

Hundreds of thousands demonstrate across Germany

Our correspondents
24 March 2003

Berlin

Just two days after a series of mass demonstrations Thursday, 40,000 once again turned out in Berlin March 22 to march from Alexanderplatz to the Brandenburg Gate. The demonstration included many families with children, as well as elderly citizens and Arab and Kurdish immigrants.

The attendance was nearly double the number anticipated by the organisers and anger at the war was very evident. Together with slogans such as “Bush to the Hague”, “What has happened to international law?” “Bush and Rumsfeld—mass murderers” and “The shame will always remain”, the central demand of the demonstration was the demand for the denial of airspace for US military planes operating against Iraq.

In front of the US embassy and within sight of the Brandenburg Gate the Greenpeace organisation had set up a 4-metre-tall peace symbol and a bell which will be struck every hour the war continues.

On the high metal barriers surrounding the embassy placards were hung declaring, “The war is directed against us all” and “Hitler is dead, Bush lives”. One banner also read: “I am not allowed to compare Bush with Hitler—what a shame!”

Frankfurt

A total of 10,000 people gathered in the centre of Frankfurt-Main (Römerberg) to protest the US war and call for an immediate halt to the aggression.

Young people and secondary school students were prominent on the march with placards and T-shirts declaring “War is not the answer!” “Bush to the Hague!” “We are the dead of tomorrow”. Since the start of the bombing of Iraq thousands of elementary school students have taken to the streets of Frankfurt every day and protested in front of the city’s US consulate.

Speakers at the rally warned of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the war and described the conditions in Iraq. A number of speakers, however, supported the German government’s position and failed to point out that the SPD-Green coalition in Berlin had promised cooperation with American war activities based in Germany.

One of the speakers, US university professor Michael Morrissey, won considerable applause when he pointed out that according to polls a third of the American population, i.e.,

nearly 100 million people, rejected the war:

“This war poses the world with a new barbaric and insane vision: the insanity is called preventive war—war to stop war. This insanity is now the official strategy of the most powerful nation in the world. The politics of the United Nations has failed and in particular the media in America bears a responsibility. When two-thirds of the American people really support this gung-ho president then it is mainly because of the enormous pressure imposed by the American media. I can no longer bear to watch these laughable CNN idiots making the horrors of war into a flashy TV reality show.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* had set up its own stand at the demonstration and as Michael Morrissey passed by he made the point that he was a daily reader of the site, which he regarded as the best source of information. He indicated that he was aware of the forthcoming conference of the WSW in Ann Arbor, Michigan, wished it success and hoped it would be publicised worldwide.

On the same day, 30,000 Kurds from across Europe travelled to Frankfurt to celebrate the traditional spring festival of Newroz. This year the rally was turned into a protest against the invasion of Kurdish-occupied northern Iraq by Turkish troops. Originally the rally had been banned by the city of Frankfurt. The ban was then overturned by the administrative court of Kassel. The rally was meticulously supervised by large numbers of police who blocked off roads and followed the march with cameras mounted on police helicopters.

Rhine and Ruhr regions

The Rhine and Ruhr regions of central Germany have been the scene of demonstrations since the beginning of the war.

Saturday saw demonstrations throughout the region with an estimated 25,000 taking part in rallies, pickets and demonstrations. A crowd of 4,000, including well-known cultural personalities, gathered in Cologne. Demonstrations and protests also took place in the towns of Bochum, Wuppertal, Hagen, Münster and Castrop-Rauxel.

Six thousand people gathered in the city of Düsseldorf for a protest action called by 60 Christian and political organisations. Young participants on the demonstration expressed their frustration with the speeches held, which restricted themselves to humanitarian appeals and uncritically defended the position

of the German government.

Bielefeld

More than 2,500 people took to the streets in the city of Bielefeld to oppose the war. The protest march was organised by the local Networking for Peace, an alliance of Christian groups, local trade unions, citizens' committees and NGOs.

Although the demonstration was dominated by pupils and students, the participants were of all ages and came from all social layers. A number of immigrant organisations, mainly Turkish and Kurdish groups, participated, displaying banners against the war in Iraq, as well as some left and radical groups. But most of the participants seemed politically unaffiliated. Some of them had the peace symbol painted on their faces and others held self-made banners, reading "No War", "Disarm Bush" and "Stop the War".

Although some speakers at the end of the rally pointed to the economic interests behind the war drive of the US, the organisers tried to restrict the demonstration to purely pacifist protest. All the speakers refrained from raising any wider political or social questions and left their protest at denouncing Bush and putting pressure on the German government to stop its military support of the US war machine.

The speeches made were in sharp contrast with the feelings of many participants. A call to extend the protest to a broader political protest made by one speaker at the end of the rally was received with enthusiasm. Some 30 youth, who were not satisfied with the pacifist protest and praying and singing for peace, blockaded the march for about 10 minutes by a sitting down at an intersection.

Every protester to whom WSWS reporters spoke accused the German government of inconsistency and hypocrisy; on the one hand opposing the war, and on the other refusing to withdraw soldiers from Kuwait or the AWACS reconnaissance planes in Turkey.

After the rally the WSWS spoke to Tobi, a 20-year-old student, who has participated in a sit-down strike against the war since Friday afternoon on the Jahnplatz, the main square in the city centre. His sit-down is a protest against the German government's involvement in the killings in the Middle East.

Asked about the reasons behind the war he said, "This is not a war against terror or a 'humanitarian' war. But I cannot imagine that it is just a war for oil. There must be something different. The war has been foreseen for a long time."

When he was asked if this war has been started by the US out of a position of strength, he first said, "Yes, of course." Then he thought it over and added: "Military strength, yes. But if you look at the social and economic conditions in the US it is a position of weakness. The war against Iraq is an attempt to divert public attention from social problems at home."

Jena

A correspondent in the German city of Jena sent this report:

An antiwar demonstration took place March 22 in Jena, a town which itself was bombed during World War II. The

protestors ranged from small children to grey-haired people, contradicting claims in the American mass media that only the "usual protesters" attend such events.

The protestors gathered at three different starting points throughout the city before embarking on marches that would converge at the city marketplace.

When I reached the starting point, the ominous sounds of sirens and falling bombs emitted from loudspeakers were in sharp contrast to the beautiful sunny day. The police presence was low-key, and the first speaker at the microphone informed the crowd that the organizers had spoken with the police and been informed that many officers were sympathetic to the demonstration. Nonetheless, the police were wearing body armour.

Before marching, various speakers made clear that they were not pro-Saddam or anti-American, and further denounced Bush's simplistic reduction of conflicts to terms of good versus evil ("Mickey Mouse and mullahs"). A good feeling pervaded the crowd since almost every person there shared common attitudes toward the present dangerous situation.

The marchers proceeded in impressive numbers to the market place, where at least 6,000 gathered. Political literature was scarce, and three hundred WSWS flyers were quickly distributed and eagerly received. The demonstration was a lively event. Aside from the creative signs, shirts and props in the crowd, there was poetry, percussion, singing and speeches during more than three hours of protesting.

Some of the speeches raised the important point that the German government (the "Red-Green" coalition of the SPD and the Greens) is currently posing as an opponent of war, even though it had participated in both the Kosovo and Afghanistan wars. The government was further criticized for providing overflight rights and other indirect aid for the US-led war against Iraq. The creation of the European Intervention Force and the rising spectre of German rearmament were also cited.

Despite these valid points, the perspective and motives of the organizers were not coherent, and politically dubious. The event was organized by the "Friedensbündnis" ("Peace Alliance"), an amalgam of organizations including the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) and Attac.

The PDS was the most prominent organization at the event, with PDS flags and pins noticeably distributed throughout small portions of the crowd. A consistent and viable strategy to oppose the war that is linked to the defence of democratic rights and living standards was not outlined.



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