

## The beginning, but of what?

Balance of the Redaktion of LabourNet Germany, 11-21

Many millions of people took part in the strike: in Portugal, in Spain, in Greece, in Italy, in Cyprus and in Belgium. In all sectors of the economy: in the public sector, in manufacturing and industry and in the service sector. Many millions of people taking to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to murderous austerity. Murderous, literally; Many in Spain and in Greece have committed suicide; not only their homes, but their lives taken from them.

The atmosphere in many European countries is explosive: Poverty is spreading with unemployment - and, more and more, even despite a status as wage-earners - people are losing their homes, hospitals become death houses through business-oriented cost-cutting, and even for those who can afford to study, the best they can get is a kind of „education light“, limited to the requirements of the nearest human resource department, which afterwards still doesn't employ them.

With that background, it was not an accident that the Portuguese union federation CGTP took the initiative for a transnational strike day, and – it is worth mentioning – it was the CGTP, as a whole, who supported the strike, not only the majority communist faction.

That was enough, at least for a transnational action day nearly all over Europe, even if the activities – for example, in Germany, but in other countries, too – were rather timid. But that day represents progress, at least a beginning. A beginning that unfurls social and political dynamics and has the potential to escalate further.

Unions that refused to take part in the strike and instead wanted the day restricted to symbolic action, got into trouble. The UGT in Portugal had to live with the fact that some of its biggest affiliated unions participated in “the CGTP strike”; the FGTB in Belgium tried hard to ignore a massive strike of metalworkers in Wallonia and of railway workers across the whole country; the CISL in Italy was very busy defending their offices from too many visitors - visits paid also by participants of CGIL demonstrations...

The problems which those unions have to face, who called for the strike, are of a different nature. They have two main problems: First, the question automatically arises of how to continue. With an unlimited general strike? As fantastic as the question seems to be, looking from Germany, in southern Europe there is a growing debate around just that.

On the other hand, some of these unions have repeatedly made it clear that they basically support the direction of EU-politics, whether it`s about safety nets for banks, fiscal pacts or governments coming into office in a very questionable way.

This is the case especially in Spain and Italy, so it was not by accident that in both countries the alternative, grass roots and more militant unions enjoyed strong support and played an important role in mobilising for the strike.

Also very visible was the strong participation of precarious workers in all of those countries, who not only have become an important part of normal employment relations, but also organize themselves increasingly, often in new and exciting ways.

Very visible was also the active participation of different social movements, often those developed in resistance against some of the countless privatization projects. Especially the health and education sectors saw broad protests.

In this situation it is not very important who exactly claims to be the organizer of all those protests. It is far more important to clarify which critic of EU-politics can be developed,

because this will define the alternatives that get formulated.

Because: Whoever gathers together under slogans like "For a Social Europe" should at least explain which European treaties, in their opinion, should be repealed - neoliberalism has become something of a contractual obligation in European treaties.

And, of course: Whoever gathers together at all, will have to face the fact that real resistance is not allowed; the use of police and propaganda will be enforced, even more.

Especially when - as it was now - new forms of organisation and mobilisation have had real impact, more spaces and possibilities for innovations in the forms of resistance open up, as precarious workers demonstrate, or, for example, students in Italy or neighbourhood associations in Spain show, as some alternative unions or a number of critical and oppositional factions in striking unions do.

Either this was the beginning (of the end?) of a resistance that behaves in the traditional ways and appeals the governments for another, more moderate EU policy. Which is certainly the case with ETUC and DGB policy.

Or it was the beginning of a coalescing of real resistance - in which the development of goals that don't modestly stay put in the framework of the European Union is a process that hasn't much time. This process has a lot of beginnings: Those living from social welfare (like "Hartz IV" in Germany) who resist misery and humiliation, those who resist - as a worker or as a patient - the perverse demands of "the health economy", those many who want to develop personalities through education - as student or as a teacher - and so on, up to those earning low wages and all those who work more and more and more...

In countries, where wage reduction and unemployment lead directly to poverty and where family savings never existed or have long since been used up - in such countries it would be cynical to criticise the demand for jobs. Even so, this slogan didn't play such a central role as did the fundamental demands for quality of life and general welfare.

In this situation, the murderous austerity politics of the European Union could turn out to be the long awaited push for quite different resistance movements, which have one more thing in common: the wish to overcome the schizoid - but economically-desired - multiple-personality-disorder in wage earners, private persons, customers, patients, political activists (after work). People from the employment offices, postmen, conductors (in France) have shown it possible a number of times. Toll-booth workers, teachers and doctors (in Greece) followed on this path. On N 14 amazing professions joined in, for example in Spain: judges who refused evictions and apparently even some policemen who, at least, beg pardon.

It is possible that only the refusal of work that doesn't serve society can be the basis of an effective and unlimited general strike. We fear that we know which unions would resist that. One can only hope that allegiance to those unions will be (finally) terminated.

Mag Wompel  
Ralf Pandorf  
Helmut Weiss