

The European Workers' Movement: Dangers and Challenges

Thursday 7 April 2011, by [SMITH Murray](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2011).

With the onset of the world economic crisis, the European workers' movement finds itself in a new phase, one that is replete with dangers and challenges. It is important to underline that we are in fact in a new situation and not just a continuation of the previous period.

Contents

- [A Frontal Assault](#)
- [Left Politics in Europe](#)
- [Unions](#)
- [Far From Hopeless](#)
- [A Key Weakness](#)

There is nothing new about the fact that the European working class is under attack and on the defensive. There has been since the 1980s a systematic drive, increasingly coordinated by the European Union (EU), to impose neo-liberal policies in Europe. The aims have been to lower the cost of labour (wages, benefits, social programs), to remove limits on capital and to open up new sectors of the economy to private capital. So we have seen deregulation of the economy and of finance in particular, the imposition of "flexible" working practices, an increase in precarious work, privatizations and "reform" of the social state in the sense of undermining universal rights to pensions, unemployment benefits, free healthcare and other programs. Collective bargaining agreements are identified as a structural problem, the weakening of unions defined as an objective (Financial Times editorial, 2010-05-10). Such a weakening has occurred in some countries, but not all. The speed and scale of the attacks has varied across countries, but the direction is unmistakable. The cumulative effects have undermined, but not destroyed the welfare state that developed in large measure during the post-WWII economic boom.

Now ruling classes are stepping up the attacks. To use a military analogy, they are moving from a war of attrition to a war of movement, making a frontal assault on wages, working conditions, the public sector and social programs.

A Frontal Assault

There is no doubt that Europe's ruling classes, acting through national governments and European institutions, backed by the IMF and the OECD, are quite consciously using the crisis and the deficits to push through a series of measures. They have the immediate problem of reducing deficits which are the product of governments bailing out the banks in 2008 and of the recession. This left several peripheral economies of the eurozone (Greece, Spain, Ireland, Portugal) with difficulty in borrowing money, with the danger of them defaulting on their debts, which would have serious effects on

European banks. At the time of the Greek bail-out, Martin Wolf admitted in the Financial Times (2010-05-05), "It is overtly a rescue of Greece, but covertly a bail-out of banks". That is true not only of Greece. Banks and financial institutions from the big three of the EU — Britain, France and Germany — own more than half the Greek debt, and also more than half of Irish, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian debt. All of that came to a total of over \$2 trillion as of December 31, 2009 (figures from the Bank of International Settlements).

The price of bailouts to Greece and Ireland was the imposition of drastic austerity programs. In the spring of 2010 it was the Greek crisis that sounded the signal for a renewed offensive by EU governments. The conditions which were then imposed on the Greek people were draconian: wage reductions of 10 to 15 percent, in a country where the average monthly wage is 1200 euros; drastic reduction of the workforce in the public sector, replacing only one out of every five workers who retire; measures to facilitate sackings in the private sector; cuts in the health and education budget; further privatizations; raising the VAT, an across-the-board tax which hits the poorest hardest, from 19 to 23 percent; reduced pensions; raising the retirement age to 67. With minor variations, these measures have also been imposed on or adopted by Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

The object is in fact to use the crisis to impose harsher measures on the recalcitrant. This is not only to cut deficits and reassure the markets. It is also to accelerate the offensive that aims to make Europe more competitive in the new international context. This is fundamental. The social state, even weakened and under attack over the last thirty years, has lasted because Europe could afford it and because it helped pacify workers. Now the word is that the game's over. The shift in the balance of economic power, the rise of new non-European economies, is underlining the fact that the standard of living and level of social protection that has characterized Western Europe since 1945 is no longer viable, from the point of view of the ruling class.

In its most drastic form at present, the offensive affects the so-called "peripheral" eurozone economies, and also several countries in Eastern Europe. But it is a Europe-wide assault. We are seeing austerity measures and a major attack on unions in Italy (centred on the FIAT car factories), and in France we saw last year's counter-reform of pensions.

A case that stands out is Britain, where the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat ("ConDem") coalition that came to power in May 2010 has launched an offensive of breathtaking proportions. Taking the need to reduce the deficit as its theme, it has imposed sweeping cuts in public spending — direct government spending, but also the amount of money allocated by the central government to local authorities. This has led to those authorities closing down public services, cutting subsidies to volunteer groups and laying off tens of thousands of local government workers. Massive increases in student fees have provoked equally massive protests. VAT has gone up from 17 to 20 percent. Real wages today are no higher than they were in 2005 - in effect a six-year wage freeze, something not seen since the 1920s. In a parallel move the government has begun sweeping reforms of the health service which amount to the widespread privatization of services and will lead to large-scale job cuts.

Left Politics in Europe

Faced with this offensive, what has been the reaction of the European workers' movement? In the first place, resistance has centred on the unions rather than on political parties. This is unsurprising when you look at the situation of the political Left. Without exception, the social democratic parties have rallied to the dominant neo-liberal discourse, enthusiastically or shamefacedly and with varying degrees of speed and internal conflict. This is true not only or even especially in theory, but above all

in practice, in government. And they continue to do so today.

Three of the four “peripheral” countries — Greece, Spain, Portugal — are presided over by social democratic governments. If we look a little further back we can see the role played in government by social democracy in Germany between 1997 and 2005, as well as in the UK, France and elsewhere. There are some signs of re-positioning to the left in the French Socialist Party, the British Labour Party and the German SPD. However, these moves remain very timid and it is always necessary to look very critically at the left-wing rhetoric of social democratic parties in opposition — it invariably melts away under the pressure of office. Let us not forget that PASOK won the Greek elections in the autumn of 2009 with a left discourse which was in contrast not only with the preceding right-wing government but also with previous PASOK governments. Now, the PASOK government is doing as the EU and the IMF tell it to. Only three of its MPs refused to vote for the austerity programme last year (they abstained, and were promptly expelled from the PASOK parliamentary group). That does not necessarily exhaust the question of these parties. Under the pressure of the crisis and the scale of the attacks on the working class, cracks may appear. But this is likely to be a slow and uncertain process.

What about the forces to the left of social democracy? First of all there are the Communist parties. Some, while taking a position of opposition to neo-liberalism, operate in a sectarian and divisive way. This is above all the case of the Greek Communist Party. Then there are the Communist parties (in France and Spain, notably) which are part of coalitions/fronts with other forces of the radical Left. Thirdly, there are the traditional far left organizations which in some ways mirror the CPs, ranging from sectarianism to serious involvement in new coalitions and parties. Finally, there are new parties involving forces from different backgrounds (as in Portugal and Germany). In some countries the radical Left, more or less united or divided, has serious weight (Portugal, Germany, Greece and France in particular). But nowhere has it succeeded in supplanting social democracy as the main force on the left.

Unions

For the moment and for some time to come resistance will be centred on the trade unions, which are recognized as representative organizations by workers. The unions can mobilize. When they issue a call to action workers respond, especially if the unions act in a united way. The two big confederations in Greece, GSEE (private sector) and ADEDY (public), organized seven massive one-day general strikes in the course of 2010. The first one of 2011 took place on February 23. In France, in the movement against pension reform that began in the spring of 2010 and reached its high point in the autumn, the trade union confederations were the backbone of the movement. This was structured around a series of one-day national strikes and demonstrations which at their height put 3.5 million people in the street. In Portugal, the Communist Party-led CGTP confederation organized a demonstration of 300 000 people in Lisbon on May 29, 2010. Then on November 24, a general strike, called for the first time since 1988 by both the CGTP and the Socialist-led UGT, was massively supported, with 3 million strikers out of a workforce of 4.7 million. In Spain, a strike called on September 29 by the CCOO and UGT confederations was supported by 70 percent of workers.

But such one-day strikes are really the limit of what the big confederations will do. And governments know it. So it may be inconvenient, but they can stand it. The main union leaderships are conservative. They don't seek confrontation, they want consultation and conciliation. Their problem is that there is less and less of this to be had, and fewer concessions on offer. So they are pushed into reacting to attacks. Furthermore, many unions are linked to social democracy, formally or informally. So when they are faced with a social democratic government, it is one thing to protest,

quite another to engage in an all-out confrontation.

Even quite moderate unions are forced into confrontation by the capitalist offensive. But they are not prepared to fight to the finish, whereas in general the governments and the employers are, making only marginal concessions. Sometimes after protesting the unions can be co-opted into collaborating with the government, as happened catastrophically in January in Spain over pension reform. Nevertheless, to the extent that the main unions do mobilize, they help to open up a space for resistance.

There is a problem of the need for unions to adapt to the new situation, for new leaderships to emerge, at all levels, which are capable of determined resistance to the employers' and government offensive. This implies a certain degree of political understanding of what is at stake. It also implies a democratization of unions which often function in an extremely bureaucratic way, in order to bring them under the control of the rank-and-file members. Such a reorientation and renewal of trade unionism can happen in two ways, by the appearance of new unions and by evolution within the existing confederations. When we look at the situation in each country there are positive signs. In France there are radical unions like Solidaires and the FSU, but there are also significant left currents within the main confederation, the CGT. In Italy the metalworkers' federation, FIOM, part of the main CGIL confederation, is spearheading resistance, on a national level and in particular at FIAT. In Spain, in reaction to the sell-out over pensions, independent unions organized strikes and demonstrations at the end of January in Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia, and there were manifestations of opposition in the CCOO and the UGT.

Far From Hopeless

There are other encouraging signs. One absolutely key factor is the role of young people. One of the most dynamic elements of the movement in France last autumn was the massive mobilization of school students. In Britain, the attacks of the ConDem government have given rise to what is shaping up to be the biggest movement of university and school students since the 1960s. There are also what can be described as "citizens' mobilizations," for example the growing and increasingly militant movement against the cuts imposed by the ConDem government in Britain, involving trade unionists, neighbourhood action groups and young people.

In spite of the scale of the challenge, the situation of the workers' movement in Europe is far from hopeless. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that workers are ready to mobilize if given a lead. Sometimes and in certain countries the offensive by employers and governments has been halted or slowed down. Opposition has been led by the unions, but it has involved students, young people and ad hoc fronts, sometimes including forces from social democracy.

But in spite of partial victories, the neo-liberal steamroller has continued to advance. The first task is to counter the offensive. Just saying no is not a sufficient response, but it is an essential starting point. The first line of defence is to mobilize against the measures. This is not in general very difficult. It is blindingly obvious that ordinary workers, particularly in the public sector which is everywhere under attack, young people and pensioners bear no responsibility for the economic crisis that has unfolded since 2007. The slogan, repeated in almost identical terms all over Europe, that "it's not up to the workers to pay for the crisis, the bankers and financiers should pay" seems like simple common sense. The anger is there.

A Key Weakness

But there is an ongoing weakness of the workers' movement, which gives the advantage to governments and the ruling class. The weakness is political. It lies first of all in the inadequate nature of the forces that are leading the struggle. But it also lies in the absence of a credible, visible political alternative to neo-liberalism. Such a political alternative is not a precondition for resisting attacks in the short term, perhaps even winning battles. But at a certain point the absence of a coherent alternative has a demobilizing effect.

One of the brakes on mobilization and resistance to the new offensive is the lack of a political alternative and indeed disillusion with politics, including and even especially with the traditional Left. This places a heavy responsibility on the radical Left. One of the strongest weapons of the ruling class for thirty years has been the claim that "there is no alternative." It has to be shown that there is one, that anti-capitalism can move from protest to developing a program that aims to win majority support. This problem predates the present crisis, but the crisis has made it a much more urgent question.

One response on the left to the tactic of repeated one-day general strikes is to argue for an ongoing general strike. That would certainly be the best way to win. The fact that it has not so far happened anywhere does not mean that it is impossible. But there are obstacles - not only the passivity of union leaderships but many hesitations and doubts within a working class that is much more atomized and insecure than it was thirty or forty years ago. And it does not have to be all or nothing. France last year showed that even short of a full-scale general strike the actions of the most radical sections of workers and the youth mobilization, combined with mass demonstrations, gave extra force to the movement, which came close to winning.

The other lesson to be learned from France is that every time a victory has been won, and indeed whenever there has been a serious battle, the battle of ideas, winning over public opinion, countering the government's propaganda, has been crucial. On this front, political organizations of the radical Left as well as global justice groups like ATTAC have played a key role.

It is useful to cite some positive examples. If we look at the victorious campaign in France against the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, it was won by a mass political campaign involving forces from both the political and the trade union wings of the workers' movement, along with intellectuals, global justice activists and others. When the CPE (a government proposal for a weaker employment contract for young people) was defeated a few months later, it was defeated by what is best described as a social and political front, involving political parties and trade unions and spearheaded by youth and student organizations. And last year's movement in France saw a similar combination of strikes, street demonstrations and a mass political campaign. These kinds of movements can win, and they are also the crucible in which a renewal of the workers' movement can take place and new political forces can emerge.

Murray Smith

P.S.

* From New Socialist:

http://www.newsocialist.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=396:the-european-wo

[rkers-movement-dangers-and-challenges&catid=51:analysis&Itemid=98](#)

* Murray Smith is a member of the anti-capitalist party Dei Lenk (“The Left”) in Luxemburg.