

1974-style political chaos ahead after European summit fails

by Rainer Apel

The March 19-20 Brussels summit meeting of the European Community's 10 heads of state ended with a bang: Britain's Maggie Thatcher threatened to pull out all British payments to the common budget if her country's contribution was not cut by two-thirds. She thus torpedoed a carefully prepared austerity package which was to have solved the Community's budgetary problems with one blow: lowering the milk production quotas, lowering the agricultural prices, and increasing the value-added tax. Mrs. Thatcher said "no" because she thought the measures were "not going far enough," and this blew all the summit expectations to pieces.

Maggie Thatcher has so far had no scruples about implementing brutal austerity in her own country, but the other nine heads of state have. The Republic of Ireland, for example, cannot approve any cuts in milk production, because the country has already an unemployment rate of 17% and has 10% of its total active work force employed in the milk-farming sector. That is why the Irish premier, Gerry Fitzgerald, stormed out of the Brussels meeting first—he could not continue the discussion on the basis of such austerity conditions.

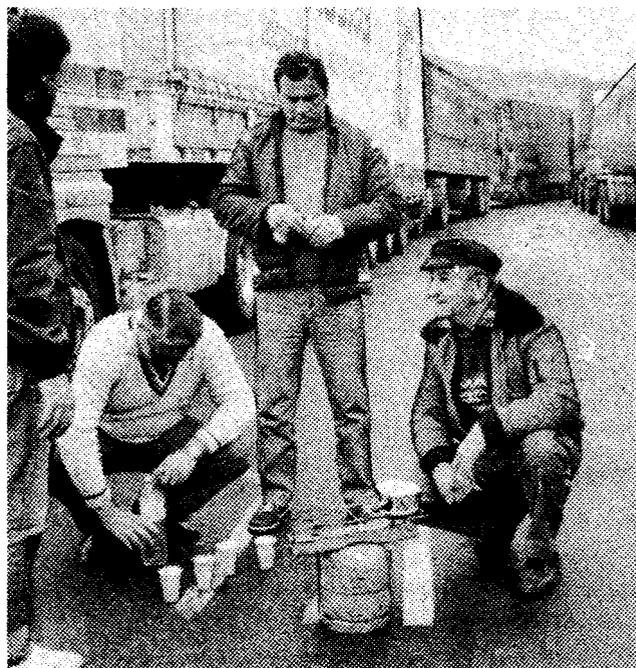
The British tactics at the European Community have, however, succeeded in blocking any viable solution to the economic depression for several years, using threats, blackmail, and raising of false expectations. The general commitment to austerity policies among the other European governments has always made them vulnerable to manipulation by the British. The Community's adherence to the Club of Rome's ideology of post-industrialism and zero-growth monetarism has created such social and economic instability that the failure of the latest Brussels summit is likely to help plunge Western Europe into chaos and virtual ungovernability now.

General European unrest

Western Europe is heading into a phase of instability comparable to the 1973-75 period, which saw mass strikes, a surge in separatism and terrorism, and the collapse of all European governments within a time span of several months. As in 1974, Great Britain is in the forefront: The British government's National Coal Board is committed to firing

80,000-100,000 mining workers, and has hired the man who ruined the country's steel sector, Ian McGregor. His unscrupulous austerity policy created a welcome pretext for the predominantly communist radical currents in the mining workers union to launch a gigantic strike, paralyzing the country's mining sector. Violent clashes with the police and "solidarity strikes" of longshoremen, who refuse to unload any imported coal, have helped to spread an atmosphere of despair and emergency. This atmosphere is now spreading throughout Europe.

In France, mass riots of farmers and steel workers, which overlapped with separatist currents in Brittany, Normandy, and the Alsace region, have turned parts of the country into emergency zones. In Le Mans, 15,000 farmers enraged over the Brussels decisions turned their rage against the "hated



French truckdrivers taking a coffee break at the blockade on the Spanish border.

institutions” in mid-March: After hijacking and burning a British truck transporting beef, they started street fights with the police and stormed the city’s police headquarters. In Lille, thousands of farmers threw tens of thousands of eggs at the mayor’s office, and in Alsace, key roads were blocked by tractors and barricades.

A sad resurgence of violent *jacqueries* among France’s peasantry is spreading among French labor as well. Mobs of steel workers protesting the government’s plans to drastically shrink the steel sector by massive layoffs started to block roads in Caen, Longwy, Nancy, Fos-sûr-Mer and other cities. At the same time, 1,000 French truckers blocked the borders to northern Spain.

Basque ‘truck wars’

The truckers, enraged at the time-consuming transit procedures at Europe’s southern borders and at the French government for various other reasons, had already besieged Paris three weeks earlier by blocking all roads leading to the country’s capital. They blocked the borders to Spain because their trucks have been torched and arsoned by Basque extremists when trying to pass through the Basque region.

Superficially, the cause of the Spanish unrest was the shelling of several Spanish fishing boats by the French coast guard in the Gulf of Biscay; in reality, the resurgence of Basque separatism against the central government in Madrid has been accompanied by a violent xenophobia which turned against predominantly French truckers.

Within one week, 30 trucks were set on fire by Basque extremists, and the Spanish government was forced to deploy the Guardia Civil (National Guard) to protect foreign trucks against attacks. In one case, the Guardia arrested about 50 of a gang of 200 waiting for a convoy of trucks in an ambush, and found a cache of Molotov cocktails and other weapons.

But these “truck wars” are only the most publicized aspect of Basque separatism and terrorism. The whole terrorist exile community of Basques living in southern France has been activated, and on the morning of March 23, the Spanish coast guard succeeded in shooting dead four such terrorists who tried to get into Spain from the sea by boat, equipped with heavy arms. The Spanish government is embarrassed at the permissiveness the French authorities have so far shown toward the activities of the Basque exiles on French territory, and the recent destabilization of the Basque region bears the potential of a major diplomatic clash between Spain and France.

German instability

In West Germany, where farmers are traditionally placid, heavy income losses of 20-22% in the past year and expected losses of an average 25% for this year have built up considerable rage against Brussels and against the Bonn government which is being accused of working against the nation’s farming sector. The first mass demonstrations by farmers

have started, and some farmer organization officials have warned: “We usually don’t take the actions of French farmers as an example, but we can block roads too!”

The deterioration in the German steel, ship-building, and capital-goods sectors, which has already contributed to considerable labor unrest, has been spreading into the labor movement as a whole around the issue of the 35-hour work week. The metalworkers have made this an issue for general strike, and their talk about a “political mass strike against the U.S. missiles” now poses a threat to the country’s domestic stability.

The massive impact on labor of Soviet propaganda against the stationing of the U.S. Euromissiles and the subversion communist agents have launched inside the unions is driving the country into potential ungovernability—and all of this is happening at a time when the government is shaken by scandals. The present situation in Germany recalls the spring of 1974, when mass labor strikes and the “Guillaume Affair” (a highly placed East German agent was discovered in the Chancellor’s own office) toppled the Brandt government.

The Italian government is under siege by the Communist Party and its own labor union, the CGIL, with a mass-strike campaign starting with the “march on Rome” on March 24. In Belgium, where the same issue—cutting the inflation compensator—has brought up all of the country’s labor unions against the government of Premier Martens, a strike wave might topple the government within days. Martens won a recent vote on his austerity package in the parliament by a margin of only one vote.

The government of the Netherlands, a country with an official unemployment rate of between 13% and 15%, is on its way out, too. Since major sections of the ruling Christian Democrats—with unofficial backing by the Royal House—have decided to join the campaign against the U.S. missiles, the Liberals have threatened to leave the coalition government. The rumor is that if the government were to resign and declare new elections, the anti-American Labor Party would win.

In Denmark, the main destabilizing threat is emerging from the fishermen, who have protested the European Community’s agricultural austerity formula which cuts their fishing quotas considerably. They have threatened to block the port of Copenhagen, the country’s capital, and if need be, the Sund as well, the strait between Denmark and Sweden which connects the Baltic Sea with the North Atlantic.

This situation, which could immediately be remedied by a crash program for economic recovery based on low-interest credit and industrial investment, is made worse by the anti-progress, anti-industrial outlook of most European governments. As one official in Bonn put it: “Well, we knew it would be getting tough. But I think we will have to live with these riots.”

This is the same austerity philosophy prevailing at the court of France before the “riots” vandalized it in 1789.