

Germany: 100,000 join antiwar protest in Berlin

Protest outside US airbase in Frankfurt

Our reporters
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One hundred thousand protesters demonstrated in Berlin on Saturday evening against a pending war with Iraq. The action was called by a collection of peace and Christian organisations and took the form of a ring of protesters in the early evening linking in a candle-lit chain extending 35 kilometres around the city. The chain spanned from the suburb of Hellersdorf in the far east of the city to Spandau in the west.

The organisers had reckoned with a total of 25,000, which would have been sufficient to make the chain. In the end, according to official police reports, four times as many turned out. Those taking part in the demonstration were a cross-section of the population—older and senior citizens, large numbers of young people and students and many families with children. Prominent amongst the demonstrators who gathered at Berlin's famous Brandenburg Gate, near the US embassy, were a large group of Americans with banners expressing their opposition to Bush's war policies.

The atmosphere along the demonstration was one of tolerance and friendliness. While there was some disruption to traffic, police otherwise reported no incidents in what was a thoroughly peaceful demonstration. Nevertheless some taking part in the action criticised the form of protest, which left little room to articulate political views. There were no speakers and virtually no banners or placards. Similar "Lichterkette" (chains of light) protests were most recently called in Germany in 1993-94 following neo-Nazi atrocities and served to dilute a wave of anger and protest into "all-party" non-political activities.

Teams from the WSW and Socialist Equality Party (Germany) distributed large numbers of leaflets at the

Berlin demonstration, which were eagerly accepted by those taking part. Raymond was an elderly participant attending the rally with his wife Thea. He is a citizen of Sri Lanka who remembers as a child the end of the Second World War. Both he and his German wife had already taken part in the mass demonstration on February 15 in Berlin and had also attended antiwar protests taking place at Humboldt University in Berlin every Monday evening.

Raymond said, "I am old enough to recall the horrors of the Second World War. I was a child in what was then Ceylon as the war came to an end. We have to do all we can to prevent a new outbreak of war and destruction, although it appears impossible to deter Mr. Bush from his war with Iraq. It is evident even to a child that he is driven by the issue of oil and controlling the Middle East. His war represents a new round of colonialism and oppression, and in my own country of birth we are very familiar with the price which has to be paid for such colonial adventures.

"I agree with you that Bush and his administration are not acting from a position of strength—there is an element of desperation in the way Bush is pushing for war. We can see the crisis emerging everywhere. Even here in Germany now you have nearly 7 million unemployed and people forced to cross the entire country in search of work. "

Thea added, "We have also taken part in the protests which are being held every Monday in Berlin at Humboldt University. It is very encouraging to see large numbers of American citizens taking part. The most positive aspect of the current antiwar movement is its international character. We all have to ensure that no element of anti-Americanism is allowed in the protests

against the Bush war!”

Kaye has worked in public services in Berlin and attended the demonstration with her friend Heiko. She said, “We were both on the demonstration on February 15 and are here tonight to protest against a war which looks inevitable. The course of the past 10 years has been alarming, with a growing number of wars across the globe and for the first time for a half century in Europe itself.

“The SPD and Greens supported the wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and although I back the current opposition by the German government to Bush’s war, I do not really trust Schröder and Fischer. If they were genuine opponents of war then they should be here taking part in these protests instead of giving speeches in parliament about how to dismantle the German welfare system. It is well and good for so many people to turn out in such protests as tonight’s, but it is a shame that no one has come to address those who have assembled. We have to be on our guard that the movement is not watered down and made non-political.”

Demonstrations and protests also took place in other German cities on Saturday. Around 10,000 demonstrators gathered in the city of Karlsruhe and several thousands also took part in protests in Munich and Nuremburg. An estimated 1,400 protesters blockaded the main gate of the American airbase adjoining Frankfurt-Main airport. They carried banners calling for “Bush to the Hague”, “No to the Iraq war—resistance is possible” and “Hello Mr. Bush, you can buy oil!”

The protesters at the Frankfurt-Main airport blocked the main entrance to the airbase “to demonstratively put a spoke in the wheels of the war machine,” as one of the organisers of the protest put it. Many demonstrators of all ages had sleeping bags and mattresses and set up in front of the gate of the airbase.

The authorities of the City of Frankfurt had originally banned the demonstration and blockade, as well as all other related meetings citywide. Two appeals courts later upheld the right of demonstrators to hold their protest in front of the airbase until 5 p.m.. The 24-hour blockade was not allowed to take place.

Police responded with a massive presence and patrolled Frankfurt central station and all commuter train stations leading to the airport. Police began by

telling people repeatedly via loudspeakers to leave the area in front of the gate. Later in the afternoon they began to carry away the 900 squatters, but in general the action remained peaceful; 77 demonstrators were taken into temporary custody.

One of the organisers of the antiwar alliance “Resist” said at the start of the rally that it was not only legitimate but also legal to block the airbase, because it was not only the right but also the duty of every citizen to abide by the German constitution and the international law, which prohibits wars of aggression, its preparation and its support.

The WSWS spoke to Majida, who came with two friends. Majida embodies the international character of the peace movement—her father is Syrian, her mother American, she went to college in Germany, studied law in Britain, lived for some time in the US and now in Frankfurt.

Majida said, “The stories we are being fed in recent months about the reasons for the war are all pretences. It’s all about power and world domination. The whole history of colonialism is coming up again. Now Iraq is under attack. But who will be next—Iran, Syria?

“The SPD-Green government doesn’t really have an antiwar position. They should not give over-flight rights and allow the use of military bases in Germany.

“The question of democratic rights is also important. In this we must fight against our own government. War preparations are being utilised to push through anti-terror laws and attacks on democratic rights. Is it democratic if you have to first ask for permission to be allowed to demonstrate?”



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