

# Class tensions in Europe at the breaking point

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Class tensions in Europe are rapidly intensifying. The ruling class will not rest until it has imposed the full burden of the international financial crisis on the working class. Its aim is to destroy the social gains of the post-war period and slash wages in Europe to a level comparable with those in China and India.

Greece, where five successive austerity packages have thrown broad layers of the population into unemployment and poverty, is only the beginning. Portugal, Ireland, Slovenia, Romania, Spain and Italy are all being subjected to similar austerity policies.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted smugly that since his election last spring, French President François Hollande has undergone a “radical paradigm shift.” His predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy, the newspaper commented, talked a great deal about social “reform,” but accomplished little. The new Socialist Party president, on the other hand, has launched significant “reforms”—i.e., attacks on the working class—without making a fuss about it.

Hollande's government has cut labor costs by €20 billion, begun to make the labor market more “flexible,” and resolved to reduce state spending by €12 billion every year. This, however, according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, is just the beginning. “The task is to carry through a backlog of reforms going back decades.”

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Peer Steinbrück of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the two leading candidates in parliamentary elections to be held in September, are both unconditional advocates of attacks on the European working class and committed to initiating new social attacks after the elections.

Hand in hand with this social counterrevolution comes a revival of militarism. Whereas the continental European powers in the past intervened in the wake of the United States, or largely abstained, as in the wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq, they are now the leading aggressors in a new “scramble for Africa.” The war against Libya was largely a French initiative, and in Mali, France has acted unilaterally. Britain and Germany urgently want to be on board when it comes to the recolonization of this resource-rich continent and have pledged military support for France.

In foreign policy as well as domestic, Hollande has undergone a “radical paradigm shift.” In his election campaign, he promised to break with the policy of “Françafrique,” i.e., the policy of sponsoring corrupt potentates in the former French colonies. Now in Mali he assumes the garb of a colonial conqueror.

Domestic as well as international considerations play a considerable role in this about-face. The *Nouvel Observateur* wrote approvingly that with his intervention in Mali, Hollande had shown his true qualities as president and strengthened his authority at home.

Workers seeking to resist the social counterrevolution and defend their jobs and past social gains are confronted with the reality that this is not possible on the basis of the methods of struggle employed in previous decades.

Not just the French Socialist Party, but all of the social democratic parties once identified with social reform are today fully committed to austerity measures and the destruction of past reforms. The trail blazed by Labour Party leader Tony Blair in Britain and SPD leader Gerhard Schröder in Germany has been taken up by José Zapatero in Spain and George Papandreou in Greece.

Likewise the trade unions, which have been transformed into appendages of the corporations and the state, function as an arm of corporate management in the imposition of layoffs and wage cuts. At a political level, they see to it that social resistance is suppressed or limited to token protests that represent no

threat to the state.

The European governments respond to any expression of working class opposition with more serious consequences for corporate profits and government policy by imposing strike bans and employing methods of state violence traditionally associated with dictatorships.

Two years ago, the social democratic Zapatero government in Spain mobilized the army to break a strike by air traffic controllers.

In France, Interior Minister Manuel Valls has instructed police and intelligence agencies to “closely” follow developments at troubled companies where labor unrest could break out and to watch for “threats to production in the event of a radicalization of the conflict.” Steel workers who recently demonstrated in Strasbourg against mass redundancies were detained by the French police, searched and attacked with tear gas.

In Greece, the government forced striking ferry workers back to work last week by imposing martial law for the fourth time since the beginning of austerity measures. Under penalty of long prison terms, the government broke the strike by workers who have not been paid for months. Two weeks earlier, the Greek government invoked the same emergency powers to break a strike by Athens subway workers.

The democratic right to strike has, in practice, been abolished. Any effective strike is illegal. Only protests and strikes that are purely symbolic are permitted.

Under these conditions, the fight to defend social and political rights confronts the working class with new political tasks. When all of the old mechanisms of compromise and concessions fail to resolve social conflict, when governments respond to social pressure with state repression, and the unions form a united front with the employers against the workers, then the class struggle must inevitably assume an insurgent and revolutionary character.

If it is no longer possible to defend jobs, wages and social gains through pressure on corporations and governments, the working class is called upon to take into its own hands the control of society and the economy. This requires an independent, international mass movement of the working class fighting for a socialist program and the establishment of workers’ governments within the framework of a United Socialist States of Europe.

A crucial obstacle standing in the way of such a policy is the array of pseudo-left parties—SYRIZA in Greece; Die Linke in Germany; the Communist Party, the Left Party and the New Anti-capitalist Party in France. These organizations oppose the establishment of the political independence of the working class from all sections of the capitalist class and seek to block an independent mobilization of the working class. They defend the unions, encourage illusions in social democracy, and support the European Union. They embody a prosperous section of the middle class that seeks to hide its right-wing politics behind left-sounding phrases.

In order to establish the political independence of the working class and prepare for the great social struggles ahead, it is necessary for workers to oppose these fake-left organizations and expose their reactionary role before the entire working class.



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