

# 100,000 demonstrate in London to demand end to war in Afghanistan

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Up to 100,000 people marched in London November 18, to demand an end to the bombing of Afghanistan.

The demonstration was called by the Stop the War Coalition, an ad hoc organisation encompassing numerous pacifist and left radical groups. The police put the number of marchers at a mere 15,000 in an attempt to down play the opposition which exists among broad sections of the population to the bombardment of one of the poorest nations by the world's richest. When the first marchers reached the end of the mile-and-a-half long route at Trafalgar Square, others had not even left the assembly point at Speakers Corner in Hyde Park. It took several hours for all those who had come to participate in the demonstration to reach Trafalgar Square.

The broad and politically diffuse character of the demonstration was reflected in the long list of some 35 invited speakers, which included Labour MPs and trade union leaders, representatives of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Green Party, and even the former president of Algeria, Ahmad Ben Bella. In the event, many of these invited guests, including Ben Bella, did not show.

The size of the demonstration indicates the broad base of opposition to the US and British bombing of Afghanistan and refutes the efforts of the media to portray near universal support for the government. Although objectively giving expression to popular anger, however, the demonstration advanced no perspective on which the war-drive of the imperialist powers can be opposed. The responsibility for this rests with the demonstration's organisers.

The only concrete demand raised from the platform was for the United Nations to intervene in order to call Bush and Blair to order. Paul Marsden, one of the small group of MPs belonging to Labour Against the

Bombing, said, "There is a better way. It is through the United Nations. Let the courts decide." Marsden called for the unity of the "peace movement, the labour movement, the anti-globalisation movement" and said, "it is time to reform the United Nations and take the power from the power hungry prime minister and give it back to the people."

The only alternative to such efforts to portray the UN as a possible vehicle through which to oppose the actions of the US and British governments came from those groups on the demonstration who supported a pan-Islamic response, or lent open support to the Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network.

The march was swelled by large delegations from several Muslim organisations and the day's events also included time for a mass prayer session. Labour MP George Galloway began by greeting those who were observing the holy period of Ramadan, saying, "The first day of Ramadan was marked in Afghanistan with the bombing of a mosque." In case anyone may have thought this was simply a rhetorical flourish, Galloway added, "and they say this is not a war against Islam."

No speaker from any Muslim organisation spoke from the platform in support of the Taliban, but there were groups participating in the demonstration which expressed such a position. The advocates of Islamic fundamentalism were joined by many middle class radicals, such as the Socialist Workers Party, who claimed the Taliban are engaged in a struggle against imperialism and therefore should be critically supported.

Whilst speaking to people at the assembly point for the demonstration, this reporter was approached by a Latin American student who said, "Please tell me that you support the Afghan people and not the Taliban regime." When he was reassured that this was the

position of the *World Socialist Web Site* he said, “Good, because I am sick of being told of the progressive nature of the Taliban. Coming from Latin America, I have no illusions as to what the Bush administration is up to, but that does not mean we can support a reactionary regime.”

Any demonstration against the bombing of an oppressed and backward state, and particularly one that has Islam as its official religion, would naturally attract many workers and youth who follow the Muslim religion. A minority of these will have political illusions in Islamic fundamentalism. Those expressing religious sentiments, and Islamic fundamentalist ideologues, were a significant presence, and perhaps were even the dominant voice on the London demonstration. This was politically the responsibility of the middle class radicals, who did their best to lend credibility to the fundamentalists’ claims to represent an anti-imperialist current. But this situation was made worse by the absence of any organised political expression of the working class.

The many workers and youth on the demonstration took part in opposition to a Labour government that has abandoned any pretence to act in the interests of ordinary working people. Tony Blair and New Labour stand as the main ally of US imperialism in the present war. The handful of trade union leaders present were forced to point out that the vast majority of the official labour movement supports the war. Painting an even bleaker picture of the role of official labour across the Atlantic, a speaker from New York City Labor Against the War said, “I would like to be able to tell you that I represent American trade unions who have come out against the war, but it’s not true. Most trade unions affiliated to the AFL-CIO have come out in favour of war.”

Having been abandoned by their old organisations, those workers seeking to oppose the war were presented with a mixture of pro-Islamic sentiment and Labour lefts urging them to rely on UN intervention. Those seeking a socialist alternative to Labour confronted the unappetising spectacle of various radical groups claiming that socialists advocate forming political and even military blocs with the Taliban. Among the dozens of speakers, not one called for a mobilisation of the working class against the war and against the governments responsible for it.

The pro-government press sought to discredit opposition to the war by linking it directly to pro-Taliban sentiment. John Vidal, writing in the *Guardian* newspaper, noted that, “the Muslim contingents were to the fore” and quoted demonstrators describing bin Laden as “a warrior, a freedom fighter” and calling Bush “a devil worshipper”. Not content with presenting a one-sided picture of the demonstration, the *Guardian* seriously misquoted veteran Labour left Tony Benn, claiming that he “raised the loudest cheers” for stating, “We have a *fascist* parliament” [Our emphasis]. Benn did draw the loudest applause, but did not describing parliament as fascist. He in fact said, “We have a *passive* parliament and a cringing cabinet.”

The efforts of the pro-imperialist liberal media to blackguard Sunday’s demonstration in this way is because they fear the spread of anti-war sentiment and want to paint it as being tantamount to supporting an unsavoury amalgam of clerical reactionaries and terrorists. The danger is that to the extent the working class is unable to advance its own independent political voice—based on the perspective of socialist internationalism—the anti-war movement will be rendered impotent by those seeking to tie it to pro-imperialist bodies such as the UN, or to tail-ending Islamic fundamentalist movements.



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