

The European election: Trade unions and the necessity for socialism

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The international economic crisis is having increasingly dramatic consequences for Europe. According to official European sources, the number of unemployed in the 27 EU member states rose to over 20 million in March. This represents an increase of 4 million compared to one year previously. Further mass redundancies in the near future are inevitable.

Many workers know that the defence of jobs and wages requires close international collaboration. When 3,000 French workers from the Continental Tire company travelled by special train to demonstrate with their German colleagues they were met with an enthusiastic reception as they arrived in Hanover.

The trade unions, however, are doing everything in their power to prevent an effective international struggle to defend all jobs and wages at every location. Instead, union leaders are working closely with company managements and the governments of their respective countries.

In so doing, the unions are playing a key role in dividing and blackmailing workers. The union bureaucrats declare that the economic crisis means there is no alternative to redundancies and use the threat of job losses in one factory to enforce wage cuts and undermine working conditions in other factories.

When the same Continental Tire workers from Northern France attempted to carry out a joint action with their colleagues in the German Continental factory, the chairman of the works council called the police who sealed off the plant in Aachen with water cannon and mounted police.

The nationalist policy of the trade unions is particularly apparent at Opel. Opel workers have worked closely together with the workforces of the international General Motors concern for many years. The automobiles produced in Rüsselsheim, Bochum, Detroit and many other cities are the product of a closely-linked international production process.

Although the threatened bankruptcy of General Motors affects all its factories, the unions are doing everything possible to prevent a combined international struggle. The IG Metall and the German works councils have appealed to the German chancellor for a

“German solution”. They have offered extensive wage cuts on the part of German workers and proposed the closure of the Saab factory in Trollhättan, Sweden, as well as the dismantling of production capacity in other European plants.

The latest union proposal is that Opel workers at four German plants should be prepared to donate their wages and make other concessions to the value of €1 billion as a “workers contribution” toward the founding of an independent Opel company. This would not only have drastic consequences for the incomes of Opel workers, it would also serve to chain the workers to the profit interests of the company management and line them up against other sections of auto workers.

In many factories opposition is growing against the right-wing nationalist policy of the trade unions.

When steelworkers demonstrated against the threat of 9,000 redundancies in front of the headquarters of the Arcelor-Mittal concern in Luxembourg in the middle of May, they were no longer prepared to tolerate the collaboration between the trade unions, company management and the government. A number of workers seized hold of the metal barriers and tried to storm the entry to the company headquarters, where the supervisory committee was meeting.

The struggle against redundancies and wage cuts is increasingly developing into a rebellion against the trade unions and works councils. This rebellion, however, can only be successful when it is conducted on the basis of an international socialist program.

The decline of the trade unions is not just a result of the broad levels of corruption that prevail among union functionaries and works councils. It is the inevitable consequence of a program which rejects the abolition of the free market system and instead seeks to influence and assist in the management of capitalism.

To this end, the trade unions have developed the closest collaboration with company executive committees and governments. In Germany, such forms of social partnership and collaboration are extensively anchored in the country’s legal system. In large factories, the unions occupy half the seats on the supervisory committee. Works council representatives work for

the union full time, with their wages paid by the company. The company's labour director is often a former leading union functionary.

During the period of economic upswing in the post-war period, this form of social partnership was able to secure a certain improvement in living standards and social equilibrium. The spread of globalised production combined with the current economic crisis, has increasingly exposed the reactionary content of the trade union perspective.

The global integration of the finance system and production has stripped away the basis for social compromise and led to a transformation of the trade unions. In the global struggle for markets and low production costs, they identify themselves entirely with "their" employers and "their" government. Their main aim is the defence of their own national bases. They regard sacrifices on the part of workforces as unavoidable and play off workers in one country against those in other countries.

In Germany, the unions work closely with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party and assist them in dismantling welfare and social provisions. Peter Hartz, the author of the most draconian set of anti-welfare laws in post-war German history, is a former labour director at VW, a trade union official and SPD member who was a highly-ranked advisor to the SPD government led by Gerhard Schröder.

From the standpoint of workers' interests it is no longer possible to designate unions as workers' organisations. They are bureaucratic apparatuses that utilise their organisational machinery to suppress any independent movement of the working class and ensure "class harmony" in the interests of employers. Their functionaries are fully integrated into the company structure. Not only do they receive remuneration that is equivalent to that of managers, they share the latter's point of view on all important economic and social matters.

The finances of the trade unions have also become increasingly independent of members' contributions. In the past the unions' motto was "one cent from every Mark makes us strong". Now they are able to rely on a wide range of sources, including investments and participation in companies. In a number of cases, they are directly financed by economic institutes or companies. One recent example was the German rail union Transnet, which received millions from the executive of the German Railways Board.

In France, where only 8 percent of the workforce is organised in trade unions, the president of the engineering employers' federation UIMM, Denis Gautier-Sauvagnac, transferred €5.6 million in cash between 2000 and 2007 into trade union accounts, in order, as he later admitted, to ensure "the necessary oil" to lubricate relations with his "social partner". In the US the auto workers union UAW controls the company's multi-billion pension fund and draws huge salaries for its leading employees.

The struggle against the cartel of employers, government, trade unions and works council must begin with the principled defence of all jobs and wages at every location. Any attempt to make workers pay for the crisis must be strictly opposed. Workers are not responsible for the crisis of capitalism. They did not take part in the speculative transactions and have not lined their pockets with millions.

To conduct such a struggle, it is necessary to build factory committees that take up the earlier tradition of workers' councils and function completely independently of the existing trade unions. Such committees must establish contact with workers in other factories and in other countries.

When the trade union functionaries declare that the defence of jobs and wages is not possible within the framework of existing relations, this means that the existing social relations must be transformed.

The major companies and banks must be taken into public ownership and democratic structures established which enable decisions to be made in the interests of the majority of workers and the population as a whole. Only on this basis will it be possible to defend modern production facilities and organise production in the interests of society as a whole.

A rebellion against the corrupt apparatus of the trade unions is absolutely necessary in order to establish new democratic mass organisations. This requires an international socialist program and the building of parties that strive for the international unification of workers in the struggle against capitalism and for the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe. This is the program put forward by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its German section, the Socialist Equality Party, in the current European elections.

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