

The Enemy of European Labor Is Maastricht

by Rainer Apel

In a well-coordinated, unprecedented labor union action, more than 40,000 longshoremen and ship pilots on Jan. 11 staged a walk-out in about 50 ports of Europe, notably the big ports in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. The protests were against the European Commission's Port Package II plan, for further deregulation of ports, resulting in a dismantling of traditional standards of loading-unloading, and of safety and health protection.

The Commission's plan would, for example, permit any "entrepreneur" from anywhere in the globalized world, to offer his port package services at rock-bottom prices, and would even permit unscrupulous ship-owners to force their own crews to load and unload—whether they were qualified to do so or not, and whether they got extra pay for it or not. The "crew can do it themselves" plan is absurd, because modern container ships have no cranes on board, and therefore depend on crane infrastructure to load and unload the huge containers. On land, the plan envisages a total deregulation of port infrastructure and procedures; for example, port authorities would be able to grant no licenses to packaging firms for more than three years, and no job guarantees would be given to the longshoremen and other personnel. And, for profit reasons, business would concentrate on the container shipments at the biggest ports which could handle several million containers every year (such as Rotterdam, Hamburg, Gioia Tauro), whereas the smaller ports would be abandoned.

The 24-hour protest was presented as just the first among several interventions to stop the Port Package II plan. The action was supported by the (public sector) port authorities themselves, and by the shipowners. The governments of France, Germany, and Sweden oppose the European Commission's plan fully, while several other governments would only accept aspects of it. In the European Parliament, a majority of deputies is opposed or highly skeptical.

On Jan. 16, longshoremen staged work-stoppages in the big ports again, joined by sympathy strikes in many smaller ports. Some of the protests and strike actions were to end on Jan. 18, when the vote on the Port Package II plan was held in the European Parliament.

Among the bigger ports on strike, were Santander, Bilbao, Marseille, La Rochelle, Cherbourg, Antwerp, Gent, Zeebrugge, Rotterdam, Piraeus, and Thessaloniki. A protest march and rally, with thousands of longshoremen from 15 European Union (EU) member states, took place in Brussels,

the seat of the European Commission and of the European Parliament.

Spokesmen for the transport workers also announced strikes against the Port Package II plan. Warnings were issued that Europe's ports would be brought to a halt, like the U.S. West Coast ports were in the longshoremen's strike in 2003; the container ports in Greece, Spain, Belgium, Netherlands, and Germany account for most of the 80% of imports-exports that the EU handles through its port infrastructure.

Roll Back Deregulation

The port strikes are only one aspect of a broad mobilization of labor unions in Europe; protests will be launched also against the Bolkestein Directive, the EU Commission blueprint for the deregulation of the entire services sector in Europe. Named after Frits Bolkestein, the former EU Commissioner in charge of the plan, the directive wants to turn services rules upside down: So far, services in any European state have to abide by the laws of that state, but Bolkestein argued that for reasons of "competitiveness," only the laws of the state in which the servicing firms have their home base, should govern future EU practice. This would imply that firms from the largely deregulated economies of Eastern Europe could compete with firms from the more regulated western countries, because the absence of minimum pay and health standards regulations would enable eastern rivals to offer services at cut-throat prices. All services, from operating parking meters to hospitals, from airport security to garbage removal, would increasingly be offered to low-cost operators by the chronically cash-strapped municipalities. The destructive nature of the EU's Maastricht Treaty budget-cutting policy is exposed in an exemplary way, with this directive.

A vote in the European Parliament on the directive is scheduled for mid-February, and a broad labor union campaign, officially endorsed by the German Social Democrats, has begun, to culminate in a protest rally in Berlin on Feb. 11. Around that date, demonstrations will also be staged in numerous other capitals of Europe, and on Feb. 14, when the European Parliament is expected to begin its debate on the directive, labor unions from across Europe want to bring up to 100,000 protesters from the services sector as well as from other branches, to Brussels.

The real enemy target of the campaign is, however, not the directive as such, but the Maastricht system, which bans EU member governments from investment programs, forces them to deregulate and to privatize, and eliminates millions of jobs in Europe. Many labor union members see Maastricht as the main evil, but union bureaucrats have hesitated to say so. Therefore it is important to address the issue, so that the labor mobilization achieves a breakthrough. The LaRouche Movement in Germany and France in particular, where it has its strongest bases in Europe, is issuing a campaign statement for the abolition of Maastricht that will go out as a leaflet for mass distribution, during the next three weeks.