

May Day 2016: The crisis of the European Union and the drive towards war

By Peter Schwarz
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The following speech was delivered by Peter Schwarz, secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to the International May Day Online Rally held on May 1, 2016.

The European Union is in deep crisis and in a state of rapid disintegration.

After the Second World War, which left Europe in ruins, the predecessors of the European Union served to restrain the conflicts between the great European powers and to provide a certain degree of political stability. Now these same institutions are the driving force for escalating national conflicts and the emergence of bitter class struggles.

In 1926 Trotsky explained that the unification of Europe “is beyond the strength of the European bourgeoisie which is utterly corroded by contradictions.” “Europe,” he insisted, “can be unified only by the victorious European proletariat.” This is once again being confirmed today.

Since the European Union was established in 1992, it has overseen a permanent assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

It has expanded to Eastern Europe, where the major European banks and corporations have reaped the rewards of capitalist restoration, exploited a cheap labour force and smashed whatever was left of the social gains of the past.

After the global financial crisis of 2008, the EU intensified its attacks on the working class and expanded them all over Europe. This has culminated in the brutal austerity diktat in Greece, which has devastated an entire country.

As a result, 23 million European workers are unemployed and millions more are struggling in low-paid, irregular jobs. In many countries—Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece—youth unemployment exceeds

50 percent. Poverty is rapidly growing amongst unemployed, young and low-paid workers and amongst pensioners.

The attack on the working class finds its most ugly form in the treatment of refugees, who are escaping from the wars instigated by US and European imperialism in the Middle East and Africa. Thousands are deliberately left to drown in the Mediterranean and the Aegean, the European borders are sealed off and asylum seekers are imprisoned in concentration camps and brutally deported.

At the other pole of society a tiny elite has amassed obscene amounts of wealth. Symptomatic for this social process is the Volkswagen company. Like a microcosm it shows what is happening in society as a whole.

As a result of the criminal manipulation of emission values, thousands of subcontracted workers have already been sacked and many thousands more are in danger of losing their jobs. The members of the board of directors, however, who are responsible for the manipulation, are cashing in. The nine top earners have increased their income from €54 million in 2014 to €63 million in 2015. This does not include a pension entitlement of €131 million.

The social situation all over Europe is characterized by growing inequality, massive social tensions and the emergence of bitter class conflicts.

The ruling elites’ react to the deep economic and social crisis of European capitalism in the same way they did in the 1930s: They resort to militarism and war, increase the repressive powers of the state, incite xenophobia and anti-immigrant racism and promote far-right and fascistic parties.

The return of militarism is the dominant feature in Europe. In 2003, some European powers such as

Germany and France were still reluctant to fully support the US war against Iraq; now they are in the forefront of imperialist wars in Africa and the Middle East.

Germany plays a leading role in the escalating military confrontation with Russia, risking the transformation of Europe into a nuclear battlefield. German troops will be permanently deployed in the Baltics and other regions of Eastern Europe, where German imperialism has committed some of its worst crimes less than 80 years ago.

The danger of war is not limited to opponents outside of Europe. Growing economic and fiscal conflicts, the resurrection of borders and escalating national tensions raise the spectre of another war between the major European powers themselves.

The rise of far-right and fascist parties—like the Front National in France, the Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, the UK Independent Party in Britain, the Law and Justice Party in Poland and the Freedom Party in Austria—are an urgent warning, that all the dangers that transformed Europe into battlefield twice in the first half of the 20th century are coming back.

These far-right parties are sponsored from above, by the ruling elites, who pave the way for them by implementing their xenophobic and nationalistic policies.

While all the parties of the establishment—including their pseudo-left variety like Syriza in Greece and Die Linke in Germany—move closer together and support the assault on the working class, far-right demagogues are able to exploit the anger and frustration of the middle class and sections of the working class.

All the establishment parties—and this is particularly true for the pseudo-left—fear a revolutionary movement of the working class much more than they fear the far-right. They would rather hand over power to a fascist dictator, as the German bourgeoisie did in 1933, than risk a social revolution.

The rise of nationalism, racism and war is inevitable if the fate of Europe is left in the hands of these parties and if the working class does not carry out its own independent political intervention.

There is massive popular opposition against war, repression and xenophobia, which is manifesting itself in many ways—in a wave of sympathy and support for

refugees, in mass opposition against austerity in Greece, Spain and more recently in France. But this opposition has neither a voice nor a perspective. It has been led into a political dead end over and over again.

As far back as 2002, 3 million voters supported candidates falsely claiming to be Trotskyist in the French presidential election in opposition to the right-wing policies of the Socialist and the Communist Party. But what did these pseudo-left groups do? They called for a vote for the Gaullist candidate in the second round of the election and, in the long term, supported the return of the Socialist Party to power. The result is the growth of the National Front.

In Greece, the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) was swept to power last year by a wave of opposition against austerity. It took the government of Alexis Tsipras only a few weeks to repudiate everything it had promised in the election and to implement social attacks that go much further than those of the previous social-democratic and conservative governments.

The task of this May Day rally is to give a voice and a perspective to the opposition against war, dictatorship and the social assault on the working class.

The struggle against war and the struggle against capitalism are inseparable. We fight to unite all sections of the working class in a common struggle against capitalism. Our answer to the disintegration of the European Union is the United Socialist States of Europe.

We strive to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International all over Europe as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class, and invite you to join this struggle.

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