

Britain: 10,000 march in Leeds against war

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More than 10,000 people stood shoulder to shoulder on Saturday, March 15, outside the Leeds art gallery to begin a march against the imminent war on Iraq. Held in solidarity with the tens of thousands who were marching on the same day across the globe, the demonstration was led by six young men bearing a coffin with the inscription, “War means death” and “War on Iraq; UN predicts 500,000 critical civilian injuries”.

Other banners read, “War and terror create innocent victims”, “No to war, No to Saddam”, “Send the UN inspectors to Israel,” and “Peace in the Middle East”. Many of the banners had been made by residents from local neighbourhoods, such as Chapel Allerton, Beeston and Dewsbury. Only two union banners were to be seen—from the Leeds Trades Council and the National Union of Teachers.

There were many inventive placards, such as, “Read between the pipelines”, “Who’s the unelected tyrant with the bombs?”, “Smart bombs don’t justify dumb leaders”, “How can we give Iraq a democracy if we don’t have one in Britain” and “No to racism, Islam is not to blame”.

People of all ages and walks of life joined the march. There were many families with children holding yellow balloons aloft in the spring sunshine that declared “No to War”. Prominent on the march was a large and vocal contingent of youth and students.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to three school students who were attending their first ever demonstration. Ashley, 15, said, “We have to stop the war because of the babies in Iraq, it shouldn’t be bombed.” His friend Daniel, also 15, added, “There’s no proof about weapons and biological weapons.” Jason, 12, explained how a policeman had responded to their high spirits with, “Keep your comments to yourself or I’ll whip you with my stick or I’ll spray you with gas.”

Housewife Mrs. Bashir denounced both Bush and Blair “for doing nothing for the coming generation.... They are creating terrorists.” She added, “They created Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Israel has nuclear weapons but they are not stopping it.”

Clare, 21, who is studying international relations at Leeds University, told the WSWs that the consensus amongst her fellow students was that the prospect of war against Iraq was terrible. “Bush and Blair keep changing their tune as to why it’s happening,” she said. “They have to have a real reason and prove to people why war is justified and they haven’t.” Her friend Momoko, a Japanese student, added that most Japanese people are against the war.

Ann and Steve, demonstrating for the first time in their lives, with their children Connor and Evie, also spoke to the WSWs. Ann, a Leeds City Council dinners supervisor, said, “There comes a time when you’ve just got to stand up and be counted. You can spend your time talking with your mates on the bus and at work, but you’ve got to show the government that ordinary people are opposed to this war.” Steve, a civil servant in the Highways Agency, added that he had yet to meet anyone who supported the war, even with a second UN resolution. “Military might will not work. You’ve got to have a dialogue to sort out differences, and you can’t talk to dead people,” he said.

The march, which was organized by Leeds Stop the War Coalition, wound its way for three miles through Leeds’ busy shopping centre up to Hyde Park for a rally held directly opposite the site of the huge anti-fascist demonstrations of the 1930s. Speakers included ex-Labour MP and member of the Socialist Party Dave Nellist, and John Trickett and Harold Best, Labour MPs for Hemsworth and Leeds North West respectively.

A particularly warm welcome was given to a 16-year-old Iraqi teenager, who described the horrific consequences economic sanctions and the first Gulf

War have had on Iraq. “I know a friend who gets frightened every time she hears thunder because it reminds her of the bombing in the First Gulf War.

“Has anyone heard of babies dying of heart attacks? Well that happens in Iraq. Does it happen anywhere in the world where mothers go through Caesarean section operations without any anaesthetic? This takes place in Iraq every single day.

“In Iraq, children and adults are left untreated with deadly life threatening diseases such as cancer leukaemia. When Madeline Albright, the former US secretary of state, was asked whether the economic sanctions that had been imposed on Iraq are worth killing half a million Iraqi children, she said, ‘Yes’.

“The first Gulf War and the economic sanctions have destroyed everything and now the US and Britain wants to attack it again. Iraq had one of the highest literacy rates in the world before the Gulf War. My country has been destroyed and thrown back decades and my people have been killed in their millions in the past 12 years. I would like to remind America that you were the ones who aided Saddam Hussein; you supported Saddam and turned a blind eye when he killed thousands of his own people with poisonous gas time and time again. They were the ones who supplied him with the weapons, simply because it served America’s interests.”



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