

75,000 march in Washington against US militarism and Israeli aggression

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Tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in Washington DC on Saturday to oppose US militarism and the Bush administration's attacks on democratic rights, as well as Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people. The Capitol Police said the protest was larger than anticipated, estimating 75,000 participants. It was the largest anti-war demonstration in Washington since the Gulf War more than a decade ago.

The demonstration began with three separate rallies, which then converged in a march up Pennsylvania Avenue to the US Capitol. The April 20th Mobilization to Stop the War, a coalition of pacifist and radical groups, held a rally just south of the Washington Monument. Another protest was held near the White House by a separate coalition, International ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), focusing on Israel's invasion of the West Bank and attracting large numbers of Palestinians.

Finally, anti-globalization protesters opposed to the policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund demonstrated near the headquarters of those two institutions, before feeding into the march to the Capitol.

Another 15,000 to 20,000 marched in San Francisco in a simultaneous protest on the West Coast. Smaller demonstrations were held in a number of other cities.

A large contingent of Arab-Americans and Muslim immigrants, who have borne the brunt of the anti-democratic measures carried out by the Bush administration since September 11, attended the Washington demonstration to protest US backing for the Israeli invasion of the West Bank.

Thousands of Palestinian-Americans made the 12-hour bus trip from Detroit or traveled from other cities such as New York in what organizers said was the largest pro-Palestinian demonstration in US history. They carried Palestinian flags, coffins symbolizing those murdered in the Jenin refugee camp, and photos of massacred civilians. Many denounced the US policy of arming and financing the Israeli military machine, carrying signs that read: "Sharon and Bush are terrorists," "Palestinians live 9-11 24/7," and "Rocks vs. F-16s, Who's the terrorist?"

Mahmoud Mansour came to the march with his wife and children from Groton, Connecticut. He said that much of his family remained in Ramallah, Nablus and the Gaza Strip. His wife's cousin was shot dead in Ramallah a week earlier, while other relatives had disappeared, he said.

"I'm here to object to US policy and to show my support for the people of Palestine," he said. "It is horrible for the people there. People cannot leave their homes without being shot; they don't have enough food or water.

"The truth is that most American people don't understand what is happening. They say it is a democracy here in America, but it is not really a democracy. The politicians are for sale and do not reflect real American values and ethics. That is the only way you can explain a government that ignores Israeli massacres and says that it is fighting to stop terrorism. What are they talking about? Democracy is supposed to be the people

running their own government, but here it is the one who has the money who runs everything."

At one point a group of Jewish demonstrators opposed to the Israeli occupation joined the Arab-American protesters, chanting "Yes to Judaism! No to Zionism!" Throughout the day, references to the refusal of Israeli military reservists to serve in the occupied territories evoked thunderous applause.

The atrocities carried out by the Israeli government further galvanized those opposed to the war in Afghanistan and Bush's open-ended "war on terrorism," including the planned military assault against Iraq and the dispatch of US troops to Central Asia, Yemen, the Philippines and Latin America. Protesters denounced the bombing of Afghan civilians and carried signs and banners reading, "No blank check for endless war," "Criminals in the White House again" and "War without an end. Not in our name."

Many protesters denounced the detention of 1,200 immigrants without due process and the unprecedented powers given to the FBI and other government agencies to carry out surveillance and wire-tapping. Others demanded funding for jobs, education and social programs instead of increasing the already huge military budget and giving more tax breaks to the rich.

The large turnout was particularly significant in the face of the campaign by the media to promote pro-war and patriotic sentiment in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, as well as the Bush administration's efforts to silence dissent and brand government critics as accomplices to terror.

In the days leading up to the demonstration the media widely reported preparations by the police, the FBI and National Guard troops for potential violence and hinted at mass arrests. Both local and national media outlets quoted DC Police Chief Charles Ramsey warning that the protest could become a cover for a terrorist attack. A total of 65 protesters were arrested for minor infractions such as trespassing and disrupting traffic, some arrests coming on the eve of the mass demonstration and some on Saturday.

Less than two dozen people attended a small counterdemonstration organized by Republican groups and addressed by ex-California Congressman Robert Dornan and other right-wingers. This pro-war rally was soon surrounded by jeering demonstrators, with mounted Washington police separating the two groups.

The marchers included large numbers of high school and college students attending their first protest demonstration, as well as workers from across the US.

"The Bush administration is using terrorism as a symbol to push through its own agenda," Gabe, a student from Buffalo State College in New York, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Anyone who opposes this war is aiding and abetting terrorism, according to Attorney General John Ashcroft."

"I'm against war because it has no basis," said Clark, a high school

student from Baltimore attending his first anti-war demonstration. "There was never an investigation into what actually happened on September 11, and instead we are just randomly killing people in Afghanistan without negotiations or anything. We're wiping out people and the media just filters this out."

Shankar, an immigrant from the southern Indian state of Kerala, came to the rally on a bus from New York City. "I don't believe in the war in Afghanistan," he said. "In the name of all of us, that someone should wage a war and drop bombs on a place that has already suffered so much, is wrong. They are just trying to divert attention away from the real problems of the world, which are caused by capitalism. They are carrying out a senseless devastation of life in a place that the people of this country cannot see and do not know."

Sammi Marconi, a high school student from Connecticut, called the September 11 attacks "the best thing that happened to Bush's presidency. People did not like him and now he was able to get people to rally around him and to use the attack to justify any war he wants to carry out."

He said he and several classmates had come to Washington "because we don't like what our government is doing, sending troops all over the world, including into the Philippines and Colombia, and because our government is taking on issues that it should not be involved in, all under the name of combating terrorism."

At the morning rally near the Washington Monument, a 15-year-old girl from a Palestinian refugee camp spoke. She said, "I don't make any distinction between Bush and Sharon. The soldiers might be Israeli, but the weapons are made in America. Your tax money is going for F-16s, tanks and Apache helicopters that are killing us."

Her friend added, "It's true that the weapons are strong and that we only have stones, but our belief is strong. I ask myself, why do they call us terrorists? Ben Gurion, the founder of the Zionist state, said that once we were expelled, the future generations would forget their homeland. He was wrong."

Those who lost family members in the terrorist attacks on September 11 gave some of the most moving speeches opposing US aggression. They have set up an organization—"The Campaign for Peaceful Tomorrows"—and several traveled to Afghanistan to oppose the US attack.

Amber Amudsen, a 28-year-old mother who lost her husband, Craig, a multi-media illustrator who worked at the Pentagon, quoted from a letter she wrote to Bush and read outside the White House. In it she said, "I do not want anyone to use my husband's name to perpetuate violence.... So please, Mr. President, when you say that vengeance is needed so the victims of September 11 did not die in vain, would you please exclude Craig Scott Amudsen from your list of victims to justify further attacks. I do not want my children growing up thinking that the reason so many people died after September 11 was because of their father's death.... He raised our children to understand humanity and not to fight to get what you want." Amudsen concluded that her grief was not a call for war.

Derril Bodley lost a 20-year-old daughter, Diora, on Flight 93, which crashed in Pennsylvania on September 11. He said he traveled to Afghanistan to call for an end to the "barbarous bombing campaign there." Just a few days after his daughter's death he spoke out against the possibility of war, saying, "Don't kill more innocent people in the name of my daughter." He said thousands were suffering and dying by the "perpetration of an aimless war." The cause of terrorism, he said, was US policies, including those that maintain an unequal distribution of the world's resources.

Other speakers denounced the attack on democratic rights that followed September 11. Michael Ratner, a human rights lawyer and president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, said, "We are here today showing that there are people here in the US who will fight back against repression here and abroad. Our government calls this a war to make us safer. But we all know it has made us less safe. It is creating chaos around the world. It is a

war against all of us, against civil liberties, and particularly against non-citizens, Moslems and immigrants from the Middle East. We must all stand with those people now, here in this country."

Ratner said his organization is representing the hundreds of detainees held by the Justice Department, but that legal cases alone would not free them. He said US citizens had to demonstrate and demand their freedom.

He then described the conditions in which hundreds of prisoners captured in Afghanistan were being held at the US military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. "There are 300 people there right now, in dog cages, surrounded by chain-linked fences, in temperatures of over 100 degrees, infested by vermin in a desert in Cuba. We went to an international court, and the Organization of American States says this is illegal. The US says: 'We don't care.'

"Guantanamo is America's Devil's Island. It is a US penal colony where no law applies. According to the US, you can do whatever you want, including torturing people, and no court can intervene. As the world's only superpower, it believes it can do what it chooses, when it chooses. And the result is more terror. America truly is a rogue state."

Although Saturday's demonstration gave expression to the growing opposition to the Bush administration's foreign and domestic policy, the politics of the demonstration's organizers offered no viable way forward. The direction proposed by many of the speakers was based on the notion that imperialist war and attacks on democratic rights can be stopped by building bigger demonstrations to exert pressure on the Democratic Party and Congress.

"We must demand more from our elected representatives and insist we have more money for education, not war," declared one of the principal speakers, Julia Beatty, the president of the United States Students Association. "Demand that Congress not fund the appropriations bill for the increase of the military budget and that it cease military and economic aid to Israel," she said.

The rally's organizers brought Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, a Georgia Democrat, onto the speakers' platform at end of the march. McKinney has come under attack from the Bush administration and right-wing Republicans for calling for an investigation of the September 11 events. She joined, however, in the near-unanimous vote in the House of Representatives last autumn to give the Bush administration an open-ended mandate to wage war.

McKinney's lone appearance at the rally contrasted sharply with the turnout at an April 16 Washington rally staged by Zionist groups to defend Israeli aggression, where dozens of lawmakers, including House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt, turned out. Bush sent Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to officially represent his administration.

The Congressional Democrats have proven unable and unwilling to offer any serious opposition to the extreme right-wing forces that dominate the Bush administration. From its cringing in the face of the conspiracy to impeach Clinton, to its acquiescence to Bush's theft of the 2000 election and its current line-up behind the White House in the "war on terrorism," the Democratic Party has prostrated itself before the Republican right. As a political organization of the ruling elite, it defends the same basic social interests as the Republicans.

Those who counsel a turn to this party and to Congress as the way to stop war and defend democratic rights are directing the emerging movement against the Bush administration's policies into a political blind alley.

The powerful feelings of outrage and revulsion expressed at the April 20 protest will find a way forward only through the emergence of a new, independent political movement of the working class, outside the Democratic and Republican parties, and directed against the profit system.



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