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EU Summit in Barcelona

The largest demonstration ever organized against corporate globalization

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In Barcelona on March 16, 2002, the movement took a major step forward!

Catalan police estimated the number of demonstrators at 250,000, while organizers placed the total at 500,000 and the media reported 300,000.

Whichever the figure, the demonstration at the European Union summit in Barcelona was at least as large as the July 2001 one at the G-7 meeting in Genoa. And the numbers are as impressive as they are unexpected: organizers anticipated some 50,000, and the 100,000-strong demonstration two days earlier at the European Trade Union Confederation created concerns that dispersed energies might weaken the showing in Barcelona.

As in Genoa, police and media pressure was intense, making Barcelona's success all the more notable. Dozens of preventive arrests were conducted. Borders were blocked, preventing the entry of 1,500 - 2,000 French and Belgian demonstrators who wanted to participate, and obsessive anti-terrorist and anti-Basque fears were used to justify calling out warplanes.

The final key measure of the event's importance: it was more locally-based than any other mobilization against neoliberal globalization. Other than an especially visible and militant contingent of tens of thousands of Basques, nearly all the banners were in Catalan. Delegations from elsewhere in Spain remained discreet. Beyond the symbolic participation of a few countries, European representation numbered only a few hundred French participants, the rest of the troops having been stopped at Perthus by Spanish authorities.

The reasons for this success should be examined closely. The Barcelona European summit was, of course, important. The most visible agenda item was the liberalization of energy markets, but other topics included the expansion of freight rail competition, labor market flexibility, the European position regarding development financing at the UN conference in Monterrey, Mexico, and more technical issues like Galileo, the European equivalent of the U.S. satellite localization system, GPS. The agenda thus offered many good reasons to demonstrate against a Europe that is dismantling public services further weakening labor markets, and in support of a Europe which would respect social rights and the environment and would build different relationships with Southern countries.

But this summit was only the intermediate one under the Spanish presidency. In general, mobilizations concentrate on the final summit, at which the most important decisions are made. The classic argument holds that the WTO and the G-7 represent easier targets than the European Union, which provides, simultaneously, an opening to neoliberal globalization and to a different social, economic and environmental model.

To understand Barcelona's remarkable success, it should be seen in the current wave of mobilization against neoliberal globalization. Since Quebec, Genoa and Porto Alegre, the movement has been in full expansion and "massification" mode.

Barcelona is one of its bastions. Thanks to contacts established after the June 2000 Geneva social summit and the Prague mobilization later that year, the Global Resistance Movement (known by its Spanish initials, MRG) was formed and massive mobilizations were held. From that point on, Barcelona militants were seen everywhere - in Nice, Genoa and Brussels. In Barcelona itself, when a major campaign was developed following announcement of a June 2001 World Bank conference to be held there, the Bank chose to cancel the event. The campaign decided to continue organizing and, rallying some 20,000 people, held a planned demonstration to celebrate the cancellation.

For the Barcelona activists, the European Union summit represented the first "genuine" reason to finally undertake a mass mobilization.

The composition of the March 16 demonstration revealed the nature of the movement in Catalonia: dynamic and energetic young people, a wide range of all social movements, and decentralized, grassroots organizational structures.

Three blocs issued the call to demonstrate: the "Campaign Against a Europe of Capital," a direct heir of the campaign against the World Bank and most of whose organizers are very young and come from the MRG. The campaign brings together more than 100 organizations. Second, Catalan and Basque nationalists. And finally, the Barcelona Social Forum, with the parliamentary left (linked to the Spanish socialist party, PSOE, and United Left, IU) and the large trade unions (the Workers' Commissions, CCOO, and the General Union of Workers, UGT) under its banner.

The demonstration had all the features of truly massive mobilizations. In contrast with more institutionally-based demonstrations, in which delegations are staggered to maintain the illusion of large numbers, this crowd was compact. Delegations were massive, with more than 1,000 from the women's movement, 3,000 from ATTAC, and thousands defending the Palestinians and the environment or with radical unions like the French General Confederation of Labor (CGT), direct heir of the 1930s National Confederation of Labor (CNT). But all the groupings were mixed. The majority of participants were young, but the rest were of all ages and backgrounds. The badges of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), the Catalan arm of the Spanish Sociality Party, were visible in the independent groupings.

Power relationships among the three blocs were clear. The 5,000-10,000 members of the colorful and lively nationalist grouping were primarily Catalan. Other than a few institutional representatives, Basques were drawn to the social movements, led by "Eumen Eta Mundua", MRG's Basque counterpart. The Barcelona Social Forum was represented in similar numbers but discouraged by the lengthy wait, its participants decided to disperse even before the commotion of the demonstration. The overwhelming majority, affiliated with the Campaign Against a Europe of Capital, remained at the head of the march.

Activist generations in Catalonia and throughout Spain - with the exception of the Basque country - experienced more dramatic fractures than did their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. The fall of Francoism shaped the horizon of the 1970s social movements's radical left. The Portuguese revolution sparked hope that the end of the dictatorship would be accompanied by a break with capitalism. But the democratic transition and the Moncloa accords shattered that hope and left a lasting mark, weakening the activists.

As mobilizations developed in the second half of the 1990s, the terrain was free for new generation

of activists to experiment with new forms of action and build their movements. From across the Atlantic, the U.S. example inspired many, leaving its mark - in small and large ways —in Barcelona, from the raising of hands to show agreement, to the use of active non-violence, to the rapid growth of organizations. Thus the break-up now underway within the MRG resembles the Direct Action Network's dismantling after the April 2000 Washington protests. These similarities spread even faster because they corresponded to the Catalans' deeply-rooted libertarian and "assemblear" culture.

But social ties are much closer here than in the U.S. And in a rare showing, the movement is now marked by new forms of militant action. For example, to avoid creating "celebrities" at the March 16 demonstration, the front lines included activists chosen for their anonymity. But the movement can also integrate all elements, ages and sectors of society.

A few concluding remarks: first, this demonstration will have an impact on the debate and how it is discussed. Madrid's august daily newspaper, *El País*, offers an example in the following headline: *"The Catalan capital was the site of the largest demonstration in support of a different kind of globalization."* For once, "anti-globalization" was not the only description used.

Second, there was the secondary nature of the violence in Barcelona. There were several incidents, including garbage cans set on fire and stones thrown. Still, there was no major violence — neither in reality nor in media reports, as police fears were found, with good reason, to be the primary cause of the minor incidents. After the rising violence in Gothenberg and Genoa, Barcelona - in the Brussels tradition - constitutes a sign of the movement's maturation.

On the other hand, the issue of unfettered travel in Europe is a significant problem. Government restrictions on citizen movements and participation in demonstrations in Europe cannot come to be seen as normal. Protests, especially ATTAC's, against these assaults on civil liberties have had some impact but the campaigns must be expanded.

Finally, the impact of this event on activist networks must be considered. It should prove very important in the Spanish context; the test coming in June with the Seville mobilization around the European summit. More broadly, one of the key questions - in Spain as well as for the rest of Europe - is the movement's capacity to organize on the basis of limited structures. Without revisiting the question of the gains that the mobilizations' decentralized and democratic form represents, their structural weakness makes it difficult to share experiences and create synergy between the Catalan and Spanish movements and their European and international counterparts.

That is the major challenge at the heart of next November's European Social Forum. How can movements pursuing the major objectives of Porto Alegre be developed globally, be based locally, nationally and by continent, and for all that, be able to formulate a body of demands and effective action strategies?

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