

Opposition to war grows across Europe

Steve James
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The imminent war against Iraq has met with rising public opposition in Europe. Large anti-war demonstrations have been held in many cities, as well as protests at the US military outposts, listening stations and airbases that litter the continent. Many more demonstrations are planned for the coming weeks against what is broadly perceived as a war for control of Iraq's oil fields.

Simultaneous with the 350,000 strong demonstration in London on September 28, up to 150,000 marched around the ancient centre of Rome in protests which also reflected deepening opposition to the Italian government of Silvio Berlusconi.

One week later, more demonstrations were held in Rome, Naples, Milan, Florence, Bologna, Catania, Bergamo and Venice. Some estimates of the total number of people involved were as high as 1.5 million. According to anti-war groups, 100 cities held protests.

The demonstrations were organised by various anti-war organisations, trade unions and anti-capitalist groups and political parties. In Florence 15,000 marchers were greeted with church bells and a banner, "Florence Open City Repudiates the War." The British Consulate in Venice was briefly occupied. In Rome, riot police cordoned off the US embassy, although the demonstrations passed without serious confrontations. Portraits of British premier Tony Blair, US President George W. Bush and Berlusconi were burnt in Milan.

A demonstration in Madrid, Spain, September 29 attracted 30,000 people, according to its organisers—a coalition of anti-war and human rights groups and the United Left. Statements were read from British Labour MP George Galloway and former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Protesters held placards opposing US terrorism and equating Bush with Adolf Hitler.

On October 6 in Rethymno, on the Greek island of Crete, confrontations broke out between 300 demonstrators opposing an attack on Iraq and hundreds

of police surrounding a hotel being used by European Union defence ministers. The ministers were discussing plans for a European Rapid Reaction Force, due to be operational in 2003, and their attitude to war against Iraq.

Demonstrations have also been held in Helsinki, Finland, demanding the government stay out of a military campaign against Iraq, and in Geneva, Switzerland, where 2,000 people demonstrated simultaneously with the large protests across the border in Italy.

Military bases have also been the focus of protests. Three thousand people marched through Dublin, Eire, September 28, in a march organised by the Irish Anti-War Movement, which is opposing the Irish government's intention to allow Shannon Airport to be used during an attack on Iraq. Anti-war activists have documented US military use of the airport as a stopover during the attack on Afghanistan. Individuals in the area trying to monitor US flights have reported increased police and airport security harassment in recent weeks. Military use of Shannon airport destroys the Irish government's claim to be upholding the country's neutrality.

Two thousand people rallied near British bases on the island of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean, which could be used to support an attack on Iraq. Cyprus's parliamentary speaker and Communist Party member Demetris Christofias called for the "total abolition of the bases and the total demilitarisation of Cyprus." The rally was jointly organised by the Green Party and peace groups and was held near Akrotiri, where the British military are building communications masts. The parliament in Cyprus opposes the masts.

On October 6, 1,117 people were arrested inside an airbase at Kleine Brogel, in Belgium, where the Belgian Airforce and NATO store nuclear weapons. Hundreds more, including pacifist campaigners from

across Europe and several members of the Dutch and Belgian parliaments, demonstrated outside the base.

Media reporting of the extent of hostility to war against Iraq has been much restricted. Jeremy Dear, leader of the British National Union of Journalists (NUJ), issued a press release prior to the September 28 demonstration in London, warning that BBC journalists had been informed by managers they would be showing bias by reporting anti-war events. The London demonstration, the largest left-wing demonstration seen in the British capital since the 1980s, and perhaps since the 1930s, was not reported at all by the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*, and was thinly reported in Britain.

Nevertheless, there is widespread scepticism about the war that goes far beyond those actually participating in demonstrations. An ICM/*Guardian* poll found that only 33 percent of the British population support an attack on Iraq, while 44 percent oppose it. The percentage of respondents supporting the war had fallen by four percent in one week—immediately after Tony Blair’s dossier of “evidence” was released. According to an *Irish Times*/MRBI poll, only 22 percent of the Irish population supported the war, while 68 percent opposed it. Fifty nine percent thought the Irish government should oppose action in the United Nations, even if Iraq failed to comply with UN resolutions. Most decisive was opinion in Spain, where, according to a poll held by Instituto Opina and *El Pais*, 87 percent opposed war, while a mere 9.3 percent supported it.



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