

100,000 in Germany demonstrate for an immediate end to the war

Our correspondents
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An estimated 100,000 joined protests, sit-ins and blockades throughout Germany on Saturday to demand an immediate end to the US/British war against Iraq. According to police, 50,000 marched through Berlin in the latest of a series of protests and activities in the capital city against the war.

An additional 30,000 demonstrators formed a 50 kilometre-long human cordon between the west German cities of Osnabruck and Munster. Both towns in the fifteenth century were involved in the ending of the devastating German Thirty Years War. Demonstrations and protests also took place in the cities of Dresden, Hamburg, Kiel, Lübeck, Cottbus, Rostock, Bonn and Munich. Blockades and sit-ins of US bases in Germany took place in Stuttgart and Frankfurt (*see below*).

Berlin

According to police figures, 50,000 gathered in Berlin and marched in two separate columns to the city's Victory Column close to the Brandenburg Gate. In bright sunshine, protesters—including very many young people, school students and entire families—carried homemade banners reading, “Shame on you, Mr. Bush” and “Send inspectors to check for weapons of mass destruction in America.” The chairperson at the Berlin rally announced that in the 10 days since the beginning of the war a total of 67 demonstrations, protests and pickets had taken place in Berlin alone. A recent survey in Germany also states that at least a third of all German school students have taken part in some sort of protest activity against the Iraq war.

At the final rally, which was organised by a coalition of peace initiatives and the Attac anti-globalisation movement, various speakers professed their anger at the war against Iraq, but failed to make any criticism of the

collaboration with the US war being undertaken by the German government.

The main speaker at the rally was the head of the German trade union movement (DGB), Michael Sommer, who denounced the war but then declared that while it was necessary to spend money on the fight against terrorism, funds should also go towards combating poverty.

While professing opposition to the war, the sum total of German trade union activity has been to organise a paltry 10-minute general strike. Sommer attacked the openly pro-war stance of the leader of the Christian Democratic opposition (CDU), Angela Merkel, but had nothing to say about the German government's practical measures supporting the US war effort. Sommer's speech was largely greeted with silence, with some members of the public loudly declaiming him to be a hypocrite.

After Sommer, the chair of the rally announced that speakers from the SPD had declared at short notice that they had other pressing engagements. The planned speaker from the Green Party did not materialise. It was left to the veteran Algerian nationalist, Achmed Ben Bella, to denounce George W. Bush and Tony Blair as fascists while then going on to congratulate the German and French governments for their stance against the war. Over the past few years Ben Bella has given his support to a number of activities organised by the Attac anti-globalisation movement.

The reluctance of SPD and Green Party representatives to address the Berlin rally can only be explained as the dismissive reaction by these parties to the antiwar movement, which has raised the central demand of an end to all forms of German government collaboration with the Iraq war.

Blockades of US airbases in Frankfurt and

Stuttgart

Saturday also witnessed protests and blockades of US military bases in Stuttgart and Frankfurt. About 6,000 formed a cordon around the major US base in Stuttgart before the protest was broken up by police. An estimated 2,000 took part in the blockade of the Rhine-Main US airbase near the city of Frankfurt-Main. The base is one of the principal airports for the transport of US weapons, equipment and personnel to the battle zones in Iraq. Traffic in and out of the airport has doubled since the war began.

There have been a series of demonstration since the war began and a mass blockade of the Frankfurt base took place just two weeks ago, when police transported away a number of demonstrators but generally reacted in a restrained manner to the protest. This Saturday the police presence was much larger and they intervened at an early stage to confiscate sleeping bags, mattresses and provisions brought by the protesters. As the group, including large numbers of youth, sat down in front of the entrance to the base police moved in to transport them away.

As the war continues, protests in Germany are concentrating increasingly on the bases being used by the US military—an operation which has been fully sanctioned by the SPD-Green Party coalition government. Banners at the Frankfurt protest also demanded an end to the use of German airspace for US bombers: “Stop assistance to the war by SPD and Greens. Ban the use of German air space.” American B-52 bombers starting off from Great Britain fly over Germany before unloading their enormous payloads of munitions on Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.

Speakers at the protest noted that, despite opposition to the war, German government representatives have avoided declaring the US aggression to be a breach of international and German law because such a statement would jeopardise German assistance to the war effort and make the German government liable to legal action.

One of the speakers at the rally, Tobias Pflüger, from the Tubing Information centre for military affairs, confirmed that the German Defence Ministry had assigned a total of 3,700 German soldiers to patrol US and British military facilities in Germany. He went on to point out that while the German government was keen to ensure that relations with the US did not

worsen, it was also intent on developing Europe and Germany as an economic and military alternative to the US.

Pflüger also criticised the plan for the reform of the German army, to be officially presented in May this year by German Defence Minister Struck, which envisages a significant alteration to the types of intervention made by the army. In particular, the reform plan proposes that the German army be capable of intervening in so-called “preventive wars” such as the present US aggression in Iraq.

Pflüger concluded that the reaction by European countries to US unilateralism was to develop their own potential to wage war: “Whoever undertakes entirely justified criticism of the US should not forget to also criticise support for the war on the part of the German government and the German military policy itself.”

Another speaker at the Frankfurt protest, Philip Wehreschild, who had helped organise mass protests by Frankfurt school children against the war, reported that a total of 200,000 pupils had gone on strike the day after the first American bombs fell on Baghdad.

Wehreschild stated that the same government which had sent troops to Yugoslavia and Afghanistan could not be regarded as fundamentally opposed to war and that growing militarism in Germany could only be financed by further drastic attacks on social conditions. Finally he noted that if the parents of the 200,000 striking school children had themselves gone on strike and participated in actions to prevent US military supplies from reaching the battlefields, the repercussions for the war would have been dramatic. He called upon the German trade union movement to translate its verbal opposition to the war into practice and organise strike action.



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