

Reports on February 15-16 antiwar demonstrations

19 February 2003

The World Socialist Web Site is continuing its coverage of the historic international demonstrations held last weekend to protest the US war drive against Iraq. Today we are posting reports sent in by readers in New York City; Seattle; Wilmington, North Carolina; Texas; and Bern, Switzerland.

We encourage our readers to send in further reports from last weekend's rallies, as well as comments on the demonstrations and the statement that was distributed in six languages from the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board entitled, "The tasks facing the antiwar movement". We also invite readers to access the full coverage of last weekend's rallies.

Massive police presence at New York City demonstration

On February 15, 2003, I was among thousands of people from New Jersey who rode packed trains into New York City in order to participate in the rally to protest the possible war with Iraq. On the train with me were senior citizens, middle aged people like me, Moms and Dads with children, and lots of young people of high school and college age. At each stop there were large groups of people waiting to get on. As we got closer to New York City, it appeared that a lot of people were forced to wait for the next train.

As you will see from my description, the people that I was in contact with were law abiding, calm and cooperative with the police. The overwhelming majority of the police were also calm, courteous and cooperative with the people. However, the police tactics which forced people into isolated pockets and prevented them from joining the main rally were in my view very provocative and probably illegal. To add insult to injury, the forced dispersal of the marchers with baton swinging and attack by horses was totally unnecessary and outrageous. I think that the handling of this Peace Rally by the City of New York and its police force was something that you would expect in a dictatorship, not in a free democratic country that holds itself up as an example to the world.

Outside Penn Station, I joined a group of people and started walking up 7th Avenue. We stayed on the sidewalk and stopped at all the lights. Eventually, more people came together, but we still stayed on the sidewalk and obeyed the traffic signals. As we got closer to the rally site, there were more and more policemen (and policewomen). It became clear that they were directing our march, by forcing us to turn at certain corners. Eventually, we were heading north on 3rd Avenue, still on the sidewalks. There were police at every intersecting street prohibiting us from going east toward the rally site. There was no doubt that the police were controlling and directing the marchers. The police were

everywhere in very large numbers, vans and buses filled with police were constantly going past as were police trucks filled with portable barricades. The argument that the police and city had presented earlier in the week about not having enough resources to deal with a legal march was clearly bogus.

Eventually, still on 3rd Avenue, forward progress became slower and slower and finally stopped. I was in the area of 48th or 49th Street. We stood in this area for some time, still on the sidewalks. (I keep mentioning that we were on the sidewalks to emphasize that there was no illegal behavior of any kind, no provoking of or disrespect to the police—the people were completely orderly and under control.) After a half hour or so of standing in place, people began to filter into the street which was full of trucks and buses, also stuck in place. So, I suppose we were now breaking the law, however, none of the many police officers who were there said anything.

Gradually, we began to inch forward and after an hour or so, I was at 3rd Avenue and 51st Street. At this point I could see that we were being held back by a line of police men and women. The block between 51st and 52nd Street was empty, but apparently the marchers north of 52nd Street were also being held back from coming south. It appeared that the police had created these artificial pockets of marchers rather than letting them continue to the end of the rally on 1st Avenue. The marchers were held back by police men and women spaced about three feet apart. There was no pushing or shoving, no confrontations, no tension of any kind on either side. People were chanting different things, including, "Whose Streets? Our Streets." This did not seem particularly provocative to me, since strictly speaking they are the taxpayers' streets and not the property of the police who are theoretically our employees. In any case, the police did not seem to be paying any mind to the chants.

After a while, the police people who seemed to be in charge began to get more and more agitated, among other things rushing back and forth between the two groups at 52nd Street and where I was at 51st Street. More police appeared and at 52nd Street I could see a group of police on horses. All of a sudden I heard some bangs and saw smoke on the ground. I thought it was tear gas, but today the paper said some one threw firecrackers. The horses rushed back and forth and one fell down near the edge of the people.

After a while, the police on horses came down to 51st Street. We were still packed in like sardines. There was no where to go, except possibly west on 51st Street. There was no one with a loud

speaker, no one asked us to disperse, there was no warning, or chance to move. All of a sudden the police charged the people on the west side of 3rd Avenue. Several people were knocked down and the police were on top of them swinging their batons. I've seen pictures of this happening, I can think of Chicago at the Democratic convention in 1968 and the Rodney King incident right off, so I know this is not the first time police have attacked civilians in the United States. However, it was quite amazing to see it at close range in person.

Next, the mounted police moved in on the people on the east side of 3rd Avenue where I was. I looked at the faces of the police men and women on the horses; most were expressionless, but at least two of the men were yelling obscenities and their faces were contorted with rage. They rode the horses directly into us, again and again. There was nowhere to go, the only thing one could do was to try and keep standing, so as to not get trampled by the horses' hoofs. At one instant, I found my self staring directly into the face of one of the horses. It was as if time stood still. I thought, what a beautiful face, I wanted to touch the horse, to acknowledge that here we were sharing this life together. I thought better of it though, I did not want to be singled out by the enraged rider for the crime of assaulting a horse (as I read today, someone else did).

Soon it was over, the police were satisfied and the horses and their riders moved on. No one was hurt where I was, although several people had been assaulted by the foot police on the other side of the street. People were stunned and mostly silent except for one young man, who had been yelling while the horses were coming at us, "I can't believe I'm being attacked by f—king horses," over and over. He was still repeating this, although not yelling anymore.

Before I could decide what to do next, I heard a voice say, "Excuse me please," and a hand gently touch me as someone pushed through the people out to the street. It was a policeman followed by several more, all of them saying, "Excuse me" and "thank you" when we parted for them. This underscored to me the contrast between the behavior of the overwhelming majority of the police officers I encountered and the few who beat and attacked us. The treatment of the police by the marchers was equally one-sided in favor of civility and politeness. I was not aware of any taunting or provocation, even after the attacks.

The police were not threatening anymore, but several were standing facing us with their batons and with the plastic handcuffs in their hands. I decided I did not want to experience those handcuffs so I moved off up 3rd Avenue. By now, people were streaming in from the east and north, so either the rally was over, or the police had dispersed them as they had us. Now the police would allow us to go any direction except east, so discouraged, I turned west and walked back to Penn Station and to my safe warm home in New Jersey.

Seattle protest draws tens of thousands

Just a brief report. I went alone to the Seattle protest with 200 copies of "The tasks facing the anti-war movement." These were distributed within 15 minutes. Little conversation was had regards the flyer, except with another ex-IWW member (as am I) who seemed more interested in promoting the King County Labor Council as a tool to stop the war.

Media estimates of Seattle's were of 15,000-25,000 people. Seattle Indymedia claims 55,000. Author Sherman Alexie and Rep. Jim McDermott spoke at the rally at the Seattle Center. I'm afraid I heard little of the speech. Afterwards, a miles-long march led to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] Detention Center to protest the mistreatment of detainees. We were told that all detainees were moved to the Portland Detention Center the day before to shield them from the protest.

Spirited march in Wilmington

More than 500 people marched in a demonstration in Wilmington, North Carolina on Saturday, February 15 in opposition to the US war on Iraq.

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed the site's statement on the tasks facing the antiwar movement and carried signs with the site's Internet address and slogans against the war: "Oppose Imperialist War," "Build an International Workers Party"; "No War for Oil, Socialize the Oil Industry"; and "Oppose Bush's War, Defend Democratic Rights." These signs were prominently displayed on a local TV report on the demonstration. Speakers at the rally in front of the downtown federal building were mostly community activists, academics and religious figures.

No representatives of the Democratic Party were in evidence. Wilmington is the location of a state port from which troops and military equipment are shipped to Kuwait and other areas in the Middle East.

Antiwar demonstrations in Texas

From Austin:

After reading your reports on the February 15 protests in US cities like Pittsburgh and Detroit, I feel compelled to tell you that we had about 10,000 in Austin, Texas, with a reported 5,000 in Dallas. I know you can't cover everything, but I just wanted to let you know. Here at the University of Texas in Austin, we also had a hastily-called student walkout last week that drew 3,000 out of their classes. Though this is all encouraging, I share your disappointment that no one is talking about ways to actually stop the US from attacking the Iraqis.

From Dallas:

Here in Dallas, Texas (of all places!) an estimated 3,000-5,000 people marched. Goes to show that although Bush considers Texas to be his home, he is not as popular as he believes himself to be.

40,000 protest in Bern

I'm a daily reader of your very informative and proactive site.

I know Switzerland is a small country but would like to inform you that we were 40,000 in the capital city of Bern protesting on this very icy Saturday. This is the largest number ever in our country! It was a great peace demonstration!

Some lukewarm members of our government received a serious warning in case they would not openly criticize the US government and give over-flying rights for US military aircraft in case of war. "You are few and we are a lot, just remember this!"



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