

Anti-war demonstrations in Europe

Our correspondent
16 October 2001

Antiwar demonstrations were held this weekend in several European cities, with the largest being in London and Berlin.

In Germany, around 20-30,000 took part in a demonstration staged in the capital Berlin, to protest the US military actions being carried out against Afghanistan.

In the southern city of Stuttgart, 15,000 gathered to voice their opposition to the Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition government's support for the war.

Organised by a broad alliance of pacifist groups, political organisations and professional bodies, both demonstrations brought together large numbers of youth, alarmed at the possibility of the current offensive in Afghanistan broadening into an all-out war, together with older layers of the population, many of whom had grown up in the ruins of Germany's cities following the Second World War. Delegations from immigrant communities in Berlin and Stuttgart also took part in the marches and rallies.

Banners held by demonstrators in Berlin condemned the unequivocal support for the war by the German government. One read: "Participation in war has a tradition within the SPD—1914" referring to the vote in favour of the First World War by the majority of SPD deputies in 1914. A few banners pointed to the material interests behind the military aggression: "No shedding of blood for oil and gas".

Prior to the demonstrations in Berlin and Stuttgart some neo-fascist groups had announced their intention of taking part in the marches. Organisations such as the extreme-right NPD (German National Party) have already held their own protest rallies after the September 11 attacks in which leading members of the party expressed their support for the terrorist acts as blows against "Jewish and American imperialism". In the event, none of these groups made an appearance at the weekend, apart from a handful of right-wingers who scaled a church tower in Berlin and attempted to unveil a banner. They were roundly booed and jeered by the assembled demonstrators. However, this has not stopped sections of the world's media from reporting the demonstrations as an anti-American coalition of the "extreme left and the far right", as a means of discrediting those opposed to the war.

Speakers at both rallies emphasised their solidarity with

the victims of the US terror attacks, but at the same time deplored the bombing of one of the world's poorest and most backward countries. There was broad condemnation of the support afforded by the German government to the military campaign and fears were expressed regarding the possible participation of German troops and an escalation of the war. Criticism was also made of the intensified assault being made on democratic rights, including attempts to gag the media.

Peter, a manual worker, who travelled from the city of Kassel to attend the Berlin rally, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I was so alarmed at what was taking place I felt it was necessary to make a protest. So together with my wife we made a banner and began collecting signatures against the war in the centre of Kassel last week. Within two hours we had collected over 600 signatures and here in the space of an hour we have probably another 300. It indicates the depth of opposition to what the German government is doing. Perhaps the most depressing aspect of the whole thing is the way in which the Green Party is so tamely trotting behind the SPD. They have obviously tasted the flesh-pots of power and are prepared to go to any lengths to stay in government."

In an interview with the *Tagesspiegel am Sonntag*, Chancellor Schröder declared that he would not waver in his support for the military action against Afghanistan despite the widespread protests. "I am sure that we will stick it out even when the [current] broad support begins to thin out with time." He said he had abandoned the "dearly held position" that one can neglect the military aspect when it comes to foreign policy.

In London, estimates of the size of the demonstration vary between 20,000-50,000, according to the organisers, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The protest included around 5,000 Muslims, with many veiled women participating, but they were far from being numerically dominant. The march was divided in two, with the first part made up of pacifist groups, and the second part containing radical left parties and anti-globalisation groups. The trade unions were virtually absent, except for a few individual branch banners and rather more National Union of Students

delegations. Labour Party banners were scarcer than gold dust.

Protesters chanted, “No war, we want peace”. There was a heavy police presence posted outside major US companies, but there were no incidents.

Sujata, a volunteer for Friends of the Earth, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I don’t think there should be a war. I think America feels it has to do something in order to say that it rules the world... I think it is really appalling that Bush can turn around and bomb a country. After condemning a terrorist attack on a building in America, which obviously is wrong, but they are turning themselves into terrorists. I think it is inexcusable they are launching a campaign against Afghanistan before they even knew it was bin Laden and they had no definite proof.

“That’s how America works all over the world. They say they are a country of freedom, but if anyone shows any signs of socialism or communism they think it is their right to start a war with them against their beliefs. It is totally against democracy, which is what America is supposed to stand for. It is more of a dictatorship than any other country. People are becoming more and more cut off from the rest of the world. I think it is damaging to America more than anything else.”

James, a student at Bristol University, said, “We need to show our supposed leaders that what they are doing is not representative of the majority of people of this country and the world. We are not happy to kill civilians in the name of justice. I think the whole cause is being appropriated for political ends both in terms of electioneering and curtailing civil liberties. It’s just people appropriating a tense situation to push through the legislation they have always wanted to. On my campus, there have been debates about whether any military intervention can be defended. The same discussion must have been going on in millions of households around the world.”

Asked why he thought the war was being waged, James replied, “I think it’s about the nature of power in a world where there is one superpower and where everyone just panders to what it wants. It is all for political and economic gain. Just look at Pakistan and their agreement to get involved in this action. The same day that Pakistan agreed to get involved, the US announced billions of dollars worth of aid and cancellation of debts. The US has the money the power and can make people do as it wants.”

Gary, a youth tutor, said, “I wish they had talked more before they started bombing the country. I can’t see any sense in it to be honest. They need to talk more. They are going to kill more people. I think a lot of it is about propaganda for their parties. I can’t understand what Blair is thinking of. I kind of expected it from the Americans and I

was hoping Blair was going to tone it down. But joining in with them, I could not believe it. I think he is a nasty hypocrite. I get annoyed and I won’t vote Labour again.”

Satnam and Ishmael from Bradford said, “We don’t like this war, we don’t want this war. We want to stop this bloodshed. It’s as simple as that.

“We don’t think that this will stop, even if they give up bin Laden. We don’t think bin Laden is the question. They are not after bin Laden, they are after something more, something bigger, maybe oil. Bin Laden has been framed and they haven’t proven that he carried out the attack on the US. We don’t think he was behind the blowing up of the Twin Towers. We think that he has been framed as a bridge to get to something bigger.

Asked if they had experienced any anti-Muslim sentiments, they responded, “We are not getting any harassment, we are still getting on well because we believe in a free world. We are all human beings, regardless of whether we are Christian or Muslims or whatever. To be honest we are really pleased with this march. People have come out in their thousands, and regardless of their faiths they all want to see the end of this war.”

In Glasgow, Scotland, a rally of around 1,500 to 2,000 was held.

In Italy, around 30,000 demonstrated on Sunday at an annual peace march—the 40th annual 24-kilometer march from Perugia to Assisi, which follows the route used by St Francis of Assisi.

In Switzerland, police said an estimated 5,000 people had protested in Berne.



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