

The European elections and the resurgence of the class struggle

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The European elections have revealed the deep discrediting of the political establishment and its imperviousness to growing demands from the working class for political change.

Across Europe, traditional ruling parties collapsed to unprecedented lows, amid mounting social anger and protest against austerity and militarist policies they have pursued since the European Union's (EU) foundation in 1992. The combined vote for the traditional conservative and social-democratic parties fell to only 43 percent in Germany, 23 percent in Britain, 15 percent in France and 32 percent in Italy. Nominally "left" allies of social democracy like Germany's Left Party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) and Spain's Podemos all suffered major setbacks.

The main beneficiaries on election night, however, were either extreme right parties like the Brexit Party and France's neo-fascist National Rally, or pro-EU liberal or Green parties linked to social democracy. This will resolve none of the problems that drove tens of millions of voters across Europe to abandon the traditional ruling parties.

The framework of European bourgeois politics still moves relentlessly to the right. The European financial aristocracy, whose fortunes were saved after the 2008 crash by a vast build-up of public debt funded by draconian austerity, have amassed vast wealth and power. Amid explosive geopolitical and economic conflicts undermining the foundations of European capitalism—threats of a US attack on Iran, a continuing NATO military build-up in Eastern Europe targeting nuclear-armed Russia, US trade war threats against both China and Germany, and Britain's imminent exit from the EU—the European imperialist powers are all building up their armies and police state machines. This determines the extreme right evolution of European politics.

These policies have already provoked an initial upsurge of social protests and strikes. This year saw the first national teachers strike in Poland since the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in 1989, a wave of strikes in Portugal, and the continuing "yellow vest" movement in France against President Emmanuel Macron, as well as the youth climate strike against global warming. The elections confirmed that the ruling class intends to make no concessions to this growing movement.

The election campaign developed within the narrow confines of a conflict between pro-EU and nationalist or neo-fascistic parties. After a decades-long shift of the entire ruling class far to the right, however, little separates the crisis-ridden EU from the "Europe of the nations" proposed by neo-fascists like Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini or France's Marine Le Pen.

Pro-EU parties—including conservatives, social democrats, and allies of Greece's Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government—have poured billions into the army, built up police powers and a vast network of concentration camps for refugees fleeing NATO's Middle East and African wars, and imposed deep austerity. Amid growing US-EU conflicts, the EU now serves as a framework for Paris and above all Berlin, which is rapidly remilitarizing its foreign policy, to try to build up

European military forces independent of Washington. As a result, the conflicts between pro-EU and more explicitly nationalist forces reduce to little more than a vicious faction fight over relations with the Trump administration, and related shifts in great-power alignments inside Europe itself.

The collapse of Europe's traditional parties of rule testifies to the bankruptcy of European capitalism. But the working class cannot remain a bystander in a fight between defenders of the EU machine and defenders of a far right "Europe of the nations" like Salvini, who is also imposing austerity and viciously targeting immigrants. Both are rapidly moving towards fascistic and authoritarian forms of rule. Unlike in the 1930s, the ruling class has not, as of yet, developed a base for a mass movement in support of fascistic policies. However, the danger of such a development is clear. Against it, the way forward is to mobilize the European and international working class in struggle, under its own banner and on its own political program.

This requires an understanding of the class dynamics of the unfolding crisis, which requires the international unification of the struggles of the working class, independently from all political representatives of the bourgeoisie and the affluent middle class. The EU elections testify irrefutably to their reactionary role.

In Britain, Nigel Farage's far right Brexit party took first place with 31 percent as Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative party fell to 9 percent, and her government collapsed. Farage was able to capitalize on explosive social discontent in Britain above all due to the bankruptcy of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Catapulted into the post of party leader by growing social anger, he studiously avoided calling for working-class struggle against May in solidarity with the struggles across Europe. After endlessly making concessions to the Iraq war criminals in the wing of his party led by Tony Blair, he ended up this year holding talks with May to prop her up in the Brexit crisis.

By demonstrating his party's alignment with the Conservatives, leaving workers looking to him with no way to fight, Corbyn handed Farage the opportunity to demagogically pose as the only opponent of the May government. Corbyn's humiliation by Farage, as Labour fell to 14 percent, was completed by the Liberal Democratic party's victory in his own Islington electoral district.

In Germany, the 43 percent result for the "Grand Coalition" government was yet another popular repudiation of its agenda of militarizing German foreign policy and promoting extreme right professors to legitimize Hitlerism, militarism and dictatorial forms of rule. Despite these close ties between the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the ruling parties and the constant promotion of the far-right in the media, the AfD's 10.5 percent score was far outstripped by the Green's 22 percent. This reflected broad opposition to neo-fascism as well as concern over ecology expressed in mass protests against climate change.

The Green party is, however, no alternative to the Grand Coalition parties, with whom the Greens work closely. It supported brutal NATO

wars in the Balkans in the 1990s and worked with the social democrats to impose the hated Hartz IV austerity laws in the 2000s. Now, one of their founders and major leaders, former 1968 student protester Daniel Cohn-Bendit, is a close advisor to Macron as he represses the “yellow vests.” If they came to power, the Greens would pursue policies indistinguishable from those currently implemented by the Grand Coalition.

The elections also exposed an entire layer of “left populist” parties of the affluent middle class constituted of the descendants of Stalinist parties and petty-bourgeois renegades from Trotskyism. Their attempts to effect policies more favorable to the privileged social layers in which they have their base, including the union bureaucracy and “left” academia, are impotent. In just a few years, bitter experience has shown that these pseudo-left parties serve almost exclusively to block opposition in the working class.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras called new elections after Syriza was beaten into second place by the right-wing New Democracy. Having flagrantly betrayed his 2015 election promises to end EU austerity and imposed billions in social cuts on Greek workers, while also imprisoning tens of thousands of refugees on Greek islands and selling arms to the Saudi war in Yemen, Tsipras is again doing what he can to hand power to the right. Lying to the last, he pledged as he called new elections that he would “never abandon the struggle for equality, solidarity and social justice.”

In Spain, Syriza’s ally Podemos lost half its EU parliament seats, after it backed a pro-austerity social-democratic government and called no action against the police crackdown on the 2017 Catalan independence referendum and ensuing prosecution of Catalan nationalist political prisoners. Its leader, Pablo Iglesias, responded by pledging to build a new coalition government with the social democrats, who are for their part considering an alliance with the openly right-wing Citizens party.

Marine Le Pen’s first-place finish in France, finally, is above all the product of the reactionary role of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) party, the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party, and the Stalinist trade unions. Having tacitly backed Macron in the 2017 presidential elections, they were vitriolically hostile to the “yellow vest” protests. Despite having won 7 million votes in 2017, Mélenchon called no mass protests to defend the “yellow vests” against the vicious wave of police violence targeting them. And the unions isolated and sold out strikes called in solidarity with them.

This handed the initiative to the neo-fascists. Despite their heritage as the descendants of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, they cynically posed as the best opponents of the hated Macron presidency and as defenders of the “yellow vests” right to protest—even as neo-fascist police beat and maim “yellow vests” on the streets.

This European election came in a period of transition and crisis, marked by the advanced state of collapse of the old ruling elite and the still initial stages of the upsurge of the class struggle. After decades of political reaction, the social democratic and pseudo-left parties have cut whatever links they retained to the working class or to social protest. Workers no longer see them as a force for opposition, and are beginning to take the struggle into their own hands. The outbreak of mass protests and strikes organized independently of the unions on social media point to a broad shift to the left in the population, even as the ruling elite shifts to the right.

This situation vindicates the perspectives and analyses of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The Stalinist restoration of capitalism did not spell the “End of History” and of the era of international class struggle against capitalism opened by the October 1917 revolution in Russia. Moreover, the ICFI correctly foresaw the form that the resurgence of the class struggle would take: a rebellion against all the old social democratic, Stalinist and Pabloite bureaucracies and their trade union allies.

Revolution and socialism, conceived of as fundamental change

improving the social conditions of the working population, are increasingly popular around the world. However, workers and youth are still in the initial stages of the process of radicalization described by Leon Trotsky in his great *History of the Russian Revolution*:

The masses go into a revolution not with a prepared plan of social reconstruction, but with a sharp feeling that they cannot endure the old régime. Only the guiding layers of a class have a political program, and even this still requires the test of events, and the approval of the masses. The fundamental political process of the revolution thus consists in the gradual comprehension by a class of the problems arising from the social crisis—the active orientation of the masses by a method of successive approximations.

For now, in the initial stages of the resurgence of the working class, much remains to be clarified. Opposition still bears the traces of the previous era, in which what passed for the “left” was the politics of the affluent middle class, presented in popular and democratic terms and opposing class struggle. Protest votes go behind Green or liberal parties promising a more humane capitalist politics, or even neo-fascists promising to make the nation state protect the people—not revolution by the international working class.

Events are rapidly moving class consciousness, however, preparing explosive shifts in the political orientation of the working class. The radicalization of workers and youth, coupled with the impossibility of shifting policy under the iron grip of the financial aristocracy, will strengthen the position of the ICFI and its call for a class-based policy. The ICFI’s European sections—the British Socialist Equality Party, the French *Parti de l’égalité socialiste*, and the German *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*—campaign in the European elections to prepare such a development.

Experience will show that the only way forward is the realization of the ICFI’s program and perspective: the mobilization of the full power of the international working class for the expropriation of the capitalist class, the taking of political power and the construction of socialism. The solution to the crisis of European capitalism is neither the EU nor a fascistic “Europe of the nations,” but the struggle of the working class to build the United Socialist States of Europe.



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