

New Zealand antiwar protestors condemn Bush and Blair

John Braddock
21 February 2003

The WSWWS spoke to some of the 7,000 participants in the antiwar protest in Wellington, New Zealand last Saturday. The large turnout caught the organisers from Peace Movement Aotearoa by surprise. They abandoned plans for a rally at the undersized Midland Park and headed to the parliament building instead, where police and parliamentary security guards hastily erected barricades.

In Auckland, the country's largest city, up to 15,000 protestors converged on Queen Street in the central shopping precinct. Rallies of around 3,000 people each took place in Christchurch and Dunedin on the South Island. Smaller demonstrations were held in other provincial centres; many organised by locally based peace groups that have mushroomed around the country.

All the marches were notable for the wide cross-section of the community represented: young and elderly, workers, students and family groupings—with many participating in a political event for the first time. Facing criticism over its failure to stand against the war, the Council of Trade Unions (CTU) issued a last-minute call to support the protests. But only a few banners and small delegations were evident.

Several hundred copies of the WSWWS statement were distributed, receiving considerable interest. A number of young people—in particular school students—spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Joy, 16, began by criticising the Bush administration for failing to prove that Iraq is dangerous. “Colin Powell said Iraq is not disarming itself and should be disarmed by force, but the US won’t tell the rest of the world what information it has, to prove that Iraq is dangerous. So how are we supposed to decide whether there should be a war or not when we don’t have all the facts?”

She said her main concern was for the innocent victims. “The effects of Bush declaring war on Iraq will be a momentous catastrophe causing death and misery to millions of people around the world. The Iraqi people haven’t done anything wrong. What about the lives of the innocent? Did Bush ever stop to think about them?” she asked. She said it was wrong to put “young people at risk on the battlefield” and Bush should examine “other alternatives”.

James, 16, read the WSWWS statement closely, and remarked that he found the parallels between the current situation and the developments prior to World War I very important. “The competition between nations to control resources and land will lead to more wars, without doubt—it’s just the same. Nationalism leads to militarism,” he said.

James was concerned about how Bush could be challenged, given the bankruptcy of the Democratic Party in the United States. James had discussed the Democrats with a friend on the march and had agreed that they were “useless”. A discussion ensued about the possibility of an internal rebellion within the British Labour Party to oust Blair as leader.

Dylan, 18, noted the massive demonstrations occurring around the world and expressed outrage that Bush and Blair would most likely ignore them. “How can they claim to be exporting ‘democracy’ to Iraq when they are acting in the most undemocratic way themselves? Not only is Bush in office by fraud, he and Blair are just ignoring the will of the people. They are the dictators,” he said.

On behalf of his school’s Amnesty International group, Dylan wrote letters of protest last year to the US military commander of the Guantanamo Bay base in Cuba, protesting the treatment of the prisoners there. “It’s just disgusting what’s happening to them,” he

said. “Not only are they being treated appallingly, they have all had their legal rights stripped away. Most of them haven’t even been proven to be connected with Al Qaeda”. His letters were not acknowledged.

Among young people there was deep suspicion about the New Zealand Labour government and the belief that, sooner or later, the country would become involved in the war.

Prime Minister Helen Clark has said that in the event of a UN resolution approving an invasion, New Zealand would offer “medical and logistic” support. While publicly insisting that, as a small country, New Zealand’s interests lie with “multilateralism” and the “international rule of law” applied through the UN, she has failed to level any criticism of either the Bush administration or the Howard government in Australia.

The government has sent two of the navy’s frigates—the *Te Kaha* and subsequently the *Te Mana*—and an Orion reconnaissance aircraft to join international forces patrolling the Persian Gulf area, thus freeing up US warships for action against Iraq.

Following the weekend’s rallies, Clark rejected calls for her government to be more vocal in speaking out against unilateral US-led military action. “I am not prepared to change the position I have taken,” she said. Continuing to avoid criticism of Washington, she argued that UN weapons inspectors should be given more time to secure disarmament before the Security Council passes a further resolution authorising the use of force.

Clark tried to downplay the significance of the New Zealand protests, claiming the turnout was relatively small compared with the anti-Springbok tour and Vietnam War era protests in which she had participated. Clearly concerned at what might eventuate, she noted that previous protest movements had been directed against “the government of the day”. Her government was not presenting itself “as that kind of target” in terms of its policy on Iraq, she added nervously.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact