Britain: Antiwar protesters lobby Parliament

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As Members of Parliament met on Tuesday, March 18, to debate the imminent military onslaught against Iraq by US and British forces, 2,000 protesters gathered in Westminster to make it known that they opposed the planned action.

By 4:30 p.m., around 200 had gathered on the green opposite the Houses of Parliament under the banners of Green Peace, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Stop the War coalition, among others. Across the road, meanwhile, several hundred more protesters lined up outside the Parliament building, and yet more protesters from Women Against War gathered across the street.

As more and more people arrived throughout the evening, it was clear that strength of feeling against the war had only increased as the deadline for military strikes draws closer. While much has been made in official circles and the media of the importance of a second United Nations (UN) resolution for the Blair government, with claims that this would lessen popular opposition, protesters repeatedly told this reporter that a UN vote would not have changed their opinion.

"Vote or no vote, this war is not legitimate," said Paul, a retail worker from London.

"Bush had set out plans for military action even before Resolution 1441 and nothing Iraq, nor the countries making up the UN could do or say was going to change that. What Saddam did in relation to weapons of mass destruction would make no difference because Bush had already said it was about changing the regime."

Ruth said she was protesting "because I think it is very scary what is happening and everybody has got to show that they don't support Blair and to encourage the MPs to vote against him today. When I was little my parents used to take me on lots of demonstrations and I have been involved in previous protests against the war in Afghanistan and was on the big demonstration on February 15."

Her friend Harley added, "While I came to the other marches against this war I have never been particularly political. It is just the brazenness of this that has inspired me to get involved. It is just so blatantly wrong and so much lies."

Both said that the issue of a vote in the UN would not have changed their opinions. Ruth said, "I think the premise that the war is based on is itself wrong. They constructed it so that the UN was put in a ridiculous situation. I think it's a pity because it completely undermines the UN, but I wouldn't have supported it with a UN resolution. I think it's a shame that America tried to use the UN in that way because they put them in a situation where the weapons inspectors were always going to fail no matter what happened."

Sarah was on the February 15 antiwar demonstration in London, but had not been involved in political protests in the past. "I am more motivated to now," she said. "I don't support military action because people are going to be hurt and I don't trust the intentions of Bush and Blair. I don't believe that it is for humanitarian ends."

She said she would be still protesting if there had been a vote through the UN: "I would feel better if there had been a vote through the UN, but I just think that Bush and Blair would have found a way to attack Iraq whatever happened. I just feel quite cynical about the whole thing. I am not going to pretend to understand the complex politics of it all, but I do think it is a bit of a coincidence that the Bush administration is made up of oil tycoons and that has got to have a part in it. I think it would be naive to think that the war had nothing to do with oil.

"I have always been really interested in human rights and have followed politics quite closely and read the newspapers," Sarah added. "I was quite distressed by stuff in the media recently, all the hate campaigns that have been whipped up about asylum-seekers. There is a lot of negative stuff going on and I felt compelled to do something about it. I think war is probably now inevitable, but I don't think that takes away from the importance of standing up and making your opinion felt."

A group of around 50 Women Against War addressed the demonstrators through a loudspeaker system, making

connections between Blair's war policies and those pursued at home. As one speaker demanded that the government spend money on care for the disabled and other social services rather than war, police moved in to ask them to move on. The protesters used the loudspeaker system to alert others on the demonstration to what was happening and they were quickly joined by some of those queuing outside parliament, who crossed the road to show their support.

Before much longer hundreds of others marched from the nearby square, stopping traffic in the process, to join the women's protest and insist on their right to remain. Then a few younger protesters sat down in the road, and they were quickly joined by hundreds of others, bringing traffic outside the parliament building to a complete standstill.

Realising the potentially explosive character of their actions, senior officers began frantically speaking into mobile phones asking for guidance. Some two dozen police attempted to stop people stepping from both sides of the pavement to join the sit-in. Ten riot vans were quickly on the scene, penning in the protesters from both sides. A lorry carrying metal crash barriers arrived and police began to fence in those on the pavement.

Protesters began pointing to the Parliament building, shouting, "This *is not* what democracy looks like," then pointing to the crowd, saying, "This *is* what democracy looks like."

Faced with over 1,000 people in the road at one stage, the police decided upon a policy of containment rather than confrontation. Concentrating on preventing those who left the main body of the protest from returning, more than 300 officers stood by until the protests subsided, though this took several hours and there was still a sizeable presence outside Parliament as the evening's proceedings came to an end.