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Merkel, Macron call for more EU militarism at Meseberg conference

German Chancellor Angela Merkel hosted French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday at Meseberg, as Berlin and Paris tried to settle on a common policy ahead of the upcoming European Union (EU) conference in Brussels at the end of the month.

The Meseberg meeting had the air of a crisis summit. It took place barely a week after G7 talks with the United States broke down, and Washington moved to impose trade war tariffs on tens of billions of dollars in EU exports. Merkel is facing an unprecedented challenge in her own government, as Interior Minister Horst Seehofer threatened to defy her authority by unilaterally reinstating national border controls targeting immigrants, after meeting with officials of far-right governments in Italy and Austria.

There were also growing signs of tensions between Berlin and Paris, after Merkel largely rejected Macron's demands earlier this month for the creation of hundreds of billions of euros in funds for bank bailouts and investment projects. *Le Monde* published a lengthy review of Merkel's talks with Macron on this subject, including Merkel's recent criticism of Macron on ARD that he keeps making proposals "that he has long known are not the right ones, in my view." The paper concluded that between the two, "the charm is well and truly lost."

Before Macron and Merkel met, French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire appeared on BFM TV to appeal for an EU great-power policy. "We must propose, as our president has, a new European project on immigration to consolidate the European Union in a world where the United States is on one side, China on another, and we are trapped in between,"

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he said. He warned that Europe is “disintegrating” and demanded joint policies against immigration and “financial risks.”

Ultimately, Merkel and Macron cobbled together an agreement pledging a drastic expansion of EU militarism, austerity and attacks on immigrants, working with the Italian and Austrian governments. With Rome now pledging to expel hundreds of thousands of immigrants and carry out a census of Italy’s entire Roma population, paving the way for mass round-ups on a scale unseen in Western Europe since the Holocaust, the EU is preparing an explosive shift to the right.

The Meseberg Declaration agreed by Merkel and Macron begins with an appeal to boost the EU’s capability to wage overseas wars and censor the Internet. It calls for building “a shared strategic culture through the European Intervention Initiative, which will be linked as closely as possible with PESCO,” the Permanent Structured Co-operation initiative for an EU army. It also called for continuing the development of a joint EU tank and fighter plane system, talks with Russia and Ukraine, and EU legislative action against “illicit contents promoting terrorism online.”

On immigration, it calls for stepped-up EU repression, by “(1) setting up a genuine European border police building on the existing Frontex, and (2) creating a European Asylum Office harmonizing asylum practices in Member States.”

The Declaration makes no criticism of Seehofer or the Italian government’s anti-Roma witch hunt. In a jab at Seehofer, however, it warns: “Unilateral, uncoordinated action will split Europe, divide its peoples and put Schengen (the treaty on free movement inside the EU) at risk. If Member States started to act unilaterally, this would end up in an overall increase of migration into Europe.”

That is, the differences of Merkel and Macron with Seehofer and Rome are not over the persecution of immigrants. Rather, they are warning that in the current situation, with the disintegration of the trans-Atlantic alliance and growing strikes and protests at home, the EU is a better mechanism to assert the European powers’ military appetites abroad and to organize repression at home.

Presenting the declaration at her joint press conference with Macron, Merkel began by hailing EU militarism: “We are looking at the interests of Europe. We have given some answers in the Meseberg Declaration. We need to be closer in foreign relations, closer in defence ... That means we will have a common strategic culture but also a common arsenal. We will have to cooperate on the deployment of our soldiers.”

On immigration, Merkel appealed for a common EU policy and indicated her intentions to work with Seehofer's allies in Austria and Italy.

She said, "We want to avoid the countries being split further. We support the Austrian initiative to strengthen the external borders of the EU. This means we will give more powers to Frontex. The standards for asylum must be harmonized, and it must be possible to do this in every country that is a Schengen treaty signatory. We want solidarity with the member countries. We are grateful to France for its support. I spoke to the Italian president; we will take into account the ideas of Italy."

On the economy, which she called "the most difficult topic," Merkel noted that the Declaration calls for using the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) bailout fund both for bank bailouts and for corporate investment. This is part of a series of other pro-business measures including harmonizing German and French corporate tax structures and coordinating EU capital markets.

This underscores that the escalation of militarism and neo-fascistic attacks on immigrants is based on continuing hand-outs to big business and austerity against the workers. The use of the ESM for bank bailouts, as occurred in Greece after 2009, still requires approval of European heads of state and finance ministers, which in exchange demanded deep austerity in Greece.

Macron supported Merkel's remarks, calling the situation "a moment of truth in Europe, each of our states and on our continent." He called for boosting the EU's Frontex border force to 10,000 men, adding: "Our decisions are clear, they allow us to respond to the gravity of the situation."

In fact, the German-French axis underlying the EU is bankrupt. The Meseberg Declaration shows that it will intensify the policies of austerity, anti-immigrant witch-hunting and imperialist war that have made it deeply unpopular with working people and shifted official politics far to the right.

Moreover, even as far-right parties like Matteo Salvini's Lega in Italy consolidate their influence in government, the response in Berlin and Paris is to take over their anti-immigrant agenda while issuing a few criticisms of their most outrageous and unpopular policies, like Rome's refusal to let the 629 refugees onboard the *Aquarius* come ashore in Italy. Merkel, and Macron, whose police is carrying out its own anti-immigrant raids in France, have thus made themselves complicit in Salvini's anti-immigrant crackdown and police build-up.

The EU plays a central role in escalating the repression. After reports emerged last year in CNN and Amnesty International that refugees were tortured, sold into slavery and even murdered in EU-funded camps in Libya, EU Council President Donald Tusk has called for the construction of more such camps, which he euphemistically called “regional disembarkation platforms.” Beyond Libya, these camps could also be built in Tunisia and Albania.

Draft guidelines for the building of these concentration camps, reportedly already approved by the French and Italian governments, say the camps’ goal would be to “establish a more predictable framework for dealing with those who nevertheless set out to sea and are rescued in Search And Rescue Operations.”

In the final analysis, the European bourgeoisie cannot escape the militaristic and fascistic implications of the ongoing global drive to war and trade conflict. Their moves to divert hundreds of billions of euros into the army in an attempt to function as a credible rival of the United States or China will only intensify the social and political crisis. Amid growing popular opposition, with strikes against Macron’s austerity policies and protests against Salvini’s anti-immigrant measures, all of the governments in the European Union are moving rapidly towards the far-right.