

Tens of thousands in Washington demand end to US occupation of Iraq

Bill Vann**27 October 2003**

Tens of thousands of people from throughout the East Coast and as far away as Wisconsin, Maine and Florida demonstrated in Washington, D.C., October 25 to demand an end to the US occupation of Iraq. Students, workers and a sizable contingent of family members of soldiers (*See: Families of soldiers condemn Bush's war*) deployed in the Iraqi occupation participated in a rally in the shadow of the Washington Monument and a march that wound its way around the White House.

Washington police estimated the crowd at 40,000 to 50,000 people, while organizers claimed that 100,000 participated. In San Francisco, some 15,000 people marched and rallied against the US occupation.

The Washington demonstration was the first major protest in the US capital since the onset of the US invasion last March. A crowd estimated at more than 200,000 had joined a demonstration last January 18 to oppose Washington's plans to launch an unprovoked war. Well over half a million rallied in New York, San Francisco and other cities in mid-February as part of global wave of protests that saw around 20 million demonstrate around the world.

As in previous demonstrations, many came to Washington with hand-painted signs expressing intense anger over the Bush administration's policies.

The major political questions facing this rally and discussed by many of those present were how a movement could be built to defeat the Bush administration and what were the roles of the Democratic Party and the United Nations.

Not a few in the crowd wore buttons or carried signs supporting Democratic presidential candidates, including Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich and black activist-preacher Al Sharpton. In discussions with supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, many people on the march raised the question of whom they should vote for next November. Some signs called for the UN to take charge in Iraq.

The record of the Iraq war and the mass protests that preceded it have made it clear that neither the UN nor the Democratic Party are a means for ending war. In Congress, the Democratic leadership handed Bush the authority to launch the war, and has voted a total of \$166 billion to fund both the war itself and the occupation. For its part, the UN Security Council has voted twice to sanction the US occupation. Its initial refusal to endorse the invasion itself was based not on any principled opposition to war or colonial conquest, but rather the concerns of France, Germany

and Russia over what they saw as a threat to their own geopolitical interests in the region.

The demonstration's organizers—International ANSWER and United for Peace and Justice—as well as the majority of those who spoke from the platform only sowed confusion on all of these issues.

The complicity of the Democratic Party in the US occupation found its clearest expression in the failure of a single elected member of Congress to participate in the demonstration. But less influential Democrats were brought on the stage essentially as stand-ins to promote the illusion that this big business party can be pressured to end the war.

Al Sharpton was the most prominent politician to speak at the rally. "Don't give Bush \$87 billion," he said, referring to the administration's legislative package to fund the occupation, which has already passed both houses with substantial Democratic support. "Don't give him 87 cents; give our troops a ride home."

Sharpton went on to voice his support for the United Nations to take over the occupation from the US. "Bush and Blair do not make a multilateral plan," he said. "We have to have multilateral involvement, under the UN and headed by Kofi Annan."

Similarly, a spokesman for Kucinich closed a series of demagogic remarks with the slogan "US out, UN in."

As in previous demonstrations, Ramsey Clark, the former attorney general in the Johnson administration 35 years ago, was left to deliver the main political remarks of the day.

"The greatest threat to peace and security, and, perhaps above all, to the well-being of the poor of the planet are the policies of George Bush. It is not terrorism, but wars of aggression," Clark told the crowd.

He spoke of the growing hostility to the US around the world ignited by the Bush administration's war and declared that the American people "have a constitutional duty to remove him from office for high crimes and misdemeanors."

Clark posed the main task of those opposing the war and occupation to be applying pressure to "persuade the House of Representatives to impeach George Bush."

Those present at the march, he added, must "lobby members of Congress, and particularly those on the Judiciary Committee." In the event that this tactic failed, he said, "We'll come back in the spring in the millions."

Before his speech, the WSWS asked Clark whether he believed the election of a Democrat in November would mean an end to US

aggression in Iraq and elsewhere. "I am always an optimist," Clark responded. "The best thing I can see right now is a change of occupancy of the White House." He added that while he did not see "a probability" of a fundamental change in US policy emerging from the upcoming election, he continued to believe that "light can come" to the Democratic Party in the future.

Speakers at the San Francisco demonstration included former Democratic congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, the Green Party's gubernatorial candidate in the recent California recall election, Peter Camejo, film actor Danny Glover and author Ron Kovic.

Supporters of the SEP at the two demonstrations distributed thousands of copies of an editorial board statement entitled "Hands off Iraq! Withdraw all US forces from the Middle East Now! Build an antiwar movement based on the international working class!" In addition to demanding an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US troops, the statement opposed any introduction of UN troops in their stead. It also posed the necessity of a break with the Democrats as the only way forward in the fight against war. "The working class must build a new political party of its own, based on a socialist program and steadfastly opposed to American imperialism," the statement said.

Many at the Washington demonstration stopped at an SEP/WSWS literature table to express their support for the web site and purchase Marxist literature.

"I don't believe that Bush wants the Iraqi people to achieve a genuine democracy," Steven Benjamin, a journalism student at the University of Massachusetts, told the WSWS. "We don't have a real democracy in this country. We have a very prescribed and limited number of politicians that we can vote for. It is the big money that determines who we are allowed to look at. Furthermore, the Democratic as well as the Republican parties are moving in a very rightward direction.

"I have visited the WSWS a number of times. I like the analysis and you can get news on that site that you can't get anywhere else. I like to read the Workers Struggle column. I am very interested in how the struggles of working people all over the world are developing. I believe in social and political equality. The only way we are going to be able to achieve this is through the massive struggle of working people."

JJ, who is 32 and works for a publishing company in New York City, said: "I felt compelled to come to this demonstration. I think everyone should be here. What's going on now is barbarism, imperialism in its classic form. We have to nail it before it goes even further, such as into Iran."

"The protests last February were unprecedented. The war happened anyway, because the government is a dictatorship of the capitalist class, and they pursue their interests as a class. They ignored democracy, or rather manipulated it by bribing other countries such as Turkey. It was the 'coalition of the coerced.'

"A friend of mine from Los Angeles sent me a link to the WSWS back before the war. I've been going back to it ever since."

Holly, 23, a student of sociology at Morehead State University in Kentucky, told the WSWS: "I don't believe that there is a just or moral reason for this war. Bush has lied to us. His buddies from

Halliburton and the other well-connected corporations are the ones who are benefiting from this occupation.

"In the way that he is attacking civil liberties, he is driving this country to the ground. He is not listening to the people of the world who are against this occupation. This is not a democracy. I don't believe he was elected in the first place. He is the terrorist that took over this country.

"I believe that the Democrats are Republicans pretending to be something different. Their politics are a game that only those with a lot of money can play. It is the elite that owns the media. I believe in the power of the working people. We don't have the money, but we have the numbers."

The WSWS spoke with a group of youth who drove from Madison, Wisc., a 14-hour trip. Erich, age 18, is a high school senior; Alex, age 19, is a sophomore at Madison Area Technical College, and Carlos, age 19, works in a factory making theatrical lights.

"It's just too much of a coincidence the vice president is involved with one of the largest oil companies in the world, and we just happen to be in one of the largest oil-producing countries in the world," said Erich. "The federal government needs a lesson in ethics. The right way would have been to open up the contracts they gave to Halliburton, but since the government is a friend to Halliburton, and Halliburton is a friend of the war, the government just gave Halliburton the contracts without bids.

"They say that the federal government shall recognize no religion, and yet a high military official is out there saying we are an 'army of God,' that our god is the right one."

Alex said: "There have been too many lies. They should have just said they were going for the oil. They haven't found any weapons of mass destruction. All the allegations they made about a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda are false. As for the whole 9/11 thing, they are not going to allow a thorough investigation of how it happened.

"The point is they're lying for money. They're ignoring the working class. Only the wealthy are benefiting. We're in this war because too many Democrats voted for the war and gave Bush money for the war. You can't be a liberal by day and a Republican by night. The Democrats still have huge corporate ties and get a lot of grants from the corporations."



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