

The European strikes and the trade unions

5 March 2010

Last week was marked by two significant developments. A strike wave hit Europe as workers in a series of countries began to demonstrate their opposition to the austerity measures demanded by the European Union and the banks.

In all countries, the trade unions responded by isolating and suppressing the workers' actions and closing ranks with their respective governments and the European financial elite. The central concern of the unions was to prevent the working people of Europe from uniting in a common struggle against their common enemy—the European bourgeoisie and its agents in the national governments and the European Union.

On Monday of last week, 4,500 pilots employed by Germany's biggest airline, Lufthansa, went on strike. On the same day, air traffic controllers in France began strike action, while workers at Total's oil refineries continued their national walkout. In Great Britain, flight attendants at British Airways voted by over 80 percent in favor of a strike.

On Tuesday, large demonstrations were held in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia protesting the cost-cutting measures introduced by the Socialist Party (PSOE) government of Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

On Wednesday, some 2 million workers took part in a general strike in Greece that brought the country to a halt for 24 hours. All flights into and out of Greece were cancelled when air traffic controllers joined the strike.

In the Czech Republic, the unions announced that public transport would be brought to a standstill starting March 1, and Portuguese unions prepared for a one-day public sector strike on March 4 to protest a freeze on wages.

The British *Independent* newspaper warned that the eruption of strikes and protests heralded the biggest wave of rebellion “experienced on the continent since

the revolutionary upheavals of 1968.”

The unions, which had called the actions under immense pressure from below, hoped thereby to allow the workers to let off steam while they worked to contain working class resistance and buy time for their respective governments.

When the German pilots' union, Cockpit, realised it was standing at the head of what could become a massive European-wide movement, it called off its planned four-day strike after just one day.

At the same time, Germany's two biggest trade unions, the engineering and industrial union, IG Metall, and the public service union, Verdi, agreed to extended contracts for their 5 million members that will impose a cut in real wages.

In France, the Stalinist-dominated General Confederation of Labor (CGT) called off the national strike against Total, capitulating to the company's plans to close its facility in Dunkirk.

In Britain, the Unite union assured British Airways that it would not strike during the Easter holiday period and would restrict any industrial action to isolated strikes.

Both of the main trade union federations in Greece, the private sector GSSE and the public sector ADEDY, support the social democratic PASOK government of Prime Minister George Papandreou and have issued statements declaring the readiness of their members to make sacrifices to ease the state's debt crisis.

Three days after the general strike in Greece, the Czech unions called off the planned strike by public transport workers.

Definite political conclusions must be drawn from the treacherous role of the unions from the very outset of a new movement of working class struggle in Europe and internationally.

Under conditions of the globalisation of capitalist production, the trade unions, which are wedded to a nationalist perspective, are incapable of defending even

the most basic interests of the working class. They have been transformed into direct agencies of the corporate-financial elite and the state.

In the boom period of the last century, the unions were able, despite their defense of capitalism and their national programmes, to extract limited wage concessions and social reforms, but this period has long since ended. The gains that workers were able to win through the unions have proved to be temporary. In these old organisations, workers now face enemies no less implacable than the employers and the state.

Even before the outbreak of the current economic crisis, the unions had supported the European Union and the introduction of the euro. They hailed the reintroduction of capitalism into Eastern Europe 20 years ago, and sent their functionaries to the East in order to help keep wages there low, thereby assisting the European ruling elite in driving down wages in the West.

The international banks that unleashed the crisis are now determined to make the working population foot the bill for their speculative losses. With working class opposition growing, the unions are concerned above all with blocking the international unification of workers and their development in a socialist direction.

The unions' present role is the culmination of a long history. Already 100 years ago they stood in the right wing of the workers' movement, and openly sided with reaction during periods of revolutionary class struggle.

For years, the outstanding leader of the Marxist wing of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Rosa Luxemburg, was banned from speaking at trade union congresses. During the debate over the mass strike at the beginning of the twentieth century, the hatred of the trade union leadership for the revolutionary wing of the SPD assumed hysterical forms.

A course was set that had devastating consequences: agreement to war credits in 1914, a no-strike pact during World War I, and finally, in April 1933, the offer by the General Federation of German Trade Unions (ADGB) to collaborate with the Hitler regime.

The rightward evolution of the trade unions arises out of fundamental features of this form of organisation. In his lecture "Marxism and the Trade Unions," the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board, David North, stated: "Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions

are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt an essentially hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labour power and determine the general conditions in which surplus value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obliged to guarantee that their members supply their labour power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, 'The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.'

"The defence of legality means the suppression of the class struggle, which, in the very nature of things, means that the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated. Herein lies the contradiction upon which trade unionism flounders."

It is necessary for workers to break from these outmoded and reactionary organisations and build new, genuinely popular and democratic organisations of struggle. At the same time, there must be a break with the nationalist and class collaborationist conceptions that underlie the unions.

The draconian austerity measures in Greece are the prelude to historic attacks on the working class across Europe, in the US and internationally. A new period of revolutionary struggle is emerging. This must be prepared consciously through the building of an international socialist movement of the working class to fight for workers' power and the reorganisation of economic life along democratic and egalitarian lines.

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