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Europe

En Route to Amsterdam

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On 14 June, demonstrators from all fifteen European Union states will arrive in Amsterdam. On Foot. Francois Vercammen introduces the European marches against unemployment, marginalisation and job insecurity.

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In June, European leaders will meet in Amsterdam to amend the Maastricht Treaty, reform the institutions of the European Union, fix the details of East European membership in the Union, and approve steps towards common domestic and foreign policy. In theory, at least. This will be the last in a series of Inter-Governmental Conferences designed to fix the strategy for the next wave of European integration, including the creation of a common currency between a number of core states before the end of the century.

The December 1995 Euro-summit meeting in Madrid coincided with the first major social movement against the neo-liberal logic of the Maastricht Treaty for monetary union: a massive public sector strike in France.

While the events in France opened the first cracks in the triumphalist neo-liberal consensus, the West European labour movement has remained perplexed, and largely silent about "Europe". The European Trade Union Confederation is dominated by conformism and apathy concerning the capitalist integration product. Many union leaders are part of the "one truth" consensus about Europe, which characterises the great and the good across the continent. The ETUC has striven to mobilise concerned workers, but without challenging the Maastricht criteria which underpin and "justify" cuts and attacks across Europe.

With the top of the labour movement still trying to square the circle, a modest collection of trade union representatives, unemployed groups, social movements and radical left currents, including the Fourth International, met in Turin to try and provoke some kind of reaction in the labour movement. We met again in Florence in June 1996, where we launched a brief appeal and a proposal: co-ordinated marches across Europe, converging in Amsterdam at the same time as the Inter-Governmental conference.

At the time, this was a risky proposition. Not everyone on the left was convinced that the project could work, or merited the considerable effort involved. Fortunately, the project went ahead.

March organisers knew that behind the official discourse, European unification was beset by monetary and political contradictions. The process of capitalist integration would not, could not be painless and straightforward.

We also realised that Europe's persistent, mass unemployment had created a "new" social question in the "rich" countries. A more and more explosive question. Official figures report 18 million unemployed EU residents. A further 18 million work part time, but would rather work full time.

The challenge, of course, was to find the lever that would shift this enormous question into the centre-ground of European societies. Something the official structures of the labour and social movements were not doing. Participants in the Florence meeting wanted action, not more words. To provoke a reaction that corresponded to the size of the problem.

An uncommon collective

The collective which formed around the "Marches against Unemployment, Exclusion and Precarity" project was exceptional, for three reasons.

- A strong moral commitment, on an issue around which we could legitimately demand a radical change in the priorities of the labour and social movement as far as the European Union is concerned. To concentrate on the social aspects of integration, rather than the single currency.
- The marginalised and excluded were at the centre of this coalition. Together with all those who were ready to act: young and old, immigrant and Europe-born, in work and out of work. Supported by activists from a wide range of trade unions, and from the ecological, feminist and anti-racist movements. The existence of such a grouping incarnated our radical critique of neo-liberal policies, and the desire for a better more egalitarian world.
- This was an all-European coalition, with organised groups (some larger, some smaller) in each of the EU states and several other European countries.

In February 1997, more than 600 people participated in the Brussels assembly which launched the marches. Just 12 months after the Turin meeting, we had a committee or collective in each of the 15 member states, as well as Norway and Switzerland. The representativity of these groups varied enormously, as did their political weight and militant force. But the assembly confirmed that the weaker had consolidated themselves since the Turin meeting, while the stronger were making headway.

New voices

More than half the participants in the Brussels assembly were from groups that almost never dominate public meetings: homeless people, immigrants without legal documents, unemployed people, including many whose benefits had expired. The tone of the meeting was set by representatives of the striking Liverpool dockers, workers from the Belgian steelworks Forges de Clabecq (threatened with closure) and a representative of the French "paperless immigrants' movement.

After discussing the participants various forms of struggle and demands, the assembly began to elaborate common demands: a tax on top fortunes, equality for women workers, shortening the working week, special measures for young people, and so on.

Participants agreed on the general structure of the campaign: 18 main marches, converging on Amsterdam, with local welcome committees along the route, activities targeting job centres, schools, universities and town halls, public meetings and debates, and festivals.

To challenge the Euro-centrist consensus, the first marches would start in Tangiers, Morocco, and Sarajevo, Bosnia. On 14 April, simultaneous actions were held across the European Union.

It was not easy to establish a common programme, because of the very varied the social contexts, militant background, political values and priorities of the participants. There was disagreement about the details, and even about the basic aims of the campaign. Slowly but surely, consensus was reached on three points. The Florence

Appeal would be the basic text of the marches. Participants in the Brussels meeting argued that mention should also be made of our rejection of the neo-liberal monetarist convergence criteria within the Maastricht Treaty. They also stressed that the march committees should launch a debate, within the march movement and in the wider labour movement, about what alternative we could propose to replace current EU policies.

Participants did not adopt the draft appeal proposed by the European secretariat (made up of the French, Belgian and Dutch march committees). Perhaps it was too early to propose a text. Perhaps it was too late. Either way, participants were divided in their views on key passages, and some objected that the document had been prepared without wider consultation.

As a result, the Appeal was only recognised as a "contribution" to the debate, to which many of the concerns raised during the Brussels assembly were added.

Not to be missed

Some currents and individuals saw the marches mainly as a chance to transmit radical opinions to a wider audience. At march meetings, these currents stressed the need to be "as autonomous as possible", and to reserve a large space for "testimony." They often confused the right way to work within the march movement, and the political objectives of the movement, towards the outside world. Other participants reflected the desire of a new generation of militants for clear socialist goals. These participants demanded greater precision in the platform of the movement. Not all were convinced that the marches did indeed represent a radically different social perspective, of rupture with the governments of the EU states, and the traditional leadership of the labour movement.

The stakes were high. The goal was to defeat, or damage, the Maastricht process and the EU integration plans. There was a chance that the marches would provoke an echo among more important currents in the labour movement, as more and more people became critical of the EU's neo-liberal policies. To do so meant understanding why there had to be a contradiction with the EuroMarch collectives: the forces actively involved in the project were almost all from the most radical part of the social movement, broadly defined. But the amended "platform" documents were very broad and open. Indeed, these texts were aimed at all those who had previously supported or accepted the supposed necessity of the Maastricht process, while struggling to oppose the anti-social consequences of the treaty, and the policies it generated.

The leadership of the political and labour wings of social democracy face a terrible dilemma. If they continue to support the EU and monetary union, they will have to confront a growing sector of their rank-and file. More and more people are realising that the Maastricht convergence criteria mean neo-liberalism, and that the "stability pact" agreed at the December 1996 Dublin summit means neo-liberalism for ever. As European integration intensifies, it provokes more synchronised labour and social struggles than ever before. Particularly for the more active sectors of the labour movement, and particularly in the core countries: France, Germany, Belgium and Holland.

Alternatively, trade union bosses and social democratic politicians can try to take charge of the "rumblings from below." But they can't do so without challenging elements of their previous support for integration, Maastricht and the Euro. The longer they hesitate, the more discredited they will be.

The EuroMarch strategy

In the final weeks of the pre-march preparations, organisers adopted a double strategy to boost the campaign. Firstly, they created a synergy with labour struggles, like the closure of the Clabecq forge and a Renault car plant in Belgium. At the same time, the EuroMarch collectives maintained an open-spirited attitude towards the broader labour movement. More and more sectors of workers are recognising the disastrous effects of the Maastricht process, and beginning to draw conclusions about the consequences for labour strategy and demands. It is important to win these sectors over, not alienate them.

The Florence appeal is certainly inadequate as an ideological alternative to the European Union. But it is a perfect document for this kind of political campaign. The spearhead of this movement is, of course, the rejection of the Maastricht convergence criteria, and the demand that unemployment, and a cut in the working week without loss of salary, take centre place in European policy debates. These demands can be the basis for a wide unity, a convergence of dissatisfied sectors of the labour and socialist movements. Wider sections of the labour movement will be watching the marches, but hesitating about committing themselves. That is the struggle to watch!

Source: "Le soulèvement de l'espoir," Inprecor #402, April 1997 pp.29-30, with additional material by Jean Dupont.