

A turning point in Europe

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Wednesday's general strike in Greece, involving two million workers in the public and private sectors, marks a turning point in the political situation throughout Europe. It represents the most significant manifestation of a growing movement of resistance to the attempt by Europe's governments and corporations to make workers pay for the economic crisis and the multibillion-euro bailout of the banks.

At the very onset of this new movement of the working class, two fundamental characteristics have emerged: the movement assumes a cross-border and international character, and the workers immediately come up against the bankruptcy of their old trade union and political organizations—all of which are wedded to a nationalist program.

Indeed, austerity measures are being imposed by governments of the official "left" no less than those of the "centre" and "right."

This week saw a succession of strikes and protests throughout Europe:

On Monday, Lufthansa's 4,500 pilots in Germany struck. In France, air traffic controllers struck alongside workers at six French oil refineries. British Airways cabin crew voted by over 80 percent to strike.

On Tuesday, protest rallies took place in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia against the austerity measures of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of José Zapatero. Trade unions in the Czech Republic announced that public transport would be halted next week.

A one-day general strike of the public sector is planned for March 4 in Portugal over the extension of a wage freeze as part of measures to cut the deficit from 9.3 percent of gross domestic product to 3 percent by 2013. French pilots have also announced plans to strike later this week.

These strikes and protests are only the initial response by Europe's workers to the offensive being waged

against them. The broadest mobilizations have been in those countries where the most savage cuts have been announced.

Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain—the so-called "PIGS"—have been targeted by the banks and financial speculators and ordered by the European Union to drastically slash their budget deficits. This will set a precedent for similar cuts across Europe. But the fact that industrial unrest has spread to Germany, France and the UK indicates the potential development of a truly pan-European movement.

The same underlying tendencies that have given rise to the reemergence of the class struggle in Europe exist in North and South America, Asia and Africa.

Many of the protests and demonstrations were relatively small—a factor utilized by the financial press to demand that the respective governments stand firm in imposing austerity measures. Nevertheless, the more perceptive commentators were clear as to the broader implications of these actions. Writing in the *Independent*, Sean O'Grady stated that the strikes marked the onset of "Europe's Winter of Discontent." They "promise to be just the start of the greatest demonstration of public unrest seen on the continent since the revolutionary fervour of 1968," he continued.

Commenting on the political impact of austerity measures that will see millions thrown into unemployment and social services gutted in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy, he noted, "The democratic strains in nations that had been ruled, well within living memory, by fascist leaders or the military are growing."

The basis for a continent-wide social and political movement is rooted in the common problems faced by workers in a globalised economy dominated by huge international banks and corporations. These organizations, and the financial oligarchy they represent, are demanding unprecedented cuts in social

programmes, wages and pensions in order to pay for the trillions of dollars handed over by European governments to the banks. They are speculating against any economy that is seen as debt-heavy and unwilling to carry forward the necessary attacks on the working class, thereby increasing the financial pressure on the targeted governments.

As yet, the objectively international character of the movement developing in Europe finds no political or organizational expression. On the contrary, everywhere it meets with the determined opposition of the trade unions, to the point of outright sabotage.

This week saw the betrayal of many of these initial attempts at resistance by the working class. The German pilots union, Vereinigung Cockpit, called off the strike at Lufthansa on its first day, and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) called off the strike against the oil giant Total in France. In both cases, the unions capitulated without having won any of the workers' demands. For its part, the Unite union announced yesterday that its members' mandate for strike action against British Airways would be put "on hold" while further negotiations take place.

Those protests and strikes that have gone ahead are, from the standpoint of the unions, designed to let off steam rather than mobilize a political movement against the governments that are imposing austerity measures. The unions portray their respective governments as mere hostages to either the European Union or the speculators, rather than the political representatives of the capitalist class.

The most draconian cuts are being imposed by social democratic governments that came to power as a result of popular hostility to right-wing governments—PASOK in Greece, the PSOE in Spain, and the Socialist Party in Portugal. In every instance, they were elected with the support of the trade union bureaucracies, which have remained their allies as promised reforms have given way to austerity budgets.

The aim of the unions is to regulate social tensions and ensure that they do not pose a threat to big business and the state. A spokesman for the Greek General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) made this clear when he said that imposition of PASOK's planned austerity measures would be "tragic because it will provoke social unrest and clashes."

Ireland is cited by global financiers as the model to be

emulated for imposing cuts in wages and services of between 10 and 15 percent. The ability of the Fianna Fail government to do so is entirely dependent on the Irish unions, which called off strikes against the budget that had involved hundreds of thousands of workers.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is limiting action against the government to a public sector work-to-rule. Its leader, Jack O'Connor, declared, "There will be those who will represent us as endeavouring to reverse the budget and undermine the democratically elected government. I want to state emphatically that agreement can be reached."

Whatever the intentions of the trade union bureaucracy, anger over the cuts being dictated by the banks and corporations will continue to grow. Their efforts to police this opposition, to stifle and betray it, will only lead to the development of a mass movement that must, of necessity, take the form of a political rebellion against the trade unions and the governments they defend.

There is no national solution to the crisis facing workers in Greece, Spain, Portugal or anywhere else. They are being thrust into a common struggle against globally organised capital. The fundamental question facing the entire European working class is the adoption of a socialist and internationalist program as the basis for a new political leadership and new mass organizations to wage the class struggle in opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist organisations of the official labour movement.

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