

Before the G8

The context and preparation of the Genoa demonstration

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All indications are that Genoa will be the biggest mobilisation against neo-liberal globalisation yet. More than 10,000 Europeans are expected to join the demonstrations, with large contingents from the UK, Spain, Germany, Greece and France. Add to this the Italian associations, political parties, NGOs and unions which make up the Genoa Social Forum and it is likely that more than 100,000 people will join the main demonstration on Saturday 21 July, which will be the culmination of a week of seminars, educational and cultural activities and protests.

The media attention has been incredible. For weeks, the main Italian newspapers have dedicated whole pages to the preparations for the protests, and the rest of the European press is not far behind. This intense interest is explained partly by the tensions following the EU meeting in Gothenburg where police used live bullets against protestors, but also by the growth of the anti-globalisation protests in all parts of the world. In the contest between the G7 meeting itself and the protests, it is the anti-globalisation movement that grabs the public interest. Even government officials and international institutions now routinely refer to the activism, a sign that they can no longer afford to ignore them.

Before Genoa, both the WTO director general Mike Moore and the French minister for foreign affairs Hubert Vedrine, explained (once again) that *"the demonstrators are missing the target"* because these institutions are here to *"to regulate globalisation."* Furthermore, they proposed that the groups opposed to globalisation should adopt a *"code of conduct"* which would exclude the violent extremists and which would, in exchange, give those groups who want to be part of the international negotiations a *"stake in the process."*

To understand what is at stake in Genoa, it is important to separate the specific situation in Italy from the broader context of Europe and the world - although, of course, they are intimately connected.

In Italy, the preparations for Genoa and the events themselves are a vital part of building the local movement opposed to corporate globalisation. They are also the first mass mobilisation against Berlusconi since he was elected in May.

As in all the countries where these summits and international meetings have been held - whether it's Prague or Chiang Mai, Melbourne or Quebec - this has been the opportunity to create or reinforce the protest movement. And in all of these events, the vast majority of activists are local. That was the case in Quebec April this year, in Gothenburg in June and it will be the case again in Genoa where the Italians will be make up more than 80 per cent of all demonstrators.

Rejection of the "old politics"

Analysts in Italy see Berlusconi's election as a mass rejection of the politics of the centre-left which had adopted neo-liberal policies, losing both popular support and the support of those groups which make up the 'militant' element of Italian politics. Almost 10 per cent of votes went to the Rifondazione Comunista and the populist anti-corruption party lead by the former mafia prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro. This, according to the left, indicates a break with the old politics.

Berlusconi and his new government symbolise the power of money (the prime minister himself is the 14th richest man in the world and controls Italy's biggest private broadcasting company) and includes some of the most reactionary groups in Italy. The National Alliance, originally a fascist party, is the main ally of Berlusconi, while Forza Italia and the Northern League - both racist and populist - are part of the coalition. For the Italian left and the social movements, which have been rebuilding during the past years, Genoa is the chance to challenge the politics of money and to build a new politics through the process of 'united front' mobilisation.

Genoa is also a step for the coordination of movement at the European level. Europe, as in other parts of the world, is experiencing a new wave of social activism and mobilisation, but it is still fragmented. The diversity of social and political realities within Europe - and the diverse trade union and social movements that have emerged from these national realities — largely explains this fragmentation.

The construction of the European Union did not automatically create the circumstances for collaboration between social movements across countries. Even as recently as the mass public service strikes in France in 1995, and the emergence of strong national campaigns such as Jubilee 2000 in the UK and ATTAC in France, which did not at first translate into a European project.

The situation now, though, is different and there are signs of change. In 1997, the European march against unemployment, insecurity and social exclusion converged from all points in Europe, ending with a 30,000 strong demonstration in Amsterdam. Encouraged by the success of the unemployed movement (and perhaps fearing being overtaken by the left) the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) organised European mobilisations in Luxembourg at the end of 1997 and in Porto and Nice in 2000.

Seattle and the growth of international mobilisation also has a positive effect in Europe, precipitating the growth of many activist structures, such as coalitions for the cancellation of the debt.

The G7 meeting in Cologne in 1999, the IMF and World Bank meetings in Prague in September 2000 and the EU Summit in Nice in December 2000, provided the opportunity for these networks to work together. And, as we have seen this year, the level of activism is growing, with more than 20,000 activists joining demonstrations in Barcelona and Gothenburg.

Trade Unions sitting on the fence

The role of the European unions in this process is not resolved. In many countries of the South, but also in North America, from Seattle to Porto Alegre, the unions are part of these demonstrations and encounters and are building alliances with other movements, even if there are still debates and divergences.

This is not yet the case in Europe. In Prague, for example, the big majority of demonstrators were young. In Nice ETUC made sure that they were totally separate from the anti-globalisation demonstrators and in Genoa, the three big Italian union confederations will not be in the demonstration. Only the most radical element European unionism, the French SUD and FSU, the

Italian Cobas and the metalworkers branch of the CGIL, the anarcho-syndicalist CGT from Spain and the major Greek unions. However, there are signs of change. In Barcelona in June, the two main Spanish trade union confederations were part of the mobilisations that forced the World Bank to cancel its scheduled conference.

The final challenge is building an international movement. The Genoa Social Forum, which will be held between 15-22 July, is important because dozens of militants from around the world will be able to meet and discuss the alternatives and the situation of movements in different continents. But the more important framework for these discussions and processes is the World Social Forum (see below) which will be held again in Porto Alegre Brasil in January 2002.

Genoa will, however, be a chance to analyse up close the strategies of the powers and to see what sort of world government they have in mind for us! And it will be occasion for people in all parts of the world to demand the cancellation of third world debt.

Avoiding the "D" word

The G7 meeting will talk about the world economic situation and probably agree to lower their interest rates to spur economic recovery. The G7 will also discuss, as did their finance minister colleagues in Rome last week, poverty reduction. In fact, it is obvious that the big countries want to avoid discussing debt and are instead giving prominence to the provision of basic services such as health and education. Following that, and in the spirit of the US Congress' Meltzer Commission, the G7 finance ministers recommended that development banks should leave infrastructure investment to the private sector, and should focus their own resources on providing grants for health and education. At first glance, this seems like a good idea, but in fact it is completely consistent with neo-liberal thinking which gives opens the door for the private sector to control the (potentially profitable) "public" activities. But most of all, the G7 - by proposing some superficial "reforms" of the World Bank and the other regional funds - are hoping to avoid dealing with the demands to cancel the debt.

In Cologne, they threw us the bone of the "reformed" HIPC, which is little more than debt re-scheduling. We now know that the bone should have been buried immediately and this experience has made the debt campaign more radical and more militant. This time, they will not be so easily bought.

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P.S.

The English version of this article is slightly different than the French original.