

Antiwar protests in France

Our correspondents
25 March 2003

Paris

Nearly 100,000 people demonstrated through Paris against the ongoing American invasion of Iraq on Saturday, March 22. The march was a very lively one with many young people playing a prominent role. There were also many immigrant youth and workers on the march.

In contrast to the demonstrations of February 15, Saturday's demonstration marked the timid re-emergence of left parties that so thoroughly discredited themselves in the last French presidential elections by calling for a vote for the right-wing candidate, Jacques Chirac. Both the Communist Party (PCF) and the Socialist Party (PS) were present on the demonstration.

However, both these parties remain in a deep crisis. This was reflected in the demonstration as both the PS and the PCF allowed Alain Krivine's LCR (Revolutionary Communist League) and Arlette Laguiller's Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Fight) to march in front of them. Until last year's presidential elections these organisations were usually relegated to bringing up the rear of political demonstrations in France. In this demonstration that place was left to Pierre Lambert's Parti des Travailleurs (PT—Workers Party).

World Socialist Web Site supporters distributed 5,000 leaflets of the WSWS and Socialist Equality Party statement "Build an international workers movement against imperialist war." This stood in stark contrast to the PS, PCF, LO, LCR and PT, whose corteges dominated the march.

Until the outbreak of war most of these organisations pinned their hopes on Chirac's veto in the United Nations. Now, all of them, including LO and the PT, offer no political perspective to all those opposing the war.

Amiens

Some 600 people marched through Amiens last Saturday to demonstrate their opposition to the invasion of Iraq by the US and British armies organised by the Somme Collective against the war.

It was more made up of trade union and political delegations than the somewhat larger spontaneous demonstration of last Thursday evening in reaction to the start of the war.

Young people were well represented: secondary school pupils, university students and immigrant youth. Older workers came in substantial numbers, many marching behind the CGT trade union banner. Teachers were in evidence with the banner of their main union, the FSU. The political parties present were

the PCF, the PS, the LCR, Lutte Ouvrière and the PT.

A team of supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed the leaflet "Build an International movement against imperialist war," a title which attracted an immediate interest with many demonstrators and supporting bystanders.

Some demonstrators questioned the efficacy of mere protest against the war in the face of Bush and Blair's contemptuous disregard for the world demonstration of February 15 and the continuing movement. Sonia, a Tunisian student at Jules Verne University in Amiens, said that she agreed that the crisis could not be solved at the level of the nation-state: "A new international needs to be built."

The Communist Party leaflet had a purely pacifist line and called for an abiding by the decisions of the UN. The MJS, the Socialist Party youth movement, declared that "the UN should have been consulted", and, in line with the PS's increasingly strident Euro-chauvinism, called for "an emergency meeting of the countries of the European Union".

The PT leaflet warned that it was "a war planned for the exploitation of oil and the break-up of Iraq into seven pieces." A major question for them was the defence of the nation-state and France's bourgeois republic: "How to defend the existence of the Republic?"

The leaflet distributed by Alternative Libertaire (Libertarian Alternative) accused Chirac of hypocrisy and pointed out that "to fight against war is also to fight against a capitalist 'peace'." It went on to say: "France, by approving UN Resolution 1441, supported a war against Iraq. The increase in the military budget and the building of a second aircraft carrier, the military intervention in the Ivory Coast as well as the participation of French firms in the plunder of the wealth and the exploitation of the peoples of the Third World are part of the process of re-colonising and re-militarising the world." It offered no perspective, however, for fighting this process.

Marseilles

This report was sent in by a WSWS reader, a university student in Marseilles.

Because of the lack of enthusiasm of the student unions, the mobilisation of university students in Marseilles has been muted. I took part in several demonstrations and rallies, but no strike or demonstration was organised at any university campus. However, many students participated individually in the various actions organised outside the universities.

The situation with the lycée [secondary school] students is different:

Thursday, March 20:

The demonstrations started in the morning and from 10 a.m. students from the Lycée Diderot took to the streets. The local press reported 300 students in “a lively demonstration without incident and which won the support of many Marseillais who were quick to hoot and applaud the march as it passed.”

One of the strikers, in the movement from its inception, said to a reporter: “We want a movement separate from the politicians and the associations. We have opted for a spontaneous demonstration.”

After meeting up with those who were coming to join them (hundreds according to the authorities), in front of the American consulate, the students went the round of the secondary schools and universities to win them to the strike. Without resorting to an excess of violence, they “forced the gates of Lycée Montgrand,” before proceeding to bring out the Victor-Hugo and Marie-Curie lycées. The story goes, and it is true, in relation to Lycée Saint-Michel, that a student did not hesitate to jump from the second story to join his comrades in struggle, when the head teacher refused to let the striking pupils out. Unharmed, the young man thus won the permission for all his fellow students to join the movement.

That evening, according to official figures, more than 2,000 demonstrators gathered in front of the American embassy to participate in a rally called by the main trade unions, left political parties and several associations.

The local press recorded the following comments at the rally:

“This war is unjust and we will go on demonstrating our hostility to Bush and to this ignoble conflict orchestrated by that great power.”

“We are reacting, of course, all the more strongly as, despite the millions of people who have been demonstrating since the beginning of the year throughout the world, Bush, Aznar and Blair have not taken the slightest notice of public opinion.”

“In 1991, the movements for peace had demonstrated their hostility to the war but the pressure of public opinion had fallen off as soon as the conflict started. This time, the pacifists do not think they have lost the battle.”

“As we are talking, the bombs are falling on Bagdad. And you think they are falling on the Iraqi leaders? No, the people are the ones who are going to suffer once again.”

“Even if it doesn’t achieve anything, we have to be here.”

There is a categorical rejection of the regime of “that dictator, that tyrant Saddam Hussein, whose victims were our Iraqi brothers, tortured to death”.

The antiwar movement handed a motion to the prefecture, the government offices, to make the point that “this attack is an act of aggression against a state and that the people responsible are liable to be indicted for ... war crimes, according to the Geneva Convention.”

Friday, March 21:

A banner 13 metres high and 6 metres wide was unfurled at 5:30 p.m. in front of the PACA (Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur) regional council building, bearing the words “No to the war”. Marseilles motorists honked their horns in agreement.

Saturday, March 22:

The mobilisation, which had fallen off on Friday—some forces being drawn off for a European demonstration against sackings—set off again at a higher level. According to police estimates, between 15,000 and 20,000 were marching. On the march were pupils from Daumier, Diderot, Jean-Perrin, Coin-Joli and Thiers lycées. Also present were students from different universities in the city. Again several left parties, trade unions and associations held up their flags and banners.

Among the slogans: “Children of Iraq, children of Palestine, humanity is being murdered”, “Aznar-Bush-Blair, war criminals”, “Stand up for peace, stand up for rights”, “1—Osama, 2—Saddam, who will be number three?”, “Boycott American products”, “Blood for oil, no, no, no”, “Disarm Israel of its nuclear warheads”.

Lycée student Anna, 17, said: “My main anxiety is, of course, the number of dead to be mourned. The media don’t give precise information, it’s difficult to know exactly what’s happening on the battlefield. I wonder what is to become of Iraq once the war is over. What government can they put at the top of the country? I fear that Iraq is going to become a new American protectorate.”

Claude, 60, on early retirement, said: “What scares me the most is the religious aspect of this conflict, the positions being taken up by both sides. I don’t think George W. Bush has calculated the consequences of his decision.”



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