

# Europe: Working class enters the struggle

## CWI World Congress Discussion

The tenth world congress of the socialist international to which the Socialist Party is affiliated, the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), took place in Belgium between 1 and 9 December. The event was attended by delegates and visitors from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Cyprus, Czech Republic, England and Wales, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Netherlands, Nigeria, Poland, Portugal, Quebec, Russia, Scotland, Spain, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Taiwan, USA and Venezuela. Unfortunately, the denial of visas meant delegates from Bolivia and Pakistan could not attend and those from other sections could not make it for various reasons.

The main congress discussions were on world relations and the world economy, Europe, Asia, Latin America, and building the CWI. The CWI is a democratic, socialist international organisation. During the congress, documents and resolutions were discussed, amended where necessary, and then voted on (see [socialistworld.net](http://socialistworld.net) for the final documents). A new CWI international executive committee was elected. Here ROBIN CLAPP reports from the discussion on Europe which was introduced by Tony Saunois and summed up by Niall Mulholland of the International Secretariat.

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**T**HE SEVERITY of the continuing world economic crisis is having a profound effect upon the entire continent of Europe. Financial bailouts are followed by unprecedented attacks on workers' rights, jobs, pensions and conditions. General strikes and mass demonstrations have heralded the re-entry of the European working class onto the stage of history.

In countries like Portugal, Spain and even Belgium there is the continuing threat of sovereign debt crises. In Greece and Ireland the International Monetary Fund and European Union (EU) have attempted to stem the financial haemorrhage, but tomorrow the danger of default looms. This raises the spectre of the unravelling of the eurozone and even the undermining of the EU in its present form.

Splits persist between the axe-wielding 'austerians' and the neo-Keynesian 'deficit-deniers'. The primary position of capitalism is one of increasing cuts, but this does not preclude more bailouts, interventions and stimulus packages should emergency circumstances dictate.

Europe has begun to be utterly transformed. The social reserves of capitalism are being eaten away. Youth unemployment stands at 40% in Greece and is officially 30% in Spain.

Working class people's lives have been shattered in Ireland and elsewhere. The scale of these brutal attacks is felt among the middle class too, drawing all sections into the vortex of misery and struggle. For the first time in a generation, Irish youth are again choosing emigration.

### 'Lesser evilism'

WHILE THERE is still evidence of 'lesser evilism' as workers vote once more for some of the former traditional workers' parties, to keep the right-wing out of power, lingering illusions quickly evaporate. The victory of Pasok in Greece has shown how former workers' parties rest securely in the camp of capitalism. This bitter experience can ignite mass resentment towards all political parties – an echo of the 'out with all of you' mood that gripped Argentina in 2001.

In crisis-ridden Ireland, prime minister Brian Cowen's popularity ratings have crashed to just 8% and the main governing party, Fianna Fáil, is disintegrating. Sections of the Irish media have spoken of 'national humiliation' and have compared the latest brutal IMF package to a modern-day 'Treaty of Versailles'. Interest on the debt is now equivalent to a staggering 10% of GDP, while the budget deficit at 32% of GDP is the largest anywhere in peacetime history.

The contempt in which the ruling politicians are held is illustrated by the fact that the IMF was viewed by many, if not as a saviour, then at least as a change from the crooks and spivs who brought the 'Celtic Tiger' crashing down.

All the major European economies have investments in Irish banks and tremble at the threat of default. With Britain's trade with Ireland constituting 7% of GDP (a greater share than with China and India combined), it is clear that the



Trade unionists from across Europe demonstrated in Brussels on 29 September.

photo Paul Mattsson

Con-Dems' willingness to shoulder its share of the burden of assisting Dublin is motivated by the panic of contagion.

### General strikes

OVER TEN million participated in September's Spanish 24-hour general strike, while in Portugal 85% of workers have struck against the government's vicious cuts programme in the biggest mass strike since the 1970s.

We predicted that the attempts by ruling classes across Europe to make the workers pay for the crisis of their system would cause mighty turmoil and lead to generalised protest on a scale not seen for decades. This prediction has been fulfilled in Italy, in France and above all in Greece, where there have been six general strikes, with a seventh planned for 15 December.

Now in Britain, just six months after the coming to power of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition hell-bent on cutting public services to their core, young people, supported by growing numbers of workers, have taken up the fight in a series of magnificent walkouts, protests and demonstrations against attempts to triple university tuition fees and abolish study allowances for poorer college students.

All that once seemed certain is now uncertain. The Greek economic bailout promised to pacify the markets and draw a line under the sovereign debt crisis only to appear in even more virulent form in Ireland, where an acceleration of the economic unravelling is now possible.

Against the trend, German capitalism has recovered from the first phase of the crisis as a result of the strengthening of its export markets. Yet this growth remains precarious and dependent upon world factors, such as the continual growth in China's economy. Unfolding sovereign debt crises in Europe deeply alarm the German ruling class, with Chancellor Angela Merkel warning that Berlin's purse will not be as 'generous' as in the past. This barely-disguised threat has manifested itself in sharp disagreements over Greece, with Merkel hinting that the euro project may have to be 'amended'. The discussion is not simply about planning for the contingency of one or more weaker countries having to withdraw from the euro-zone, but in extreme circumstances, even Germany exiting and the reconfiguring of the entire project.

### Working class enters struggle

THE KEY feature in this changed period is the entry of the working class into struggle. This, in turn, sharply poses the question of the need for working class leadership – both industrially and politically. Unfortunately a competition could be held across Europe to judge which country has the poorest union leadership!

Where there have been one-day general strikes in Spain and Portugal, these have been convened only as last resorts by the leadership bureaucracy. The leaders consider their job done after organising these stoppages. In Ireland, the union leaders held back the movement for

a whole period, joining in the patriotic refrain that the country had to 'pull together'. But now an explosive movement is developing again.

These strikes have assumed more of the character of protest, rather than a preparation to bring down governments. Broad consciousness has not yet reached the level where there is an understanding that a general strike poses the question of which class can run and control society.

This is linked to the crisis of working class political leadership and the lack of a viable alternative to the market system.

The organisations of the CWI must bring forward timely proposals that clearly identify the next steps for these movements. The idea of continuing the struggle must be elaborated in a concrete way. This will differ in each country according to the preparedness of workers to struggle and the existing level of consciousness.

In Italy, the CWI would pose at this stage the need to build for a one-day general strike. In Greece, after six general strikes, there is a need to go further and develop more extensive actions, underlining what will be necessary to defeat the cuts.

Workers will realise that we do not face a short-term period of crisis but an organic crisis of the system. Abrupt changes can occur when events make this clearer. What may begin as 'anti' protests that identify symptoms of crisis – for example the pickets of Vodafone shops in Britain – will develop into a broader anti-capitalist consciousness and a conscious embracing socialism.

Our demands for non-payment of the debt, for the nationalisation of the banks under workers' control and management, which the Greek CWI has skilfully expounded, will be eagerly taken up as a path that can show the way to a different society. As part of this explanation, we must give specific definitions to what is meant by the idea of a workers' government.

Where Left parties exist in Greece, Portugal and elsewhere, they have been found wanting in the new situation. On paper, many have formally radical manifestos. But these are far from adequate in the face of deep capitalist crisis. A fighting programme that includes the repudiation of national debts, the nationalisation of the banks, the taking over of the major corporations under the democratic public ownership of the working class must become welded to the day-to-day struggles.

The turn to the right by the Syriza (coalition of the radical left) leadership in Greece and its poor vote in the 2009 election reflect the confusion that exists in this and other formations. The more recent local elections saw mass abstentions and little enthusiasm for Syriza's abstract position on how to fight back. Portugal's Left Bloc has policies that hardly differ from that of the former Portuguese social democracy.

In Italy, the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) is on its last legs and more politically advanced workers are seeking an alternative. Given the betrayal by left and communist parties some have embraced the Fiom (metal mechanics section of the CGIL trade union federation). It is receiving membership applications from non-metal workers desperate to find a formation that has the strategy, tactics and slogans to build a viable alternative to the tsunami of attacks unleashed by the employers.

### Vacuum on the Left

THE VACUUM on the Left can allow the forces of the far-right to attract support, both from the middle class and demoralised workers. The neo-fascists obtained success in the recent council elections in Athens, while the far-right made electoral gains for the first time in over 20 years in the Swedish general election, as the Social Democrats recorded their worst performance in almost a century. In Hungary, the ultra-right Jobbik party, whose leader openly proclaims his fascist lineage, obtained 16% in the parliamentary election.

The national question can flare up too, not least in Belgium where the traditional parties have been incapable of forming a government in nearly six months. Belgian banks are also very vulnerable to the financial contagion, with a Gent professor warning that Belgium is on its way to the "slaughterhouse" of the IMF!

Die Linke (Left Party) in Germany has made a certain electoral impact, while the Izquierda Unida (IU - United Left) in Spain has been able to attract new layers of militant workers and youth with a more left programme and appeal. Standing in the polls currently at 7.5%, the IU still struggles to link its programme to the



The RMT was amongst the trade unions represented on the Brussels demo.

photo Paul Mattsson

consciousness of the working class.

In Greece the debt crisis created a crisis in Syriza, whose leadership failed to put forward policies to show a clear way forward for the working class. It was not sufficient for Syriza to put forward a slogan of 'down with the government' alone.

The CWI in Greece explained the need and potential for the election of a left workers' government. This must be linked to the question of cancelling the debt, nationalising the banks and the day-to-day struggles of Greece's working class.

The NPA (anti-capitalist party) in France still has potential, but whether it can build as a mass working class force is not at all assured. The NPA calls for a government based on struggle, but we have to be more explicit in calling for a government of the working class. These are not hair-splitting questions, but vital slogans that can arm the working class in the direction of building parties that can fill the gaps on the left that presently exist in many countries.

The recent movement in France saw millions take to the streets and despite only a minority taking strike action, there have now been eight days of protest. Pension 'reform' became the catalyst for all the disparate strands of anger in society – a lightening rod for action. The movement to stop the pension law however proved insufficient and there is now a pause in the struggle. Workers blockaded refineries and sought to cut off the oil supply to Charles de Gaulle airport. However this is still a long way off from 1968, when ten million workers occupied their factories.

Overall eight million workers participated in a demonstration or strike but workers

need political demands and organisational forms to take struggles forward. Anti-trade union legislation did have some effect in intimidating workers.

In Britain, the Cameron coalition government seeks to curtail protest through 'kettling' tactics. Across Europe, the ruling class is laying down the preparations for the growing class wars that inevitably characterise this period.

The imposition of the first 'state of alert' since the Franco dictatorship years, and the recent militarisation of airports by the Spanish government in response to industrial action by air traffic controllers, is another illustration of the growing anti-strike, authoritarian measures being unleashed by pro-capitalist governments. These can have a temporary effect but will further deepen hostility and prepare more dynamite in class relations.

In this fevered atmosphere and without the formation of new workers' parties, anarchistic and syndicalist moods can develop. The postal bombs sent recently to EU leaders indicate that even terrorist trends can take hold among the most alienated and desperate youth.

### Europe no longer a 'model' for capitalism

WITH IMF visits, bailouts, debt defaults and unstable governments, Europe is no longer the 'model' for stable and prosperous capitalism. Characteristics of Africa or Latin America are coming to Europe. Events will unfold at different paces, but low growth, austerity and crises of both political and social characters will be dominant.

We must prepare for a protracted period

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### thecommitteeofworkersinternational

THE COMMITTEE for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 40 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

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