

Britain's Socialist Workers Party suppresses dissent at antiwar "People's Assembly"

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On March 12 during a seven-hour meeting held at the Central Halls, opposite the House of Commons, the steering committee of the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) formed a People's Assembly. More than 1,000 delegates attended—some after being elected at antiwar rallies and others from political organisations, student groups, trade union branches, schools and colleges.

Speakers and delegates denounced the Labour government, insisting that the People's Assembly truly reflected the will of the British people whereas the Houses of Parliament expressed the will only of Tony Blair and George Bush.

The meeting was held under the auspices of the STWC, an organisation made up of the British Muslim Association, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a number of left-wing parties of which the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is the most prominent. The People's Assembly met with considerable support, particularly from young people who were at the forefront of organising the largest demonstration in British history on February 15.

The anti-imperialist sentiments that brought people from all over Britain, however, were not reflected by the leadership of the Assembly, who sought to impose a very different orientation. Pride of place in the discussion was given to dissident Labour MPs and senior trade union officials. Their agenda is to dragoon the antiwar movement behind a political perspective of support for the European imperialists and an attempt to revive the United Nations as a vehicle to try to restrain American militarism. In pursuit of these aims, they hope to separate Prime Minister Tony Blair from his alliance with US President George W. Bush and reorient British foreign policy toward a closer alliance with France and Germany.

Andrew Murray of the train drivers union, ASLEF, and Paul Mackney, general secretary of the teaching union NATFE, chaired the assembly sessions despite the trade unions playing virtually no part in the antiwar movement up to that point. In the first debate delegates were asked to vote in support of a Peace Declaration proposed by the steering committee of the STWC.

The first point of the original "Declaration of the People's Assembly for Peace", in a clear reference to the stand taken by France, Germany and Russia on the UN Security Council, said the body, "holds that it is possible to resolve the present international crisis by exclusively peaceful means, in line with proposals made by many states and eminent personalities around the world."

Such an open declaration of support for the European imperialist

powers would serve to corral the antiwar movement behind those sections of Britain's ruling elite—firstly the Labour lefts and trade union bureaucrats, but including also the Liberal democrats and some within the Conservative Party such as Kenneth Clarke. The SWP and other ostensible revolutionary groupings gathered there had no intention of challenging these forces. The elevation of SWP members within the antiwar coalition means they are now regularly hobnobbing with and speaking alongside everyone from Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy to celebrities such as Bianca Jagger. And they have no intention of allowing issues of political principle to cut across their chance of securing a position of influence within the sphere of official politics and in particular amongst their target audience—the trade union bureaucracy.

Instead of challenging the political line expressed in the resolution, it was dealt with in a purely procedural manner so as to avoid being politically embarrassed by such an overt declaration. Alan Thornett of the small group in the Labour Party, Socialist Outlook, stated that for the declaration to be credible in the eyes of the antiwar movement it had to delete the line "in line with proposals made by many states and eminent personalities around the world". The SWP, through their representative on the platform, Lindsey German, simply accepted Thornett's amendment. It was then read, proposed, put to the vote and accepted.

The political blushes of the SWP et al were spared, but the essential orientation of the People's Assembly was still set by the speeches of various left Labour MPs and trade union leaders that went unchallenged. Labour MP Alice Mahon denounced "the sickening press campaign in Britain against the French president's opposition to a war not under the auspices of the United Nations" and declared "I say, Vive la France." She also rounded on critics of Russia's stance, insisting that President Putin—the one-time KGB operative—was moved to oppose war by the tragedy suffered by the Russian people in World War Two.

Labour MP Alan Simpson, national chair of Labour Against the War, told delegates that when *he* looked at the assembly and the antiwar demonstrations he saw the "process that is to refound the United Nations." He then proposed the British public withdraw finance from investments in the dollar as a "first strike against the US".

The task of closing the assembly was bestowed upon another dissident Labour MP, George Galloway, who ended his contribution by saying that it would be "churlish not to acknowledge France, Germany and Russia for their positions" and

suggested that the assembly “should commend that”.

It was then time to make an attempt to bring the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) in from the cold and restore its sagging authority. A second session started with the introduction of a resolution issued by the TUC General Council calling for a “multilateral approach working through, and only with, the explicit authority of the UN Security Council” and opposing “any military action being contemplated by the US or any other country on a unilateral basis; that the Government should seek to align with our EU partners its response to any initiative by the US administration; and that military action should only be an option as a last resort.”

It concluded: “The General Council are concerned at the damaging consequences of action taken without the sanction of the Security Council for multilateral institutions, such as the UN and NATO, and for the future development of the European Union.”

It can now be pointed out that the TUC has abandoned any opposition to Blair’s war against Iraq [*See: Britain: Trades Union Congress disowns antiwar movement*], even of the tactical character expressed in the resolution cited above. But their orientation towards a block with the European powers against the US could not have been more clearly expressed.

To give this stand a left coloration and oppose any political challenge to the TUC and Labour Party leadership was an unenviable task. In the first instance it was assigned to a number of recently elected “left” trade union leaders—many ex-Stalinists or members of various left groups in their youth.

Bob Crow, leader of the rail union RMT, made no criticism of the TUC or the Labour Party and limited himself to calls for individual civil disobedience measures.

Nick Blackburn, of another rail union, ASLEF, said that opponents of war will be attacked as “part of an antigovernment force”. He insisted, “We are not.” The general secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Bill Hayes, simply called on those gathered to force Tony Blair to listen.

A resolution was then presented to the assembly calling on the TUC and the leaderships of the trade unions to join the antiwar movement.

Fulsome praise was heaped on these contributions by the left groups. A speaker from the Socialist Party (formerly Militant), Ken Smith, singled out Bob Crow’s speech and that of retired Labour MP and leader of the Socialist Campaign Group Tony Benn as “key to the future of the antiwar movement” (Benn argued that the antiwar movement must reclaim the Labour Party.) John Rees of the SWP said the speeches reminded him “of how the trade unions were before the Thatcher era”.

Dave Nellist, a former Labour MP and member of the Socialist Party, supported the resolution and appealed to the TUC to produce a letter alerting the wider trade union movement of its position (a measure necessitated by the TUC having disappeared long ago into the political equivalent of a black hole as far as most ordinary workers are concerned). Nellist warned the bureaucracy that it was crucial for the trade unions’ survival that they align themselves with a popular movement against the war.

As well as endorsing the stand taken by the TUC and Labour lefts, the SWP worked to suppress political dissent and any genuine debate. A resolution proposed by a small left group, the

Speakers Corner Against the War, was proposed which stated, “behind the conflict at the UN lie the conflicting interests of the dominant world capitalist states, primarily Europe and the USA,” called the UN “an unreformable organisation” and insisted that “world peace is only possible with the elimination of Capitalism and its replacement by common ownership of the world economy under democratic control of the consumers and producers.”

Neither the SWP, the Socialist Party nor any of the left groups would formally disagree with such an assessment of the UN and a basic statement of a socialist solution to the question of war. But they are anathema to the forces to which they are in reality oriented towards and so must not be raised openly. The resolution was denied a place on the agenda. When one Heiko Khoo approached the platform to demand the resolution be read and discussed, supporters of the SWP chanted repeatedly, “We want action” and he was denied the right to speak.

Lindsay German of the SWP summed up the discussion on behalf of the STWC steering committee. She insisted that the assembly had to get serious and stop masses of resolutions “wrangling” and “nit-picking” and get down to strikes, occupations and demonstrations. Chris Banbury, another senior member of the SWP, later reiterated the purpose of the SWP’s intervention, declaring: “The time for talking ends this evening at six o’clock.” He demanded a move on to discuss action to “shut down” London in the event of war.

In contrast to the treatment of the Speakers Corner resolution, a speaker from the nationalist Campaign against European Federalism was given the right to speak on a debate that had already been closed by the chair. He concluded his speech calling for assemblies to be established throughout the country so that the “people’s national will can be given expression”.

Also, John Woolly from the Liberal Democrats said that British troops should be brought home as the best way of defending our “world class troops”. Neither speech was challenged.

The perspective advanced by the leadership of the antiwar movement, despite their left-sounding rhetoric and appeals for “action”, is for an orientation toward those political forces demanding an alliance with German and French imperialism in response to the growth of US militarism. In pursuit of this agenda, it was necessary for them to abandon the pretence that they were merely lending expression to the outpourings of spontaneous anger against war and to make sure that the agenda of the Labour lefts and the TUC went unchallenged.



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