

# Governments resort to police violence against international May Day protests

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May Day demonstrations around the world on Tuesday gave voice to growing discontent over poverty, unemployment and the impact of global capitalism on the lives of ordinary people. Alarmed at the rising tide of protest, many governments responded with police violence.

A massive police presence—according to some reports outnumbering protesters by 2 to 1—greeted May Day rallies in London. Some 6,000 officers were on duty or standing by, and 30 police vans were stationed in Whitehall to prevent demonstrators gaining access to Downing Street, the residence of Britain's prime minister.

Several thousand participated in anti-corporate demonstrations organised loosely around the theme of “May Day Monopoly”, with small rallies taking place at several London sites featured in the board game. The protests, organised by a variety of anti-globalisation, anarchist and environmentalist groups, were denounced as “spurious” by Prime Minister Tony Blair, who promised “absolute and total backing” to the police in controlling them. London Mayor Ken Livingstone joined in the witch-hunt, claiming the protests were a “deliberate attempt... to promote violence and destruction of property in London”.

Despite the peaceful character of protests throughout the day, police in riot gear blockaded a crowd of 5,000 in Oxford Circus, the hub of London's premier shopping street. Demonstrators were kept tightly packed into the square for more than four hours in the rain without access to any facilities. Several were injured as police used batons to beat them back and at least 35 were arrested.

According to one report on BBC radio, the police would not allow anyone to leave Oxford Circus without first providing their name and address. A wide-ranging surveillance operation was mounted throughout the day, with police video squads on the ground filming all the demonstrators to augment footage gained from surveillance cameras and helicopters.

In Zurich, Switzerland, police sealed off the financial district of the city from protestors and, at the conclusion of a peaceful march, surrounded 400 masked anti-globalisation anarchists. After the demonstrators threw rocks and paint bombs, police responded with overwhelming force, firing rubber bullets, water cannon and tear gas before launching baton charges. Some 200 arrests were made.

Riots and street fighting took place between police and demonstrators in Berlin, Germany, following a ban of the annual “autonome” (anarchist) demonstration implemented by city interior minister Eckart Werthebach. A total of 9,000 police were mobilised to stop thousands of anarchist and anti-fascist demonstrators from carrying out a planned march. Street fighting erupted as police used water cannon and truncheons to clear several hundred demonstrators from a crossing in the Berlin district of Kreuzberg. Several dozen demonstrators were arrested and a number injured. Prior to the May Day ban the Berlin head of police Gernot Piestert declared that the police would intervene “in an offensive and consequent manner”. At least 150 arrests were made. Representatives of civil rights organisations expressed fears that the unprecedented ban of a

May Day demonstration and ensuing conflicts was a planned provocation on the part of the Berlin Senate to precipitate new measures to restrict the right to demonstrate and assemble. At the same time a large contingent of Berlin police shielded the few hundred members of the neo-fascist NPD (National Party of Germany) who carried out their own demonstration in the east of the city under the central slogan of “Jobs for Germans first!”

Protracted clashes also took place between police and anti-fascist youth in Frankfurt-Main as large numbers of police escorted a march of NPD members through the city. Journalists described this May Day as the most violent in Germany for a decade. Across the country, some half a million people took part in nearly 1,000 demonstrations, according to official figures of the German Trade Union organisation (DGB).

An estimated 100,000 rallied in Vienna, Austria, demanding job security. Large crowds took part in traditional marches in France, Italy, Spain and other European Union states with concern over unemployment among the main slogans. Some 20,000 marched through Istanbul, Turkey, denouncing the treatment of political prisoners and government economic policies.

An estimated 300,000 people took part in May Day rallies in 480 cities across Russia, calling for higher wages, improved social security and price controls. In Siberia, an area hard-hit by industry and mine closures since the restoration of the capitalist market, over 50,000 were reported to have demonstrated. Throughout Eastern Europe, rallies denounced the vast social decay that has accompanied the return of capitalism.

On the other side of the globe in Australia, mounted and special operations police conducted provocative attacks on 1,500 anti-globalisation and environmentalist protestors who blockaded the stock exchange in Sydney. At least 34 were detained and numbers of protestors battered. Smaller blockades took place at the exchanges in Melbourne and four other cities, with more than 30 arrests in Brisbane. A separate trade union march in Melbourne drew some 10,000 workers.

In Pakistan, the police and military pre-empted planned anti-government protests by imposing de-facto martial law in Karachi and banning all outdoor demonstrations. Up to 1,000 members of opposition parties were arrested in morning raids.

Traditional May Day activities in the Philippines were overshadowed by the bitter street fighting between police and supporters of ousted president Joseph Estrada. President Gloria Arroyo reacted by declaring a “state of rebellion” in the capital Manila and arresting senior opposition figures on the grounds of conspiracy.

In South Korea's capital Seoul, 15,000 riot police used batons and water cannon to block a march on government buildings by 20,000 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The police in Seoul deployed 56 camera crews across the city to videotape the rally, with images broadcast throughout the day over the Internet and individuals identified for potential arrest. KCTU-organised rallies and marches took place in most Korean industrial cities, under banners demanding the ousting of President Kim Dae-jung over police brutality and an end to

International Monetary Fund (IMF)-directed economic restructuring.

Indonesian police attacked a rally of 2,000 workers in the West Javanese city of Bandung as they marched on government offices. At least half a dozen protesters were injured. A rally of 5,000 in Jakarta demanded a 100 percent increase in wages and attacked the impact of IMF-dictated restructuring since 1997. More than 2,000 police and paramilitary looked on. Rallies of over 3,000 workers took place in the industrial cities of Medan, Semarang and Surabaya, calling for wage rises and improved working conditions.

In other parts of Asia, rallies proceeded without incident. Thousands demonstrated in central Bangkok, Thailand, to protest the growth of unemployment, expected to rise by 1.4 million this year as layoffs mount due to the downturn in the US. In Taiwan, some 5,000 workers marched through Taipei against the growth of unemployment. In Japan, an estimated 1.36 million workers joined trade union rallies at which union leaders attacked the new Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi for proposing economic reforms that will drastically increase joblessness.

Workers attended trade union May Day rallies across India. In New Delhi, workers burned an effigy of the finance minister, denouncing "his proposal for amendments in labour laws under the pressure of the WTO". Other marches took place in Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Kerala, Punjab, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh. In Nepal, a mass rally called for the resignation of the government.

In South America, tens of thousands of workers rallied to protest poverty, falling wages and unemployment, estimated at 10 percent in much of the continent. Some 1.5 million people took part in May Day activities in Sao Paulo, Brazil, under banners condemning the free trade agreement for the Americas. The events paralysed the northern sections of the city.

In Buenos Aires, Argentina, unemployed workers established street barricades in industrial areas to protest against joblessness. In Colombia, rallies took place in 30 cities against the 18.8 percent official unemployment and continuous paramilitary violence. A large rally in Santiago, Chile, denounced unemployment and government steps to freeze wages. Workers demanded jobs in Montevideo, Uruguay, where an outbreak of foot and mouth disease has led to mass layoffs in meat packing plants.

Thousands assembled in Mexico City to protest the plans of new president Vicente Fox to extend taxes to food and cutback health care and social benefits. Workers carried effigies of Fox and the country's Labor Secretary, the latter wearing a crown of swastikas.

In Long Beach, California, police fired rubber bullets and arrested 100 anarchist demonstrators who disrupted traffic to protest the treatment of immigrant workers. Some 1,200 people marched in Portland, Oregon calling for an end to corporate greed and an investigation into the police shooting of a Mexican immigrant last month. May Day protests focusing on the plight of immigrants in the US also took place in New York, Boston and Chicago. Rallies were held in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and other Canadian cities.

In South Africa, large crowds attended rallies of COSATU, the trade union federation, where speakers attacked the ANC government for overseeing a "job bloodbath" and planning the privatisation of state-owned industries. Across Kenya, workers boycotted official May Day celebrations en masse to protest the collaboration of the trade unions with the austerity policies of the government. At the conclusion of the official event in the capital Nairobi, riot police dispersed the small crowd to prevent opposition politicians addressing them and criticising the union federation. Riot police also attacked workers in Harare, Zimbabwe, when they tried to prevent groups connected with Prime Minister Robert Mugabe taking over the rally.

The recourse to state repression against many May Day rallies testifies to the lack of any solution to social inequality on the part of capitalist

governments and free market ideologues. A decade ago, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they proclaimed that capitalism was the only form of social organisation that could provide prosperity and democracy. But this has given way to open admissions that the gulf between rich and poor is an inevitable consequence of the operations of the global capitalist system.

While the rallies and protests reflected wider concerns and unease about the state of the world and the impact of global capitalism, the leaders of political parties, trade unions and environmental groups who organised and addressed the demonstrations had no solutions either. Their slogans and speeches were characterised by appeals to nationalism and the defence of their "own" national state.

It is important to recall that the Marxist movement first called for the staging of international rallies on May 1 in 1889. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, May Day was explicitly conceived as a demonstration of working class unity in the common cause of replacing capitalism and the national-state with a more advanced, socialist society based on global economic planning and co-operation.

But far from calling for the unification of workers internationally against the depredations of capitalism, the protest leaders appealed to national governments to protect workers in one country at the expense of workers elsewhere. The unions in Australia used May Day to agitate for the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) slogan, "Fair Trade, not Free Trade". This translated into the call for the protection of local industries from foreign competition and the denunciation of government for weakening the nation by signing world trade agreements.

Trade union head Leigh Hubbard declared: "We're sick to death of seeing factories closed and being shipped off shore. We're sick of governments standing round saying sorry we can't do anything. We're sick to death of seeing our national government sign away its right to regulate the national economy to unrepresentative organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the IMF. That has got to change."

In Russia, demonstrators carried portraits of Stalin and banners calling for a return to the autarkic, highly regulated Stalinist state and condemning the Putin government for its "anti-national policy". In South Korea and India, denunciations of the WTO and IMF were coupled with demands for the exclusion of foreign companies with definite anti-American overtones.

In Germany, neo-Nazis marched under the xenophobic slogan of "jobs for Germans", while in Taiwan, Malaysia and Iran the official trade union federations demanded the expulsion of foreign workers as the solution to unemployment. In France, the trade unions drew up a long list of targets including British supermarket chain Marks and Spencer, McDonalds and other foreign corporations.

Sri Lanka, which has been torn apart by civil war for 18 years, provided one of the most graphic illustrations of the reactionary logic of nationalism. May Day rallies in that country were divided on party and communal lines. While support for demonstrations staged by the parties of the ruling Peoples Alliance was low, the largest rally, attended by some 20,000 in the capital Colombo, was organised by the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The speakers combined denunciations of globalisation as a foreign conspiracy to take over Sri Lanka, with agitation to step up the government's racist war. Elsewhere, 10,000 predominantly Tamil estate workers, facing wage cuts and repression, attended a union-organised rally.

Against the dead-end of nationalism that sets worker against worker on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion and language, the great principles of socialist internationalism—which animated the founding of May Day—must be revived as the basis for a genuine unified struggle against the outmoded profit system.



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