes and the contradictions between the key imperialist powers are threatening to drive Europe apart once again. Under capitalism, greater unification could only be achieved by the subordination of the semi-colonial states of the EU/Europe, a more dynamic intervention into the global economy and increasingly overt political and military intervention in the struggle for a re-division of the world. Most importantly, this could only be done by one imperialist bourgeoisie establishing its dominance over the other historic powers. It is the antagonism between those powers; Germany, France and Britain, that is the main obstacle to uniting Europe in an organic and durable way.

For the German capitalists, but also for the other imperialist bourgeoisies, it is becoming clear that the EU, the European Parliament and the 'European institutions' generally, will not organically grow into a 'larger Germany' despite that country's dominant economic position. Time is running out, since the inner contradictions of the EU will lead it to fall further and further behind the US and China. So, a 'new' strategy is needed. This could be a determined push by German imperialism to turn its economic role into a political and military dominance but, as we can see with the policy of the European Central Bank, or Britain's financial strength, even its economic dominance is far from absolute.

Therefore, a period of re-alignment between Germany, France and Britain and a move towards some reconfiguration of the EU is more likely - even if its eventual shape, and future relationship to the US, China and Russia remains unclear and will not be established without further crises and confrontations.

The increased imperialist interventionism of France in its historical zone of influence, with troops on the ground today in Mali and the Central African Republic as well as the bombing campaign in Syria and

clandestine interventions in Libya, is certainly a sign of this period of realignment. It also shows a renewed consciousness amongst the French bourgeoisie that a continued and reasserted domination over what is left of their colonies might be crucial for their future as an imperialist power.

Within the EU-framework, but also in consultation between the 'big three', we can expect further interventions in the 'near abroad'. Clearly, the deal between the EU and Turkey to seal off the European borders also reflects Germany's ambition to play a more prominent role in the re-division of the Middle East. The policy towards Russia, the main European power outside the EU, will itself be a constant source of tension and, perhaps most importantly, Germany and Britain are increasing economic ties with China and thereby possibly laying the basis for closer political collaboration in the future – a development which the US views with great concern.

Whatever the details, the general prospect for the coming years is clear: there will be a deepening of the European crisis, greater instability in Europe and a sharpening of the contradictions both between the states and within them.

The 'crisis of the European project', the continued austerity in all the countries and the push by Germany to further dominate the continent politically and economically, have given rise to sections of the ruling classes, supported by the petit-bourgeoisie and middle strata, opting for nationalist solutions.

In many countries, we have seen a rise of nationalist, right-wing populist, racist, far-right or even fascist forces. Some are demagogically challenging the 'social destruction' of the EU, others, like the right wing parties running governments in Eastern Europe, or the German AfD, adhere to ultra-neoliberal social policies. They do not want to give a penny either to the refugees or to the peoples of Southern Europe who have been humiliated by European capitalism. Others, like the FN in France, present themselves demagogically as defenders of 'the French worker'. Racism against immigrants, and Muslim people in particular, is a uniting feature of all these. It is also clear that a number of these parties and movements may become tools for even sharper attacks not only on the immigrants in Europe, but also on the working class, who will be made to pay the cost of the next round of a global economic crisis.

The current political crisis in the EU will become even more acute because of the chronic stagnation of the continent, its growing unevenness and a looming recession. Whilst Germany, and some countries tied to its economic cycle, have been able to strengthen their economic position in the EU/Eurozone, they have done so at the expense of a chronic social and economic decline in large parts of Southern and Eastern Europe. The Eastern European regimes and the Baltic states have meanwhile acted as servile followers of neo-liberalism, demanding that, since their people had to take the social devastation of capitalist restoration, nobody should be 'rescued' from its degradation.

Although German and British imperialism were able to maintain key aspects of their industrial or financial might, of all the historic powers, French imperialism (not to speak of Italy and Spain) has been hit hardest by the economic crisis of the EU. For decades, the French government acted as an equal, if less dynamic, 'partner' of Germany, but it finds it difficult even to claim to be 'equal' now and to sell this to the French people. Now, it intends to give the French workers the equivalent of Germany's 'Agenda 2010' to make up for the lost ground. Certainly such a programme, if implemented, would be a strategic defeat for the French working class. Whether it would revive French capitalism, however, is at least doubtful.

The current crisis has also revealed that the 'values' of the European Union and the plans for a 'social Europe', which had been the hallmark of sections of European social democracy and even Christian Democracy in the 90s, have long been sacrificed. During the refugee crisis, any appeal from Merkel, Juncker or Schulz to the other leaders in the name of those 'European values' was rejected with outright

contempt, thereby revealing not only the limits of Germany's power but also the ideological crisis of the Union.

The scale of the political crisis will be further highlighted by the economic crisis. In recent years, it has hit Southern Europe, leading to massive convulsions and resistance. Now, it is also reaching the key European countries, France, Germany and Britain, though in different ways. The coming economic turmoil will feed into, and synchronise, a European crisis.

Clearly, the divisions between the European governments and the unfolding of the contradictions within the ruling classes could have allowed a concerted counter-attack by the working class and oppressed. Instead, however, the bureaucratically led unions and mass reformist parties of a social-democratic or Stalinist tradition have actually functioned as stabilising factors for bourgeois rule.

Not surprisingly, therefore, unlike in the period immediately after 2007/2008, it is now generally reactionary, nationalist and racist forces that are gaining from this crisis. This is a result of important defeats in the past period and of a continued decline of the 'traditional' labour movement, the erosion of trade unionism and working class representation and, ultimately, of the parties that rested historically and organically on the working class.

The working class thus enters this period in a weakened position and almost paralysed as a 'European force'. Of course, we see continued defensive struggles in Greece against the pension reforms, but they are waged against the background of a strategic defeat, which the Greek working class suffered after the betrayal of the Oxi and with the installation of the second Syriza/ANEL government.

Rightward move of reformism

This was the highpoint of a series of betrayals by the existing working class leaderships in Europe. Not because the leaders of Syriza are any worse than the reformists of other countries, but because its rise, and the pre-revolutionary period it opened, had posed the question of a workers' government and a revolutionary solution to the crisis. The defeat had massive reactionary consequences not only in Greece, but on the whole continent.

This defeat, however, does not mean that new eruptions of class struggle are excluded in the coming years. For instance, in France, a new wave of attacks against the working class is to be expected after the next presidential election in 2017 and this could trigger large movements of resistance. That is already partially the case today with the movement against the new labour code (law El Khomri) still growing and posing the possibility of a united struggle between the youth and the working class. At the same time, betrayals and sabotage by the reformist leaders could again undermine the confidence and fighting capacities of the working class, if no revolutionary alternative emerges.

Throughout the crisis period, the bureaucratically controlled trade unions and mass reformist, social democratic parties have, generally, seen a decline and a rightward shift. Even where they started off by promising some kind of challenge, like Hollande in France, they quickly capitulated to the ruling class and turned against their own working class base.

Under the current crisis, the reformist leaders, generally speaking, looked for an alliance with 'their government', their bourgeoisie. On all major political issues, they refused to wage resistance. Faced with increased imperialist intervention and the growth of militarisation, they remained silent, at best. Most of them supported NATO and 'their' states' interventions in the Middle East, in Africa, in Ukraine. A minority of them raised pacifist objections but we have seen no mass mobilisation. Indeed, when it comes to the

?War on Terror?, the labour movements and their organisations have backed the slashing of democratic rights, colluded in anti-muslim racism, struck unholy alliances with their ruling classes and even backed the imposition of states of emergency, as in France. During the ?refugee crisis?, they did not come out in solidarity with all migrants, all refugees to tear down the walls of fortress Europe, but either ended up supporting Merkel and her call for ?controlled? immigration or even moved to spearhead the closing of borders, like the Austrian government.

This social-chauvinist policy has further divided the working class and the oppressed. The refugees, migrant workers and youth are its first victims. It will lead to further divisions between the labouring masses in the whole of Europe. There has been a massive turn to nationalist solutions, tying one's fate to that of the national capital under the illusion that the British, German, French, Swedish or Austrian government is somehow a lesser evil than the ?far away? bureaucrats in Brussels.

The election of Jeremy Corbyn in the British Labour Party was an exception to this development, when hundreds of thousands defeated the right wing apparatus and the parliamentary party. But even this can only be a temporary victory without a decisive break with the party's right wing and the British bourgeoisie and overcoming the hold of the bureaucratic apparatus. Whilst this will be a difficult task to achieve, it is the duty of revolutionaries to engage in the struggle without hesitation. They need to join forces with Corbyn?s supporters against the right wing, reject all concessions to them and, at the same time, expose the limitations of Corbyn's own strategy and programme of (left) reformism.

The betrayal of Syriza, the right wing move of the populist party Podemos and, generally speaking, the politics of the European Left Parties, demonstrate that, in the end, reformism and Keynesianism are unable to provide an answer for the working class in Europe and elsewhere. Their key slogan was the call for a ?social, democratic, ecological, feminist, anti-racist ?? Europe, in other words, a reformed European Union based on a ?social market? which would, supposedly, ?contain? the rule of finance capital.

The bankruptcy of this policy was revealed to millions in recent years. Only a declining number of reformists, or ?erratic Marxists? like Varoufakis, want to revive this programme, trying to breathe new life into a dead body.

Ironically, the mainstream of European reformism has turned for salvation to a different corpse, which was already buried long ago: the independent national state. If reforming the capitalist EU did not work, why shouldn't we re-capture our ?own state?? Whilst revolutionaries would defend (though not advocate) the right of every nation to leave the European Union, and recognise that the EU cannot be reformed, they reject the utopian and reactionary notion that the alternative is a return to the many ?independent? capitalist states with their ?independent? national currencies and banks, their border controls and their abolition of the freedom of movement across the continent. All these measures are thoroughly reactionary and would impose further obstacles on the united struggles of the working class and oppressed throughout Europe.

Revolutionaries need to counter-pose to this reactionary answer to the capitalist EU, the joint struggle for the extension of democratic and social rights throughout the continent, the opening of borders, the scrapping of the austerity treaties, the struggle against war and imperialist intervention. They need to call for united, European wide, action and to demand from the unions and mass parties of the working class that they break with ?their? bourgeoisies and mobilise their millions of members in such struggles.

Once such struggles assume a mass character, in the form of mass strikes, of occupations, they will put the question of power back onto the agenda. They will pose once again, as in Greece until mid 2015, the question of workers' governments, that is, governments which break with the ruling class, which set out to

implement an emergency programme for the working class, the peasants and the poor, a programme to take the control of finance and industry out of the hands of the ruling class, to expropriate it under workers' control and with a democratic plan to meet people's needs. The class struggle in Greece has shown that this is only possible on the basis of fighting organs ? councils of action and Soviet-type bodies ? that can unite the workers and oppressed masses, mobilise against the ruling class and take power into their own hands. It has demonstrated that no revolutionary outcome is possible without the creation of workers' militias and councils of rank and file soldiers in the army to break up the repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie. Only a workers' government based on such organs will be able to prevent the counter-revolutionary attacks from the bourgeoisie, its state forces and its imperialist allies and backers.

History has shown that such a programme cannot be implemented in one country alone. Even the most powerful European economy, Germany, would run into enormous chaos, losses and friction, if its links to the other European countries were to be severed. The working class of Europe has no interest in turning the continent into a mosaic of bigger and smaller capitalist states. On the contrary, the class as a whole, and any workers' government which might be created in one country, needs to fight to reorganise the whole continent, economically and politically. This can only be done by uniting the continent under the rule of the workers, by the struggle for, and the creation of, a United Socialist States of Europe.

A party to fight for a socialist Europe

The reformists have long given up on the struggle for socialism. They oscillate between ?pan-European? bourgeois utopias and the road of ?national reform?. But what alternative did the far left, the anti-capitalist left, present? None. As the reformists tail different fractions of the ruling class and their policies, the far left, by and large, tails the reformists. They mainly differ in their choice of whom to tail.

For a longer period, large parts of the ?far left?, in particular the sections of the ?Fourth International?, have tailed the reformist advocates of a ?social Europe?. This corresponded to their support for the creation of ?broad left parties? which would include all currents of the working class movement in a state of peaceful co-existence on the basis of a reformist programme.

Since more and more sections of the European left parties and of populist forces have abandoned this, a number of the ?far left? groups have moved to advocate leaving the EU. Whilst the reformists claim that this would ease the realisation of a reformist programme via a number of Keynesian economic measures, an increasing number on the ?far left? claim that this will be an easier ?road to socialism?. For them, capitalism is not an international system but, rather, a collection of national states and, therefore, internationalism is ultimately only a collection of national class struggles. In the end, these are latter day imitations of the Stalinist utopia of ?socialism in one country?.

The advocates of a "social Europe" and of the EU-exit differ much less on two key issues than they are prepared to admit. Both of them are actually tailing a reformist programme. Secondly, both of them usually argue that the struggle for a revolutionary programme to take power and for the United Socialist States of Europe is not ?on? at the moment. Even where they do not reject it outright, they effectively see the struggle for a socialist Europe as a task for a more or less distant future. They claim that only a programme to reform the EU or to fight for better conditions on the national terrain is ?realistic?. In the end, both of these strategies are roads to nowhere.

If the working classes of Europe want to prevent the fragmentation of the continent back into the collection of crisis-ridden small states and increasingly desperate powers prepared to use any means to achieve domination that sparked two world wars, it needs to base itself on a programme to unite the continent on the basis of working class power with public ownership of the economy under workers' control and a

democratic plan.

For this, however, the working class needs new political organisations, new revolutionary parties in every country and a new, Fifth, International. In the past decade, the European working class, the youth, the left, have lost valuable time. Capitalist Europe is in crisis and our rulers are preparing a nightmare of reaction as we can see on the EU's borders or in the growth of the far right, the imperialist interventions in Africa and the Middle East, the social devastation in Southern and Eastern Europe and the coming social and political attacks.

Therefore, we call on all revolutionaries and anti-capitalists to unite in this task, to work out a programme of action for the socialist transformation of Europe! Join us in this task!

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