

Brussels protest draws 50,000

By Marianne Arens
17 March 2003

An estimated 50,000 people flooded again into the city centre of the Belgian capital on Saturday to protest against the impending war against Iraq.

Nobody knows exactly who took the initiative to organise this demonstration. The meeting place—“Saturday, 2 p.m., Gare du Nord”—was advertised, for only a few days, on the web sites of several peace groups, left organisations and the Belgian branch of Attac. That was enough to fill the central axis of the capital that goes from the north railway station to the Gare du Midi, with a sea of people who were carrying self-made banners, signs and multicolour disguises.

Beside the most varied peace and protest initiatives, the demonstration was mainly characterised by the presence of families and entire classes from schools and youth groups. The demonstration was international, with the demand “No War for Oil” featured in French, Flemish, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic and English, and accompanied by more slogans such as: “Free Palestine—Sharon for the International Criminal Court”, “CocaCola—Marlboro—Pepsi—Nestle—MarsandAriel Finance the War”, “Tomorrow We’ll All Be Iraqis”. Other slogans included: “Bush and Blair—History Has Many Lessons, But No Pupils”.

A poster declaring: “No Logistical Support for the US Army from Belgium” directed its fire at the Belgian government—a Rainbow coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals. At the first mass demonstrations a month ago, on February 15, Social Democratic speakers were pelted with eggs. This time there was no podium and no official speakers.

Delegations of the coalition parties, above all from the Parti Socialiste Belge but also from the trade unions, were marching with the demonstration. The appeal to strike—for 15 minutes—against the war, called the day before by the European Trade Union Council, was followed massively by the port workers of

Antwerp. On Friday, March 15, workers at the port as well as at the Opel factory in Antwerp walked out, sirens were sounded and bells rung. Government ministers play down the use of the port of Antwerp by the US army as “routine” transportation— “a regular mission” as the minister of defence and SP leader, Jean-Marie Flahaut, termed it.

In the centre of Brussels the crowd symbolically blockaded the stock exchange in order to expose and ridicule the quick profits expected from war. Over the last days the press had many reports about the fact that the overwhelming majority of speculators at the stock exchange were hoping for a quick, brief war. In front of the stock exchange a white banner could be seen reading “Hire Postmen, Not Soldiers”.

A WSWs team, which distributed the appeal of the WSWs [“The tasks facing the anti-war movement”], in Dutch and French asked the demonstrators for their opinion about the connection between the struggle against the war and the fight against unemployment and social destruction.

A young woman from Liege reported that in her town the steelworks of Cockerill, which has employed 2,000 workers for many years, will be closed next year. Over 10,000 families will be affected directly or indirectly in an area that is already suffering over 20 percent unemployment.

Amri and Brasi, from Morocco, agreed that workers must unite internationally without placing hope in Chirac, Schröder or other European politicians. They reported the high levels of unemployment in Brussels and the difficulties faced by young people to find real jobs as opposed to cheap labour, particular for people of foreign origin.

An older worker from Turnhout in Flanders came to Brussels with other older people because, as he explained, his area was the scene of two world wars in the last century: “Some of us have been through the

last war, that's why we're here." There are many war cemeteries in Flanders

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