

Protests in Australia and New Zealand mark war anniversary

James Conachy
22 March 2004

Rallies took place in major Australian and New Zealand cities to commemorate the first anniversary of the war on Iraq. The main demand of the demonstrations was for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq, including the 850 Australian troops, and an end to the US occupation of the country.

Approximately 5,000 people rallied in Sydney's Hyde Park before marching through the central business district. Two thousand rallied in Melbourne, with smaller protests taking place in Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra and other centres. In New Zealand, demonstrations were held in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. Some 400 people marched through Wellington to the cenotaph near the parliament buildings. Those participating in both countries were mainly younger people.

In Australia, placards and banners denounced the Howard government's complicity in the lies that were told to the world's population to justify the illegal invasion. Signs read: "WMDs, Where are they John?", "America, the world's biggest terrorist", and "Bush, Blair, Howard, war criminals." One demonstrator in Sydney carried a sign listing 22 countries the US had bombed or invaded since the end of World War II.

Other placards called for the release of David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, the two Australians imprisoned by the US military in Guantanamo Bay. The Melbourne rally was addressed by Terry Hicks, David Hick's father. He told demonstrators: "David, if he had of done anything wrong, should have been charged or released two years ago." In Sydney, a five-foot effigy of Howard's head was carried inside a cage, to highlight his government's complicity in the ongoing detention of Hicks and Habib.

The demonstrations were organised by antiwar coalitions made up of the Greens, the Socialist Alliance

parties, Middle Eastern cultural organisations and religious groups.

The Labor Party, which supports the US occupation of Iraq and opposes the withdrawal of Australian troops, did not participate in the main rallies in Sydney or Melbourne. The trade unions and the Democrats had no visible presence either.

Speakers at the Sydney rally, such as former intelligence official Andrew Wilkie and journalist John Pilger, denounced the lies told by Howard over WMDs and the catastrophe the war had inflicted on the Iraqi people. The only perspective put forward on the day, however, was the removal of the Howard government at the next elections. The defeat of the conservatives and the election of the Socialist Party in Spain were repeatedly hailed as a model.

While largely unstated, the position from the platform was that a Labor government in Australia would be a "lesser evil". Greens senator Kerry Nettle appealed to protestors to pressure Labor, and particularly its new leader Mark Latham, to commit to a policy of withdrawing Australian troops from Iraq.

The WSWs spoke with and interviewed participants in the demonstrations in Sydney and Melbourne. In contrast to the attempts to sow illusions that Labor may represent some alternative, the main sentiment was that no solution exists within the present political framework. Overall, the comments of demonstrators revealed that the experiences of the last year have had a profound impact.

In Sydney, Jim Dixon, a former tax accountant, commented: "The only conclusions that can be drawn from the past year is that all the lies, which we all knew all along were lies, have been exposed. Now all we get is silly claims that we wanted to leave Saddam Hussein in power."

“It shows the sham of the so-called democratic systems we have. They do not work, they are not a true reflection of true people power, or people’s views. It is an elitist system, in which the privileged, powerful people make the decisions to protect their own interests.”

Lisa, a student in Sydney, said: “Most people were opposed to the war and disappointed that governments didn’t listen to their opposition in February last year. In order to cope with their disappointment that their actions don’t matter, people have retreated a bit. Some are saying that at least Saddam Hussein has been removed and we will ignore all this other stuff.

“In a way, governments have always ignored the population. At the time of the protests there was a sense of desperation. People thought they could stop the war and negotiate a peace or something. What can we do now?”

Clare Green, a social sciences student at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, said: “It is absolutely appalling what is still happening in Iraq. I’m not sure how this is all going to stop. Millions turned out last year and our voice was ignored. We are told that we can have one day of democracy, in the election in three years time.

I have no faith in the Labor opposition. Look at Blair, he is supposed to be Labor and they are still supporting the war. It seems most of the parties are representing business.”

Ade Abioye, a student in accounting, commented in Melbourne: “Politicians seem to forget what people actually want. What has happened in Spain is something to show people’s opinion. This should be taken into consideration in big matters like this war on Iraq. The big parties all have the same ideology.”

WSWS and Socialist Equality Party literature stalls in Sydney and Melbourne were visited by hundreds of people during the demonstrations. Many of the people had visited the WSWS online or purchased the *WSWS Review* magazine at previous rallies. The decision of the US SEP to stand candidates on a socialist platform in the presidential election provoked particular interest among people looking for a political alternative.

Several thousand copies of the WSWS editorial board statement, “One year since the invasion of Iraq”, and the SEP statement, “Spanish defeat exposes vulnerability of Howard government”, were distributed.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact