

French Prime Minister Valls travels to Berlin

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French Prime Minister Manuel Valls met with Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on Monday to seek her approval of the French state budget. It was Valls' first foreign trip since a cabinet reshuffle last month prompted by the firing of two government ministers, Arnaud Montebourg and Benoît Hamon, who publicly denounced Germany and called for a shift in French economic policy.

Merkel gave lukewarm support to Valls' deeply unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government. She commented that although the social cuts France is implementing were certainly “impressive,” France had to also conform with the Maastricht Treaty. While Berlin approves the 50 billion euros in social cuts in the French government's Responsibility Pact, it is still pressing Paris to cut its budget deficit yet further, from 4.4 percent to below 3 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as dictated by the Maastricht Treaty.

On Tuesday, Valls addressed the powerful Federation of German Industry (BDI). He began his speech in German with the words: “I like businesses!” (*Ich mag die Unternehmen!*), to applause from the assembled businessmen.

Valls continued, “if Germany has been able to make its reforms successfully, why can't France succeed as well? Of course, it will take some time. But when the will exists, when the orientation is clear, when the whole country is mobilized then there is no reason why things don't move forward.” He then detailed Paris' agenda for social cuts, much of which is modeled on the Hartz IV reforms imposed on the German working class a decade ago by the social-democratic government of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

Valls' toadying to German business interests marks a further step in the coming-out of the PS as an unabashed advocate of austerity and free-market capitalism. It follows a similar declaration in a recent speech to the French Employers Federation (MEDEF),

pledging to undo all the laws protecting workers' jobs and working conditions and drastically reduce French employers' contributions to social programs.

Despite the attempt by Valls and Merkel to cover over the devastating social impact of their policies and the escalating tensions between France and Germany—countries that fought each other in two world wars—the bankruptcy of European capitalism is increasingly coming to the fore.

Workers and youth have already witnessed how austerity and bank bailouts impoverished the working class in European countries such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, whilst increasing the countries' indebtedness. Yet Berlin and Paris are both driving ahead and, in the process, undermining the Franco-German axis that historically underlay the European Union (EU).

In France, the neo-fascist National Front (FN) is gaining ground on a platform of taking France out of the EU and the euro currency. Even within France's right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), there are increasing signs of tensions with Germany.

Ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy, who in 2010 threatened Merkel that he would take France out of the euro amid bitter conflicts over bailouts in the Greek debt crisis, was far from enthusiastic about Franco-German relations in his comeback-to-politics interview last weekend. He said, “Germany and France are the first and second economies in Europe. Together we represent 50 percent of the GDP of the euro zone. Germany for France is not a choice, it's a fact of life.”

The austerity policies of the Valls government are pushing towards a social explosion amongst the working class and the youth. Major bourgeois daily papers such as *Le Figaro* and *Libération* have characterized the situation of the Valls government as a “crisis of rule”.

This state of affairs in France and the fear that any

open attack would further boost the FN's electoral fortunes stopped Merkel from raising overt criticisms of Valls during his visit. However, she was also under pressure from inside Germany not to concede anything to France for reducing its debts or slowing the pace of devastating austerity policies.

Within Germany itself, hostility to the EU and to the current state of Franco-German relations is also growing. A new party has emerged in Germany, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), one of whose main demands, like the FN, is the break-up of the euro. Recently, in the Thuringia region of East Germany, the AfD received 10.6 percent of the votes whilst in the Brandenburg region around Berlin, it got 12.2 percent.

In a column titled “Visit from the vale of tears,” Stefan Kornelius of Germany's liberal *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* told Valls to be a better “psychologist” and argue more forcefully for the French people to embrace austerity. He complained, “The country is so grouchy, that he [Valls] does not even want to claim credit for the small successes of his policies, the historic reform of local government and the weakening of the 35-hour work week law.” He blamed Valls for supposedly failing to forthrightly promote austerity, a decision he called “strange.”

Above all, however, austerity measures and imperialist wars led by France, Germany, and all the NATO powers including the United States have brought the tensions between French and German imperialism to the boiling point.

Aside from supporting the imposition of brutal austerity measures across southern Europe, the main strategic reaction of French imperialism to the Greek debt crisis was to launch a series of wars. First Sarkozy and then Hollande waged war—in Libya, Ivory Coast, and Syria under Sarkozy, and then Mali, the Central African Republic, and now in Iraq under Hollande—to shore up French imperialism's position against Germany and divert opposition at home to austerity policies.

In Germany, Merkel and the German political establishment are now turning to a similar policy, waging a proxy war against Russia over Ukraine and moving to re-militarize its foreign policy. Sections of the German press are moving to break “taboos” and politically rehabilitate the Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler.

(See: “An attempt to rehabilitate Hitler”)

Paris and Berlin have, naturally, asked for and largely obtained each other's public acquiescence and even support for these wars of plunder. However, as the wars spread and the amount of booty to be divided between France, Germany, and other NATO powers increases, the military tensions between them are coming to the fore. Notwithstanding the empty slogans of Valls and Merkel, they now increasingly confront each other, each with its own hostile imperialist interests.



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