

UN warns against social unrest in Europe

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In its *World of Work Report 2013* published on Monday, the United Nation's International Labour Organization (ILO) warned about the prospect of social unrest in Europe. The report cited rising social inequality, growing unemployment and the absence of popular confidence in the region's governments.

The ILO's annual report brings together different economic figures from the last several years and attempts to forecast the course of social development. Growing social inequality in most of the EU states has been a central feature in recent years.

Only nine of the 25 listed countries saw a decrease—albeit small—in the level of social inequality from 2010 to 2011. Three had no significant change and 13 saw an increase. In some cases the rise was very sharp, in particular in Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy.

After witnessing inequality rise the most of all European countries from 2007 to 2010, France saw the gap between income levels continue to grow in 2011. That year, however, Hungary and Bulgaria came to the front of the pack, recording the greatest increases in inequality in the region. Bulgaria, which saw massive social upheavals in February, is now the most unequal country in the European Union.

The inequality figures are connected to the sharp growth of unemployment in Europe reported by Eurostat last week. While unemployment levels increased to 12.2 percent throughout Europe, they are reaching particular highs among youth in certain countries. Greece, for example, has a youth unemployment rate of 62.5 percent. In Spain, 56.4 percent of young people have no job.

The ILO report shows unemployment in these countries has been a permanent structural factor of society for some time. In Ireland and Spain, long-term joblessness has increased by at least 20 percentage points. In addition, large numbers of workers have given up looking for jobs.

At the same time, there is a fierce struggle to secure even the worst paid jobs. For instance, in Spain 18,524 applied for 11 job openings as a museum guard, the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported. The position pays just €13,000 a year.

These conditions are not only rampant in countries with high unemployment rates. Germany saw a 1.5 percent increase in employment from 2010 to 2011. This has been accompanied by an increase in involuntary temporary employment of nearly a full percentage point. Between 2007 and 2011, spending on social benefits in Germany decreased by a full percentage point.

These figures coincide with other studies from Germany showing that every fourth worker in the country is low paid. Similarly in Greece, the average hourly wage level decreased by 8.9 percent in the same period. Temporary employment increased by 0.7 percentage points. Other studies document an even larger decline in wages in Greece.

On the basis of these figures the ILO warns about the prospect of social unrest in most European countries. The risk of social unrest is highest in the EU countries, increasing from 34 percent in 2006-2007 to 46 percent in 2011-2012. In 17 of the 24 EU countries listed in the report, this coefficient rose. The prospect of “social unrest” is measured by the ILO based on factors such as “living standard”, “confidence in government,” and “freedom in your life”.

Even the ILO's relatively high figures are a gross underestimation of the real social situation, as demonstrated by recent events in Sweden. While the “social unrest” coefficient of the Scandinavian country has fallen continuously over the last years, Sweden's major cities just witnessed large-scale youth riots.

The ILO figures highlight the deep alienation felt by the population towards the political elite, which has been presented in earlier studies as well. A May 2013

report by Pew Research found that a majority of Europeans object to EU institutions. The percentage of those who feel favourably towards the EU fell from 60 percent in 2012 to 45 percent in 2013.

Youth riots in Britain in 2011, repeated strikes and mass protests in Greece, social unrest in Bulgaria at the beginning of this year, and the recent riots in Sweden demonstrate the explosive social situation throughout Europe. The warnings of future unrest by the ILO are a sign that the ruling elite consider these upheavals to be just the tip of the iceberg. Years of austerity have brought class relations in Europe to the breaking point.

Various politicians responded immediately to the ILO report. German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble published an article on Monday in the German daily *Tagesspiegel* in which he warned about the possibility of losing Europe's children to "extremists or populists".

Schäuble, however, like all the representatives of his social class, has no answer to the mounting crisis apart from more austerity. Schäuble underlines this in his article, pointing to the necessity for wage cuts and worsening working conditions in order to make the country more competitive on the world market. On Sunday, the new Italian prime minister, Enrico Letta, echoed this same point by demanding more flexibility and lower wage costs in order to create new jobs for youth.

The fear of "social unrest" and "extremism" expressed by leading European politicians is, in reality, a threat against all those who oppose austerity. The ban on virtually any strikes in Greece, the collaboration of the German state with fascistic terrorists and the lockout of teachers in Denmark are signs that the European ruling class will resort to ever more state repression against workers to defend its interests.



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