

The Strike in Southern Europe

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A storm is brewing in Southern Europe. In Greece on November 6 and 7 another general strike will take place. On November 14 Portuguese, Cypriot, Spanish and Italian trade unions intend to go on strike in opposition to the austerity policies of the European Union. Belgian and British trade unions, as well as the European and German trade union confederations, are also calling for action. If the mobilization is successful, this transnational strike will be a milestone in the formation of a European protest movement desperately needed to prevent the final demolition of the European welfare states.

Unfortunately, the German contribution to this protest movement has thus far been rather meagre. Tens of thousands of people have indeed taken to the streets in Germany this year demonstrating against the dictates ordering cutbacks coming from the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, IMF), and in favour of the redistribution of societal wealth. The participation of the German trade unions, however, has left much to be desired in each case, to say nothing about strike action. The realization that German workers will ultimately also be affected if demand in our neighbouring countries massively collapses appears to be asserting itself only slowly. And there are legal obstacles. While political strikes are permitted in most European countries, German trade unions are legally permitted to strike only in pursuit of collective agreements. This absurd limitation of a fundamental democratic right must at long last be abolished. We too need the right to a political strike in Germany!

Political Strike?

Events in Southern Europe show the political strike to be an indispensable tool for self-defence. What the EU and the International Monetary Fund are demanding of states such as Greece and Portugal has nothing to do with neutral crisis management, but is rather brutal class struggle executed from above. Cutbacks and elimination of government services are targeted only at ordinary people. Only sales taxes are being increased, while high incomes and economic assets are spared, and corporations are relieved of tax obligations. But that's not all. In order to implement even more drastic reductions in wages, workers and their organizations are being weakened and deprived of rights. In such a situation political strikes can serve as the last line of self-defence.

It would be a mistake to believe though, that only the over-indebted states in crisis are being confronted with attacks on trade union, social, and democratic rights. Indeed, the European Court of Justice has decreed in various cases that free collective bargaining, the national right to strike, employment laws, even freedom of expression, and the protection of human dignity, all encounter limits when confronted with the right of corporations to unrestricted freedom in the single market. A rectification of this scandalous judgement, which grants corporations the de facto right to wage dumping, has yet to be achieved.

We need a socially progressive clause added to European Union treaties clearly stating that basic social rights have priority over rules pertaining to competition and corporate freedoms. A socially just Europe can only exist if we succeed in turning the tables. We must be able to limit free trade in services, the freedom of corporations to establish operations, the free flow of capital, and competition policies in the interests of employees and trade unions. •

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