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European Union

Defeat the Bolkestein directive!

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Three weeks before the opening of the debate in the European Parliament, the mobilisation against the Bolkestein circular is becoming stronger. Preparations are under way for the demonstration that will take place in Strasbourg on February 11th, three days before the debate in the European Parliament opens. The following article, published in Rouge, weekly paper of the LCR, deals with the content of the directive and the mobilisation against it.

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[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/europe-bolkestein1a.jpg>]

Brussels anti-Bolkestein demo

On February 14th, the European Parliament is due to vote on the first reading of the directive on "services in the internal market", which is nothing but a rehash of the essential feautres of the so-called "Bolkestein" directive. This document provoked widespread opposition in the member countries of the European Union (EU) and 100,000 people took part in a demonstration in Brussels on March 19th, 2005, called by the European TUC (ETUC) and by several components of the global justice movement.

The rejection of this directive played an important role in the campaign for a "No" to the Constitutional Treaty, because it symbolised and concentrated everything that was wrong with the liberal policies that are conducted by the EU. At the time, Chirac violently criticised the directive and he even announced that it was definitively dead and buried. For him it was a question, at that point in time, of saving the Constitutional Treaty and preventing the irresistible rise of the "No" from the left.

Far from being dead and buried, the Bolkestein directive was never abandoned and it duly made its way around the circuit of European institutions. It was thus amended by the commission on the internal market and the protection of consumers.

The principle of the country of origin was baptised "clause of the internal market", without that changing anything about the fact that an enterprise which exercises an activity in a country of the Union will automatically have its right to exercise it in all the others recognised, its activity being subject to the regulations of its country of origin.

That obviously represents an incitement to delocalise towards countries where the social and fiscal regulations and those concerning the protection of the environment and of consumers are the weakest, with in addition a levelling down of workers' rights.

Nor does it change the fact that the directive provides for a liberalisation of all services except those that are free, the only more open element being the possibility of derogations. But even if these derogations are introduced in sensitive areas such as health, the history of European construction shows that these derogations are put into question in a short space of time. So it really is all public services that are being targeted.

Lastly, Horst Schmitthener, leader of the German IG-Metall union, illustrates an aspect of the directive that is too often underestimated: "The adoption of the Bolkestein directive would not only lead to increased social dumping, it

would also profoundly affect the relations between capital and labour, by influencing the relationship of forces.

For example, what would become of the right to strike? The directive would enable capital to avoid a confrontation by referring to European law to look for another enterprise to provide the service in question. So, even formally written into the European texts, the right to strike would be reduced to a "wasp without a sting", incapable of flying".

For a pure and simple withdrawal

What is at stake is to impose the pure and simple withdrawal of this directive. As Marco Bersani, leader of ATTAC-Italy, puts it: "All the strategies aimed at amending it are doomed to failure because, even though the initial field of application of the directive was limited, the principle of the country of origin (PCO) could subsequently be progressively widened: there is no such thing as a "light" Bolkestein".

The dockers, by organising a European strike that blocked several ports of the EU and by demonstrating massively in Strasbourg, showed that it was possible to make the European Parliament give way. They obtained the withdrawal of the port directive which allowed ship-owners to use, in certain cases, their own personnel to load and unload ships, thus putting into question social legislation in a sector where the workers are highly organised. The dockers have shown the way. It is by doing the same thing that it will be possible to defeat the Bolkestein directive.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/europe-bolkestein2a.jpg>]

The demonstration on 11th February in Strasbourg is an essential part of building up a relationship of forces and we have to do everything to ensure its success (see the united front appeal below). The same day, numerous initiatives are being organised in dozens of cities in Europe. On February 14th, the day of the debate in the European Parliament, the ETUC will follow on by also organising a European demonstration.

And if the Parliament does not reject this directive, we will then have to widen the mobilisation and increase the pressure by organising a strike and a demonstration on a European scale, on the occasion of the meeting of the heads of government, when they will be called upon to take a position on this heinous directive.

Appendix

Extracts from the united front appeal

Against the projected Bolkestein directive, for a united front mobilisation!

The projected "directive on services in the internal market" is due to have its first reading in the European Parliament on February 14th in Strasbourg. Based on the principle of the country of origin (...) this document is an incitement to competition between states and peoples. It organises social dumping, less protection for consumers, a threat to culture, a lowering of norms concerning the environment and public health. In fact, this document makes impossible public control over enterprises in the service sector.

Public services are still considered as commodities. The projected directive wants to liberalise all services, without taking into account their diversity. (...) The document still contains a long list of measures that are judged to be incompatible with the freedom of entrepreneurs, measures which are however the basis for public policies.

Defeat the Bolkestein directive!

This project was met by unanimous disapproval by public opinion. (...) A convergence is necessary between social movements, associations, trade union organisations and political parties to defeat this project, on both a national and European level. (...)

The President of the French Republic, who had, however, announced that this project was dead and buried, is today placed before his responsibilities. He must respect his undertakings and act so that this directive does not see the light of day. We appeal to citizens to call the French government to account so that this promise is kept.

The mobilisation of the peoples of Europe is today indispensable. We are calling for the building of a European day of mobilisation on Saturday February 11th, which will be expressed in particular by a demonstration in Strasbourg. We will be present at the demonstration called for February 14th by the ETUC, on the occasion of the debate in the European Parliament.

This appeal has so far been signed by more than 25 organisations in France, including, the Communist Party, the LCR, the Socialist Party's youth organisation, ATTAC, the Peasant Confederation, feminist groups and several trade unions.