

The real face of the European Union

6 April 2012

On March 25 of this year, the European Union celebrated the 55th anniversary of its foundation with the passing of the Treaties of Rome. The celebrations were a quiet affair compared to the pomp, and pageantry which marked the EU anniversary five years earlier. On that occasion leaders of the continent's political parties and states met together with trade union leaders in the German capital city of Berlin to indulge in an orgy of self congratulation.

To the strains of Beethoven's Ode to Joy the assembled dignitaries drank champagne and celebrated themselves. The text drawn up for the occasion began with the words: "For centuries Europe has been an idea, holding out hope of peace and understanding. That hope has been fulfilled. European unification has made peace and prosperity possible."

The EU Berlin Declaration continued: "We are striving for peace and freedom, for democracy and the rule of law, for mutual respect and shared responsibility, for prosperity and security, for tolerance and participation, for justice and solidarity."

Far from guaranteeing "peace, prosperity and solidarity," the European Union has been exposed as a reactionary trap, with increasingly devastating consequences for the working population of Europe. This assessment has been underlined by a series of recent events across the continent.

On Tuesday, a 77-year-old Greek pensioner committed suicide in broad daylight in front of the nation's parliament building. Before shooting himself, Dimitris Christoulas left a suicide note comparing the current government in Athens with the Greek regime which collaborated with the fascist German occupation forces during the Second World War.

Christoulas shared the fate of hundreds of thousands of elderly Greek citizens. Having worked his entire life as a pharmacist, he had been stripped of his pension due to the budget reforms of the Greek government. In his note he states "...since I cannot find justice, I can

find no other means to react besides putting a decent end [to my life], before I start searching the garbage for food and become a burden for my child."

He concludes his note by predicting the same fate for the current Greek political elite as that of the Italian fascist leader: "Young people without a future will one day take up arms and hang the traitors upside down in Syntagma Square, as the Italians did to Mussolini in 1945."

On the same day, a 38-year-old Albanian man who had been unemployed for some time leapt to his death from the second-floor balcony of a building on the island of Crete. Local news outlets reported that the cause of his suicide was financial hardship.

As a consequence of the vicious austerity measures dictated by the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, pensions in Greece have been slashed by an average of 40 percent. The country's unemployment rate of 21 percent is one of the highest in Europe. A few years ago, Greece had one of the lowest suicide rates in Europe. According to police reports this rate has doubled in the course of the past two years.

The destruction of living standards and prospects for the future is not confined to Greece.

Also on Tuesday this week, a 78-year-old woman threw herself to her death from her apartment in Sicily. She had recently been informed that her monthly pension was to be cut from 800 to 600 euros. The toll continues...

On Monday a picture frame-maker hanged himself in Rome. His suicide note referred to overwhelming economic problems. His death was preceded by two attempted suicides last week in northern Italy. In separate incidents two men—both involved in the building trades—tried to burn themselves to death. Severely burnt, both survivors had left notes claiming that their desperate financial situation was the cause of their actions.

The social crisis in Europe is not just affecting adult workers and retirees. Increasingly the prospects of entire families and young children are being sacrificed to the demands for “fiscal consolidation” and “welfare reform” by a tiny privileged financial elite. A recent report in the *Le Monde* newspaper revealed that tens of thousands of Italian children are leaving school early in order to find work and support their families. The article reports on ten-year-old children working 12-hour days for wages of one euro per hour or less.

Poverty and extreme social polarisation are ravaging the entire continent. According to the EU figures available for 2009, which are already grossly outdated, over 20 percent of the population in the western European countries of Spain and Greece live in poverty. These rates are exceeded in a number of central and eastern European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Bulgaria.

All of these countries have been subjected to massive austerity programs dictated by the EU and the IMF. As a direct result of the social crisis, the population in Romania has declined by 12 percent in the past ten years—due to a combination of declining life expectancy, declining birth rates and the mass emigration of young people seeking a future abroad. Similar declines in population levels have been recorded for Bulgaria and Latvia. At the heart of Europe, poverty and social polarisation are also increasing dramatically in the biggest Europe economies—Germany and France.

The wiping out of living standards and prospects for the future across the continent is unprecedented in peacetime. It is a devastating indictment of the capitalist European Union and in particular, its apologists in the trade unions and ex-left parties.

The desperation which led Dimitris Christoulas to take his life this week cannot be explained solely by his economic plight. Working people and their families are capable of overcoming even such dire problems when they feel they have the backing of an organisation or party prepared to fight on their behalf. But this is precisely what is lacking in the current situation.

All of those organisations which still nominally claim some allegiance to the working class have long since passed over to the opposing side. There is no more resolute supporter of the EU and its policies today than the European trade unions and their pseudo-leftist

adjutants, such as the Greek SYRIZA, the German Left Party and the French NPA. All their talk of reforms and the possibility of a “social Europe” is merely aimed at disguising the umbilical cords which link them to the EU bureaucracy and its think tanks and lobbyists in Brussels.

The only alternative to the social devastation currently enveloping the continent is the mobilisation of the working class all over Europe against the trade union bureaucracy and its hangers-on, and the formation of workers governments. Such governments would immediately repudiate the austerity and debt repayment programs dictated by the banks, withdraw from the EU and all of its institutions and begin the process of constructing a genuinely democratic alternative based on satisfying the needs of the broad masses of the population, the United Socialist States of Europe.

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