

New Zealand: Tens of thousands join antiwar protests

John Braddock
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Over the past four days, tens of thousands of people have turned out in the main cities and provincial centres around New Zealand to protest the invasion of Iraq by US, British and Australian forces.

Protestors also expressed opposition to the equivocal role of the country's Labour government, which has distanced itself from Washington and Canberra, while declaring complete agreement with their aim of "disarming Iraq". Protestors have demanded that Prime Minister Helen Clark recall New Zealand's naval frigate *Te Mana*, which is currently operating in the Gulf of Oman as part of an international "anti-terrorism" taskforce.

On March 20, the day the bombing of Baghdad commenced, several hundred marchers gathered in Auckland and Wellington from 5 p.m. In Auckland about 200 people marched on the US Consulate, shouting "Shame! Shame!" In Wellington, 300 marched from the war memorial to the US, Australian and British embassies.

Other protests took place around the country. Candlelight vigils were held in the South Island cities of Christchurch and Dunedin, where earlier in the week rallies numbering about 2,000 took place.

In Napier, some 50 school students from Taradale and Tamatea High schools defied their principals and walked out of school. They gathered at a nearby park, holding banners denouncing the air strikes on Baghdad. Protest organiser, sixth form student Te Rangi Devine had earlier printed 700 posters and leaflets and distributed them in the Napier area.

Major antiwar protests took place on March 22. About 10,000 people took to the streets of Auckland. Stretching over two city blocks, the march started from Queen Elizabeth II Square and moved up Queen St to Myers Park for a rally. One group of 80 protestors,

some with their faces covered by black balaclavas, held an impromptu sit-in on the road opposite the park.

In Wellington, about 3,000 protesters gathered in the central city's Civic Square before marching to parliament and on to the US embassy, by which time their numbers had swelled to 5,000. At parliament, protestors chanted two messages to the government: bring the *Te Mana* back from the Middle East and throw out American ambassador Charles Swindells.

Many Iraqi immigrants concerned about the plight of their families joined the protests. Hutham Ali, who marched in Auckland with her 14-year-old son, told the *Sunday Star Times* she had been trying to reach her family since the attacks on Baghdad intensified. The phone line had cut out and she has been unable to get through. "Our people severed their links with Saddam 30 years ago.... We want Saddam pushed out but without war.... I saw on TV the Americans removed an Iraq flag and put up an American flag. We don't like that," she said.

Walid Rasheed, a doctor, who joined the Wellington march, reached his parents in Baghdad by phone, but was told: "My son, don't call us now—the bombs are falling." He said New Zealanders recognised the US was not fighting for freedom but for its own interests. "I don't think the current regime in Iraq is a good one but I don't think it is the business of America. It is the business of the Iraqi people."

Rasheed was worried about his parents, who he said would have taken cover in a sheltered corner of their home as the bombs hit Baghdad. "I don't think anyone can imagine that bombing the country, invading it, terrifying people, can be the solution to the Saddam regime," he said.

The Wellington protest was closely guarded by police. More than 100 police, carrying long batons,

used barricades to block off the American embassy and the Australian and British High Commissions. Three people were arrested after a police photographer was hit with an egg. As at previous demonstrations, the police waited until the rally was breaking up before moving in to arrest those they picked out as “ring leaders”.

A notable aspect of the demonstrations was the isolation and irrelevance of the traditional “labour movement”. In Wellington, a handful of trade union banners were evident, but were manned almost exclusively by full-time officials, with no support from organised groups of workers. There were no banners or placards representing the Labour Party. Only a few isolated Alliance placards—old election posters with “No War” hastily scrawled across them—were to be seen. The Alliance—a coalition partner in the 1999 Labour-led government, split apart when its MPs unanimously supported the invasion of Afghanistan.

Attempts by speakers from the official peace movement to whip up support for the government and the Greens were met, in the main, by indifference. A call from the microphone for the Wellington meeting to “thank Helen [Clark]” for “keeping New Zealand out of the war” received desultory applause from a minority. Similar praise by a march leader for the Green MPs was soon drowned out by chants from the crowd of “Bring home the frigate!”

Prime Minister Clark quickly made clear that neither bringing the *Te Mana* home nor throwing out ambassador Swindells were “options”. She was adamant the frigate was in the Gulf region as “part of the war on terrorism” not the invasion of Iraq, ignoring the obvious fact that the presence of the *Te Mana* freed a US warship for frontline duties.

In other centres, a peace vigil in central Christchurch was attended by about 100 people and a Peace and Music Festival was held at the Riverside Community, near Motueka .



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