

Britain: Father of Nick Berg supports march against Iraq occupation

Paul Bond
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Several thousand people marched through the centre of London on Saturday May 22 to demand the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq. The march was called by the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) in response to the revelations of torture in military prisons in Iraq. Marchers demanded an end to the torture and an end to the occupation.

CND's Bruce Kent spoke of seeing "thousands when we expected hundreds." At a rally in Trafalgar Square, the most moving and significant contribution was read on behalf of Michael Berg, the father of Nick Berg, the American recently murdered in Iraq.

Berg is deeply critical of the Bush administration, holding them responsible for the fate of his son. He denounced Bush as a policy-maker who does not have to live with the consequences of his policies. He underlined the distance of those in government from the effects of their policies. He pointed to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld saying that he "took responsibility" for the sexual abuse of prisoners in Iraqi military prisons. Berg denounced this rhetorical statement: this was not responsibility, he said, as Rumsfeld does not have to face any consequences for his decisions.

He said it was time for the US government to stop making up rules for the rest of the world, which it then did not apply to itself. He said that the controls for the known weapons of mass destruction were in the White House. The US government had unleashed a sequence of events which have implications of their own; it was now up to people on both sides of the Atlantic to say that they are fed up with war and to demand peace now.

Other speakers drew connections with the situation facing the Palestinians, pointing out that the US-led

barbarism in Iraq had encouraged Israeli Prime Minister Sharon in his onslaught against Gaza.

Attention was also drawn to the court-martial of Nicaraguan-born US Sergeant Camilo Mejia for refusing to return to the torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Mejia has applied for discharge as a conscientious objector, after witnessing the treatment of Iraqi civilians by the occupying forces.

Many of the speakers used the rally as an opportunity to promote the electoral formation Respect, led by the former Labour MP George Galloway, which is standing in June's elections both to the European Parliament and to the Greater London Assembly.

For Galloway himself, who is heading Respect's slate for London in the European elections, the lesson is that "we've marched and we've marched, and now it's time to vote and sweep the warmongering government from office."

Retiring Labour MP Tony Benn spoke of Hugh Gaitskell, the right-wing Labour leader of the 1950s, denouncing then Prime Minister Anthony Eden for breaching United Nations' resolutions. Benn wished there were a Labour leader like that now.

Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, was heckled. For all his protestations that he was speaking as mayor and not as the spokesman for any government, his return to the Labour Party was heavily criticised by the crowd. His desperation was evident in his call on demonstrators to vote, "not for me, but for anyone" in order to supposedly keep the fascist British National Party out of the Greater London Assembly.



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