

SEP Summer School 2021 Report

The pandemic exposes the bankruptcy of European capitalism

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The following report was delivered at the Socialist Equality Party (US) 2021 summer school, held August 1 through August 6, by Johannes Stern, the deputy editor of the German-language edition of the World Socialist Web Site and a leading member of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) in Germany.

Over the last year, the initial propaganda of the European governments that they had responded more responsibly to the pandemic than the US government—first under Trump and now under Biden—has been exposed as a murderous fraud. As in the US, the European population faces a ruling class that puts profits before lives and effectively pursues a policy of social murder.

There are officially over 1.1 million dead on the continent. This includes more than 150,000 in Britain, more than 160,000 in Russia, about 130,000 in Italy, 110,000 in France, 92,000 in Germany, 82,000 in Spain, 75,000 in Poland and 53,000 in Ukraine. Such numbers are unprecedented outside times of war. And as in the US and India, the real numbers are certainly much higher. And they continue to rise.

As we hold this school, a deadly fourth wave of the pandemic is developing, exacerbated by the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant. In the UK, Spain and France, 20,000 to 30,000 new infections are reported every day. In Germany, the numbers are rising rapidly and, as a result of the government's reckless reopening policy, it is only a matter of a few weeks before daily infection figures reach new records.

Earlier this week, Chancellery chief Helge Braun of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) even warned of 100,000 new daily infections in Germany in September. Incidence rates of over 800 infected with COVID-19 per 100,000 inhabitants are “unfortunately not unrealistic,” she said.

What such an incidence rate means is clear: the complete overload of the health system and a renewed wave of mass death. A recent study published by the RKI calculated that intensive care capacities would be overwhelmed at an incidence rate of 400. Already in the second and third waves of the pandemic, the health care system was at its limit, and tens of thousands of people succumbed to the virus in Germany alone.

As in the first waves of the pandemic, the mass suffering is a direct result of the aggressive opening policies pursued by the European ruling class. Governments of all stripes are pursuing a deliberate policy of “herd immunity,” putting profits before lives.

In order not to jeopardize the orgy of enrichment on the stock exchanges, governments across Europe insist that there must be no more lockdowns and that one must “live with the virus”—or, rather, “die with the virus.” British Prime Minister Boris Johnson summed up the ruling class's policy in his infamous statement, “No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!”

With this the governing parties in Europe—whether conservative, social

democratic or pseudo-left—are in essence implementing the program of the extreme right, which has long called for an end to all pandemic containment measures. In Germany, just a few weeks ago, the CDU leader and likely next chancellor, Armin Laschet, openly declared his solidarity with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in a diatribe against new lockdown measures.

The WSWS has described the pandemic as a trigger event that enormously accelerates the already advanced economic, social and political crisis of the capitalist world system. This is especially visible in Europe. The ruling class has used the pandemic to further advance its policies of social austerity and rearmament, which it had already steadily intensified after the 2008-09 financial crisis.

As in the US, trillions were handed over to banks and large corporations last March. As a result, the fortunes of the super-rich have continued to explode in the year of the pandemic. According to this year's Forbes list, Europe's billionaires have grown richer by a total of \$1 trillion over the past year. These 628 people now have a total wealth of over three trillion dollars, an increase of around 50 percent in just one year.

These gigantic sums are now to be squeezed out of the working class again. Hence the aggressive “back to work” and “back to school” policies supported by all capitalist parties and organized in close cooperation with the trade unions.

The herd immunity policy and social attacks go hand in hand with calls for a more aggressive imperialist policy. Like the US government, the European powers are taking advantage of the crisis to intensify their rearmament policy. All the central European powers have massively increased their defence budgets in the year of the pandemic. Germany is leading the way. Next year, for example, the defence budget is set to rise by another five percent, to well over 50 billion.

We have written about the aggressive NATO manoeuvres in the Black Sea, which heighten the danger of a direct military confrontation with the nuclear power Russia. And the European powers are also becoming increasingly aggressive toward China, despite close economic ties.

In a fit of megalomania, Berlin sent a frigate towards the Indo-Pacific—on the pretext of securing freedom of navigation there. Aggressive anti-Chinese comments in the press bring back dark memories of Kaiser Wilhelm's infamous Hun speech almost 121 years ago to the day.

We have discussed in detail the January 6 coup and the danger of fascism in the US in this school. In Europe, too, the turn of the ruling class toward dictatorship and fascism is well advanced and has been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

I have already mentioned that fact the ruling class in Germany is adopting the program of the far-right AfD. In France and Spain, there are far advanced coup plots in the army. The Macron government in France and the PSOE-Podemos government in Spain are downplaying the danger

and are themselves responding to the far-right threat with a sharp shift to the right.

Their stance expresses the same class interests that we have analysed with respect to the Democrats in the United States. The nominally democratic parties in Europe reject any serious struggle against the far-right danger because they defend the interests of finance capital and, above all, fear the growing militancy and resistance of the working class. To suppress the class struggle, they themselves increasingly adopt the program of the extreme right.

At the same time, the pandemic has aggravated the deep crisis of the European Union and the tensions between the imperialist powers on the continent.

While the European powers in general agree on issues of social cuts, militarism, and war, they have been utterly unable to organize a common approach to contain the pandemic. When the virus spread dramatically last spring, for example, the German and French governments imposed export bans on medical protective equipment. Since then, tensions have continued to grow, especially between France and Germany. In mid-July, French neo-fascist and possible next president Marine Le Pen threatened to break the alliance with Germany and develop a close military cooperation with Britain and the United States.

The spectre of catastrophe returns. Germany and France have fought three bloody wars against each other in the last 150 years. Now the escalating economic, social and political crisis is reviving all the unresolved problems of European capitalism in the 20th century.

The entire history and development of the European Union confirms the Marxist analysis summarized by Leon Trotsky in 1917: “A halfway complete and consistent economic union of Europe coming *from the top* by means of an agreement of the capitalist governments is sheer utopia.”

And further: “The economic union of Europe, which offers colossal advantages to producer and consumer alike, and in general to the whole cultural development, becomes the revolutionary task of the European proletariat in its fight against imperialist protectionism and its instrument—militarism.”

This is the perspective that the Trotskyist movement has defended against Social Democracy and Stalinism, and which now takes on immediate significance. Among workers and youth, resistance is developing across Europe.

First, there was a wave of spontaneous strikes in key auto, manufacturing and food factories in Italy and across Europe that forced European governments to implement the initial lockdowns last spring. Then in the fall of 2020, there were renewed strikes and protests against the opening policy, including school strikes in Greece, France and Germany.

Now strikes and protests are developing across the continent against attacks on workers’ jobs and wages. As in the US, corporations, with the help of the unions, are using the COVID-19 pandemic to push through historic attacks on wages and working conditions.

These are only some examples we have been covering extensively on the WSWS: the struggle of the Banbury300 at JDE in Britain, the strikes and protests of the Gorillas delivery workers in Berlin, the struggle of the WISAG airport workers in Frankfurt and the spontaneous strikes of electricity workers in Turkey.

In all these struggles, we have not only commented on events, but intervened as active participants in the class struggle. We fought to organize workers independently of the unions and clarified central questions of political orientation and perspective. On this basis, we have been able to set up rank-and-file committees among teachers and students and make similar developments in other workplaces and industries.

We are in a situation where our party’s intervention is becoming the most decisive factor in determining how political developments play out.

The example of our intervention among Volvo workers in the Belgian

city of Ghent is worth considering again. Our intervention there and the support we won for the strike of the Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia directly strengthened the struggle of the rank-and-file there. At the same time, the strike in Dublin, which we told Volvo workers in Ghent about, spurred their fight against the 40-hour week. Just one day after our first intervention, there was a spontaneous walkout at Volvo Cars in Ghent.

We cannot underestimate the influence we have. Similar to the response of the WSWS to the 1619 Project, we have understood that the rewriting of history in Germany—the trivialization of Nazi crimes by far-right professors such as Jorg Baberowski—has far-reaching consequences. We have not only noted this, but we have mobilized a powerful intellectual and political offensive against it, which has found such a great response because it articulates the enormous opposition among workers and youth to fascism and war.

There is one other more recent experience that I want to share with you. We are currently in the midst of a federal election campaign. We decided to intervene strongly after the recent flood disaster, in which more than 200 people died because they were not warned and no safety measures were organized. Like the pandemic, this disaster is again exposing the criminality of the ruling class and the bankruptcy of capitalism. Our latest video report, with interviews of those affected, was viewed over 200,000 times within only five days. This underscores the impact we have when we respond aggressively to political events.

In his report to the summer school two years ago, Comrade North explained, “The attack on our German section by the Verfassungsschutz is a clear political statement that the ruling elite recognizes that the program and ideas of our movement have the potential to gain a mass following in the working class.”

He added: “This acknowledgment of the political stature of the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* is, in one sense, a compliment. But it is also a threat, and it must be taken seriously... To meet the demands of this global development of the class struggle it is necessary for the cadre of the International Committee to draw upon the entire theoretical and political capital of our world party.”

This is the orientation of this school and the basis on which we must now continue to develop the work of the SEP and the entire International Committee of the Fourth International.



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