

European Labor Rejects 'Frankenstein' Directive

by Rainer Apel

In late November, a number of labor unions from several European countries staged protest actions against the European Union Commission and its "Bolkestein Directive" for radical deregulation and privatization. Three thousand members of the European Federation of Building and Food Workers, and the European Federation of Public Service Unions, marched in Brussels on Nov. 25, under the banner, "Bolkestein Equals Frankenstein," and charged the EU Commission with proposing "death to the European social model," by imposing "the law of the jungle."

Named after its initiator, former EU Commissioner for Competition Frits Bolkestein, the directive is part of a package of deregulation and privatization measures, which is supposed to make the European Union the "most competitive and efficient economic bloc of the world" by 2010. First proposed officially in January 2004, the Bolkestein Directive has now entered the decisive round of negotiations, and the EU's official timetable calls for its passage by Spring 2005. Bolkestein himself quit the Commission post several weeks ago, but his directive is on the agenda of the new Commission that took office in mid-November.

Dock Workers Protest

Labor resistance broke out with coordinated warning strikes on Nov. 19, by dock workers in Germany, Denmark, Netherlands, Britain, France, and Greece, lasting for several hours. This was in particular to protest against the directive's plan to abandon existing guidelines for loading and unloading cargo at ports, which currently include strict rules as to what is acceptable to dock workers in terms of working time, working conditions, and health standards. The Bolkestein Directive would authorize owners of ships to have their own crews do the unloading and loading, rather than longshoremen. That is a particularly obnoxious demand, as crews on many, if not most, freighters are not even trained properly as seamen, much less for the work of operating cranes and like equivalent at port. Already now, there is a huge gray area involving working standards for crews of ships which are not registered in Europe, and whose owners do not feel obliged to ensure the minimal standards that are mandated by law in Europe. After this day of action in numerous ports of Europe, representatives of dock workers from all EU member countries met in Brussels on Nov. 22, to map out more protests and strikes.

The issue of deregulation was also addressed on Nov. 23, by the French road transport association OTRE, which had 700 trucks from all parts of France converging on Paris. The protest was mainly against diesel fuel-price inflation, but also against the European Commission's call for more transport sector deregulation, which would abandon protective national standards and legalize dumping practices by non-French companies.

Driving Down Wages

On Nov. 24, the German construction workers union warned that it was considering protests and warning strikes against another aspect of the Bolkestein Directive, which would legalize driving down wages on construction sites to the level of the lowest wage paid anywhere in the European Union.

For example, if Polish workers worked in Germany at 10% of the wage usually paid to German workers, this could be declared "legal" in Poland, without any German institution being able to legally oppose it, as is possible now. Next to the docks, the construction sector is the one with the biggest violations of existing labor legislation. Labor unions have been fighting an uphill battle for years, against practices coming very close to those that would become legal under the Bolkestein formula. In many cases, construction workers from non-German countries have not even been paid their meager wages in the range of 20-30% of what a German worker would receive, because the entrepreneur would stay outside the territory of Germany, and could therefore not be held responsible, as Portuguese, Czech, or Spanish authorities would not feel an obligation, under their less stringent legislation, to intervene on the case.

The Nov. 25 Brussels demonstration, mentioned above, underlined that the consequences of the Bolkestein Directive would be "lower pay, longer working hours," and that "health, education, culture, and other resources would be treated just like material commodities." "Degradation of employee rights" would go along with "disruption of the employment market in Europe," the protesters charged, warning that the Bolkestein Directive was a "threat to the survival of high-quality public services." Particularly egregious, the workers said, is the planned "reform" of health services, which would "ultimately mean the end of any public health service worthy of the name."

The Brussels demonstrators presented a statement saying: "We cannot accept an ultra-liberal Europe that is fully subjected to the laws of the market, where employees are regarded as merchandise, and where restructuring, dismissals, and decentralization are the order of the day."

"We also demand high-quality public services accessible to everyone, and consequently a framework directive for services of general interest," the statement said, making reference to the fact that "public and private services are not equal," as alleged by the advocates of free trade.