

Discussions with Paris antiwar demonstrators

David Walsh
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An overwhelming majority of the French population is hostile to the US war against Iraq. According to a poll done by the IPSOS global research firm for French television and released February 17, nearly 9 in 10 French men and women (87 percent) are opposed to such a military intervention. Opposition has grown by 10 percent since the beginning of January alone.

This opposition was expressed in the turnout at dozens of antiwar demonstrations held in France last Saturday. In addition to the several hundred thousand people who marched in Paris, 20,000 protested the impending war in Marseilles, 15,000 in Lyons, 10,000 in Toulouse, Bordeaux, Montpellier and Nice, 5,000 in Strasbourg and Rennes, 2,500 in Nîmes, 2,000 in Avignon. One thousand people demonstrated in Roanne, hundreds demonstrated in Albi, Metz, Nancy, Tarbes, Montauban, Besançon, Aurillac, Arles, Aubagne and Salon-de-Provence, Auch and Cahors.

On the island of Réunion, the French territory in the Indian Ocean, some 6,000 people marched in the main city of Saint-Denis (population 131,000), according to police. More than a thousand people protested in Corsica.

The French establishment has attempted to translate the antiwar feeling into support for the Chirac regime and indeed the same IPSOS survey found that 85 percent of the population approved of the government's policy in relation to Iraq. Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin congratulated the demonstrators worldwide, claiming that this proved "France can be followed." He declared that for France "it is not simply a battle of the pocketbook," but rather "great causes." This is a statement that anyone with even a passing knowledge of French literature, much less history, will refute.

The presence of hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets is as unsettling for the French government as it is for any other. Inevitably, social issues—unemployment, homelessness, the plight of undocumented immigrants and poverty—are raised in such protests. If the Chirac government has any stability, as it prepares to attack pensions and other social gains of the working class, it is largely due to the impotence and cowardice of the "left" and "far-left" parties, which did so much to legitimize the French president in the elections last spring.

The great majority of those on the Paris march seemed to be politically unaffiliated, and they greeted with notable eagerness the statement, "The tasks facing the antiwar movement," distributed by supporters of the WSW. On a march where

political literature of a serious kind was little in evidence, the sight of a serious text, which might offer an explanation of events, attracted attention.

We spoke to a number of the demonstrators.

Martin, a nurses aide, originally from Guadeloupe in the West Indies

I am against the war—it is unjust, without even the agreement of the UN. Chirac what he's doing with Germany, is good and maybe they'll bring Russia along, fortunately.

WSWS: France is also a colonial power. It is playing a colonial role in the Ivory Coast right now.

Agreed. But that went though the UN at any rate, the intervention in the Ivory Coast. But all war is inhuman.

WSWS: Do you think that the UN can defend people?

No, the UN can't defend people. No, sorry. Kofi Annan, what is the role of secretary of the UN, I don't understand. The US invades everywhere. It invaded Panama and all the others. Sometimes they defend dictators.

Corinne Bécourt, Communist Party [PCF] organizer, St Quentin, l'Aisne

War is the most disgusting thing for humanity. I think that it is always the same people who suffer. They spend a ton of money on it while there are serious diseases like AIDS and cancer. It would be better to give this money to research and eradicate the diseases, but they have no interest in that. This war is for oil and a war that smells of money.

The US and Bush want to impose themselves as the policemen of the world and if we let them things will get worse and worse. I am for peace in Iraq and I'm also thinking about the Palestinian people.

WSWS: What do you think of the Chirac government policy?

For the moment Chirac is saying no, he says he is not going along with it, but, for example, we recently learned that in the upper echelons of the government they have already calculated how much this war is going to cost. That is to say, not in terms of their presence on the ground, but in terms of their presence in the air. So we know that in relation to that Chirac has always been a liar and, myself, I don't expect anything from him. Even if in appearance he seems to be saying that he is not going along with the war, we know that in the end he will anyway. I hope that the pressure of all these demonstrations is going to continue and increase to the point that we can stop it. But I'm not certain of that.

WSWS: *You have confidence in the UN?*

No confidence.

WSWS: *On what social force should a movement against war base itself?*

I believe that the only solid basis for acting against war is this type of rally; it is all those who mobilize themselves, the progressives, all the people of good will, leaving aside our differences. After that, honestly, I don't see too much.

WSWS: *How do you see the conflict between France and the US?*

In fact, that makes me laugh. I don't give a damn. We know that tomorrow through some deal they will be allied and that this won't pose any problem. It's cinema, it's theatre.

WSWS: *Just after September 11 [PCF leader] Robert Hue said that he supported Bush's campaign against terrorism...*

On the one hand, on that question I am not in agreement, and, on the other, I have been in total disagreement with the policies of Robert Hue for a number of years. I've been a member of the Communist Party for 14 years. I've been a local leader of the party in my town, St. Quentin in the Aisne.

Alain Guilmain, auto worker, CGT, Loire et Cher

People worldwide are strongly against this war. They know that it's a war orchestrated by the US. Again, the experimentation with bombs. They are going to kill the innocent in the name of dough, in the name of American imperialism.

WSWS: *What do you think of Chirac's policy?*

We have to be pleased at the moment that he is refusing to get involved in the conflict. We hope that he will maintain that position. We are here to put pressure on the French government so that it holds to its position.

WSWS: *But France has its own colonial interests.*

Sure, also. We see what's happening in the Ivory Coast, for example. There are still colonial interests on France's part, that's undeniable.

WSWS: *What do you think of the UN?*

We know that they are in the pay of imperialism. We are not expecting any great things from the UN. In 1991 they gave their endorsement to the bombing of Iraq and I think, unfortunately, they are going to rally to the side of the US.

WSWS: *Do you think French or European nationalism is a proper response to this war?*

I think that we have to see to it that at the European level the countries opposed to war are united. If they all had a common position that would weigh far more in the balance.

WSWS: *Don't you think that the working class on a world scale should intervene as a class rather than seeing the thing in terms of nations?*

Yes, absolutely, it is up to humanity to put pressure on the US and on the leaders of their countries in order to oppose what might degenerate into a larger conflict, given the tensions which dominate in that part of the world. It is up to the people of each country to express themselves strongly against this

conflict. We know that this period is a good time [for governments and employers] to put in question all our gains, which is nothing new.

WSWS: *What do you think of the conflict between France and the US?*

They have already begun to boycott certain products. Are they going to make this into a big thing? It's not impossible. Now there are certain negotiations going on between the Raffarin government and the Bush government.

I work in the auto industry for a parts maker that manufactures diesel pumps for cars, for an American outfit. Naturally!

Letitia, child-care worker, 24, Cergy Pontois

The war against Iraq is completely unjust, it is an imperialist war, a colonial war. America is going to kill many civilians and destroy the infrastructure even more. I am completely opposed to this. We have to create mass pressure.

I had expected more people today. But this is just the beginning. Everyone is against this war. We have so many problems in each country: poverty, homelessness, unemployment. What's the solution? It will take a revolution! No, seriously, we need a redistribution of wealth.

WSWS: *To bring about that redistribution of wealth will take a revolution.*

Yes, probably true.

WSWS: *What about the divisions between Washington and Chirac?*

They have their own interests. Chirac is not progressive in any way, any more than the US.

WSWS: *When one speaks of the US, one is speaking of the US government. There is massive opposition to the war in America.*

Letitia: Of course, the media paints a picture that the entire American population is behind Bush.



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