

The G-8 summit in Genoa: illusion and reality

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If one were to ask a filmmaker to make a movie depicting the gulf between the world's political elite and the broad masses of people, it would be hard to come up with a more appropriate script than that offered by the G8 summit held last weekend in Genoa.

The meeting between leaders of the eight most powerful industrial countries was overshadowed by an air of unreality. Stage-managed by a master of his trade, media mogul and Italian head of state Silvio Berlusconi, every detail of the summit was decided upon in terms of what looked good for television. The scene of the meeting, Genoa's historic Palazzo Ducale, was restored at a cost of 200 million German marks. Surrounding facades, which did not fit into the picture frame, were draped with huge tarpaulins.

Attention was paid to every detail. In the background of photos of the smiling heads of state, fully ripened lemons had been attached to the branches of nearby lemon trees with nylon twine.

In order to keep the real world at bay, a two square kilometre cage was constructed, surrounded by a five-metre-high steel wire wall, guarded by 20,000 members of the security forces. For days, countless inhabitants of the 690,000-strong city were unable to receive visitors, use public transport or open "critical" windows. Army snipers were positioned on their terraces and balconies.

In the course of the summit and outside the steel cage, civil war-type battles of enormous brutality took place between protesters and police. Armed with truncheons and tear gas, police repeatedly attacked the 200,000 demonstrators who had come from all over the world to protest the summit proceedings. The peak of the conflict came on Saturday night, when police charged the headquarters of the Genoa Social Forum (GSF), which had coordinated the demonstrations. Police forced their way into buildings occupied by demonstrators, beat up and injured those present, smashed computers and confiscated numerous hard discs.

One demonstrator dead, at least 500 wounded, over 120 arrested and at least 40 million marks in damage to property—this was the balance sheet of two days of street battles. Police and politicians were unanimous in claiming that sole responsibility for the violence lay with the demonstrators, specifically the so-called "Black Bloc"—groups of masked demonstrators, garbed in black sporting helmets and gas masks, who appeared virtually from nowhere, laid waste to the immediate vicinity, set cars and shops in flames, and then disappeared as rapidly as they had come.

In order to justify the savage attack on the GSF, Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi claimed that the organisers of the demonstration had not officially distanced themselves from the Black Block, but had rather protected and covered for them. Therefore, they (the GSF) were also to blame for the violence.

Testimony from demonstrators, however, presents a very different picture. According to witnesses, there was a considerable degree of cooperation between the Black Block and security forces. Many protesters claimed that police allowed the masked demonstrators to roam free. As the latter disappeared following outbreaks of violence, the police picked on peaceful demonstrators and beat them up. Entire gangs of masked demonstrators were able to move through the city without interference

from the security forces.

In the course of visiting arrested demonstrators at a local police station, Senate Deputy Gigi Malabarba reported seeing black-masked demonstrators gather and engage in friendly discussion with police. Demonstrators themselves repulsed the troublemakers, shouting "Murderers out!" and calling on them to leave the demonstration.

Bearing in mind the history of the Italian security forces, it is entirely possible that state provocateurs were at work. In the middle of the 1960s, leading members of the intelligence forces, army and police were involved in an extensive conspiracy known as the "strategy of tension". It was aimed at destabilising the republic and preparing a coup, should the Communist Party come to power.

In the course of the "strategy" bomb explosions occurred, which were blamed on the left. At the time, the fascist MSI played a prominent role in the provocations. Now the chairman of the successor party to the MSI, Gianfranco Fini of the National Alliance, is Italian deputy premier.

It would, however, be wrong to reduce the violent clashes witnessed in Genoa to merely the activities of police provocateurs and violent "hooligans". Every international summit since the conference in Seattle a year-and-a-half ago—Davos, Washington, Prague, Nice, Quebec and Göteborg—has been accompanied by demonstrations that have often ended in violent confrontations with the police. The yawning gulf between the telegenic, artificial world within the gilded cage of Genoa and the brutal scenes that took place in the city itself says more about current reality than any of the summit participants are prepared to concede.

The broad coalition of demonstrators—ranging from left-wing radicals, environmentalists and Third World activists to Catholic youth groups—reflects growing concerns over a society that is increasingly careering out of control. Issues such as the enormous divide between rich and poor, increasing worries about everyday life, the destruction of the environment, the spread of devastating diseases, and the social decay gripping entire continents have unsettled wide layers of the population.

The government heads in Genoa are not only removed from the cares and concerns of broad layers of humanity, they are also gripped by a growing inability to confront reality. At the first summit in the middle of the 1970s there was at least some serious discussion on the problems of the world economy, even if one could argue about the viability of the solutions proposed. In Genoa, on the other hand, the main concern of the assembled heads of government was to plaster over the problems and blame one another when things went wrong.

Under circumstances where the US, Europe and Japan are experiencing a dramatic economic downturn and financial crises in Argentina and Turkey threaten to unleash an international chain reaction, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder informed the press: "Nobody is worried about a recession and there is no reason to do so." For its part, the American government declared that with interest and tax cuts, it had created the conditions for accelerated economic growth in the second half of this year.

The prevailing air of self-satisfaction led to exclamations of concern, even within banking circles. The chief economist of the Deutsche Bank, Norbert Walter, commented in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "In

my opinion we are in a worse crisis than the government heads are willing to admit. It seems to me that whenever they meet they put on their rose-tinted glasses. They neither clearly enough see the risks in those regions for which they are responsible, nor the risks arising from the combination of various factors at work inside and outside these regions. To put it briefly, there is no mention of the crisis in developing countries such as Turkey and Argentina, with its possible consequences for Brazil, nor of continuing sources of conflict, such as Indonesia, which taken together are too much for the IMF. No one in the US and Europe gives any real thought to the virtually hopeless situation of Japan.”

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the former French president and initiator of the first summit in 1975, was contemptuous of the proceedings in Genoa. Half of the participants have not even read the papers under discussion at the conference, he ridiculed.

Giscard makes a mistake, however, if he thinks this is merely due to the personal inadequacies of the assembled heads of government. Much more fundamental processes are at work, giving rise to the paralysis at the summit and its lack of results—which stood in stark contrast to the extravagance and ceremony of the event.

The process of globalisation has not only brought individual national economies closer together, it has also dramatically intensified competitiveness on a world scale. The contradictions between the US, Europe and Japan have reached a level that makes it increasingly difficult for them to come to an agreement, even on minor issues.

The extent of the conflicts were made clear at the international Climate Conference which was meeting in the German city of Bonn at the same time as the Genoa summit. The central issue in Bonn was to secure an agreement, first made in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, for the world-wide reduction of greenhouse gases. The agreement was in danger following resistance by the US government, which regards the deal as a threat to American interests.

Environment ministers from around the world who assembled in Bonn had hoped for a positive signal from Genoa, where the issue was also discussed. Their hopes were in vain.

Following a 24-hour marathon negotiating session on Monday, the Bonn conference finally came up with a compromise. Together with Europe, Japan, Russia and Canada signed a deal which can now be put into practice without the US.

The emission targets set by the agreement, however, have been so watered down that the final deal can only be regarded as a monument to the inability of the assembled governments to prevent a future global catastrophe. The original agreement anticipated a 6 percent reduction in the emission of greenhouse gases by the year 2012 (compared with the level of 1990). Now this target has dropped to less than 2 percent. Scientists had already criticised the original 6 percent target as far too modest to prevent an environmental disaster, threatening the living conditions of billions of people.

The Genoa summit also made no further concessions regarding debt relief for the poorest countries. At the beginning of the summit, Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, had declared that the fight against poverty would be at the heart of the meeting. But then, under American pressure, the conference agreed merely that the World Bank should in future check whether subsidies should be given to poor countries, instead of credits. As long as the industrial countries are not prepared to free up more money for the World Bank, this decision means, in fact, that poor countries will receive less money than ever.

On one point the summit registered a “success”, but even then this represented a drop in the ocean. The participants agreed to provide \$1.3 billion spread over a number of years toward a global health fund to fight HIV-AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. According to UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, a sum of between \$7 billion and \$10 billion annually is necessary to combat these illnesses.

The protests against the G-8 summit were entirely justified. It is necessary, however, to make a distinction between the motives of the demonstrators and the political solutions proposed by the various organisations that took part. Despite their different political orientations, these groups fundamentally agree on two questions.

In the first place, these groups are united by their national orientation. They condemn globalisation as such, and make no distinction between the globalisation of production and the social relations under which it takes place. In fact, the global integration of production is, in and of itself, a progressive development: it brings together millions of workers in a process of production extending far beyond national and local boundaries. It has, moreover, brought about an enormous increase in labour productivity, and thereby established the prerequisite for overcoming the problems of poverty and backwardness.

This integration of production takes place, however, under conditions where the process of production is subordinated to the profit interests of the major business and financial concerns. The task, therefore, is to bring property relations in line with the social nature of production or, to put it another way, organise production in the interests of society as a whole. In order to attain this end, it is necessary to unite workers and overcome all national barriers that divide them.

The organisations leading the protests pursue an entirely different perspective. Their answer to globalisation is a strengthening of the nation state. A typical representative of the opposition groups is the Frenchman, José Bové, who was generally at the head of the demonstrations in Genoa.

Bové is a radical intellectual who some years ago devoted himself to breeding sheep and living the simple life in the countryside. Two years ago he demolished an American McDonald's fast food restaurant in protest against US “junk food”, and has since been regarded as a hero of the anti-globalisation movement. In fact, his combination of anti-Americanism and glorification of the simple life in the countryside is compatible with the politics of extreme right-wing, chauvinist movements.

A second common characteristic of the protest groups is that, despite their anger and disgust with the G-8 governments, their protest is directed towards those in power. They seek to put pressure on the government heads, and expect changes to take place. This is at the heart of their tactics.

Their response to the evidently hopeless nature of this project is to intensify the pressure, and devote their energies to ensuring that the next demonstration is bigger, more effective and better publicised than the one before.

They cannot envisage any social force capable of genuinely changing society. They reject a policy of mobilising the working class. Such a policy would require a political struggle against those organisations that have dominated the working class in the past—the trade unions, social democracy, Stalinism and its various successor organisations—and have used their influence to subordinate workers to the interests of the ruling classes.

The organisers of the protest demonstrations are not interested in such a struggle because they fear it would destroy the “unity” of the anti-globalisation movement and endanger their support from a few trade union bureaucrats and influential politicians. With such a perspective, the various protest organisations are driving the movement into a dead end.

The profound gulf between the ruling political elite and the masses, so graphically displayed in Genoa, provides the objective prerequisite for the building of a new international, socialist movement of the working class.



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