

Vienna: 8,000 blockade Fascist celebrations

Arbeiterinnenstandpunkt, Austrian section of the League for the Fifth International Fri, 31/01/2014 - 21:30

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Every year, the right wing Freedom Party in Austria organises a celebration for the members of the traditionalist, that is right wing, 'student fraternities'. This is the 'Academics' Ball' at the prestigious Hofburg in Central Vienna. Over the years, it has become a focus for extreme nationalists and fascists to meet up and network and, as a result, also a focus for anti-fascist mobilisations.

This year, those mobilisations were very successful; some 8,000 marched to protest at this arch-reactionary celebration. In particular, the 'Offensive Against the Right', an alliance of left wing groups, which had openly declared that its aim was to stop the fascists and their allies from meeting at all by a mass blockade, drew more forces onto the streets than ever before. This is the way to stop the Nazis!

Although the anti-fascist demos in recent years were smaller, they have certainly made an impact ? drawing public attention to the activities of the extreme right wing and forcing down the numbers of the master race who were prepared to take the risk of confrontation. Press reports suggest that this year there were only 400 at the Ball, even though the organisers had laid on an early evening champagne buffet to try to pre-empt the demonstrations.

Escalation strategy of the police

The size of the demonstrations may also have been a response to the outrageous repressive measures announced by the Vienna police in advance. The declaration of a ban on any rally in the main square, the Heldenplatz, in effect made half the city a no-go area. Under the pretext that they needed protection, (from whom exactly?) the policy would only allow journalists restricted entry to the area and only if accompanied by police press officers!

On top of that, they announced a 'mask ban' - anyone carrying, or wearing, anything that could be used as a mask, including hoodies and scarves, could be searched, ordered away from the scene or even be arrested. On a night in mid-January, in the winter, in Vienna, that gave them the power to harass practically anybody. Quite apart from the cold, being able to cover your face against filming by the fascists, or the police, is a basic aspect of self-defence for demonstrators.

Of course, the purpose behind these measures is to accustom the public to the idea that demonstrations are automatically a danger to everyone and to legitimise any kind of repressive action the police say they think is 'necessary'.

Police violence and riots

In fact, two feeder demos marched to the meeting point on Stephansplatz without any major incidents. Once there, thousands of people streamed past the police barricades into the restricted area to occupy the access roads to the Hofburg. The police weighed in with pepper spray and truncheons, breaking up the

crowds by driving their cars through the area. On the fringes of the demo, paramedics had to set up a first aid post to deal with injuries.

After the main demo by OAR was over, there were more clashes between police and the 'Autonomous' demo, in the course of which some windows were broken and cars damaged. Unlike the BBC, which reported minor incidents of violence, Austrian media devoted most of their coverage to this. Press reports, such as in the Kronen newspaper, spoke of a 'night of riots' and internet reports were even more lurid with comparisons to 'civil war' and calls not only for more arrests but even the death penalty and for gassing to be used against the 'Black Bloc'!

Militant resistance is justified

In fact, the tactics of some in the "Black Block" were a gift to the right wing media, detracting from the success of the demo against the Ball and appearing to legitimise the repressive powers of the police. That is why we do not support the destruction of cars and small business premises along the route of demonstrations.

However, we defend the principle of responding to racism and fascism with militant resistance. By this we mean an attitude that is determined and steadfast. We reject all pacifist illusions either about fighting fascism or in the role of the police and state apparatus. We are committed to blocking right-wing and racist events by mass actions.

Any suggestion that, instead of trying to block the Academics' Ball, or other fascist mobilisations, we should just hold symbolic rallies, would simply play into the hands of the right wing and their defenders by allowing them to mobilise. We defend the right of demonstrators to defend themselves against attacks by Nazis or the police.

The anti-fascist tactics adopted by the OAR were successful because they showed it was possible to bring together different groups in a common, coordinated demonstration. One action, of course, will not stop the Nazis and to build on this year's success, the next step must be to broaden the forces involved, particularly to draw in the unions. Only recently, the ex-Governor of the province of Carinthia, Gerhard Dörfler, called for the disbanding of the unions and this underlines the need to take the struggle against right-wing populism and fascism into the workplaces and the trades unions.

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