

WE WANT A EUROPE FIT FOR WORKERS

When the Common Market was founded in 1957, and the Treaty of Rome was signed, with six European countries it was called the European Coal and Steel Community. Its original and principal aims were economic union and an end to war on the European continent. There have been four enlargements since 1957 (to nine, then to ten, twelve, fifteen and last year saw the biggest influx of new members with ten). From the outset the forces of capital were in the driving seat. With increased membership has come a more ambitious, planned agenda.

From the beginning there were strains and tensions between members. In recent years this tension has become more marked, most especially between Britain and its allies and the French/German positions on critical issues, although German election results may soon change that country's relationship with Britain.

The Iraq war caused one of the most serious crises when Britain and many of the new wave of members lined up with the US. Along with Britain, the most subservient and vocal supporters of the US war in Iraq (and also of Thatcherite/Blairite economic and social policies) have been the leaders of former "Socialist" countries and parties of Eastern and Central Europe. It is no surprise. These opportunists, who once proclaimed the virtues and benefits of "socialism", who talked about "a workers' paradise", are now proclaiming the benefits of a hard right-wing capitalist social and economic programme.

They will stoop very low to show their loyalty and commitment to the United States and its ideology. We can recognise the type, whether they are from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic or Romania to name the most prominent. We had them in our own party. They professed to be not only Socialists but Marxists. They went to bed one night and woke up Social Democrats or even capitalists. Whatever label they attach to themselves, we know them as apologists for the system dominating Europe and most of the world today, capitalism. This system only survives through the exploitation of the many by the few.

Since its founding there have been many groups and parties opposed to the ethos and policies of what is now the European Union. From Ireland's entry into the EEC in 1973 the Workers' Party has continued to have fundamental concerns at the EU's structures and policies. For over 30 years we have expressed our reasonable concerns. Time has not lessened our opposition to anti-working class ideology and policies of the European Union. And yet whatever opposition is presented, the EU marches on and we must recognise this and formulate the necessary strategy and tactics to halt the advance of capitalism.

The EU's present impasse, arising from the rejection of the European Constitution by Dutch and French voters, will only represent a temporary setback unless the progressive forces in Europe are capable of formulating and presenting a coherent and viable alternative to the capitalist project.

The French and Dutch vote will give an impetus to the "No" lobby across the EU, but because the No lobby is made up of many diverse elements, from fascists to the ultra-left, it is of the first importance that we make a clear distinction between these reactionary forces and genuine progressive parties in Europe.

Part of the opposition to the EU bases itself around a reactionary, obscurantist, Francoist hostility to change. In Ireland a number of organisations, aided and funded by ultra-Catholics in Ireland, Europe and United States, seek to undo all progressive legislation and return this country to clerical domination. The Hierarchy of the Roman Church does not align itself openly with Justin Barrett (unlike some who purport to be "progressives" who sit on his platforms and lend credibility to Barrett and his supporters). It is a mistake not to recognise that there are some groups and individuals who parade as "progressive" and yet will align with any group, regardless of its orientation, once it says

“No” to the EU.

Some of these forces would have us retreat into sterile, narrow nationalism (a malignant disease) which has caused untold misery, death and destruction across the world in recent decades.

As Socialist Republicans our opposition to the European Union derives from a principled political position. It is necessary to place clear water between progressive forces committed to principled opposition to the European Union and those groups and individuals aligned with the ultra-right.

The current developments in the European Union reflect the ideology of neo-liberalism. The Lisbon Strategy was set out by the European Council in March 2000. The broad aim of the strategy was to make “the EU the world's most dynamic and competitive economy” by 2010. For decades the EU has been moving in a neo-liberal direction. The object of competitiveness was to be achieved by cutting public services and increasing the trend towards privatisation. International experience dictates that this will be achieved by lower wages, cutting taxes, reducing regulation and lowering or removing protection for workers' rights and the environment. The EU is simultaneously attempting to reduce the state's responsibility for pension provision. The Stability Pact which requires EU member states that have adopted the euro as the unit of currency not to incur an annual deficit of more than 3% or a total debt of more than 60% of the budget. This will have the effect of limiting state spending on health, education, housing and social security.

Although the EU is presently a “confederation” it is moving in an ever more federal direction. In theory, power is divided between central decision making institutions and regional decision making bodies with both having powers and responsibilities for public policy. However, the balance is shifting towards the centre and the sovereignty of member states is increasingly undermined. The EU policy agenda is largely framed by the Commission. The unelected, unaccountable Commission has the task of furthering the Lisbon process by forcing member states to deregulate labour markets, open essential services to private control and reduce social welfare commitments.

Although it has long been a principle endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly that “all people have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”, the Lisbon process which commits member states to the neo-liberal political agenda cannot be changed by the voters of any member state. It is fundamentally undemocratic that the peoples of Europe are subjected to a right-wing political, social and economic programme over which they have no control.

Similarly, the unelected European Central Bank dictates vital monetary policy. Article 105 of the Treaty states: “The primary objective of the European System of Central Banks shall be to maintain price stability. Without prejudice to the objective of price stability, the ESCB shall support the general economic policies in the community with a view to contributing to the achievement of the objectives of the Community as laid down in Article 2 of the TEC”.

Although Article 2 identifies community tasks as including a high level of employment and social protection the ESCB has considerable independence. The EU has, accordingly, transferred vital decision making powers, not to a transparent, accountable, democratic institution but to a group of bankers who are unaccountable, wholly undemocratic and fundamentally and inherently hostile to a socialist agenda.

Euro zone countries can no longer take individual decisions on the monetary policies they should pursue since the Euro zone has common monetary policies which are determined through the zone's own structures and which must be closely aligned.

These arrangements expose the difficulties of creating a “social Europe” when the systems is based on policies and institutions which are not amenable to democratic control and which accept, unchallenged, the philosophy and ideology of capitalism.

There have also been a number of foreign policy developments since co-operation in this area was launched under European Political Co-operation in 1970. Foreign policy co-operation had a section in the Single European Act and was strengthened in the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties. The

Amsterdam Treaty referred to a “progressive framing of a common defence policy”. The European Constitutional Treaty marks a further step towards the development of a common foreign and “security” policy. These developments must be considered in the context of majority voting and the new arrangements for enhanced co-operation.

The Amsterdam Treaty confirmed the status of the Western European Union (WEU) and the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) provides for the possible future integration of the WEU into the European Union. The WEU is a “defence and security” organisation established by the Brussels Treaty of 1948. There has also been a synchronisation of the WEU and EU meetings. The WEU Secretariat and Council moved from London to Brussels. In 1999 Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU was also appointed Secretary General of the WEU. Even those members of the EU who were not members of the WEU (Ireland included) were granted observer status.

The growing militarisation of the European Union is a continuing cause of concern. This militarisation is a two-pronged affair. On the one hand there is the increased “defence” spending in all EU countries; the modernisation and standardisation of weapons and training; the strengthening and deepening of links with NATO; the setting up of EU battlegroups; and the assertion of the EU of a military role for 2,000 KM outside its own borders. On the other hand is the hidden militarisation: the growth and power of the EU armaments industry; the Nuclear capability of some UE countries; the usurpation of large amounts of university research for military purposes; and the promotion of the concept of a “battle of civilisations”.

This Ard Fheis therefore particularly condemns the decision of the Irish Government, announced recently by the Minister for Defence, that Ireland “was willing” to participate in EU battlegroup activities without the authority of a UN mandate. Added to the known use of Shannon airport as a massive transit camp for American soldiers en route to and from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the probable use of Shannon for covert CIA flights for “extraordinary rendition” (ie kidnap and torture) this marks another step away from neutrality and the further integration of Ireland into the EU/US military fabric.

The Ard Fheis therefore adopts the demands, as part of a Europe wide campaign of communist, workers’, and other left parties that i) No foreign military bases in the EU and ii) No EU troops outside the EU except under UN mandate and control.

Recognising the political reality that the majority of the people of Ireland are generally well disposed to the concept of European unity it is important not to fall into the trap of automatic negativity on everything connected with the EU. There is substantial support throughout the country for Ireland’s membership and we must recognise the significant benefits in social and progressive legislation since 1973. Despite these welcome advances, we make it clear that we stand for a different Europe to the present capitalist bloc.

This would be a Europe based on the principles of full democracy and accountability of those elected or appointed to lead, equality for all citizens, full employment, housing for all its citizens, a one-tier health service free to all at the point of delivery, a comprehensive education free to all from kindergarten to third level, a living income for pensioners, an end to military blocs, a fair and generous aid development programme representing a minimum of 0.07% of GDP, an environment protected by an energy policy based on clean and sustainable fuels with the option to examine the possibility to build a safe nuclear power programme.

It is an insult to the French and Dutch voters to claim that their rejection of the Treaty was based on national attitudes to their own governments. While this may have had some effect on the result the fact that the “No” vote was made up of Leftist/Rightist voters, and that the majority rejected the instructions of their party leaders is an indication of a new factor in European politics. The leaders of the EU, including its bureaucracy, fail to understand that the people of the EU are seeking not just cosmetic reform or a few more crumbs of democracy but a fundamental and radical reappraisal of the entire project. There is, as has been recognised by commentators for a long time, a growing alienation of voters from the structures, the political elite and the bureaucracy. This is demonstrated by the continued decline in turnout for European parliamentary elections while at the same time there

is a high turnout in referendums where the voters realise they can have a direct effect on the issue. One commentator described a referendum as “a potentially dangerous instrument of direct democracy”.

The fact that the voters of two founding members rejected the Treaty shows that given an opportunity, the people took the decision to make their voices heard clearly. The attitude of those discredited political leaders who endorsed the Treaty is reflected in their shoddy “explanations”, such as “people didn’t know what they were doing”, “did not vote on the issues” or that “other questions intruded on the day”. In this regard we are perturbed at the stance of ICTU which has in the main supported the policies and aims of the Irish Government and the EU Commission. As representatives of the Irish working class, it behoves then to be more critical and to consult more frequently with workers on EU issues.

This attitude is reinforced by Commission President, Manuel Barroso. Speaking at the Forum on Europe in Dublin on June 30th 2005, he said: “The “No” camp said Europe’s institutions are too undemocratic. And yet the Constitution goes a long way to resolving the democratic deficit. It gives the European Parliament a much greater role in decision making allowing it to amend and approve almost all new legislation” our emphasis added. Note his words: “It gives the European Parliament a much greater role in decision making” (not full democracy) but “a much greater role allowing it to amend or approve.” Our definition of democracy is based on the principle that citizens of a free society elect the parliament which legislates and elects an executive. You cannot have partial democracy, or a democratic halfway house. There is no middle way in democracy.

In the same speech Mr Barroso stated: “The constitution gives the citizens the right to invite the Commission to introduce proposals on appropriate issues, if they can gather one million signatures in a significant number of member-states.” He goes on: “National parliaments are given important new powers to enforce subsidiarity. They will be given early warning of new legislative proposals from the Commission and the possibility to send them back for a rethink.” Note that he says “gives the citizens the right to invite the Commission”, and to do this “they must gather one million signatures in a significant number of member-states”.

These half-hearted concessions are meaningless because the power resides with the Commission to reject any proposals from citizens or European or national parliaments.

Any meaningful, democratic European parliament must be elected by the people of the Union. All other central institutions of the EU must be subordinate to the parliament in all matters affecting the Union. Our demand is for Democracy in the Parliament, in the Council and in the Commission.

It is the parliament which must have the power to elect and, if necessary, recall the Council and the Commission if either or both have lost the parliament’s confidence. It is fundamental that the bureaucracy be subordinate and accountable to the citizens through the parliament. The suggestion by the political elite that it is not willing, or indeed that it is unnecessary, to redraft the Treaty is typical of the arrogance that sparks the alienation of the citizens of Europe from the institutions and the policies of the EU.

It is clear that an agenda (and conclusions) had been set long before the representatives met to draft the constitutional Treaty. Repeatedly Valery Giscard d’Estaing, who chaired the convention, ignored the views of the majority in the convention and put forward in his report and conclusions the views of the EU’s ruling circles as the views of the convention.

The Constitutional Treaty may not yet be dead, but a strict watch must be kept on the Commission as to how they will try to achieve their aims, which are contained in the Treaty.

The Directive on Services in the Internal Market (the so-called Bolkestien / Services Directive) was and remains a part of this agenda. This directive proposed fundamental changes to the EU services market. The first change relates to the “freedom of establishment” which means that companies or individuals providing a service in one EU country should be subject to little, if any, legal or administrative restriction in setting up in another member state. The second major change was the application of the “country of origin principle”. Under this arrangement a provider of services to

consumers in one member state would be entitled to provide services in another member state on the basis of the laws of the country in which the provider was established or originated and without the need to register with the regulators of the host member state.

On 14-16 February 2006 the European Parliament debated the Directive in plenary session and amended the text, removing, for example, reference to the country of origin principle. This result was achieved by reason of major resistance on the streets. However it is important not to be complacent. The directive proceeds apace. The "freedom to provide services" provision requires member states to respect the right of the service provider to supply services and to guarantee the provider "free access to and free access of a service activity within its territory". Even where a member state it permitted to apply their own regulatory regimes these must still comply with principles of non-discrimination, necessity on grounds of public policy, national security, or the protection of health and the environment - and proportionality, that is the requirement must be justified and appropriate for achieving the declared objectives. Given the powers of the European Court of justice it is likely that member states would face challenges to a regulation as unnecessary or disproportionate, and the 'country of origin' principle may still, in fact, be applied. In any event the political, economic and legal imperative remains the same: the liberalisation of the EU services market.

ETUC (a body which, incidentally, is 75% funded by the European Commission) was forced by its member organisation and by grassroots anger to object to the imposition of this draconian directive. Massive demonstrations were held by trade unionists all over Europe but, once again, an alliance of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in the parliament sold out the interests of the working class. On the positive side the parliament did vote to exclude 'social services' from the draft directive. Social services includes such things as social housing, and homes for disabled or elderly people. Commissioner McCreevy has even threatened that the European Court would override this exemption.

On the negative side the directive still includes all public services within its ambit. This Directive is a big gain for supporters of neoliberalism. The directive, if passed into law will lead to the liberalisation of education services, culture services, environmental services, distribution and purification of water, waste services, postal services, energy services, and the services of storage of dangerous goods. Competition by transnational providers could not be blocked. Thus a creeping privatisation would be set in train. Under the Directive multinational service providers in these areas will have an automatic right to set up in any country of the EU. If elected governments wish to regulate these companies they will be subject to gruelling legal processes at the European Court of Justice to justify every regulation. Multinational service companies have massive financial resources and the case law of the ECJ favours liberalisation.

The situation now prevailing in the Union whereby the forces of capitalism that dominate it continue to expand and consolidate their influence and power in all areas of people's lives has to be challenged and halted. We see the widespread movement of capital across national borders allowing banks, financial institutions, speculators to do what they wish to make huge profits.

As part of this consolidation these forces have established a European Central Bank. It is unelected and unaccountable. The expansion of the EU and NATO into East and Central Europe has meant that Brussels has become the de facto capital of Europe with the European Commission and its bureaucracy a European government in transition.

The various proposals in the draft constitutional treaty would have ensured that this process be strengthened and allowed the ruling circles to accelerate their programme.

The Workers' Party has one test in respect of any political issue: "How does this issue affect the interests of the working class? Is it in their interests or the interests of capitalism?" We are sure that the European Union under its past and present regimes pursues its policies in the interests of the few. The EU has failed the working class. Yes, there have been concessions and improvements in the lives of many people (in Ireland especially) in relation to social and human rights issues. But the reality is that the forces of capital have been able to repeatedly enrich themselves, through the privatisation of state companies across Europe and through widespread corruption at the expense of

the citizens of Europe.

The democratic deficit is the EU's Achilles heel and this is borne out by the experience and views of Jens-Peter Bonde, the Independent Danish MEP since 1979, who in a recent article, made a number of proposals to expand democracy and transparency.

On the issue of Commissioners he said: "The Commission has immense powers. Commissioners are the only people in Europe with the right to propose EU Laws. No-one whom the people of Europe actually elect can propose an EU law". This reality means that such rightists as Charlie McCreevy and Peter Mandelson are two of the few people who can propose EU laws. We all know whose side this pair is on in the struggle between labour and capital. Imagine a room full of 25 McCreevys and 25 Mandelsons and what benefits workers would get from such a gathering.

Jens-Peter Bonde proposes that the people of each member-country elect their own commissioner and that this commissioner reports regularly to their national parliament.

On the question of transparency he seeks to reverse "the burden of proof" so that all EU documents would be automatically published. This would mean that all EU meetings would be open and all documents would be available to the citizens of the EU. The current system means that all new EU laws are prepared in secret working groups of the Commission and the names of the members of these groups are secret. Some 85% of EU laws are agreed in secret working groups under the Council. Members of the European Parliament have no access to these groups. What have our elected representatives to the European Parliament been doing about this scandal, aside from drawing huge salaries and expenses? And in the case of Avril Doyle and Proinsias De Rossa taking large pensions from the Dail - where they no longer sit?

Among capitalist parties there is broad and general agreement on the direction that the European Union should pursue. The defeat of the constitutional treaty by Dutch and French voters will force these parties to re-assess their tactics, but they will continue with their overall objective of creating a unified, capitalist Europe. We have already seen many aspects of their agenda, including cuts in public spending, welfare, pensions, extending the working week, slashing the budgets of health, education and housing all to different degrees in different countries.

Simultaneously we see the steady and substantial loss of jobs in the older member-states to newer members, which now have lower wages and costs. As Marx predicted, capitalism has no compunction in transferring jobs from one region or continent to another to take advantage of lower wages, fewer workers' rights and less restriction on capital's ability to exploit workers and resources.

In Ireland in recent times we have witnessed the coming of a huge number of migrant workers from the new member countries of the EU. We are also experiencing serious, widespread and sickening exploitation of thousands of these workers. Many employers in the construction and service industries have employed agencies or in some cases opened offices in a number of these new member countries (Poland and Hungary in particular) to recruit workers for employment in Ireland.

The scandal is that these workers are paid the rates applicable to their native country, not to Ireland. Construction workers are being paid 6 euro an hour while the rate for the job is nearer 16 euro per hour. On top of that these workers are being deprived of pension rights and other entitlements. Many are living in appalling conditions in caravans or huts on illegal sites for which they are being charged a large portion of their wages.

The Turkish company GAMA's exploitation of its workers earlier this year was exposed and one would expect that the various government departments concerned with the protection of workers' rights would by now have a system in place that would safeguard workers. Not so. In fact the exploitation of migrant and indeed native workers has become more blatant and cruel. Given that all the parties involved in these examples are members of the European Union why are laws to protect workers not on the statute book of the EU and applied equally and strictly across the entire European Union? The answer lies in the system which rules and underlies the European Union, capitalism.

The contempt which the employers' organisations and the vast bulk of employers hold their workers is well illustrated by the actions of the Irish Ferries Company which decided to make hundreds of its workers redundant without any consultation. It states quite clearly that its decision is based on profit and to achieve this it will sack hundreds of Irish workers and employ hundreds of migrant workers on low pay. And all within the law as drafted and enforced by the EU Commission and bureaucracy.

Coupled with this there is a continuous assault on the public sector for the benefit of a clique of capitalists. The scandal of the Telecom sell-off in Ireland, when leading trade unionists and capitalists got together to bribe and con workers and hundreds of thousands of small investors, should serve as a clear example of what is intended for other public companies.

These are among the many crucial issues confronting progressive parties throughout Europe. In addition, the peoples of Europe face the questions of pollution and the loss of national culture, identity and national sovereignty.

There is a clear need for the progressive forces across the European continent to take unified action to begin to properly combat on a continental basis the activities and policies of capitalism in all its manifestations.

This should begin with a well-prepared European Union conference open to all progressive parties. The Workers' Party would suggest a similar initiative to the San Paulo Forum, which brought together all progressive parties and movements in Latin and Central America. After some years and much discussion, there gradually emerged a consensus for a realistic programme of action among the progressive parties and movements.

We recognise that the Union is now an established and important factor in the lives of hundreds of millions of people in 25 countries. A campaign for Ireland's withdrawal is not viable having regard to the political realities in this country. In those circumstances, it is necessary to create a people's Europe. There is nothing inherently wrong in a Union of free independent countries working together for the benefit of all. The priority must be a coordinated programme to attract and win workers to the cause of Socialism. This struggle must start with the demand for democratisation, starting with basic reforms which we have called for in the course of this document.

The key demand is Democracy in all areas of life in the EU. Accountability and Transparency must form the cornerstone in every decision-making process. Voters must have the right to recall their MEPs if they are dissatisfied with the work and voting record of the member. This process can only be set in place when twenty per cent of the registered voters in the member's constituency sign a petition for the member's recall.

It remains essential to oppose privatisation and defend all public sector enterprises. The recent statement by President Barroso that to all intent and purposes the Constitutional Treaty is now off the agenda, or at least for the next three years, while welcome to all progressives, is not enough. The campaign for the rejection of the draft European Constitution as approved by the Intergovernmental Conference on 18 June 2004 remains a vital task for the Left in Europe because the ideas and aims it contains remain the aim of the ruling circles in the EU.

The defeat for the Constitution in France and the Netherlands should not lull the Left into false security. The previous record of the EU in the case of Denmark and Ireland shows little regard for democracy and the political battle over the Constitution enshrines the basic principles of laissez-faire capitalism as the economic system of the EU. It places the permanent domination of capital over labour at the heart of the European Union.

The obligation to follow and implement neo-liberal economic policies at regional and national level

sets the privatisation of public services and the implementation of monetarist economic policies as political imperatives. It further centralises the EU, removes power from national parliaments and locates that power in remote EU institutions. The Constitution effectively transforms the current European Union into a federal state. The fight against the EU Constitution is, accordingly, a struggle in defence of democracy.

Demands:

- * The key demand is Democracy in all areas of life in the EU.
- * Accountability and Transparency must be a cornerstone of all decisions.
- * The right of voters to recall their members of parliament if they are dissatisfied with the work and voting record of the member. This process can only be set in place when twenty per cent of the registered voters in the member's constituency sign a petition for the members recall.
- * Oppose Privatisation and defend all Public Sector enterprises.
- * End the exploitation of migrant workers by enacting legislation which will make employers accountable so that all their workers are protected and given full rights as citizens of each EU country.

The Workers' Party stands with our fellow European socialists in all European progressive organisations who are committed to a different Europe based on genuine internationalism, peace, equality, solidarity, dignity, social progress and workers' rights, a respect for and defence of the environment and the value of all living things over private profit and corporate greed.