

The way forward in the struggle against austerity in Europe

14 November 2012

As workers march today in protests throughout southern Europe called by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) against social austerity policies, they face urgent questions of political perspective.

Previous strikes and protests, dominated by the official trade unions and limited in scale and duration, have failed to halt social devastation on a scale unseen in Western Europe since the Nazi occupation during World War II. Despite overwhelming popular opposition and dozens of one-day national strikes across Europe every year since 2008, the European Union (EU) has imposed social cuts that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

In both Greece and Spain, 25 percent of workers and over half of young people are jobless. Greece's economy has contracted by 25 percent since 2008 and, with wages collapsing and taxes soaring, masses of Greeks rely on charity for food and elementary health care. Yet the EU, surveying the failure of its policies to reduce Greece's indebtedness, sadistically responded by working with the coalition government of Greek Premier Antonis Samaras to pass a new €13.5 billion (\$17.2 billion) package of social cuts.

In Spain, where over 400,000 people have been evicted from their homes, authorities have increased the riot police's equipment budget by 1,780 percent.

Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt recently warned that Europe stands on the brink of revolution. This shows that the political representatives of the ruling class are very clear on the dangers they face.

These attacks arise from a historical crisis of world capitalism that has revolutionary implications. Trillions of euros are pumped into the banks to pay off the rich, while governments work with employers and union officials to keep industries globally competitive by cutting jobs and wages, or shut them down completely.

Finance capital pits workers against one another in a

fratricidal struggle for jobs, fueling a downward spiral in living standards to levels in Eastern Europe and Asia. The test case and model for all of Europe is Greece, where Special Economic Zones to profit from ultra-low wages are in the offing.

Such policies can be stopped only by a united international offensive of the working class to take state power, expropriate the banks, and subordinate the European and world economy to rational planning in the interests of the masses. Working people cannot fight for this by simply mounting another protest action. As in previous mobilizations, the ruling classes will work with the union bureaucracy to wait out the one-day strike and then proceed with their offensive against the workers.

The working class faces the necessity of a revolutionary struggle for socialism. This implies in Europe the building of a mass movement for the overthrow of the EU and its constituent governments and the creation of workers' governments within a United Socialist States of Europe.

Such a struggle cannot be mounted through, but only against, the pro-capitalist trade unions that are aiding and abetting the attacks in each country.

The German union bureaucracy is centering its activity today on a protest at the Brandenburg gate in Berlin by "individual DGB union members," who will "pass on their messages of solidarity with European workers" to German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The British Trades Union Congress—which has not called a single strike against £100 billion in austerity measures in Britain—plans to lobby the EU and mount "virtual action on social networks."

Behind such cynical charades lies the ETUC's basic agreement with the policies of finance capital. Its call for the November 14 protests begins by informing the EU that it supports "the objective of sound accounts."

It then demands giving “the ECB [European Central Bank] the role of lender of last resort, thus enabling it to issue eurobonds,” and a new “social compact” between employers’ federations, the EU, national governments, and the unions.

The ETUC does not advocate tens of millions of jobs and trillions of euros for public works, but rather more money-printing to fund bank bailouts and continued union negotiations with the ruling class over social cuts. The policies it advances, and the class interests it defends, are indistinguishable from those of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Union.

New, independent organizations of working class struggle are required to mount an effective fight against the social counterrevolution being carried out by the banks and the bankers’ governments. The political guidepost of these new organizations must be the fight to unify the entire working class of Europe and beyond—across all national, linguistic, ethnic and racial boundaries—in a common struggle for socialism.

This requires a rebellion against the official unions and an uncompromising struggle against their allies in the various middle-class pseudo-left parties, such as SYRIZA in Greece, the Left Party in Germany, the New Anti-capitalist Party in France, the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, and the International Socialist Organization in the US.

These forces insist that workers line up behind the unions, attempting to cover up the union bureaucracy’s support for austerity, because they themselves represent privileged and complacent layers of the upper-middle class that are hostile to the working class and support the cuts being negotiated throughout Europe.

The Portuguese Left Bloc, though it proclaims to seek an alternative to capitalism, voted for the reactionary Greek “bailout” when it was presented to the Portuguese parliament.

In the latest negotiations for cuts in Greece, SYRIZA decided not to walk out of parliament, which would have provoked the fall of the government and the collapse of budget talks. Instead, SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras gave an interview in the German weekly *Die Zeit* declaring that “the Greek people” bear responsibility for Greek indebtedness.

The only party advocating a politically independent, revolutionary struggle against the EU and its

constituent bourgeois governments is the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties. We ask workers to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, contact us, and support our struggle to build the ICFI as the new socialist leadership of the European and international working class.

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