

Four days of antiwar protests in Melbourne

Our reporters
24 March 2003

Melbourne, capital of the Australian state of Victoria, has witnessed four antiwar demonstrations in the four days since the US-led bombardment of Iraq began on Thursday.

In the largest, more than 20,000 people converged on the city centre several hours after the first bombing, closing the main thoroughfares. Protestors continued to arrive hours later. Around 5,000 people attended a lunchtime rally of unionists the following day. A second rally on Friday evening of 15,000 people took place in pouring rain. On Sunday, several hundred people—mainly families with small children—rallied under the banner “Babies not Bombs.”

At the main rallies, convenors blew air raid sirens before the speeches. Demonstrators carried placards and banners including “Not in our Name!” “War is not a Game!” “Peace Not War” and “No Blood for Oil”. The mood was sombre and angry, in marked contrast to the rather joyful outlook of earlier rallies.

There was growing distrust of the mainstream media and its pro-war coverage. WSWs members and supporters distributed over 3,000 leaflets, and met more people who are reading the site, especially since the February demonstrations. Many people are searching through everything, taking any information they can get and reading it carefully.

Official speakers included Australian actor Heath Ledger, in Melbourne to launch the film “Ned Kelly” and Alex Tikchener from the Vietnam Veterans against the War. Tikchener described the Howard government’s decision to send troops to defend Australian interests on the other side of the world as a betrayal of the young generation.

Victorian Trades Hall Council official Leigh Hubbard congratulated Robin Cook for resigning from the Blair Government in Britain. But like other speakers, Hubbard simply repeated the call for more pressure on the Howard government. None of the trade unions have

taken any but the most perfunctory measures to mobilise their members against the war.

WSWS reporters spoke to a number of workers, students and others who attended the antiwar protests.

Jenny Wynter-Steggall, who attended the “Babies not Bombs” rally with her husband and young daughter, angrily declared: “Where do the mass media get their details from? It is so dodgy. The US has promised minimal casualties. They’re saying eight dead so far! It’s ridiculous! The censorship and the whole way the coverage has been arranged are so undemocratic.

“There will be no installing of democracy in Iraq. Here, people haven’t been listened to. There has been no referendum. They sent Australian troops without asking. The debates in parliament were worth nothing. People protesting have been looked upon merely as a mob. The leaders think they know better than the public. There would be such a revolt if they did tell people the truth.

“What they’re doing is so much against humanity. The United States is empire building. It is a package deal—they will get the oilfields and they can use Iraq as a centre for control in the Arab world. They are playing on the fact Saddam Hussein is an evil dictator to do it. The link to terrorism is ridiculous.

“All this about liberating the people, making a better Iraq. It is exactly the same tune as in Afghanistan. Tim’s mum has a friend who was a refugee from Afghanistan and has been back. Is it better after the war? No, it is worse—the people are in complete poverty. They throw them a scrap of food and medicine, and leave them alone to rot.”

Javiera Maturana, a university student, said that her mother had organised a website dedicated to architects for peace. “This war is against the UN. How can Howard speak for us Australians? They’re doing this to Iraq, but we don’t agree with it at all. They’re taking over a country, and treating a people there as though

they're nothing. Australia is on the other side of the world, but it has to participate with the United States to take part in this war. The people in Iraq are all going to be dying because of this."

Andrew Downie, 19, a TAFE student, attended the antiwar rally on Thursday after seeing news of the war on television. "The bombing of Iraq is over oil, so they can get their hands on the oil. I think France and Germany have done the right thing to oppose the United States, but it is not going to work. The US is too powerful, way too powerful. They've got lots of people, lots of money and a huge military machine. The situation isn't good at all, and if war breaks out between the major powers, it won't be like the last world war. It would be nuclear war and chemical warfare."

Mandy and Lainie came with their children to the "Babies not Bombs" demonstration on Sunday. Like many others at that rally, they had never been to a demonstration before in their lives.

"We came to the demonstration because we visit a mum's site—a lot of mums are talking about the war. War is not about the world we want for our kids. I help run YMLA.com for the young mums of Australia. Everyone is really upset about the war. We're thinking about the other young people out there hiding themselves and possibly their kids from the bombs. A few are really afraid about what will happen," Lainie said.

"It is horrible—a lot of innocent people and kids out there. We're not hearing the truth about what is happening. I've got two friends who are in the army. If they get sent to Iraq, they will try and get the truth of what is happening out to me. We're not sure what the solution must be. There must be other answers than this."



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