

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3396>



Europe

The situation in Europe today

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV472 - May 2014 -

Publication date: Sunday 11 May 2014

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

This report on Europe was made to a national meeting of NPA branch representatives on 1-2 December, 2013.

1) Our positions on Europe are part of a historical continuity, the history of currents that have sought to give an internationalist response to European developments, beginning with the First World War;

We counterpose to war, to reactionary regimes and monarchies, to free trade, to the different customs unions and institutions of the single market, solidarity and cooperation among peoples and the political perspective of the United States of Europe or the United Socialist States of Europe. It is a question, in our view of things, of considering Europe as a historical, political, economic and cultural reality - open to the South and the East - and of infusing the struggle in Europe with an anti-capitalist and socialist content.

2) Since the 1960s, we have been confronted with a project of European construction of the ruling classes, directed against the USSR and the Eastern bloc but competing with the USA. Nearly 60 years after the Treaty of Rome, there has been, for the European bourgeoisies, undeniable progress in the establishment of political, economic and legal institutions, the single market and the creation of the Euro. Since the productive forces were cramped in a national framework, this has led the ruling classes to build the broader spaces that are indispensable for the processes of development of the concentration of capital. It is this process that was crystallized with the Single European Act in 1986, the Maastricht Treaty after German reunification and the other treaties. But with a series of specificities:

* There is a European market, but without the creation of a European capitalism as such: there are European capitalisms, but no large-scale industry or strong European economic entities, with the exception of EADS. European integration has been carried out through capitalist globalization and the financialisation of capital, with interlinking capitals and North American and Asian pension funds. In this framework, each capitalism and each bourgeoisie plays its own particular role.

* There is a Euro and a central bank, but they exist along with inter-capitalist competition, the corset of neoliberalism and the absence of democratic sovereignty for the peoples; there is a common currency for economies with different levels of development, which could only exacerbate inequalities.

* There is a para-state construction, but it is an entire institutional architecture that escapes, once again, not only popular sovereignty but even the forms of the parliamentary type of democracy. This is what explains the authoritarian policy of the "Troika" - the EU, the ECB and the IMF - in the South of Europe and increasingly, restrictions on democracy throughout Europe. The citizens have been excluded from this project. It is a question of having institutions for the single market. As a consequence there is no political, economic, social and fiscal policy, but there is also a structural weakness on the political, diplomatic and military levels. The EU does not have the decision-making capacity of the USA or China.

Europe has therefore been, from the start, consubstantially neoliberal and undemocratic. This has been the choice of the governments and ruling classes of each country.

So we do not agree, faced with austerity policies, with putting the responsibility on Europe on every occasion! No, the EU is the dispositive that has been chosen by each bourgeoisie to reinforce its economy and its position in the world economy, by increasing the pressure in order to maintain and increase its rate of profit.

3) And it is these contradictions that the crisis will make explode. There is no European capitalism as such, but the EU is the vector of the integration of the European economies into capitalist globalization. This has two consequences:

* The first of these consequences is that in order to complement the frenetic march of international competition with a global market for labour, it is necessary to break the European social model, in short to liquidate what remains of social, and in some cases democratic, gains in Europe in order to maintain and conquer new positions in the global economy. That is what has led to a lowering of purchasing power and wages – between 20 and 30 per cent in Southern Europe, and a casualization of the labour force in Germany and Eastern Europe – and to deregulation in order to ensure the famous "free and undistorted competition", the progressive dismantling of social security and the privatization of public services.

* The second consequence is an internal competition within the EU, with what specialists call the asymmetrical trajectory of the economies of the EU, with new relationships of forces, expressed in the 160 billion euro trade surplus of Germany and the 70 billion euro deficit of France, and then by the differences between the satellite countries of Germany and the South and East of Europe, with France and Italy occupying an intermediate position. With the result that in order to respect the golden rule of the struggle against fiscal deficits and the imperatives of debt repayment, there are austerity policies that lead to a long period of recession or sluggish growth, between zero and one per cent. This creates an infernal dynamic: the contraction of the economy causes the loss of tax revenue, which deepens the deficits and the debt, putting countries under the constant threat of financial markets which are pushing for new austerity policies. It is not the umpteenth programme of austerity: it is permanent structural austerity. Which precludes any "Keynesian" economic relaunching in Europe. The crisis has been contained, unemployment can be stabilized, the banking union can control a part of the banking sector.

But we are in a period of recession or sluggish growth. There is no perspective of a way out of the crisis and the possibility of new crises of debt or the banking sector is not excluded.

It is this situation of a long recessive period that is now leading to a feeling of rejection, a justified rejection of Europe as the vector of austerity policies. A survey shows that 44 per cent of people see Europe as a source of fear and 28 per cent as a source of hope. We are not in the situation of the late 1970s for countries of Southern Europe or the 1990s for the Eastern European countries, when structural funds and European aid were synonymous with the development and improvement of people's living conditions. Today, Europe is rather associated with austerity policies. The pro-European demonstrations in Kiev are more the expression of democratic aspirations and rejection of Russia than attachment to European policies.

And even though the ruling classes and elites have chosen capitalist globalization and Europe, the "austerity crisis" is leading to a political crisis that reinforces the Right and the far Right and that can lead to authoritarian regimes.

The leads us to the conclusion, of course, that we must combat permanent austerity policies and governments of both the Right and the social-liberal Left, at national and European level, and that this requires a break with the present kind of construction of Europe and with all the European treaties - Maastricht Amsterdam, Lisbon - and the European institutions, because the EU is not reformable. There is no possibility of a political reorientation of Europe, which has been neoliberal and anti-democratic from the start. We must break with the present kind of European integration, but not with Europe.

4) But what do we put in its place? "A return to the national framework", to national currencies, customs barriers and laws? That would be a step backwards, and would especially create new tensions, confrontations and even conflicts in Europe.

Take the example of leaving the Euro: in the first place it would be the equivalent of a massive devaluation, of at least 25 to 30 per cent; this would be followed by an generalized outbreak of protectionism, by new trade wars that would impose new austerity policies against workers. To exit the Euro in the framework of capitalist relations would be to aggravate the crisis. That is politically dangerous because it would create the conditions for a nationalist inter-class union to defend the new national currency. This is especially to confuse the fundamental question - what economic policy do we need – with its instruments, such as the currency. To make, in France for example, "leaving the Euro" a central question is to fall into the trap of the National Front, which makes this political dividing line into a major political differentiation. There may be situations, such as in Greece, where faced with blackmail from the EU saying: "you must choose, either the Euro or austerity" or "you refuse austerity, but in that case you will no longer have the Euro." Although it is difficult, the Greek comrades are right to say: "We reject this blackmail, we will not make sacrifices for the Euro and we will not accept the austerity plans, even if you expel us from the European Union." But this is a response in a crisis situation. The "programmatic" response, in the face of developments on a world scale, of the crisis and of the needs of the people, is a response on the scale of broader spaces, a scale that makes possible a better distribution of wealth and new divisions of labour corresponding to human needs.

5) So! We counterpose to the present Europe, another Europe, a Europe that serves the people and the workers.

This implies taking up again certain points of national programmes and projecting them in order to formulate a European international programme. We can take up the idea of a social shield in Europe, an upward social and fiscal harmonization:

– a European minimum wage – they ask us how we would reconcile the French minimum wage of 1500 and the Portuguese minimum wage of 450 Euros or the proposed German minimum wage of 850 euros - this implies organizing an upward convergence of minimum wage levels on the basis of purchasing power parity. This is the only long-term solution to the problems of posted workers. We have of course to oblige the employers to pay the same social security contributions for all employees, but in the medium and long term we need to have comparable levels of wages.

– the defence and extension of European public services; we must move towards equivalent systems of health and social security;

– the prohibition of sackings and the implementation of massive job creation programmes and a sliding scale policy of reducing working hours and working time, moving towards the 30-hour week;

– the end of the central bank and the establishment of a European public banking service under the control of citizens and workers;

– the implementation of a policy of environmental planning and energy transition, with major projects of non-polluting transportation systems, and protection of the environment;

– a common agricultural policy that defends peasant agriculture against the agribusiness multinationals.

We can see that such a European policy involves incursions into the system of private ownership of the key sectors of the economy.

6) The implementation of this programme implies popular mobilization and democratic debate;

– Popular mobilization - it is true that on this point, we encounter difficulties. There are social mobilizations, indeed social explosions, particularly in Southern Europe. These mobilizations have not been able to block the austerity policies. But there is a whole process of exchange of experience, coordination, meetings by sector and by industry. The ETUC, which is integrated into the plans of the EU, is not much help. We need to strengthen cooperation and solidarity between the struggles in each country. We have meetings by sector - health, the car industry - but there are limitations in these activities. In all cases we must demonstrate international solidarity, both in terms of struggles and in our political activities, particularly as concerns European anti-capitalist relations.

– Democratic debate is also very important. First of all we must defend all democratic rights, especially the rights of immigrants and undocumented workers, against Fortress Europe. We want a Europe of women's rights, including the right to abortion, which has still not been won or is being challenged in a number of countries. We also advocate a Europe of peace, without military intervention abroad, particularly in Africa, and we want a Europe that respects self-determination; I am thinking of the question of Catalonia and Spain, which will be in the coming months a central issue. But more generally, if we propose breaking with the existing treaties, we need another Europe, a democratic Europe that serves peoples and workers. Democratic: we must move towards a constitutional process, where the peoples decide, through a broad discussion and the election of delegates who will establish a new democratic organization of Europe.

Socialist, because in this democratic debate, we have a proposal, around anticapitalist, socialist responses: a Europe at the service of the peoples, in the framework of the United Socialist States of Europe. We need a form of union that respects national and popular sovereignty.

To conclude, we can see that, unlike currents or intellectuals who tend to evacuate Europe from our strategic horizon, we believe that we cannot have anti-capitalist politics without internationalist and European perspectives. As Trotsky noted, "revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena and ends at the global level." There is a link between the national and international terrains. It is possible that there will be a synchronization in the development of revolutions, but in general there is a desynchronization of stages, of moments of the class struggle. Each nation must not wait for the others. If there are progressive experiences in one country, we must defend the conquests that have been made and protect what has been won. But we must at the same time have a policy of extension, of international projection and especially of a call for popular mobilization in order to extend these progressive processes.