

The bankers' dictatorship in Greece

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Details revealed this week of a letter to the Greek Labour Ministry by the so-called troika—the International Monetary Fund, European Commission, and European Central Bank—make clear that the European working class stand at the crossroads. The financial elite is calling for a fundamental assault on all the gains of the working class in the twentieth century.

Some 150 years after the first struggles for an eight-hour day, and a century after the introduction of the first five-day work week, the troika is demanding that workers in Greece work 6 or 7 days a week for subsistence wages, or less. To this end, the troika wants further cuts to Greece's already miserly minimum wage (€586, or US\$736, per month), plus new powers for employers to sack workers.

The troika's letter cynically implies that its measures will combat mass unemployment. In fact, the current record level of 30 percent unemployment in Greece is a direct result of the austerity measures imposed by the troika, which have devastated the Greek economy. The troika's comments make clear, however, that the capitalist class will agree to re-hire workers only under conditions of virtual slave labor.

Just before the troika letter was published, Martin Schulz, the president of the European Parliament, called for establishing special economic zones (SEZs) in Greece. Such zones, modeled on cheap labor facilities in poor Asian or African countries, would provide tax-free havens for companies to exploit workers to the bone. Schulz declared that such SEZs would be administered by a "European growth agency"—so that similar zones could be established across the continent after their implementation in Greece.

The appointment of Schulz, a member of Germany's Social Democratic Party, as president of the European Parliament at the start of this year was greeted enthusiastically in trade union circles. They argued that

his stress on economic growth was a shift to the left in European politics.

In May, Schulz warmly welcomed the election of the new French president, Socialist Party leader François Hollande. Along with the head of the Greek SYRIZA coalition, Alexis Tsipras, he was portrayed by the unions and petty-bourgeois "left" parties as a force for economic growth in Europe that would oppose the austerity politics dictated by the EU and Berlin.

Just a few months later, these claims have been exposed as lies. In recent weeks, Hollande has closed ranks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to support drastic new austerity measures for Greece—knowing full well the markets expect him to advance the same agenda in France.

In the second decade of the 21st century, all the ills described by chroniclers of early capitalism are re-emerging in Europe. Earlier this year *Le Monde* reported on child labour in Italy, where tens of thousands of children now quit school to find work to support their parents. The paper quoted Naples' deputy mayor: "Of course, we are the poorest region in Italy. But we haven't seen a situation like this since the end of the Second World War... At age 10, these kids are already working 12 hours a day."

In Germany, nearly one quarter of the workforce is employed in the cheap-labour sector, and millions must rely on social welfare payments. A recent report reveals that the number of Germans dependent on regular food handouts increased by 300,000 in 2011, to 1.5 million.

The consequence of the austerity measures demanded by the financial elite and administered by the EU and national governments is mass poverty. Last month, Unilever's chief of European operations, Jan Zijderveld, declared that his company was reconsidering its sales strategy in light of the "return of poverty" to Europe. Unilever is already producing downsized products to sell to low-income customers in

Spain, modeled on its operations in Indonesia where, according to Zijderveld, “we sell individual packs of shampoo for 2 to 3 cents and still make decent money.”

After the liquidation of the USSR, propagandists for capitalism argued that the benefits of the free market would raise the living standards of workers in the ex-colonial countries to those of workers in the West. In fact, the process is moving in precisely the opposite direction. The immiseration of the working class described by Marx, and long derided as a fantasy by his petty-bourgeois critics, is being ruthlessly organised by a small, parasitic and fantastically wealthy elite.

The reactionary and irrational character of European capitalism—which is preparing an immense historical retrogression to impoverish the population and shovel trillions of euros into the pockets of the financial aristocracy—will inevitably provoke massive struggles in the working class.

The state of international class relations was most aptly summed up by Marx in *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*: “At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.”

The key issue for the working class is the building of a new international political party which has assimilated all of the major experiences of past class struggles and provides a genuine revolutionary perspective. In Europe this means a struggle against the European Union and all of its constituent states, the seizure of power by the working class and the building of the United Socialist States of Europe as an integral part of the world socialist revolution.

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