

Antiwar demonstrations in New Zealand cities

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Demonstrations against the US-led invasion of Iraq took place on Saturday in New Zealand's major city Auckland, and the capital Wellington as part of ongoing antiwar protests.

In Auckland, more than 1,000 people marched through the city centre to the US, British and Australian consulate offices, where US and Australian flags were burnt. The route passed via a number of downtown petrol stations, highlighting the connection between the war of Iraq and US aims to control the country's oil reserves.

The march ended outside the headquarters of Television New Zealand, where speakers denounced the media reporting of the war as propaganda for the US-led coalition. The protesters called for more balanced reporting in the local media.

In Wellington a spirited and colourful group of about 200 protestors marched in the rain from Civic Square to parliament. Demonstrators chanted slogans such as "Occupation is not liberation!" "US imperialists—number one terrorists!" and "Troops out of Iraq".

The march was led by a group of young people carrying a huge cardboard replica of the New Zealand navy frigate *Te Mana*, which is currently on "anti-terrorism" duties in the Gulf of Oman. Outside the Ministry of Defence headquarters protestors demanded that the frigate be pulled out of the Middle East.

A notable feature of the demonstration was the political fissure now emerging between the representatives of the official peace movement and the sentiments of demonstrators and onlookers.

At Civic Square, Nicky Hager, speaking for Peace Movement Wellington, referred to a recent high-level US rebuke to Prime Minister Helen Clark after she mildly criticised the Bush administration's pursuit of the war about a week ago. He said New Zealanders should be "grateful" to Clark for "keeping us out of the

war". Hager declared that Clark's decision not to send troops was a significant step, given the diplomatic pressure brought to bear by Washington.

Many of those taking part in the march, however, were critical of the Labour government's tacit support for the war. In addition to demanding the return of the *Te Mana*, demonstrators also called for the government to sever all existing links with the US military, including the return of NZ military personnel from Afghanistan and US Central Command in Florida as well as the closure of the Waihopai electronic spy base near Blenheim and the US Air Force facility at Harewood, Christchurch.

The leaders of the peace movement have also gone to considerable lengths to promote the Greens as an "antiwar" party. The Greens like the Labour Party and the trade unions have no principled opposition to the US war but have criticised the failure of the US to obtain UN approval. At the Wellington rally, Green foreign affairs spokesman Keith Locke appealed for the government to work with other nations to ensure the "rebuilding" of Iraq take place under UN rather than US control.

Locke's comments were enthusiastically supported by the other main speaker, Council of Trade Unions representative Helen Kelly, who is also a member of the Labour Party policy council. Neither speaker called pointed to the blatantly colonial character of the regime, which will be imposed on Iraq—with or without the imprimatur of the UN.

Last weekend's demonstrations follow rallies, vigils and meetings throughout the country. On April 5, 150 people marched through Lower Hutt to the private residence of the US Ambassador, stopping along the way to protest recent pro-war statements made by the city's mayor, former Labour MP John Terris. On the same day, hundreds of immigrants protested in Auckland against the war.

In Wellington, a regular Thursday vigil at the National War Memorial has built up substantial support. Late last week, several hundred copies of recent *World Socialist Web Site* statements were distributed at the Wellington campuses of Massey and Victoria universities, receiving a warm response.

The antiwar protests are taking place against a backdrop of overwhelming public opposition to the war. A poll published in the *Sunday Star Times* on March 30 showed 64 percent opposed the war and only 31 percent were in favour. The Bush administration's overall handling of the "Iraq issue" was disapproved of by 72 percent of respondents, while 75 percent said they opposed any involvement by New Zealand combat troops.

The next round of demonstrations is being planned for May 3.



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