

Letter to the Editor

Genoa: on the political and social landscape in Italy that made the movement's success possible

Sunday 7 August 2011, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2002).

CLAYTON SZCZECH AND Shira Zucker did a good job ("Reflections from the Trenches," ATC 95 [[1](#)]) of explaining how terrible the repression was in Genoa during the G8 summit last July and what a big success the actions there were. Sadly, they did less well in explaining t.

How were 300,000 people mobilized for Genoa — several times more than in Seattle or Washington? The answer has everything to do with Italy's political parties, trade unions and other established social movements.

The Party of Communist Refoundation, one of very few parliamentary parties in Europe that clearly oppose neoliberal globalization, threw itself into the organizing; since it routinely brings out 100-150,000 people for its own rallies, that was a good start.

Tens of thousands more were mobilized by trade unions — not by any of Italy's trade union federations, which sat on their hands, but by both the COBAS, the radical unions outside the federations, and by the largest union in the largest federation, the metalworkers' union FIOM of the CGIL, which had just been engaged in a hard-fought auto strike in nearby Turin.

For unions inside and outside the CGIL to work together was a breakthrough. For them to come together in the Genoa Social Forum (GSF) with many other social movements, ranging from Catholic activists to the direct action current Tute Bianche, was crucial.

The GSF's very name indicates the kind of internationalist spirit that has been spreading in Italy. The movements consciously named their coalition after the February 2001 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in which thousands of representatives of movements opposed to corporate globalization came together from every continent to work on developing radical social and economic alternatives. (The World Social Forum meets again in Porto Alegre in February 2002, and its organizers hope for a bigger presence from the US this time: see www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.)

The GSF's staying power is also remarkable: since Genoa GSF branches have formed more or less spontaneously in hundreds of Italian cities, big and small — the best example yet in the world of a movement against corporate globalization's structuring itself in a broad-based way on a local and national level.

It's not clear what Szczech and Zucker's criticisms of the GSF are based on. What do they mean in their lead paragraph by "unaccountable leadership"?

The GSF leadership was accountable to the dozens of groups that made it up. This did not include all the groups that tried to get into the Red Zone — Ya Basta (a distinctive Italian current which

Szczech and Zucker dismiss without explanation as <"disruptive communists") or the international contingent around the British Socialist Workers Party — or the Black Bloc, which focused its anger instead on "symbols of capitalism" like banks.

These groups didn't co->ordinate their tactics with each other, let alone with the GSF. How was the GSF supposed to give people arriving in Genoa guidelines on how to join in direct action when the groups doing direct action didn't agree with each other?

Szczech and Zucker also accuse GSF leaders of "defining anyone more militant than the median as necessarily outside of the movement," but don't give any quotations or sources to back up their charge.

The quotations I've seen from GSF leaders aim their fire above all at the Berlusconi government and the police — understandably. While GSF staff and volunteers, unlike Carlo Giuliani, did get out of Genoa alive, the police did trash their headquarters and beat many of them bloody. The "forces of order" were apparently less convinced of the GSF's moderation and reformism than Szczech and Zucker are.

Szczech and Zucker's complaint that there was "no effort at collective organization of cooking, serving, cleaning, recycling or anything else," finally, usually comes up at international actions in Southern Europe. Awareness of ecology and issues of daily life is simply less developed among Southern European radicals, whatever their generation or politics, than among Northern Europeans or North Americans.

Discussion of these issues is often on international planning meeting agendas, and it will continue. But showing up at actions and complaining that it's done better back home doesn't do much to move the discussion forward.

Activists against corporate globalization in different countries and cultures have a lot to learn from each other. The Italian movement in particular has a lot to teach the rest of us. Those interested in learning more about it could start by reading the analyses of Genoa translated into English in *International Viewpoint* nos. 334 and 335.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 22484): [Reflections After Genoa](#).