

# Mobilisations against the Evian G8

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For five days, from the 29<sup>th</sup> May to the 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2003, the main cities around Lake Geneva - Geneva, Annemasse and Lausanne - were the setting for the biggest mobilisation ever organised in this area.

But before coming back to the mobilisations, a few words on the G8 itself.

It was held less than two months after the taking of Baghdad by the American forces, and was the symbol of "reconciliation" between the major powers, a few days after the unanimous vote at the UN Security Council ratifying the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq.

But behind a very formal reconciliation - George Bush only remained in Evian for a few hours - the results of the G8 are so weak that the NGOs that were present headed their final evaluation "A G8 for Nothing".

If the Evian G8 will not go down in history, its final communiqué continues with its usual recommendations without any break with its neo-liberal policies, and emphasises the importance of finding an agreement on the opening up of world trade during the ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation next September in Cancun.

The new feature of this G8 was a slightly different stance and a priority towards Southern Hemisphere countries, NGOs and alternative globalisation movements, without this changing in any way the policies of the G8 countries, nor the recommendations from the Evian meeting. This priority towards greater acceptance already existed among the international institutions that have been seeking to emancipate themselves from governments by putting forward the concept of international "civil society": i.e. the World Bank during the Rio conference in 1992, and the IMF, WTO or the United Nations following Seattle. But governments, referring to the legitimacy granted them by having been elected through universal suffrage, had always rejected this step. This change of attitude is an additional indication of the strength of a movement that is making lasting changes to the international balance of power.

The breadth of the mobilisation was not however guaranteed. The cities in the area are of a limited size: 250,000 inhabitants in Geneva, 120,000 in Lausanne and far fewer in Annemasse. The security campaign had been unbelievable, with the local media announcing the arrival of "hordes of vandals". But, above all, France, the host country for the G8, was experiencing a very strong social movement in defence of the pension and public service systems: the teachers had been on an open-ended strike for weeks; on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> May demonstrations had brought together millions of people, and activists were preparing an open-ended inter-professional strike for the 3<sup>rd</sup> June.

For the French strikers and demonstrators, the link between their fight and liberal globalisation was a strong one: the endangering of the pension system and the attacks on public services are at the heart of the neo-liberal policies recommended by the international institutions and applied the world over.

But on the practical side, it was difficult to prepare a national demonstration in Paris for the 25<sup>th</sup> May, a European demonstration in Geneva and Annemasse for the 1<sup>st</sup> June and an open-ended strike

starting on the evening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> June all at the same time!

In these conditions, getting 100,000 people together between Annemasse and Geneva was a considerable success, but the success of the anti-G8 demonstrations is not limited itself to this figure.

Upon the creation several months ago of a single co-ordinating body, the choice was made for a flexible and minimalist organisation of the event, guaranteeing total autonomy for the various groups that had formed. This choice was the only way of bringing together a broad spectrum of activists, coalescing political forces ranging from anarchist movements to the French socialist party, and in particular, a large number of trade unions, NGOs, movements and associations. This diversity was mirrored at a geographical level. The choice had been made, from the very first, of working above all on a European level, with representatives of movements from Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and in particular, France and Switzerland. In these last two countries, the local and regional groupings played a central role: the Geneva (Leman) Social Forum for the Geneva canton, the anti-G8 committee for Lausanne and the Vaud canton, Charg8 for Annemasse and the Haute Savoie.

The demonstration on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June between Geneva and Annemasse was the only initiative that was common to all groups, the others being undertaken by specific coalitions. But the European co-ordination of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> March had agreed on the fact that everyone was to support the different actions as long as they remained peaceful and non-violent.

The overall success of the mobilisation reflects the success of the different actions and initiatives carried out between the 29<sup>th</sup> May and the 2<sup>nd</sup> June.

### **The alternative villages:**

The idea for these villages stemmed from two factors:

- The experience of the "No Border" village in Strasbourg during the summer of 2002, an experiment that many activists wished to repeat on a larger scale
- Refusal to embark upon actions which might have triggered a spiral of violence, such as approaching Evian and the "red zone". The villages also existed to demonstrate the possibility of living away outside the rules of the system, even if only for a short period of time.

Two villages were created: the VAAAG, run in a libertarian and anarchist spirit, which brought together over 3000 participants; and the VIG, which had a more varied composition, bringing together over 5000 participants. In addition to these two villages could be found the "point G", a village for women only, and a group of over a thousand techno and sound system fans.

Both the participants and the visitors to the villages were enthusiastic about the results, be it the capacity of each of the villages to run autonomously, the exchanges and the co-ordination between them, or the number of debates and initiatives that took place on the sites.

### **The counter-summit and activist debates:**

Large gatherings over the last few years can be divided into two types of initiative: meetings centred on debates and activist exchanges, as for example the three World Social Forums in Porto Alegre, and the big international demonstrations, such as in Prague, Nice, Genoa or Barcelona in Europe, where debate played a very minor part.

The particularity of this counter-G8 was the interweaving of mobilisations and debates, these having

counted as much for the general success of the initiative as the demonstration on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June or the roadblock initiatives that preceded it. In this way, the counter-G8 follows the pattern of the European Social Forum that took place in Florence last November, which was notable for its twofold success: for its debates and exchanges, and for the demonstration against the war and against neo-liberalism.

It would take too long to make a complete list of all the debates and discussions that took place, but it must be emphasised that two types of meetings were held:

- Conferences and events in which points of view were expressed and analyses made, in particular those organised by an NGO collective in the "Summit for Another World" in Annemasse, and the CADTM (committee for the cancellation of the third-world debt) and ATTAC in Geneva;
- Activist co-ordinations in Annemasse, Geneva or in the villages allowing for an evaluation of campaigns and mobilisations, such as the anti-war campaign or the mobilisations for the defence of pensions and public services, and for the preparation of coming initiatives, such as the ministerial assembly of the WTO in Cancun next September.

### **The roadblocks on Sunday morning:**

These were not organised with the aim of preventing the G8 from taking place. The idea was rather to hinder its progress and to oblige the whole of the accompanying personnel to take the helicopter or boat in order to get from their hotels in Lausanne and Geneva to the summit itself in Evian, thus clearly demonstrating the opposition of the French and Swiss populations to the holding of the G8, considered to be illegitimate by the entire anti-G8 coalition.

In Geneva, the bridges of the city were blocked from 6 a.m. and, in spite of some tension with the police, who were present in large numbers, no serious incidents were recorded.

On the road between Annemasse and Evian, 2000 activists coming from the villages made their way towards strategic crossroads with the intention of blocking them. The operation was successful, and several hundreds of activists blocked the road peacefully for several hours, in spite of repeated tear-gas attacks.

The situation was hardest in Lausanne because of police actions. A British environmental activist fell 20 metres after a policeman cut the climbing rope to which he was attached and which was "hindering" the traffic on the motorway bridge between Geneva and Lausanne. The police also entered the alternative villages in Lausanne, arresting hundreds of young activists.

### **Violence during the activities against the G8**

Two years after Genoa, this was the favourite subject of the media, and the police presence was unprecedented both on the French side and on the Swiss, where the authorities had to appeal to police contingents from Germany to reinforce their numbers!

In the end, the incidents were less serious than in Geneva and would have been even less so if the police operations had not made matters worse.

On the French side, the only incidents, regrettable but insignificant, happened on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May outside the hall where the Socialist Party was due to meet.

On the Swiss side, the difficulties were greater, both in Lausanne, following the police operations over the blockades on the Sunday morning, and also in Geneva.

Overnight between Saturday and Sunday a group of more than a hundred unidentified individuals -

there were neither claims of responsibility nor arrests - broke a large number of shop windows and started fires which put human lives at risk; a garage situated in a housing estate was totally burnt out.

Criticised for its inaction during the night, the police stepped up their operations in the city of Geneva after the demonstration of 1<sup>st</sup> June, but also on the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> June. During these operations, a journalist was seriously wounded and the "Usine", an alternative meeting-place, was broken into in a very brutal fashion. Not content with these acts of violence, the Geneva authorities have forbidden all further demonstrations and rallies "sine die"!

The demonstration on 1<sup>st</sup> June had for its part shown the developing maturity of the movement. From the point of view of activist networks, the situations were very different between francophone Switzerland, especially the canton of Geneva, and German-speaking Switzerland, the cantons of Berne and Zurich.

In Geneva, in line with what is taking place in France and Italy, the protest movement against the G8 was very broad: all the trades unions of the canton urged their members to join the demonstration, as did the left-wing parties, including those who have the majority in the city of Geneva. In such situations, radical activists feel part of a much broader movement, which does not preclude discussions or disagreements but which places the priorities on a numerical level - how to mobilise as broadly as possible - and on a political level - rejection of the G8, the war, and neo-liberal policies. These aims and links were much weaker in Zurich or Berne, and the radical activists, mostly very young people, sometimes found that violence was the means of expressing their rejection of an unjust society.

The dynamics of the mobilisation against the G8 enabled the divide between these two activist realities to be narrowed, which became clear when the young radicals from Zurich and Berne decided to march to Annemasse with the rest of the demonstrators.

This article has only presented a few elements of an evaluation which deserves many contributions. Initiatives like G-Monde, organised in Paris on 28<sup>th</sup> May by ATTAC groups from all over the world, the "fires on the lake", organised on the evening of Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> around Lake Geneva, or the debates and initiatives undertaken in Annecy, will all need separate assessments. The role of the alternative media, which was very visible during all the initiatives, will also need to be highlighted.

During the evaluation meeting of the Paris collective, the idea was put forward to take advantage of the European Social Forum meeting in Paris/St Denis in to organise a seminar where the large European initiatives, from Genoa to Geneva and Annemasse via Barcelona, Brussels, Thessaloniki etc., can be discussed by a variety of activists networks.

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**P.S.**

\* Translation. Jane Holister, Barbara and David Forbes. Coorditrad, volunteer translators.