

EU referendum - Apres le Non

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The resounding Non! to the European Constitution was a body blow to Franco-German plans to create a European imperialist superpower. It was a victory for the French and European proletariat which led to immediate disarray among the EU's leaders and created the prospect of major transformations in working class politics. Michael Pröbsting examines the forces shaping European politics and the emergence of a new reformism that threatens to squander the gains that have been made.

Both the conflicts between Europe's leaders and the sharp increase in the tempo of class struggle within many EU states are a product of the combination of sluggish economic growth internally and the impact of globalisation externally. Globalisation is, essentially, a massive expansion of the power and influence of US capital. Taking advantage of the collapse of Stalinism, US capital was able to offset declining growth rates and profitability at home by forcing other countries, particularly in the 'global South', to open their economies to US exports, sell off public assets to US corporations, accept US investment in plants that employed cheap labour and to adopt 'structural adjustment' policies which geared their economies to the provision of cheap goods and raw materials. Inherent within globalisation is also the drive to secure markets, sources of raw materials and energy by the projection of military power under the guise of the 'War on Terror'.

Globalisation has allowed US capital to strengthen itself; in 1981-1991, GDP growth was 2.9% per annum, whereas in 1991-2002 it rose to 3.2% per annum. Having topped 4% at the peak of the current cycle, it is now back to 3.1%. For comparison, although the EU is now the biggest 'unit' in the world economy, its growth rates are dismal. The Eurozone's GDP growth rates in the present cycle are 1.6% (2001) 0.9% (2002) 0.5% (2003) 1.8% (2004) and 1.5% (predicted for 2005). German growth is very low, 0.6% in the year to November 2005, while Italy is actually in recession with industrial production today more than 5% below its 2000 level. The British economy is in a somewhat better state than the Eurozone. It grew by 1.8% (2002) 2.2% (2003) and 3.1% (2004) although it is expected to fall to 1.75% in the current year. However, while, overall, this might be better than the rest of Europe, it is clearly depressed compared with its own past growth; 3.2% p.a. from 1980-1990 and 2.6% p.a. from 1990-2002.

No single European country could possibly aspire to rival the USA but the two main continental powers, France and Germany, cannot rest content with their present status. If they are to secure their own raw materials and energy and their own overseas markets, if they are to attract capital themselves when the US is currently sucking in capital from around the world, they have to make themselves the joint leaders of a unified European imperialism. The proposed Constitution was an integral part of this strategy and that is why its effective demise at the hands of the French and Dutch voters has destabilised the politics of both countries.

In France, the Socialist Party was openly split down the middle over the constitution while, on the right, Nicolas Sarkozy, who is a more overt neo-liberal, is now breathing down the neck of the seriously wounded Chirac, hoping to win his party's nomination for the 2007 presidential elections. In Germany, Schröder, who

was occasionally willing to criticise the US and UK axis, has gone and Merkel, a self-proclaimed Atlanticist, has replaced him, albeit on a greatly reduced vote and at the head of a potentially unstable coalition.

Nonetheless, although the draft constitution cannot be resurrected, at least for a few years, the Franco-German policy, to which it gave expression, was not just some passing whim and we can expect the same objectives to be pursued by other means. Indeed, if we leave aside the procedural and voting provisions, which reflected compromises between the different states, much of the real substance of the constitution, its codification of a form of neo-liberalism, is already the avowed policy of the majority of EU governments. However, while each government will, no doubt, continue with plans to privatise, deregulate and shift resources from social provision to the advantage of corporate capital, this will not, of itself, bring about any unification of European capital under Franco-German leadership.

Behind the constitutional fiasco lies the fact that the French and German ruling classes have not, as yet, been able to promote the formation of any really substantial European capital. Having failed in their strategy to strengthen the ability of the European institutions to bring this about, they will now have to bring forward a more overt policy of their own. This will require more extensive and vigorous state intervention to force through concentration and centralisation of capital in many sectors as has already been done to a significant degree in the arms and aerospace industries. This will mean subordinating national interests not only in the 'smaller' states but even in their own countries. This will, inevitably, further destabilise political and class relations. To justify it will require the development of an ideology, a 'European' nationalism, as it were, which cannot simply be an amalgamation or extension of German or French nationalism.

We are, therefore, faced with a period of a real, strategic crisis of bourgeois politics in Europe. This historical shift and the accompanying crisis of bourgeois policy will open tremendous opportunities for the European working class. It will force the bourgeoisie, in one way or another, to openly act against the existing political and ideological forms of its own rule. If it tries to push through the same or a modified constitutional project, it risks further political mobilisations and radicalisation of the popular masses.

At the same as they attempt to find a political structure to take forward the European state project, the continent's major bourgeoisies will be forced, because of their economic stagnation and increasing competition with US imperialism, to step up their offensive against the social gains of the European working class. They will target not only wages and pensions but also democratic and trade union rights. In the present period, despite the cyclical upswing, there is no room for capital to make considerable concessions on any of these fronts.

Waves of mass resistance to the neoliberal offensive

Since the turn of the century, there has been a series of mass actions and opposition against the ruling classes in Europe. In Italy alone there have been six one- or half-day general strikes, with huge demonstrations, since Berlusconi became prime minister in 2001. In Spain, in 2002, a general strike forced the arch-neoliberal José Maria Aznar to back down from imposing anti-union laws. Spain also saw the largest European antiwar demonstrations, in February 2003 while the continent as whole was the core of the global protest. After the Madrid bombings, in March 2004, when Aznar attempted to 'steal' the election by blaming ETA, he was swept from power amidst mass demonstrations, and a centre-left government withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq. Now, his successor, Zapatero, dancing to the tune of the IMF, wants to enact anti-union laws, promote 'flexibilisation' and cut protection against dismissal.

The present year has seen more major mobilisations. In October and November there has been something of a hot autumn in Europe. On 4 October, more than a million French workers demonstrated in more than 150 cities and towns. The main union federations called the day of action against the neoliberal reforms

announced by the prime minister Dominique de Villepin. Other major issue affecting private sector workers were falling real wages and the threat of job losses and closures in a whole series of companies.

Then, on 7 October, a general strike brought Belgium to a standstill, with transport, schools and government services all hit. The 24 hour stoppage was the first general strike in Belgium since 1993, but they did not wait so long again; on 28 October, the country ground to a halt again. Some 100,000 striking workers marched through Brussels to protest against government plans to raise the retirement age from 58 to 60.

On 25 October, in Italy, 100,000 teachers and students from all over the country marched through Rome, protesting against a new law which will drastically worsen the conditions of work and study. Attempts by demonstrators to occupy the Italian parliament resulted in armed police mercilessly beating them in front of national TV cameras.

Then, at the beginning of November, France was shaken by riots which began in the suburbs of Paris but spread across the country. After 12 nights of confrontation between youth, mostly of Arab and African origin, and the paramilitary police, the CRS, Dominique de Villepin and President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency, using a 1955 law drawn up during the Algerian war of liberation, which involved curfews, closing of meeting places, censorship, and draconian penalties for breaches of it. The heavy irony was not lost on the grandsons and granddaughters of the generation of 1955. Over 4,700 youths were arrested and 785 imprisoned by kangaroo courts. All immigrants - even avec papiers - were deported, no matter where to.

These 'riots' were in fact a youth uprising with few recent parallels in mainland Europe. Britain has seen its urban riots under Thatcher, Major and Blair, too, but they were not such a nationwide phenomenon. In France, the running battles with the police, the torching of cars, shops and public buildings began to stand comparison with the uprisings of the ghettos of the United States in the 1960s and 1980s.

On 25 November, the three largest trade union confederations in Italy (CGIL, CISL, UIL) staged a half-day general strike against the Berlusconi government's new cuts, outlined in the budget for 2006. Millions of workers struck; public transport stopped for four hours; schools had their timetables curtailed; post offices and banks closed; hospitals provided only emergency services; and dustbins remained unemptied. All three federations reported that 80 to 90 per cent of workers obeyed the strike call.

Obviously, the particular issues at the heart of these struggles, anticapitalist, trade union, youth, antiwar, vary greatly in the different countries. There is also an enormous unevenness between Western and Eastern Europe, where the labour movements have not yet overcome the effects of Stalinism and capitalist restoration and where migration to Western Europe and investment of Western capital combine to alleviate the class struggle to some extent.

Nonetheless, in most major West European countries, we have seen mass struggles with an enormous potential in the last years, some of which could even have opened pre-revolutionary situations. Indeed, given the increasing contradictions of European capitalism, similar developments and opportunities of class struggle are possible in the period ahead. The French Non! was so electrifying because it came against the background of these mass struggles and mobilisations against neoliberalism.

The French working class, thanks to the efforts of anti-neoliberal forces within the altermondialiste movement, centred on Attac, were well aware of the threat to public services and the welfare state. In a series of mass meetings organised through more than 900 local committees, a campaigning alliance between the French Communist Party (PCF), the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the left of

the Socialist Party, plus the CGT and G10 Solidaire union federations, exposed the Constitution as an attack, aimed at the social gains of French workers.

As well as blocking the bourgeoisie's favoured European strategy, the French Non, and the Dutch Nee, also revealed the depth of a political gulf in both societies. Media pundits bemoan a rift between the 'political class' and the 'people' but the essential content is the erosion of working class support for the major reformist parties. It is those parties which have provided the mechanism for integrating the working class movement into bourgeois society, taking the edge off developing conflicts, disintegrating class wide movements into sectional skirmishes and diverting mass-based direct action into the harmless channels of token protests and parliamentary squabbles. In France, in particular, the constitutional referendum forced the Socialist Party, although in Opposition, to reveal its leadership's complete commitment to the French bourgeoisie's chosen strategy - and working class voters deserted it in droves.

This phenomenon is not confined to France and the Netherlands. It has gone furthest where reformist parties in government have been responsible for direct attacks on social services, employment rights and the privatisation of public assets. In Germany and Britain, it has taken organisational form in the shape of the Linkspartei, the disaffiliation of unions from the Labour Party and played a role in the founding of Respect, developments which are discussed in detail elsewhere in this journal. In Sweden, increased electoral support for the Left Party expresses the same tendency.

In France and Italy, it has led left-reformist organisations, including former Stalinist parties, Attac and sections of the unions, to try to construct a pan-European reformist alternative within the framework of the European Left Party (ELP) a collection of largely 'post-Stalinist' parties, which had its first congress in Athens on 29-30 October 2005. The 'big four' in the ELP are Rifondazione Comunista of Italy, the Parti Communiste Français, the Linkspartei of Germany and the Greek Synaspismos.

Centrism and Neo-reformism

These forces have also been developing their neo-reformist strategy, which is in no sense anticapitalist, in association with the European Social Forum. In this, they have been aided and abetted by the Fourth International (led by the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire) and the International Socialist Tendency (led by the Socialist Workers Party). What is the justification these 'revolutionaries' give for supporting the recreation of a neoKeynesian, neo-social democratic reformism in France, in Germany, in Italy, in Britain? The logic of their strategic thinking is explained by Stathis Kouvelakis, a representative of the LCR, in the Autumn 2005 edition of the SWP's International Socialism journal. In this, he outlines the centrality for the LCR of what he calls 'the popular anti-neoliberal bloc'.

It is precisely the stabilisation and deepening of an anti-neoliberal orientation, equipped with the aim and the means of breaking with the existing state of affairs, which raises the question of an anticapitalist perspective. This requires a perspective flowing from the logic of things rather than a programme stuck on from the outside, an abstract radical rhetoric, incapable of acting on the actual faultlines of the given situation. Today, after decades of capitalist offensive, the development of effective anti-neoliberal politics is the principal dividing line for all social, intellectual and political forces. Its implementation by a popular majority bloc at the level of existing institutions (including governmental) can only lead in the short term to class conflicts on a huge scale. Such conflicts will inevitably raise the question of the ownership of the principal means of production, exchange and communication as well as those of the power structure and the state apparatus. It is also this movement that will build a European space for struggles which could lead over time to the establishment of a 'constituent' democratic process going beyond the framework of the existing nation states? It is therefore on the terrain of a consistent anti-neoliberal orientation that the question of hegemony within the anti-neoliberal block will be played out. The political strength of

revolutionaries will be judged on their capacity to give impetus, at every stage of the situation, to the deepening of the orientation without breaking the unitary framework of the popular movement.?

In plainer terms, then, revolutionaries should not bring revolutionary politics into the working class movement, they should merely echo its existing demands and endorse existing tactics. Unlike the Marxists who ?disdain to conceal their views? the LCR and SWP will keep quiet about their own politics in the belief that the ?logic of events? will ?force? their reformist allies to take anticapitalist measures and, somehow, this will strengthen the ?hegemony? of the working class within the popular bloc. This perspective is obviously what underlies the LCR?s rapprochement with the PCF, its advocacy of a joint electoral project, and even a new party. For the Fourth International, it also accounts for the relative mildness of the critique of Rifondazione Comunista?s projected re-entry into a L?Unione government with Romano Prodi. That there is any criticism at all is surely only because no sane person could imagine that the anti-neoliberal RC tail will wag the arch-neoliberal Prodi dog. But, therein lies the first hurdle, at which this centrist schema will fall, spectacularly.

The parties of the European Left are real reformist parties. They have roots in the trade union bureaucracy and the labour aristocracy and they are totally committed to the parliamentary game. From day one of this process, even before they get into government, their electoralism damages and deprioritises the class struggle. We have seen this over the last five years in the mass struggles against the Lisbon agenda and the antiwar movement. Instead of seeking to build up a mass direct action confrontation with the ruling classes of Europe in defence of workers? jobs, wages, social gains and the democratic rights of all the exploited and oppressed, instead of building a real united front of the exploited and oppressed, at best, it reduces things to a series of national days of protest action, a letting off of steam, hoping instead to reap the benefits at the polls. This electoralism across Europe in 2003-04 broke the impetus of a mounting wave of resistance to neoliberalism and war in favour of the small change of electoral success or, more often, failure.

Even if the European Left parties do form their ?anti-neoliberal? governments, in coalition with the likes of Prodi, Fabius or Lafontaine, they will find that these governments carry out the IMF?s bidding and the policies of the Lisbon Agenda, just as Schröder and Jospin did. In such governments, the task of the RC or PCF will be to keep the working class from rebelling, a job they know all too well. And the ?anticapitalists? of the LCR, desperate at all costs to avoid splitting the ?popular anti-neoliberal bloc?? They will face a cruel dilemma. Admit that their whole wretched schema was nothing other than a capitulation to reformism or, having said the A of the reformist alphabet, will they go on to say B and C and D too? Or, as in Brazil, will they at some point disembark from one reformist ship (Lula?s PT), simply to board another (P-Sol)?

And what is this new formation, this ?anti-neoliberal orientation?? Why, it is the old rassemblement populaire, that is, the Popular Front, a strategic element of the Stalinist and left social democratic programme, which Trotskyism was founded to combat. This is what the Fourth International has come to.

Taking the anticapitalism out of the European Social Forum

For its first three gatherings; Florence, 2002, Paris, 2003 and London, 2004, the dominant organisations in the ESF, particularly Attac-France and the Italian delegation, kept it resolutely ?free? of politics by reliance on the reactionary Principles of Porto Alegre. In 2005, after the French NON, however, these same organisations suddenly changed their tune and came up with the project of developing a political basis for another Europe, an agenda, a charter, maybe even a draft constitution, to counterpose to the Lisbon agenda and the neoliberal European constitution.

The first attempt was the proposal for a European Petition, which was launched at a conference held in

Paris on 13-14 August, the central idea of which is to get over a million signatures for the petition. Elizabeth Gauthier of the PCF and Michel Rousseau of the LCR headed the French organisers. Then, in a different project, around 180 delegates came together in Florence on 12-13 November to discuss the idea of charter or a statement of principles 'for another Europe?'. Neither the Paris nor the Florence assemblies were officially part of the European Social Forum, but the participants were much the same.

What we are now witnessing is an attempt by neo-social democratic or Eurocommunist reformists to turn the ESF into a continent-wide, public policy forum. Their aim is to get its backing for their European reformist strategy, which is aimed at pressuring mainstream social democracy and the 'left wing of the bourgeoisie', people such as Romano Prodi of the Christian Democrats, to return to Keynesianism. They want to turn what were mobilising and coordinating bodies, such as the social forums in Italy and the coordinations in France, into talking shops and pressure groups for their initiatives, whilst they prepare for government in the coming period.

This reformism is both utopian and reactionary. Utopian because it sees the whole crisis in Europe as a crisis of 'bad politics' and rejects any notion that it is rooted in a structural crisis of capital accumulation itself. Reactionary, because its ultimate goal is the formation of an imperialist Europe with working class participation, i.e. social chauvinism. It is not accidental that many of the parties supporting this initiative, such as the PCF, have backed various imperialist interventions, racist policies or been involved in savage attacks on the working class when they were in government.

The language in which this reformism is couched is resolutely non-class, despite the fact that the leaders who express it are overwhelmingly trade unionists or members of reformist workers' parties, often called 'communist'. Its French representatives speak, like bourgeois democrats, exclusively of 'citizens' and 'rights' or 'equality' and 'republican solidarity'. The Italians speak in pseudo-Gramscian and post-modernist jargon. Their constant theme is the need for a 'social' Europe, a formula which deliberately avoids the question, who would rule in a 'social' Europe? Not to pose it, not to question whether the capitalists or the workers should rule, means that the European multinationals will still dominate its economy. It would still be the European imperialist states that would run such a Europe. The 'social' is just a deceitful cover for the reformist and trade union leaders who use it to obscure the fact that they do not intend to overthrow 'their' capitalist classes but quite the opposite; they intend to defend them and hope to get some concessions for this, at the expense of millions of workers in the EU and billions worldwide.

Revolutionaries across Europe must fight for a socialist Europe, for the Socialist United States of Europe. Capitalism cannot be made 'social'. European imperialism and its states cannot be made 'ecological', 'peaceful', 'anti-racist' or 'feminist'. It cannot be reformed away. It has to be fought, smashed and replaced by a socialist Europe as part of new socialist world.

The European working class and youth are faced with a tremendous chance in this period, but also with a sharp crisis of leadership that brings the danger that the opportunities created by the victory in France and the political crisis of European imperialism may be lost. Instead of building European wide co-ordinations to mobilise millions against the social, economic and political attacks, the leaders of organisations such as RC, the PCF or the Linkspartei want to demobilise the movements that already exist. They are quite happy with occasional demonstrations and symbolic actions, but they do not want to see any structures of the social movements or the rank and file of the trade unions, which could unify actions, generalise the fight and hold the bureaucrats to account. They want to have their hands free for all possible deals with the social democrats and the unions, including entry into social democrat-led or popular front governments, which will carry out strategic attacks on the working class.

Therefore, it is imperative for revolutionaries to intervene in this movement. In order to do so we have to sharply denounce the plans of the reformists, the trade union bureaucrats and the centrists, to lead this movement into the cul de sac of another European reformism. Against their attempt to turn the movement into a talking shop to discuss an 'alternative' constitution or to construct an alternative utopia for a capitalist unification of Europe, we have to raise three crucial and interlinked demands:

- a) The need for a European wide, co-ordinated fight back against the generalised attack on the working class, youth and immigrants.
- b) To set ourselves the goal that the working class and its allies must unite Europe on a socialist basis and rally around the slogan for the Socialist United States of Europe.
- c) The need for new working class parties to lead the struggle, based on the mass trade unions and the social movements, focused on a revolutionary action programme, and united in a new, worldwide Fifth International.

In this, we will not be isolated. In Latin America, the balance of power within the World Social Forum is swinging away from Chico Whitaker and the PT and towards the likes of Hugo Chávez and, if he gets elected, Bolivia's Evo Morales. In Asia, Africa, the Middle East, even Russia, the social forums have grown and radicalised in the recent period. When the ESF meets in Athens in 2006, it will do so against this international background and in a host country, Greece, whose youth and working class have mounted waves of struggle in the past few years. A conscious, revolutionary intervention can and should connect with these forces to throw the reformist and centrist would-be governmental coalition partners onto the defensive.

For a United Socialist States of Europe

The defeat of the constitution in France and Netherlands was a real setback for the European capitalists and the neo-liberal attacks on the people of the whole continent.

Our alternative to the constitution is not a return to the narrow boundaries of 'independent' national states or the addition of more 'social' provisions, but to call for the election of a European Constituent Assembly and the fight for a Socialist United States of Europe.

Our alternative to the Europe of the corporations and generals has nothing to do with the nebulous twaddle of a 'social, peaceful and democratic Europe' that the reformist Euro-Left parties and their allies in the Fourth International propagate. Their project is, as the leader of the Austrian Communist Party recently openly stated, to domesticate global capitalism by an international framework of institutions and regulations. One might as well try to convince a tiger of the advantages of vegetarianism. No, without the revolution, without the overthrow of the political and economic power of the bourgeoisie by the working class, in Europe and worldwide, there will be no social justice, no real democracy and no peace. Therefore we are unambiguously in favour of fighting for the United Socialist States of Europe.

Against the degenerate fragments of the Fourth International, the LCR and the SWP, we echo the words of Leon Trotsky, in 1929: ***?'In the person of the Opposition the vanguard of the European proletariat tells its present rulers: In order to unify Europe it is first of all necessary to wrest power out of your hands. We will do it. We will unite Europe. We will unite it against the hostile capitalist world. We will turn it into a mighty drill-ground of militant socialism. We will make it the cornerstone of the World Socialist Federation.'***

