The resurgence of nationalism in the European Union

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The latest stage of the European debt crisis has seen the emergence of the most serious divisions in the history of the European Union.

Editorialists and economic commentators are publicly speculating about a collapse of the continent's common currency, and only a few weeks ago German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that a failure of the euro would mean the end of the European Union itself.

The acrimony between European leaders over the future of the continent climaxed in the criticism made of Germany's role in the crisis by the chairman of euro zone finance ministers, Jean-Claude Juncker. Following Berlin's rejection of his proposal for a euro-bond last week, Juncker, long regarded as a close ally of Germany, was unusually blunt in his response. "Germany is thinking a little simply," he said, adding that it dealt with European affairs in an "un-European manner."

Within Germany, a new nationalist campaign has been launched to disengage the continent's largest economy from its commitment to Europe. In his new book *Rescue Our Money*, the former head of the German business federation, Hans-Olaf Henkel, argues in favour of splitting the euro zone in two, with northern Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, Austria) in one camp and southern countries such as Spain, Italy and France in the other.

Henkel's proposal, if carried out, would be a prelude to the breakup of the euro and the fracturing of Europe as a whole. His thesis of a two-tier Europe has the backing of the notorious social democrat Thilo Sarrazin, who recently published his own book advancing racist arguments against Muslim immigrants. Presenting *Rescue Our Money* at its official launch was none other than the German finance minister, Rainer Bruederle.

Forces are coalescing in Germany for the emergence of a new pseudo-populist right-wing party based on nationalism, the defence of the interests of the ruling elite, and an uncompromising onslaught on the past social gains of the working class.

In a number of other European countries, including Italy, Austria, Denmark, Holland and Hungary, ultra-right and racist political formations are already either in government or playing a leading role in determining policy. In France, President Sarkozy has sought to steal the colours of the neo-fascist National Front with campaigns against the country's Muslim and Sinti and Roma communities.

In every case, the rise to prominence of the extreme right is closely linked to the offensive launched by the ruling elite against the living conditions of European workers and the welfare state system.

Having made trillions of euros available to rescue the continent's banks, the ruling elites insist that the working population be made to pick up the tab. Now the governments in Berlin and France, along with the EU bureaucracy in Brussels, are dictating punitive austerity programs across the continent that will decimate what remains of existing welfare provisions and plunge additional millions into poverty.

The encouragement of right-wing populism is aimed at dividing workers along nationalist lines and creating the best conditions for this offensive. This is also the source of the chauvinist campaigns by many European governments against the most oppressed social layers.

As the historian Tony Judt points out in his recent history of Europe, the founders of the European Union and the European welfare state system were in the main conservative politicians who had directly experienced and could vividly recall the slaughter of the First and Second World Wars.

Confronted with a radicalisation of the working class after the Second World War, they set about establishing minimum conditions for the welfare of the broad masses of the continent's citizens. Their aim was to create favourable conditions for European businesses to secure markets, while ensuring against a return to the type of destructive nationalism that had plunged Europe into war.

Now all of these props of the postwar order are being systematically dismantled by the European political elite. The final blow to the political framework sustaining the project of a united capitalist Europe was delivered by the financial crisis of 2008, which exposed the parasitic relationship between European governments, whether conservative or social democratic, and the banks.

Now, economic nationalism is increasingly the order of the day. One European government after another, with the full support of its respective trade union apparatus, has elevated national interest at the expense of workers from other countries to be the highest political principle.

In the final analysis, the current crisis reveals the complete incapacity of the European ruling classes to integrate Europe in a peaceful and progressive manner. The rise of nationalism throughout Europe places back on the agenda all the unresolved issues of the Twentieth Century.

In his writings on the European question in the 1920s, Leon Trotsky warned that should the working class fail to resolve the crisis of European society with its own methods, the solution "will be undertaken by reaction."

Trotsky's brilliant assessment of European relations at that time has lost none of its relevance. In his 1926 essay "Europe and America," Trotsky concluded that only the European working class could unite Europe. He wrote: "Bourgeois economists, pacifists, business sharpers, daydreamers and mere bourgeois babblers are not averse nowadays to talk about a United States of Europe. But that task is beyond the strength of the European bourgeoisie, which is utterly corroded by contradictions. Europe can be unified only by the victorious European proletariat."

The explosive emergence of profound fault lines in European politics makes clear that Trotsky's perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe remains the only progressive alternative to the rise of nationalism and the threat of dictatorship and a new world war.

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