

Antiwar protest grows in Britain

Tony Hyland
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Public meetings and demonstrations opposing a renewed military attack on Iraq and calling for an end to economic sanctions have drawn greater numbers than anticipated by their organizers.

More than six hundred people turned out for the “No More War in the Gulf — An End to Sanctions Against Iraq” meeting convened last week in the House of Commons. This was double the capacity of the room booked by the Emergency Committee on Iraq (ECI). Speakers were forced to repeat their contributions to the 300 people unable to get in who were lined up on the pavement outside.

Last Saturday thousands of protesters lobbied Downing Street and the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence. Mounted police were brought in to clear demonstrators who sat down in the road, stopping traffic in Whitehall for almost an hour. Both of these events have received scant publicity in the media, because they fly in the face of official claims that a renewed military offensive led by the US and Britain enjoys popular support.

The ECI is an alliance of Labour Party “lefts,” led by Tony Benn, and representatives of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church, novelists, playwrights and other prominent figures from the entertainment industry.

Playwright Harold Pinter expressed outrage over America’s drive to war, describing US imperialism as a “Bovine monster, out of control.” The supposedly “humanitarian motives” for a military attack on Iraq were held up to ridicule. Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn said that air strikes would most likely be mounted from the island of Diego Garcia, whose population was forcibly removed in 1966 to make way for Anglo-American air bases. The planes would be refuelled in Bahrain, which suspended its parliament in 1975. He added that a consignment of antibiotics and antiseptic creams destined for Iraq had recently been impounded by British Customs officials.

Tony Benn predicted a major backlash once war broke out and the extent of the carnage became evident: “The day the bombings begin and the bodies start coming back we can anticipate huge anger...” He called for a campaign that was not strictly limited to the left, but stretched “right across the spectrum.”

The ECI does not represent a principled alternative to the growth of militarism and war. Speakers did refute America’s claims to champion world peace and democracy, but their condemnation of Britain’s role in the Gulf focused on their concern that British foreign policy is becoming an appendage of the US.

Speakers criticized the Blair government for acting as America’s “poodle” and “puppet,” while anti-imperialist rhetoric was largely reserved for denouncing Washington’s predominance in world affairs.

What Benn means by a “broad church” extends to the highest echelons of the military establishment. A copy of a letter sent by Field Marshal Sir John Stainer to The Times newspaper was circulated as an example of where the ECI may win support. Stainer complains that, “The conduct of a successful air war is a politician’s dream; it avoids the mud and blood of a ground campaign and enables wars to be fought without getting your hands dirty. Unfortunately air wars are never successful in isolation. If you wish to expel an invading dictator from, say, Kuwait or the Falklands, you have to go there and drive him out. The same applies to stopping him from doing something you don’t like. As Simon Jenkins points out, a land invasion is out of the question: in the Gulf War, some 600,000 troops were needed to do the job.”

Stainer then advances an alternative method for the imperialists to extend their stranglehold over Iraq: “Perhaps if we attempted to improve the lot of Saddam Hussein’s people by offering a reduction in sanctions in exchange for evidence of his abandonment of weapons of mass destruction, a more realistic result

might be achieved. It would certainly be a lot cheaper.”

For Benn and the ECI to publicly align themselves with these views speaks volumes about their own political agenda. Their fear is that British imperialism is heading into a war that will only benefit the US, while damaging its own strategic interests in the Middle East and provoking political instability within Britain itself.

In 1990-91, Benn headed the protest movement against the Gulf War. Then, as now, he held up the United Nations as the guarantor of peace and claimed that economic sanctions were a peaceful alternative to a military campaign. The intervening years have amply demonstrated the incapacity of such forms of protest to prevent war.

They have also shown that economic sanctions were an alternative means of killing innocent Iraqi men, women and children. Over the last seven years the economic blockade on Iraq has proven to be more lethal than carpet bombing — with estimates of 1.2 million people dying as a result.



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