

The European elections and the revival of class struggle

By Ulrich Rippert
29 April 2019

Four weeks before the European elections are due to take place in late May, there is very little of any campaign in many European countries. In Germany, the various parties represented in the German parliament are hanging up election posters that are virtually identical. The demands raised are largely interchangeable. Election meetings are not taking place because of fears that hardly anyone will turn up.

The general lack of interest in the election reflects growing opposition to the European Union (EU) and is closely linked to the increase in strikes and mass protests in many countries. In France, the “yellow vest” movement is continuing. Every week hundreds of thousands take to the streets to protest against low pay, social inequality and the Macron government, despite massive police operations and a vicious media campaign against the movement.

In Poland, over 300,000 teachers were on strike for 17 days against the right-wing PiS government before being sold out by their union and ordered to return to work. When government officials issued an ultimatum for an end to the strike earlier last week, teachers angrily refused and 40,000 social workers announced they would join the strike. It was the first national strike in Poland for decades and one of the biggest work stoppages since the massive strike movement against the Stalinist dictatorship in the early 1980s.

The struggle of teachers for better working conditions, higher wages and properly equipped schools is part of an international wave of class struggle. Thousands of US teachers participated in strikes last year and nationwide teacher strikes took place in the Netherlands and Argentina last month.

But it is not just teachers taking strike action. In Western and Eastern Europe, resistance to the dire living and working conditions imposed in recent decades by the EU and its respective governments is growing. Prior to the Polish teachers strike, workers at the national airline LOT also went on strike. Polish Amazon workers have also stopped work in recent weeks. In the past few months, there have been strikes by auto and other industrial workers in

Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia and Kosovo, as well as mass protests against the so-called “slave law” introduced by the right-wing regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which forces workers to work unpaid overtime.

In Germany, tens of thousands of public service workers took part in short term “warning” strikes against the catastrophic situation in schools, unbearable working conditions and miserable wages. In March, thousands of public transport workers went on strike in Berlin and brought the city to a standstill; three weeks ago, 40,000 marched through the German capital to protest against rising rents and to demand the expropriation of real estate companies and hedge funds.

The ruling class and its parties in Europe and Germany are responding to this growing radicalisation by closing ranks, working closer together and moving even further to the right.

Last week, German politician Manfred Weber (Christian Social Union, CSU, and leader of the conservative European People’s Party, EPP, faction in the European Parliament) introduced a 12-point program “For a Strong Europe.” In the program’s first point the EPP leading candidate adopts a central demand of the far-right Alternative for Germany with regard to refugee policy and calls for a massive upgrading of the Frontex border police. “By 2022 I want to equip the European border and coast guard with at least 10,000 additional border guards, state-of-the-art technology, including drones, and a right to intervene directly,” Weber writes in his program for Europe.

A “right to intervene directly” means that Frontex, in addition to Europol, should be revamped into a new pan-European police force with new powers.

In point two, Weber calls for the establishment of a “European FBI to fight terrorism.” He calls for a doubling of the staff of the Europol police force. Joint investigation teams are to collect information about offenders and politically radicalised persons and exchange information. The cooperation of the secret services is to be intensified and upgraded across Europe.

The construction of a European police state is aimed directly against the working class. Weber focuses on the fight against terrorism and organised crime in order to justify the preparations already being made to criminalise strikes and opposition to military rearmament.

In the tone of an autocrat, Weber declared: “I will not allow our democratic principles in the EU to be undermined” and announced “new legal mechanisms” to defend democracy. Weber completely rejects the fact that democracy is bound up with the civil rights and freedom of the population to resist the force of the state. For him, the state is the embodiment of democracy, i.e., a government, army, police and security apparatus able to impose its will on the people through force.

According to this logic, a strike organised outside the control of the unions is a violation of the law and can be rapidly declared illegal.

This reactionary concept of a European police state is supported by all political parties. As part of the Germany’s ruling grand coalition, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has already supported and promoted measures to tighten up asylum laws and expedite the deportation of refugees. It is now criticising the plans of Weber and the EPP as empty words and accuses the conservative Christian Democratic Union and CSU for concentrating on party tactics and failing to support the SPD’s proposals for domestic rearmament.

The Greens fully support the creation of a European police state, but merely give it a different name. Their European election program focuses on “defending the state’s monopoly of force.” The struggle for freedom and security requires “stronger European cooperation between security authorities,” their program reads.

Offences such as “burglary, pickpocketing or fraud” should be prosecuted across all borders. “Accordingly, the police must also operate across borders.” This applies “especially to EU-wide data exchange.” It can no longer be tolerated that “obsolete technology” prevents the effective comparison of data.

Under the heading “Creating a European Criminal Police Force,” the Greens demand: “Our security should not be compromised by the failure of the police forces of the member states to cooperate and the fact that surveillance of suspects stops at intra-European borders. That is why we are calling for the establishment of a European Criminal Police Office (EKA).”

The Left Party does not go quite so far, but has removed any criticism of the European Union from its European election program. In February, the party executive intervened to remove from its draft program a passage which described the EU as “militaristic, undemocratic and

neoliberal.” Dietmar Bartsch, the leader of the Left Party in the Bundestag, justified the deletion by arguing that any overt criticism of Europe would bring the Left Party into the orbit of populist parties in Italy, Hungary and France. “Our job is not to leave Europe to the right wing,” he said. The Left Party wanted to “build on the tradition of a Europe devoted to peace, its great cultural project.”

At a time when the EU is transforming from an economic community into a military and police alliance and becoming a hotbed for right-wing extremist organisations and parties, the Left Party masks this development with eulogies about the EU as a project for peace and culture.

The Socialist Equality Party (SGP) is the only party that opposes the all-party coalition backing the EU and provides a clear socialist perspective to the growing strike movement and protests.

It is standing for election throughout Germany and is putting forward its program at a series of election meetings, which states:

“We are irreconcilable opponents of all forms of nationalism and of the European Union. The division of Europe is not between those for and against the EU, but between the working population and a small upper-class elite, which is shamelessly enriching itself. The EU is responsible for the brutal austerity programs that have condemned broad social layers to abject poverty. It is the driving force behind the return of militarism and war, the establishment of a police and surveillance state, and the reinforcement of Fortress Europe, which condemns tens of thousands of refugees to certain death. It is a breeding ground for right-wing and fascist forces.

“Our answer to the European Union is the United Socialist States of Europe. We fight for a workers’ government that expropriates the super-rich, banks and corporations and reorganises the economy on a socialist basis.”

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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