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Europe

EuroMarch v unemployment reaches Amsterdam

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The Marches against Unemployment, jobs security and marginalisation set off on 14 April, and converged in Amsterdam two months later. Their success, even their existence, in all parts of Europe, is an unprecedented event. From Luxembourg to Finland, march organisation committees were established. These brought together whatever unemployed organisations existed locally, and a current of trade union support, mainly dominated by the organised left.

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During the marches, 1,000 meetings between unemployed and working people were held across Europe. The passage of a march was usually an important moment for joint activity by local groups working against unemployment and exclusion. In Paris, the National Bank was briefly occupied.

The marches had an impact outside the borders of the European Union. Committees were set up in Switzerland and Norway, and one of the marches was launched in Sarajevo and Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina. As well as eight Bosnian marchers, the final gathering in Amsterdam included delegations from Turkey, Albania, Arab-speaking North Africa, and even the Americas!

The march and rally in Amsterdam on June 14 is the most important all-European demonstration to date. The march for jobs organised in Brussels earlier this year, to protest the de-localisation of the Renault-Vilvorde plant to Spain, was larger (70,000 participants). But almost all came from Belgium itself, and neighbouring France. In contrast, the EuroMarch demonstration in Amsterdam included thousands of French, Belgians and Germans, hundreds of Greeks, Spaniards, Danes, Swedes and British, and over 100 Finns.

This unprecedented breadth of participation illustrates the growing consciousness of the importance of European-wide negotiations between the governments. After left electoral victories in Italy, Britain and France, and a growing concern about social issues in Germany, the EU's largest, richest and most populous member state, everything "ought" to be open for re-discussion. But as always, social questions have passed into the background, while European leaders debate the extension of the single (common) market for goods and services.

Inevitably, European governments will be more interested in the practical steps to take as the new single currency is introduced in early 1988. They will discuss which countries can and should adopt the "euro", and decide whether or not to soften the criteria for participation, so as to allow Spain and maybe Italy to participate.

This debate on European Monetary Union will continue to dominate the continent's newspapers. The Italian and Spanish governments consider a block on their participation as an insult. The French Socialist Party won the recent election on the basis of a call for softer convergence criteria, and the participation of the south European countries. Meanwhile, in Germany, the suggestion to revalue the country's gold reserves, so as to "magically" reduce the budget deficit, has provoked a serious confrontation between Chancellor Kohl and the influential Bundesbank.

A different Europe

A commitment to social progress in Europe would mean tearing up not only the Maastricht Treaty, which fixes the criteria for European Monetary Union (EMU), but also the Stability Pact signed in Dublin at the end of last year. This second agreement locks in the economic convergence criteria, even after EMU, confining participating economies in

a neo-liberal straight-jacket for years to come.

Another policy in Europe is possible! A policy prioritising employment, and facilitating a co-ordinated reduction in the working week. This would give the unemployed and marginalised the chance to work, at a decent salary. It could reverse the growing job insecurity in European countries. This is the real European debate for the months to come.

The EuroMarch organising committees took a clear stand on these issues. The Maastricht Treaty convergence criteria are unacceptable. They are arguments to justify severe cuts in social budgets all over the European Union: even in countries which will not be in the "first round" of EMU.

Common demands

The social movement for "a different Europe" laid the basis for an alternative priorities during the June 1996 Counter-summit in Florence, Italy. Associations and trade union currents there initiated what became the EuroMarch committees, which finally met in Brussels in February this year. Over 500 militants from across the continent widened the "Florence demands," establishing a number of areas of broad agreement between the social movements in the different countries.

There is, for example, general agreement around demands for immediate measures against social marginalisation, and ensuring that the unemployed have decent living conditions. In most countries, the participants fully support campaigns to prevent the eviction of the unemployed from their homes, the disconnection of their gas, water or electricity. The tendency is to recognise a series of fundamental rights, and demand that resources be found so as to ensure all can benefit from housing, education, health care and so on.

There is also general agreement on the main demands, which everyone recognises must centre on the sustained reduction in the unemployment rate. There must be massive job-creation programmes, particularly in sectors like health and education, where there are massive, unsatisfied social needs. And the working week should be cut, right across Europe. Without reducing the earning power of working people!

There is agreement on these issues, despite the real differences in political culture and national priorities across Europe. In Britain, there is no minimum wage or legal limit on the number of hours you can be asked to work. While British EuroMarchers are obviously in favour of a reduction in the working week, they preferred to stress the importance of a decent income and full employment. In other words, a reversal of the reforms of the Thatcher years.

Meanwhile, German unemployed groups are most concerned about "forced labour" — new regulations forcing the unemployed to accept any job offered, whatever the conditions, or lose part of their unemployment benefits. In western Germany, mass unemployment is a recent phenomena, and a larger part of the population believes that those without work are not really looking, compared to most other countries.

Obviously, there is no fundamental contradiction between the priorities of the British and German unemployed movements. But it takes time to establish a common platform.

The second 'great debate' in the EuroMarch campaign was over the nature of the European integration project. Participants from Denmark, and from the EU's newest members, Sweden and Finland, see the European project as a handicap to popular aspirations. They insist that movements like the EuroMarches should make no demands leading to the reinforcement of the European Union's institutions (such as European legislation on collective bargaining).

Reforming the European Union?

In other continental countries, many EuroMarchers consider that the struggle for "a different Europe" should take the path of elaboration of pan-European demands. If satisfied, such demands would expand the existing European Union structures, particularly in the social field.

There is no quick solution to this differentiation. But the form that popular mobilisations take in the coming months and years will have a clear influence in the strategic debate. If mobilisations remain essentially within the national framework, then this is the level at which people will perceive the political and social confrontation. But if it is possible to develop pan-European struggles, then it will be easier to put forward collective demands, thus elaborating another strategy for "really building Europe."

If Europe is to develop in the direction we want, we need pan-European social movements. It may even be that such movements are essential for any type of European construction. A Europe built only on a free market of merchandise, services and capital, and reinforced only by a bureaucratic technostructure in Brussels, would probably crack at the first real shock. Imagine a second French public sector strike, like in November-December 1995. But this time confronting decisions made by the European Commission and the new monetary authority in Frankfurt, Germany, rather than the French state. In such a situation, the French government would surely withdraw from the common monetary mechanisms, just like Britain and Italy withdrew from the European Monetary System (EMS) a few years ago. This shows how fragile the European construction still is.

European identity

A European identity can only be built through common struggles, and common protests. In this sense, 1997 will probably be remembered as the year when truly European mobilisations emerged. Previous pan-European initiatives, like the co-ordinated railway strikes in 1992, have been few in number, and usually confined to a specific professional group. The impact on public opinion has been very slight.

In contrast, the first half of 1992 has seen a succession of events. First came the protests against Renault's decision to close its car factory in Vilvorde, Belgium, in favour of a lower-wage site in Spain. The vibrant protest of Renault workers struck a cord in public opinion, mainly in Belgium and France, but also further afield. Then the European Trade Union Confederation [a pressure group of national trade union leaders – IV] organised an EU wide day of protest on 28 May. Finally, the EuroMarches assembled 50,000 Europeans in Amsterdam to protest against unemployment, job security and marginalisation.

These challenges to the neo-liberal and technocrat management of European integration have forced the question of social measures at the European scale into the political centre-stage. And they have made credible the idea of pan-European political mobilisation.

For the EuroMarch network, the priority now is to develop a horizontal network which can support trans-European mobilisations. Not to compete with the existing structures - the European Trade Union Confederation and the European Network of Unemployed (ENU) But to reinforce them. ENU, for example, contains unemployed groups with very different practices.

EuroMarchers have learned to respect these differences, to learn from diversity, and to build a coherent, pluralist campaign. The march on Amsterdam also helped consolidate national federations of unemployment organisations in

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countries like Italy where they did not previously exist.

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