

WSWS speaks with demonstrators outside the World Economic Forum in Melbourne

Linda Tenenbaum
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Three days of protests were held outside the World Economic Forum in Melbourne from Monday to Wednesday this week. Organised by a coalition of radical organisations to oppose globalisation, the event attracted quite a wide range of people. The WSWS spoke with several who were keen to discuss the political issues involved.

The most significant feature of the S11 (September 11) demonstration against the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Melbourne last Monday was the deep-felt dissatisfaction on the part of many ordinary people with the current state of society.

Most participants were confused about the anti-globalisation perspective of the protest organisers and what they thought the protest would achieve. Those we spoke with were not necessarily opposed to globalisation as such. Rather they felt profound distrust towards the domination of large transnational corporations and the impact of their activities. The main issues they raised were the exploitation of workers and the impoverishment of the nations of the so-called “Third World”.

A growing sentiment appears to be emerging that these are not single issues, but systemic: the product of a global system. There is a feeling that the problems are not simply Australian, and that people all over the world need to start addressing them.

So far, however, little attention has been paid to critically examining the historical and political processes that have given rise to the present situation. What dominates, therefore, is a considerable crisis of perspective.

The 15,000-strong crowd that gathered outside the Crown casino was overwhelmingly young—school and university students, young workers and unemployed youth between the ages of 15 and 25. While some were members of various radical and environmental groups, most came by themselves, or with friends. Hundreds of older workers and professional people also attended.

S11's stated aim was to stop the WEF from meeting, so the major preoccupation of the organisers was to blockade the casino's seven entrances. Shouting slogans like “Shut the

casino” and “Stop the WEF” about 2,000 protesters spent the day massed at the concrete and cyclone wire barricades set up by thousands of police and security guards. With arms linked confronting lines of police, dancing, beating drums or sitting down en masse, they managed to prevent some 200 of the Forum's 900 delegates from getting in.

But the majority did not participate in the blockade. They ambled up and down Queensbridge Street, which had been blocked to traffic from early in the morning, stood in groups talking, or watched from a distance what was happening at the casino entrances.

Many of the people we interviewed said they had come as “observers”. Worried about the possibility of police violence, after weeks of press reports condemning the protest, they wanted to see for themselves what transpired.

Three young Technical and Further Education students, Tania, Daniel and Ricardo said that they had decided to come some time ago. Tania said: “I just wouldn't have had a clear conscience if I didn't come.”

Why, we asked. “Because of all the things we've heard about the big corporations, about the exploitation of workers.”

What would the demonstration achieve? Daniel replied: “This is an undemocratic, unelected body. We're making it so they have to work around us.”

Tania added that it was “unlikely it would change anything. It's more about awareness. We have to inconvenience them.”

Gavin, a 19-year-old plasterer, had travelled across the continent from Perth to participate. He had previously been involved in protests against logging and the destruction of forests in Western Australia, and had witnessed police violence first hand. Eighteen of the “forest group” of about 40 had cycled to Melbourne, protesting against the mining of uranium. It took them months to make the journey.

Why hadn't Gavin joined in the blockade? “I'm here as an observer,” he replied. “I don't think I agree with stopping someone from meeting. That won't solve anything on a major scale.”

"I'm here because I don't like beautiful things destroyed and because there's a lack of compassion in the world today."

But he felt unclear about what to do about it. "A lot of people are lost," he said. "They don't really know what they're doing. They don't like what's happening, but they just get caught up in the whirlwind."

An Aboriginal worker, who came with a contingent from Adelaide, said he wanted to protest against "the men with the dollars". "They're the ones responsible for what's happened to Aboriginal people," he said. "If they had their way, we'd still be on the reserves."

A young cityworker was looking on as the police tried unsuccessfully to escort a bus through the blockade.

"I'm just watching," he said. "From what I've read it's the biggest civil unrest that's happened in my life. That attracts you."

Chris, 26, a kitchenhand, told us: "I don't agree with the WEF. I'm not sure if I agree with the blockade. I'm not sure whether it's undemocratic to stop them from meeting and I don't know what it will actually do. But the ones inside should know that the people are unhappy."

"What concerns me is that the little man is left on the outer, he's completely disempowered. The gap between rich and poor is not right. All men are supposed to be equal."

Two older women, professional educators, said they did not like the activities of the major corporations.

"We're here to show we're watching the forum is on. We're aware of what they're talking about inside. We're not ignorant. We're the eyes outside. We're here to show them that we're concerned."

Adrian, a young tram driver, came to the demonstration because he wanted to hear what people had to say. He wanted some answers. He was quite impressed with the turnout, which he thought revealed that more people were starting to question what was going on.

"This will send a message," he said, "that people aren't going to swallow this forever."

What in particular, we asked. "What global companies do," he said. His solution has been to boycott particular consumer products. At least he was doing something, he told us.

The question of the role of the unions came up, and Adrian was scathing in his assessment of what they had done over the past years. But why had they acted as they had, we asked him? Wasn't it necessary to examine their political program?

At lunchtime a spirited contingent of about 20 students from Wesley High School marched down Queensbridge Street to join the protest.

Pip Kelly told the WWS: "I'm here because I'm a student and the issues raised are important for the future. We're not

taking what's happening in the world lying down. We're here for change. This is one of the biggest statements I can make to come here in my school uniform."

Did she agree with the radical groups that globalisation was the problem, we asked. After some thought she replied: "Well, there are different types of globalisation, some are good and some aren't. It's globalised poverty that I don't agree with."

She felt that the international availability of computers and other technological advances had tremendous potential, they brought people closer and made the world smaller. But globalised production had created terrible problems.

"The corporations shift their production to lift their profits. The problem is they employ workers in different countries at lower wages."

Pip thought that perhaps the solution lay in strengthening the power of national governments to regulate and prevent transnational corporations from undermining conditions.

"National governments are the only ones that provide welfare," she said. "And things like unemployment benefits."

We pointed out that in fact the tendency was the reverse. To attract globally mobile capital against their rivals, governments around the world were gutting the welfare state measures of the past, and driving the unemployed into cheap labour.

The problem lay, we suggested, with the economic and social order in which globalised production had emerged.

We asked her what she thought should be done. "People need to be made aware, they need to know what is happening."

Why? "Because we have to create a global resistance."

How that would emerge and what its tasks were, she hadn't considered. "I haven't thought that far," Pip admitted. But she felt the issues were serious and important and appreciated the discussion.



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