

May Day 2017

# The Crisis of the European Union

By Peter Schwarz  
4 May 2017

*This speech was delivered by Peter Schwarz, Secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to the 2017 International May Day Online Rally, held on April 30.*

In the 20th century, Europe was the origin, and the main battlefield, of two imperialist world wars. In 1945, the continent, which was the centre of the industrial revolution and at the forefront of cultural progress, lay in ruins. Between 80 and 100 million people were killed in the two wars. Germany, which had once been proud of its culture, its writers and its composers, had become the centre of the most barbaric crimes humanity has ever seen.

“No more fascism; no more war!”—this slogan was supported by millions at the end of the war. It was widely understood at the time that fascism and war were the product of capitalism. Particularly in Italy and France, where the Communist Parties had mass support, and where—despite the treachery of Stalinism—the memory of the October Revolution was still alive, workers were determined to settle accounts with the bourgeoisie and establish socialism. In Germany, anti-capitalist sentiments were so strong, that even the conservative CDU felt obliged to inscribe into its program that capitalism had failed.

But the Stalinist and reformist leaders of the workers movement blocked these socialist aspirations and worked closely with their respective governments to stabilize the capitalist system. They promoted a number of mechanisms which, as they claimed, would overcome the national and social antagonisms that had led to fascism and war.

Social reforms—rather than social revolution—would gradually overcome social inequality and create prosperity and equal opportunities for everyone; the economic integration of the continent on a capitalist

basis—the European Union—would overcome the national antagonisms that had destroyed Europe.

Seventy years later all these promises lie in tatters.

Social inequality—both across the continent and in every individual European country—is greater than ever before. The average wage in Bulgaria is more than ten times lower than the average wage in Denmark; and even in rich countries, like Germany, millions live in poverty, work at sub-minimum wages and in precarious jobs. Unemployment is high; in some European countries, more than fifty percent of young people are without work.

The danger of war is bigger than ever since 1945. Every single European country is massively increasing its military budget; European troops are engaged in imperialist wars in the Middle East and in Africa; and for the first time since the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the Western imperialist powers are deploying troops to the Russian border.

The threat of a military confrontation between the two largest nuclear powers of the world, the United States and Russia, is no longer a hypothetical possibility but a real danger. It would transform Europe into a nuclear battlefield.

Not only the threat of war with Russia, however, but also the danger of war between Europe and the United States, and within Europe itself, is growing. Tensions between the United States and Europe—and Germany in particular—have been increasing for a long time. But with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, they have acquired a new dimension.

Germany has reacted with an aggressive foreign and military policy. It is massively increasing its military budget and is trying to transform the EU—or at least its core—from an economic into a military alliance, dominated by Germany and coequal to the US.

The European Union—once advertised as a means of unifying Europe—has emerged as a breeding ground for nationalism, xenophobia, social regression, law-and-order policies and war.

The austerity programs dictated by Brussels and Berlin have devastated entire countries—like Greece. The brutal rejection of refugees by Fortress Europe has created conditions where more than 5000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean within a single year. The only field where the EU is making real “progress” is the build-up of a vast police and surveillance machine.

Europe is bristling with social tensions. It is like a ticking time bomb. The gap between the political and economic elites and the vast majority of the people is huge. This is expressed in the collapse of political parties that have been in government for decades—like, most recently, the Socialist Party in France.

But social discontent, outrage and anger find no progressive political expression. This is due to the right-wing policies of the political parties and trade unions that once claimed to take care of the social interests of the working class, and of the pseudo-left organizations of the middle class. They play a central role in attacking the working class and promoting militarism and war.

This was most clearly demonstrated in Greece. Faced with the alternative of accepting the austerity diktat of the EU, or mobilizing the Greek and European working class against it, the Coalition of the Radical Left—Syriza—decidedly opted for the first. The affluent middle class layers, which Syriza represents, are ten times closer to the corporate and financial elites, represented by the EU, than to the working class.

The utter bankruptcy of the reformist and pseudo-left organizations has created the conditions where far right forces—like the Front National in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, the AfD in Germany, UKIP in Britain, or Geert Wilders in Holland—have been able to capitalize on social discontent, and profit from hostility to the EU.

They stand for xenophobic, chauvinistic and even fascist policies and are a big danger. But they cannot be stopped by supporting their bourgeois rivals. To rely on pro-EU parties to fight the nationalist far right, is like relying on an arsonist to extinguish a fire.

The growth of far-right parties does not mean that there are no left-wing sentiments. But to the extent that

they find expression within the present political setup, they are immediately betrayed. In Greece, Syriza was elected into government because it promised to oppose austerity—only to implement even more ferocious attacks on the working class.

In France, the vote for Jean-Luc Mélenchon has more than doubled since the beginning of the year, because he has made anti-war and anti-austerity noises. In the end, only 1.7 percent separated him from Marine Le Pen, the Front National candidate. But, as a seasoned bourgeois politician, who has been in business for more than 40 years, the last thing Mélenchon wants is an independent movement of the working class.

The urgent task now posed in Europe, as everywhere in the world, is the building of sections of the ICFI that can provide the working class with an internationalist socialist orientation in the coming social eruptions.

Our answer to the crisis of the EU is the United Socialist States of Europe. This is not a rhetorical slogan, but a political perspective.

We fight for a mass movement of the working class against war, dictatorship and social inequality, that is politically independent of all the parties of the bourgeoisie and their pseudo-left, petty-bourgeois agents.

We fight for the unity of the European and international working class against any form of nationalism.

And we fight for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society, based on social need instead of private profit.

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>