Sydney: Australia's largest ever demonstration

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The antiwar protests throughout Australia last weekend, in every major city and many smaller regional centres, were the country's largest-ever political demonstrations. The turnout far exceeded the expectations of the organisers and expressed the hostility of broad layers of the people—from all walks of life, all ages and a wide array of ethnic backgrounds.

On Sunday, the streets of central Sydney were brought to a standstill by a crowd conservatively estimated by the police and the media to exceed 250,000. Organisers said between 300,000 and 500,000 people assembled in the city's Hyde Park and marched through the central business district. Whatever the exact number, the rally was the largest in the country's history.

The demonstration was as diverse as it was large. Groups of youth came from across the city and professional families from Sydney's inner suburbs rallied. Religious groups, political parties, ethnic associations, trade unions and student bodies were represented. Stunned by the turnout, the organisers were forced to change the route of the march. Instead of proceeding through the city back to Hyde Park, marchers were diverted to the Domain—another large public park—because the first marchers began arriving back before the vast majority of demonstrators had even set off.

Many of the hand-made banners and placards reflected the broad view that the impending war was driven by US ambitions to dominate Iraq's oil. Examples were: "How many lives per gallon?", "Read between the Pipelines", "No Oil Crusade" and the common "No Blood for Oil". Other signs damned the Howard government's collaboration with the Bush administration. Many voiced alarm over the likely civilian casualties of a war: "Collateral damage is mass murder" and "Iraqi kids need food, not bombs".

Those attending saw themselves as part of a global movement. Many of the speakers made reference to the massive demonstrations held only hours earlier in the UK, Spain, Italy and the United States. "You are part of a movement that has seen 20 million people demonstrate around the world this weekend," the rally chair told demonstrators.

More than 20,000 copies of the WSWS statement were distributed. WSWS correspondents spoke with dozens of march participants. Michael Kessler, a 24-year-old physics student from the University of Western Sydney said: "The reason I came is that I don't agree with war. To be honest, I don't believe that demonstrations really achieve much in themselves. But already walking around, I've realised that it's more a meeting place for other ideas and that's really positive."

Kessler said the Internet was a major factor in the worldwide antiwar movement: "Information is being passed around the world, allowing people to clarify the information that is available and have feedback and in that way develop their ideas. It really seems to be a positive step forward. It's probably one of the main reasons that people are coming together.

"The issue about what's happening in Iraq is pretty complicated but I would agree with a lot of the general ideas that it's probably about oil or economic reasons. There isn't any clear evidence of provocation from Iraq. Going against countries and disarming them before they have actually attacked another country is quite new in world politics. It is really quite a clear change."

Mark Borland, a lawyer, said he had followed the WSWS for a few years. "The war hasn't happened yet and I'm hopeful that people like us can stop it," he

said. "It's about oil. It's about American hegemony in the world. Within the Republican Party there's some very right-wing people. I don't like to use the word fascist, but people know what I mean. There are strong militarist elements that have swindled their way into office with the confidence tricks they played and by stacking the Supreme Court and now we're paying the price for it."

The official line of the rally was that protest could pressure the Australian government to withdraw its support for a US war on Iraq. None of the speakers from the trade unions or major political parties stated that they would oppose a UN-endorsed war.

Laurie Brereton, a senior figure in the Australian Labor Party, told the rally: "Let the weapons inspectors do their job. Let the UN find a resolution". Brereton was silent on Labor's deployment of troops to the first Gulf War in 1991 and the stance of his current leader Simon Crean, who has publicly stated that Labor will support a UN-backed attack.

Australian Greens Senator Bob Brown said the government was acting undemocratically and that the resources being mobilised for war should be used to benefit the world's population. He was also the most strident in promoting a nationalist standpoint that "this is not Australia's war".

Journalist John Pilger, the final speaker at the rally, evoked the strongest response from the crowd. He documented the tragic conditions of the Iraqi people and provided a graphic depiction of the likely outcome of a US onslaught on civilians. He told the rally it had to "understand the gravity of the war crime about to be committed". Evoking the Nuremberg Trials, he compared the actions of the Bush administration to those of the Nazi regime, saying he "did not make the comparison lightly".

Pilger was given thunderous applause when he made a scathing attack on the leading columnists of Australia's major daily newspapers. He named four of them and denounced their columns as lies and propaganda and labelled them "accessories" to war crimes, who would have "blood on their hands". He declared it "time for journalists to stand up and speak out". Like Brown, however, he promoted the illusion that protests would stop Bush and Howard from going to war.