

DC march circles White House to protest war

Bill Vann
17 March 2003

Tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in Washington Saturday to oppose what many saw as an inevitable war of aggression against Iraq. While one police spokesman put the size of the crowd at 50,000, organizers of the protest estimated at least 100,000. The second figure seemed closer to the truth if one counted all those who joined either the rally at the Washington monument or the subsequent march that wound its way around barricades, mounted police and truncheon-wielding cops who sealed off the blocks surrounding the White House.

Bush himself was out of Washington for the demonstration, going to his Camp David retreat in Maryland to prepare for the so-called “summit” with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Spanish Prime Minister Aznar in the Azores.

Demonstrators gathered at midday in the shadow of the Washington Monument, soon filling the slopes surrounding the towering white obelisk with multicolored banners and placards.

The protesters carried hand-painted signs reflecting immense popular hostility both to war against Iraq and the Bush administration in general: “Disarm them, then bomb them, is this war?” “From drunk to dictator in 15 years!” “No war for empire,” “Shock and awe is a terrorist plot,” and “This is not war, it’s murder,” read some.

The demonstrators grew impatient with a long list of speakers, most of whose remarks failed to rise above the level of radical sloganeering. While the speeches were continuing, thousands began streaming down the hill from the monument to Constitution Ave. to begin the march themselves. Organizers, seeing the crowd begin to dissipate, scrambled to catch up with it.

Many had traveled enormous distances to be in Washington for the protest, coming from northern Minnesota, Maine and southern Mississippi.

Saad Kadhim, of the Iraqi-American Antiwar Association, came with a group of nearly 50 Iraqis from New York City. Just returned last week from Baghdad, Kadhim said that the Iraqi people had no doubt that they will soon be the targets of a military onslaught.

“We are expecting war by Thursday or Friday,” he said. “The impact will be devastating. This will not end in a matter of days or weeks. It will be a bloodbath against the people with casualties on both sides, and it will be an annihilation of a culture.”

Kadhim ridiculed the Bush administration’s pretension that it is seeking a democratic renewal in Iraq. “Name me one country where the US has brought democracy with an invasion. The Dominican Republic? Panama? Afghanistan? It has never happened.”

He stressed that even with war imminent, the Iraqi people draw a sharp distinction in their feelings toward the American people and the government in Washington. “My two young nephews in Baghdad kept asking me, ‘Can we come to America?’” he said. “I told them yes, you can come, but not now. If you did you would have change your name, your religion and your color or risk being sent to prison.”

Philip Miller, 79, attended the demonstration in his World War II uniform, the yellow patch of the 1st Cavalry on his shoulder. He flew to Washington from his home in Colorado to join the protest.

“I was in some of the worst battles of the war in the Pacific, so I know

what these words ‘collateral damage’ and ‘casualties’ really mean,” he said. He spoke in particular of his experience in the occupation of Manila in the Philippines, seeing families starving in the bombed out wreckage of their homes. “One night, a young Filipino man came out of his home, and one of our soldiers shot and killed him,” he said. “The next morning, you could hear his mother wailing—that’s collateral damage, and that is what they’re going to do to the Iraqi people.”

“An unnecessary war is the worst crime there is,” Miller noted. “If they start this war, I would hope that some day they will be tried and punished for it. The problem is that the US is such an overwhelming military power, that there would have to be some big changes before that could happen.”

The seriousness and determination expressed by many of the demonstrators contrasted sharply with the hollow rhetoric and opportunist politics that blared out from the speakers’ platform. The program was organized by ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), a coalition dominated politically by the Workers World Party.

Beneath a torrent of radical phrases and identity politics, the basic message was one of support for and reliance upon the Democratic Party, the trade union bureaucracy and the European bourgeoisie to halt war.

Congressman John Conyers was brought onto the platform. “The people can stop the war,” declared the Detroit, Michigan Democrat, who expressed the hope that Bush was taking note of the demonstration.

Other speakers hailed the AFL-CIO’s recent resolution of mild criticism of the Bush administration’s Iraq policy as a signal of renewed militancy within the sclerotic bureaucracy of the US labor movement. The bureaucracy’s resolution—passed after Bush’s Labor Secretary offended AFL-CIO bureaucrats assembled in Florida by referring to union corruption—limited its criticism to Bush’s failure to offer an adequate “explanation” for the war and called the imminent invasion “premature.”

Ramsey Clark, the former US attorney general from the Johnson administration, delivered the principal address at the rally. Clark began his remarks by extolling the position of the Chirac government in France, which opposes the US war on Iraq only from the standpoint of the strategic interests of French imperialism, and is responsible for bloody interventions in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere. “Lafayette must be proud,” he said.

Clark went on to call for those present to “take back the Constitution” by fighting for the impeachment of Bush. This proposal is essentially aimed at orienting those looking for a way to fight war and the policies of the Bush administration toward the Democrats in Congress. Having voted to grant the president power to wage a preemptive war against Iraq, this same Congress is hardly about to impeach him for carrying it out.

With war imminent and its stark implications for world politics and social struggles becoming clearer, the profound limitations and essentially reactionary content of this form of protest politics combined with illusions in the Democratic Party are increasingly evident.

It stands as an obstacle to the development of a political force capable of mounting a successful struggle against war. This requires the building of a new and independent political movement that unites the working class of all nationalities on the basis of an international socialist program.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality

Party distributed thousands of copies of a statement “The tasks facing the antiwar movement,” [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/feb2003/demof12.shtml] explaining the necessity for the development of such a movement.

Those attending the Washington protest represented a broad spectrum of American society in terms of age and class background, and traveled to the US capital from throughout the East Coast, the Midwest and the South. While the great majority were not politically affiliated, many expressed a understanding of the political and economic issues involved in the drive to war and linked the government’s policy of military aggression abroad to the attack on democratic rights and social conditions at home.

Susan, 54, came to the demonstration from Columbus, Ohio. Recently laid off from a box manufacturing plant, she said that the imminence of war in Iraq made it all the more important to participate in the protest march.

“This is madness; they don’t even think about what is going to happen the day after,” she said. “There is so much instability in countries like Turkey, and who knows what Israel is going to do? Not to mention the economic situation in this country. People are losing their jobs, and social services are going to be cut because the money is going to the military. The government seems not to listen to the protest demonstrations. If they are willing to go it alone without the UN, they aren’t going to listen to us.”

Kevin, 23, an artist, made the 22-hour trip from Rochester, Minnesota, with a bus full of antiwar protesters from Minnesota and Iowa. He sat with a couple of friends behind a large campaign poster for Minnesota’s late Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone, who was killed last October in a plane crash while campaigning for reelection.

“I came to show my support for the antiwar movement,” said Kevin. “I am not a Democrat, but Wellstone was against the war. I believe there was something suspicious about his plane crash. It’s possible he was assassinated because of his views against the war. I don’t know where this country is going; it really scares me.

“The American government is basically telling us to shut up and go along with their agenda, which is world domination. All the people who are demonstrating overseas and in America, too, their viewpoints are being ignored. The media hardly covers them because they are pro-war, controlled by corporations that are all connected.”

Louise is a consultant for social service organizations in Washington DC, who previously worked as a congressional staffer for 20 years.

“I strongly oppose the Bush administration’s drive to war,” she said. “I disagree with his priorities. I want the money going to health and education. He doesn’t listen to the voices of democracy. He calls us a ‘focus group.’

“Congress has abdicated their responsibility. They have been pathetically silent. We have a dearth of leadership. The Democratic Party has been incredibly timid and has let the Bush administration use the fear hammer of 9/11 to try to tie Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden. The war resolution Congress passed abdicates their constitutional duty.”

Mufeed, 47, a consulting engineer originally from Syria who immigrated to the US 15 years ago, came to the demonstration from New Jersey. “What’s the reason for the war? Israel has 10 times the weapons that Iraq has,” he said. “The US has 100 times what Iraq has. Before we look to the little army in Iraq, let’s look at the big armies of Israel and the United States.”

Raul and Joshua came to the demonstration from New Mexico. They were in Washington DC for a school trip and along with several of their classmates decided to participate in the demonstration.

Joshua said, “We don’t want to see all the innocent people get hurt that are going to be hurt if there is a war. We want to show that our generation is very much against another war and we want to do what we can to stop it. “This war is really about Bush wanting to dominate oil and the Middle

East.”

Raul added, “We spent two days on the train to get here. We didn’t come for the demonstration, but this is an added bonus. We want to show people that we are against this war. I don’t want to see innocent people getting killed. Bush is just ignoring the people. He does not have the right to go to war just for oil.”

Malachy, a young worker from Washington DC, said: “I am here today because I strongly oppose this administration’s plans for military action in Iraq. This war is about oil and US control over the entire region.

“The Democratic Party is supporting the war drive with their silence. The few that have spoken up are in a very weak opposition to the war. There are very few Democratic officeholders who are against this war and it shows that it is just a matter of degree, the difference between the two parties.

“The media has given the government a complete pass. All the corporate media is just restating the lies of the government to the people. The Sunday talk shows are all dominated with people from the administration and to the extent that there is a debate, it is about when is the best time and way to go to war, not whether or not we should go to war. There is no critical analysis of why this administration wants to go to war. Millions of people oppose this war, but this administration is determined to proceed with it anyway.”

Angel, 22, came to the demonstration from Kean University in New Jersey. “Whenever a professor brings up the subject of terrorism, it seems like everybody clams up and doesn’t want to talk about it,” he said. “But what I see is that we are the ones who should be speaking up and saying what we think. There shouldn’t be a war. A lot of people are going to die fighting for Bush, Cheney and the oil companies who will benefit from this war.

“All my classmates said that I should not come to this rally. They said that the government would be watching who came. I am not going to be scared; I am not going to be silent.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact