

Reports on February 15-16 antiwar demonstrations

20 February 2003

The World Socialist Web Site is continuing its coverage of the historic international demonstrations held last weekend to protest the US war drive against Iraq. Today we are posting reports sent in by readers from Brussels, rural Oregon and California.

We encourage our readers to send in further reports from last weekend's rallies, as well as comments on the demonstrations and the statement that was distributed in six languages from the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board entitled, "The tasks facing the antiwar movement". We also invite readers to access the full coverage of last weekend's rallies.

A further report from Brussels

I went to the Brussels demonstration and handed out about 150 statements, in three languages: English, French and Dutch. While I was there, it was a peaceful demonstration, if you discount the noise generated by one particular stand marked "International Resistance" that belonged to the Belgium Workers Party (PTB in French, PVDA in Dutch). The Greenpeace contingent was also large and noisy, occupying about 50 meters of the escort. StopUsa had painted a lot of people red and white. Socialist Workers Party also distributed a lot of small black and white pamphlets, highlighting the oil component. The Socialist Party had a sophisticated stand.

The [official] estimated number of people in attendance was 30,000. However, when I was there for the initial hour, there were probably that many people already and they were still pouring in from the adjacent Brussels Nord train station.

The demonstration started at 2 p.m. in a boulevard. To a large extent, all the big organized groups fell onto one side and mums and dads with their families on the other. Amongst the small groups, I noticed Palestinian flags as well as other small Muslim groups with their green background. Even Turks appeared with Ataturk's "Peace at home, peace in the world" rhetoric.

I had little chats with people when distributing the WSWs statement. Some of them even recognized it immediately. I can say young people were particularly interested in getting one, as they always waited for it while I was busy packing

three sheets for the previous recipient. I was giving three copies initially, but they were returning the wrong language to me. So I ended up covering more ground than I initially thought. They went very quickly and in the end I was sorry not to have printed more.

Protest in southern Oregon

I just wanted to let you know that there were also dozens (likely hundreds) of antiwar protests in rural America which slipped under the national media radar.

I live in Medford, Oregon, a former mill town in somewhat conservative southern Oregon. On February 15, about 300 people walked more than 12 miles in driving rain from the town of Ashland to the government buildings area of downtown Medford. In Medford, they were joined by a few hundred more protesters to listen to local veterans and ministers speak out against the war. A few weeks before, on a much nicer day, more than a thousand people made the march. Protestors also held antiwar banners on freeway overpasses throughout the day for thousands of I-5 motorists to see.

While the response from most passing motorists to the march was indifference or looks of puzzlement—several people I spoke with didn't even know we were contemplating an attack or where Iraq was—we did receive more positive gestures and shouts than negative ones. Still, it is the negative reactions that tend to linger in my mind days after the event.

One woman in particular slowed down her car to harass a friend of mine and myself as we arrived in downtown Medford. She screamed, "Our veterans defended freedom. What are you doing?" Now, this woman's blindness to the principles of democracy were equaled by her tunnel vision in reality. I was holding a sign which said, "Medford Vet against War of Aggression." The person I was standing next to, though he did not hold a sign, was a local Vietnam vet. We both laughed and I pointed to my sign, and she took off.

The other side of my sign said: "Our Government Lies." I think perhaps that woman and millions of others aren't quite comprehending this: the context of proven American government lies parroted again and again by the media.

From the Gulf of Tonkin, through endangered students on Grenada (endangered only by our attack), Libyan terrorist camps (my unit's contribution when I worked for the Navy and NSA), Noriega's bags of cocaine (actually tortilla flour), Iraqi soldiers tossing out incubator babies (public relations) and the Kosovo genocide (more PR)—the American media consistently acts as a conduit for outrageous propaganda lies and only offers a meek clarification as to reality months or years later when nobody is watching, if at all.

Is this the Land of the Free that I supposedly defended?

On the San Francisco demonstration

I attended two marches this past weekend. The smaller one, of about 3,000, took place in Santa Cruz, California, on Saturday, February 16. The other one was in San Francisco the following day, where between 200,000 and 250,000 people showed up. Both were spirited and largely made up of people who had never participated in a protest before.

At both demonstrations, especially in San Francisco, I noticed the following. First, many workers and labor members participated, especially those belonging to the social services, which have been so drastically cut by both the federal and state governments. There were also Teamsters, auto workers, steel workers, farmworkers, and, of course, students of all stripes. There were also thousands of professionals. And this sea of humanity had something that was sadly lacking in the antiwar movement of the '60s and '70s: the participation of large contingents of workers and middle class people from all races, cultures, nationalities and religions. There were large contingents of Hispanics, Asian, and black, as well as Arab nationals.

Another amazing thing was the age range of the participants. I had never seen so many middle-aged people and senior citizens—many of them in wheelchairs or walking with the aid of canes—marching alongside their more youthful brethren. And the number of children was incredible! There must have been hundreds, perhaps thousands of youthful parents, carrying their children in baby carriages or by the hand. High school students participated in the thousands, too. And there was even a contingent of "Mormons Against the War," which in its own way may be an expression of the wide opposition to the government's war plans.

I had the opportunity to talk with many people. Three things stood out more than anything. First, everyone, I mean *everyone*, was disgusted with the Democratic Party; in fact not many paid attention to its representatives at the rally which culminated the march. They indicated, at best, disappointment with the Democrats' support for the war and practically the entire Bush program of attacks against democratic rights. At worst, many felt revulsion and

expressed they will not vote for the Democrats in whatever election they run.

Second, everyone I talked to understood that the war was being fought for economic gain, in particular the conquest of oil by the corporations. Many thought that the United States' objectives went beyond Iraq; that Iran, North Korea and other countries were next on the Bush agenda. Many could make the connection between the war and the economic system—or at least part of it—in ways that I never saw during the Vietnam era.

Third, one of the things many people brought up was the international character of the movement. They expressed they gained strength from knowing that massive demonstrations had taken place the day before all over the world. When I asked a young worker in his thirties what he thought had brought about this change, he said, "Globalization, man, globalization. Now we can communicate instantaneously with the rest of the world." This brought to mind the WSWs's analysis of this social and economic phenomenon—that is, globalization—of our times: that it has a progressive side in that it has brought together, on an international level, the very forces which may doom international capital.

So, these are not a repeat of the anti-Vietnam War protests. There is a new content, a new consciousness brought about by globalization and the enormous changes it has brought to bear on the politics and economics of our times.

Of course, there were the usual radical groups. One of these, Progressive Labor Party, which seems not to have changed at all during the past 30 years, had a big banner which said, "Fight for Communism," a meaningless abstraction if there was ever one.

In Santa Cruz I got to talk to some members of the Workers World Party. When I told them I was a reader of the WSWs, they expressed their gratitude to it for having defended them against the vicious red-baiting attacks by the *New York Times* and other publications.



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