# German trade union officials and academics publish defence of European Union

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On March 26, several leading German trade union officials and "left" social scientists and politicians published a statement entitled "Put Europe on a New Foundation", calling for the defence of the European Union (EU). The statement is a response to the growing resistance of workers in Europe to mass layoffs and cuts in social services.

Earlier this week, the statistics agency Eurostat announced new unemployment figures showing that nearly 25 million people in the EU are without a job. The unemployment rate of 10.2 percent is the highest since 1997.

*Le Monde* published a shocking report on the growth of child labour in Naples and other deprived areas.

Millions are witnessing the European Union and its institutions force one country after another to impose drastic cuts in welfare programs and mass public-sector layoffs. Having driven Greece into ruin, the "troika" of the European Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB) are now eyeing Spain, Italy and Portugal. Popular opposition is increasingly directed against the EU.

In this situation, a number of German union officials and academics, including the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, have come to the defence of the European Union.

They write worriedly that the "European project … stands on the brink" and that growing numbers of people are "withdrawing their sympathy and approval for the EU". The statement criticizes the impact of the austerity measures dictated by the EU and denounces the "dominance of the (financial) markets" in Europe. It continues: "Public expenditures on wages and social benefits are being cut radically … wage earners, the unemployed and pensioners are being saddled with the cost of the bailout."

However, instead of treating this state of affairs as evidence of the reactionary character of the institutions in Brussels, the union bureaucrats and academics counterpose the EU's policy of cuts to an abstract ideal of an EU based on social harmony—an ideal which does not now and never has existed in real life.

The statement speaks of the possibility of a "change of direction". This, it argues, can be achieved through the imposition of a financial transactions tax, the creation of euro bonds, and an inflationary monetary policy. It also calls for a "democracy offensive", declaring: "If Europe is to have a future, the approval and agreement of the people must be actively solicited". All of the "players in the European public arena" must, it adds, "agree on a central theme of a social and democratic Europe".

The hollow rhetoric about an alternative economic policy and "democracy" hides the fact that the EU serves the interests solely of the European bourgeoisie. It is an instrument of the ruling class of Europe to destroy all of the social and democratic rights that the European working class has secured in the course of a century of massive class battles.

The arguments of those defending the EU are absurd. They speak of a "democracy offensive" at a time when the troika and the institutions of the EU have pushed through a change of government in Greece and Italy by totally undemocratic means, installing so-called "technocratic" governments whose explicit mission is to implement savage welfare cuts in the interests of the financial aristocracy and in defiance of the will of the vast majority of the people.

The government leaders in Athens and Rome appointed by the EU—Loukas Papadimos and Mario Monti, respectively—are former bankers and economists. Their governments were not democratically elected and are openly committed to the interests of the European banks and financial elite.

The EU finance ministers approved the fiscal pact, which includes a debt ceiling following the German model. This forces parliamentarians at the federal, state and local level to impose austerity measures. If they oppose this policy of social devastation and give in to popular pressure, they are liable to prosecution.

The EU policy is dictated by the European and international banks. First, the financial elite had hundreds of billions of euros in taxpayers' money transferred from the state coffers to the banks and speculators in the bailouts that

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followed the financial crash of 2008. Then they declared that the people were living beyond their means and ordered the various governments to carry out austerity measures. Now they are exploiting the economic crisis and mass unemployment to destroy all of the past social gains of the working class.

Under these conditions, those speaking of a democratization of the EU are either fools or political charlatans. Either way, they are covering up the EU's right-wing policies with left phrases.

The union officials who have signed the statement are members of parties involved in the development and implementation of the current EU policies. The organisations they lead have, moreover, played a key role in keeping growing popular opposition to the EU under control and dissipating it by means of futile protests. Just days before the statement was published, German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with leading European trade union leaders to "set the course for the future", as Merkel put it.

The statement itself makes clear that the unions agree in principle with the social cuts being carried out across Europe. The text calls for the "rejection of the fiscal pact in its *present* form" [emphasis added] and argues for "a renegotiation of the fiscal policy framework". The unions are demanding, in essence, that they be more directly involved in the formulation and enforcement of the cuts.

The signatories to the statement are all veteran collaborators in the imposition of social attacks on the working class. The German trade unions worked with the Social Democratic-Green Party government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to introduce social cuts on a scale previously unseen since the end of World War II. The EU and the European governments regard this "German model" as the template for deeper cuts across Europe.

The list of signatories reads like a "who's who" of the German trade union bureaucracy. The initiators of the appeal include Frank Bsirske, the head of Verdi; Annelie Buntenbach, a German Union Federation (DGB) official and member of the Green Party and Attac; and Hans-Jürgen Urbahn, an Executive Board member of the IG Metall union. Among the first signatories are DGB President Michael Sommer and Franz Steinkühler, former chair of IG Metall, who now works as an asset and business consultant.

The list is supplemented by the signatures of several academics. In addition to Habermas, it includes social scientists Elmar Altvater and Frank Deppe, who are both members of the Left Party and have long seen their task as giving the EU a democratic sheen.

But facts are stubborn things, and every day it becomes clearer that from the beginning the EU was an initiative of the ruling classes. The establishment of a European common market served to strengthen Western Europe against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In the 1970s, it became an instrument for the suppression of strikes and the mass movement of workers. Especially after German reunification and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the EU was used as an instrument of the European great powers to assert their interests in the changed world situation.

The "Treaty of the European Union" was signed in Maastricht in March 1992, just three months after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the outset, the EU saw its task as strengthening the European corporations against their international competitors. The so-called Lisbon strategy, adopted in 2000 at an EU emergency summit of European leaders in Portugal, had the declared aim of making the EU the "most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world."

What this means in practice can be seen currently in Greece. The austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the European Central Bank have completely ruined the country and plunged wide sections of the Greek population into poverty and misery. There are mass layoffs, wages are being cut by up to 50 percent, benefits are being slashed and the Greek economy is being plunged into a deep recession. The consequences are hunger and long queues at soup kitchens in Athens. The official unemployment rate is over 23 percent, while youth unemployment is estimated at over 60 percent.

To stop this social nightmare, European workers must consciously take up a common struggle against the EU, its institutions and its political supporters. The unity of the European working class and the entire population of Europe is created not by the EU, but in a struggle against it.

The EU must be brought down and be replaced with workers' governments across Europe. For all Habermas's phrases about a "democratization of the EU", the reality is that Europe cannot be democratically united on the basis of capitalism. That is possible only through the struggle for the Socialist United States of Europe.

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