

European Governments Falling Left and Right

by Rainer Apel

Starting in mid-March, with the decision of the Spanish electorate to vote conservative Prime Minister José Maria Aznar out of office, European governments have gone into a period of intense instability. One of the leading reasons is the fact that some of these governments had linked their cause with that of the Bush Administration's war against Iraq, which is blowing up in the occupiers' faces. But equally threatening to their survival, is the fact that most European governments, including those opposing the war, have failed to address the fundamental issues affecting their populations, especially the global depression collapse.

The fall of Aznar, for example, while mainly provoked by his active support for the Iraq War (of which his instantly exposed lies about the real authors of the March 11 Madrid bombings were an integral aspect), was a product of broad opposition to his neo-liberal austerity policies. The vote for Socialist Francisco Zapatero was a call for a profound change in economic policy.

A similar process is going on in Poland, where broad popular anger at the government's pro-war policy on Iraq mixed with growing opposition to its austerity policy, forced Prime Minister Leszek Miller, faced with the March 21 exit of another 20 members of his minority government coalition in the Parliament, to announce his resignation for May 2.

Then there is Italy, where Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has held on in the face of heavy opposition to Italian involvement in Iraq, as well as resistance to his austerity programs. In a widely read interview with the March 27-28 weekend edition of Italy's *Corriere della Sera*, European Commission President Romano Prodi (a former Italian Prime Minister) was introduced as the potential head of a post-Berlusconi Italian government. Indeed, after the mid-June election for European Parliament, Prodi might quit his post at the European Union's headquarters in Brussels, to head an anti-Berlusconi alliance in early Italian elections. Prodi said that the war against Iraq (and implicitly, the deployment of Italian troops) was illegitimate.

War Opponents Also Hit

But a similar upheaval is going on even where governments are opposed to the Iraq War. In Greece, for example, the Socialists were voted out in the national election of March

7, mostly on economic issues. There has hardly been a single week without labor strikes and other walk-outs, and although the incoming conservative government does not pose any acceptable economic policy alternative, the electorate was just tired of keeping the Socialist government.

Then there's France, where the conservative governing coalition, which has been in the forefront of international resistance to the Iraq War, was roundly defeated in the regional elections on March 21 and 28. Of 22 regions, 20 went over to the Socialists. The landslide victory of the Socialists occurred against a background of continuous labor protests in French cities, and although these were only regional elections, the President of France, Jacques Chirac, saw no alternative to reshuffling the government. The new Cabinet is widely seen as a transition, however, as the elections for European Parliament on June 13 are expected to result in another defeat for the conservatives and another reshuffle.

Were there national elections in Germany now, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder would be voted out as well: His popularity has dropped to less than 33%. In September 2002, Schröder managed to defeat the opposition Christian Democrats by only a few thousand votes nationally, with his campaign against the coming Iraq War. But now, 18 months later, discontent over his "budget reforms" austerity has become so strong that the rating of his Social Democrats is at less than 25% of the vote. Schröder is only saved by the fact that the head of the Christian Democratic Union, Angela Merkel, is even more unpopular than he is, and does not dare to challenge him directly.

Fortunately for most European governments, there are no national elections scheduled right now, otherwise they would have extreme difficulties staying in power, as discontent over the rising unemployment, worsening economic situation, and harsh cuts in the social welfare and labor market budgets is on the rise everywhere.

Maastricht Must Go

None of the reshuffles so far will help to improve the situation anywhere in Europe, especially with respect to the economy. None of the economic problems can be solved, unless the budget-balancing policy of the European Union's Maastricht Rules is abandoned. The Maastricht "Stability Pact," as it is called officially, bans individual EU member governments from launching state-funded conjunctural incentives, special labor market mobilization programs, and public sector and infrastructure projects. The ailing banking, insurance, and telecom sectors of Europe are certain to add more jobless to the statistics in the coming months, and labor union protests will increase, undoubtedly.

Ungovernability will dominate Europe, unless its governments adopt a pro-investment crash program, based on state-controlled productive credit-generation of the kind that has been proposed by the LaRouche movement, for the June 13 elections for European Parliament.