

European Union crisis

Former German foreign minister demands more determination and less democratic scruples

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Germany's former foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, titled the latest of his regular Monday columns for *Die Zeit* newspaper: "Vive l'Avant garde!" By avant-garde Fischer means a bourgeois elite leadership, although in the case of Germany this latter term (in German Führung) invariably evokes associations with the type of leadership exemplified by the National Socialists and its "Führer" six decades ago.

What Fischer proposes is nothing less than the creation of a European elite which, in the interests of developing Europe into a influential great power, is prepared to ignore popular referendums and the wishes of smaller nations. This is Fischer's response to the recent rejection of the European Union's Lisbon Treaty by Irish voters.

This is the second article by Fischer on the topic. Immediately after the vote in Ireland he published a commentary titled "Europe's Misery" and wrote, "Following the Irish 'no' to EU reform and the rejection of the constitution in France and the Netherlands there is no chance of a strong and united Europe for a longer time." His analysis culminated with the despairing sigh: "Poor Europe!"

Now, two weeks later, Fischer's frustration over the opposition shown by Irish voters is met with his determination that the "power and decision-making authority" of Europe should not be sacrificed for the sake of the democratic will of the people.

Europe has decided "for a snail-like crawl", while the world is changing "at Formula One speed," Fischer writes, and warns that the result for Europe would be a "loss of power and decision making authority over its own fate." This process of the "self weakening of Europe," he said, will not only have devastating consequences for the continent but would also mean "a crucial weakening of the West in a world in which the politico-economic centre is now increasingly gravitating away from the West towards Asia."

Similar sentiments were being expressed in imperialist propaganda texts a century earlier. At that time the rise of Asia—the "yellow peril"—was also considered a threat to the traditional, economic and political supremacy of the West. And as is the case today, imperialist sabre-rattling was invariably accompanied by the suppression of democratic rights at home.

Fischer accuses European governments of cowardice because they acquiesce to the referendum results. He declares that the main reason for "the present rejection of the European project" is a widespread "opportunism, lack of determination, even cowardice on the part of

many national governments in the European Union member states."

He is especially critical of the Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer from the social democratic SPÖ. Gusenbauer recently announced that in the future he would submit all important European decisions to popular referendums. Fischer mocks such a stance as "adventurous European opportunism" and accuses Gusenbauer of "throwing himself at the feet of a Euro-sceptical boulevard paper" merely to secure the survival of his party domestically.

Fischer concludes: "When it is left to the SPÖ, from now on all important changes of the European Union treaty will be subject to a popular vote in Austria and this means its rejection is almost certain! Poor Austria, poor Europe, to be led by such opportunists."

There could be no clearer expression of his contempt for the sentiments and democratic rights of the broad masses of people in Europe. Fischer knows the "no" vote by Ireland would be repeated in other countries and calls upon the European elite to implement their pan-European plans in the face of popular opposition. He calls for the "a show of leadership on the part of decision makers."

Fischer is a leading member of the Greens—an organisation that likes to print election slogans on their green t-shirts. In line with Fischer's proposals they could quite reasonably print the following slogan on t-shirts prepared for the European election campaign in the spring of 2009: "We utterly reject popular referendums which are nothing more than opportunist adaptations to majority opinion!"

At the time of its foundation 25 years ago, the German Greens described themselves as a "democratic corrective" and entered the German parliament on the basis of a string of reformist promises. The party's entry into a federal coalition with the Social Democratic Party in 1998 marked the final abandonment of all its supposed principles. However, the fact that its leading figure now argues so passionately against popular referendums on the EU marks a further stage in the organisation's lurch to the right.

Fischer not only accuses European governments of cowardice in relation to the electorate, he also calls upon the major European powers to dictate terms to smaller states.

Well over a year ago, the former foreign minister had already called for "more leadership and organizational power on the part of Europe." In his speech to an audience at the Humboldt University in Berlin he said it was "frightening" that the "Europe's growing insignificance in the world" is not even noticed in European capitals.

Fischer then went onto pose the question: “Are we as Europeans prepared to resolve the problems which have arisen as a result of the self weakening of the United States due to its politics of the unilateralism, which led to the disaster of the Iraq war?” He then went on to answer his own question in the negative.

Now he is calling for the establishment of a “European avant-garde” in order to provide a positive answer to his question. “There is no avoiding the necessity of a European avant-garde,” he writes in *Die Zeit*. The compromise between pro- and anti-European unity advocates must be revoked, enabling the unity forces to recover their “visionary and at the same time pragmatic strength.” This applies “whether or not the Lisbon Treaty is rescued by another vote in Ireland.”

Fischer demands the “formation of a group of states within the European Union, which is prepared and able to go forward. Whoever wants to and can participate should be allowed to do so, whoever is not prepared to do so should not be allowed to stand in the way of the others.”

Fischer’s remarks make abundantly clear that this “avant-garde” group of states will dictate policy inside Europe and force the less willing to accept their terms. “The pro-Europeans are called upon to stand up and once again push ahead,” he writes.

Following a tide of resistance in Europe to the arrogance and self serving policies of the EU bureaucracy in Brussels, which have speeded up the destruction of social standards, legitimised cheap labour and intensified attacks on immigrant workers, Fischer proposes an alternative in the form of the equally arrogant and self serving representatives of the biggest European governments—with Germany to the fore.

While Fischer’s latest proposals follow the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by Irish voters, the more deep-rooted reasons for his stance are bound up with the intensification of the international economic crisis and growing worldwide political tensions. Fischer speaks for those sections of the German and European capitalist class that seek to overcome the European dilemma and assert their imperialist interests on the world arena through a strong hand and more authoritarian structures.

The US economic crisis has intensified the crisis in London, Paris and Berlin. The strength of the euro is unable to compensate for the weakness of the dollar. The war in Iraq and preparations for a military strike against Iran threaten energy supplies and the stability of Europe. Based on the high price of oil and gas Russia is pursuing its own interests in Eastern Europe while establishing closer co-operation with China. Although these developments demand that Europe pursue a common foreign policy, the conflicts and tensions between the major European powers are increasing.

In particular, resistance on the part of the European working population is growing. Although in the past the unification of Europe was predominantly determined by business and economic interests, it was also characterised by policies aimed at reconciling regional tensions and conflicts. For a period EU funds for agricultural and regional aid were able to smooth over the most pronounced social differences.

Against a background of increasing transatlantic tensions and a world-wide struggle for energy supplies, raw materials, markets and cheap labour, the role of European institutions has changed considerably. Increasingly, the Brussels EU commission has become synonymous with deregulation, liberalisation and the destruction of employee rights.

Instead of dampening down social and regional differences, the EU intensifies them. The bureaucratic colossus situated in Brussels with its 40,000-strong staff is largely removed from any democratic control. At the same time, thousands of lobbyists ensure that the EU functions as a naked instrument of the major European powers and the most influential sections of big business and finance.

This is, at the same time, the reason for the hostility towards the EU by large parts of the population. Fischer is reacting to the widespread rejection of the Brussels bureaucracy by demanding an avant-garde, which can enforce the unity of Europe from the top downwards.

Fischer’s assault on democratic decision-making evokes historical analogies. At the end of the 19th century the German petit bourgeois applauded the unification of Germany imposed by a strong state from the top—on that occasion with the assistance of the Prussian boot and Bismarck’s military policies.

In the middle of the same century, German middle class democrats assembled at the German National Assembly in Frankfurt to form the delegates of the first German parliament. Their political cowardice and impotence was ridiculed by Friedrich Engels at the time with his unforgettable description: “THIS Assembly of old women was, from the first day of its existence, more frightened of the least popular movement than of all the reactionary plots of all the German Governments put together.” The same characterization is absolutely fitting for Fischer and the Greens today.

Twenty years after the bloody suppression of the revolution, Bismarck and the German emperor created the German Reich on the basis of war and robbery—and the German petit bourgeois democrats were full of praise. A cult of the person of Bismarck was established and outlasted the reign of the Emperors Wilhelm I and II. Even today there are numerous monuments to the “Iron chancellor” to be found in towns and cities all over Germany. The only party that genuinely fought for democratic rights was the one of Marxist social-democracy. But that was a long time prior to the historic betrayal of the SPD in 1914.

The open and blunt manner in which Fischer now polemicizes against popular votes and democratic rights underscores the lack of democratic traditions in the German middle class. This makes it all the more important to oppose this Green philistine and his reactionary twaddle today.



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