

Florence ESF: mass anti-war march in Italy follows historic conference of the left

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Sometimes facts do speak for themselves. The biggest ever demonstration in Florence, the largest anti-war protest to date. At least half a million from all over Italy - possibly many more ? poured out of trains and coaches into the city centre on Saturday afternoon to join the 35,000 who had been locked in the embrace of the Fortezza de Basso for three days at the European Social Forum ? itself a unique political dialogue of the European anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation left.

At the ESF there were 400 sessions, ranging from small workshops of a few dozen on the outer-reaches of the city to six thousand strong ?conferences? inside the Fortezza. All of Europe was there and people from more than 80 other nations. The vast majority were young Italians, there in such numbers that the organisers were completely taken by surprise. They originally thought around 15,000 would appear, but eventually they ran out of delegates cards when more than twice that registered on the first two days.

The Pavillion inside the Fortezza was a veritable market place of ideas and merchandise; from dozens of stalls over two floors you could buy tracts, eat food, get kitted out in the latest t-shirts, watch videos and have any number of impromptu discussions. Outside in the grounds of the Fortezza every wall was covered in banners and flags, hastily organised meetings took place, even small rallies and mini-marches! Overall there was very little petty bureaucracy

Politically, the majority of platform speakers in the larger sessions ? on war, globalisation, the future of Europe ? did not reflect the radicalism of the mass of younger people there. Many of the ?leaders? of the ESF are reformists without a home. Ten years ago they could be both for capitalism and against neo-liberalism and be comfortable members of most social democratic or Labour parties in Europe.

But the sharp lurch to the right by most of these parties has cut adrift thousands of traditional supporters and intellectuals. The attitude of the Italian social democrats towards the ESF was symptomatic here. The Democratic Left leaders were resolutely against even breaching the walls of the Fortezza in order to enter the battle of ideas with their left-wing opponents. A few DS members lower down the food chain were present, but their leaders&Mac226; hostility to the ESF project of questioning the war against Iraq and the benefits of corporate globalisation meant that the DS had no profile or input into the sessions.

They homeless reformists taking temporary shelter in Florence were there in abundance: ATTAC ideologues (e.g. painstaking utopias on getting rid of tax havens in Switzerland), Greens on biodiversity. The insistence on no voting and arriving at ?consensus? ensured that the politics of the lowest common denominator prevailed ? effectively a veto exercised on radical positions by the most right-wing forces present.

The socialist left was in a minority and the Italian ?disobedienti? ? due to its position on having ?one foot in and one foot out? of the Fortezza ? did not have as much impact inside the ESF as it could have. The

International Socialist Tendency had a high profile (though as Globalise Resistance, due to the reactionary ban on political parties inside the ESF), mainly from the UK and Greece. It was able to claim an important role in the sessions on fighting the war threat against Iraq as a result of the recent success of the Stop the War Coalition in Britain in having organised more than 300,000 onto the streets of London against the warmongering of the US and UK.

While projecting a position on the war to the left of most others at the ESF (clearly connecting the threatened war to an oil grab, globalisation and imperialist ambitions for the region) they resolutely failed to argue for the defence of Iraq against imperialism and refused to call for the defeat of imperialism in case of war. They were the architects of the draft statement on the war for the conference of the European Social Movements on Sunday which embodied all these weaknesses. The IST, as usual, preferred centrist evasion on all contentious issues and were content with a 'commitment' to a European day of action against the war.

Strangely, the largest party of the European left, Rifondazione Comunista, was less visible as such in the ESF due to the ban on parties. Its members preferred to appear in countless other guises in a variety of local campaigns and cultural associations. However, less anyone be in any doubt about the size and weight of RC (with its 100,000 members) the largest of all the big sessions on the war threat witnessed six or seven thousand ESFers gave a rapturous reception to a speech from RC leader Fausto Bertinotti.

A few dozen comrades from the LRCI and REVO youth group participated enthusiastically in the ESF. We had a comrade in the central organising committee, fighting for militant defencist positions on the war and an open and democratic conference. We had a stall in which we sold a mass of literature and Intifad and REVO t-shirts We helped to organise a successful and well-attended seminar by No Sweat Europe which heard speakers from REVO, World Development Movement, Unite! and other activists. It was an excellent opportunity to network and spread the campaign into other countries. REVO speakers stressed the importance of not relying upon company codes of conduct to defend workers pay and conditions but rather establish workers control of health and safety issues in all these plants that exploit youth labour.

We were proud to be able to introduce the European left to the first direct testimony from the occupied factory of Zanon in Neuquén, Argentina. Natalio Navaterra (Chicho) spoke eloquently of the political transformation in the lives of the Zanon workers as a result of the realisation that they could run the factory without the managers and owners. The Zanon occupation has also become a focal point for regional resistance to the savage attacks on the whole of the Argentine working class. Mariano Pedrero, the Zanon workers' lawyer, made a passionate call for solidarity from European workers, as did an Argentine MP from Isquierda Unida.

LRCI and REVO comrades were able to contribute to two separate big sessions on the war; our message through the whole ESF has been on the need to work for the defeat of US and UK forces at the hands of the Iraqi resistance should the war mongering give way to war. We also fought hard both in general sessions and in the leading co-ordinating committee of the ESF through the week's negotiations over the draft of an ESF statement on war to commit the leaders of the trade unions and left parties to specific action inside and outside parliament if Iraq is attacked. But all the other forces resisted this.

We carried this message onto the mass march the next day. The lively contingent kept up anti-war and pro-Palestinian slogans ("Abasso la Guerra imperialista!") for the whole of the long march and was received by many Florence citizens as they lined the route of the march and hung anti-war banners from their flat balconies. The whole attempts of the Berlusconi government and his mass media to instil fear and loathing into the city's population for weeks before the ESF failed utterly.

The Sunday European Social movement was a disappointing postscript to the mass demonstration. It was a carefully choreographed session of speakers representing all parts of the movement. A bland declaration against the war was acclaimed ? worked out in session of the co-ordinating committee in the week before. A broad outline of events for the year ahead was set down.

As to the future of the ESF? As we said beforehand:

"Assemblies on the scale of Porto Alegre or Florence do present enormous opportunities for networking, for bringing together militants from the semi-colonial countries and the imperialist heartlands, for discussions on tactics and overall strategy.

But they will be of use only if they are bold enough to issue calls to fight on the key issues of the day. Then they could play a progressive role in moving the organisations of the working class, the peasants, the myriad of parties and campaigns towards the realisation that an even higher form of international organisation is needed.

But this will be ultimately fruitless unless an organised and militant revolutionary alternative is mounted to ?official? forums whether in Florence or Porto Alegre. To do this means also fighting the ?revolutionary? apologists for this undemocratic, talking shop system. Militant class struggle forces, trade unionists, the organisers of strikes, mass direct action, road blockades, rather than academic seminars will be what is needed if there is to be a true ?rebel international".

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