

Britain: Determined opposition to US-UK occupation of Iraq

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An estimated 100,000 to 150,000 protesters marched through London against the occupation of Iraq.

Police tried to dismiss its significance by claiming that only 20,000 people had gathered for the rally in Hyde Park organised by the Committee to Stop the War in the Gulf, the Muslim Association of Britain and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

There is no doubt that most of those who marched did not stay to hear the platform of speakers, though it is impossible to say how many did. Most filed into the park at one end and left by the gate opposite.

But this only shows the depth of the political discontinuity between the protesters and the official leadership of the antiwar movement—with its calls for taking control of the Labour Party as the most pressing task for antiwar activists and advocacy of a reformed United Nations as a bulwark against war and colonialism. One of the strangest sights at the demo was the banner at the side of the stage urging opposition to war but linking this with the demand, “Labour take the power!”

Their position was not strengthened by the efforts of the French and German governments—who have been held up as an example—to mend their relations with the Bush Administration and secure a share of the spoils of war.

Another indication of this phenomena was that even 15 minutes before the demonstration was due to set off, there were only a couple of thousand assembled at each of the two meeting points. The tens of thousands who joined the protest in the main made their own way there or as part of an informal network of antiwar protest groups.

The demonstration was certainly smaller than previous protests, but was still large, determined and angry at the atrocities that have been witnessed in Iraq

over the past weeks.

Starting at Victoria and Waterloo stations, the two wings of the march met up at Parliament Square where a minute of silence was held to honour those killed in the war, civilians, Iraqi conscripts, journalists and US and British soldiers alike. Many marchers laid flowers, cards and wreaths.

Scotland Yard said just three men were arrested during the rally at Hyde Park, but this figure would lend itself to an underestimation of the often aggressive and provocative policing of the demo. Those with stalls or selling political newspapers were threatened with arrest if they took money, which is prohibited under a by-law but has been carried out freely by custom and practice for years. Other protesters were targeted by roving groups of police if they were seen drinking beer, again using by-laws as a means of disguising behaviour designed to intimidate.

David from Quebec told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

“I’m deeply against this war and think there should be more direct action to stop it. Ever since the Second World War civilians have always been the targets. In Baghdad they are not liberating people by destroying their homes. A lot of the stuff used in Iraq, the purpose of the propaganda, is taken from the Nazis. It’s to break the morale of the enemy. Its part of a global agenda, which is not just about oil: Oil is a tool to control the region and those who use that oil. It is against Europe.

“Iraqi oil fields at the moment are devastated it will take a long time to make them work again. The US gets its oil mainly from South America and more from Africa. They don’t get much oil from Iraq. They want it to avoid any regional power emerging. This campaign will not stop with Iraq, be sure of that. It will

drive toward other countries, Iran and Syria. Any country that doesn't obey the US will face serious consequences. European governments oppose the war because it suits their interests. France has major oil contracts—they don't oppose the war in any humanist way.

"The antiwar movement has reached a lot of people that were not involved before. It has to have new alternatives to connect the movement with all other issues on racism, capitalism and environmentalism. Just one protest after another and listening to so many speeches without discussion is not enough. There should be more local meetings where the grassroots can get involved. Last November I went to the European Social Forum in Florence. But there were so many people; there wasn't enough discussion, just speeches and questions from the floor.

"In Quebec in the provincial elections all three party leaders take the side of opposing the war. Is it just a tactic to win votes because all the people are against the war? Some may be honest but generally they are suspect. They tell so many lies.

"I received one of your leaflets on the February 15 demonstration in London and went to the *World Socialist Web Site*. I read it mainly for the coverage of the antiwar demonstrations. It's something you can't get in the mainstream media. The article about the Iraqi general on the side of the Americans who was involved in the gassing of the Kurd's was the kind of information you don't get in the mainstream media."

Ali, an Iranian, who has lived most of his life in Britain, was a regular reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* and commended its coverage for its objectivity and lack of rhetoric. He said: "What is taking place in Iraq is an occupation. The Iraqis never asked the United States to come in.

"The problems are only just beginning. Iraq has never been pacified. Saddam held it together by force and repression, but there have always been rebellions by the Kurds and Shias and they will rise up again. The occupiers will do no better than Saddam.

"The war will strengthen repressive pro-US regimes in the region—the Saudis, Bahrain, etc. The next targets will be Syria and Iran, those states that have caused the US trouble, and the pro-US regimes will be happy with this and feel more secure to carry out their policies. Egypt and Syria will feel they have a free hand.

"There have been protests expressing the opposition of the street to war, but they are repressed. It is not like here where there are still some freedoms.

"I have been a long-time supporter of the Labour Party and remained so until after the last election—26 years. But we should now make sure that Blair becomes political collateral damage of this war. I would like to see this antiwar movement become an embryonic movement for a new politics. We should end the two party system—one Tory Party and one ultra-Tory party and use the present movement to create a broader movement against the status-quo and the new colonialism that has emerge."

Alan from Dundee said, "The weapons of mass destruction are like the hunt for the Holy Grail. It is as if Bush and Blair are on a mission to hunt for the weapons of mass destruction around the globe. They knew from the start that there were none in Iraq.

"Blair is like a chameleon—he is all things to all men. He's a neo-conservative who wants to attack people's rights. He is in bed with the rich so that anyone who gives the Labour Party a donation is suddenly OK. Tony Blair should be on trial for war crimes. He's a warlord.

"The warmongers have become braver since the war began, but it's based on a fraud. Alistair Campbell, Labour's media chief, has built up the greatest spin machine since Goebbels and panders to Rupert Murdoch. They're going to give him Channel 5 when they deregulate the media. That's why an independent web site like yours is crucial."



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