

Lessons of the European strike wave

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The betrayal of the strikes in France against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts underscores the need for a political balance sheet of the struggles waged against social cuts adopted by European governments amid the global economic crisis.

The outbreak in October of a port and oil strike in France, supported by widespread high school protests, galvanized working class opposition to Sarkozy and rapidly led to a severe gasoline shortage. The strikes were effective and highly popular, and the government soon found itself politically isolated.

Nonetheless, Sarkozy succeeded in using riot police to break the strike and has ignored continuing protest marches by hundreds of thousands of workers and youth.

The French strikes are part of the initial stages of an international resurgence of the class struggle, which has again demonstrated the immense social power of the working class. On Saturday, over 100,000 people marched in Lisbon against the social cuts of Socialist Prime Minister José Sócrates. Yesterday, a student protest in London against a three-fold increase in university fees gathered 50,000 marchers, some of whom occupied Conservative Party headquarters and clashed with riot police.

The brutal fact, however, is that despite massive opposition to social cuts and the willingness of workers and youth to do battle, working people everywhere have been thrown back.

Governments, both conservative and social democratic, are imposing savage cuts with total disregard for public opinion. Workers throughout Europe find themselves in a battle not only against their employers, but in a political struggle against the state, for which an entirely new perspective and new organizations of struggle are required.

The main reason for the workers' defeats has been

the bankrupt perspective of pressure politics imposed on them by the unions and the existing "left" parties. Such a perspective has nothing to offer under conditions where the state and the ruling class, driven by a capitalist crisis unprecedented since the 1930s, do not intend to concede anything.

In Greece, as in Portugal and Spain, unions called several one-day national protests, ostensibly aimed at pressuring the social democratic government to modify cuts it was imposing to satisfy its creditors during this spring's Greek debt crisis. Predictably, the government, which is supported by the unions, ignored the protests, which entailed only a brief interruption of economic life.

The results have been disastrous for workers. According to press estimates, Greek workers have on average taken a 30 percent wage cut.

In France, the government and the press treated similar protests with open contempt. One commentator told *Le Monde* that they were "an episode in the process of producing the reforms." A union official, seeking to express workers' frustration with the impotence of such protests, explained that they were "fed up with simply strolling through the streets."

Middle-class ex-left parties, such as SYRIZA in Greece or the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, nonetheless insisted that workers' main task in fighting the cuts was appearing in large numbers at these rallies. With this cynical policy, they sought to appeal to the population's desire to fight reactionary governments while simultaneously channeling it behind the unions, despite rising frustration in the working class with the dead end of union-organized protests.

The outbreak of protracted industrial struggles by the working class has torn the mask off these organizations, which in times of real struggle function as agencies of the state. In Greece, the unions openly backed PASOK's use of the army to break the July-August

truckers' strike. French unions made no move to organize solidarity strikes to halt Sarkozy's strike-breaking against the refineries last month.

Elsewhere, the unions have declined to even organize token protests. In Ireland, the public sector unions negotiated a four-year no-strike pledge this April, while the state prepared mass layoffs and attacks on working conditions.

In Britain, unions have made no plans for nationwide strike action to protest the policies of the recently-elected government of Prime Minister David Cameron. He has pledged to make ?83 billion in spending cuts, including eliminating 500,000 public-sector jobs, which is anticipated to lead to overall job losses numbering in the millions.

The middle-class parties are accomplices in the betrayals by their silence on the unions' policy of isolating strikers and suppressing the class struggle. This is bound up with their opposition to any movement of the working class that escapes the unions' stranglehold.

The most critical question is developing the political perspective and new organizations needed to draw broad layers of the working class into industrial and political struggle against the capitalist governments in Europe and internationally. For this reason, the WSWS calls on workers to form committees of action independent of the unions and based on a struggle for socialist policies.

The post-war social gains achieved by workers throughout Western Europe are being shredded, as the ruling class enriches itself by forcing workers into a downward spiral of competition against their class brothers in Europe and around the world. This is combined with the promotion of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism throughout Europe, to poison the political climate and divide the working class.

Workers' struggles against austerity are not national struggles, but European and global struggles and must be fought on that basis. Workers cannot defend their living standards by pressuring governments through organizations wedded to the service of the ruling class. Nor is it a matter of bringing alternative bourgeois governments to power in individual countries, under conditions where all parties are committed to imposing historic cuts.

Workers must fight to bring down the anti-democratic

bourgeois governments as part of an international struggle to establish workers' governments based on socialist policies. In Europe, the program must be based on the overthrow of the capitalist European Union and establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe. This struggle, in turn, is bound up with the fight for workers' power and socialism internationally.

The working class faces the task of organizing itself and building a party to wage a political struggle against the international offensive being waged by the financial aristocracy. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages workers in Europe and around the world to read its coverage, contact the WSWS, and fight to build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary party of the European and world working class.

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