

Hundreds of thousands march in London

Chris Marsden
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Antiwar protest demonstrations were held in many British towns and cities, with the largest assembling in London.

The organisers' estimates of attendance varied between 300,000 and 500,000, while the police figure of 200,000 was routinely cited by the media in an attempt to dismiss its significance and claim that people had either been won over by the government or become apathetic about war.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Though smaller in number than the one and a half million that marched on February 15, this was still one of the largest political demonstrations ever seen in Britain and took over five hours to pass into Hyde Park. It was a remarkable expression of the depth of anti-war sentiment, particularly given that it was organised at four days notice and after war had been declared.

The mass media has been saturated with coverage of the military action in the war that is designed to numb the senses rather than inform. It uncritically repeats the claims of the Bush administration and the Blair government that this will be a "clean war" because the use of smart weapons will prevent civilian casualties. On top of this, there is the constant propaganda that to oppose war is to stab "our boys" in the back and to side with Saddam.

Following the parliamentary victory of the Labour government, the opposition Liberal Democrats proclaimed that they would now support British forces and hope for a speedy victory. The Trades Union Congress had also withdrawn support for the antiwar movement, with General Secretary Brendan Barber declaring that he would not support a movement that was set on deposing Tony Blair.

Those who marched, therefore, did so out of a profound sense of conviction that this was an unjust war and a crime against humanity and in the teeth of almost universal opposition from the political establishment.

This does not mean that the propaganda barrage had no impact, particularly given that the organisers of the demonstration—the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf, the Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain—had urged opponents of war to look to precisely these forces along with dissenting Labour MPs for leadership. In one revealing episode, a representative of

the Committee to Stop War in the Gulf introduced a trade union speaker with the boast, "The entire trade union movement in this country is opposed to this war," as if Barber had never made his statement attacking the march.

But the impact of these developments was not simply negative. People on the demonstration who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* were in general sobered by the terrible experiences of the past days and wanted to discuss the perspective on which the struggle against war could go forward. There was recognition amongst many that the perspective offered thus far had failed. Indeed one of the things that made estimating the numbers marching difficult is that the majority of demonstrators did not stop to listen to the platform speeches and did not see the relevance of what was being said by many to their own views.

Another feature of all the protests around Britain was the far more bellicose and intimidating attitude of the police. A total of 3,500 police officers lined the route of the London march and ten people were arrested. At the end of the demonstration, riot police charged a crowd of around 100 protesters who had blocked traffic in Oxford Street.

A number of protesters in London spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Suzanne said, "I'm here today to register a no-vote—it's the only way—the public weren't asked. Blair has tried to mask what he is doing by putting the emphasis on 'our boys' and supporting them, rather than what's happening which is bombing another country.

"Nobody is attacking us. We are not protecting ourselves. Everyone knows Saddam Hussein is a dictator, but there are a lot of other dictators. In the last few days it reminds me of Margaret Thatcher and the build up to the Falklands War. They are trying to do that again.

"I am really scared this is going to escalate against the Muslims and Islam. Bombing Iraq is not the end of it. The only chance of sorting it out is peacefully."

Holly, aged 13, from London, had been on several other protests, including a March 5 lobby of Parliament. She said, "On the March 5 demonstration one of the police threw me into the banners for no reason."

Mona, 14 said, "Last Thursday I was grabbed by the neck

because they wanted me to move. They were beating up boys who were under 16. We want to stop this war as soon as possible. We are sending a message to the government to stop war.”

Nye, 14, sporting a bruise to her eye, said, “Two of my friends got punched in the face and I got punched in the eye. It was a peaceful protest. We didn’t do anything to break the law. This is supposed to be a democracy. Why don’t they listen to the people who are 85 percent against the war? There are children in Iraq who don’t have the opportunity like us to protest. We are doing it for them.”

Ahmed Shibli, a scientist, said, “I think the media builds up the emotions in favour of war. In the last two months we have seen a lot of programmes on Saddam Hussein. We all know Saddam Hussein is cruel, but they are constantly brainwashing the people. There has not been a single programme about Ariel Sharon and his brutal past. We are finding out from the Internet what the Palestinians are being subjected to. It’s important to tell the people what is happening because we constantly hear about the resolutions against Iraq, but we never hear of the 68 resolutions against Israel. I think the media is telling half-truths as well as lies.

“The role of a journalist is to tell the people what is happening so they can make their own mind up. But they are constantly telling us from a patriotic viewpoint. There is a need for an alternative political party and news media.

“Blair has lost his credibility, he has told so many lies in the last few months. Every time he speaks he gives a different justification for war, making up facts and figures. Part of the dossier was an old thesis of a student. Blair is defying public opinion not Saddam and he should be punished for this.

“They are taking the world back to the eighteenth century, to colonise the world. Bush and Blair are acting like warlords. People have to realise there are two super powers—the US and the people of the world. It is not a Muslim thing; it is a war against the people.

“My worry is that if the US win this war they will be more bullish and other countries will see the only way to save themselves is to get nuclear weapons. They talk about weapons of mass destruction, but the depleted uranium that they dropped in the last Gulf War has caused a lot of cancer deaths in Iraq. Cancer has gone up four percent and deformed babies have been born.”

Doryan, a retired worker from Maryland, said: “Bush is a warmonger who is intent on throwing his weight around. He uses the excuse of 9/11, but there is no evidence that Iraq was connected with the atrocities. If you just lash out against any nation that could attack us at some time or even has weapons, where will it stop? Anyone could be attacked.

“I didn’t vote for Bush and there is not universal support

for this war. I don’t believe the opinion polls. Look at the US. There is acute poverty. People can’t get Medicaid, so we can’t afford war.

“At least half of Iraq’s population are children, so Bush is a childkiller—a murderer of children. They try and silence opposition by saying that we are attacking our boys in the armed forces. It is unfortunate that there are poor men being sent out there, who probably joined the National Guard for a career—working class boys who don’t want war and don’t want to be killed.

“Bush never answers the questions posed to him. Like how many lives and how much money will this war cost? It is the same with his henchman Rumsfeld—they dodge all questions.

“This war is the worst thing that has happened in my lifetime and I’m over 60. Vietnam was bad, but this will encourage Bush to war with other countries—Korea, Iran. More opportunities for expansion will have been scheduled.”

Sarah, a secretary, said: “I know marching won’t change anything—the government’s mind has been set for a long time—but I have to take a stand for an alternative. I believe giving people the right to determine how they live and not rule through World Bank dictate, oil-for-aid, etc.

“I hope I and everyone here can send a message to Blair—We have you now on sufferance, but not after the next election. You have shoved a metaphorical two-finger up at all of us and when the time comes, we will do the same to you. I am not an anarchist or anything. Make no mistake. My mother feels the same way and has marched against war. This is Middle England talking.”

Kathryn, 25, said, “I’m totally against war and have been from the start. It’s a disgrace how the government is ignoring the people. They have invaded Iraq in an act of aggression that is against international law.

“I’m also worried about the broader question of US foreign policy. It has ignored the UN and dismisses France and Germany as insignificant because they disagree with Washington. We have to stop the war against Iraq because then it will be someone else’s turn. The US is the biggest threat to world peace, not Iraq.

“Presently we have no voice, but we must keep pushing. I voted for the Labour Party, but never again. We need a political alternative, that can’t be the Conservatives or Labour—that should stand for what people believe in.”



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