

Massive anti-war protest in Rome

A correspondent
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Rome saw the biggest antiwar demonstration worldwide, with over one million demonstrators participating in a march through the centre of the Italian capital. The protest was jointly organised by trade unions, anti-globalisation groups and parties of the official Italian left. Demonstrators came by special buses and trains from all regions of Italy. The march, which had to be started earlier than scheduled, lasted over seven hours.

Alongside contingents of trade unionists, anti-globalisation protesters and political parties (the Greens, parties of the Olive Tree coalition), there were great numbers of working class families, students and youth. The demonstration was headed by several “caravans of peace” that had started on February 28 from Venice, Genoa and Sicily, organising antiwar protests along the way.

One prominent slogan was the demand for the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq. Another was “Your war, our dead,” a slogan used by anti-Aznar demonstrators in Spain last week and aimed on Saturday against the Berlusconi government. Italy has 3,000 troops in Iraq, and Italian soldiers were hit by a devastating attack at the hands of the Iraqi resistance in November of 2003. Some wives of US soldiers spoke against the war at a rally at the Circo Massimo [Circus Maximus].

The huge turnout, which surprised the organisers themselves, stood in sharp contrast to an official “anti-terror” demonstration held on March 18 in Rome. The official “bipartisan” demonstration sponsored by the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) and attended by political parties from the right (including government parties) and the left, attracted virtually nobody. It was derided by speakers at Saturday’s mass protest.

Piero Fassino, leader of Democratici di Sinistra (Democratic Left), the successor of the Italian

Communist Party, who was present at the March 18 demonstration, tried to join Saturday’s march. He made his appearance, surrounded by numerous bodyguards, and was verbally and physically challenged by marchers and forced to leave. Part of the youth organisation of Democratici di Sinistra also had to leave.

While the demonstration was said to be “unitarian” in the “name of peace,” and the overwhelming majority of demonstrators showed sincere hatred of imperialist war, statements by politicians and other “antiwar” leaders who took part made clear that they were following a different agenda. The presence of Democratici di Sinistra on the march was deemed a “victory for the movement” by the leader of the Social Forum, Vittorio Agnoletto.

The general line of the politicians of the official left and the union leaders was to replace the US-led military occupation of Iraq with one carried out under the auspices of the United Nations. The leader of the CGIL trade union, Guglielmo Epifani, declared that his union demanded the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq “not in order to create a vacuum, but to aim at filling one: with the UN.”

The leader of the Greens, Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, said, “The withdrawal of the troops from Iraq is the courageous and really reformist option. Staying is a conservative act.” He added that maintaining Italian troops in Iraq “means to support the positions of the American right and Bush. Only withdrawal can force the right to understand that the way must be cleared for the UN.”

Francesco Rutelli, the leader of the Margherita, a coalition of opposition parties, said, “What matters today is that we are all against the war in Iraq, and that we remember that what is needed is for the UN to move in as soon as possible, so as to create better conditions to fight terrorism with greater efficiency.”

The right-wing government parties reacted angrily to the march, saying it was aiding terrorism. “It is possible that some today ... demonstrate for peace in good faith, but the fact is that with marches of this kind one only helps the terrorists,” said Roberto Calderoli, a leader of the Lega Nord and the vice president of the Senate.

The leader of the Christian Democratic Union, Marco Follini, said, “It is wrong to imagine that the enemy is on the other side of the Atlantic or in Palazzo Chigi (the seat of the Italian government) rather than in the caves of Afghanistan.”

The government deployed large numbers of police to protect government and official buildings, including Prime Minister Berlusconi’s Roman residence, and surveillance helicopters hovered over the demonstration.



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