

Montreal: 250,000 condemn US war on Iraq

Richard Dufour
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Close to a quarter million people marched through Montreal Saturday to condemn the coming US-British war on Iraq. Sponsored by a coalition of artists, community groups and trade unions known as the “Stop the War Collective,” the demonstration was amongst the largest political protests in Canadian history.

The marchers included a broad cross-section of Montreal’s population drawn from all the city’s major ethno-linguistic groups—French, English and immigrant. Young people comprised much of the throng, but there were also many working class families and large delegations of teachers and other professional workers from the Centrale des Syndicats du Québec. (CSQ).

Starting as two wings from the east and west sides of downtown Montreal, the demonstration converged in front of the city’s best-known federal building, the Guy-Favreau Center, to listen to speeches.

The first official speaker was Henri Massé, president of the Quebec Federation of Labour, the province’s largest union federation, and spokesman for a union coalition for wage parity. (Initially, the union coalition had planned a demonstration for Saturday, but chose instead to join the march organized by the Stop the War Collective. This accounts at least in part for Saturday’s stronger union presence than on previous antiwar protests.)

Echoing the Bush administration’s war propaganda, Massé began his speech by denouncing “the tyrant Saddam Hussein.” Then, without much conviction, he pledged the union movement’s unanimous opposition to a war against Iraq, adding that “diplomacy and weapons inspectors can stop Saddam Hussein.”

Massé concluded his remarks by making clear the unions oppose any independent mobilization of working people against the coming US aggression against the Iraqi people. All workers could do, he said, is to “continue to march and continue to shout our

indignation” in the vain hope that the United Nations, which is completely subservient to the imperialist powers, could stop the war. “The UN,” Massé claimed, “is the only organization able to defend peace and the UN needs support from the streets.”

Massé’s ritualistic five-minute speech drew little applause from the crowd and it was clear that the overall mood of the marchers stood in stark contrast to the right-wing outlook of this typical union bureaucrat.

The antiwar movement has emerged almost entirely from below, and outside the control of the trade unions and of the Quebec nationalist parties—the Parti Québécois (which currently forms the provincial government) and its sister party on the federal scene, the Bloc Québécois (BQ). Whereas at the last antiwar march, the sponsors had specifically welcomed the presence of several PQ ministers and BQ leader Gilles Duceppe, praising their professions to oppose a war unless sanctioned by the UN, this time no mention was made of the big business PQ/BQ even though a provincial election is now under way in Quebec.

Those who spoke from the podium after Massé were far more energetic in their denunciations of Washington’s war preparations and the impending threat of the slaughter of Iraqi men, women and children. And whereas the demonstrators had sat on their hands during Massé’s speech, the crowd responded with great enthusiasm to what often sounded like a radical critique of present-day international and social relations.

“Mr. Bush, you say you want to protect us from terrorism, we no longer believe you,” said singer Dan Bigras. Two Canadian army veterans of the 1991 Gulf War, François Gignac and Louis Lamarre, told the crowd, “This has been going on for 12 years. It is time to stop. There is a population which is suffering.” When the veterans said that rather than waging war governments should be providing greater “access to

health care, housing and education,” they were loudly applauded.

The main speaker was Raymond Legault, spokesman for the Stop the War Collective. “Diplomacy,” he began, “now consists for a number of countries including Canada in setting the date for war.” Later he added, “We are well aware that Saddam Hussein is a dictator, but we are also aware that dictators such as him have been put in power throughout the world by the United States.”

“We do not believe that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. We do not believe that the US wants to defend democracy.” Washington’s aim, said Legault, is to “take control of oil resources, take control of the region.”

Legault also drew much applause when he stated: “We are a movement which is having an impact on international politics. The Blair government could well fall if war begins.”

Legault accused the federal Liberal government of Jean Chrétien of constantly wavering on its attitude toward the war. (In fact, Chrétien has repeatedly praised the US military build-up, saying it alone has forced Iraq to cooperate with the UN inspectors.) “We want a categorical opposition to war.... We want Canada to denounce the domination and the hijack of international institutions by the Americans.”

Legault drew attention to the fact that “Canada is taking part in the war ... Canadian military personnel are acting as part of the Joint Command.” This was a reference to the fact that top-level Canadian Armed Forces personnel have been in Qatar for several months working with US and British war planners. And last week it was revealed that the Department of National Defense has authorized dozens of Canadian officers working, as part of an exchange program, on US ships and planes and in army battalions deployed in the Persian Gulf region to participate in an invasion of Iraq “regardless” of whether Canada ultimately decides to join the US military campaign against Iraq or not.

“We demand the return of the [three] Canadian war ships now en route to the [Persian] Gulf.... We demand that Canada puts a full stop to its war production and its integration with the American war industry,” continued Legault to loud applause.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in the demonstration and handed out hundreds of copies

of a WSWS statement “The tasks facing the antiwar movement.” As that statement explains, “The opponents of war must turn to the working population, which stands in fundamental opposition to the entire system of capitalist exploitation and imperialist plunder.”



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