

Three million take to the streets in Rome

Marianne Arens, Peter Schwarz**17 February 2003**

Italy experienced one of the biggest demonstrations in history, when, according to the organizers, more than three million people flooded the streets of the historical city on Saturday. The police gave no figures. It was not possible, they said, to arrive at any concrete estimation of the huge crowd that brought large parts of the city to a standstill for the entire day.

For an individual observer, it was impossible to take in the demonstration, or even a substantial part of it. Although the start was officially scheduled for 2 pm, the streets were already bristling with people carrying rainbow-colored "Peace" flags when our reporting team walked towards the assembly point at Ostia railway station at ten in the morning. The massive size of the march can be gauged by the following fact: at 11 am the front of the demonstration started moving, but it was not until 4 pm that the last march contingents set off on the 15 kilometer route that passed by the Forum Romanum and the Termini railway station, ending at St. Giovanni in Laterano.

In the end, one could not even tell which streets the demonstration was traversing, as huge crowds moved in all directions to and from the venue of the final rally.

As is traditional in Italian demonstrations, most participants marched under the banner of their organization, indicating the name and local of their political party, trade union, association, group or workplace. On Saturday, the number of groups represented seemed endless, without any particular organization dominating the march.

Present were the traditional trade unions, in particular, the CGIL, once close to the Communist Party, and the COBAS rank-and-file trade unions. Of the political parties, the Rifondazione Comunista was quite visible, while the Left Democrats (DS) were less so. Also present were Margherita and Olive tree, both anti-globalization movements like the European Social Forum (which had called for the March) and Attac; numerous radical groups and parties; environmental movements; cultural organizations; entire local administrations and parishes of

the Catholic Church.

The main slogan was "*No alla guerra, senza se senza ma*" (No to war without any reservation), indicating opposition to war against Iraq with or without a United Nations mandate. The more moderate parties and organizations, in particular the DS, but also the CGIL, prominently added, "No to terrorism," and their leaders stressed the need to disarm Iraq.

However, the overwhelming sense of the demonstration was that the danger was not Iraq, but rather the Bush administration in the US. An opinion poll published on Friday found that 73 percent of all Italians reject a war against Iraq, even if it is mandated by the UN, and 85 percent reject a war without a UN mandate.

What united the march was an overwhelming rejection of war and an urge for peace. Outside of that, however, there was little orientation or direction. At the final rally, representatives of political parties were not allowed to speak. Instead, there were contributions from victims of different wars, representatives of oppressed nationalities, immigrants and various religions, interspersed with music. The moderator stressed the importance of peace in general, without providing any particular analysis or explanation of the reasons for the war drive against Iraq.

Among the speakers was a rabbi from the US, who stressed that there is growing opposition to the Bush administration within the US itself. He said that all religious leaders should work together to oppose Bush's war plans and stated his support for the French-German plan for increased weapons inspections in Iraq. He was followed by a representative of the Islamic community in Italy, who stressed his solidarity with the American people and said the people of all countries should work together in favor of peace.

A Kurdish woman described the appalling conditions under civil war conditions in Turkish Anatolia and praised "our President Öcalan". An immigrant from Senegal denounced the increasing repression of immigrants in Italy. An actor read the testimony of a 12-year-old child from Africa who had been forced to fight as a soldier.

To huge cheers, a list of all countries where antiwar rallies were being held was read out. “This,” the moderator said, “is the globalization we like”. She also greeted two veteran politicians, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro (a Christian Democrat and former president) and Pietro Ingrao, who had helped draft the Italian constitution. She praised this “wonderful collection of laws” which, in Article 11, repudiates war.

The attempt to keep politics out of the rally went so far that even the name of right-wing Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a staunch ally of Bush, was hardly mentioned from the platform. This was in part motivated by the desire of the organizers not to disturb the unity of the demonstration, but there were also more immediate tactical considerations. As Manuele, one of the organizers, told us when we visited their headquarters the previous day, they hope that a section of the government camp will oppose the war in a parliamentary vote next week.

On the demonstration itself, there were few leaflets distributed giving a political orientation. The statement of the WSWS, “The tasks facing the antiwar movement,” which was distributed in Italian, aroused great interest and an animated response.

Danilo, Maurizio, Francesco and Gianluca, four youths in their twenties from Cosenza in Southern Italy, who survive on the basis of casual employment, said they considered the struggle against war a political task. “To end war, one should get rid of all of them: Bush, Berlusconi and all the heads of state,” they said. “All they know is their own interest—money and power. This is what it is all about. Everything should be fundamentally changed.”

They were very critical of the role of the Pope, who has spoken out against a war in Iraq. “We are very angry that the Church presents itself as pacifist,” they said. “In reality the Catholic Church, the Pope and the Vatican are involved in every war. If they would leave Christianity as a private affair to every individual, that would be OK. But no, they meddle in everything.”

They went on to describe the social conditions in Calabria. “In Calabria, in the Cosenza area, it is like scorched earth. There is nothing there; in particular, there are no decent jobs. There is no investment by companies and from the government we hear only empty promises. We have never seen any results. And there is so much that should be done, particularly in public institutions.

“The situation is particularly bad for youth. There is nothing you can do after school. Many in our age turn

depressive, or they emigrate. And for the smallest offence you are thrown in jail.”

Carlo, an elderly employee and member of COBAS from Varese in the North, supported the proposal to build a new, international workers party: “This is the main problem here in Italy, this is what is missing. In reality there is no serious opposition to Berlusconi.”

Asked his opinion of the French and German governments, he said, “The position taken by France is not very new: De Gaulle left NATO before, years ago. Does this mean he was a pacifist? France simply had its own interests, different from those of the US.”

Almost all the people our team spoke with made a clear distinction between the American government and the American people. “It is the workers and soldiers in the US who have to carry the cost of this war,” said Rossella and Roberta, a telephone worker and photographer from Sicily. “We do not believe that they are all in favor, and we think it is a very good idea to try and unite all workers internationally.”

Ali, an Iraqi who has been living in Italy for 25 years, gave the following reasons for Bush’s insistence on war: “In my opinion it is sober calculation. Bush promised too much in the election campaign and was never able to fulfil his promises. Quite the opposite. He has promised tax cuts, but the economy is in a bad state and the stock market is spiraling downwards. Then there was the Enron scandal with high-ranking government representatives like Cheney involved. Furthermore, unemployment is on the rise.

“So the easiest way out is to invent a problem like this ‘struggle against terrorism,’ which does not take place in reality. In my opinion, bin Laden has done Bush a tremendous favor. Without the attack on the twin towers, Bush could not have gone so far.”

Asked about his opinion on the US-sponsored “democratic” Iraqi opposition, Fateh, a former Communist Party member and opponent of Saddam Hussein, said, “This opposition has no support whatsoever in Iraq. It has no active basis. It exists only outside of the country. It is a weak opposition that cannot achieve much.”



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