



# Europe Against Austerity

K D Tait Tue, 16/10/2012 - 12:29

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The southern states of the European Union ? Portugal, Italy and Spain ? are imposing brutal cuts to public services. The EU heavyweights, Germany, France, and even non-eurozone Britain, demand endless cuts and privatisation. These are being reinforced by a new European Fiscal Treaty. The treaty introduces a "golden rule" making balanced budgets mandatory. Every state?s structural deficit would be capped at 0.5 percent of gross domestic product. "Automatic brakes" will be triggered if this goal is missed.

The Europe-wide austerity policy and the new treaty for the eurozone will drive most countries into even deeper recession, more debt and increased misery for working people. German workers get only the crumbs from this pillaging, but the workers of Europe should not line up with ?our? bosses and governments whose cuts prove they have no loyalty to us. Instead we must use the international character of the crisis as a weapon against the capitalists and their institutions.

Massive, co-ordinated action across Europe is vital. Workers in Germany, France and Britain need not only to organise solidarity, but also to fight to cancel illegitimate loans which impoverish other nations and reinforce national divisions.

Portugal on the streets

On 15 September 500,000 flooded the streets of Lisbon (ten per cent of the city?s population) and a similar number came out in other towns and cities across the country. The protests were against the latest round of cuts imposed in return for a EU bailout of €78 billion. These demonstrations were the biggest since the Portuguese Revolution of 1974, which saw the downfall of the military dictatorship. Their slogans included ?Out with the Troika!? and ?We want our lives!?

Then, on 4 October, transport workers struck, increasing the pressure on the centre-right government of Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho. Walkouts on the underground and strikes on the railways and bus networks delivered a clear statement of intent from workers angry at further tax hikes and cuts.

Coelho had just announced further income tax increases for next year and his finance minister, Vitor Gaspar, added that the hike would be "enormous?". In addition, the government warned the contraction of the economy will continue well into 2013 ? making it a fourth year of recession. Unemployment, already 15.9 per cent, is expected to rise to 16.4 percent.

The CGTP, the largest union federation with 600,000 members, has already announced a one-day general strike against austerity on 14 November. But such days of action with long delays between them only give the government time to rally its forces, while interrupting the momentum of the movement in the streets. Portugal?s Left Block has laid out a three-prong strategy. ?Firstly, urgent support for popular mobilisation; secondly, support for a general strike which would unify the entire trade union movement and broaden out socially; thirdly, appealing to the Constitutional Court, with a motion of censure and a fight in Parliament to present clear alternatives.?(International Viewpoint October 2012)

If this means a struggle for an all-out indefinite strike to bring down Coehlo then all well and good. But this will require building local delegate committees to direct a general strike to victory and protect it against a sell-out by the union leaders. If the Left Bloc?s proposals mean trailing behind the union leaders and concentrating on parliamentary

manoeuvres they are too little, too late. The far left needs to spell out concrete measures for solving the crisis. The rising tide of mass anger, and the similar struggles in Portugal's big neighbour, require an overtly anticapitalist action programme and a revolutionary party able to win the masses to it.

Greece ? the challenge to Syriza

A general strike set the scene for the first confrontation between Greece's three-month old government and the anti-cuts movement. Anywhere between 300,000 and one million people took to the streets as docks and transport ground to a halt. Shopworkers, tax-collectors and air traffic controllers also joined the strike. Running battles broke out between protestors and some of the 3,000 police deployed in the centre of Athens.

After five years of recession and punishing austerity, the EU continues to demand what it is not owed from those who do not owe it ? and the Greek government continues to promise what is not theirs to give away.

Specifically, a further ?9.5 billion cuts will be made over the next two years in return for the next EU bailout. The recipe is the same old fare: deep cuts to wages, pensions, jobs and social security. Youth unemployment stands at 55 per cent, with a quarter of the working population on the dole. These conditions are ripe for organised forces to channel popular anger against the system which caused the crisis, and against the institutions which implement the austerity.

But Syriza ? the reformist-led coalition that came from the fringe of politics to nearly forming a government in the June elections ? has, since then, definitely been tempering its radicalism. Hoping to ride the mass opposition to electoral victory in spring 2013, its leader, Alex Tsipras, is doing more to reassure European bosses that he's a man they can do business with, rather than involving his party in the struggle of the poor and oppressed suffering social disintegration.

Were it elected on its current programme, Syriza would use its newfound influence in the trade union bureaucracy to play a dangerous game, that is, attempting to use the radical expectations of its mass base as bargaining chips against the IMF and EU. But a party of government can only rule in the interests of one class. Without a programme for workers' control of production, outright rejection of all debts and a direct call for international solidarity action, it will end up carrying out the policy of the EU moneylenders.

Nevertheless, Syriza represents the most serious force for uniting the anti-austerity movement behind a programme for power. Greek workers and youth should join Syriza. But in there they must fight intransigently for the policies necessary for a workers' government that would take decisive anticapitalist measures.

To grow and sustain a struggle which can kick out Samaras and Co. means rebuilding popular assemblies, committees of action capable of co-ordinating trade union struggles, whenever the leadership is not willing to fight. Given the rise and rise of Golden Dawn, it is vital to build a united anti-fascist defence force, drawing in left parties including the Communist KKE, the unions and immigrant organisations.

Out of these bodies can emerge local councils of action which could form the basis for a genuine workers' government ? where production and the monopoly of armed force is democratically controlled by the working class itself, not a tiny clique of millionaires and the racist institutions of the capitalist state.

France: No to austerity - reject the referendum

Around 50,000 people demonstrated in Paris on Saturday, under the slogan ?No to the Fiscal Austerity Pact?. Gathered under the banners of more than 60 organisations, the protesters demanded the scrapping of the treaty which will turn over control of government spending to EU bureaucrats.

The protest marked the end of Socialist president Francois Hollande's post-election ?period of grace?. The government's austerity budget has dispelled many illusions in the Socialist Party's ability to end the politics of making workers and youth pay for the crisis. The announcement of a job-creation scheme for young people is a drop in the ocean when the youth unemployment rate stands at nearly 25 per cent ? rising to 50 per cent amongst immigrant and

North African youth.

Headline-grabbing taxes of 75 per cent for those earning more than €1 million a year will be of little comfort to France's three million unemployed. Inflation and wage cuts have demolished workers' living standards, while enriching a tiny elite.

When Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the Left Front said, 'today is the day the French people launch a movement against austerity?', it begged the question, what he and his allies in the Communist Party have been doing since 2008.

Although a promising step forward, the movement in France continues to struggle with serious limitations. Not least of which is the Left Front's demand for a referendum on the EU treaty. It's true that a referendum is more democratic than the Socialist Party's attempt to railroad through the treaty. But French workers should recognise not the slightest legitimacy in a Fiscal Pact whose only purpose is to make the working class bear the burden of the bosses' attempts to recover from the crisis.

The timid strategy of the leadership of the French working class is a recipe for demoralisation and defeat. The failure of the wildcat refinery strikes in 2010 exposed both the union leaders' readiness to compromise rather than fight and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste's inability to challenge them for leadership.

Faced with this attack from a government elected on the promise of jobs, not cuts, the French working class has the urgent task of rebuilding a revolutionary leadership. This means organising the most militant workers in an organisation capable of taking the offensive with a strategy to beat the cuts. This means calling for an end to all cuts, the cancellation of all the debts, nationalisation of companies which close or sack workers, rejection of the EU Austerity Pact and co-ordination of all the anti-austerity struggles across Europe.

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