

Alter-Summit in Athens: Pseudo-Left Response to Growing Social Opposition in Europe

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Last weekend, approximately 200 European trade unions, political NGOs (non-governmental organizations), charity groups, and feminist, environmentalist and pseudo-left groupings organized a so-called Alter-Summit in Athens. The congress endorsed the institutions of the European Union (EU), with which union bureaucracies have worked closely in negotiating and approving austerity policies since the outbreak of the European debt crisis.

On Friday and Saturday, some 1,000 people from across Europe came to the Olympia area of northern Athens to discuss in different “assemblies” about themes including “social rights”, “ecology” or “education”.

The summit began with a special “feminist assembly”, in which women attending the meeting gathered separately for discussion.

The turnout was much lower than the 5,000 attendees that were expected. This reflects the bitter experience of Greece as the focal point of social counter-revolution in Europe. After numerous EU bailout packages negotiated with the Greek government and union bureaucracy, more than 60 percent of the youth are unemployed, wages have fallen by 35 to 50 per cent on average, and the education system has been smashed.

The Alter-Summit’s organizers—including many of Europe’s biggest trade unions, which played key roles in negotiating social attacks on workers across Europe—could not generate any genuine broader enthusiasm.

Greece’s two main union confederations, GSEE and ADEDY, have functioned as extended arms of the state, suppressing working class opposition to the cuts and by trying to limit every action of the workers to brief protest strikes. When Athens put the striking subway drivers, seamen and teachers under martial law to force them back to work, ADEDY and GSEE called off solidarity strikes.

The German IG Metall, the largest single trade union worldwide and one of the sponsors of the summit, already organized the closure of an auto plant in Germany—the traditional Opel plant in Bochum.

Besides these organizations, the major European pseudo-left parties were active at the conference, even though they did not officially sign the initial appeal. Members of France’s New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the German Left Party and the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) attended the conference. Many of their affiliated organizations—the Left Party’s Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, SYRIZA member party AKOA, or the NPA-affiliated *Solidaire* trade union—helped organize the summit and signed its documents.

These organizations have played a reactionary role throughout Europe. The Left Party not only facilitated the bailout of the banks in the German parliament, but organized itself the sharpest social attacks in different states throughout Germany. SYRIZA is preparing [to join the government in Greece](#), having pledged to repay the banks.

In the center of the Alter-Summit stood its so-called “People’s Manifesto”, which outlines “urgent common priorities for a democratic, social, ecological and feminist Europe” shared by the participating organizations.

This document is essentially the outline of an alternative austerity policy, hidden under formless proposals for “wage increases” or an “adequate minimum wage”. Coming from organizations such as the GSEE, which has helped impose one wave of EU wage cuts after another, such a demand is a cynical ploy. It aims to hide the manifesto’s anti-working class program behind demands which the Alter-Summit’s organizers not only are unwilling to fight for, but are actively hostile to.

Far more prominent in the “People’s Manifesto” is the defense of the EU. “Rising inequalities endanger social cohesion,” the manifesto states in its preface, continuing: “The very existence of the European Union is now at risk”. For this reason, they demand “that the EU institutions must be brought under democratic control, just as the public interest must prevail and ecological and social needs be met.”

This presentation of the EU as a potential guarantor of “public interest” and of “social needs” is absurd. From its founding in 1992, the EU was a tool of the ruling elite to smash the living standard of the working class first in Eastern Europe and then throughout the continent. The brutal social attacks in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy are conducted by its institutions.

With their absurd as desperate defense of the EU, the summit participants’ response to the growing social opposition within the European population not only against austerity, but also against the EU institutions.

In the last two weeks, a whole slew of comments in the bourgeois press have warned against the dangers posed by growing opposition to the EU. While an UN report said that the risk of “social unrest” is dramatically rising, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble spoke of the threat of “revolution”.

The trade unions and pseudo-left parties are responding to this situation by praising the EU and developing an alternate program for imposing austerity measures in Europe.

The manifesto opposes cancelling the debts of the southern European countries, which have been the main mechanism to introduce austerity measures in these countries. Instead, it opposes existing credit agreement with the EU and calls for a haircut of the debts. The latter already happened in Greece—with full support from the lenders, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the EU—in a move that did not ease austerity, but instead aimed to save private lenders’ money.

The manifesto also expresses its support for another IMF proposal. It demands to “mandate and oblige the European Central Bank [ECB] and other public European banking institutions to lend directly to states at low interest”. Having the ECB as the lender of last resort is just another way to repay major banks holding sovereign debts with freshly-printed money.

The manifesto also demands a public bailout of failed banks—a policy the EU has already employed across Europe, to transfer bad private debts onto governments' balance sheets to justify more reactionary budget cuts. In another sign of the Alter-Summit organizers' deep hostility to socialist policies, the nationalization of banks that are not failing is explicitly ruled out.

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