

The Strike Wave in Europe and the Decay of “Democracy”

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The growing struggles of the working class in Europe and internationally against mass unemployment and government austerity policies are exposing the reality behind the façade of bourgeois democracy. In every country, the government, whether conservative or nominally “left,” is cutting jobs and wages and slashing social programs in complete disregard for the overwhelming opposition of the population.

Elections, parliamentary debates have no effect on policy. The state does the bidding of the financial aristocracy, tearing up the living standards of the masses in the interests of the bankers who are responsible for the economic crisis. The financiers and corporate executives are making more money than ever by exploiting mass unemployment and growing social distress to slash wages and increase the exploitation of the working class.

Where the best efforts of the trade unions do not suffice to hold the workers in check and struggles break out that challenge the plans of the capitalists, most prominently in France and Greece, the state uses its powers of repression to smash strikes and protests. In France, the Sarkozy government has deployed riot police to break up workers’ blockades of oil depots and attack protesting students with tear gas and rubber bullets, arresting hundreds across the country.

In Greece, the social democratic PASOK government, elected with the support of the unions, deployed the military to break a strike by truckers in August. Last week, the same government used riot police and tear gas against culture ministry employees occupying the Acropolis to protest mass layoffs.

Despite these attacks, the resistance of the working class is growing. The current wave of strikes and protests in France is the most developed expression of a new stage in the international class struggle. It marks a shift in the world political situation of historic proportions. The working class is once again entering into battle against the capitalists.

Recent days have seen the spread of the strike movement in France, the outbreak of a strike in Greece that has paralyzed the country’s rail system, and a demonstration of hundreds of thousands in Rome protesting the policies of the Berlusconi government.

There have been one-day general strikes and mass protests in Spain, Portugal and Ireland, strikes by workers in Romania, and powerful strikes by auto workers in China and by workers in India, Cambodia and Bangladesh.

In Britain, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is imposing historically

unprecedented cuts totaling 83 billion pounds, which will mean the loss of at least 500,000 jobs in the public sector and another 500,000 in the private sector.

British workers have repeatedly sought to resist the government-corporate onslaught, but have to this point been stymied by the treachery of the trade unions, which oppose any serious strike action or social mobilization. London tube workers have struck against privatization and mass layoffs, prompting the government to draw up anti-strike legislation. BBC and British Airways workers have voted for strike action, but the union leaders have refused to call them out.

In the US, Obama, who came to power by appealing to the intense hatred among working people and youth for the pro-corporate, militarist policies of Bush and the Republicans, is carrying out uniformly right-wing, anti-working class policies, shattering the illusions of millions who voted for him. The inability of the White House and the Democratic Party to in any way distance themselves from the corporate-financial elite has been underscored by the administration's actions over the past week, just two weeks before the congressional elections.

The administration has lifted the moratorium on Gulf oil drilling, announced that Social Security recipients will receive no cost-of-living increase, and rejected calls for a moratorium on home foreclosures.

The growing opposition of the American working class is finding expression in an incipient rebellion by workers against the United Auto Workers union, which is seeking to make the 50 percent wage cut for newly hired workers worked out last year between itself, the auto bosses and the Obama administration the new baseline for the industry.

The contempt of the American ruling class for the democratic will of the people was summed up in an editorial on the events in France published Tuesday by the New York Times. The major organ of the "liberal" Democratic Party establishment acknowledged that there is broad support in the French population for the strikes and protests against Sarkozy's plans to raise the retirement age. "Despite the widespread inconvenience and economic losses," it wrote, "public opinion has remained sympathetic to the unions." (French polls show upwards of 70 percent supporting the strikers).

This did not prevent the Times from insisting, "France's Parliament should give final approval to the retirement age reform bill this week," and adding, "Even with the age raised to 62, further painful adjustments would be needed before the end of this decade."

What is emerging in the experience of hundreds of millions of people around the world is the incompatibility of the capitalist system with their most basic needs. The growth of the class struggle is exposing bourgeois democracy as little more than a fig leaf for the dictatorship of the banks and corporations over economic and political life.

The political conclusions must be drawn. The fight for jobs, decent living standards, housing, education, health care and all other social rights is a political fight against the capitalist state. It is not a matter of pushing the state to the left, reforming it, or replacing one bourgeois government with another, but rather of replacing it, through the revolutionary mobilization of the working masses, with a workers' state, based on social ownership of the means of production and workers' democracy.

The fight for workers' power emerges organically and inevitably out of the struggles of the working class against the attacks by the bourgeoisie. It must be conducted consciously, in opposition to the trade unions, the official "left" parties and the various middle-class pseudo-left organizations, such as the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France, that seek to keep the working class tied to the existing political setup and prevent it from mounting an independent struggle for power.

This fight is, moreover, an international struggle. Workers throughout Europe and around the world are facing the same attacks and fighting the same enemy. No matter how bitter the conflicts between the ruling elites of the various nations, they are united in seeking to impose the full cost of the crisis on the backs of the working class. International finance capital is carrying out a coordinated offensive against the workers. They must fight back by uniting their struggles across national borders and fighting for the program of world socialist revolution.

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