Antiwar protests held across the UK

WSWS reporting teams
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Tens of thousands of people demonstrated across the UK on Saturday March 8 in opposition to the impending US-led war against Iraq.

The largest demonstration was in Manchester, northwest England but smaller protests were also held in towns and cities across the country, including Sheffield, Barnsley and Nottingham. In Scotland there was a demonstration and rally in Aberdeen and 500 people gathered outside an RAF base at Leuchars in Fife.

Below we report from Manchester, Sheffield and Aberdeen.

More than 20,000 people marched in driving rain through Manchester, and into Albert Square at the centre of the city, to register their opposition to the impending war against Iraq. It was one of the largest demonstrations seen in the city since 1819, when 50,000 people gathered on St Peter's Field, in virtually the same location, to demand universal suffrage—a demonstration that led to the Peterloo Massacre, with 11 demonstrators killed and hundreds injured.

Trade union banners were notable by their absence on the march in an area that was once the heartland of trade unionism. Instead the demonstration was lead by a homemade banner that declared, "The real threat is US. No war for Empire."

As the march streamed down Oxford Road and into Albert Square, a sea of umbrellas could be seen jostling placards that read, "Stop Labour Warmongers", "Stop the War on Asylum Seekers", "Drop sanctions not bombs", "No to War, No to Saddam". A line of black umbrellas spelled out the words GENOCIDE as a figure dressed as the grim reaper towered above the crowds. A large contingent carried banners supporting the Palestinian people.

The march was organised by the Stop the War Coalition, who have also set up a week long Peace Camp in the Peace Gardens behind Manchester Town Hall. Demonstrators converged from three locations to the meeting, to hear Labour Party backbench MPs George Galloway and Jeremy Corbyn, the Bishop of Manchester and other speakers.

There were a large number of young people on the march, including many Asian youth, as well as families and pensioners.

Paul Sweeney, a 77-year-old pensioner who had travelled from Blackpool for the demonstration, explained his views to the WSWS.

"I think that this war is completely immoral. Bush and Blair are talking of spreading democracy throughout the world. Bush wasn't democratically elected to the office of president of the US. Ordinary people were denied the vote in the state where his brother is governor. If Blair wants democracy, he should start with this country because democracy is being destroyed here.

"We pensioners have been let down by the Labour government and the trade unions. They all pay lip service to the defence of the social services and democratic rights, but it's empty rhetoric.

"I was in London for the demonstration on February 15. I've never seen crowds like it. It is amazing that so many people have turned out today in this appalling weather. I am very pleased to see so many young people. The issue of this war has cut across the ideas of materialism and selfishness that have been drilled into young people for so long. They have been brought to realise that there is much more to life than their own individual self-interest. I am a Christian—I think that anyone who follows the teachings of Christ must be a socialist.

"There definitely is some good coming out of this situation. The main thing is that it is an international campaign. It is uniting ordinary working people. You know the saying, 'Workers of the world unite'. It's as true today as it ever was."

The WSWS spoke to Peter and Susie Bolchover of the Manchester Jewish Socialists. Peter said, "We consider Bush to be a very dangerous person with global aspirations. He is obviously in the pockets of the arms industry and the oil industry. He has created this situation to protect his own interests.

"This war has absolutely no legitimacy. The parallel that is being drawn between Saddam Hussein and the Third Reich is a totally false analogy. There is no denying that Saddam is an autocratic dictator, but being anti-war is not the same as being pro-Saddam.

"As Jewish socialists we consider that peace in the Middle East is an absolute priority. But we can't achieve peace there by following the policies of Bush and Sharon. There has to be a dialogue that Sharon has completely undermined. As socialists we believe that people have got to live together in peace, harmony and common understanding.

"Manchester has a tremendous tradition of left-wing Jewish activism. We sent many volunteers to fight in Spain and some died there."

Susie added, "This anti-war campaign gives us hope that we are beginning to see the power of culture against the culture of power."

Yasmin, aged 24, and Bushra, aged 41, explained to the WSWS their strong opinions against the war:

"We are here to demonstrate because this war is totally unjust. It will be the beginning of a much greater conflict. There will be more hostility in the Middle East that will affect the whole world.

"Bush and Blair keep harping on about the moral case. But no one thinks that Saddam is a good person. He has killed a lot of people in his own country, but that was done with the support of the west. The bottom line is that this war is about oil. If there were only carrots in Iraq no one would bother.

"UN rules have to apply in the same way everywhere. Bush and Blair say the UN is in danger of being made a mockery of. That has already happened. Look at the situation of the Palestinians. How many UN resolutions has Israel refused to carry out?

"The international campaign against the war is fantastic. It shows that people are not stupid. They can see beyond the rubbish that is being spoon-fed by the politicians."

Sixth Form Students from Whalley Range High School spoke to the WSWS at the assembly point in Whitworth Park.

Asia said, "This war is all about oil and America's ambition to dominate the world. Behind all the talk about weapons of mass destruction we think there's a hidden agenda—something out of place in the world. Israel has had 60 violations of UN resolutions and has weapons of mass destruction too, but we hear nothing about that. We have nothing against Jewish people, only the injustice that the Palestinian people suffer at the hands of the Israeli state".

Naima, now at university, added that she agreed with the call to unite the workers of the world to overcome the divisions of religion, colour and

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country. “I feel young people must study politics seriously and am interested in attending your meeting”.

Over a thousand WSWS leaflets were handed out to marchers advertising a public meeting in Manchester on March 18.

Some 7,000 people also protested against a US-led war in Sheffield. It was the largest demonstration seen in the South Yorkshire city since the yearlong miners’ strike of 1984-85.

Six feeder marches from various neighbourhoods set off at 11.30 a.m., carrying hand-made banners and placards, merging just outside the city centre and then continuing on to the City Hall. A large proportion of the demonstration was made up of young people from schools and colleges across Sheffield, who led the chanting as the march proceeded from the City Hall, around the perimeter of the city centre, and back to the starting point.

“George Bush we know you—your father was a killer too”, “Bush, Blair, CIA—how many kids have you killed today”, were amongst the most popular slogans on the demonstration. “Not in our name”, “Disarm America” and “smart bombs don’t justify dumb leaders”, the most popular placards. Many of the placards and slogans targeted Prime Minister Tony Blair directly, blaming his determination to back a US-led war as a major factor in enabling the Bush administration to press ahead with its plans to decimate Iraq.

The size of the turnout took both police and the organisers by surprise. The police had counted on a maximum of 3,000, which would still have made the protest the largest in the city for two decades. So too had the organisers, the Stop the War coalition, booking just a small public address system that proved so weak no one could hear the speeches. No one could see the platform either—the back of a small truck—as it became buried in a sea of people.

The protestors weren’t concerned. Despite drizzling rain and heavy winds their aim was to make visible their anger at the government’s contempt for public opposition to its war-mongering—Blair’s setting of a date, March 17, as the deadline for war, only fuelling the outrage.

The WSWS spoke to several of the protestors.

A group of six form students, aged between 17- to 19-years-old, from Thomas Rotherham College were on the demonstration. (see pic sheff6—Sarah, Paul, David top row right) Paul Brammer explained, “We’ve come along to make clear that we don’t want this war. It’s a war for oil and everyone knows.

“Tony Blair is ignoring us. He doesn’t care what the people of this country think or want. Instead he thinks he can decide for us what we want, and so he is dragging Britain into a war, refusing to listen to any one other than George Bush.”

David Copley continued: “Tony Blair has now built his political reputation on backing the US in going to war against Iraq, so he is not going to back down. He has bigger plans than Iraq too. War is not going to stop with Iraq. North Korea is next.”

Paul interjected: “Bush and Blair are like the Crusaders. A major factor for them is the oil, because the US is running out fast. The other is just power. They just want to take over other countries—that’s really it”.

David went on: “If Britain wasn’t seen to be supporting the US, it would be very difficult for America to go ahead with its plans so Blair has a big responsibility for what happens in Iraq. Blair should be listening more to Europe. If America goes to war, and it will, it will take over Iraq just like it did in Afghanistan.

“They don’t have to go to war, but they will. Look at what’s happening now. We’re just two weeks away from the deadline they’ve set for war and all off a sudden they’re talking about the break through their making against Al Qaeda. They’re saying they’ve got bin Laden’s sons. It comes at a convenient time for them, backing up their so-called war against terrorism.

“The next few weeks are make or break time. Blair has made a lot of people very angry. Its possible he could go”.

Their friend Sarah added: “Look at Afghanistan and what’s happened there. They’ve made a mess. There’s no need for what the US and Britain are doing—they’re just power hungry. They plan to take over one country, then another, and then another and they will do it again and again.”

Kaye Hudson was also on the demonstration with her daughter Alex, aged 12. Kaye told the WSWS, “I was very concerned that on the radio this morning there was a discussion that some of the documents that said Iraq was importing uranium were found to be forged! The question is who forged them?

“I think its amazing that people all over the world are standing up and voicing their disagreement with the war. Including people of all ages. For instance, my daughter went on the [school student] march on Wednesday, despite the fact that the letter received from school said the march was organised by an extreme left-wing faction. It’s about all school pupils coming together.

“The head teacher was standing at the gates to stop them leaving. I can understand that teachers have a responsibility but at the same time its very important that youth are finding a political voice about this issue. This reminds me of when I was at primary school—we had the four-minute warnings [as drills for nuclear attack] but we didn’t understand it. Kids need to express their fears”.

Chris Wragg, 15-years-old, was also on the Sheffield protest. He told the WSWS, “Blair should listen more to youth. We are the next generation to be voting. Young people have their own views on politics. They’re saying it’s about terrorism but they just want to get their hands on Saddam Hussein’s oil reserves and are teaming up with the US, which is stupid. My mum thinks I should trust Blair and he will make the right decision, but I don’t think it’s like that.

“I think everyone taking part in the demonstrations is thinking about the world. A lot of people have got things to say. Look at the fact that 15 percent of money is spent on the military when it should be spent on the countries where people don’t even have clean water.

“There are more important issues than oil and business and money and they are putting a lot of things at risk for not the right reasons. Why is it all now? I don’t think Saddam Hussein is that much of a threat. We have much more dangerous things going on and the world is no longer a safe place to live.

“If Blair was on the frontline he’d think differently, instead all these people are going to be sacrificed.

“A lot of people are scared and want to keep the world OK and get on with their lives. At the moment young people are doing their GCSE’s and if they’re worrying about war this will cause even more stress. The news that’s going out is not giving us the information. We need we are not hearing all sides of the story”.

In Scotland, approximately 3,000 people marched through the centre of Aberdeen to oppose the war. The protest was made up of workers, students, retired persons and families with young children.

At the end of the march several local politicians and a representative from the public sector union Unison addressed the rally. A local Labour MP received a frosty reception from the audience as he insisted that United Nations authority had to be upheld and the weapons inspectors should be given more time to continue their work. Spokespersons from the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Socialist Party offered a nationalist perspective for the anti-war movement, suggesting that votes for them in the upcoming local authority elections would represent a “Scottish voice” against war.

Supporters of the WSWS distributed hundreds of copies of the statement, *The tasks facing the antiwar movement* and many people asked

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for copies, some who said they were regular readers of the site.

Katharine, a final year university student, told the *WSWS* how pleased she was that so many people were turning up to demonstrations around the world but that she was not sure what effect they could have. “I think regardless of these protests the war will go on because Bush and Blair are war mongers.

“It’s so hypocritical, what they’re saying about Saddam Hussein, because Bush himself is not an elected president. He keeps spouting the word democracy but the fact is there is no democracy—most of the world is against this war.”

Asked what she thought of the Anglo-American claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, she said, “America and Britain sold them the weapons in the first place and funded them heavily in the 1980s in the war against Iran. The sanctions against Iraq are so wrong and they’ve never stopped bombing the country. Britain and America have destroyed the country. They go on about Saddam gassing the Kurds but the first person to do that was Winston Churchill in the 1920s.”

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