

Australia: Thousands rally in Melbourne protest against war

Our correspondents
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Antiwar protests continued in Australia last weekend with a 35,000-strong rally in Melbourne on March 29. The demonstration, which began at the State Library and marched through the city to the Treasury building, is the third major rally in the Victorian state capital in the last 10 days.

Middle Eastern families marched with workers, students and young people to voice their opposition and disgust over the invasion of Iraq. Some of the hand-made banners carried included, “Knowledge is power—don’t follow the propaganda”, “Peace is the benchmark of intelligent living”, “If we cry for Iraq we must cry for Palestine”, “They were right—we were shocked and awed by this stupid war”, “USA + Howard = Coalition of the Killing, not Willing” and “Globalise Peace”.

In contrast to the mood of rising anger among the protestors, the official platform was dominated by three parliamentarians—Kerry Nettle (Greens), Lindsay Tanner (Labor) and Lynn Allison (Australian Democrats)—none of whom have any fundamental disagreement with war on Iraq.

When Tanner, a so-called left, was introduced, a heckler yelled, “Get rid of [Labor leader] Crean!” But Tanner made no reference to Crean or his recent statements indicating Labor would not support the immediate withdrawal of Australian troops. Instead he launched into a demagogic denunciation of Prime Minister Howard for supporting a war without UN sanction.

Australia needed the support of the UN, Tanner argued, for operations like the Australian military intervention in East Timor. “Who would we turn to if similar circumstances emerged in other countries in our

region, such as Papua New Guinea? It would be the United Nations,” he said. “Yet as a country that has participated in an unprovoked attack—contrary to the charter of the UN—how can we go to other countries and urge them to honour their commitments to the UN?”

In other words, Tanner is not opposed to US-led war on Iraq or Washington’s predatory aims in the Middle East. Labor, along with the Greens and other parties, backed the Australian military intervention in East Timor, which was aimed at securing control over the Timor Gap oil and gas reserves. Tanner’s only criticism is that without UN backing, it will be difficult for Australian governments to carry out similar operations, in Papua New Guinea for instance, in the future.

There is a growing gap between the formal “opposition” of Labor figures like Tanner and the concerns of tens of thousands of ordinary people, in particular youth, attending antiwar rallies. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with some of those attending.

University student Sam Diwan, originally from Iraq, came with his sisters Idem and Reem, both senior students at Preston Girls Secondary College. “Where’s the greetings for the US soldiers? I saw injured US soldiers in Germany being interviewed. They said no way they’d go back to Iraq and said any US soldier would be glad to be injured like us, so they could get out,” he said.

“Our family on my father’s side is all in Iraq. We were planning to go and visit later this year. We have 50 cousins and six uncles but we can’t find out how they are, the phones are all cut. It is a life-and-death situation. When we called earlier, they were all sitting at home; praying the bombs wouldn’t fall on them. All

the factories have been closed down and the doors are bricked up so nobody can go in.

“I lived in Iraq during the Gulf War. I was about 11. I saw what they did and it was disgusting. There were dead people everywhere. They weren’t military targets—there was no army anywhere near. Water was cut for 45 days and so was electricity and telephones.

“The food in the fridges went rotten and the sirens were just awful. You couldn’t sleep. In our neighbourhood, two old ladies died of heart attacks from the sirens. There were rockets flying around, which were specifically designed to destroy the safe houses. Remember the bunker bomb in Baghdad, it was all women and children killed.”

Idem Diwan, who read her poem “The Horrors of War” at the student demonstration on March 26 in Melbourne, said: “They’re killing innocent people and it’s for oil. They think they’re going to occupy and they call that liberation. We’d rather have Saddam Hussein than the United States.”

Commenting on student arrests at the recent Sydney antiwar protest, Idem said: “We heard what happened on the Sydney demonstration when the students were arrested. We rang up friends there and they told us. The police deliberately pulled the girl’s scarf down and that caused it. It is a racist campaign against the students.”



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