

European trade union head backs austerity measures

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An interview with John Monks, the general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), given last Friday to the online news service EUobserver, provides a revealing glimpse into the discussions taking place behind the scenes between leading figures in the European political establishment.

In the interview, the European trade union head declares that measures being imposed by governments across the continent threaten a return to the 1930s. Monks describes the current situation in Europe as “extremely dangerous.” He continues: “This is 1931, we’re heading back to the 1930s with the Great Depression, and we ended up with militarist dictatorship. I’m not saying we’re there yet, but it’s potentially very serious, not just economically, but politically as well.”

Monks reveals that he is relaying fears about political stability in Europe expressed by no less than the president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso.

Indicating the cozy relationship between the ETUC leader and the conservative head of the EU body, Monks elaborates: “I had a discussion with Barroso last Friday about what can be done for Greece, Spain, Portugal and the rest, and his message was blunt: ‘Look, if they do not carry out these austerity packages, these countries could virtually disappear in the way that we know them as democracies. They’ve got no choice... He’s very, very worried. He shocked us with an apocalyptic vision of democracies in Europe collapsing because of the state of indebtedness.’”

Having been informed by Barroso that dictatorships are the only alternative if austerity policies are not carried out, Monks makes clear that he will do everything in his power to ensure that the draconian measures demanded by the EU and the International

Monetary Fund are successfully implemented.

Monks states that Greece and other European countries have no choice but to accept the terms laid down by the EU and the IMF for the repayment of loans, i.e., the implementation of drastic austerity programs.

He tells EUobserver: “Greece obviously does have to change. It does have to tighten up... the terms of the EU-IMF bailout are the only terms Greece has got. They haven’t got a choice, Greece. They’ve got to comply with what they’ve been given.”

The only light on the horizon for Greece, according to Monks, is the prospect of a restructuring of its loans “if Greece shows that it’s making a good attempt to fulfill the EU-IMF terms...”

Other countries which, in Monks’ opinion, “have no choice” but to agree to the harsh repayment terms laid down by the EU and IMF are Ireland, Hungary and the Baltic states.

The timing of Monks’ remarks is significant. In recent weeks numerous governments across Europe have announced sweeping austerity packages to be implemented in the coming months. The common features of the measures are huge cuts in wages and pensions, combined with broad attacks on social welfare systems.

The main aim of the cuts is to free up resources for further infusions by European governments into the vaults of the continent’s leading banks and financial institutions. At the start of this week it was revealed that French and German banks had lent nearly a trillion dollars to the weakest of the European economies, such as Spain, Greece, Portugal and Ireland. This figure is much higher than analysts had anticipated. With Europe’s growing list of ailing economies increasingly unable to pay their debts, additional state bailouts of the

banks are inevitable.

The austerity measures already imposed in Western and Eastern European countries have been met with a series of strikes and protests. In Romania, where the government plans across-the-board public sector wage cuts of 25 percent and pension reductions of 15 percent, workers have responded with the biggest demonstrations since the collapse of the country's Stalinist regime. On Tuesday, state employees took further strike action and demonstrated before the parliament building in Bucharest to protest the proposed wage cuts.

It is this movement by broad layers of the working population against austerity measures in many European countries which is ringing alarm bells in Brussels and leading to the closing of ranks between the EU Commission and the continent's trade unions.

Barroso warns that the only alternative to savage cuts in working class living standards is dictatorship, which implies either severe restrictions or the shutting down of the trade unions. Monks responds by signaling to the European bourgeoisie that he will use all the resources of the trade union apparatus to demobilise opposition to the cuts.

As history has repeatedly demonstrated, the defeat of working class resistance to attacks on jobs and living standards, far from preventing dictatorship, is the prelude to dictatorship. There is no "democratic" solution to the global crisis of capitalism outside of the revolutionary mobilization of the working class to put an end to capitalism and establish socialism. To this Monks is unalterably opposed, and he speaks for the trade unions internationally. Given the choice between working class revolution and capitalist dictatorship, they will to a man choose the latter.

Having admitted that Europe faces the greatest danger of dictatorship since the 1930s, Monks proceeds to make clear that the ETUC is planning to sit on its hands for as long as possible. It has ruled out any broad action by European workers. Instead, the ETUC is planning a Europe-wide "day of action" for September 29 (i.e., in three months time!) to coincide with a meeting of EU finance ministers in Brussels—in other words, a harmless protest.

Monks goes on to assure his interviewer that this one-day affair will not involve mass strike action. "We're encouraging members to take strike action as part of a

menu of different types of activities, but it's not a general strike," Monks stresses.

Monks' open declaration of solidarity with the EU and IMF is a devastating indictment of all those political organizations, such as the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, the Left Party in Germany, the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, and SYRIZA and Antarsya in Greece, which declare that workers' resistance to the cuts must be left in the hands of the trade unions.

In the unions—thoroughly corrupt, antidemocratic and right-wing—the workers face an enemy no less hostile than the bankers and their political mouthpieces.

An effective struggle against the austerity programs begins with a Europe-wide rebellion against the trade union bureaucracies and their petty-bourgeois hangers-on and the formation of new, democratic organizations of the working class fighting for workers' power and socialism.

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