

Britain: Massive turnout at demonstration against Bush and Iraq war

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Upwards of 150,000 people participated in a protest demonstration in London on November 20 against the state visit of US President George W. Bush. The turnout far exceeded the organisers' predictions of 100,000. Throughout the day police and media had attempted to play down the scale of opposition to the Bush visit, but the police were begrudgingly forced to acknowledge the presence of at least 100,000 protesters.

As protesters swelled at one end of Malet Street in central London, waiting for police to open roads along the route so the march could begin, the length of the demonstration stretched back several kilometres to Euston railway station. By the time the demonstration had reached the Houses of Parliament at Westminster, thousands more people had poured onto the streets to join the protest in front of the official march banner.

The media had been full of predictions that the march would be far smaller than expected, citing initial police estimates of less than 30,000. CNN had said they would not even bother covering the event, as the extent of opposition to Bush and the US occupation of Iraq had been exaggerated.

In the event, the demonstration was the largest weekday protest ever to take place in the capital, and the newly enlarged Trafalgar Square could barely accommodate the crowd. The BBC's *Six O'Clock News* spoke of a "sea of humanity" and a "massive" turnout.

As the first marchers arrived in the square, several thousand people who had gone there directly from work greeted them. The march effectively began all over again after the close of business, as London workers joined the protest. A substantial part of the march had still not left the assembly point some two hours after the rally had ended in Trafalgar Square.

The demonstration set off a matter of hours after Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared at a joint press conference in which they sought to use the terror bombings in the Turkish capital of Istanbul to lend legitimacy to the occupation of Iraq and their "war against terrorism." Many demonstrators, however, saw the Istanbul attacks as proof that America's aggressive foreign policy was fuelling rather than lessening the threat from terrorism.

Some 5,000 police officers had ringed the route of the march, sealing off huge swathes of the capital. The police reported that 40 people had been arrested by 5 p.m., mainly on charges of breaching the peace, but little information was forthcoming. Earlier in the day, Scotland Yard had warned that over 1,000 anarchists from across Europe were planning to join the demonstration for disruptive purposes, but their claims failed to materialise as the march passed without significant incident.

The capital expressed its hostility to Bush and Blair, with workers turning out of offices to greet the marchers all along the route. Separate demonstrations were held in cities such as Edinburgh and Manchester, so that those unable to make the journey to London could make their opposition known.

Significant numbers joined the London demonstration from outside the capital, and the composition of the march was extremely diverse, with large numbers of college and school students joining people of all ages and from all walks of life.

Banners and placards carried slogans demanding the immediate withdrawal of all US and British troops from Iraq, denouncing Bush for war crimes, and alluding to the stealing of the 2000 US presidential election by the Republicans. Some called for a second American revolution, one banner declaring, "1776 Was

Not for This!”

As organisers staged a symbolic toppling of a giant figure of George Bush, mimicking the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein by pro-US supporters of the Iraqi National Congress in Baghdad, the crowd erupted in cheers that drowned out the whir of police helicopters flying overhead.

A group of sixth form students who had travelled to the demonstration from Dorset, southern England, carried a placard which read “George Bush: Unpopular, Unethical, Unelected and Unwelcome.”

Speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, CJ and May said they had marched against the war in February and March of this year, but it was “obvious they [Bush and Blair] weren’t going to listen and were not interested in democracy.”

Sahra said she “felt sorry for London kids who were going to get suspended from school if they came out and marched.” She added, “I think it is important for us to show our opposition. Americans are just as opposed to Bush as we are to Blair. They were divided before the war, but Bush got elected illegally. Perhaps this demonstration will help to change the situation in America at the next election.”

Hanne added, “Tony Blair should stop being such a close ally to George Bush and should not do everything he says. In the larger scheme of things, demonstrations do make a difference. They might just make them think twice in the future.”

Haley, a voice-over artist, had travelled to Trafalgar Square after working in Kent in the South East. She had been unable to get back in time for the march, but came straight to the square to make her opposition known. “Bush should get back to the US,” she said. “It is atrocious that Blair should allow this to happen. It has been said about Londoners’ money being spent, but we should get back to the real issues, which are the Middle East, Palestine and the military policy of the US. Neither Bush nor Blair represents their country. Bush was elected in a phoney election. He was a friend of the bin Laden family for years, and the whole terrorism thing is a cover-up for a money-led drive for world domination.”

One of a group of young girls from London who had participated in the two-million-strong demonstration in the capital on February 15 said, “We were completely against the war then and are against the policy towards

Iraq now. My views are that I am not anti-American per se, but I am completely against the administration’s policy and how they are treating people right now, and the loss of lives. I am also against their alignment of views and the claim that somehow because you oppose the war you are somehow in favour of terrorism and authoritarianism, which is not the case at all.

“Blair is accountable to us. He is our prime minister and he needs to take on board what we think, and I don’t think he is representing the views of the British public. I think the demonstration is having an effect. I just got a call from a friend in Santiago, and these images are going out around the world and it is humiliating for Bush to be confronted with a massive demonstration. It is people of all ages, of all nationalities, so they can’t just write us off and say that it is the view of just one section of society.”

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed a statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party in Britain entitled, “An international socialist strategy to oppose militarism and war.” The statement stressed the need to build a new workers’ party based on the principles of socialist internationalism. Several of those who took the leaflet said they were regular readers of the WSWS and expressed an interest in the forthcoming meeting in London on November 30 to mark 50 years since the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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