

Brussels: workers from East and West demonstrate for a “social” Europe

Dietmar Henning
21 March 2005

On Saturday, some 60,000 people from throughout Europe demonstrated in the Belgian capital Brussels against welfare cuts. The demonstration, which was mainly supported by trade unionists from various European countries, had been called by the European Trade Union Federation under the slogan, “More and better jobs, Defend Social Europe, Stop Bolkestein.”

For the first time since the European Union expanded eastwards, workers from east and west were demonstrating side-by-side. As well as substantial trade union delegations from France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany—and smaller groups from Italy, Spain, Britain and Portugal—Polish, Romanian and Slovenian workers came to Brussels.

Originally the Brussels demonstration had been planned as part of the worldwide protests against the Iraq war. In October 2004 in London, the European Social Forum (ESF) had decided to call this central demonstration. But the leaders of the ESF, such as ATTAC and others are oriented politically towards providing a left-cover to the social democratic and former Stalinist parties and the trade union apparatus—advocating that they adopt minimal social reforms and impose legal measures to limit the activities of the global corporations. They decided therefore to hand over the event to the union bureaucracy to use it for its own interests. Thus an antiwar protest became a trade union demonstration advocating national protectionism. The European Trade Union Federation did not mention the Iraq war at all in its call for the demonstration.

As a result, there were three different assembly points for the demonstration, one organised by the trade unions, one organised by Belgian youth organizations wishing to protest against rising unemployment and racism, and one for organizations supporting the ESF. The protestors marched from the Gar du Midi rail station in the south, through Brussels city centre to the Gar du Nord. Along

the way, the demonstrators passed by the enormous glass-clad offices of the major European companies, the EU administration and the European Trade Union Federation.

The organizers claimed this would put pressure on the EU government heads, who would be meeting in Brussels on March 22 and 23. This EU summit is supposed to draw a balance sheet of the so-called “Lisbon process”, now it has reached the halfway stage. Five years ago in Lisbon, the EU decided to strengthen the European great powers and corporations by 2010 against their rivals in America and Asia, and to make the EU the leading economic area worldwide.

This process has seen the construction of an EU military capability, and the constant attacks on the social gains of working people. EU expansion is being used to play off workers against one another in east and west. The social standards of the west are not being introduced to Eastern Europe, but rather the working conditions of Eastern European workers are becoming the new norm throughout Europe. A general lowering of wages and social benefits is on the agenda across Europe.

In a press interview, Andrzej Matla of the Polish trade union Solidarnosc called for a minimum wage in order to stop wage cuts in the German meat processing sector. German and Danish meat processing companies have recently started employing workers from Poland on short-term contracts in their German plants. German workers are being dismissed and replaced with workers from Poland, who are paid far less and enjoy no employment rights. Matla pointed out that this was a never-ending downward spiral. In the meantime, even cheaper labour is flooding into Poland from the Ukraine.

Another example of this process is the fate that has befallen the workers employed in Vitoria Gasteiz in Spain’s Basque Country by the German company August Rueggeberg GmbH, the world leader in grinding tools. They sent a delegation to Brussels to publicise their

16-month strike and mobilize support.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Ilde Ogayar and Pedro Barragan. Some 16 months ago the company had sacked 77 out of 220 workers. The company argued that they had become “redundant” as a result of the rationalization measures being carried through involving the redeployment of some production to Bologna in Italy and low-wage countries in Eastern Europe and Asia.

The workers took strike action because the company had ignored all its legal obligations. The management had arbitrarily sacked trade union members. They also sacked two women, one because she was pregnant and the other because she was ill.

Only 20 workers are still working at the plant. “A hundred and fourteen of us are still on strike,” reported Pedro Barragan. “The management has rejected all the offers of the workforce to lower production costs by making concessions such as working longer hours or taking lower wages.”

Ilde Ogayar added, “The management said we could be redeployed to work in other factories abroad. But we have families, we can’t simply move to another country where we don’t speak the language.”

No employees had accepted the “voluntary” redundancy payments which the company offered.

“We must hold out,” the two workers said. That is not so easy. Although the union supports them, it claims it can do nothing. “We largely live from donations made by workers in our town. Some of us have had to sell shirts and clothes on market stalls.”

The Rueggeberg workers were only ably to speak to a few hundred at the ESF assembly point, and were not permitted to address the rally at the conclusion of the demonstration to a crowd numbering tens of thousands.

Instead the rally was addressed by 10 high-ranking European trade union functionaries. Their short contributions were particularly directed against the so-called “Bolkestein directive.”

This draft directive was written under the auspices of the former European Commissioner Frits Bolkestein (a Dutch liberal). If adopted, it would open up the provision of all services within the EU to competition from the private sector. It is considered one of the most important projects of the European Union Commission. The provision of services accounts for two thirds of the entire EU economy. The acting European commissioner for internal market and services, Charlie McCreevy, vehemently supports the directive, claiming it could create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

In reality the directive would continue the downward spiral in wages and social conditions. The directive would operate on a “country of origin” basis, allowing those offering services to operate abroad according to the conditions governing their domestic market. For example, building contractors from the accession countries in Eastern Europe, or international building companies that establish operations in such countries, could then bid for contracts in Western Europe using the lower standards applying to work safety or working times of these new EU member states.

The unions are not interested in unifying European workers. They are seeking protectionist measures based on the post-war political arrangements within the European nation states in which their position as enforcers of the demands of big business is recognised. Not only has globalization undermined the basis for such measures, as the fate of the Rueggeberg workers shows, but the demand for national protectionism divides European workers and makes it possible for the corporations to play them off against each other—even when it is pitched as a progressive “pan-European” measure as was done in Brussels.

In their short speeches, the union officials warned the European governments of the explosive consequences of their policies. They fear that European workers will turn away from official politics and that a movement could develop outside their control.

This was put most clearly by the chairman of the German Trade Union Federation Michael Sommer. “The capitalists and the European Commission must take note: It will either be a Europe of working people or they will turn away from it. We do not want that.” He criticized the commission for making decisions, “without considering the consequences” and demanded that it “finally listen to the trade unions”.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed several thousand leaflets at the demonstration, elaborating a perspective for the European working class against militarism and welfare cuts.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact