

# Why we're protesting the G20

Tuesday 29 September 2009, by [LE BLANC Paul](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2009).

**LeBlanc talked to Ashley Smith about the issues behind the summit and the aims of the demonstrators.**

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## **WHAT IS the G20, and what are they meeting about in Pittsburgh on September 24-25?**

**Paul LeBlanc** - THE G20 consists of the top economic and political leaders of the global economy. They want to ensure that the global economy functions in a positive and smooth way in the interests of those who dominate the global and key national economies. Often that is in direct conflict with the needs and interests of the majority of the world's people.

The G20 will be gathering together in Pittsburgh, but they haven't revealed what topics they will be discussing. To be honest, the G20 is not noted for its transparency.

I think it's obvious that they will be addressing the economic crisis. I guess they would be talking about the environment, which is a key issue for the world's people, but also for the global economy. It's conceivable that they will be talking about issues of wars and peace.

But they have not shared with us or consulted with us, the majority of the world's people, about exactly what they will be discussing. That's one reason why we have to raise our voices and advocate for the kind of world we would like to see.

## **INITIALLY, THE G20 was planned to meet in New York City. Why did they move it to Pittsburgh?**

THE OBAMA administration hasn't given a clear answer. They've said Pittsburgh is a wonderful and beautiful city, and it's doing all kinds of innovative things. Many have speculated that political deals have been made. Remember that Pennsylvania went for Obama, and Pittsburgh in particular, and so Obama may have decided to let Pittsburgh host the G20 summit to reward his political allies and keep the state aligned with the Democratic Party.

There are other issues, though. Pittsburgh is smaller and less complex than New York. The progressive movement here is vibrant, but there are fewer of us here than in New York. So they hope to minimize and contain whatever protests develop against the G20.

## **HOW HAVE activists in Pittsburgh responded once you found out the G20 was happening in Pittsburgh?**

THE RESPONSE of the activist community has been amazing. [\[1\]](#)

We have at least three tent cities being planned. There's an environmental encampment organized



by a number of environmental groups, there's a women's encampment organized by Code Pink and Women's League for International for Peace and Freedom, and then there's another poor people's encampment organized by Bail Out the People and Monumental Baptist Church.

There are at least three educational activities, which raise questions about and criticisms of the G20. The one that I'm most intimately involved with is the People's Summit. There will also be an International Peace Justice and Empowerment Summit that is being organized by progressive activists in the African American community here. The People's Summit and the International Summit are working together to coordinate their efforts. There's another activity initiated by the United Electrical Workers Union in conjunction with the Institute for Policy Studies.

### **WHAT ABOUT plans for demonstrations and actions?**

THERE ARE several peaceful, legal demonstrations planned. The Bail Out the People movement has called for a demonstration for jobs and justice on Sunday, September 20. The Steelworkers and Pennsylvania state Sen. Jim Ferlo have planned one for Wednesday, September 23. The Thomas Merton Center has called for a big peaceful legal rally for Friday, September 25 [2] in cooperation with dozens and dozens of other organizations from around the country.

The Pittsburgh G20 Resistance Project has called for actions of an undefined character on Thursday, September 24. This group has not announced that its actions will be restricted to peaceful or legal methods. I don't know what the character of those activities will be.

Those are just some of the activities that are taking place.

### **WE'VE SEEN reports in the media about a huge police presence being deployed in Pittsburgh, and heard that the city and federal government may not provide permits for demonstrations. Where does the fight for civil liberties and the right to protest stand now in Pittsburgh?**

FIRST OF all, there has been a considerable amount of fear-mongering and violence-baiting in much of the media initially, and it's still going on. The media and authorities lump all of the different protests together and smear them, implying that activists are going to do horrible things and generate immense violence.

They've generated a significant amount of fear in the population. The authorities are using this situation to justify a series of policies that are potentially extremely repressive. They have put out a call out to police departments in the surrounding area to supply up to 4,000 additional police.

This is not simply a local police matter; it's a national security matter. The Secret Service and other federal governmental agencies are directly involved in coordinating and training the police in all sorts of tactics to deal with this supposedly grave threat that they've projected. So there's potential for significant police violence as has happened in other places against protesters.

At the same time, the local government indicated initially that it would provide permits. But then later, it stated that they would not be providing permits. Now there are all sorts of stories in the media saying either that permits have been provided or not been provided.

The situation is a bit confusing. But the movement has rallied together to push for democratic rights for all to engage in peaceful, legal protests, and to secure the various permits we need for the encampments, marches and rallies. There's also a wonderful team of lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union, National Lawyers Guild and Center for Constitutional Rights, which have been representing activist groups in negotiations with the representatives of the city and the federal



government.

There has been an indication that at least some of the permits will go through. But the city has stated that everything is subject to approval by the federal government, which may reserve the right to rescind any permits.

So all of this is still up in the air. But it does appear to me that the government will be giving some ground to the constitutional rights of protesters to organize peaceful, legal actions.

**MANY ACTIVISTS experienced this kind of restriction, and in some cases police violence, under the Bush administration, and expected different from the Obama administration. What do you make of what the Obama administration is doing in Pittsburgh?**

DURING THE campaign, Obama repeatedly said that the way positive social, political, and economic change was brought about in the history of this country has been through protest movements—through the struggles of the labor, civil rights movement, and women’s movements. He said that all this change was brought about through organizing and protesting in the streets and workplaces.

One would have thought therefore that his response and the response of his administration would have been to welcome people speaking out about the kind of world they’d like to see, and having protests raising questions about the G20.

His administration has done the opposite. It appears that there’s not that much difference between the policies of Bush and those of Obama toward these kinds of protests.

It seems to me that it would be in Obama’s best interests to adhere to what he was talking about in his campaign. If he really believes in those things, then he should be true to what he was saying in the campaign. So far, there is no clear evidence that he is being true to that.

**WHAT DO you and others have planned for the People’s Summit?**

THE PEOPLE’S Summit [\[3\]](#) is going to take place September 19 through September 22. It is being sponsored by a broad array of forces. Recently, unions such as National Organization of Legal Services Workers (UAW Local 2310), the United Steel Workers and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers have decided to join in.

We’ve got a number of local community leaders from Pittsburgh speaking, such as Carl Redwood, Tim Stevens, Molly Rush and John Canning. We also have some leading labor leaders like Leo Gerard from the Steelworkers, as well as John Tarka from the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers.

We have invited major international speakers. Walden Bello from the Philippines and one of the key leaders of the global justice movement will be speaking. A representative from Jubilee Zambia/Jubilee USA named Privilege Haangandu will also be addressing the summit.

From the U.S., we have some leading activist voices. Jeremy Scahill, the crusading journalist who writes for *The Nation* and other publications, will be speaking. Anthony Arnove, who works closely with Howard Zinn and wrote an excellent book, *Iraq: The Logic of Withdrawal*, will be at the summit. Howard Zinn himself, who for medical reasons will not be able to be here, has made a video presentation especially for the conference.

There will be cultural activities that include an African dance group; Son of Nun, a nationally known hip hop artist; and a presentation of Howard Zinn’s one-act play *Marx in Soho* by the wonderful



actor Brian Jones.

Throughout the whole conference, we've organized an inter-weaving of the global and local to show common problems that we are facing. It's a very intense and rich array of speakers, educational activities and discussion about what kind of world we would like to see.

There isn't full agreement among the Peoples' Summit sponsors on whether the G20 can be part of the solution to the world's problems. Some feel that it is an organic part of what is going wrong.

But we are unified in a commitment to have that discussion, and also around a basic set of principles: decisions being made about all of our lives should be made by all of us. There should be liberty and justice for all. All of us in the U.S. and throughout the world are entitled to freedom expression, freedom of beliefs, freedom from fear and freedom from want.

That's the kind of world we want to see. The Peoples' Summit as a whole isn't involved in any demonstrations, although some of its sponsors—such as the Thomas Merton Center, to which I belong—are very involved in preparing for peaceful, legal protests.

**ALL THE hype about police repression and the battle over permits may give people the feeling they should stay away. What do you say to activists who are wondering whether or not to come to the demonstration?**

NO ONE should have any doubts or questions: there will be a peaceful legal demonstration on Friday, September 25.

The Thomas Merton Center is spearheading a broad coalition that is absolutely committed to making that happen. It is organizing a network of peace marshals to ensure the peaceful nature of the demonstration.

I am confident that the government will not try to violate our constitutional right to march. It may want to tailor where we march. But our legal team will fight very hard to win our right to march to the City County building, where we will have a rally and then go on to the Federal Building, which is very close to the Convention Center where the G20 will be meeting.

The marchers want to go there to express their beliefs and ideas on what kind of world we want to see, to question whether the G20 should make decisions that affect our lives, and to demand that such decisions be made with the democratic participation of the people.

If it turns out that the city does not allow the march to go the Federal Building, that will be challenged through legal channels, but there will be no confrontation with police. Such a confrontation would only happen if our democratic rights were entirely violated. In that case, I think significant numbers of people would follow the example of Martin Luther King Jr. and commit non-violent civil disobedience.

King once put it this way, "We must have the right to protest for what is right." People will be prepared to do that if their constitutional rights are being violated.

I don't anticipate that this will happen. The indications from the city are that it will be allowing a peaceful legal protest on September 25. So any activists who can should come to Pittsburgh and join our march.

**HOW DO you see the People's Summit and the protests against the G20 fitting in with the growing frustration with the limits of the Obama administration and the recognition that**



## **we have to fight for the change we want?**

OUR ORGANIZING is crucially important. Only through educating, organizing and mobilizing pressure for peace and social justice, independently of all politicians and governments, will we win the better world we need.

We have to develop popular pressure that will compel governments to respond in a positive way to the needs of the majority of the world's people. If the Obama administration is going to live up to its campaign promises, it must feel this kind of popular pressure.

As Obama said during the campaign, this is only way that genuine change is brought about—by mobilizing such pressure. The time to do so is now.

But even if the Obama administration, other governments and the G20 respond positively on certain kind of issues, it will be necessary to maintain popular pressure, because there are powerful counter-pressures from multinational corporations and the wealthy to make the world go their way at the expense of the rest of us. We must build popular pressure to push it our way.

But there's another issue as well, a more fundamental issue, and that is we believe a different kind of world is possible, one in which the people democratically make decisions, control the institutions that affect their lives and control the economic resources on which on all of us depend.

We need a better world, a different world, in which that democratic principle permeates everything. Until we are able to achieve that world, we need to build popular pressure to win reforms that support democracy, human rights, and social and economic justice.

As we build movements for these short-term victories, we have to debate and discuss how can we bring about a world which is based not on the profit for the few, but on meeting the needs of humanity. We are at pivotal time in building this struggle, both for reforms and a whole new world.

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### **P.S.**

\* From Socialist Worker (USA):

<http://socialistworker.org/2009/09/10/protesting-the-g20>

\* Paul LeBlanc, a long-time socialist and author of *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, is active with the Anti-War Committee of the Thomas Merton Center and one of the leading organizers of the Peoples' Summit in Pittsburgh, called to offer an alternative to the pro-free market policies that will be discussed at the Group of 20 economic summit of industrialized countries on September 24-25.

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### **Footnotes**

[1] See <http://www.g20media.org/>

[2] See <http://www.pittsburghendthewar.org/>

[3] See <http://www.peoplessummit.com/>