European summits: Aggressive action against Libya and European workers

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The rapid succession of high-level meetings in Europe over the past few days reflects a deep crisis of the European Union (EU). The popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East have taken the European governments by surprise and upset their foreign policy calculations. At the same time, there is a further intensification of the debt crisis, which threatens the collapse of the euro.

These two issues—the war in Libya and the continuing crisis of the euro—were the focus of meetings over the last two days. The EU is responding with increasing aggression to both developments.

On Thursday, the EU foreign ministers met in Brussels and decided on tougher sanctions against Libya. NATO defence meetings were held in parallel. On Friday, the 27 EU heads of state met for a special summit on Libya. Then, 17 of them met at a summit on the euro and adopted proposals for a rescue package to be approved in two weeks' time at a further EU summit.

The 27 EU leaders demanded the immediate resignation of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi and did not exclude a military intervention. The EU foreign ministers had already agreed to step up sanctions against the Libyan regime and to cut off the cash flowing to Libya's central bank and four other financial institutions. NATO defence ministers ordered that military surveillance be stepped up off the Libyan coast.

The 17 participants of the euro summit agreed on a "Competitiveness Pact", which aims to resolve the debt crisis on the backs of the working class by subjecting wages, pensions and taxes to European-wide controls.

Threats against Libya

The mass protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have direct consequences for the European powers. Beginning with the so-called "Barcelona Process" of 1995, the EU has developed close economic and political relations with countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

In particular, since he took power, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has regarded the building of a Mediterranean union as a key project of his foreign policy. This is supposed to unite all the Mediterranean coastal states under French leadership and form a counterweight to the EU's eastward expansion, from which Germany has mainly benefited. "Bringing the two shores of the Mediterranean together is of central importance for the influence of France and Europe in the world," former French Foreign Minister Herve de Charette said when the project was launched in 2008.

The overthrow of the regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, and the risk of further revolutions in Algeria, Morocco and the Middle East, have called into question this project. With its aggressive actions against Libya, the EU is trying now to defend its interests in the region. The demand for intervention has just as little to do with the "protection of the civilian population" or other "humanitarian" goals as did the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The establishment of a government in Libya dependent on Brussels and Washington would secure access to profitable Libyan oil for the Western corporations. Libya could also serve as a military bridgehead to keep in check the revolutions in neighbouring countries.

President Nicolas Sarkozy is taking a particularly aggressive stance. On the eve of the EU summit, he received two representatives of the National Transitional Council from Benghazi in eastern Libya, recognising them as representatives of the official Libyan government, and threatening the Gaddafi regime with air strikes. According to a report by the pro-government newspaper

Le Figaro, he had not even consulted his own foreign minister before taking this step.

While Sarkozy's initiative found some support in London, in other European capitals it met with fierce opposition, particularly in Berlin. The German government has no fundamental objections to military intervention. However, in North Africa, Berlin is not only a partner of France, but also a rival, which inevitably leads to tactical tensions.

Berlin has been the most vociferous in pushing for sanctions against Libya, but fears that too open a military intervention could strengthen radical forces in Libya and neighbouring countries, where Germany already has close links to those seeking to succeed the deposed rulers. Therefore, the German government is at this point insisting that a military intervention can only happen with approval from the UN and the Arab League.

Sarkozy has some German supporters, including in the European Parliament. Both Elmar Brok, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) member of the European Parliament, and the Green Party MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit have suggested in interviews that Libyan aircraft could be shot down from ships anchored off shore. They are relying on an American study, which found that a no-fly zone over the densely populated coastal strip enforced by NATO from the sea would be much cheaper than a total no-fly ban.

The MEP Lothar Bisky, previously the long-serving chairman of the Left Party, is also among the supporters of military intervention. He presented a resolution that the European Parliament passed on Thursday, which included the call for a no-fly zone.

"Competition Pact"

Sarkozy's hasty approach—*Financial Times Deutschland* described it as "diplomatic rampage" by a "crazed" president—also has domestic political grounds. As in many other cases, militarism is being used to divert attention from growing social tensions within Europe.

After dictating draconian austerity measures in the heavily indebted countries such as Greece and Ireland, the EU is now seeking to organise centrally the attacks on wages, social benefits and pensions across Europe.

The core of the "Pact for Competitiveness" supported by the euro summit, and which will be presented to the EU summit in two weeks, includes the establishment of a permanent euro "emergency parachute", which will use public money to guarantee the banks. It also commits all governments to implement structural reforms in pensions, wages and taxes. In concrete terms, the retirement age will be greatly increased and wages tied to the development of productivity rather than to the cost of living.

Similar proposals were also submitted by Chancellor Angela Merkel four weeks ago, triggering fierce protests. Meanwhile, they have been revised by EU Commission President Manuel Barroso and EU President Herman Van Rompuy.

Merkel is using Berlin's role as the largest contributor to the EU in order to lend weight to German demands. In turn, she is under pressure from Germany's employers associations and a wing of her own party to reject any further transfer payments to the heavily indebted EU member states. The current state elections in Germany have been dominated by arguments that the "German tax payer" should not be liable for the debts of other countries.

The financial markets are also exerting a strong pressure to intensify the attacks on the working class. Just before the euro summit, credit rating agency Moody's lowered the status of Spanish government bonds, increasing the pressure for further cost-cutting measures. That is now a common pattern; before seven of the last eight EU summits, at least one euro country was downgraded by the rating agencies.

A new wave of attacks on the European working class is clearly imminent. Here too, governments fear the consequences of the riots in North Africa and the Middle East. They have not only found support and solidarity among European workers, but are often seen as a model to be imitated.