Poll shows widespread disquiet in US over Iraq war

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A *New York Times*/*CBS News* opinion poll published Sunday provides an indication of the widespread concern among Americans—ranging from suspicion and disquiet to outright opposition—to the Bush administration's drive for war against Iraq.

The results of the poll, conducted by telephone from October 3 to October 5, reveal a high degree of resistance among masses of working people to the relentless propaganda from the government and the mass media in favor of an imminent US attack. With both the Republican and Democratic parties, as well as the media, lined up solidly behind the White House war campaign, the poll provides a striking barometer of the degree to which the concerns of the vast majority of the population are unable to find even a faint reflection within the political establishment.

In broad terms, the poll shows that a substantial majority of Americans, in contrast to the Bush administration, oppose any military attack before United Nations weapons inspectors have been given a chance to resume their monitoring of Iraqi installations. Most Americans, moreover, reject the White House's policy of "pre-emptive war."

By a wide margin, Americans are more concerned with the deterioration of the US economy and the growth of unemployment than they are with the ostensible threat from Iraq. The *Times*/*CBS* poll reflects deep-going anger and frustration over the failure of both the Bush White House and the Democrats to address the mounting social crisis within the US.

As with all such polls, the results of the *Times*/*CBS* survey cannot be accepted uncritically as a definitive measurement of mass sentiment. The way in which such polls are conducted and the manner in which the questions are framed inevitably evoke a distorted and fragmentary picture of the real mood of the population. If anything, the conduct of such polls is calculated to underestimate popular opposition and sentiments of a broadly left-wing character. All the more significant, therefore, are the indications that the current war drive lacks any solid and active base of mass support.

The *Times* reportage of its own poll is indicative of the concern within high places of the survey's results. The page-one article on the poll in Monday's edition omits any mention of the question on Bush's "strike-first" war policy. In fact, the poll showed that only 33 percent of Americans believe that a country should be able to attack another because it thinks that country might attack first. A majority, 56 percent, thinks a country should not be allowed to attack another unless it is actually attacked first. When applied to the United States, a greater percentage of respondents still rejected the notion of "pre-emptive war" (44 percent) than those who supported it (43 percent).

A further indication of the limited character of the poll is the notable omission of any question regarding the role of Iraq's oil resources in the US drive to topple Saddam Hussein. The absence of this question—which would likely tap into the general feeling that oil and the interests of US oil companies have an enormous bearing on the war drive—is indicative of the systematic effort of the media to block any discussion of the historical, geopolitical and economic driving forces behind the anti-Iraq campaign.

The broad mass of the American people are deprived of any objective information regarding US-Iraqi relations and the pre-history of the present confrontation. Instead they are bombarded by propaganda depicting Saddam Hussein as a modern-day Hitler. This makes all the more notable the reservoir of suspicion and unease over the Bush administration's aims and intentions in the Persian Gulf.

While 67 percent of respondents in the *Times*/*CBS* poll said they supported the use of military force to remove Saddam Hussein, this figure represents no increase over

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previous polls, and indicates that the Bush administration's concentrated campaign since early September to whip up a war fever has failed to shift popular sentiment. Moreover, the support for military action drops precipitously when the issue is posed more concretely. For example, only 54 percent of respondents said they would back military action if it involved substantial US losses. Significantly, that figure dropped to 49 percent if the war involved substantial Iraqi civilian casualties, and again fell to 49 percent if an attack were to evolve into a prolonged war.

The percentage of respondents supporting military action "soon" actually dropped from that registered in a poll taken two weeks ago, falling from 36 percent to 30 percent. The sentiment for allowing UN inspectors time to resume monitoring before taking military action increased from 57 percent to 63 percent.

With 70 percent of respondents believing war with Iraq to be inevitable, it is a fair conclusion that much of the reported support for military action has the character of resignation, rather than wholehearted approval. Indeed, the *Times*/*CBS* poll indicated widely felt forebodings about the coming conflict. More than half of the respondents, 51 percent, said any military action would result in a long and costly involvement. 60 percent said they believed an attack on Iraq would lead to a broader conflict in the Middle East, and 50 percent said it would increase the threat of terrorist attacks within the US (a rise of 6 percent from a poll taken one month ago).

A majority of those polled expressed dissatisfaction with the role of Congress, saying it had not sufficiently questioned the administration on its war plans. More than half, 53 percent, questioned Bush's motives, saying they believed he was more interested in removing Saddam Hussein than in removing weapons of mass destruction from Iraq.

The poll reflected mounting anxiety over the growing assault on jobs and living standards, and exasperation at the failure of either party, especially the Democrats, to address the issue. The largest group of respondents (37 percent) felt a war would further weaken the economy. Seven in ten said they would rather hear candidates in next month's congressional election speak about economic issues than about the war, and 57 percent said they would base their vote for a candidate on economic policy above foreign policy.

The poll reflected growing social opposition to Bush's pro-business agenda. The number of Americans who approved of Bush's handling of the economy—41 percent—was the lowest of his presidency. Nearly half of the respondents felt Bush was more interested in protecting corporations than in protecting ordinary Americans.

According to the *Times* article on the poll: "Again and again, in questions and in follow-up interviews, respondents talked more about the economy than Baghdad and expressed concern that leaders in Washington were not paying enough attention to the issues that mattered to them."

"No one is talking about how to solve the economic downfall," said one respondent. Another gave vent to the widely held view that Bush is manipulating the war question to divert attention from the social crisis, saying, "He thinks keeping us fearful about going to war will distract us from how bad the economy is."

The publication of the *Times*/*CBS* poll coincided with anti-war demonstrations held in cities across the country and involving tens of thousands of protesters. While the protests were barely reported in the media, they indicate growing opposition to the impending war.

But anti-war sentiment and social opposition in the working class to the government-corporate attack on jobs and living standards find no expression in any section of the political establishment. Later this week both houses of Congress will pass resolutions giving Bush a virtual blank check to wage war against Iraq and other countries the US government targets as "rogue states." These resolutions will undoubtedly pass by large, if not overwhelming, margins, with the Democrats lining up en masse behind the White House.

Never in modern history has the chasm separating the American people and the political representatives of American capitalism been so stark, and the need for the working class to build its own political alternative to the parties of war, repression and social privilege been so urgent.

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