

Reports on February 14-16 antiwar demonstrations

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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 from demonstrations in Portsmouth, Ohio and Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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.

Peace rally in Portsmouth, Ohio

Over 80 people attended the peace rally in Portsmouth, Ohio on Saturday, February 15, despite the severe winter weather that was attacking the area. By Sunday the ice storm had caused massive numbers of trees and branches to fall, covering roads, snapping power lines, pulling down power poles, and knocking out electricity, heat and telecommunications to large parts of the area. Some sections of the community were also without water. Ohio Governor Taft declared a state of emergency for Portsmouth and Scioto County.

Because about 4,000 reservists and guardsmen have been called to active duty in Ohio for the impending war against Iraq, none were available for the governor to send to help remove the trees and limbs which still blocked many state and county roads.

Local residents caught a momentary glimpse of life in Iraq after the Americans and their allies attack, except instead of trees and branches cracking and falling, it will be missiles and bombs. Instead of a temporary inconvenience, for the Iraqi people it will be an extended period without basic human necessities and infrastructure. Instead of armies of electric, cable and telephone company crews rescuing people from discomfort, it will be military troops attacking, killing and destroying. For Iraqis things will not return to normal in just a few more days.

Given the size of Portsmouth—just over 20,000 people, the size of Scioto County—just under 80,000, and the horrible weather conditions, the attendance at the rally was impressive. As Mike Bryan, spokesperson for the Portsmouth Area Peace Coalition, said, Portsmouth, Ohio represents a section of middle America that is "on the cutting edge of economic and social despair." Everything that could go wrong economically went wrong over the last 50 years. The population shrank from the mid-50,000s to the low 20,000s. Most recently, the uranium enrichment plant in nearby Piketon ceased production. While there were antiwar

demonstrations during the Vietnam War era, this peace rally was an unusual event for an increasingly conservative and disempowered area.

In his opening statement Bryan said, "President Bush and his advisors appear intent upon waging war against Iraq with or without proper justification. No realistic opposition exists in either house of Congress or from either major political party against this march to war. Our government leaders are united in their support of the war because both parties depend on the huge political contributions they receive from this nation's major corporations, from its major industrial, union and service organizations, and from its wealthiest individuals..."

"Unfortunately, we can no longer look to the Democrats or to the unions to represent the interests of the poor, the working class, or even the middle class. The growing social inequities, the reductions in our social safety nets, de-unionization, privatization and the increased attacks on our civil rights and on our personal freedoms over the last quarter century attest to this fact. Ultimately, the only way for our nation's agenda to return to representing the interests of its people is for the people to insist that it does. We cannot rely on those who have been bought and sold to represent our interests.

"A group of a few hundred or even a few thousand protesters in a city like Portsmouth, Ohio on their own may be relatively insignificant. But in combination with thousands, hundreds of thousands, and even millions of antiwar protesters marching in other cities, both small and large, throughout the United States and in other nations around the world, we can and we will build a voice that must be heard by our government officials, a voice large enough to break through the veil of suppression created by our corporately controlled media."

In his closing statement Bryan continued, "Our enemies are not the people of Iraq. Our enemies are not the Arabs and Muslims. Our enemies are not the French or the Germans or the people of any other nation that disagrees with our policies.... Our enemies are the massive international corporations and the extremely wealthy individuals who wish to control our nation's agenda for selfish and shortsighted reasons and to plunder the world's wealth and resources."

Several other speakers, including university professors, local activists, a nun, ministers, and an ACLU spokesperson, made short presentations expressing a variety of reasons for opposing a war against Iraq.

Some of the speakers indicated they only oppose the war as long

as it does not have the blessing of the United Nations. Some oppose the war because they see it as a pretext for expanding American control over Iraqi oilfields and for increasing control over the strategically important Middle East region. Others oppose the war because of the additional horrors it will unleash on the men, women and children of Iraq. Still others oppose the war simply because they oppose all wars.

Following the rally the crowd marched to a veteran's memorial for a prayer for no additional war deaths.

Colorado Springs antiwar gathering

Billed as a rally and protest "in the belly of the beast," an estimated 3,000 demonstrators gathered at Palmer Park in Colorado Springs, Colorado on the afternoon of February 15. The city has three Air Force bases, including the US Air Force Academy, one US Army base, and is the home of the Strategic Air Command Headquarters, NORAD, located in hollowed-out Cheyenne Mountain, as well as the US Space Command. It is also famous for its right-wing religious groups, such as Focus on the Family, etc., who rant from their headquarters there.

Colorado Springs is known throughout the state as a "conservative" city, which here in always-Republican Colorado can be construed as a euphemism for "nearly-fascist." So, it was with apprehension that my wife, daughter and I drove south from Denver that cold, gray Saturday to stand in support with the burgeoning worldwide antiwar movement.

The rally in the park was very colorful, energetic and crowded. Rev. Thomas Harding spoke, who had been a friend of Martin Luther King, and had been among those who convinced him to deliver his famous Riverside Church anti-Vietnam War speech in April 1967, the speech many think got him targeted for assassination exactly a year later. Others spoke as well, and there was smiling and greeting and comradery all around as people milled around to see who else was there.

Speeches and puppet shows, etc., over, the crowd was led to the intersection of Academy Blvd. and Maizeland, where we were to file out and line the sides of the six-lane boulevard for, it was hoped, miles. A brass band was playing Dixieland jazz as my little group approached the intersection, deciding to cross the street and head south for a spot to do our bit to greet passing motorists.

The traffic light changed, the traffic cop motioned for the crowd to cross, there was a surge forward, and suddenly the whole tone of the demonstration changed. A group of black-dressed, black-masked teen and twenty-something youths bearing black flags and a 12-foot banner lurched into the north-bound lanes and positioned themselves to block traffic. A city police helicopter flew in circles overhead. After a little tension, a little shouting and little shoving, the kids moved off the street, and the sideline demonstration arranged itself for the hour-long job of getting the antiwar word out in a heavily military-influenced and right-wing town. Now, however, the focus of the demonstration was split between the antiwar message and the black-flag kids venting at the cops.

The cop presence increased markedly immediately after the little traffic-stopping stunt. Soon the traffic stopped altogether. We looked south to see that the police had set up roadblocks to divert traffic away from the demonstration lining the road. Same to the north. Deprived of our targeted audience, we started walking

south, leapfrogging the police barriers, wondering if they'd play the game until we'd come to the city center about two miles to the south. The cops moved the barriers one more block after the crowd surged beyond them the first time. About fifty protestors on our side of the road moved down to greet the motorists as they waited in long lines to take the detour. Some drivers were quite angry at the delay. Others honked in sympathy, thumbs up, peace signs, smiles.

While the south-most demonstrators were doing our greeting-thing, the black-clad gang was busy annoying the police. We had watched several confrontations at the intersection as the police refused to let the black-clads anywhere near the traffic or onto the street pavement. As my family and friends began walking back to the park, we passed a knot of police, some of them bent over a prone young man. Further on we came to another police action. This time a formation of about 20 riot-clad armored police, clubs at the ready, gas masks on, stood facing a crowd of surly kids and, surreally, that brass band right in the middle of the kids playing John Lennon's "Imagine" in the lowest, most ominous register the instruments could reach.

More riot-clad police formations occupied the intersection of Academy and Maizeland, where we planned to cross back into the park. My daughter led us away from what would be a troubled area in a few minutes. We crossed the street, passed through a field that served as a makeshift parking lot for the demonstration, and arrived at our car as the first teargas canisters emitted their clouds in the road below.

We learned later that 34 people had been arrested that day; 20 were arrested along Academy Blvd after most of the 3,000 participants had gone, and 14 were arrested at the civil disobedience action that took place at Peterson Air Force Base later on. By the time we got back to our car, traffic was flowing on Academy Blvd., the cops were standing around talking and the teargas clouds had blown away.

We stopped at a pizza place to eat before the drive home, talking about the police, the police-state, the war, etc., when a news program came on the TV showing scene after scene of antiwar demonstrations in city after city, continent after continent: millions and millions of ordinary world-class citizens coming out to reclaim their planet from the Great Parasites of capitalism. We drove home warmed to the soul.



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