

Europe: antiwar protests draw largest numbers in London and Rome

Paul Mitchell
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Thousands of antiwar protesters, predominantly youth and students, marched in London on Saturday in a demonstration organized by Stop the War Coalition, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain. While police claimed 15,000 people took part, the real figure was more than triple that.

The London protest was one of a number organised across Europe and internationally to mark the third anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

On the whole, however, the demonstrations revealed a certain exhaustion with the policy of pacifist protest that substitutes simply mobilising numbers on the streets for a political perspective aimed against imperialist war and the capitalist profit system that gives rise to it.

In Denmark some 4,000 people rallied in Copenhagen; in Stockholm, Sweden, about 1,000 marched to the US Embassy. Three thousand protesters gathered in Istanbul, Turkey, around 1,000 in Berlin and approximately 500 in Vienna. In Barcelona, Spain, 4,000 demonstrated and there were also protests in Portugal, Greece, Switzerland and Ireland.

The demonstrations in London and Rome were amongst the largest, no doubt motivated by opposition to the governments of prime ministers Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi. Both countries have troops in Iraq. According to reports, Romano Prodi, who heads the alliance that is challenging Berlusconi in next month's election, had declined to participate in the 10,000-strong Rome march.

In London, a handful of Labour MPs and trade union leaders addressed the crowd, including London Mayor Ken Livingstone and former Labour MP and minister Tony Benn, and George Galloway, head of the Respect-Unity coalition. Their speeches made general criticisms

of Blair and called for a reorientation in Britain's foreign policy, away from its reliance on the US.

Several members of Military Families Against the War addressed the rally. These included conscientious objector Lance Corporal George Solomou and Pauline Hickey, whose son was the 97th British soldier to die in the Iraq conflict.

Ben Griffin, a former SAS special forces soldier, said he had doubts before going to Iraq that the war was illegal. Once there, he saw that the coalition forces treated Iraqis civilians with "utter contempt" and this had made him resign from the army.

Sheik Hassan Al Zagani, foreign affairs spokesperson for the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, greeted the demonstration and sent "condolences in the name of most Iraqi people to the families of soldiers who have lost their lives in this unjust war." He added, "Do not get tired of demonstrating and protesting. We are the voice of humanity, and we have to continue fighting."

The audience reaction to the lack of any perspective to address the eruption of militarism and attacks on democratic rights was reflected in the muted response to many of the speakers.

Amongst those who discussed with WSWs campaigners there was a great deal of concern about current US plans to attack Iran.

Mark told the WSWs that the threats against Iran were another example of the double standards being employed by the Bush administration, which had no criticisms of Israel's nuclear weapons arsenal.

A change in US administration would not fundamentally alter the course of the US, however, he said. "Successive American administrations have been acting in the same imperialist, authoritarian, bullyish way—it doesn't matter whether Republican or Democrat. The thing is, the establishment in the US has

so much at stake, and war is the biggest business in the US. War will continue to grow unless the American people take matters into their own hands.”

There were many in the US who opposed the actions of the government, he continued. “Thousands of people marched against the war, which means that there is quite an awareness in America among ordinary citizens that what their administration is doing is not in the benefit of their country. Those are the people I am appealing to, those who are aware of the evil politics of their government.

“People need to bond and network. All the other forums are dominated by governments. That’s why the only chance that people really have is to bond with each other across national borders. That actually reinforces each other, and it’s only that way that people can really influence government decisions.”

Margaret, a professional woman in her fifties, said that the US-led attack on Iraq was “one of the most disgusting times of mankind because none of this was provoked. I remember hearing George Bush saying, before he was president, that he had every intention of going into Iraq. The lies, the deceit, the torture; it’s just completely disgusting! And it’s evolving, it’s a global thing now, it’s involving the whole world.”

“I would like to see a global general strike, for everybody to stop work, certainly initially for 24 hours.”



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