Britain: Protesters condemn military assault on Iraq

Our reporters
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Thousands took to the streets in Britain on March 20 to protest the start of the US-led war against Iraq. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to protesters in London, Leeds and Sheffield about their opinions on the war, and Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to support it.

London

The largest demonstration took place outside Parliament, where more than 6,000 people were gathered at any one time. As the protest had begun at midday, when school youth and college students walked out of lessons, and continued into the evening the actual number of participants was probably closer to 10,000.

Mia and Rosa both have parents who were members of the African National Congress (ANC) and had been involved in the anti-Apartheid protests in South Africa as young children. Mia and Rosa, 17 and 18 years old, were keen have their views on the war made known.

"We have been here since midday," Mia said. "Up until about 3:30 it was all students, but then more people started to come in. I came down from Camden in North London with about 100 others. A lot of the sixth form came down. I think the teachers gave their blessing but haven't come down themselves."

Rosa said she arrived with about 200 other young people. "I think the teachers were treated quite harshly, told they would be sacked if they participated."

Commenting on the massive police presence surrounding the protest, with at least 100 riot vans visible from Parliament Square, Mia said, "We were having a sit-down protest and the police were literally picking up 10-year-old kids and dropping them on the floor. They were incredibly rough and totally against everything we stand for. I was called a bitch by one. As the adults arrived they eased off, but until then it was quite scary. I was sitting up a tree and I could see all around the police were behaving terribly.

"They have been saying in the press for years that the youth of today have gotten complacent and I think this is a real indication that we are saying 'no' as well and we are trying to make our voices known. At least we can say it is not in our name. They are going ahead with it but the British public are not backing it. It is the imperialists sitting up there [pointing to the Houses of Parliament] watching us. Bush and his chums have got huge shares in the oil companies and if they were worried about the people of Iraq being oppressed they would have stepped in 12 years ago when they started oppressing the Kurds."

Rosa added, "Blair is just trying to preserve capitalist interests in Britain. If America is not behind you, then you are in trouble."

Abdulwahid is an Iraqi college lecturer in Britain. He said:

"I am from Babylon, the site of the first civilisation on this planet. Now George W. Bush and the backseat drivers ruling the United States are trying to impose what he calls civilisation, but it is causing misery in Iraq and all over the world.

"Blair in his campaign leading to the war said the Americans are the masters and we have to listen to them. But he is not listening at all to his own people. It is really shameful that Labour MPs voted for Blair. They have voted for a mass killing in Iraq. The whole region is being de-civilised. They think they are fighting terrorism, but you can imagine what will happen. People there are boiling. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's police fired against demonstrators and 150 were injured. Where's the democracy? The time will come when if we open our mouths in Britain we will be sent to Guantanamo Bay too.

"The Iraqi opposition are a bunch of hypocrites. They are supporting this unjust war and telling lies all the time, but they have said nothing about the unjust sanctions over the last 12 years that have killed one and a half million.

"There has been killing going on in Israel for 50 years but nobody cares about it. The young American girl Rachel Corrie was crushed to death when she was trying to stop a house being demolished by the Israeli forces. But when you ask Bush about Sharon he says this is a man of peace.

"I have family in Iraq, but we have no news. The telephones have been cut since yesterday and we have no contact."

Luke and Catalena attended the demonstration representing City and Islington Sixth Form College. Catalena said, "We came in a big group with part of the London Metropolitan University. It was a big protest. The main reason I am here is because it's wrong to be the aggressor in a war. All war is bad but we're the aggressor here so we are completely at fault. I am just here because the people in [Iraq] need to know that they are making these decisions for us and we don't agree with them."

Luke said, "I think it is wrong to devastate a country that has already been devastated by war so many times by us, because there are these apparent Al Qaeda links that no one has proof of.

"The thing is that we don't need to be going to war. We can't afford to pay the firefighters the money they need to live on, yet we have all this money to go and bomb a country. I don't want to have to say goodbye to my friends and family and I don't want anyone else to have to either."

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Leeds

In Leeds, West Yorkshire, rush-hour traffic into the city was blocked for hours when protesters formed human roadblocks at two of the main roundabouts. Police had to call in a specialist team to release the protesters, who had chained their wrists together inside plastic piping. Nine people were arrested.

At noon hundreds of school youth and university students flooded into the city centre to join a group of local government workers in a demonstration against the war. When the march reached the Town Hall, police had to set up a mounted guard to prevent the demonstrators occupying the building. As dusk fell, up to 3,000 people marched through the city, accompanied by a heavy police presence, including mounted police and a helicopter flying overhead. When they attempted to march into City Square, police blocked their way.

Emma, 19, from Park Lane College said, "I am completely against this war because I feel that innocent people will die for a stupid cause. Bush is a murderer. He is following in his father's footsteps because he was a murderer too in the Gulf War.

"My sister and I watch News Round, the TV programme for young people. They keep saying, 'Don't worry. The fighting is in Iraq and it won't come over here.' But I think the consequences involve us all. It's just heartbreaking to think about the innocent people and young children who are dying. They are people, like all of us, who want to have the possibility of a happy life and it is being denied them. It is very frightening."

Zairab, 16, is from Ralph Thorseby High School. She said, "I am an Iraqi. I have been in this country since I was one year old, so Britain is home for me. I know that Saddam is not a good person, but that is not what this war is about. It is not fair that innocent people are being killed. My family is terribly worried because we have relatives over there.

"Britain is a democratic country. Everyone is allowed to voice their opinion, but what is the use of that if nobody in the government is listening?"

Her friend Wasan, 16, is also an Iraqi. She said, "Everyone knows that this war is about oil. But it is also about redrawing the map of the Middle East and restabilising Israel. Sharon thinks that he can cover up for the injustices and atrocities he is committing against the Palestinian people because the eyes of the world have been shifted from Israel to Iraq."

Elaine, 18, is a pupil at Notre Dame High School. She said, "This is the third time we have walked out of school. About 150 of us joined the university students on March 5, then again on March 19 and today. I didn't used to be at all political. I didn't understand anything that was going on. But now I won't be passive any more. I feel the need to stand up for what I believe in."

A group from Lawnswood High School were carrying a banner in the march which read, "If you are not outraged you are not paying enough attention". As she walked along, Hannah told our reporter, "The present leaders in the US are completely hypocritical. Everyone knows that they were the ones who armed Saddam Hussein in the first place. And Al Qaeda is exactly the same.

"The oil issue is also very important. At the end of the Cold War, over 10 years ago, Cheney and Rumsfeld sat down and decided that they couldn't allow any other country to challenge the US. The American imperialists think they can control the whole world."

Four young workers walked out of a branch of Pizza Express in the city centre. One of them, Jamie, aged 23, said, "We decided to walk out today. We left them trying to cope, with a staff of two people. We all decided that something had to be done."

Sheffield

In Sheffield, students and children who had walked out of school had been collecting in the city centre of Sheffield since midday. Later a larger crowd of around 500 gathered in front of the town hall. There was a heavy police presence with horse-mounted officers along the roadside.

Katharina, a student teacher from Bavaria, said, "I think it's an imperialist war. Not really even a war—an aggression against a country that has suffered quite a lot over the last few years, and has already been disarmed. The Iraqis can't really defend themselves. It's a big lie to say that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction and has to be disarmed when it is Bush and Blair that really have these weapons and are using them.

"Hopefully we are creating a social popular movement that shows these so-called democratic governments that they can't just do as they want. I fear that lots and lots of innocent people are going to die. They don't seem to think Iraqi lives are worth much."

An Iraqi refugee from Basra approached the *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team. He insisted on anonymity so as not to jeopardise his case with the British Immigration Service. The largest number of refugees arriving in the UK last year came from Iraq, followed by Afghanistan and Zimbabwe. He expressed his deep sadness about the current situation:

"It is all wrong. I want regime change in Baghdad, but not like this. Four female members of my family are suffering from breast cancer (one of them had to have a breast removal) because of the depleted uranium shells used in the last Gulf War. Now I've just telephoned home, and they say that the city is about to be occupied."

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