

# The British disease is spreading throughout Western Europe

by Rainer Apel

When *Newsweek* magazine ran a recent cover story, "Europe Isn't Working," portraying Western Europe as the sick man of the Western alliance, a zone of economic, technological decline and of cultural pessimism, what *Newsweek* did not reveal was the reason for this mess. The most recent disasters in European politics can be called—the "British Problem."

The British Problem is the double game played by the British oligarchy and its public servants against the continent of Europe and against the United States. This policy has strategic-military and economic aspects; both emerged in the two weeks between March 19 and April 3. At the strategic-military level, the British government made efforts to exploit for its own purposes the policy vacuum created by Henry Kissinger in the alliance: Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher voiced her interest in inducing the United States not to actually develop the strategic beam defense-weapons program, but to make it a bargaining chip in talks with the Soviets—who are well on their way to deploying beam weapons.

Meanwhile, her secretary of defense, Michael Heseltine, contacted his colleague in the West German government, Manfred Wörner, and fed him with additional doubts on the U.S. "Strategic Defense Initiative" policy of beam-weapons development. Heseltine said that these weapons were being pursued to enable the United States to decouple from Europe. U.S. beam weapons would be used to protect U.S. territory from Soviet ICBMs, he claimed, but would do nothing against the medium- and short-range missiles threatening Europe.

Wörner, who grew rather paranoid during the recent scandal in Bonn around General Kiessling, conveyed this British distortion in a background briefing to journalists in Bonn, and announced that he would be the "voice of Europe's skepticism against these new weapons" at the NATO defense ministers' meeting in Turkey, on April 2.

The British oligarchy's chief spokesman on strategic matters, Peter Lord Carrington, appeared on West German TV March 27, to spread his view that "there will not be anything like cheap defense with . . . beam weapons." As Carrington added, he saw Henry Kissinger "as the only one around to have any ideas about NATO's future at all." Since Carrington is preparing to take office as NATO's next secretary-general (replacing Joseph Luns in July), his statement could be taken

as a statement of intent on the future policy of NATO in Western Europe. Carrington's remarks also indicated that Britain was making efforts to position herself as the central game-master for Europe in the "crisis of absence of the U.S.A."—the crisis orchestrated by Carrington and his business partner at Kissinger Associates, Henry Kissinger!

## British economic warfare on continent

This strategic move was accompanied by massive economic warfare by the British against the continent of Europe. The British government made the ongoing dispute over the distribution of financial shares in the European Community's common budget its main lever of blackmail. Instead of agreeing on a policy of economic growth, the Community agreed on austerity and cuts in subsidies to the vital sectors of agriculture, steel, shipbuilding, and mining. Again, this austerity package was sealed with the complicity of the German government, which decided to play Britain's junior partner. Bonn's foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, candidly told the West German weekly, *Der Spiegel*, March 26 that on European policy, he was "pulling the same rope together with the British," and saw "with certain interest that the British government is convinced that the austerity measures agreed upon did not go far enough."

The British argument was that, if the European Community did not go for massive austerity and budgetary cuts, London would stop all payments into the common budget, which then would fall into an open bankruptcy situation with 8-10 billion deutschemarks uncovered by August/September of this year.

If any resistance remained to this British-German alliance for austerity in Europe a week after the failure of the European summit in Brussels (March 19-20), Genscher's remarks pulled the rug from under those who—like the Irish—still dared to say "no" to the blackmail. Two days after the Genscher interview in *Der Spiegel* came out, the Bonn cabinet voted up the agricultural austerity formula of the European Commission (the milk quota). The French government followed on March 29, passing the "Plan Acier" (steel plan) and the "Fourth Consolidation Plan," which will reduce steel production and shipbuilding in France by one third within two to three years. The "consolidation sacrifice" to be paid

for this austerity policy by France's mining workers will be even higher. On March 30, the Irish surrendered to the agro-austerity package. The coercive unity of the Europeans on austerity did, however, open a Pandora's box of social upheaval spilling all over Europe.

## Strikes erupt in France, Belgium, Germany, U.K.

What followed promptly were the most violent labor riots France has ever seen: Whipped up by agitators of the Communist-controlled CGT union, thousands of steel workers rampaged in key steel-production regions, unrolling rolls of sheet metal in the streets of Longwy (Lorraine), Metz, Marseille, blocking railroad connections and inner-city traffic. In Metz and Longwy, mobs of workers armed with iron bars and picks stormed the local offices of the governing Socialist Party and vandalized them, as they did with most of the municipal office buildings in Longwy. The CGT called a general steel strike for April 4, and a "March on Paris" for April 13.

The chief inciter of the mob, the French Communist Party (PCF), accused its coalition partner in the Paris government, the Socialists, of having caused the riots with a policy never approved by the PCF. PCF secretary Georges Marchais accused the Mitterrand government of "having committed treason against the coalition agreement of 1981" and threatened a labor insurrection: "If the workers fail to reverse this government policy, I am sure the social situation in this country will get very bad." Radical CGT officials in Lorraine, the region hit by the worst violence, said that they were prepared to "fight the CRS" (the French anti-riot police).

Mitterrand's government, following the bad advice of the two "austerity popes," Finance Minister Jacques Delors and Agriculture Minister Michel Rocard, is now forced to fight on several social fronts at the same time: the ongoing peasant revolts against the agro-austerity policy, the steel riots, the strikes in the shipbuilding sector, and the PCF and its labor-affiliate, the CGT, are surfacing on top of all these mass strike developments. The Soviet hand in the background became more than visible when the Soviet media called on the PCF to leave the government in Paris.

In neighboring Belgium, a general strike by the left-wing labor unions against the government's plans to dump the cost-of-living escalator (wage increases to compensate for inflationary devaluation) was not officially joined by the Christian Democratic labor unions (CSC), but the CSC leadership won the vote to abstain from the strike only by a small margin. The Liberal Party coalition partner of Belgium's Christian Democratic Premier Martens threatened that, if the premier showed signs of conciliation with labor, they would leave the government coalition and call for new elections. New elections would, however, provide a good chance for the Belgian Socialists to capitalize on the strike ferment and get back into the government.

The liberal coalition partner of Premier Lubbers of the Netherlands, the VVD, also threatened to pull out if the government fails to win a majority in the parliamentary vote in favor of stationing 48 U.S. cruise missiles.

In West Germany, the Free Democrats led by Foreign Minister Genscher have threatened to leave the government if the Christian Democratic majority of Chancellor Helmut Kohl fails to push through the planned tax and budgetary cuts. A broader majority of Christian Democrats has good reason to hesitate over these cuts, which would leave the government short by at least 8-10 billion deutschemarks, a sum that could only be raised by drastically higher consumer taxes. Such tax increases would be very unpopular, and Genscher's Free Democrats have presented another alternative as the alleged "lesser evil"—cuts in the defense budget which would play into the propaganda of both the anti-NATO movement and Moscow's own intentions of weakening the defense of Europe.

Caught in its own austerity philosophy, the Kohl government in Bonn might actually try to package a mix of tax cuts, tax hikes, and defense budget cuts, making the problem even worse. West Germany faces a bigger strike wave in the weeks ahead because all wage-bargaining levels in the metal industries and the printing sector collapsed in the last week of March. The public service sector might join the strike ferment soon, and the epidemic of civil disobedience and class-struggle slogans inside the West German labor movement means serious trouble for social stability. As in France, the labor movement columns of the German Communist Party (DKP), with more than 800 shop stewards in the strategic industries, are surfacing in this radicalization process.

Finally, the British homeland is not left untouched by the process of destabilization. The miners' strike, which has paralyzed 75% of the coal sector, has been joined by the six major transport worker unions, who refuse to transport any coal in solidarity with the miners. The 140,000 railway workers and all the seamen as well as the longshoremen, have joined the strike movement. Some British newspapers have started to draw a parallel to spring 1974, when a mass strike toppled the Heath Conservative government. The London *Sunday Times* wrote April 1 that the "miners' strike turns into battle on control over Britain." While it is still unclear how far especially the traditionally strong Communist cadres inside the mining workers union intend to drive this confrontation, the fact that more than 20 key utilities of the country were put under siege by striking miners reveals that there is indeed some battle plan involved."

Thus, while the Communist cadres capitalize on the repercussions of Western Europe's austerity policy, Warsaw Pact troops are deployed for the largest maneuvers ever at sea, augmented by ground and air units. In the predicted "April of Western Vulnerability," a moment of strategic opportunity for the Soviets has arrived—with the British lending a hand.