

Paris, Berlin and the war against Iraq

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The March-April edition of the magazine Gleichheit will be published this week. This is the editorial of the latest edition.

As this edition of *Gleichheit* goes to print, American preparations for a war against Iraq have reached the point of no return. The latest comments from the White House make absolutely clear that the Bush administration is prepared to wage war at all costs.

During the past few weeks it has become increasingly evident that the issue of so-called Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, UN inspections and the debate on the Security Council serve as a pretext for a war which is being waged for very different aims—the takeover of Iraqi oilfields, a reorganisation of the entire Middle East under American domination and the consolidation of American hegemony against its rivals in Europe and Asia.

European governments have reluctantly come to the conclusion that they can no longer avoid an open conflict with the US over the future course of world politics. While the British and Spanish prime ministers, Blair and Aznar, have joined forces with the transatlantic Great Power, the standpoint taken by France and Germany has hardened. From diplomatic manoeuvring aimed at securing their influence on developments in the Middle East, France and Germany have now gone on to develop their own initiatives and construct their own alliances. The term “axis”, which one recently could only find in history books, has now become a key word in official political language—for example, to describe the current collaboration between Paris-Berlin-Moscow.

The unilateral and ruthless conduct of the Washington administration has forced the governments of these three countries to develop a clearer common line against the Bush war plans than they had originally wished. Behind such a common stance rests exclusively the concern by each of these countries for its own global interests. They have no objections when Iraq’s national sovereignty is treated with contempt—as is demonstrated by their support for strict weapons inspections. Neither are they opposed to a reorganisation of the region, nor are they in principle opposed to the use of military force—as was demonstrated by their ready support and participation in the recent war in Yugoslavia.

The real basis for their stance becomes apparent when one considers their domestic policies. When it comes to the issue of the dismantling of democratic rights and the strengthening of

the state apparatus, Paris and Berlin have nothing to learn from Washington. Both European governments are currently in the process of planning the most fundamental cuts in their welfare states since the end of the Second World War. Workers’ rights, together with health provisions and care for the elderly, are being systematically dismantled. The French and German governments are reacting, on the one hand, to intensified global competition by seeking to make workers shoulder the consequences. In addition the foreign policy rift over Iraq has rapidly worsened the economic climate. Already there are calls in the American press for an economic boycott of the rebellious French.

On the other hand, further cuts in the welfare system are aimed at freeing up finance for rearmament. France has already made a substantial increase in its military budget this year and Germany is remodelling its army into an international intervention force. A recent remark by the Social Democratic Party Defence Minister Peter Struck, that “German interests could also be defended in the Hindukusch”, would have previously unleashed a storm of protest. In the meantime there is widespread agreement over defence policy in the SPD-Green Party government camp.

The refusal by the US to respect established political institutions and regulations has been carefully noted in the German press. In the event of a unilateral invasion of Iraq by the US, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* anticipates the end of the “collective security system, established out of the ruins of the League of Nations and nourished by the power of a continually growing international law.” In its latest edition the usually reserved *Die Zeit* newspaper asserts in its lead article titled “Hyper-power USA” that America is undertaking a “morally inspired policy of hegemony”.

“As soon as the war against Iraq commences”, according to *Die Zeit* publisher Michael Naumann, “a profound split will open up in the old world order which had guaranteed Europe 50 years of peace under American protection.”

In light of this development other newspapers have pleaded for a policy of military strength. “Without military strength then there can be no convincing deterrent. And without deterrent no respect can be won from the United States,” wrote the *Handelsblatt*. “Europe must devote itself to a policy based on strength, in order to put an end to the imbalance which has prevailed since the end of the Cold War.”

Against such a background it becomes apparent why a movement against the war cannot be based on illusions in the French and German governments. Any support for the French and German governments would transform the antiwar movement into an instrument for the aims of European rearmament, which is being deliberately pursued in Paris and Berlin. Such a movement would cut itself off from the mass of the population who are being called upon to finance militarism in the midst of a growing social crisis. And it would help to set in motion a spiral of rearmament which could lead to even more terrible wars—including a military confrontation between the Great Powers themselves.

The movement against an Iraq war must be organised independently from all bourgeois institutions—whether it be European governments or the United Nations. It must extend beyond national borders and turn to working people by combining the issue of war with social questions.

In this respect the mass demonstrations of February 15 represented a historic turning point. Millions of people protested against war across the globe, including in the US itself. The extent of the demonstrations—in many places the biggest for a half century—surprised even the organisers of the protest. The *New York Times* conceded with astonishment: “The fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.”

The protests gave voice to social discontent which has been brewing for years, but up until now has found no organised political outlet. The alienation of large sections of the broad masses from official politics had up until now taken predominantly passive forms—declining voter participation and political disinterest. Now, however, many millions have actively intervened in political life.

The massive participation on demonstrations inside the US itself brought an important fact to light: the Bush administration is not acting from a position of strength but rather from weakness and internal crisis. With its aggressive foreign policy the US government is responding to domestic problems for which it has no answer—the dramatic polarisation of American society, the declining living standards of broad layers and huge economic and budget deficits.

George W. Bush, who came to power in the wake of a stolen election, rests on an extremely narrow social base. He represents the moneyed oligarchy which was able to fabulously enrich itself during the stock market boom of the '90s—and as is exposed in the case of Enron—was prepared to employ thoroughly criminal methods. He represents the coming to power of the underworld. He remains in power only because the Democratic Party, propped up by the same layers of the superrich, has refrained from any sort of opposition while the US mass media has effectively blocked out any dissenting opinion. In light of the general social decline Bush resorts to

the military option, the only area in which the US has real superiority. This explains his aggressive, ruthless and irresponsible actions.

The social polarisation of the US not only explains Bush's politics, it is also the key to establishing an alternative. The American working class—millions of manual and clerical workers struggling for a decent living in factories, service industries, schools and offices across the country—represent a powerful social force who, unlike America's privileged elite, lack their own political organisation and perspective.

European governments have no interest in mobilising the masses of the US—after all they are very well aware that it was American imperialism which came to their aid at the end of the Second World War to ward off revolutionary social explosions. This explains why conservative forces in Europe—including the opposition parties in Germany—line up in their majority with Bush. They regard social upheaval in the US, which would inevitably be echoed in Europe, as an even greater risk than Bush's unilateral politics. The official “left” in Europe—in Germany, the Social Democrats and the Green Party—also refrain from questioning the legitimacy of the Bush administration and scrupulously avoid anything which could be regarded as an appeal to the broad masses in the US.

The *World Socialist Web Site* works to provide a political orientation to the mass movement against war which emerged on February 15 and make it the basis for the construction of an international socialist party of working people. The current edition of *Gleichheit* is dedicated to this aim and, for clarity, has been divided into three parts. The first part consists of reports and analyses of the path towards war; the second comprises programmatic and political statements by the WSWS editorial board and the final part is devoted to extensive reportage of the demonstrations which took place across the globe on February 15.



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