

Massive protest against European Union summit in Barcelona

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Organisers claim that between 300,000 and 500,000 people joined the weekend protests outside the European Union (EU) summit in the Spanish city of Barcelona. Even the official estimates are as high as a quarter of a million, far in excess of the 50-60,000 that had been anticipated.

Yet the media made only passing reference to the massive size of the protest, concentrating in the main on the violent clashes between the police and a few hundred anarchists on the night of March 16. The various organisations involved in the protest said that such clashes were isolated incidents and that the demonstrations passed off peacefully.

One protester, Anne-Marie Mujiea, told Euobserver.com, “At some points, you couldn’t move for protestors.” But reports, particularly in the British media, were largely sensationalist accounts of clashes with the police involving at most 2,000 protestors, that ended with 98 arrests. Police fired rubber bullets and made repeated baton charges. One protester, Ruben Bayona, said, “The police started it. I’m not saying they weren’t provoked, but it takes very little to provoke them.”

The Spanish government had done everything possible to limit the size of the protest. It would have been larger still if the Schengen treaty guaranteeing the free movement of EU citizens had not been suspended for the duration of the summit. An exclusion zone has been declared, and road and transport links nearby have been closed. Dozens of buses carrying anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist protesters were detained at the French border. Over 8,000 police were stationed around the summit venue, which met behind a huge metal fence.

The organisers had tried to cooperate with the police, agreeing to stage their main demonstration on Saturday

evening, after the EU summit had concluded and routing the march away from the summit venue from Placa de Catalunya to the harbour front.

The protest was characterised by confused anti-capitalist sentiment, including many voices opposing the Bush administration’s warmongering—one group was dressed as Afghan detainees at Camp X-ray in Cuba—and many more demanding the preservation of European-style state welfare policies and opposing economic liberalisation. Nevertheless, that so many gathered to oppose what they saw as the worst depredations of big business and the major powers against the world’s people was a decisive rebuff to those media pundits and politicians who had insisted that such opposition was impermissible after the September 11 terror attacks.

Various former liberals, who have become the most unabashed apologists for imperialist militarism, came forward to declare that any opposition to US imperialism was impermissible given the terrible results of the anti-Americanism advocated by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. They claimed that the anti-globalisation movement would wither away, but this prediction that everyone else would join them in kow-towing before the Bush administration has been revealed as wishful thinking.

This does not mean that the protest should be glorified or its political deficiencies ignored. The organisations involved were generally advocates of a regressive response to global capital—based on preserving existing European state institutions from change, or advocating the creation of new ones on a nationalist programme, or calling for some form of international economic regulation on a Keynesian model implemented through the reform of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the

World Bank.

There were three political blocks on the demonstration: the Movement Against a Capitalist Europe, with more than 100 organisations; a block of separatist movements—collectively entitled “nations without a state”—made up of Catalan, Basque, Corsican and Scottish nationalist groups. And finally, there were the various social democratic, Stalinist and middle class radical parties and trade unionists, which did not get to march due to the streets being jammed.

The placing of those groups that are at least nominally associated with a perspective based on a socialist perspective at the back of the demonstration was an indication of the political hostility of groups such as Attac (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), to a perspective based on the mobilisation of the working class. Their appeal is for reform measures to be implemented by the ruling class, rather than for the building of a genuinely independent movement against capitalism.

To the extent that anti-capitalist rhetoric is employed, it is more often than not directed against the United States with European social democratic traditions counterpoised to “Anglo-Saxon” free market liberalism. The organisers appealed for the EU not to go down the American road, with a spokeswoman for the march, Ada Colau, telling the media, “We’re here to say ‘no’ to the European Union, which... is becoming a model for globalisation and is more like the US in favour of arms and war.”

On the previous day a separate and smaller protest was organised by the Confederation of European Trade Unions, involving several thousand delegates from all across the 15 EU countries. It called for full employment and social rights, but again on the basis of a nationalist programme. The main demand of the demonstration was to oppose EU plans to liberalise the energy and transport sectors.



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