

London: 35,000 march in “Put People First” protest

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A march by 35,000 people through London was perhaps the largest of a number of anticipatory protests in Europe, directed towards this week's G-20 summit. Protests also took place in Berlin and Frankfurt, Vienna, Rome, Paris and Geneva.

The London demonstration was assembled by a coalition of trades unions from the UK and other European countries, France's CGT, Italy's CGIL and the FNV federation from the Netherlands. NGOs, charities and religious groups marched under the slogan "Put People First."

Of these, the most influential politically is the Trades Union Congress, which has played a key role in drawing up a series of demands on the G-20 leaders limited to appeals for additional stimulus packages, greater transparency and "just, fair and sustainable policies" to "lead the world out of recession."

Nothing advocated by the protest in any way impinges on the essential interests of the profit system, the major corporations and banks. It was an attempt to channel popular anger generated by the onset of recession into safe channels, advancing prescriptions that can be drawn from policy documents from any number of European governments. Its central thrust was summarised by China's Xinhua news agency as "a unified call for a coordinated fiscal stimulus to create and preserve jobs, international action to ensure that an out-of-control finance sector never threatens the stability of the global economy again and a commitment from world leaders that they will move to a low carbon economy"—all measures that Prime Minister Gordon Brown would be happy to endorse.

This agenda shaped the character of the demonstration, which was much smaller than its pre-publicity claimed would be the case. There were those on the demonstration who have been moved by the worsening economic and social situation, but many were political and trade union activists, close to the union bureaucracy or directly involved in various charities and climate change groups such as the Greens. Also present were the various "left groups" that have as usual focused on boosting the political credentials of the TUC and the rest of the union bureaucracy.

At a rally in Hyde Park, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber claimed that the crisis was the result merely of "irresponsible reckless decisions" and "greed." "If we can generate fabulous wealth, and we can, then surely we can learn how to distribute that wealth more fairly," he added.

Susan George from ATTAC France, the most left-sounding speaker, merely called for progressive tax policies internationally and for the banks to be "treated like public utilities." Sharon Barrow of the Australian Council of Trade Unions called for a "recovery plan that includes the world's poorest nations."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Elena Becker, who is an editor for a medical journal. She said, "I feel very angry. The situation faced by millions is so unbelievably bad and unfair on the weakest sections of society. What is happening is overwhelming in the world as we know it and the way capitalism is collapsing.

"I would like things to change in a way that will promote opportunities for all. People should have access to the most basic things in life—healthcare and education. We need to stop a system that promotes inequality and individualism. It's about compassion.

We need to work out a dramatic change in our institutions."

Martin, a student who came with his friends on the demo, said, "I'm here because we're not being listened to and the situation is not likely to change without further action. "People must be willing to apply more pressure than the organisers of these protests are willing to do. The government is dealing with it in league with the media, calling it a credit crunch instead of a recession and it will keep happening under the current system.

"A lot of people I know are unemployed and are faced with losing their jobs. I'm finding it hard to find work around my studies.

"The scale of the losses gets bigger all the time. Capitalism is on its way out one way or another. I have noticed recently that advertisers are using slogans associated with anti-capitalism. So even they're very conscious of what's going on. I think there is an overload of information where people don't know what to think."

Tom Van Droogenbroeck attended the G-20 demonstration from Belgium. He said, "I am a member of the ACLVB which is one of the three big national union federations in Belgium. I work for financial institutions there. There are about 50 people from the union here.

"I think this demonstration is a good thing. Last Tuesday, we also organised a big protest in Belgium of the people working in the financial institutions. What is happening in Belgium is that a lot of financial institutions are being financed, and hardly any of the money is going to the workers. For employees now, they are being pressed by the bosses to work even harder, and there is also a reduction in the amount of benefits being paid to workers and the pressure of being sacked.

"There is a lot of criticism of what is taking place in the general public at the moment, and there is a really stressful situation being felt by the people. There has been a bailout in Belgium, just like here. After this crisis, there will be only one last Belgian bank left. All the others will have been taken over or are involved in fusions.

"I think there needs to a lot of pressure put on by the

people, because at the moment the system has eaten itself. The financial system has been the motor of the economy, but we need to have a normal economy with real products and not virtual things that don't even exist. The banking system is going a thousand times quicker than reality. Things need to come back down to earth, because otherwise they are creating a disaster for all workers in all sectors, for all the employees."

Sylvie Diagoras, a secretary, is also from Belgium. She said, "I am very glad to see people from everywhere at the demonstration, from many countries. I think it is impressive and it is a pleasure to see the mobilisation. In Belgium, there is a lot of unemployment. I think we need to get the politicians to think about these problems. It is the same in all countries."

A number of young people spoke of their struggle to find jobs after graduating. Amina, a shop worker said, "I have been applying for so many jobs and have not received a single reply. I vowed when I took my degree I would never go back into retail, but I have no choice especially living in London."

Caroline, a freelance worker from Slovakia, said, "I don't like the idea that a few people have all the profits so everybody has to pay for their party. Most of us don't have a party.

"I want all people to live a decent life instead of just a few. Nowadays, a small proportion are very rich and a lot of people are poor. This always leads to conflict and war. Something has to change. I think this is just the start."



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