

The European Elections and the Crisis of the EU

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Two decades after the meeting of its heads of state and government in Lisbon in March 2000, the European Union has become the "weakest link" among the great powers in the imperialist world order. In fact, disorder would be a better term for a world of rival powers with their trade wars, new cold war and military interventions in Africa and the Middle East, their refusal to do anything serious to avert climate catastrophe and the threat of a new global conflict. Within the Union itself, open struggles have broken out over the nature and future of unification (Brexit).

Introduction of the euro

The introduction of the euro at the turn of the century and the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, were intended to make the largest economic area in the world into a common European capital block. This would mean nothing less than the political and military unification of the continent under German and French domination. Its leaders declared, albeit cautiously, that they wanted to catch up with the US and call into question its worldwide role.

Since the Great Crisis of 2007-09, despite the austerity policies and attempts at economic unification, the EU and the euro zone have continued to lag behind the US and China.

The 21st century has brought to the surface the deep contradictions that shaped the "European project" from the outset. The hopes of millions of workers, peasants and even large parts of the middle classes, were disappointed by the policies of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, ECB, the heads of state and government and the key ministers of the major European powers.

Around the turn of the millennium, neoliberal policies were finally adopted as an inevitable and inseparable part of this supposed new world order. The European Union experienced a shift towards what had previously been regarded as the "Anglo-Saxon" model; "free market reforms". For millions, former promises of a "more social Europe" that would be "more prosperous", "more democratic" and "more humanitarian", were revealed as audacious lies.

After the Lisbon Agenda

The Lisbon Agenda of 2000, with its emphasis on austerity and "labour market reforms" to increase global competitiveness, marked a rejection of the "welfare state" and Keynesianism by the European bourgeoisies. Not only conservative parties but also, Labour and Social Democratic parties, adapted to neoliberalism. Without Blair's "Third Way" or Schröder's "New Centre", the adoption of the neoliberal agenda would have been impossible or at least it would have met with much more resistance from the union movements linked to the mass parties of the Socialist International.

The leading powers and the EU Commission not only pushed through the Lisbon Agenda, but also aimed at the adoption of a neo-liberal constitution for the entire European Union. However, this was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands. The response of the European governments and institutions to this setback was instructive. The massive resistance and rejection of the Constitution was countered by its introduction as a "treaty" plainly against the will of the peoples of the continent.

This made clear to millions the "democratic" deficit of the EU as well as the "social", ecological and many other shortcomings which result from this lack of European democracy. It underlined that the ruling classes cannot and will not unite the European continent in a democratic, let alone a "social", way, but will completely ignore the "will of the people".

Yet even Britain, the principal opponent of a federal Europe that stood aside from the single currency, effectively supported this lack of democracy within the EU in the name of preserving its national sovereignty. This rendered totally hypocritical successive Westminster governments' complaints about the unaccountable Brussels bureaucracy.

The undemocratic label applies all the more to the areas of finance, foreign policy, military interventions and wars. European governments have never asked "their" people whether they should be bombing Syria or Libya or occupying Iraq, whether they ought to be intervening in Mali or other African states, or whether their fomenting "colour revolutions" in Ukraine was a good idea. Nor have they consulted "their" peoples on whether they should sign new European military treaties and support NATO's eastward expansion by deploying troops on Russia's borders, thus starting a New Cold War.

Thus, the last decade revealed very clearly the difficulties and challenges facing the EU.

Global competition

Economically, the EU fell far behind the USA and China. After the Great Recession, Germany and other more competitive countries passed the cost of the crisis on to weaker European economies. In the name of budgetary discipline, the institutions of the euro zone have deliberately impoverished large parts of southern Europe. They have imposed brutal austerity policies on Greece and other countries, making them even more vulnerable to the ravages of a new global recession. But Germany and France paid a high price for this; the centrifugal tendencies within the EU and the euro zone have increased sharply.

Militarily, and in terms of its geopolitical influence, the EU remains a dwarf compared to the USA, Russia or China. The European powers' attempts to overcome this are all half-hearted and often reflect their internal tensions rather than a clear policy. While the EU tried to play a key role in the regime change in Ukraine, it could not prevent the US from manoeuvring it into a new Cold War, thereby destroying Germany's plans for closer economic ties with Russia and, beyond that, with China.

Putin began to support "troublemaking" EU governments like that of Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and a series of right-wing, extremist populist movements across the continent. At the same time, the Trump administration's aggressive "America First" policy has exacerbated tensions not only between the EU and the US over trade, military and international policies, but also within the EU and even within the ruling classes of the great powers. Alt-right billionaires and racist ideologues like Steve Bannon, have also bankrolled or supported old and new right-populist forces in Europe. They have supported the Brexiteers in Britain and anti-immigrant islamophobes like Matteo Salvini of Italy's Lega.

The EU has thus become a potential battlefield on which its rivals fight for political and military influence. Italy, under its right-wing populist government, has intervened against Macron in France's internal affairs

and signed an agreement with China, whose "New Silk Road" project is sharply rejected by other EU members and the US.

The so-called refugee crisis has further aggravated tensions. Racism and xenophobia have become a real means of mobilising masses of disillusioned petty bourgeois, or even the most backward sections of the working class already impoverished, or fearing poverty, from deindustrialisation and globalisation,. The rise of nationalism and the anti-EU sections of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie reflect the growing tensions and internal contradictions. Meanwhile, the EU has not become anything close to a European super state, but remains a federation of nation states, each with their competing interests.

No wonder this has led to the emergence of right-wing populist and racist anti-EU forces across the continent trying to present themselves as an alternative to a German- or Franco-German-dominated union which is about to fail. Once petty-bourgeois forces enter the scene, this crisis can and will take reactionary and violently irrational forms, the most extreme probably in Britain, where the whole country is stuck with a Brexit that the majority of the population and the two main classes don't really want but do not know how to reverse, or fear to do so.

A Fateful Choice?

Against this backdrop, the European elections of May 23-26 appear to involve fateful choices. Of course, they will not decide the future of the EU, the Union's power centres are not in the European Parliament or even the EU Commission itself, but in Berlin and Paris.

These centres of power are weakening, however, not least because the internal contradictions in their countries, caused by their lack of a common "European strategy", will probably sharpen the conflicts and confrontations and could lead to the disintegration of the euro zone and even the EU itself. The European bourgeoisies obviously cannot unite Europe, even though the economy and the movement of people have long since transcended the borders of its nation states.

Even if there are no European parties in the true sense of the word, there are signs of a clear polarisation in the elections and a clear shift to the right. In some countries, however, the major reformist parties, like the British Labour and the Spanish and Portuguese Socialist Parties, have shown signs of recovery through rejecting further austerity and acting as an electoral defence against the dangers of right.

The European right-wing populist parties will certainly form a much larger bloc. A regrouping or unification of the right around "Europe of Nations and Freedom", ENF, with "Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy", EFFD and "European Conservatives and Reformers", EKR, is emerging, which would be tantamount to a combination of the French "Rassemblement National", RN, Italian Lega, the Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, the German Alternative for Germany, AfD, the Danish People's Party and the "True Finns".

ENF is also courting the Hungarian Fidesz, which still belongs to the "European People's Party", EPP, and the Polish PiS. The strengthening of the ENF as the gravitational centre of right-wing populism is also reinforced by the likely withdrawal of Britain from the EU, as the two competing right-wing factions, EFFD, EKR, would lose their most mandated parties with the UKIP and Tories.

Three factions/party alliances of the "bourgeois centre" are competing against the right.

The largest faction in the EU Parliament is likely to be the EPP again. Its success is considered quite certain but, at the same time, it will lose votes and mandates. Election forecasts from April assume that it will have 176 seats in the future, as compared to 217 at present, or only 165 if there is an election in Britain.

The united right wing and right-wing populist parties, however, will be about as strong as the EPP overall, and possibly even stronger with an election in Britain.

In addition to the People's Party, two other factions of the bourgeois "middle class" are competing: the "Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe", ALDE, which includes Macron's "La République en Marche" as well as the FPD and "Free Voters", and the "Greens/European Free Alliance", DG/EFA. Both are pro-European and camouflage their support for an imperialist Europe with "democratic" phrases, the one with an openly neo-liberal variant, the other with a "Green New Deal".

Thus, the European elections will superficially appear as a struggle between "pro-European" and nationalist bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties, a choice similar to that between plague and cholera.

The workers' movement

This is due in part to the fact that the parties of the workers' movement and the left are themselves little more than appendages of these two camps.

The European Social Democracy continues to campaign on promises of a "social Europe", although fewer and fewer believe in it. Its election campaign is not aimed at giving the party a decisive voice in determining the policy of the EU, but at becoming a coalition partner of the openly bourgeois "pro-European" parties. Even if no one really wants such a "grand coalition" in Europe, social democracy is already in the starting blocks. The fact that they are responsible for every kind of mess, that their "social" promises at the European level are even more worthless than on a national scale, has been sufficiently proven by the torture and blackmail of Greece.

Even European parties to the left of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, however, are unable to present a clear or radical alternative. On the contrary. While the European Social Democracy clearly sides with the "pro-European" wing of the bourgeoisie, they are struggling with their European strategy. Some are trying to relaunch a "European reform programme" that is basically a traditional reformist strategy for the EU. Since there are no potential allies for this among the openly bourgeois parties or Labour or social democracy, this wing can still present itself as comparatively "internationalist" and militant and, at least in words, opposed to the turn to nationalism in many countries.

The other wing of the European left, on the other hand, is banking precisely on just such a turn towards national politics, on withdrawing from the EU, on moving away from "class identification" to left-wing populist politics. This is what forces like "La France insoumise", or "Aufstehen" in Germany, stand for. Indeed, despite all their justified criticism of the utopian sides of "pro-European" reformism, they want to focus on national adaptation and replace the reformist bourgeois workers' parties with left-wing "people's parties", that is, cross-class organisations. This leads them to adapt to national sovereignty, even wrapping themselves in their national flags and justifying popular fears of immigration.

This fundamental critique of the institutions and the parties, however, does not mean that we can simply turn our backs on the EU elections. An electoral victory of the right, a strengthening of the various openly bourgeois factions will also make the balance of power less favourable. Where reformist parties have significant class roots and attract the illusions of wage earners, such as Labour in Britain or the PSOE in Spain, they should be critically supported, without concealing our criticism of their programmes and their reformist, that is, ultimately bourgeois, orientation. Labour's evasive support for Brexit, or the PSOE's refusal to support the right of the Catalans to self-determination, certainly must be publically and unequivocally condemned.

In Germany, where the SPD has become a weakened and demoralised partner of the Christian Democracy in coalition after coalition, we call for critical support for the Left Party, despite its reformist programme and illusions in the reformability not only of the EU but also of capitalism. We combine our call with the demand that the Left Party actively participate in the resistance and mobilisations against the current and coming attacks and to actively support the organisation of a Europe-wide action conference of the resistance that builds on the best aspects of the European Social Forums.

A Fighting Alternative

Despite the rise of the extreme right, there is no lack of struggles and resistance. The existential crisis in the EU, the onslaught on democratic rights in the member states, have repeatedly driven hundreds of thousands, even millions, of workers, young people and oppressed minorities out onto the streets. The ongoing movement of young people taking direct action to demand major action to prevent irreversible and catastrophic climate change, shows what can be done. The next recession and the intensification of inter-imperialist rivalry in both economic and military terms will intensify this.

This is not a time when capitalism can allow great reforms, unless threatened by the outbreak of great class struggles that could lead to a revolutionary escalation. The current leaders of the trade unions and reformist parties, right and left, and of the "left" populists have undoubtedly demonstrated their inability to meet this challenge.

What is needed is a Europe-wide revolutionary alternative, new revolutionary parties united in a Fifth International. Of course, such a process cannot take place without an effort to win the anti-capitalist and internationalist activists of the existing reformist parties.

A step in this direction would be to convene a European Social Forum, like the one in Florence in 2002 that brought into being a global antiwar movement against the Iraq invasion and occupation. The aim now should be to build a combined continent-wide struggle against the EU's austerity, against racism and the rise of the right, against wars of interventions, and at the same time for the rights of migrants and refugees.

Included here must be support for oppressed nationalities within Europe; the Catalans, Basques, Irish and the Kurds, across Europe's borders. If we gather such militant internationalist forces together, steps could be taken to build new fighting parties against not just neoliberalism but against capitalism and imperialism. A vital task of such parties is international solidarity with revolutionary movements like those of the Arab Spring or the movements in Sudan and Algeria today. Nor must we forget solidarity with the opposition to Trump in the USA, or to Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Such parties, however, will need not just unity of action around all these issues but a programme of action that links these struggles with the struggle for workers' governments in every state and a Socialist United States of Europe.

It is precisely this fundamental alternative to imperialist unification and nationalist isolation that the working class and the "radical" left lack. Because it lacks such a programme, such a perspective, it regularly proves itself incapable of solving all the great problems of the continent, condemns itself to powerlessness or a policy of tailing behind the various wings of the ruling class.

The slogan of the " Socialist United States of Europe", a Europe based on democratic planning and a workers' government, is therefore not an "abstract" or distant vision of the future in the current crisis, it is the only realistic alternative to nationalism and imperialism, however difficult it may be to fight for it. For this reason, the League for the Fifth International proposes an action programme for Europe.

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