

Ireland: Mass opposition to war vs. Iraq

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Opposition to the US-led war against Iraq has drawn mass protests in Ireland. On Saturday, March 29, some 20,000 people joined an antiwar demonstration through the capital, Dublin, whilst thousands joined protests in Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Sligo and Derry.

Fianna Fail offices in Cork were briefly occupied by protesters, whilst a short work stoppage following the war's outbreak was officially endorsed by SIPTU, Ireland's largest trade union.

Shannon airport, near Limerick, has also been the focus of regular protests after Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern defied popular opposition to the war and granted overflying and landing rights to US military transport planes en route to the Middle East.

Ahern's stance had received full support from the Irish republic's ruling Fianna Fail and Progressive Democrats and has split the Fine Gael opposition. Labour, the Green Party, and Sinn Fein all oppose the military flights. Votes in favour of continued use of Shannon airport were carried by comfortable majorities, after a six-hour debate in the Irish parliament, the Dail, on March 20.

Shannon airport is an important transit post for the US military. Some 43,000 US troops are reported to have transited through it since January 2003, including 10,000 since the outbreak of war. This figure will likely increase dramatically as the US prepares to send 130,000 more troops to Iraq.

Some 2,000 took part in a rally outside the airport last month, and a permanent camp of antiwar protesters has been set up at the base's perimeter. The government responded by deploying armed police at the base.

During the parliamentary debate on the US military's use of Shannon airport, 100 antiwar protesters had barred the entrance to a government building, pouring paint over a pro-war MP.

As elsewhere, the antiwar protests have been organised by a coalition of Green, pacifist and left

groups, but the strength of opposition to the US-led war has mobilised thousands of working people and youth, many politically unaffiliated.

Generally, the Greens, Sinn Fein, the SIPTU trade union and the Irish Labour Party have sought to use the protests to build up illusions in Ireland's traditional constitutional neutrality and in the United Nations.

Underlying Ahern and Fianna Fail's support for the US action, however, is their concern to protect Ireland as a favoured location for American corporate investment.

During his March 20 speech to the Dail, Ahern had expressed alarm and a fair degree of bewilderment at the inability of the UN Security Council to find a unified position. Whilst he said he regretted the US decision to proceed without UN sanction, however, Ahern made clear he was not prepared to alienate the US and the UK by withdrawing rights for military flyovers.

"The United States and Great Britain ... are our biggest trading partners. They are the biggest foreign investors in the Irish economy. They are host to the biggest Irish communities overseas. They share many of our political and civic values. They are particularly worthy of our understanding where such understanding is appropriate," Ahern said.

This meant that overflight and landing facilities to US military transports would continue to be granted, Ahern insisted, whilst claiming that this did not constitute a violation of either the UN charter or Irish constitutional neutrality.

One unnamed MP told the *Irish Independent*, "I have 17 US firms in my constituency. I'd march with them if that's what it took to keep them there." A professor of business studies commented, "I have a very strong feeling that were the United States administration to pursue a vindictive policy against Ireland they could make moves that would change dramatically the

profitability of US firms in Ireland.”

Prior to the Dail vote, a rabid piece in the US-based *Irish Echo*, entitled “Ireland Waffle Imperils Vital Ties with America”, by Patrick Hurley, indicated the level of pressure being exerted on Ahern. Hurley hailed the “new Europe” that had lined up with the US against Iraq (mainly Britain, Italy, Spain and several Eastern European countries) and berated Ahern for his apparent hesitancy in signing up to the same.

Pointing to the extent to which the Irish economy is underpinned by the US, Hurley warned of the consequences of the government opposing Shannon’s use by American forces.

“‘The US has no better friend in Europe than Poland,’ President Bush said recently. Would that he could say the same of Ireland? The ouster of Saddam will be followed by a major realignment of US foreign policy. The warm sentiment recently expressed toward Ireland in the Oval Office will quickly evaporate, unless Ahern’s shamrock diplomacy translates into moral and tangible support. Dublin can no longer evade the question: Will it be Boston or Berlin?”

Hurley’s remarks indicate the extent to which the break-up of the structure of international relations caused by the US action against Iraq marks a crisis for corporate Ireland.

The success of the so-called Celtic Tiger economy has been based on the Republic providing a cheap labour, low-tax environment for US companies exporting to Europe. As such, maintaining good relations between Europe and America is essential. With the US in conflict with much of western Europe, specifically those countries organised within the European Union, Ireland faces the “choice” of a rock or a hard place.

While Ahern has nervously sided with the US and UK, former Fine Gael prime minister John Bruton has attacked the “European war leaders—Blair and Aznar” for breaching the Maastricht Treaty that had called for a common EU security policy. Bruton warned that sooner or later Europe would be forced to build such a policy. Another former prime minister, Garret Fitzgerald, has insisted that postwar Iraq must be handed over to the UN, a call the Bush administration has made clear it has no time for.

In Northern Ireland, which is just as dependent on US and UK investment as the south, the pro-British Ulster

Unionist Party and Democratic Unionist Party have also sided with Blair and Bush.

Their stance has also attracted widespread public opposition. Some 15,000 people marched in the capital Belfast on March 29 against the war. Last month, riot police in the city were deployed against school children who had tried to occupy the US Consulate.



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