

Tens of thousands march against Bush in Berlin

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As many as 50,000 demonstrators marched through the middle of Berlin Tuesday in the first of a series of demonstrations and rallies planned for the next three days protesting the first ever visit to Germany by American President George Bush.

The demonstration was organised by the "Axis for Peace", consisting of over 200 peace, environmental, protest and political groups, including the Attac anti-globalisation movement. Delegations of Arab demonstrators attended the demonstration and rally to protest the Sharon government and the complicity of the Bush government in the brutality of the Israeli army in the occupied territories.

The orderly march, escorted by thousands of police, threaded its way peacefully through the centre of Berlin to the central meeting point, where a rally was held against the backdrop of the motto: "We do not want your wars, Mr. President". Demonstrators came from as far as the cities of Duisburg and Hanover to attend the rally. Large numbers of school youth and students were also in evidence, bearing banners condemning the war activities of the Bush government and, in particular, its preparations for war against Iraq. One banner carried by demonstrators read: "The axis of evil runs right through the middle of the Pentagon".

American government plans for the continuation of the "war against terror", and in particular the campaign to drum up German and European support for a war against Iraq, are said to be the main topics planned for discussion between Bush and the German government during the president's brief 19-hour stay in Germany. After speaking to the German parliament Thursday, Bush plans to fly on to Moscow for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. On Sunday Bush is expected to visit France, where the first protest demonstrations against his impending visit also took place on Tuesday.

Following repeated warnings from Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD—German Social Democratic Party) and Green Party Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, only a handful of SPD and Green Party members could be seen participating on the march. Although one of the few political speakers to address the rally at the end of the march was a leading member of the IG-Metall engineering union, barely a single trade union banner was to be seen in the course of the demonstration.

The only German parliamentary party with any sizeable contingent was the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—formerly the ruling Stalinist party of East Germany, SED). However, in line with the new responsibilities of the party as a leading coalition partner in the recently formed Berlin state government, no leading PDS members spoke at the final rally and the party's presence on the demonstration itself was low-key.

One of the main speakers at the concluding rally was Jean Ziegler, a professor at the University of Genf, advisor to the United Nations on issues of nutrition and for many decades a leading social democrat in Switzerland. Over the past few years he has increasingly associated himself with the Attac anti-globalisation movement. In a speech which drew the most applause from those immediately assembled around the speaker's podium, Ziegler lashed out at the "Bush empire" and declared his disappointment with social democratic leaders such as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder for their complicity with Bush's politics.

Ziegler then went on to strike the sort of pro-European chauvinistic tones characteristic of leading layers of the Attac movement, as well as leading social democrats, when they feel they can speak freely.

“Bush’s empire was a deadly danger for civilisation,” he commented. “There must be an end to the European slave mentality. We cannot continue to gather like bleating sheep around the White House and subordinate ourselves to the dictates of the king of the cowboys from the US.”

Despite the official shows of warm hospitality for their American guest by Chancellor Schröder and his Green Party foreign minister, leading members of the German government are concerned over the considerable tensions pulling apart the Atlantic alliance. Fischer has been quoted recently referring to the “light years” between American and European perceptions and the Euro-bashing he encountered on a recent visit to Washington. Nevertheless, faced with overwhelming American military superiority, the German ruling elite are unable to develop a strategy independent of the US. Leading figures in the Attac movement—in particular, experienced long-time social democrats such as Ziegler—are playing a significant role in developing a debate on a possible alternative strategy for the European bourgeoisie faced with the hegemonic demands of the US government.

Participants at the demonstration expressed their alarm at the policies of the Bush government and also indicated their dismissive attitude towards the German SPD-Green government.

The WSWS interviewed Wilfried Platzek, a middle-aged public service worker in Berlin, who explained why he came to the demonstration: “Like many others I am alarmed at the divisions which are emerging in our society. We are witnessing what appears to be a return to a kind of Manchester-type capitalism, where all forms of the traditional social safety net are being done away with. Divisions are also growing between the north and the south of the planet with enormous imbalances in trade and destruction of the environment. And at the heart of it all is an American president who sees fit to ignore all international rules and regulations.

“Bush condemns international terror while at the same time using the ‘war against terror’ to dogmatically further the US’s own interests and dominating position world-wide. International conventions are simply swept aside and Bush exhibits absolutely no respect for what one could describe as international values. What happened on September 11 was a terrible crime, but I am old enough to remember

another September the 11, nearly 30 years ago, when progressive forces in Chile were persecuted in a former ‘war against terror’ supported by the American government. It is deplorable that the German government and SPD Chancellor Schröder are backing Bush. But what can you expect from a chancellor who himself boasted that he is ‘the boss of all bosses?’”

The WSWS also spoke to Mathias, a young student who travelled to attend the demonstration from the surrounding state of Brandenburg with some friends. He said, “I have come to the demo to express my opposition to all forms of war and the enormous inequality which is growing everywhere. Bush has set his sights on war with Iraq, but what is at the back of his campaign are economic and financial interests; in Iraq, the chase for oil. Such a policy is false and dangerous. We have had a bit of discussion on these issues at the apprentice school where I study (OSZ-KIM in Berlin) and I was surprised at the interest in these issues and the extent of the opposition to Bush.

“As for the German government, you can forget it. The SPD has been so long in power that you can disregard it as a political agency which listens to ordinary people, and the Green Party is finished. Thirty years ago they would have been organising demos like this. Today they instruct their members not to go on the demo. You cannot take the party seriously.”



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