

Europe-wide protests against austerity and cuts

Our correspondent
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Up to 100,000 took part in a march Wednesday on the European Union buildings in Brussels, Belgium, organised by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

The march in the Belgian capital was the official centre-piece of Europe-wide demonstrations against austerity and cuts, though a general strike in Spain was by far the most significant expression of workers rising anger at the attack on their livelihoods.

Many flights in and out of Brussels were cancelled or delayed because of strike action by air traffic controllers. European flights were the most affected. Flights in and out of Liege and Charleroi were hit.

The trade unions conceived of the protests as a means of letting off steam, rather than seriously opposing government austerity measures. Speaking at the march, Jean Claude Mailly, head of the French union, Force Ouvriere, said, "It is never too late because the austerity measures are in the process of being set up now. So we are in a period where social movements of a different nature will have a big value in the weeks and months to come."

Leading the march was ETUC General Secretary John Monks and ETUC President Wanja Lundby-Wedin. Monks was formerly the head of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC), which claims to have played the leading role in organising the protest. Yet the TUC organised no action in Britain, because even a token protest would embarrass their political allies in the Labour Party, whose congress is taking place this week.

The message of support to the march from TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber was politically revealing. He complained that, "All across Europe governments have become obsessed with immediate

deficit reduction and are embarking on cuts programmes of such magnitude that the fragile recovery of the continent's economies is threatened.

"Unions aren't asking governments to ignore the deficit," he reassured the ruling elite, "just to discard the timetable that demands deficit reduction now and instead to concentrate on boosting growth and jobs."

Monks was accompanied by the leaders of 50 trade union organisations representing workers from 30 European countries, but most of them had organised no action at all. And those that had were generally of an extremely limited character.

This was the case, with the exception of Spain, in most of the so-called "PIIGS" that are most impacted by austerity.

Greece's main union federations, representing about 2.5 million workers, did not strike on Wednesday and only organised a march to parliament in the evening. Only a few of the smaller unions called strike action, with hospital doctors stopping work for 24 hours. There was strike action by bus and trolley drivers for several hours and the Athens' metro system and trams were shut down for a period at noon.

In Ireland, there were rallies hundreds strong in Belfast and Derry. A man drove a cement mixer covered with anti-bank slogans into the gates of the Irish parliament in Dublin to protest the bailout of the banks.

In Portugal, there were protests in Lisbon and Porto. According to trade unions sources some 20,000 people took part in the evening demonstration in Lisbon.

Most of the other protests were in eastern Europe. In Poland, thousands marched in Warsaw against government plans to freeze wages and raise some taxes. They demanded the government guarantee job security and scrap plans to raise taxes. In Lithuania, some 400

protesters held an illegal demonstration in Vilnius. In Slovenia, around half of all public service workers continued a third day of an indefinite strike to protest at the government's plan to freeze salaries for two years.

Despite the limited character of the protests, the ruling elite is acutely aware that the ability of the trade union bureaucracy to contain rising social anger has definite limits. James Shugg of leading Australian bank, Westpac, predicted that yesterday's protests were are a sign of things to come.

Citing the example of Latvia, which received IMF assistance in exchange for drastic cuts in 2008, he said, "Hospitals in rural areas were closed, pensions were cut, salaries were cut, basically mortality rates went up, more old people died in the winter because they couldn't afford to heat their homes. You're actually starting to hear stories about people dying because of budget cuts there. That is the future for Greece, Portugal, Spain, and maybe to a lesser extent Italy as these cuts really start to bite."



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