

Europe's cannon fodder: Introduction and expansion of conscription in numerous EU countries

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In the coming days, 18-year-olds in Germany must register to be mustered for the new military service. Most of them will receive this news with horror and fear. The gradual reintroduction of conscription, which was initiated last year, signifies the preparation for war in a very immediate sense. Young people are to fight, kill and die for the interests of German imperialism.

This prospect is meeting with overwhelming opposition among young people. Following a nationwide school strike in December, school students and young workers are planning the next strike against conscription for early March. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) stresses that the fight against conscription requires a fight against war preparations and militarism as a whole and the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist perspective. The strikes must be expanded from the schools to the factories and workplaces and can thus become the spark for a Europe-wide strike movement against the pro-war policy.

In **Greece**, university students and workers protested in mid-December and again last week against a tightening of the existing military service. On Friday, the Greek parliament passed the law "Roadmap for the Transition of the Armed Forces into the New Era." It provides for registration for the 12-month military service to begin at age 17, so that young adults can be conscripted immediately after school.

Those who report for the military immediately at 18 must serve "only" nine instead of 12 months. This "incentive" is intended to lure young people into the army as quickly as possible. Those who apply for a deferment due to university studies or vocational training are now being put under massive pressure: University students can only be exempted from military service until the age of 25 (or until 26 or 27 for a five- or six-year degree course) and doctoral students until the age of 30; vocational students only until 21.

Most students in Greece have to work on the side to make ends meet financially and therefore do not complete their studies within the standard period of time. In practice, this means that in the future they will be forced to interrupt their studies for a full year of military service, which will have

negative effects on scholarships, as well as housing and social benefits, and will delay their degrees.

Only from the age of 40 (previously 33) can one buy oneself out of military service—at a high price of €1,500 [\$US 1,746] per month (previously €810 [\$US 943]). Those who have served now remain in the reserve until the age of 60 (previously until 45). In addition, the recognition of mental illness is being made more difficult, and voluntary military service for women is being introduced.

Dozens of student associations in Athens called for protests on January 8 and demanded the repeal of the law. This law is designed to prepare the Greek army "for more active participation in NATO plans," their statement reads. They warn: "With these regulations, they want to make more young people more quickly available to send them to the battlefields for the profits of the major corporations."

Conscription is on the march across Europe. Numerous countries have expanded military service, are reintroducing conscription or harbour corresponding plans. This step results directly from the military rearmament in the NATO war against Russia and the preparation of a Third World War, which would turn the entire European continent into a battlefield.

In 2025, nine of 27 EU countries had conscription—Greece, Cyprus, Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. While Latvia only reintroduced the 11-month military service in 2024, all these countries are expanding their existing military service, like Greece.

For example, **Denmark**'s Social Democratic government has extended the duration of military service from four to 11 months and introduced mandatory mustering for women starting this year.

Croatia is returning to conscription, which had been suspended since 2008. Even the nominal opposition Social Democrats voted in favour. From this year, men must once again complete a two-month basic military training.

In **France**, conscription, suspended since 1997, is not yet being reactivated. But President Emmanuel Macron, who is also Commander-in-Chief of the French Armed Forces, announced the introduction of a new "voluntary service"

starting this September during an appearance before uniformed soldiers in November. Recruitment of 18- to 25-year-old men and women for the 10-month military service, which is allegedly oriented towards “homeland defence,” has begun in recent days. The number of volunteers is to rise to at least 10,000 by 2030.

Macron declared: “This service pursues three goals: To strengthen the pact between our nation and the army, to increase the resilience of our nation and to consolidate the training of our young people.” As in Germany, the militarisation of the whole of society is justified with the pretext that one must defend oneself against the supposed threat from Russia.

The “voluntary service” is merely the preliminary stage of conscription, which from the government’s perspective is simply not yet implementable logistically and financially. However, Macron emphasised: “In the event of a major crisis, parliament can draft everyone else beyond the volunteers and make military service mandatory.”

In **Italy**, Defence Minister Guido Crosetto of the fascist governing party Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d’Italia*) also proposed a new military service at the end of November last year. The goal is initially the recruitment of 10,000 volunteers and then the increase of the armed forces by 40,000. At the same time, Italy is increasing military spending and wants to establish a new “cyber army” for digital warfare.

There is a broad rejection of conscription in the Italian population, which was suspended two decades ago. According to a survey by the Centre for Social Investment Studies (CENSIS) last July, barely a third of those surveyed fear that Italy could be directly involved in a war in the next five years. Yet only 16 percent of Italians of military service age would take up arms for the country. Some 39 percent of those surveyed between 18 and 45 would describe themselves as pacifist conscientious objectors, 19 percent would try to evade conscription in other ways.

This rejection of conscription is part of the immense opposition to Italy’s war policy, which was clearly shown in the powerful strikes against the war budget and the genocide in Gaza last year. The news agency Reuters also refers to a further survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations, in which only 17 percent of Italians spoke out in favour of an increase in defence spending.

In **Poland**, where conscription was abolished in 2009, the government has launched a nationwide military training programme. It wants to train 400,000 people for the event of war this year—from school students to pensioners. Despite the vehement war propaganda and rearmament in Poland against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, here too, the majority of the population is not in favour of military service. Based on an opinion poll from August 2025, *Euronews* reported that 49.1 percent of all respondents refused to defend the country voluntarily in the event of war, while 6.1 percent were

undecided. Among 18- to 29-year-olds—the age group that would be sent to the trenches first—the result was even more unequivocal: 69 percent do not want to go to the army.

In **Romania**, where conscription was abolished in 2007, the government introduced a four-month voluntary military service last October for 18- to 35-year-old men and women starting in 2026, in order to replenish the professional army with young reservists. They are lured with remuneration of €400 to €600 per month as well as free accommodation, board, medical care and a bonus—a perfidious blackmail when one considers that many young people in this shattered Balkan country live in poverty.

All these voluntary or mandatory military service models have one and the same goal: to prepare the youth of Europe quickly and comprehensively for a hot war—militarily and ideologically. When Donald Trump goes on a rampage of plunder in Eastern Europe, Latin America or the Middle East and ignites a war against China, the European powers do not want to stand there empty-handed. They are pursuing their own imperialist predatory interests, which have not the slightest thing to do with the “defence of European peace ideals” against Russia or the US. Just like Trump, they are concerned with access to more raw materials, markets and sources of profit, for which they are ready, as in the First and Second World Wars, to sacrifice millions of young people as cannon fodder on the battlefields of Europe.

But their Achilles heel is the seething opposition to war in the population. The school strike in Germany, the protests by university students in Greece and the strikes in several countries against support for the genocide in Gaza are only the beginning. They must become the starting point for a united, cross-border anti-war movement of the working class, which opposes the capitalist Europe of rearmament and war hysteria, the Europe of poverty and social inequality, with a common struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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