

UN legal fig leaf for illegal war

Paris, Berlin, Moscow sanction US occupation of Iraq

Peter Schwarz
23 May 2003

The United Nations Security Council on Thursday sanctioned the military occupation of Iraq by the United States and Great Britain. With the votes of 14 of its 15 members, the Security Council decided to immediately lift sanctions against Iraq and accord effective governmental power and unlimited control of the country's oil wealth to the occupying forces.

The vote was a shameless endorsement of the results of a brutal and unprovoked war of aggression, which Security Council members France, Germany and Russia had warned during the diplomatic struggle preceding the invasion would constitute a breach of United Nations resolutions and violation of international law. While the European powers carried out a cynical about-face in an attempt to conciliate with Washington and obtain a share in the war booty, Syria provided yet another demonstration of the cowardice and perfidy of the Arab bourgeois regimes by failing to even show up for the vote. The Syrian regime could not muster the will to officially register an abstention, let alone cast a negative vote.

The vote had been preceded by a fourteen-day tug-of-war by the Security Council members that ended with the capitulation of France and Russia, permanent Council members who have veto power, as well as Germany, a non-permanent member of the Council.

On May 9th the US presented the first draft of its resolution. This was aimed at testing how far other members of the Council were prepared to go in resisting its demands for colonial-style control over Iraq. France and Russia rejected the draft, while Germany refused to take a clear position and offered to play the role of mediator.

There followed a combination of political pressure and diplomatic concessions. US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Moscow and Berlin and conferred repeatedly via telephone with the heads of government and foreign ministers of the decisive countries. The draft of the resolution was reworked four times and included 90 changes in the final version, all of which were of a superficial nature and did nothing to alter the main thrust of the resolution.

The outcome became clear on Wednesday evening when, following a meeting in Paris, the foreign ministers of France,

Russia and Germany declared they were prepared to support the resolution. All three emphasised this did not mean "retrospective legitimacy for the war"—a ludicrous claim that could not disguise the extent of their capitulation.

By sanctioning the US occupation of Iraq, they are legitimising ex post facto the means by which the occupation was established. It is as if the success of a robbery exonerated the thief and bestowed on him the right to keep his ill-gotten goods. Only in this case the issue at hand is not a burglary, but rather the rape of a country, the killing of thousands of its citizens, and the theft of its vital resources—above all, oil.

The Security Council resolution awards the powers that carried out the war absolution for their past, present and future crimes. The resolution annuls all "previous, relevant resolutions" of the Security Council and concedes unlimited power over Iraq to the US and its allies. There is no stipulation of a time limit for US political rule and economic control over the country's resources. Demands for such a limit on the part of France and Russia were rejected by the American government.

The only concession is that the United Nations will be allowed to "check" the success of the resolution after a year and, if necessary, "initiate further steps." Given that the US and Great Britain can use their veto power to torpedo any "further steps," this clause has little practical significance.

The UN resolution explicitly concedes control of Iraq's vast oil wealth to the US. Here as well, purely verbal concessions were made to demands for international control. Representatives of the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund will be allowed to "participate" and not merely "cooperate," as per the wording in the original draft. The result remains the same: these institutions (which, in any event, are dominated by the US) can express their opinions, but it is the US government that will decide and American-based oil conglomerates that will cash in.

The significance of this vote goes much further than providing a legal fig leaf for the conquest and colonial-style occupation of Iraq. It creates a precedent for future wars of conquest and justifies the pre-emptive war doctrine of the Bush

government. In future, when the US invades another country—whether it be Iran, Syria or North Korea—it will be able to draw on this decision of the UN.

The German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that the Bush government had “retrospectively received for its interventionist policy that which it had sought in vain before the war ...the benediction of the UN and thereby the semblance of legality and legitimacy.” The newspaper continued: “Those in power in Washington will wave this resolution and say to their critics: look here, the Security Council has confirmed us as the rulers of Iraq. In so doing it has implicitly recognised our campaign and, in addition, our entire pre-emptive war doctrine. The old international law is dead, long live the law of the Imperium Americanum.”

The capitulation by Berlin, Paris and Moscow is a blow against the many millions who actively opposed the war throughout Europe, the US and the rest of the world. It strengthens Bush and his backers in the US, as well as the forces of reaction across the globe. It confirms the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the struggle against imperialism and war could be based only on an independent movement of the working class and not on the European governments or the United Nations.

Last autumn the German coalition government of the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) and the Greens was able to win re-election because it spoke out against the American war plans. Now the government is not even making an effort to justify its change of course.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his foreign minister Joschka Fischer merely declare that it is necessary to look to the future and, at all costs, improve relations with Washington.

France’s conservative government expressed its unease over the UN resolution—a presidential spokesman declared that it had hoped for a stronger role for the United Nations—but then said there was “no alternative” to voting in favour. According to a French diplomat, Germany and Russia had no interest in any further conflict in the United Nations and France was “not interested in separating from them in future, because one cannot rule out that the Americans at a later time will once again try to push through their policies with force.”

President Jacques Chirac has made it clear that his priority is to rescue the G8 summit of world leaders due to take place in the French resort of Evian on June 1-3. Chirac evidently fears that the failure of the summit could drastically exacerbate the global economic crisis.

He said it was the task of all participants at the summit “to communicate a message of confidence to the world: We are determined to do everything to ensure that the world economy recovers.” For its part the US government made clear to Chirac that an “icy” or friendly mood in Evian was dependent on the way France voted in the Security Council.

Irrespective of the result of the meeting in Evian, the concessions made to the Bush government by Paris and Berlin

will only encourage Washington to pursue its interests in an even more unilateral and ruthless fashion. In the long term, tensions will only grow, not lessen, between Europe and the US. The same is true for conflicts within Europe itself.

In order to effectively counteract Washington’s aggressive foreign policy the bourgeois governments of Europe would have to act together. But the growing conflict with the US has undermined the basis for the very politics of concessions and compromise that have, up until now, allowed the European governments to bring the continent together step by step. Both Germany and France are increasingly claiming the right to play the leading role in Europe. Under such circumstance the US government was easily able to exploit internal European tensions and animosities to undermine any joint foreign policy.

Moreover, the intensification of social contradictions within Europe has tended to drive individual governments to Washington’s side. They cannot attack their own people and take on the US at the same time.

Initial popular support for Chirac and Schröder, based on their previous opposition to the Iraq war, has long since evaporated. In France mass protests by teachers and public sector workers against proposed pension reform has precipitated a crisis for the Raffarin government. In Germany, Schröder has been able to push ahead with his “Agenda 2010” assault on the welfare state only by threatening his own party with resignation.

Under these conditions, both governments prefer to come to some sort of accommodation with the US. They oppose unilateral American action, but not the neo-colonial content of such action, including the violent suppression of the Iraqi masses. One of the reasons they are now prepared to support a US-led colonial regime is their fear that opposition to the American occupation could get out of control and provoke upheavals in the entire region, threatening their own imperialist interests.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact