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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Socialist Equality Party (UK), Parti de l'égalité socialiste (France), Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Germany), Sosyalist Eşitlik Grubu (Turkey)
12.02.2023

The mass strike movement, war and the revolutionary crisis in Europe

A mass strike movement has erupted in Europe, drawing in millions of workers from every corner of the continent. What is unfolding is not a series of national trade union struggles that can be resolved by isolated negotiations with one or other capitalist government. Rather, it is an international political struggle, as workers raise similar demands in every country and are met with police crackdowns and legal threats from governments that are discredited and widely despised.

As they proclaim that no concessions can be made to the growing demands of the masses, Europe's governments of all colorations—conservative, social-democratic, or Green—are recklessly escalating the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine. They are spending hundreds of billions of euros and pounds on their militaries and arming the Ukrainian regime to the teeth with tanks, jet fighters, missiles and other arms. They are setting into motion the eruption of a Third World War, whose cost will be borne by the working classes in every country.



Demonstrators during a march against pension cuts in Strasbourg, eastern France, Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Jean Francois Badias)

Their criminal character is sharply revealed by their response to the earthquake disaster on the Turkish-Syrian border. Amid this social catastrophe that has left millions homeless and tens of thousands dead, the European powers, together with Washington, have maintained crippling sanctions on Syria, a country already devastated by NATO's 12-year war for regime change.

What is emerging across Europe is an objectively revolutionary situation. The alternatives are as starkly posed as they were at the outbreak of World War I, over a century ago. Either the capitalist class plunges Europe and the world into a global war between nuclear-armed states, or the working class takes power out of the hands of the warmongering ruling elites.

In World War I it took nearly three years until the working class mounted its first great political counteroffensive against the war: the February 1917 revolution in Russia toppled the czar and led to the coming to power of the working class, led by the Bolshevik Party under Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, in the October 1917 revolution. Today, however, even as the bourgeoisie is still trying to drag humanity into World War III, the working class is launching a wave of powerful struggles.

The sentiments moving millions into struggle have an incipiently anti-capitalist, anti-militarist and socialist character. After decades of state bailouts handing over trillions of euros and pounds to the super-rich, workers angrily reject austerity policies eviscerating pensions and key social services, or contracts that slash real wages amid a global surge of inflation. They do not accept impoverishment in order to divert massive social wealth into all-out war with Russia.

In France, 3 million workers have gone on strike against Macron's plan to slash tens of billions of euros from pensions by raising the retirement age. This opposition grew after Macron announced a 40 percent increase in military spending and the dispatch of tanks to Ukraine for war with Russia, and unleashed tens of thousands of riot police to assault strikers. Polls show 70 percent opposition to Macron's pension cuts and 60 percent support for a social explosion to shut down the economy and stop the cuts—in effect, a general strike against Macron.

In Britain, rail, post, telecoms workers, nurses, paramedics, school teachers, lecturers and civil servants have joined a strike wave now lasting seven months and encompassing millions. Strikes continue despite constant attempts to call them off by the trade union bureaucracy and in the face of government plans to criminalise strikes in key industries and services.

In Turkey, where over 100 wildcat strikes against the rising cost of living and general strikes by health care workers have taken place in the past year, social anger among the working masses is heading towards a revolutionary explosion. The fact that the earthquake, which has already caused over 20,000 deaths in 10 cities inhabited by 13 million people, was long predicted but no measures were taken, and the victims have largely been abandoned to their fate, is fueling mass anger all over the country.

In Germany, strikes are mounting against the devastating impact of inflation on real wages, compounded by the cutoff of Russian energy exports to Europe. Two-and-a-half million teachers, postal workers, hospital and sanitation workers, transport workers and other public employees are involved in “warning strikes” in the midst of contract talks involving major pay cuts. There is overwhelming popular opposition to the political establishment's plan to fully remilitarize Germany for war with Russia.

The pattern is repeated throughout Europe, with the UK's right-wing *Daily Mail* railing against “mayhem” because “industrial action is gripping Europe's economies.” In Italy, airline and airport workers, rail workers, educators and local transport workers are taking industrial action this month. In Spain, air traffic controllers, airline workers, health care workers, Amazon staff and teachers have gone on strike. In Portugal, strikes are at a ten-year high, including action by rail workers, doctors and educators.

Of particular significance is the action taken in country after country by health, education and transport workers, who were made to suffer the brunt of the illness and death caused by European governments' rejection of any scientific policy to suppress the spread of COVID-19.

The panic and fear in the ruling class caused by the rising demands of the masses are a major driving force behind its escalation of war with Russia. Having utterly lost its head, it is making a desperate and reckless gamble that escalating the war will allow it to at least temporarily suppress the growth of the class struggle.

Instead, opposition to war is becoming a decisive factor in social and political protests and an open political confrontation between the capitalists and the workers. This month saw an estimated 50,000 people demonstrate in Denmark's capital, Copenhagen, against plans to scrap a public holiday to help fund an increase in military spending. Again and again, strikers across Europe complain that there is no money for wages and social services such as public health and pensions, but no end to increases in the war budget.

In the first year of World War I, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, then a seemingly isolated political exile in Switzerland, insisted that the eruption of world war also created the objective conditions for world socialist revolution. He irreconcilably opposed European social-democrats who supported the world war and denied that revolution was possible. A revolutionary situation, Lenin indicated, is characterized by the following three major symptoms: (1) When it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change...; (2) When the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) When, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses... into independent historical action.

A century later, Lenin's analysis illuminates the objectively revolutionary character of the crisis underway in Europe. The European bourgeoisie can no longer rule in the old way, as it did in the period after the Stalinist bureaucracies' restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe and their dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Since 1991, it has waged NATO wars abroad—in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Mali and beyond—and carried out relentless austerity at home. It has utterly repudiated the reformist guise it adopted in the period after the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, and today openly promotes fascistic parties and police-state forms of rule. It is a grotesquely parasitic financial aristocracy, whose wealth depends on relentless military escalation abroad and speculative stock market frenzies driven by social cuts and handouts of public money in bank bailouts at home.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger event in world history, bringing class conflicts developing over decades to a qualitatively new peak of intensity. The ruling elite's paper wealth was vastly inflated by a new round of bank bailouts, but it was discredited by its

callous indifference to mass death and suffering. It has responded with a sharp shift to the right, stoking a suicidal war with Russia and stepping up military-police repression of protests at home.

For the working class, the pandemic signified a drastic intensification of suffering and want. Two million people died of COVID-19 in Europe, while the sudden injection of cash from massive new bank bailouts triggered an inflationary spiral. The international wave of struggles the working class has launched across Europe against concessions contracts and “social dialogue” between national union bureaucracies and the ruling classes constitutes its entry into independent historical action.

Explosive social anger is fueling the continent-wide strike movement of the working class that is an advanced expression of an emerging global eruption of the class struggle. The decisive question is to develop in the working class the consciousness that its struggles against the employers or the national governments are part of an objectively united, international offensive of the working class against capitalism.

Working people, who create the wealth of today’s globally integrated mass society, have the right to decide how this wealth will be used, and must smash the diktat of the financial aristocracy over the economy so as to meet essential social needs and halt the ever-expanding war. The development of such an understanding among advanced layers of the working class will lay the basis for unifying these struggles in a fight against imperialist war and for socialism.

Stopping the war and ending austerity requires building powerful, international rank-and-file organizations of struggle in workplaces and schools, independent of the union bureaucracy. Every strike that erupts confirms the fact that the trade union bureaucracy works to subordinate workers to its dealings with the employers and the capitalist state, and its defense of the war policy of the capitalist class in each country. It is only with new organizations of struggle that the working class can unite internationally against the austerity demands of the banks and against the NATO war on Russia.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, calls for and fights to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and File Committees (IWA-RFC) as an essential component of the struggle against austerity and war. The timeliness of this initiative becomes ever more clear as the class struggle evolves towards the eruption of general strikes across Europe.

The enormous political tasks facing the movement of the working class place on the order of the day building of the ICFI as its international political leadership.

Even the greatest general strike will not halt capitalism's plunge into a Third World War and its relentless social attacks and repression of the working class. The working class must be armed with a clear understanding that all the forces of the political establishment confront it as determined enemies. The crisis cannot be resolved by trying to elect more left-wing capitalist governments, but only by the fight to transfer power to the organizations built by the working class in its struggle, so as to establish workers' power and socialism across Europe and internationally.

In government or opposition, the former reformist parties such as the Social Democrats in Germany and Britain's Labour Party are ferocious partisans of austerity and war. Nor do the pseudo-left political descendants of supporters of Stalin's false theory of "socialism in one country" or petty-bourgeois renegades from Trotskyism represent an alternative.

The affluent middle-class milieu of forces such as Die Linke in Germany, the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, Podemos in Spain, and Syriza (the "Coalition of the Radical Left") is exposed by its record. In power in Greece, Syriza reneged on its pledges to end austerity, instead slashing pensions and social spending and building concentration camps for refugees. In power today, Podemos is arming the Ukrainian neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, bailing out the banks, and sending riot police to assault striking truckers and metalworkers.

Jeremy Corbyn and his pseudo-left backers, swept into the leadership of Britain's Labour Party, refused to conduct any struggle against the party's right wing and handed the leadership back to the declared opponent of strikes and rabid warmonger Keir Starmer. Forces like Mélenchon and Die Linke have won millions of votes in elections, but have strictly avoided any appeal to mobilize mass sentiment against the war.

The alternative to this right-wing, pro-war milieu is the ICFI's defence of Marxism and the perspective of Permanent Revolution that underlay the October Revolution. It provides the political and historical foundation for a struggle of the working class to expropriate the financial aristocracy, overthrow capitalism and build the United Socialist States of Europe. The ICFI in Europe and internationally will respond to the escalating war and revolutionary crisis by intensifying the struggle for Marxist revolutionary consciousness in the working class. There remains a chasm between the scale of the movement and its objective revolutionary potential and the residual influence of hostile class forces, which must be overcome through determined struggle. We will fight to transform the growing revolutionary movement of the working class into a conscious movement for socialism.

This means building the ICFI and its sections as the new mass parties of socialist revolution.

World Socialist 11.02.2023