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The Right-wing Offensive and the Responsibility of the Left

The political situation in Europe is at a turning point and new challenges are facing the Left. From 1998 to 2001 Social Democratic parties led 12 out of the 15 member states of the EU. But they did not use their position of power to break with neo-liberal policies. The Social Democratic parties together with the main tendency within the labour movement maintained their allegiance to the EU and made no attempt to stop the neo-liberal offensive, making it almost impossible for ordinary people to see the difference between social democracy and bourgeois policy. In fact the answers of European governments to the current slide of the world economy towards recession is more deregulation, more privatisation, and a stronger drive towards neo-liberal solutions. At the same time this policy hit the working class and plunged millions of workers and young people into insecurity, misery and despair. Hence xenophobia and racism were able to win over parts of the middle classes as well as sections of the working class and youth. Thus the Social Democratic parties bear the bulk of the responsibility for clearing the way for right-wing governments in many European countries. But for the first time in twenty years, the political offensive of the ruling classes is running up against a significant new social movement, born by a new generation of youth, which is global, internationalist, on the offensive and opposed to the system from the start. Since about two years, different rhythms and amplitudes between countries, a junction is underway between the working class and the alterglobalisation movement. The European Social Forum in Florence experienced this convergence, built on the basis of series of general strikes in Spain, Italy, Portugal and an overall relaunch of working class struggles. With the paralysis of the Social Democratic parties it is the responsibility of the Left, and especially the anti-capitalist left – to form a credible and strong opposition to the ongoing neo-liberal policies. The aim is to create a coalition between the new social movements and the traditional labour movement. With this perspective the Conference of the European Anti-capitalist Left meeting in Copenhagen states as follows:

1. People before profits

The economic basis of the EU is the single market the free movement of capital, labour and goods. In the name of competition vital supply lines like telecommunications, electricity, postal services and transport are to be liberalised in order to open up the market to others. No national considerations are to be taken when solving a task. Directives or common rules governing the single markets of the environment and the labour market are based on the lowest common denominator to prevent any distortion of competition. In a few years time this policy has meant that telecommunications, railway companies, the postal services and energy have been or are about to be privatised. The consequences are that supply lines have been made more expensive, more polluting and less secure. Public services like the care of the elderly, child care, the bus services etc. have been put out to tender. This has led to a larger consumption of energy, a drastic strain on the environment as well as poorer services for the citizens in outlying areas in particular. The EU puts the profit before people. We put people before the profit.

We want to retrieve the full rights of society to put public interests before those of the market. The public sector must be governed by the rights and requirements of the citizens for good services. We want to retrieve the right to put the considerations of the environment, jobs and working conditions before those of competition. To us it is essential to prevent the pollution of nature and the wearing down of people. Moreover:

The market requirements of the EU have turned the labour market into one of hard competition, stress and social marginalisation. People over 50, immigrants and single mothers with children are the big losers. On top of this, the European Commission and the European Council are slowly and steadily undermining the system of free bargaining between management and labour by issuing directives. Directives are being forced upon the labour market and to be implemented through negotiated settlements. Those parts of the negotiated settlements that include provisions of directives cannot be terminated as long as the directive is in force.

To the EU labour market policy means regulation of the single market. We wish to turn in the opposite direction. We want to secure the labour movement the right to bargain freely and to strike – to achieve the best possible result of the struggle negotiated settlement or the best legislation. We struggle united on a European scale for the best social rules in order to overcome the systematic competition between the working classes in the different member-states and prevent the multinationals from speculating against in our wage- and working conditions.

Our alternative programme is simple, easy and clearly defined: It puts people before profits. We wish to share these economic, ecological, social, political and cultural alternatives with all of humanity. We consider the social needs of the people the top priority. This implies all the necessary measures including inroads in the domain of private property relations.

2. Let the people decide – for equal rights of all men and women

With the accession of the applicant countries to the EU, new challenges are facing the left. There will no longer be a division between countries inside the EU and those outside the EU, but a division within the EU between A-members, namely the original countries – and B-members the new countries, as well as between the working classes of Western and Eastern Europe. Both basing inside the EU, it will offer European Big Capital a massive reservoir of cheap labour ready for sur-exploitation, without fighting traditions, extensive social rights and strong trade union organisations. Hence the need for a common struggle for common demands in common social organisations to overcome these uneven social conditions.

For years the EU has forced the neo-liberal agenda upon the Eastern European countries to make them apply for EU membership. Now the EU is dictating the populations of Eastern Europe imbalanced terms in connection with the negotiations of accession taking place at the moment. The EU is demanding that applicant countries fully implement the existing EU legislation and rules while for example at the same time denying farmers in the applicant countries the same subsidies as those in the existing EU countries. The consequences will surely be a breakdown of Eastern European agriculture and of connected industries and hundreds of thousands of people will experience a social and economic deterioration of enormous proportions.

The EAEL is opposed to the unacceptable terms of the negotiations of enlargement. The EAEL proposes that the new Eastern European countries are accorded favourable terms taking into account the massive social crisis due to the capitalist "restructuring" of their economies. From the first day on, the incoming Eastern European countries should have access to all the funds in the same way and quantity as the actual EU members, with positive discrimination for the poorest regions. The transfer of subsidies should not be distributed in a direct way from the EU Commission to individual persons, regions, factories, or agriculture units, but through the democratic institutions of these countries under control of the populations concerned. The rapid equalization of social conditions with the Western part of the EU is in the interests of the working people all over the EU.

The anti-capitalist left is committed to develop contacts and cooperation with the Eastern European left and with people there active in various progressive movements. As for Turkey we support all the progressive forces in this country, still dominated by the military caste, in their struggle for radical change in the areas of law, human rights and political democracy. In particular, we declare our solidarity with the Kurdish people, who are struggling for their national and democratic, political and cultural rights.

In the context of the immigrants and the worsening living conditions of native working people, neo-liberal capitalism is creating tension and divisions between the native-born poor and newly arriving poor in the working place, the neighbourhoods and schools of working people. The stakes are day-to-day survival through access to a (backbreaking) job, (pathetic) wages, (ramshackle) housing, a (struggling) school and (cut-rate) medical treatment. The result is a humanly unbearable situation for immigrant workers and a menacing division within the world of labour. It generates exacerbated competition between native workers and immigrants, leading to a general decline in the living and working conditions of both. We are in favour of opening the borders. At the same time this should be combined with a "Marshall-plan" to rise dramatically and immediately the living standards of the poorest strata of the population in order to stop the actual "war between the poor", those who are "in" and those who are arriving". Otherwise they create a social soil for far right and fascist parties.

We oppose any form of xenophobia or racism, whether of state or popular origin. We extend our solidarity to all the victims of the discriminatory policies of the governments and of Capital. We demand immediate equality, and full social and political rights for all men and women living in our countries. But we are conscious of the necessity to deal with the roots of the problem: we have to fight and organise for solidarity and unity within the world of labour, by insisting on the same wage, working and living conditions for immigrants and the native-born and for men and women. To do this the labour movement must take a radical turn and stop turning native-born workers against those who are newly arriving and male workers against female. This means making the organisation of newly arriving workers a moral and social priority so that they can take an active part in the same struggles, the same organisations, and the same programme that puts "people before profits".

3. Rejecting the war against Iraq is promoting peace and solidarity between peoples

The USA wants a war against Saddam Hussein to eliminate him and his supporters within the military and security establishments. In their place the US wish to bring in a pro-US regime, handpicked from the present Iraqi military.

When President Bush wants a war against Iraq, his objectives are as in the Gulf War of 1990/91 to secure American economic and political interests. It is to secure that Iraqi oil resources the second largest in the area – will be at the disposal of American and Western economy. It is to secure that a regime will be in power in Iraq that is friendly towards US interests. But it is also about US long-term plans in relation to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. If the present Iraqi leadership is eliminated, the US will have total dominance in the Middle East.

The EAEL is opposed to this imperialist war, because it is a war that will not help the Iraqi people to achieve democracy and justice on the contrary. A "No" to a US-led war against Iraq is not a "Yes" to the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. A "No" to war is not accepting chemical or other weapons of mass destruction in the possession of Saddam Hussein. These are weapons that he has shown to be willing to use against his own population without any protests being raised by the USA, Britain or the rest of the Western world, and not leading to any considerations of war against Iraq.

On the other hand, years of sanctions have cost thousands of Iraqis their lives, millions are starved and the Iraqi health and educational sectors are in ruins. We know that at the same time Saddam Hussein is coldly and cynically misusing the money he gains from the exceptions to oil delivery authorized by the UN to open up for supplies of food and medicine etc. to Iraq. But this is no excuse for the present UN sanctions that are primarily making victims of the Iraqi people.

Therefore the EAEL considers the building of a broad and massive international movement of peace to prevent the war as its priority. And to contribute to establish peaceful conditions making it possible for the Iraqi people themselves to break with the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. In particular we commit ourselves to building a European-wide day of action against the war on February 15th 2003.

4. An EU Convention of the bourgeoisie

The EU structures were despotic from the very beginning. The bulk of the executive, legislative and constituent powers is now more than ever in the hands of the bourgeoisie – especially those of the largest countries – meeting in the European Councils of Ministers, the European Council of heads of state, the Commission and the Intergovernmental Conference. Thus the EU does not even equal the level of bourgeois parliamentary democracy still existing in its member states.

The European bourgeoisie have set themselves major objectives in the near future, all related to their pursuit of creating a European Great Power: market annexation of the Eastern European countries; incorporating the UK, Denmark and Sweden into the monetary union; creating an "economic government", essential to synchronizing monetary and economic management with the European Central Bank; rapid activation of a European armed force also to be used to intervene in the major social crises looming in Europe; and reinforcing EU diplomatic, political and military intervention in the world arena.

We also recognize that in different EU countries the political circumstances with respect to the EU are different. In Scotland and England, Sweden and Denmark the majority of the left have decided to oppose the euro, tied as it is to the growth and stability pact, when there is a referendum. In other countries where the euro has already been accepted the key campaigns will take other forms. The Convention is a parody of a democracy: there has been no public debate and intervention on different ideas and proposals, no electoral mandated persons to defend them, no democratic body to debate and decide. In fact it is the EU-governments who have despotically appointed their "knights" to keep a tight control over the whole process.

The despotic nature of the Convention reflects the reactionary aims of the ruling classes 1) to fix a leadership structure adequate for an imperialist supranational state; 2) to build a "democratic façade" with some popular legitimacy; 3) to prevent any transfer of social rights which exist in the member-states, on the European level.

This state apparatus is neither usable nor can it be reformed. It must be overthrown so as to open the way for a radical democratic process from below. It is up to the peoples to decide what kind of Europe they want to live in, with what sort of institutional relationship among the member states, and on what social and economic bases. Such a conquest of radical democracy will necessarily go hand in hand with the overturning of neo-liberal policies and replacing them with a programme of urgent social measures in the interests of the workers and the poorest sections of society. Starting now we must demand that at the very least any new treaty or constitution be submitted to a referendum organised simultaneously in all member and candidate states. But in the final end it is up to the People's of Europe to discuss and decide how they will live together.

5. An anti-capitalist European Left is necessary

We, anti-capitalist parties and movements of Europe, are opposing the EU, its institutions and policies, not in order to defend our national capitalist states but to create a different Europe founded on solidarity. We are fighting for a democratic, socialist society, without the exploitation of labour or oppression of women, based on sustainable development and self-managing socialism from below. This is a difficult road, and one that will take time.

For the first time in many years, a political polarisation is taking place in Europe, clearly and visibly, in struggles, in the various social movements and trade unions and in elections. This anti-capitalist polarisation is developing, not on the basis of abstract ideological debates, but on the basis of the desire of putting people before profit.

Our conclusion is that we urgently need to develop the perspective of a European political formation as a space and process in which social and political, anti-capitalist and alternative left forces engage in discussions and actions to move forward.

The organisations that came together in the Conferences of the European Anti-Capitalist Left are moving ahead. First, we are staking out our own political identity, made concrete through a "common logo". Second, we are starting to work on more detailed positions on immigrant issues and on the Charter of Social Rights, as a basis for joint activity. Finally, the next Conference of the EAEL, the sixth one, will take place in Greece, in June 2003.

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