

WSWS International Editorial Board meeting

The dead-end of European capitalism and the tasks of the working class

Part Two

Uli Rippert
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Published below is the second in a three-part report on Europe delivered by Uli Rippert to an expanded meeting of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board (IEB) held in Sydney from January 22 to 27, 2006. Part one was posted on March 13. Rippert is a member of the World Socialist Web Site IEB and national secretary of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) in Germany.

WSWS IEB chairman David North's report was posted on 27 February. SEP (Australia) national secretary Nick Beams' report was posted in three parts: Part one on February 28, Part two on March 1 and Part three on March 2. James Cogan's report on Iraq was posted on March 3. Barry Grey's report was published in two parts: Part one on March 4 and Part two on March 6. Patrick Martin's report was published in two parts: Part one on March 7 and Part two on March 8. John Chan report on China was published in three parts: Part one was posted on March 9, Part two on March 10 and Part three on March 11.

The growing international conflicts have been accompanied by comprehensive attacks on the working class. Particularly over the past five to six years, we have seen a tremendous acceleration of social decline in Europe.

An important factor has been the eastward expansion of the European Union—the effects of which were already noticeable during the official entry of new members in 2004. European companies suddenly had access to a huge supply of cheap, well-trained workers within a relatively limited geographic space. These workers are now being systematically used to lower living standards throughout Europe.

The wage differential within the European Union is enormous. One working hour in Scandinavia, Germany, Britain and France costs between 25 and 30 euros. In Poland it is 5 euros, in the Baltic states and Slovakia 4 euros, and in Bulgaria, the next candidate for EU admission, just 1.40 euros.

Average gross wages in companies employing more than ten people vary in the major Western European countries from 2,500 to 3,300 euros per month. In Poland they are 540 euros a month, in Lithuania 345 euros and Latvia about 208 euros.

This downward spiral takes place within a small area. From the German capital Berlin to the Polish border is just 100 kilometres, to the Latvian capital of Riga just over 1,000 km. Across a distance of 1,000 km, there is a wage differential of over 90 percent.

The amounts spent on social and welfare payments—pensions, health, social welfare assistance etc.—also vary greatly. Sweden spends €10,000 annually per inhabitant. In Poland, 250 km to the east, it is €1,100 and on the other side of the Baltic Sea in Latvia €590.

Following accession to the European Union, wages in the largest of the new East European member states actually dropped. According to official EU statistics, the average wage in Poland sank from €625 per month in 2001 to €536 in 2003. One reason is that many Polish companies have shifted to the neighbouring Ukraine, where the average wage amounts to €50. That is less than 10 percent of average Polish wages and just 1.7 percent of the Western European average.

The general standard of living in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was already lower than in Western Europe before the reintroduction of capitalism, but above all today's catastrophic conditions are the result of the restoration of the free market. It brought about a level of destruction of productive capacities and social infrastructure, unparalleled in peacetime.

This was poignantly and effectively demonstrated in a documentary film, which we reviewed recently on the WSWS. It deals with the lives of two women, a doctor from Russia and a music teacher from Belarus, whose fates are typical for hundreds of thousands. Both women spend their entire lives travelling to the Polish capital Warsaw, to sell their wares at the local bric-a-brac market.

The doctor, a cardiologist who formerly headed a health centre, now regularly makes a dangerous 14-day journey of 4,000 km, enduring hours of ice-cold weather, to smuggle goods over the border. Through the sale of her wares, she earns a maximum of \$100 per journey. This typifies senseless waste of mental and physical resources now commonplace in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

On the other side of the social divide is the phenomena of the “new Russians” who possess millions—in some cases billions—of US dollars, live in expensive mansions, drive luxury Western cars, and have displaced even the Americans from the top holiday resorts in the French Riviera and Swiss Alps. They became rich by plundering the state property of the former Soviet Union—the most comprehensive act of robbery in modern history.

In Western Europe, the bourgeoisie is currently wiping out all the remaining social and political achievements that the working class had fought for during the post-war period.

There is only limited data available on the extent of this social decline. There are—partly outdated—statistics on unemployment, income and social inequality. There are barely any figures dealing with the consequences of the unceasing cuts to health provisions, pensions, education and local services. These cutbacks have had devastating effects in societies where free access to education up to university level, comprehensive publicly-financed health systems and well-developed public infrastructure were major factors in living standards.

The official unemployment rate in the 25 EU member countries was

about 8.5 percent in October 2005. This statistic says little, because the methods of measuring unemployment are constantly changing and the numbers do not accurately reflect real unemployment. In addition, rates vary widely according to region, from under 5 percent in Ireland, Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands, and just over 10 percent in Germany and France, to almost 20 percent in Poland and Slovakia.

Official unemployment rates are even higher in local regions and among young people. Nearly every European country has areas where unemployment lies between 25 and 40 percent. Almost one fifth of all Europeans under 25 years of age have no work; in Poland the figure is 38 percent.

These figures are only a pale reflection of the real level of social reversal. New forms of unpaid or very low-paid work, such as internships and volunteering, which do not appear in the statistics, are developing at a cancerous rate. In the Netherlands—the European front runner—21 percent of male and 74 percent of female workers now have part-time jobs, with corresponding low incomes.

Even a university degree no longer guarantees a job, let alone well-paid employment. A broad layer of well-trained university graduates are being proletarianized—a fact that is of some significance for the development of our movement.

In 2001, prior to the EU's eastward expansion, approximately 15 percent of the EU population, or 68 million persons, lived in poverty. Children and women were particularly hard hit. In first place was Italy, with a poverty rate of 20 percent.

The situation is much worse in the new member states, where large areas are plagued by intolerable living conditions. In the Baltic states, more than one-third of households live in unsatisfactory conditions. Between 20 and 25 percent lack a flushing toilet. This figure soars to 30 and 39 percent respectively for the EU candidate countries Bulgaria and Romania.

Worsening poverty and unemployment have produced a growth in suicide and the numbers of prisoners. Suicide is now the second most common form of death among young males aged between 15 and 30. Some 400,000 people are rotting in European prisons. This is less than the two million prisoners in the US, but significantly more than just a few years ago. In France, the number of prisoners has risen from 40,000 in 1981, to 56,000 in 2000 and is estimated to reach 70,000 by 2010. In the Netherlands, the prison population has doubled since 1990.

Class conflicts

Intense social contradictions have repeatedly found expression in violent class confrontations, which have only failed to develop into revolutionary conflicts because the working class lacks any independent political orientation following decades of domination by the social democratic and Stalinist bureaucracies.

A brief review indicates the intensity of these struggles during the past few years. I have selected the period from spring 2001 to spring 2004 in just one country, Italy, during the first three years in office of the Berlusconi government.

In July 2001, only two months after Berlusconi assumed office, 100,000 demonstrated in Genoa against the G8 summit. One demonstrator was shot, following brutal police actions.

The following year, 2002, saw a wave of political and social protests:

* In March, half a million demonstrated in Rome against “the creeping undermining of the constitutional state” by the government. This demonstration was not organized by the official opposition or trade unions, but rather by artists and intellectuals.

* Two weeks later, two million demonstrated throughout Italy against the dismantling of the welfare state.

* In April, 13 million workers took part in a general strike to defend laws providing protection against dismissal.

* In October, 13 million took part in another general strike, and one million took to the streets in Rome, Turin and other cities. Factories, stations and motorways were occupied.

* Protest, strikes, demonstrations and occupations against the dismantling of 300,000 jobs took place throughout the autumn.

In the following year, on February 15, 2003, the largest single demonstration in Europe took place in Rome against the Iraq war. Three million protested against the Berlusconi government's support for the war. In April, further anti-war demonstrations took place, involving hundreds of thousand of participants.

October 2003 witnessed yet another general strike, with approximately ten million participants—this time for the defence of pensions.

In March 2004, one million again took to the streets of Rome on the anniversary of the Iraq war.

I will stop here; the list could easily be expanded. This brief review makes clear the intensity and extent of the social and political protests that have taken place.

The situation is similar in France, where the list of strikes and protest demonstrations is even longer than in Italy. I will not go into detail but can give you one interesting statistic—the number of working days lost through strikes.

1995 was a record year, with a total of 5.8 million working days lost—2.1 million in the private sector and 3.7 million in the public sector. It was a year of mass protests and strikes against the conservative government headed by Alain Juppé, who was forced to resign the next year, only to be replaced by a leftist coalition under the Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin.

Initially, the level of strikes under the Jospin government decreased considerably—in 1997 just half a million working days were lost. But when Jospin failed to fulfil his election promises, the number of strikes and protests once again rose rapidly. In 2000, the number of working days lost through strikes rose to 3.1 million. In 2002, Jospin suffered defeat in the presidential elections and the conservatives returned to power.

Since then, although there have been fewer strikes, France has instead witnessed a powerful political mobilization. During the presidential elections in 2002 the whole country was rocked for weeks by demonstrations against the National Front of Jean Marie Le Pen, who was able to make it to the second round of voting. Last year saw French voters reject the European constitution in a referendum. Last autumn, the accumulated rage, frustration and indignation of unemployed youth exploded in disturbances, which, within the space of a few days, had spread to 250 cities. The protests were only put down after three weeks by a huge police deployment.

There has also been a significant social mobilization in Germany during the past few years. In terms of numbers, the protests were smaller than in Italy and France. This is bound up with the political traditions of the country and the corporatist structures built into its legal system, making it easier for the trade unions to keep such movements under their control. But Germany also saw a number of remarkable developments.

In the spring of 2004, 500,000 took part in demonstrations against welfare cuts implemented by the SPD-Green government. This was twice as many as organizers expected. In the summer of the same year, a series of demonstrations against the government's “Hartz” labour reforms took place, completely independently of the trade unions and political parties. Over a period of weeks, tens of thousands took to the streets each Monday. We assessed these demonstrations at the time as “an unmistakable sign that something is moving in the depths of society”.

Political experiences

Without exaggeration, all these social struggles were, in one way or another, betrayed or beheaded by the trade unions or reformist parties, without ever achieving their aims. Nevertheless, they are significant: millions of workers and young people have gone through important political experiences.

They have seen that they cannot stop the social assault under the leadership of their old organizations—the reformist and Stalinist parties and the trade unions. All attempts to force the established political parties to change course have proved fruitless.

When, under the pressure of protests, the ruling class felt forced to make tactical retreats, it was only the prelude to new, even sharper attacks. Where popular pressure resulted in the election of a so-called “left” government, the attacks of their right-wing predecessors were continued in an intensified form. The old organizations, which once claimed to represent the interests of the working class, have integrated themselves entirely into the apparatus of bourgeois rule. The terms “left” and “right” have become politically insignificant.

The established political parties reacted to the growth of social struggles by closing ranks and moving further to the right. The grand coalition government in Germany—comprising the SPD and the conservative Christian Democratic parties—is symptomatic of this process.

Everywhere in Europe the ruling class has reacted to popular protest by boosting the powers of the state apparatus. The “fight against terror” has become a fig leaf for the most comprehensive attacks on democratic rights since the collapse of the Hitler regime.

In France, the government of Jacques Chirac reacted to the recent rebellions in the Paris suburbs by re-activating a law going back to the Algerian war, and proclaiming a state of emergency for three months. In Germany, the political elite swept aside its own constitution in order to stage early elections and a change of government in a manner that can only be described as a “cold coup d’état”. In Italy, Berlusconi arbitrarily altered the country’s electoral laws and created the constitutional conditions for a presidential dictatorship.

The complete bankruptcy of social reformism in all its forms—the trade unions, social democracy, and the various Stalinist and petty bourgeois radical parties—is the key to understanding the political situation in Europe today. From this standpoint, the working class has gone through decisive experiences over past years. But socialist consciousness does not develop automatically from these experiences.

It is our task to generalize these experiences, to elevate political consciousness and draw out the necessary political conclusions. The attacks on social and democratic rights can only be repelled by an independent political movement of the working class on the basis of an international, socialist programme. An organizational, political and ideological break with social reformism in all its forms is the precondition for such a movement.

In the introduction to his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky described the social and psychological conditions necessary for a revolutionary development of the masses.

“The swift changes of mass views and moods in an epoch of revolution thus derive not from the flexibility and mobility of man’s mind, but just the opposite from its deep conservatism. The chronic lag of ideas and relations behind new objective conditions, right up to the moment, when the latter crash over people in the form of a catastrophe, is what creates, in a period of revolution, the leaping movement of ideas and passions ...”

And further: “The masses go into a revolution not with a prepared plan of social re-construction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old regime. Only the guiding layers of a class have a political program, and even this requires the test of events and the approval of the masses.

The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists of gradual comprehension by a class of the problems arising from the social crisis—the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations.” [3]

If one analyzes the social and political situation in Europe from the standpoint of the experiences made by the working class in recent years, then it is clear that we are moving into such an epoch. A “sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old regime” is omnipresent. The 15,000 votes that the Socialist Equality Party received in the Bundestag elections last autumn is also a clear sign of an emerging radicalization.

We can reckon with a powerful expansion in our forces and influence in the coming period, and we will develop into an important factor in political events. A precondition for such a development is that we do not adapt to prevailing political pressures, or capitulate to reformist and centrist conceptions.

To be continued

Notes:

3. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Preface.



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