

May Day demonstrations in Europe marked by low turnouts and clashes with bureaucrats

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A number of major European countries witnessed smaller turnouts than usual at traditional May Day rallies and demonstrations held on Saturday. Attendance at May Day festivities was down in France, even though French trade union leaders had called for a big turnout from union members to protest against the austerity policies of the government of President Nikolas Sarkozy, and in particular his recently announced plans for further attacks on the French pension system.

The head of France's biggest union, the CGT, Bernard Thibault, was forced to admit that only around 300,000 people had marched in protests across France. This compares to an estimated 1.2 million people a year ago. In Paris, the main rally drew 45,000 people, far fewer than the 160,000 protesters who took part last year.

In Germany, which still has one of the highest rates of trade union membership in Europe, turnout across the country was also low, with a paltry 2,000 in attendance at the main trade union demonstration in Essen.

Essen was chosen as the site for its central rally by the DGB, Germany's federation of trade unions, because the city has been selected as Europe's Capital of Culture for 2010 and is also centrally situated in Germany's most popular state—North Rhine Westphalia—where important elections are taking place on May 9. Bureaucrats from the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and the Left Party which are all standing candidates in the NRW election filled the site of the rally with flags and party banners accompanied by a small crowd composed mainly of elderly trade unionists.

In his speech in Essen the chairman of the DGB, Michael Sommer, lashed out at greedy bankers in a

general fashion but made no mention of the crisis in Greece or the austerity measures being implemented by the Greek government against the population at the behest of the international banks, including major German banks, and the institutions of the European Union.

At the same time, Sommer advised the German government to bring the trade unions on board in order to determine the most effective means of implementing austerity measures. Sommer warned that the future of capitalist society was at stake. He said: "We cannot afford a new crisis, because we will not be in a position to control such a crisis, and we cannot keep silent because democracy and freedom would be threatened."

May Day rallies in other parts of Europe were marked by clashes between demonstrators and trade union and social democratic bureaucrats.

Turkey

In the Turkish capital of Istanbul, an estimated 200,000 people gathered in Taksim Square, in the centre of the city. The rally was the first to be held in Taksim Square since 1977 when gunmen believed to be far-right militants aided by members of the intelligence services opened fire on a May Day crowd and triggered a stampede that killed 37 people and injured more than a hundred others. Security this year was tight, with more than 22,000 police officers deployed for the rally.

Trouble broke out at the final central rally when a group of workers began to protest as the head of the Confederation of Turkish Labor Unions, (Türk ??) took the stage to make a speech to the crowd. The president

of Türk ??, Mustafa Kumlu, is notorious for having signed a string of contracts which have resulted in heavy job losses and pay cuts for union members. Following protests from workers from various organisations—Tekel, the former state alcohol and tobacco monopoly; ?SK?, the water and sewage directorate; and a fire brigade—Kumlu was forced to leave the stage.

Surrounded by union bureaucrats and police, the union boss was taken for his own safety to the nearby Atatürk Culture Center. Some of the protesters then pursued Kumlu to his hideout and threw stones, breaking some of the cultural center’s windows,

After the workers’ protest, the stage remained empty, and the crowd began to disperse. The speeches restarted some time later to a much reduced crowd.

Greece

In Greece, an estimated 20,000 people joined marches in Athens to express their anger at the new round of budget cuts planned by the Greek social democratic PASOK government.

In fact, the details of the new Greek austerity package only emerged one day later. On Sunday, the Greek Finance minister George Papaconstantinou announced a 36.4 billion-euro program of cuts to be carried out over the next three years. Among measures announced by the minister were an increase in VAT from 21 to 23 percent and a 10 percent increase in consumption taxes on fuel, cigarettes, alcohol and luxury goods. He also announced a drastic reduction of the so-called 13th and 14th salaries for civil servants and cuts in both public and private sector pensions, additional 8 percent cuts in civil servants’ benefits, further reductions in pensions, and a three-year salary and pension freeze.

While the exact details of the government’s plan remained unclear Saturday, demonstrators were clear that huge attacks on their living standards were being prepared. One protester, printer Ericos Finalis told reporters: “It’s the biggest attack on workers for centuries. They want to return us to the nineteenth century.”

In one significant incident, demonstrators identified a

leading politician from the ruling PASOK party. A BBC reporter relates how he observed the socialist deputy and former chair of parliament, Apostolos Kaklamanis, being harangued by demonstrators. Denouncing him as a thief and liar, the protesters threw stones and bottles at Kaklaminis, who was forced to retreat inside a cafe and lock himself in a toilet until he was subsequently freed by police.

5,000 protesters also took part in demonstrations in the northern city of Thessaloniki, where police fired tear gas at youths who attacked banks and business premises.

While attendance at May Day rallies in Western Europe was smaller than usual—indicating increasing bitterness with the trade union bureaucracies and their collaboration in government-sponsored austerity programs—sizeable demonstrations took place in a number of East European countries where opposition is growing to the devastating social impact of the financial and economic crisis. Among those countries witnessing significant May Day rallies were Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania.



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