Hundreds of thousands in US protest Iraq invasion plans

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Rallies and marches to oppose the Bush administration's plan to launch an unprovoked war against Iraq brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators into the streets in Washington DC, San Francisco and several other US cities on October 26.

Simultaneous demonstrations opposing a US invasion of the Arab country were held in Rome, Berlin, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Mexico City and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Attending the Washington demonstration were delegations from throughout the East Coast, as well as the South and Midwest. The participants included busloads of college students and high school youth as well as professionals, Arab- and Palestinian-Americans, and workers.

Demonstrators carried a wide variety of signs and banners opposing US militarism. Among the more popular slogans were "Drop Bush, Not Bombs," "No Blood for Oil," "Regime Change Begins at Home" and "War is Bush's Weapon of Mass Distraction." There were also signs attacking US Senator Joseph Lieberman and other Democratic Party supporters of war with Iraq.

Demonstrators gathered near the Vietnam War memorial in the morning and later marched to and around the White House, returning to the site where the rally began. The marchers, who at times stretched shoulder-to-shoulder across the Washington streets, were so numerous that when the head of the march returned to the starting point, the last demonstrators were just setting off. Police kept a relatively low profile and there were only three reported arrests.

While Washington police acknowledged that the protest in the US capital was probably the largest antiwar rally since the Vietnam era, it got scant coverage from a media that daily serves as a conduit for the Bush administration's war propaganda.

The demonstration provided another illustration of the vast gulf between official politics and the sentiments of masses of people who oppose the war. It was largely boycotted by elected Democratic officials. The march's organizers, a coalition of protest groups, had called it as a means of pressuring Congress and the White House to halt the buildup to war. Weeks before the demonstration, however, both the House and Senate approved with little debate resolutions giving Bush unrestricted powers to launch a war whenever he sees fit.

There was virtually no participation by the trade unions. With the exception of a relatively small contingent from Hospital Workers Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union from New York City, no official union delegations attended.

One local union president who addressed the crowd claimed that George Meany, the former AFL-CIO president, had stated after the Vietnam War that he would have opposed it "had he known then what he knew now." The official then exhorted the crowd to "learn from George Meany." In reality, the present AFL-CIO bureaucracy is pursuing the same kind of national chauvinist policy in backing the Bush administration's war plans that Meany did 30 years ago.

While most march participants expressed anger and disillusionment with the Democratic Party, the orientation of Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER), the coalition organizing the protest, was to blunt any opposition to the Democrats. The main speakers at the rally included former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the Reverend Al Sharpton and Democratic Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia.

McKinney, the only elected official to address the

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protesters, is a lame duck, having lost the Democratic primary in her district.

While the speakers delivered many denunciations of Bush, they failed to spell out any perspective upon which to fight against war. Jackson and others offered the vain hope that through continuing protests the "voices of the people" would be heard by the Bush administration and Congress. There was little or no reference to the large vote by Democratic Congressmen and Senators, including the Democratic leadership of both houses of Congress, to authorize the use of force by Bush in a first strike against Iraq.

The claim of Jackson to oppose war with Iraq is entirely cynical. Invoking a biblical passage at one point in his address to the crowd, he said that "there is a time to every season under heaven," including for war. Among the "necessary" wars he cited was the Persian Gulf War launched by Bush senior against Iraq in 1991 that left the country in ruins and led to punishing sanctions that have claimed some 1.5 million lives. Jackson has stated, as have virtually all the Democrats who have voiced reservations about Bush's war policy, that he would support an attack on Iraq provided it received United Nations sanction.

A unilateral US attack, Jackson said, would cause the US to "lose all moral authority" in promoting its interests abroad.

The main thrust of Jackson's remarks, and the central political line coming from the protest platform, was an attempt to corral the anger of the protesters back behind the Democratic Party. "It's time to vote for change. We need a regime change in this country, so let's vote," he said. "Democracy will come alive on November 5."

A similar line-up dominated the San Francisco march, where Congresswoman Barbara Lee was the keynote speaker. She emphasized the "no" vote by a section of Congressional Democrats on the war resolution, while centering her own criticism of Bush on his denial of the necessity for UN approval of an invasion.

A handful of local officials from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union participated in the rally, though few if any rank-and-file dockworkers were brought. Richard Mead, president of the San Francisco local of the ILWU, attacked California's Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein for supporting the use of the Taft-Hartley Act against the union. He portrayed her position a stab-in-the-back because of the contributions the union had made to her re-election campaign.

Other speakers at the Washington rally included actress Susan Sarandon and Sami-Al-Arian, the Palestinian-born University of South Florida professor who is being victimized as part of the Bush administration's witch-hunt against Arab-Americans.

Kadouri Akaysi of the Committee in Support of Iraq spoke from the platform, detailing the suffering that sanctions have brought upon the Arab country. "What does Bush want in Iraq?" he asked. "He wants only oil."

Speaking to the WSWS afterwards, Mr. Akaysi said that he has talked to many people in Baghdad and that their concerns about and opposition to a US invasion belie the Bush administration's claims that US troops would be welcomed as "liberators."

"For eight or ten years they have had only war, they have had enough," he said. "You can talk to people on the left and people on the right and they all say that if war comes, they will unite to defend Iraq and to fight against the US."

The Iraqi American activist dismissed recent small demonstrations staged by members of the US-backed Iraqi opposition in Washington. "These people are puppets," he said. "None of them has seen Iraq for ten years or more, but they are hungry for power and hope that the US will give it to them. My view is that if Iraq is going to change it should be the Iraqi people who change it, and not the US."

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) distributed thousands of leaflets reprinting a statement posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* entitled, "A political strategy to oppose war against Iraq."

During and after the Washington demonstration many people stopped by an SEP and WSWS literature table. There were lively discussions with march participants about the policies of the SEP, and hundreds of dollars worth of Marxist literature was sold.

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