Daniel Cohn-Bendit's imperialist "For Europe" manifesto

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Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Guy Verhofstadt have written a joint manifesto titled "For Europe", which argues for a strong European Union and a federal Europe with a powerful central government. The manifesto is to be distributed as a book in multiple languages.

Born in 1945, Cohn-Bendit is chairman of the Green Group in the European Parliament and was one of the most prominent figures in the student revolt in France in 1968. Verhofstadt, born in 1953, was Belgian prime minister from 1999 to 2008 and now heads the liberal group in the European Parliament, which includes the German free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP).

The most remarkable element of the manifesto is not its advocacy of a federal Europe with a strong executive—such notions have been commonplace within bourgeois circles since the birth of the EU project. What is striking is the manner in which Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt largely dispense with linking this demand to calls for peace and prosperity. Instead they argue bluntly for Europe as an imperialist superpower. In their opinion austerity and militarism are the necessary price to achieve this goal.

On the very first page, Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt justify their commitment to a strong European Union by declaring: "We must more emphatically defend our interests against economic and political great powers of the calibre of China, India, Brazil, Russia or the United States."

This is the theme that reoccurs through the entire manifesto. Another passage reads: "In just 25 years no European country will be counted among the powers that determine world affairs." A "strong and united Europe", however, would now and tomorrow, be "the most powerful and wealthiest continent in the world, richer than America, more powerful than all of the new empires combined."

The authors of the manifesto do not lose a word on the plight of millions of Greeks, Portuguese, Irish and Spaniards, whose livelihoods are currently being destroyed in the name of defending the euro and the EU. They consider EU austerity diktats as essential "to secure our place in the world—whatever it takes."

"A currency cannot be maintained without solidarity and discipline", they write, and call for dictatorial powers for the European Commission: "We need ... common institutions with the power to outline economic, budgetary and tax policy for the entire euro zone. Institutions with the tools to really enforce the implementation of the rules of the game, without member states impeding them."

Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt also regard military interventions as essential to secure "our position in the world." This is not only apparent from their demand for a joint European army, but also from their praise for the new UN doctrine, the "responsibility to protect." This has "ushered in a new era, extending the sovereignty of international law and human rights far beyond nation-states," they write.

The concept of the "responsibility to protect" serves as a justification for the US and its allies to militarily attack sovereign nations and force regime change in their own interests. The war against Libya was justified on such grounds, and the same concept is now being used to urge a direct intervention against Syria. Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt have supported both. They justify such imperialist violence with the need to spread "human rights, freedom and democracy". Their language is

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strongly reminiscent of the “civilizing mission” of British imperialism, used to justify the brutal subjugation of India and Africa.

In order to lend some credibility to their plea for a more powerful European Union, Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt raise the spectre of nationalism. They evoke the two world wars, which brought “persecution, broken families, the extinction of minorities, countries in ruins and cities bombed to the ground” and warn: “Sooner or later nationalism always leads to the same tragedy.”

They deliberately ignore the fact that it is EU policy that has strengthened centrifugal tendencies in Europe. The destruction of millions of livelihoods by the social cuts ordered by Brussels—with the full support of the social democrats, Greens and trade unions—plays into the hands of right-wing, nationalist forces. Neo-fascist groups are also able to exploit the policy of European authorities intent on setting up new barriers against immigrants and intensifying the persecution of refugees.

The subjugation of Europe to the dictates of the most powerful financial and economic interests through a strengthening of the EU and the growth of nationalism are two sides of the same coin. Often, the proponents of both positions are to be found in the same political camp, as it is the case in Germany where the spectrum inside the ruling coalition extends from vehement nationalists to resolute supporters of the EU.

The real political dividing line in Europe is not between EU supporters and nationalists but along social divisions—between the ruling elite which is amassing huge fortunes and driving the continent into disaster and war, and the working class which is being subjected to unceasing attacks on its social and democratic rights.

A relapse into dictatorship and war in Europe can only be avoided by working people closing ranks across borders, expropriating the ruling elite and establishing Europe on a socialist basis. This requires an uncompromising struggle against the EU and its institutions.

Cohn-Bendit and Verhofstadt, both fierce anti-communists, combat such a perspective. Their manifesto aligns communism with fascism and Nazism and includes it among the “enemies of freedom.”

It is no surprise that a free-market liberal such as Verhofstadt defends such views. As for Cohn-Bendit, however, he still retains a whiff of the rebel “Danny the Red” from his student days. In fact, his commitment to imperialism is nothing new. In 1999, when his long-time friend and companion Joschka Fischer—at that time German foreign minister—agitated for the participation of the German army in the war against Yugoslavia Cohn-Bendit was his most energetic defender in overcoming pacifist opposition inside the Green Party.

Cohn-Bendit embodies those layers of the middle class whose principal aim in 1968 was to expand their own potential for individual advancement and who despised the working class. Under the influence of anti-Marxist theories they regarded the working class as a backward mass, in the thrall of consumerism. When—to their big surprise—French workers intervened in May and paralyzed the country with a general strike, occupying factories and bringing the government of General de Gaulle to the brink of collapse, they reacted with shock and turned rapidly to the right.

Passing through various anarchist, Maoist and pseudo-Marxist groups they commenced a “march through the institutions”, enabling them to make a career and obtain lucrative posts. Not a small number of such former anarchists, Maoists and other “leftists” now occupy leading positions in the boardrooms of the EU, European governments and the established parties—functioning as pillars of the ruling order. Cohn-Bendit is just one of them, although certainly one of the most repulsive.

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