



The Euro-marches culminate in a demonstration through Amsterdam

Adventures of a Euro-marcher

By Ruah Carlyle

TWELVE separate "Euro-marches" converged on Amsterdam last month at the end of a two month long series of marches, protesting at unemployment and social injustice. It was a peculiar yet inspiring display of internationalism. These Euro-marches arose largely from the success of shorter marches through France in the last few years.

The model was that of the "hunger marches" through Britain in the 1930s. The labour movement would organise funds and support them with food and accommodation. These were highly political marches of mainly unemployed workers whose destination would be the seat of government. In 1930s Britain this meant London and the Houses of Parliament. For the Euro-marches it meant Amsterdam and the European Summit — held on 14 June.

Just as in the past, on the Euro-marches the end destination was less important than the experience of the march itself. In theory the march would culminate in a "lobby" of the heads of the European states. In practice we scorned their summit.

The purpose of the march was publicity and propaganda. We were a mobile campaign which rallied local activists in

each town we passed through around our three masthead slogans:

"Against a Europe of Capital",
"Against unemployment and job insecurity",
"Against social exclusion".

We did not entertain any reformist/liberal illusions that marching across Europe

"The model was the hunger marches, destination the seat of government. For the Euro-marches that meant Amsterdam and the European Summit."

with all the correct arguments (for a minimum wage, cut the working week without loss of pay, make the bosses pay for our welfare state, etc.) would have the slightest effect on Europe's capitalist ministers.

The European march was a fully fledged campaign but with a limited lifespan — two months of marching, 18 months of preparation — whose three main demands could be and were read to mean

far more than the liberal slogans they clearly are.

It was a kamikaze campaign composed of revolutionaries, anarchists, reformists and even some liberals, with a central core of unaffiliated unemployed workers. For some the campaign was a "charitable" endeavour — save the trees, save the Third World, oh, and save the unemployed too. This patronising approach accounted for some of the middle class support we received — money and media coverage — in the towns we passed through.

But it was a genuinely broad-based affair which attracted new marchers wherever it went on the basis of the core demands. Here is a description of the march I joined in Paris. At that point it had already travelled from Tangiers, through Spain and southern France.

France, 17-25 May

IN every town that the march visited, meetings were held. The first meeting in Paris was on the streets at Place d'Allègre. After speeches, a street theatre group performed a political play attacking the evils of Thatcherism. Then more culture

— this time in the form of a classical musical recital in the local trade union building. The building was, in fact, squatted property. We enjoyed all the art and appreciated the differences in culture between the British and French labour movements (they had some!) but we were still surprised and feared these people were soft. The recital was fascinating, performed as it was in a tatty room on the fourth floor, with the Alsatian dogs of the various crusty/punk marchers wandering between the two performers, followed by a drunken marcher staggering into the violinist. A unique performance.

The following day provided a stark contrast to the almost summer holiday ease of our first day on the march. We stayed in Paris to help out a local campaign against homelessness — *Droit Au Logement*. No music today, except the hippy songs on the Metro. Instead, we squatted empty property in the 16th arrondissement. The police took action, arresting over 50 people in two separate occupations. Three people were beaten up and later charged by the police for resisting arrest. Because of this action the march gained a great deal of publicity across Europe — on French TV, on European radio and in papers as far away as Germany.

The publicity gained us warmer receptions and new marchers in the towns we passed through as we headed north. It also brought some Parisian trade union branches out, to march with us in protest at the police action.

The day after the occupations, we had to wait for the release of the three marchers who had been kept in jail overnight. While our lawyers attempted to gain the release of the three at the Palais de Justice, the marchers and other protesters surrounded the court.

At one point, without any justification in law, the judge told our lawyers that unless we left the environs of the court the captives would not be released. To this our lawyer simply replied: "You think there are too many demonstrators outside now? If they are not released within one hour, by this evening there will be 3,000." Bluff or truth, it worked on the judge. The captives were released one by one and greeted with rapturous applause outside the jail gates.

One of the people arrested was not a marcher but a student involved in the homeless rights campaign. His clothes were bloodstained and a hastily sewn-up gash across the side of his head was so deep and long that it resembled a knife wound.

Following various protests, trade union action in solidarity with the marchers, and further arrests of marchers for purely intimidatory purposes, we held another action. Still keen on publicity and fuelled by an

ultra-leftism only seen in the most mental left groups in Britain, we occupied the French equivalent of the Treasury. With more cameras present to witness the scene, the CRS (militarised riot police) refrained from rushing in and cracking heads. The occupation lasted for about five hours and the CGT trade union branch in the government building held a solidarity picket and briefly joined the occupation.

At some points it was quite comical. Other suggestions for occupation included the Stock Exchange and Parliament. We did in fact occupy the theatrical display area of the Treasury where my friend found a placard — a stage prop — with "no nude bathing" in French on it. He planted it in front of a line of police and demanded: "Why not?"

There was violence on the way out with the CRS, the same squad who had arrested us two days before. The commandant and I recognised each other and I wondered if he would wave. He didn't!

"The bulk of the marchers are ordinary, out-of-work men and women with trade union or collective links, some homeless people, some alcoholics, some trade union officials and a smattering of revolutionaries."

They began stamping on people, but failed to arrest anyone. After this occupation — on the plus side, the publicity it had gained and, on the minus, the anger it aroused in the CRS — we decided it was time to leave Paris as quickly as possible and continue the march.

Some comments on the political and national make-up of the march. It is mostly French, with a significant number of Spaniards, mainly from Valencia, Barcelona and Catalonia, and some from the south. This means that the daily marchers' meetings are slow and laborious with much information being missed, as at least two translations are needed. This communication problem got worse as we went north, adding Flemish, Dutch and English to the language list. As we left Paris we were also joined by a Bosnian delegation — miners, postal workers, nurses and youth — three of whom spoke English.

The Spanish are mostly anarchists from the CNT and there are many French anarchists too. One difference between mainland Europe and Britain is that a sizable organic, organised, anarchist tradition sur-

vives and shares space with other revolutionaries. These aren't Class War, violence-glorifying, ultimately working-class-alienating wankers, or lifestyleist, dog-on-a-rope anarchists. These people have a worked-out, coherent (well, as far as anarchism can be coherent) philosophy and method of activism in conflict with that of revolutionary socialism. These people are political.

In addition, there are plenty of lifestyle anarchists too, more colourful, more dirty, more drunk: they make a principle of boycotting the daily marchers' meeting where we decide what to do. These people aren't political.

There are also lots of eccentrics and more sinister, essentially mad, people for whom the march's third slogan, "against social exclusion" has an additional meaning. There are a few "perverts" (voyeurs, as far as I could make out) who soon clear off, and more comical nutcases such as the bloke whose every article of clothing bears a Christ-like portrait of Che Guevara with a blazing sun in the background. On the continent and especially in Spain — partly as a result of the Rage Against The Machine logo and partly due to transferred Catholic emotion — the Che cult is vast.

More comical is Ivan, an ultra-left Spanish anarchist with a perm (more about him later), or Mao Monkey, a scruffy 19 year old, who was learning Chinese so he could read Mao in the original text.

The bulk of the marchers are ordinary, out-of-work men and women with trade union or collective (like co-ops) links, some homeless people, some alcoholics, some trade union officials and a smattering of revolutionaries.

Once out of Paris we put some space between us and the CRS, taking coaches to Arras up in the north, where in a round-about way we take part in the government elections (only a few days away at the time).

The Mayor of Arras is right-wing, affiliated to the Chirac-Juppé right coalition. The Arras council provides us with abysmal lunch — just rolls — which in France is an insult (the idea that a Tory council would provide a labour movement march with *any* food in Britain is astounding). Using this as our starting point, our march through Arras detours — the local CGT trade unionists with us — into the town hall which we occupy, strewing it with confetti and crow-frighteners (very loud fireworks). We also enlist the aid of some local peasants (yes, peasants: their tractor had a banner of the Peasants' Land League draped over it) who throw a bale of hay at the mayor, shouting: give him the food of a donkey!

In the evening we are fed gourmet food, garnished with beer, and provided with accommodation by the Socialist Party-



Sans-papiers demonstration in Lille

led council just adjoining Arras. We had in fact been enlisted by the reformists — in exchange for beer, food and a decent kip — to fuck up their opponent's last few days of campaigning. Way-hay!

The next few days are a succession of marches between small northern mining towns (*Germinal* country) with incumbent Socialist Party councils who put us up and entertain us and are very patronising in the process. At one Town Hall reception, a marcher from Brittany demands of the Mayor, "never mind your objection to this or that condition, what are you doing right now to end unemployment in this town?" The reformist has nothing to say — town hall decked out with murals, heroically depicting the recently dead President Mitterand, was testimony to what his well-fed greed had done in the 1980s: increased unemployment and provided fertile ground for the Le Pen fascists. This mining area was now largely derelict, most mines being closed for at least 25 years, and had a great deal in common with the Yorkshire pit villages in Britain, including useless local politicians. The Mayor's face in one of the murals — greeting Mitterand — had been repainted, retouched with each new vor, each new bourgeois 'functionary' giving a short span of imaginary glory even being painted out!

At this point in the journey the march had too small a kitty left to provide the marchers with a little necessary money — tobacco money for most people. To remedy this we went collecting on the motorway — a 'payage', something close to highway robbery. In France, you pay at toll booths for using the motorway. About 40 of us attacked the toll booths, broke the barriers across the road, and waved traffic through the gaping toll booths, after telling them that the Euro-march was performing this action and why, selling them the march paper (called *Amsterdam*; the march is really now like a miniature campaign) or just asking for and usually receiving 10 or 20 francs. We continued this for about two hours while motorway police milled around, failing to stop us. They didn't even try.

We cost the state a lot of money and made the equivalent of over £1,300! Not bad.

Following a large demonstration in Lille — at which the "sans papiers" (people without papers), immigrants denied permanent leave to stay and deprived of full citizenship rights, marched with us. We left France, crossing several hundred miles in a few days. We did not walk all the way: coaches, clapped out old minibuses and cramped cars carried us large distances.

Belgium, 25 May-4 June

THE Belgian leg of the Euro-march was far more low-key than the French campaign. The local organisers decided against flamboyant occupations, preferring loud and frequent demonstrations wherever we went. We marched greater distances more often. The march split into three to maximise publicity and new recruits. Our leg went through the centre of the country to Brussels, then veered off toward the coast.

The march consisted of a tour of the Belgian labour movement — through Tournai, Quaregnon, Louvière, Tubize, Brussels, Vilvoorde, Mechelin, Antwerp and the border town of Tournhout. The Belgian labour movement is strong but conservative. It provided us with support, but did not agree with the main intent of the marches and their call — for most in a confused and unfocused way — for some sort of fundamental change in society. Again, we are sponsored by reformist socialists.

The organisers of the march in Belgium — maybe as an attempted substitute for political actions such as those in Paris — provide more entertainment, creating a more carnival-like atmosphere. On the first day we are joined by a troupe of 10 or 12 actors, "les bouffons", dressed in macabre costumes and performing insane, sprite-like street theatre. They look like characters from Hieronymous Bosch, Breugel or Ken Currie paintings, misshapen, hunch-backed, black-toothed, dirty, one with two heads, another the devil on stilts.

They were employed to accompany the march at various points along the way to Amsterdam. They are superb, playing as a band in the evenings. One of them quotes Brecht from the steps of a Town Hall: "Knowing that you were strong and we were weak, you decided to make us serfs. Knowing that there was coal and you were cold... etc." (from *The Demands of the Communards*). Additionally, the march is joined on the second day by a seven-foot tall boot.

The more lightweight atmosphere does not dispel tension between marchers though. After a fist fight, two are expelled from the march in Quaregnon. Aside from crazy outbursts, simply the pressure of day-to-day communal living — sleeping in halls, queueing for food, for showers, not understanding the language of those around you, dealing with, or being, someone with psychiatric problems (of whom there were many on the march) — bred petty disputes and tensions — conflicts over sleeping mats, sometimes even over food, which occasionally became violent. Not a lot could be done about it.

The high point of the Belgian campaign was the visit to the Vilvoorde Renault

Diary of an occupation

IN Paris, as in most European cities, there are more empty properties than homeless people. In conjunction with the local squatters' groups, we decided to occupy enough property to house 100 families.

Political activism in France is different from activism in Britain. The Socialist Party has cut all ties with the unions, and during 14 years in government did effectively what the Tories did in Britain. As a result, militants are more willing to strike, occupy, fight and break the law. Also, the fascists polled 15% in the last election, which gives activists more sense of urgency.

On the way to the 'target' squat, a big, fat Frenchman in a sheepskin waist jacket tore down all the fascist election posters we passed with a pickaxe. Very funny. We passed a monument 'in commemoration of French dead who died under German bullets'. A Frenchman exclaimed, "those were Nazi, not German bullets."

From the Metro, we charged inside a very large, very posh... well, mansion — not really a house at all. We hung banners out of the windows and brought mattresses, sleeping bags and desks for the students inside.

The wonderful building we'd reclaimed was very old but immaculately clean, with four storeys and about sixty rooms, in a bourgeois area of the city. It must have been the city home of a very rich family in the past.

A crowd gathers outside the building to listen to the speakers. All very Spanish Civil War (lots of CNT red and black flags stuck out of windows). We all chant, "un toit, c'est un droit" (a roof is a right!).

A few police turn up, but merely look flustered. The squatters' lawyer arrives. In France, a squatter has certain rights and, after inhabiting a property for a few days, only needs a legal document of some sort to gain tenants' rights.

About half the occupiers leave for another occupation. 30 of us stay to prevent the doors being boarded up again. People sit about chatting, but they are only half relaxed, expectant. The crowd outside grows smaller as people come inside. One occupant is showing his father around his new home.

A reporter from the French daily *Le Figaro* interviews some of the residents. She seems friendly at first but, with her tape recorder on, her questions reveal a deep scorn: "You expect to live in a house like this?"

A young man replies: "While there are buildings empty and young people homeless, yes."

Suddenly a torrential rain begins. The interview is interrupted by clanking feet up the stairs. At first I think they are running in from the heavy rain, but the agitation of the occupants in the room indicates something serious. Over 100 riot police are standing outside in the road, in formation, shields up. An alarm cry of "CRS, CRS" breaks out among those at the window.

The CRS are policemen who are actually part of the army, supposedly responsible for the security of the President, but notorious for being very violent, stupid thugs, used to smash up demonstrations.

The rain is pelting now, and the CRS look very military, not moving although they are getting soaked.

One of the squatters was standing out-

side when the police appeared and now wants to get inside the mansion to be with his friends. He's very comical as he clammers up the drainpipe. Someone shouts "dump your drugs" and we all sit down in the same room, arms linked, each with a sleeping bag, expecting a night in the cells.

The CRS march in and, after a brief refusal to stand up, we leave, arms still linked (the CRS are known for grabbing individuals and throwing them down stairs or separating them off and battering them in a quiet corner). CRS men line the stairs and exit; police vans are parked in front of the building and we are herded into them. An old lady is crying; one of the colourful banners that was hanging out of the windows earlier has been cut loose, and lies in the road, half submerged in a puddle.

Once we're in the van, we are more relaxed — we make jokes and sing *Summer Holiday* as the bus passes the Arc de Triomphe. We considered writing a tourist book, 'Paris from a Police Van'.

It took a while to be processed, and there were too many people arrested to fit in the cells, so they used the space between two outhouses to contain us. The Declaration of the Rights of Man was written across the top of the police station. We sang, "All the coppers' flies are undone". The really stupid ones kept checking.

The squatters' dogs — three big Alsations — are impounded. But, soon after, a civilian CRS man returns to tell us "we're letting the dogs go because they don't like the policemen looking after them." A chorus breaks out of "Lock up Juppé, free the dogs".

Someone lights up a joint, everyone's in conversation — if it wasn't for the two rows of policemen we would look rather jolly. Someone notices that one of the buildings alongside us is the CRS officers' locker room and one locker has a National Front election sticker on it. One of us attempts to photograph this and is warned that he will have his camera broken if he does.

When arrested in France, you are obliged to give only your name and age, but they ask you other details in the hope you will tell them. When being asked these questions I refused to answer, but felt guilty as the plainclothes lieutenant asking me was so polite! Then the commandant chased me out of the station and half way down the road, which reaffirmed my faith that all police are bastards.

As we converge outside, waiting for the last two evicted occupiers to be released, a fat policeman walks up to us and demands that we leave the area or the last two will not be released. "You smell" he says. You see, it's a rich area, and not the sort of place for homeless people and revolutionaries.

Later that evening, as we are making our way back to the sports hall where we will sleep, we meet another marcher, Christine, who has been waiting unsuccessfully for two hours for another marcher, Laurent, to be released from another police station, after the CRS arrested him for photographing them harassing an old man in the street.

Christine is very angry. My comrade consoles her: "I'm sorry you had to tell me this story."

She starts: "No, no, it's OK. I'm glad it happened, it's been revelatory. It makes things clear."

By Ruah Carlyle
and Luke Koschalka

car plant, just beyond Brussels on the cusp of the divide between the Walloon (French-speaking) and Flanders (Flemish-speaking) parts of the country. Vilvoorde was the sparking point for a Europe-wide strike wave in Renault plants to combat the capitalist tactic of moving capital around, in this case closing down plants and re-opening them in countries with a less militant workforce. In defence of Vilvoorde, Renault workers struck all across Europe. The march is greeted and entertained by the workers, who occupy — with a barbecue — the front entrance to the plant's storage car park, christening it the Café Mégane. They also provide us with accommodation inside the car plant itself, in the company committee rooms, directly above the factory floor!

As we progress through the Flemish, northern part of Belgium, something in the air sends our loonies more loony. A Flemish masochist joined us and insisted on roller-skating to Amsterdam — even though he couldn't skate. Once he had all but severed his legs continually falling over, he went barefoot. When we had music in the evenings, he danced like a psychotic, flipping over and landing on his spine repeatedly until he had huge cuts all along it. Mao Monkey — similar in appearance to Stig of the Dump — made friends with the masochist, went barefoot as well, discarded his sweaty shell suit for ragged shorts and T-shirt, and took to carrying a spear broomstick around, while running with a pack of dogs. He thus clearly demonstrated the devolutionary role Maoism plays in history, for after Maoism comes — savagery; he had, after all, devolved from a Maoist into a troglodyte wolf-boy.

Ivan (anarchist with perm) decided to wander around in a judo suit with a stick and a floppy hat, like a cross between Luke Skywalker and a Bolivian peasant. Che bloke had taken to hugging trees, each and every one we passed on the road from Tournhout to the Dutch border. I felt we'd better leave Belgium before normal marchers began to be affected by the air too, but Holland was not the ideal escape, considering the amount of dope there and the fleets of bicycles designed to kill stoned people.

Holland, 5-14 June

THE Dutch campaign was less low-key than the Belgian, partly due to the fact that it was less well-organised. At one point we were unsure where we would be sleeping a day in advance, as our usual dormitory, at the nearest leisure centre or sports hall, had not been arranged. As a result, there were fewer reformists to annoy and we had a freer hand. We met up with marchers bussed from southern Spain —



The author (far left) on the road

Andalusia and Alicante — as well as the English (stereotypically pissed-up) and Irish (stereotypically lost) marchers.

Our actions consisted of a job centre occupation, sit-downs and two attempted train occupations (a major demand of the labour movement on the continent is free transport for the unemployed) — one successful and one unsuccessful.

Holland's police were deceptively nasty. In France the police and the CRS were notorious for their violence and we had expected their behaviour. In Belgium, the police were comical, either very fat, handle-bar moustachioed, in leathers that made them look like bondage fetishists, atop huge motorbikes, or, at the other extreme, wimpy, plastic-coated lab technicians riding at most 50cc, phallically unimpressive pushbikes, at which we yelled "wiener", and who were constantly getting irate when we marched ahead of them, our supposed escort.

In Holland the police greeted us in shirt sleeves and on bicycles, were blonde, smiled, waved traffic on and were so seemingly inoffensive as to be almost cuddly. We assumed they would stay like this. When we attempted to occupy a train to take us to Delft, rather than let us break the law by fare-dodging, the police found us a spare driver to take us on a free, requisitioned train.

Understandably, we now considered these police absolute wimps. We characterised them too soon. When we attempted to 'requisition' another train the following day the police ambushed us inside and out of the platform.

They behaved like lunatics, clubbing us indiscriminately, splitting our eyebrows open. One police officer's particular dislike to a Spanish man clubbed him while he was

cornered inside the train. Others attacked people as they scrambled over the tracks. Three people were hospitalised, one with a broken arm.

In Amsterdam we rendezvoused with the other French march (the German march had met us back in Antwerp), along with the northern march from Finland, who had in fact cycled all the way in four days. Euro-march over, its protagonists on the 14th of June joined the march of 40 to 50,000 people (police figures) through Amsterdam.

This march was like an enlarged Euro-march, with thousands of CNT and CGT from France and Spain, autonomists and anarchists from Germany and Holland, as well as a few hundred people from Britain. Several thousand Italians squatted trains to Holland but were prevented from joining the march.

Swathes of people converged in the Dam Square, the pre-march gathering, stretching back over half a mile on either side of the street.

The final rally had speakers from, among others, Vilvoorde, the Liverpool dockers and the Hillingdon strikers.

It was a resounding end to the Euro-march, making clear the commitment of the European labour movement to fight the capitalists' plans for our class. The march highlighted the plight of the twenty million or more unemployed workers in Europe. We left in each town we passed through and in its local campaign an enhanced sense of being part of a much bigger movement and a strong residue of anger, protest and resistance that will not quickly disperse.

The march was a contribution to the vital work of building the international working-class solidarity which is now more than ever necessary to combat the predatory internationalism of capitalism.

Workers' Liberty publications

- How to save the Welfare State 95p
- New problems, new struggles:
A handbook for trade unionists 90p
- We stand for Workers' Liberty £1.50
- A workers' guide to Ireland 95p
- The lies against
socialism answered 50p
- How to beat the racists 95p
- Socialism and democracy £1.95
- 1917: How the workers
made a revolution 60p
- Israel/Palestine:
Two nations, two states! 30p
- Magnificent miners:
The 1984-5 strike 75p
- The case for socialist feminism £1.50
- Socialists answer the New Right £1.50

Issues for socialists

- Socialists and the Labour Party:
The case of the Walton by-election £1
- Arabs, Jews and socialism £3
- Ireland: The socialist answer £2
- Why Yugoslavia collapsed 75p
- East Europe: Towards capitalism
or workers' liberty? 60p
- Solidarity with the South
African socialists £1

The AWL and the left

- Is the SWP an alternative? 75p
- Open letter to a supporter
of *Militant* 20p
- Why the SWP beats up
its socialist critics 80p
- A tragedy of the left:
Socialist Worker and its splits £2
- Seedbed of the left: The origins
of today's far-left groups £1.50
- Their polemics and ours:
Excerpts from *Socialist Organiser*
and *Socialist Outlook* 90p

Education bulletins

- Marxism and black nationalism £1.50
- Study notes on *Capital* £2.50

Cheques payable to "WL Publications" to: Workers' Liberty, PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA. Please add 20% to cover postage and packing. Orders over £10 post free.

Overseas prices on request, or in Australia, from WL, PO Box 313, Leichhardt 2040; in USA, from Barry Finger, 153 Henderson Place, East Windsor, NJ 08520.