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Europe

Europe Against Austerity conference report

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The Europe Against Austerity conference on 1 October was attended by 681 people including 150 from outside Britain. This happened the same weekend that two big demonstrations took place. On Saturday in Glasgow, there was the "People First" demonstration of 15,000 called by the Scottish TUC. On Sunday, 35,000 joined the demonstration in Manchester on Sunday outside the Tory Party conference which was called by the TUC and backed by the Coalition of Resistance and the Right to Work Campaign.

The conference adopted a declaration agreeing to establish a network, to plan for a day of action against austerity next year, as well as to call on unions to organise a day of industrial action across Europe. The conference put on the agenda in Britain and across Europe the need for an audit (although that is not in the final [declaration](#)) and cancellation of the "illegitimate" debt. It also started a debate in Britain on the European Union and the euro, hopefully drawing it away from a simplistic "No to EU" position, and putting withdrawal from these capitalist institutions as a consequence of our campaign against austerity, rather than as a starting point. It was a serious and sober event which recognised both the scale of the economic crisis and the tasks ahead in escalating the resistance against austerity. Olivier Besancenot for the NPA explained it starkly when saying "We have to find ways of coming together to build this social movement of the people in Europe..... And this isn't a whim or just propaganda, working towards the first general strike in the history of Europe is a duty for political activists in the coming months."

The breadth of representation was impressive as it encompassed most of the anti-neoliberal left (Die Linke, Sinn Fein, European Left Party) and a particularly strong anti-capitalist current (NPA, CADTM, Bloco). Major unions supported the conference such as UNITE, the NUT and the RMT from Britain, Solidaires from France, the teachers union OLME from Greece, and LAB from the Basque country. There were also representatives of the CGTP of Portugal, COBAS of Italy and many others. Particularly noteworthy was Elżbieta Fornalczyk of the Free TU "August 80" representing Tesco workers who outlined the dramatic condition of women in Poland as mothers and workers. Sonia Mitralia of the CADTM in Greece also stressed how the crisis was hitting women harder.

This conference, as well as the demonstrations this weekend, is an excellent springboard for making the November 30 strike by over 20 trade-unions a massive success. We need to mobilise other sections of society not on strike about pensions, but who wish to fight to defend the welfare state. It is also important to mobilise from the conference for European-wide events such as the G20 on 1st November. Congratulations were sent in by many people. Those who travelled from far, such as the 12 CGT, FSU & SUD stewards from Le Havre in France, thought it was interesting and a necessary event for stepping up the resistance across Europe.

Olivier Besancenot of the Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste from France spoke in the closing plenary. This is a translated and slightly edited transcript of his speech.

The sovereign debt crisis follows on from the sub prime crisis in the United States in 2008. What we are seeing now, in spite of the intervention of different governments, is the explosion of the financial crisis across every economy and every society. In just the same way that the sub prime crisis was itself the outcome of the crisis of overproduction and over-accumulation, in the Marxist sense, which had been brewing in our societies for years and years.

And that's the whole problem with the neo-liberal policies we're fighting against. They're not only unfair. They also make the economic crisis much worse. This crisis of capitalism is global because it combines questions of climate change, food supplies and energy sources. We are seeing an historic tipping point in the relationships between the imperialist powers. We already spoke about wars, but we must remember that the great powers like Europe and the

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United States are now in decline and the United States barely manage to compensate for it by their military supremacy. New powers are emerging.

The powers which dominated the world through the history of capitalism are currently in decline and that has political consequences for us and the political debates that concern us.

What type of movements and what type of alternative? We can no longer debate in the way we used to debate. Previously it was a thing we had big arguments about. Some people thought that it was only workers' mobilisations and nothing else which would allow us to establish a political alternative and there were others who thought that we had to recreate a credible political alternative in order to encourage workers mobilisations. Today there is a complementary, dialectical relationship which obliges us to try to create a synthesis between the left in the social movements and the political left in each of our countries. This needs a complementary relationship in which one strengthens the other, without a hierarchical relationship between them and which gives us both political responsibilities and responsibilities in the movements. In the movements, we have to find ways of coming together to build this social movement of the peoples of Europe. Of course we have to help and support the indignados on the 15th October. And it needs to be not just for amusement or just for propaganda: working towards the first general strike in the history of Europe is a duty for political activists in the coming weeks and months.

In each of our countries we are having days of action and general strikes or semi-general strikes. The fact that for the first time we find ourselves on strike at the same time on the same day would give us the possibility of having a European unity, not just for the sake of it, but to enable us to be on the streets for a long time, to continue the strike, to bring the economies and governments to a standstill.

What is the anti-capitalist perspective suffering from at the moment? It's the absence of victories for industrial action. There is resistance and there are struggles because there is a crisis of capitalism. However we haven't yet demonstrated that we are able to stop a single part of an austerity plan, to destabilise even one part of a government which is implementing these policies. None of what we are talking about will happen if we can't persuade a significant part of the population to burst onto the political scene, to stop allowing politics to be conducted by the professional politicians.

To make a programme we have to be a bit more radical than we can imagine, not for the pleasure of being radical but to respond to what is at stake in the economic crisis itself. For the austerity programmes are being carried out by governments of the right and the left and sometimes they are helped by what calls itself the radical left.

The question that is posed today is to understand that the response to the crisis is neither borders nor the capitalist state. It's not borders because they put peoples in conflict with one another. For us the real question isn't whether or not we should stay in the euro zone it is should we stay under the dictatorship of the financial markets.

The response is not to have stronger capitalist states. We had illusions in the anti-globalisation movement that to turn back the neo-liberal wave we needed a bit more state intervention in the economy. However we can see that capitalists are quite comfortable with state intervention when it's a matter of sharing their losses across society while privatising their profits.

The anti-capitalist movement today should be leading campaigns to cancel the illegitimate debts across Europe, to demand transparency to know who own what and to expropriate the private banking system and propose a public European banking system which will be the basis of a radically different Europe, a Europe of the workers and the peoples.

About a one hundred and fifty years ago someone used to say that the emancipation of the workers would be

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achieved by the workers themselves. In a new context, in a new period, in the countries of the south and in the Arab world. And our responsibility is to see that the wind of this Arab Spring blows across all of our countries.