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# Europe hit by wave of anti-austerity protests

Marches paralyse centre of Brussels while Spain sees first general strike in eight years

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A demonstrator reacts after being hit by anti-riot police in central Barcelona during the general strike held in Spain. Photograph: Josep Lago/AFP/Getty Images

Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of [Europe](#) today as strikes against austerity measures that have hit public spending and services on the continent caused widespread disruption.

The main demonstrations were in Spain, Belgium and Greece, although there was co-ordinated action in more than a dozen countries including Portugal, Ireland, Slovenia and Lithuania.

One of the largest protests converged on a park in Brussels. The demonstrations in the European capital were reinforced by Spain's first general strike in eight years, which was called to oppose the Spanish government's spending cuts and reforms of the labour market and pensions. In Portugal, unions said 50,000 protesters joined a march in Lisbon and 20,000 in Porto.

"It's a crucial day for Europe," said John Monks, general secretary of the European Trades Union Confederation, which orchestrated the events. "This is the start of the fight, not the end. That our voice be heard is our major demand today – against austerity and for jobs and growth. There is a great danger that the workers are going to be paying the price for the reckless speculation that took place in financial markets. You've really got to reschedule these debts so that they are not a huge burden on the next few years and cause Europe to plunge down into recession."

In Brussels marchers from across Europe waved union flags and carried banners saying "No to austerity" and "Priority to jobs and growth", bringing parts of the city to a halt.

The protest was led by a group dressed in black suits and masks and carrying umbrellas and briefcases to represent financial speculators, acting as the head of a funeral cortege mourning the death of Europe.

As the protests were staged the centre-left cabinet in Portugal called an emergency session to try to prune more from public spending, as it grappled with a debt and deficit crisis that has thrown the spotlight back on to the country.

In Paris, the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy was wrestling with similar

measures, although all the signs are that Sarkozy will not risk worsening his low ratings in the opinion polls with further substantive budget cuts.

The bond markets were relatively calm. Portuguese bonds rose, after a big sell-off earlier this week. British 10-year bond yields are at a much lower 2.92%. The cost to insure \$10m of Portuguese bonds against a potential default had reached an all-time high of \$465,000 on Wednesday, but closed at \$445,000.

Irish 10-year bond yields remained unchanged at 6.7%, as investors failed to be reassured by speculation that the Irish government will tomorrow announce an additional €5bn capital injection into its banking system.

Market traders said, however, that the calm was only due to the European Central Bank buying bonds of struggling European countries. The bond vigilantes, or active credit investors, are still expecting more trouble to unfold.

"We are very worried, many things still need to be done," said Ashok Shah, chief investment officer at London Capital, a fund management firm. "These countries still need to cut their budget deficits and convince the market that their five-year budget deficit plans will work out." Investors remain sceptical about the commitment of Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal to fulfil their promises to cut their deficits because of the social unrest that they imply.

Protesters in Brussels included steelworkers from the Ruhr, office workers from Wallonia, miners from Silesia, and civil servants from Lille, all demonstrating against the job losses, deferred retirement ages, diminished pensions, and cuts to schools, hospitals and welfare in their various home countries.

"Why should the workers have to bear all the costs of this crisis?" asked Kazimierz Grajczarek, 57, a miner from Bielsko-Biala in Poland, who came to Brussels by bus on Tuesday. "They give all the money to the banks and we have to carry the costs."

"We want to correct these policies of austerity in all the EU countries," said Mariano Fondes of the CFDT union from Paris. "We want jobs and growth policies, investment in research, infrastructure, and transport, a European industrial policy."

Unions said 100,000 demonstrators had gathered in Brussels although police put the figure at around half that, 56,000, and reported a couple of hundred arrests following scuffles with "anarchists" in the city centre.

Protesters clashed with police in Barcelona and set fire to a police car. Spain's general strike was the first time the unions had challenged their ostensible ally, the socialist prime minister José Luis Zapatero.

The strike won more support from workers than a weak public sector walk-out in June, yet its impact was limited, as Spaniards have resigned themselves to austerity to trim a massive deficit even though unemployment is now more than 20%.

The European commission president, José Manuel Barroso, told reporters that the EU was aware of the "social knock-on effect" of austerity but that governments saw the measures as the only way out of crisis. Stock markets across Europe ended marginally lower.

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