

Ottawa rally against NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia

Guy Leblanc
3 June 1999

Canada's national capital was the scene of a 5,000-strong demonstration May 29 against the aerial bombardment of Yugoslavia by the NATO allies, including Canada. Serbian and Greek immigrants, students, and anti-militarists comprised the bulk of the demonstration, which began on Ottawa's Parliament Hill, then proceeded to the Ministry of National Defence and the US embassy. There was a heavy, even intimidating, police presence along the entire demonstration, but especially in front of the US embassy.

Eighteen Canadian warplanes are participating in the bombing of Yugoslavia. Canada has also dispatched 800 troops to Macedonia that are earmarked to join a NATO Kosovo occupation force and the Chretien Liberal government is now considering a NATO request that it double this troop commitment.

The demonstrators listened attentively and with great emotion to the anti-NATO speeches. When the speakers began to rebut NATO's war propaganda, they were frequently interrupted by cries of "Lies," "Shame," or "Stop the bombing."

About half of the demonstrators were Serb immigrants, most of them working class and of all ages. Understandably, they were deeply concerned about the fate of their friends and relatives who remain in Serbia. In imitation of anti-NATO demonstrators in Belgrade and other Serbian cities, many carried targets formed by concentric circles.

Most of the Serb immigrants were opponents of the Milosevic regime, but nonetheless they tended to view the war in the Balkans as rooted in historic, national-ethnic conflicts. Still, particularly among the older workers who had grown up in the Yugoslavia of Tito, there was support for the notion of a voluntary union of the Balkans based on the unity of working people.

Given the lack of organized opposition to the war, there was a surprisingly strong presence of students. Youth interviewed by this correspondent indicated outrage at the high-tech slaughter being carried out by NATO and saw the war as rooted in the needs of the armaments industry and the military-industrial complex as a whole.

The Ottawa protest was organized by C-SWAY (the Coalition to Stop the War Against Yugoslavia) and supported by, among others, the Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade and the Ottawa-Carleton District Council of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

The speakers exposed the hypocrisy and brutality of NATO's assault on a small semi-developed country. But the central political perspective of the demonstration was to pressure the Canadian government to renounce its participation in the NATO action so Canada could resume its traditional stance as a force "for peace" in international relations. In fact, throughout the course of the twentieth century, Canada has been aligned with the world's strongest imperialist powers, first Britain, then the US.

C-SWAY leader David Orchard said Canada and NATO had "initiated a war of aggression ... with the aim of making all the non-nuclear nations subordinate to NATO." A virulent Canadian nationalist, Orchard came to prominence in the late 1980s as a critic of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement. Last year, he joined the Conservative Party—claiming, with some justice, that Canada's oldest political party is the traditional standard-bearer of anti-Americanism—and to the consternation of the Tory establishment, finished second in the race for Tory national leader running on an anti-free trade platform.

Deborah Bourque, a national vice-president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, observed that it is

working people who are the principal target of NATO's bombs. "In the US there is a wall dedicated to the Americans killed in Vietnam. It is a very long wall. But if one had erected a similar wall for the Vietnamese killed in that war, it would have had more than a million names. It was principally workers like you and me who were killed in that war. It's the same in this war in Yugoslavia. Ask your letter carrier on Monday if he thinks he's a military target, and he'll probably answer no. But in Yugoslavia, were you to pose the same question to a letter carrier or workers in an electricity generating center or a journalist he would answer yes."

Apart from Bourque, there were no other speakers from the unions; nor were there any union delegations. At last month's Canadian Labour Congress convention the executive moved an emergency resolution calling for an immediate end to the NATO bombing and the withdrawal of Canadian fighter planes from the NATO campaign, but the resolution was tabled after encountering widespread opposition within the union officialdom. Since then, the CLC has fallen silent on the war.

Canada's social-democratic party, the New Democrats, were also notable for their absence from Saturday's rally. Initially, the NDP embraced the NATO bombing campaign, but in early May it issued a call for a "pause" in the bombing. Subsequently, NDP foreign affairs critic Svend Robinson visited Yugoslavia, including Kosovo. Robinson, who at one point favored a NATO ground invasion of Kosovo, now describes the NATO bombing campaign as a "complete disaster." Yet neither he, nor the NDP, have retracted their initial support for NATO's attack on a sovereign country that had not threatened, let alone attacked, any NATO member.

Meanwhile, in a related development, Canadian Defence Minister Art Eggleton and Liberal Senate leader Al Graham are protesting Canada's exclusion from a top-secret meeting last weekend of US, French, German, Italian and British Defence Ministers that reportedly discussed the possibility of a ground invasion of Yugoslavia. Their protests underscore that behind the posturing about intervening in a "humanitarian crisis," Canada's political and economic elite views this war from the standpoint of gaining advantage and influence.



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