

New York to California

Tens of thousands in US rally against war on Iraq

A reporting team
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On the eve of President Bush's televised address to the nation urging support for a war of aggression against Iraq, tens of thousands turned out at demonstrations from New York to California to oppose US military action.

More than 20,000 people protested the plans for war at an October 6 rally in New York City's Central Park. In Los Angeles over 10,000 assembled at the Federal Building, located near the UCLA campus in Westwood. Similar protests took place the same day in San Francisco, Chicago and other cities around the country.

The larger-than-expected turnouts, in the face of a virtual blackout of the planned protests by the media, showed the depth of opposition to the Bush administration's policies. The demonstration in New York City, the site of the worst of the terrorist attacks of last year, had particular significance, given Bush's attempts to invoke September 11 to justify a war of aggression to seize control of Iraq's oilfields.

Among those who joined the rally were relatives of people who were killed in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center as well as emergency service workers who participated in the rescue and recovery operation precipitated by the collapse of the Twin Towers.

"It's become increasingly clear to me that they are trying to use the families to build up support for war," said Colleen Kelly, who lost her brother William in the disaster at the trade center. She noted that the proposed congressional resolution granting unlimited powers to Bush to launch an unprovoked invasion of Iraq includes an entire paragraph on the September 11 attacks.

"Why is that paragraph in a resolution that would authorize war on Iraq?" she said in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. "There is no concrete proof that Iraq had anything to do with September 11." Kelly, a family nurse practitioner, charged that the Bush

administration "is playing on the fears of Americans. All of us are afraid, but this is just making things worse."

Some of the families who lost loved ones at the Pentagon have stopped attending memorial services there, she said. "They stopped going because they decided that these ceremonies were not about memorializing those who died but about promoting military intervention and revenge."

Meanwhile, Meg Bartlett, an emergency medical technician who participated in the response to the World Trade Center disaster, delivered a statement to the New York rally on behalf of a group of emergency service workers called "Ground Zero for Peace."

"We resent our president telling us how we represent the best America has to offer while simultaneously withholding funding for our medical treatment," she said. "As soon as we are told how thankful he is for all we have done, how proud he is of our bravery, our efforts and suffering are used as the excuse for future violence."

"We do not choose to save only the victims who look like us, share our faith or were born in our country," said the EMT. "Instead, we faithfully attempt to save the lives of anyone who needs us. Given this, it doesn't make sense that we support the creation of any more casualties, here or abroad."

Sunday's demonstrations were called by the Not In Our Name project, a coalition of pacifist, liberal and protest organizations that recently published a "statement of conscience" containing more than 4,000 names. Among the signers were noted writers, artists and intellectuals, including: playwrights Tony Kushner and John Guare; authors Gore Vidal, Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Walker and John Edgar Wideman; writers Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn; and actors Andre Gregory, Wallace Shawn, Danny Glover and Susan Sarandon.

The protest included a mass adoption of a “Pledge of Resistance” to the coming war and repression. Among the speakers in Central Park were Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins; musician David Byrne; and Lynne Stewart, the civil rights attorney who was arrested last April in connection with the representation of her client, a jailed Egyptian cleric, and charged by the Justice Department with aiding “terrorism.”

The New York demonstration reflected broad opposition to the Bush Administration, with numerous signs referring to the theft of the 2000 election and to the government’s use of war as a means of diverting attention from the growing social and economic crisis at home. Others proclaimed that Iraqi lives are just as important as American lives. At the same time, in the absence of any perspective for mobilizing the working class majority against this government, what dominated was the call for pressure on the Democratic Party.

Actor Susan Sarandon, who gave one of the main speeches from the platform, declared: “Bush says you’re either with us or against us. I don’t know who ‘us’ is. I say to Mr. Bush—this is what democracy looks like. We will not give our daughters and sons for a war for oil.”

Actor and director Tim Robbins, declaring himself an opponent of “fundamentalism of all kinds,” added, “What is our fundamentalism? It is cloaked with patriotism and the claim to spread democracy around the world.... Our fundamentalism is business. Our resistance to this fundamentalism must be resistance to profits against life, to the business of diverting attention from Enron and Halliburton.”

Sarandon called on those present to pressure the Democrats in Congress to oppose Bush. “There are some people still functioning in the government,” said Sarandon. “We must support them, particularly (West Virginia Democratic Senator) Robert Byrd.” She gave the phone number of the Capitol Hill switchboard and urged people to call those Senators “who look as though they might have the courage” to oppose Bush.

The call from the platform to base opposition to war on the Democrats was undercut by the near total absence of Democratic politicians at the protest itself. Democratic Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia was the principal politician to address the crowd. She is a lame duck after losing in the Democratic primary to a heavily funded challenger who enjoyed the tacit support of the party’s leadership. McKinney was targeted after making statements questioning whether the Bush administration had prior knowledge about the September 11 terrorist

attacks. The only other politician to address the protest was New York Democratic State Senator Tom Duane, who represents Greenwich Village.

The makeup of the protest rally clearly demonstrated the impossibility of channeling the broad opposition that exists against war through the Democratic Party, which has already committed itself to backing the Bush administration in an invasion of Iraq and defends the same essential social and economic interests as the Republican administration.

Many of those at the protest in New York City expressed enthusiasm at seeing so many people demonstrating against war. They saw the turnout as a refutation of the constant media onslaught portraying a population united behind the Bush administration.

Kyle Smith, 23, who came to the demonstration from Cleveland along with his brother Brett, 21, told the WWS: “We came to New York today because we wanted to be part of the protest. It was supposed to be one of the biggest and we wanted to make it bigger.

“We disagree with war in general,” Smith added. “We are at a time in life when we can just get along and not have to blow each other up. We have all this technology, it should be bringing us together, but we are still acting like barbarians.

“A lot of this is over oil, not over any serious threat Iraq poses to the United States. That is farfetched. There is a possibility it could lead to future wars. The government is taking advantage of September 11. Everywhere you look there are reminders of September 11, intended to scare people and intimidate them into supporting war. They’re taking advantage of the innocent lives lost on September 11.”



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