New York Times offers “friendly advice” to abort the anti-war movement

David Walsh
28 January 2003

This month’s mass demonstrations against the Bush administration’s imminent war in Iraq took the political and media establishment by surprise. The surge of opposition evaded their political radar screens. They had either ignored the growing resistance or pretended it did not exist.

Once the depth of popular sentiment against war became impossible to disregard, the various factions of bourgeois opinion makers swung into action. They had now to confront the reality of a nascent mass movement emerging outside of their control.

On the one side are political thugs like right-wing commentator Michael Kelly, who launch witch-hunting attacks on the “communist” Workers World Party, which played a prominent role in organizing the protests. (See “*Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly red-baits the Workers World Party,” 24 January 2003). This is the crude and filthy face of bourgeois politics. The particular task assigned to these forces is to stir up everything backward and poisonous in the body politic.

The liberal, or erstwhile liberal, establishment, represented most prominently by the *New York Times*, has undertaken a subtler and more sinister intervention. Its aim is to isolate the left-wing elements and drive them out, so as to bring the movement under the control of reliable political agents of the ruling elite, principally the Democratic Party.

This is the significance of a January 24 *Times* article, “Some War Protesters Uneasy With Others.” Lynette Clemetson writes that “behind the scenes, some of the protesters have questioned whether the message of opposing the war with Iraq is being tainted or at least diluted by other causes of International Answer, which sponsored both the Washington and San Francisco rallies.... Some of the group’s chief organizers are active in the Workers World Party, a radical socialist group with roots in the Stalin-era Soviet Union.”

The precise meaning of the phrase “roots in the Stalin-era Soviet Union” is not explained. The founder of Workers World, Sam Marcy, was associated with the Trotskyist movement until he abandoned it in 1959 and founded his own group. The evident purpose of the inchoate reference is to drag in the name of Stalin as a political epithet.

The unstated political motivation of the article is indicated by the insinuation that the movement against war in Iraq is being “tainted” by the illegitimate interjection of “other causes.”

Clemetson elaborates on this theme: “Answer’s critics say they simply wish that when it sponsors antiwar rallies, it would confine its message to opposition to the war.” She cites the comments of *Tikkun* magazine editor Rabbi Michael Lerner, whose concerns include “pro-Palestinian speeches.” Lerner observes, “It feels that we are being manipulated when subjected to mindless speeches and slogans whose knee-jerk anti-imperialism rarely articulates the deep reasons we should oppose corporate globalization.”

In a hopeful tone the *Times* notes that the next major rally, to be held February 15 in New York, is being organized by United for Peace, “a coalition of more than 120 groups, most of them less radical than Answer.”

The political message is clear. The *Times* wants an anti-war movement that does not go beyond the confines of the existing social order. The newspaper’s editors are alerting sections of the middle class: you can have your rallies and protests, but not on the basis of anti-capitalism.

The *Times*’ editors are arguing for a protest movement that accepts certain basic premises—above all, the defense of US imperialism and its right to dominate the world. They fear the development of a movement that links the struggle against war to critical social issues in America and makes a direct appeal to the working class.

The *Times*’ sudden interest in the anti-war movement is

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cynical and self-serving. The newspaper has been one of the chief drum-beaters for war. Only Saturday, in an article calling on Bush to delay a conflict only until the necessary international support can be built up, Op-Ed columnist and senior writer for the *New York Times Magazine* Bill Keller asserted: "So far in its showdown with Iraq, the Bush administration has mostly done the right things.... There are compelling reasons for war with Iraq."

How should serious opponents of US militarism respond to the attempt by the *Times* to politically tame and strangle any movement against imperialist war?

In our view, they should make every effort to expose these attempts and drive such pro-imperialist elements out of the anti-war movement. As events have already shown, together with the Democratic Party and the establishment liberals come the red-baiters. And behind the red-baiters come the state and the police.

The anti-war movement must be built from the start as an *anti-capitalist* movement. At the heart of building a mass movement is the struggle to mobilize the working class independently of the bourgeois parties, above all, the Democrats. Long and painful experience demonstrates that any movement that remains subordinate to the parties representing the interests of big business is doomed to impotence and failure.

Here is where fundamental political differences between the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Workers World Party emerge. The latter seeks to maintain a political alliance with sections of the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. Indeed, Workers World facilitates the domination of the anti-war movement by these elements.

It hopes to cajole and win over such forces. This is the reactionary heritage of Stalinism and its perspective of subordinating the working class to the liberal bourgeoisie—a policy that attained a finished, and politically disastrous, expression in the "popular fronts" engineered by Stalinist Communist Parties in the 1930s.

Today, with the protracted crisis of American liberalism resulting in utter prostration before the most right wing sections of the ruling elite, this political line assumes the most noxious forms. Thus Workers World prides itself in parading the likes of Al Sharpton before anti-war protesters. It genuflects to such charlatans and presents them as legitimate "people's leaders," providing them with much needed credibility.

An alliance with the Democrats and the trade union bureaucrats is possible only on the basis of repudiating any serious opposition to capitalism. This alliance cannot be combined with a genuine appeal to working people. Far from "broadening" the anti-war movement, the influence of the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO bureaucrats would guarantee the strangulation of democratic debate, narrow the movement's social base and transform anti-war activity into a harmless sideshow, a pressure-valve regulated by the Congressional Democrats. The end result would be to alienate the working class and keep it on the sideline.

Imperialist war cannot be stopped by moral appeals to sections of the ruling elite, or the application of pressure on the Democratic Party. Nothing could be more futile and self-defeating than such a strategy. Only the international working class can halt the drive to war against Iraq and the danger of world war, because only the working class is capable of replacing the capitalist system with an egalitarian and truly democratic society.

A movement of broad masses of workers and youth must not only articulate their general concerns, including opposition to war, but provide a program to address their needs and interests: decent jobs, education, health care, housing, democratic rights. Only a socialist program can fulfill that need.

A truly broad and democratic anti-war movement will intervene boldly in the working population, explaining the link between social inequality, poverty, homelessness and the criminal policies of the Bush administration. It will raise the necessity for a decisive break with both big business parties and the need for a new, independent socialist movement. It will openly state that a successful struggle against war and militarism means going to the source of these evils, the profit system. It will be an international movement, armed with an international strategy.

And it will have sufficient political consciousness to distinguish between its friends and its enemies, and reject with contempt the malevolent advice of such pillars of American imperialism as the *New York Times*.

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