Antiwar demonstrations throughout the UK

Our reporters
24 March 2003

Protests against the war vs. Iraq were held at Fairford Town in Gloucestershire, a Royal Air Force base where US B-52 bombers are based. About 1,000 police lined the route of the protest by over 5,000 people and five arrests were made. Three coaches full of protesters from London were stopped and searched by police and then turned back under the Criminal Justice Act. A spokesman for CND denounced the police action stating, “It is unheard of for 20 years”—a reference to the 1984-85 miners’ strike against the then Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher.

The US surveillance centre at Menwith Hill in Yorkshire also saw a protest by 1,000 and dozens of arrests were made.

About 1,500 antiwar protesters marched in Manchester, and a small demonstration took place in Tony Blair’s Sedgefield constituency.

In the capital Edinburgh, 5,000 people marched from Parliament Square to the American consulate. Later they protested outside the official residence of Jack McConnell, Labour First Minister for the Scottish Parliament.

Protests were also held in Inverness, Aberdeen, Lerwick and Stirling. In Dunnand Dundee, 500 people demonstrated outside the Scottish Labour Party’s annual conference, which was heavily guarded by lines of police.

Around 4,000 people of all ages and backgrounds gathered in Glasgow’s George Square to protest the outbreak of war. On the podium in Glasgow were speakers from the Greens, Scottish National Party and Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), Labour MP Mohammad Sarwar, Palestinian and Iraqi spokespeople, and Muslim and Christian leaders.

Although some young people from local schools and colleges were invited to address the crowd, the focus of most of the speakers was to use the protest to generate interest in the upcoming May 1 elections to the Scottish parliament, alongside appeals for the “democratisation” of the United Nations and support for the European imperialist powers, particularly French President Jacques Chirac. Calls for mass civil disobedience by the organisers, the Scottish Coalition for Justice Not War (which includes the SSP, Greens and the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain and the Communist Party of Scotland), can only deflect from a serious investigation of the war’s origins and a perspective on which it can be opposed.

Following the end of the rally, groups of protestors took off around the city looking for busy junctions. Traffic was brought to a standstill at several locations as protestors sat in the road around George Square, at Charing Cross and various other points around the city centre. Four people were arrested after being penned in by the large numbers of police on foot and in riot vans tailing the demonstrators.

In Leeds, West Yorkshire, 500 people marched through the city centre on March 22, with banners declaring, “Say No to Bush’s Imperialism”, “and “This is not war! This is slaughter!” “Why are they not listening?”

After the demonstration speakers addressed the marchers from the steps of Leeds Art Gallery. Many young people took the microphone to express their opposition to the war. One young school student said, “We are the voice of the Iraqi people. They don’t have a voice, but we are their voice and we must continue to make our voices heard.”

Barbara Slaughter addressed the demonstrators on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site* and read out sections of the statement by the editorial board that was circulated as a leaflet. She was cheered when she insisted that “People all over the world understand that the real threat to the peace and security comes from Washington and not from Baghdad. The lies used to justify the war have been exposed for what they are, cynical pretexts for this brutal attack against a defenceless people.”

Abla Tawfiq also addressed the demonstrators. She said, “I am an Iraqi. I don’t support Saddam, but neither do I support this war. Please understand us. We are proud people. We have never been people to surrender.”

After the meeting Abla told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “They claim to be ridding Iraq of so-called ‘weapons of mass destruction’. What about the weapons they are using on Iraq and have been using for throughout all the years of bombing? How many young people have been killed going back as far as 1980? And since 1991, how many children and old people have died because of lack of medicine caused by the sanctions?

“There are problems in many regimes throughout the world, but Bush doesn’t care about them. He picks on Iraq

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because it is in his interests.

"I am a refugee in this country. I have been here for three years. My father is the former Iraqi ambassador to Spain. He resigned from office in 1991 because he did not agree with the invasion of Kuwait. At that time the US gave Saddam the green light. He thought the Americans would back him up. He walked into a trap laid by the US.

"I want people to understand that though we are against Saddam Hussein and against the regime, that does not mean that our identity and dignity can be attacked in this way. The change in the regime must come from inside Iraq.

"We are desperately worried about all our relations who are over there. We have close family in Baghdad and Mosul. My cousin has got young children, including a baby of 18 months. The 30-year-olds are used to the sounds of war, of missiles flying overhead. But these young children are terrified."

The commencement of the US-led war against Iraq had unleashed three days of antiwar protests in Bristol, in Southwest Britain.

On March 20, local school pupils and college students walked out of classes to demonstrate their opposition to the invasion of Iraq. The daytime demonstration brought the city centre to a standstill and mounted police, riot police and dogs were used to break up the march.

On Thursday evening, 5,000 protested against the bombing of Baghdad, with the whole of the city centre being brought to a standstill. The protestors also blocked traffic from the M32 motorway. Slogans chanted included "Blair Out" and banners declared Blair to be a "War Criminal", "Stop the US" and "This war is an act barbarism".

The police continually antagonised protesters, herding them into confined spaces. As the demonstration came to its conclusion mounted police were used to disperse the protesters.

According to *Evening Post* reporter Sarah Key, "Helicopters, umpteen police vans and armed officers accompanied the protesters everywhere; some incited to violence by officers, some well versed in the ways of the force to pretend this was an incident. I was also mishandled by three officers in riot gear. I was put in an arm lock, not once but twice."

The following night, antiwar protesters returned to the city centre and were again greeted by a large police presence. The demonstrators once more brought the city centre to a standstill by sitting in the roads and blocking traffic.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Ian Gittings, aged 31, who lives and works in Bristol. When asked what he thought of Blair's contempt for domestic and international opinion regarding the war in Iraq, he replied, "Bush and Blair are both war criminals and this is an illegal war and we must demand the withdrawal of British troops from the Gulf.

"The war is about dominating the world's oil supplies and reinforcing the USA's political and economic global dominance.

"Blair is trying to silence the people and all the police are trying to do is to force a reaction in an attempt to discredit the antiwar movement."

On Saturday March 22, some 2,000 demonstrators again marched through the city centre. At the end of the march, a group of protestors sat down in the street and were physically removed, frequently quite violently, by police.

Jay and Nerida were two of the many young people who had come to oppose the war:

"I think it is hypocritical to attack another country for being a dictatorship, when the US and UK are both dictated by money and capitalism. This is a war for oil. Bush is behaving like a Nazi right-wing politician. Tony Blair is turning the Labour Party, which is supposed to be for the people, into another version of the Tory party.

"To stop war, we need to make changes in society. We need to be less greedy and society needs to be based less on hierarchy and more on respect for one another."

Jay was very critical of the role of the press: "All the news is so pro-war, there are no alternative views being shown. They are not showing the true picture. Last night they showed a couple of casualties in Iraq, but it was only on for about two seconds. There are definitely more Iraqi casualties than are being shown."

Simon, a retired teacher, had come on the march with his daughter Melissa: "I have come down today because I feel this is the only way I can demonstrate my feelings about the war. The US has gone to war to demonstrate that it is a world power that no one else can touch, and it's to do with access to oil reserves.

"Given the way Tony Blair has moved to the right since the moment he got into power, I'm not surprised he has gone to war. But it is very depressing that he has aligned himself so closely with Bush and the rightwing in the US.

"I am not a financial expert, but you would be very naive to believe that the war doesn't have anything to do with the financial crisis in America."

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