

The struggle against militarism and the far right in Europe

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The following speech was delivered to the May Day rally by Peter Schwarz, Secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International for the past 32 years, and a leading member of the German section of the ICFI.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the European bourgeoisie was confident that—more than 140 years after the publication of the “Communist Manifesto”—it would no longer be haunted by “the spectre of communism;” that Marx would soon be forgotten and would only be of interest to specialized historians.

A quarter century later, on Marx’s 200th birthday, the opposite is the case. There is hardly a newspaper, a radio station or a TV channel that has not published articles, interviews, documentaries, debates or even special supplements on the subject of Marx. It has become impossible to ignore him or to reject him with a few primitive anticommunist slanders.

The crisis of global capitalism, the deepening gulf between rich and poor, the resurgence of the class struggle and the acute danger of war confirm every aspect of the analysis and perspective developed by Marx and the great Marxists of the 20th century, above all Lenin and Trotsky.

The bourgeoisie and its flunkys in the world’s editorial boards try desperately to deny this. They pay tribute to Marx as a prophet, but denounce him as a revolutionary. They pay lip service to the theoretician, but are hostile to the socialist. They refer to his critique of capitalist society, but reject its revolutionary implications. To use Marx’s terminology: They tolerate, to a limited extent, the “weapon of criticism”—but they firmly reject the “criticism of weapons.”

Their attempts to defuse Marx, however, and to transform him into a harmless icon, will fail. Each day provides new proof that capitalism cannot be reformed,

but must be overthrown by a socialist, mass movement of the working class.

The economic, social and political mechanisms that provided some stability to European capitalism after 1945 have largely broken down. The objective conditions that rendered the first half of the 20th century the most violent period in history—dominated by ferocious class battles, a victorious proletarian revolution in Russia, the rise of fascism in Italy, Germany and Spain and two devastating World Wars—are emerging again.

The political and trade union organisations, which claimed that capitalism could be improved, in the interests of the masses, by class compromise and social reform, have either collapsed or moved so far to the right that they are indistinguishable from the most reactionary bourgeois parties.

The same is true for the revisionist and pseudo-left organisations, which have abandoned the Marxist perspective of the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class, and subordinated themselves to Stalinist, reformist and bourgeois nationalist movements and different forms of identity politics.

The most brutal attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class over the last two decades are identified with the names of a British Labourite, Tony Blair, a German Social Democrat, Gerhard Schröder, and the leader of the Greek Radical Left (Syriza), Alexis Tsipras.

The trade unions have been transformed into corporate tools that discipline and suppress the workers.

The anti-working class policy pursued by the European Union, on behalf of Europe’s banks and corporations, and its unconditional support by the social democrats, trade unions and pseudo-left parties, has created conditions where the extreme right can channel social anger in a nationalist direction.

As a result, the AfD has become the first far-right party

to enter federal parliament in Germany since World War II; the National Front has risen to become the second-largest party in France; the far-right Freedom Party has assumed government responsibility in Austria; the xenophobic Lega and Five Star Movement hold a parliamentary majority in Italy, and far-right parties are in power in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

In a more fundamental sense, the rise of the far right is an expression of the decay of bourgeois democracy. “The excessively high tension of the international struggle and the class struggle results in the short circuit of dictatorship, blowing out the fuses of democracy one after the other,” Leon Trotsky wrote in 1929.

The same process is repeated today. The German and the French government present the European Union as an antidote to the growth of authoritarianism. In a speech to the European Parliament last month, French President Emmanuel Macron described the EU as “a unique democratic model in the world. But this is a lie.

The European Union, which has been portrayed as the guarantor of peace, democracy and prosperity, is the driving force of austerity, militarism, xenophobia and the build-up of a police state in Europe. Far from unifying the continent, it is generating the nationalist tensions that are tearing it apart.

The diktats of the EU have decimated the standard of living of the Greek working class and driven youth unemployment in Southern Europe above 50 percent. In the Eastern European countries, which joined the EU more than ten years ago, average wages are still only a fraction of those in the West.

The EU’s war against refugees has cost more than 15,500 lives over the last four years in the Mediterranean alone. This is an average of 11 casualties a day.

Both Paris and Berlin aim to transform Europe into a police state and a military great power dominated by France and Germany, able to compete with the United States in the imperialist re-division of the world.

Last month, Macron ordered air strikes against Syria on false pretenses, without a parliamentary vote, and over the opposition of most of the French population.

Germany is in the midst of a massive rearmament campaign, aimed at enabling the German army to both participate in a war against Russia and intervene in imperialist wars throughout the world. The new Grand Coalition government has pledged to double military spending to 70 billion euros by 2024. This rearmament is being accompanied by a continuous onslaught on social programs and workers’ living standards.

The AfD, which contains a high percentage of former military officers, policemen and judges amongst its MPs, has been warmly embraced by the government. It is fully integrated into all the major parliamentary committees, and the government has adopted its xenophobic refugee policy, which forms the spearhead of the attacks on democratic rights.

The return of militarism and the entrance of a far-right party into parliament, in a country where survivors of the Nazi concentration camps are still alive, has ominous historical significance. It demonstrates that the bourgeoisie will return to the most brutal forms of dictatorship, if the working class—that is, the vast majority of the population—fails to establish its own rule; if it does not conquer power and reorganize society on the basis of social need.

There is tremendous opposition to austerity and war among the working class and youth. This is demonstrated by the militant struggles of rail workers and students in France, the scale of the strikes in Germany’s metal industry and public services, the repeated eruption of general strikes in Greece, the reemergence of workers’ struggles in Eastern Europe and many other strikes and protests.

The coming period will be characterized by bitter class battles and mounting opposition to war and state repression. But these struggles require a political perspective. They can be successful only if the working class breaks with the social democrats, trade unions and pseudo-left parties, unites internationally, and combines the struggle against war and austerity with the fight against the capitalist system. Only in this way can the rise of the far right be halted.

The ICFI is the only political tendency fighting for this perspective. We call on you to join it and build its sections in Europe and all over the world.



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