

Over 500,000 march in Florence against Iraq war

Our own correspondent
12 November 2002

In one of the largest peace demonstrations ever held in post-war Europe, more than 500,000 people marched in Florence, Italy November 9 to protest US plans for war against Iraq. Demonstrators came from many European countries, as well as from North America and other parts of the world.

The official police estimate of the crowd size was 450,000, itself enormous in a city with a population of 500,000. March organizers estimated that by the end of the day, some 1 million had participated.

The demonstration took place toward the end of the first European Social Forum, a four-day gathering that brought together a variety of anti-globalisation groups, political parties, peace initiatives and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to discuss strategies to oppose the consequences of globalisation and neo-liberal economic policies. The organisers of Saturday's march had anticipated a turnout of up to 200,000, and were concerned that the adoption of a United Nations resolution on Iraq the previous day would deter some protesters from attending. In the event, the march was forced to set off two hours earlier than scheduled because of the enormous crush of people assembling in the city.

The demonstration spread right across the city of Florence and followed a route from the historic city centre to an end point at the city's football stadium. The march was twice as large as the mobilisation of 300,000 protesting the G-8 economic summit in Genoa last year. In the course of the Genoa protests, police and undercover agents intervened to break up and disrupt the protests. One Genoa demonstrator was killed by the police, and many more were injured or arrested.

In Florence, the police maintained a low profile and the event remained peaceful.

Banners denounced the war drive against Iraq,

proclaiming, "Stop the War Coalition" and "No War on Iraq." Placards called for a "globalisation" of the resistance and opposition to increasing militarism and the destruction of living standards. Speakers at the end of the march, including American anti-war protesters, called for the unification of peace movements throughout Europe with peace initiatives in the US.

The only trade union banners visible on the march were carried by members of the CGIL union, which traditionally was linked to the old Italian Communist Party. The latter has since been dissolved and given rise to the Democratic Left and the smaller Refounded Communist party.

The leaders of Italy's other main trade union federations made little effort to link the issue of war to the increasing attacks on the living standards of Italian workers by the right-wing Berlusconi government. Only a day before the Florence march, tens of thousands of Fiat workers took strike action and held their own separate demonstrations in a number of Italian cities to protest plans for mass redundancies by Italy's biggest car producer.

Trade unions in other countries also ignored the protest. Bernd Gehrke, a speaker for the million-strong German public service, banking and insurance trade union, ver.di, explained that the head of the union had decided to stay in Germany for talks with the government, instead of "taking up the issue of a social Europe".

The parties of the ruling right-wing Italian coalition, for obvious reasons, boycotted the protest. The Berlusconi government has proved to be one of the most loyal allies in Europe of the Bush government. But the low turnout by the main opposition party, the Democratic Left, underscored that party's reluctance to officially associate itself with the demands of the

protesters.

The European Social Forum met in Tuscany under the slogan “Another Europe is Possible—Against Racism, War and Neo-liberalism.” It brought together a total of 413 non-government and anti-globalisation groups, peace and environmental groups, social and welfare organisations and a variety of radical protest parties. For four days up to 35,000, mainly young people, from a total of 32 different countries took part in a variety of workshops and conferences to discuss such issues as the threat of war, the attacks on democratic rights, and the economic and social costs of global capitalism.

The mass demonstration Saturday was a powerful expression of the profound opposition of young people and broad layers of working people throughout Europe to the US plans for war. In advance of a US invasion of Iraq, a movement against war is developing that is largely independent of the existing trade unions and social democratic parties. The march also made clear the broad opposition within Italy to the ultra-conservative and militaristic policies of the Italian coalition government led by Berlusconi.

The groups involved in Saturday’s demonstration have announced plans for a European-wide day of protest against war on February 15, 2003.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact