

European Union: 65 hours? We can stop them! - Why this week's international day of action was called

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The proposed modification of the current European Working Time Directive, agreed in June by the Employment Ministers of the European Union (EU) and awaiting approval by the European Parliament, represents one step further in the process of greater flexibility of work relations and the erosion of the social guarantees of European workers. Against this serious backward movement, this October 7, a day of mobilization called in several EU countries is taking place.

The new "65 hour Directive", as it is known, allows the working day to be extended up to 60 or 65 hours, accentuates its flexibility and irregular distribution, and favours individual contracts between companies and workers to fix its duration, thus eroding collective bargaining and individualizing labour relations. An increase in the working day is synonymous also with greater work related risks, health problems and more difficulty in balancing working life with family and personal commitments. Its content connects with the neoliberal logic of European integration, with the approach derived from the Lisbon Strategy approved in 2000 and with the spirit of the failed European Constitution and the later Treaty of Lisbon which includes the essential content of that Constitution. Once approved, the measures envisaged will affect first and foremost precarious and immigrant workers. A labour market with high rates of unemployment and precarity like that of the Spanish State will suffer particularly from the application of the Directive.

The systems of social protection and the regulations of the existing labour market in EU countries are an obstacle to the dominant classes in their fight for a hegemonic and competitive position within the global economy. For this reason, neoliberal reforms and the pressure on wage earners and on the bases of the so-called "European social model" are intensifying, seeking the reduction of labour costs, the dismantling of the systems of social protection and the super-exploitation of workers. The present context of economic crisis will accelerate still further this dynamic. The Directive on Return, the "Directive of Shame" which penalizes the immigrant population is a clear example of this.

The day of mobilization on October 7, with strikes of 5 to 15 minutes in workplaces, comes at the request of the European Trades Union Confederation (ETUC) which brings together the big unions of the continent. Traditionally, the ETUC has maintained a frustrating position of "critical support" for the logic of European integration, as was patent in the past debates on the draft "European Constitution". There has only been opposition to concrete initiatives judged to be "excessive" like the first draft of the Bolkestein Directive, concerning liberalization of the public services. For this reason, the decision of the ETUC to oppose the "65 hour Directive" and call a day of mobilization is positive, although deeply insufficient. It should be the beginning of a real sustained campaign against the Directive and not merely a symbolic day without follow up. But for anything to happen it will be necessary to push from below, as is already known by most of the combative social and union

movements who will participate on the day.

The fight against 65 hours is very defensive, intended to prevent a great backward movement and a reduction of long won rights. But it should be remembered that far from extending the day, what European workers need is its reduction. We do not want 65 hours, but 35 hours... or less!

Few regressive Directives have been stopped in their tracks in the history of the UE. Among those which have is that concerning the liberalization of port services, rejected by the European Parliament after an intense mobilization of the workers in that sector, including one "Euro strike" in January 2003 that involved more than 20,000 port workers and one "Euro demonstration" in front of the Parliament in Strasbourg in March of the same year. The new revised version of the Directive was blocked again in January 2006 due to insufficient support in the Parliament, opposite which thousands of workers were again congregated, accompanying their protest with strikes in the main EU ports. The message that can be drawn from the success of the port workers seems clear: articulating resistance and giving a coordinated mobilised response on a European scale to neoliberal reforms is the path to follow. While adapting fatalistically to the neoliberal measures only leads to a continued loss of rights.

At the recent European Social Forum in Malmo (Sweden), in spite of its limits and the impasses in which it is sunk, new initiatives for coordination of the social movements opposing neoliberal globalisation were approved, among them an alternative meeting in Brussels in March 2008 during the summit of the EU Heads of State. Let us hope that these campaigns continue advancing towards that "other possible" and necessary Europe as much as they distance us from the interests of the employers.

P.S.

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