

On eve of Republican Convention

Massive anti-Bush march in New York

The a WSWS reporting team
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Hundreds of thousands of people marched Sunday past New York City's Madison Square Garden, site of this week's Republican National Convention, in a massive repudiation of the policies of the Bush administration.

March organizers put the size of the crowd at 400,000, a far more credible figure than the gross underestimate of 120,000 given by some officials in the New York City Police Department (NYPD). When the first marchers had completed the nearly 40-block trek through Manhattan, large numbers of demonstrators had yet to start off. Solid crowds surged up Seventh Avenue, west on 34th Street and back downtown on Broadway for a full five hours.

The huge demonstration expressed the immense social opposition that has built up to the Bush administration over the war in Iraq, attacks on democratic rights and policies of social reaction. Its militancy stood in sharp contrast to the desiccated liberalism and half-hearted opposition to the Republicans exhibited by the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate John Kerry. Under conditions in which Kerry is supporting the war, the hundreds of thousands who marched—and many millions more who share their views—find themselves politically disenfranchised.

The huge turnout was all the more significant given the ham-fisted efforts of both the city authorities and national agencies such as the Homeland Security Department and the FBI to intimidate those planning to protest.

Activists faced surveillance and harassment from the Joint Terrorism Task Force, threats of mass arrests from the NYPD and the denial by New York City billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg of a permit for a rally in Central Park after the march. Moreover, the city remains on so-called "orange alert," with near-daily warnings from Washington of supposedly imminent threats of terrorist attacks.

Thousands of police were deployed along the route of the march. At 34th Street, helmeted riot cops and mounted units were massed in a show of force designed to dissuade demonstrators from attempting to continue marching north to Central Park.

Hundreds of other cops—some armed with automatic rifles—National Guardsmen and Secret Service agents were also massed in front of Madison Square Garden, where the convention begins Monday. Entrances to the Garden were blocked with concrete barriers and sand-filled dump trucks.

Marchers chanted "No more Bush," "Stop the war, stop the lies," and "No more years." Many carried hand-lettered signs with slogans such as: "Support our troops, bring them home," "Don't make the dead vote Republican, RNC out of NYC for 9/11," and "Iraq is Arabic for Vietnam."

When a small group of Republican delegates gathered outside their hotel to watch the march, demonstrators shouted, "Go home!"

One section of the march consisted of 1,000 flag-draped coffins, symbolizing the fatalities suffered by US troops since the Iraq war began.

The demonstrators, who turned out in near 90-degree-Fahrenheit heat,

included young people who had driven from as far away as Los Angeles and Texas, as well as large numbers of New Yorkers, including contingents drawn from the city's immigrant communities, including Koreans, Filipinos, Haitians and South Asians.

Damien N. and Ula B. came from Brooklyn, carrying a sign reading, "Poland 1939, Iraq 2003." Damien is originally from Michigan, while Ula immigrated to the US from Poland.

Asked about the sign, Damien explained: "The buildup of the German military machine came to a head with the invasion of Poland. The Germans claimed they had to invade Poland in order to protect their security, and to establish 'living room' in the East. Similarly, the United States claimed that Iraq was a threat to its security, with its 'weapons of mass destruction.'

"In both invasions, you have an imperialist nation attacking a weaker nation."

Significant numbers of veterans participated in the demonstration, as well as some active-duty soldiers returned from Iraq, who marched in desert fatigues.

One of the latter, Mathias Feurer, said that he had come to the march to demand that his fellow soldiers be brought back from Iraq now. A member of the 1st Armored Division, he participated in the invasion of Iraq and spent four months there. Having completed his military service, he attempted to leave the Army, but had his service involuntarily extended, and was sent back to the US to an assignment with the National Guard.

"At the time the war began, I trusted our president," Mathias, a resident of the Bronx, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "I thought it would be justified and that we would really find weapons of mass destruction, but there was nothing there."

He said that he was shocked by the poverty, destruction and suffering that the war had inflicted upon the Iraqi people. "When we first got there, the kids would wave at us and stuff, but by the time I had left, everything had already gone to hell. They just want us out of there. Sooner or later, that is what will happen, but in the meantime a lot of soldiers and a lot of Iraqis are dying."

Mathias said he would advise anyone thinking of going into the Army not to do it. "Today you've got young guys going in who don't want to be in combat, and they choose something else, like being a cook. But what they need is infantry and military police, and once they get in they just send them over there—a bunch of untrained kids—and they're the first ones to get killed. All anyone over there now wants to do is come home."

Dave Pacella, a veteran of the first Persian Gulf War, said that he was marching on behalf of disabled veterans. "I think the present war in Iraq should be stopped," he said. "The US interest is in oil, but you can't win a war against the Iraqis when they're fighting for religion and against being colonized.

"The disabled veterans who are coming back from Iraq are not getting the right treatment. Spending \$177 million a day for the Iraq war is an

outrage when people are starving in this country, and they're cutting back veterans' services.

"The soldiers in the Iraq war need counseling when they come back. Their families need counseling. And they're not getting it. Psychiatric facilities are being cut back."

Dave said that his father, a veteran in Pennsylvania, had been receiving psychiatric therapy once a week, but the facility closest to his home had been closed. He now has to drive a long distance and is able to get an appointment only every other week.

"I believe they want more people to join the military, he said, "but once your duty is done, they don't want anything to do with you, and your medical coverage and treatment are frequently cut off."

Relatively few of the marchers wore Kerry campaign buttons, and banners supporting the Democratic presidential candidate were extremely rare. There were no prominent Democratic Party leaders or elected officials participating in the protest.

Clearly, the party leadership wants to disassociate itself from this mass outpouring against the war and other policies of the Bush administration. Those leading the march included Jesse Jackson, filmmaker Michael Moore, actor Danny Glover and a smattering of New York City Council members.

When the head of the march reached Madison Square Garden, Jackson stepped to the front with a bullhorn and asked the front ranks to sit down, leading them in a call-and-response chant of "Hope is in the air, help is on the way." The slogan echoed the speeches given by Kerry and his vice-presidential running mate John Edwards at last month's Democratic National Convention.

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed 10,000 copies of a leaflet entitled "The socialist alternative to Bush and Kerry" and had numerous discussions with marchers. Many said that they were voting for Kerry, but were not at all happy about it. Others expressed strong interest in the election campaign of the SEP.

The WSWs spoke with Alejandro Urruzmendi, age 25, who drove to New York from Los Angeles, picking up several friends along the way. While born in the United States, he spent some years living with his family in Uruguay.

He said, "Creating a third party is going to take a lot of hard work and effort. Sadly, most people see Kerry as their only choice. It would be nice to have a real democracy. John Kerry agreed with the invasion. He shows no shift in policy from the Bush administration. The reason is that the same people who are supporting Bush are supporting Kerry."

"No matter who is elected president, the problems in our country are only going to increase."

Carey Fay-Horowitz, a bakery worker, said, "I am totally against the war in Iraq. It was started based on lies, and it is a war for oil. Now it continues out of loyalty to the people in power."

"I'm not too happy about Kerry supporting the war. He is not that good an alternative. I wish another party could work, but at this time it's too late. But I agree there should be another party, it would be ideal."

The WSWs also spoke with Herman Bijkerk from Holland, who was taking a weeklong vacation in New York. He had originally planned to go back Saturday, but decided to extend his visit by a day when he heard about the demonstration.

Herman said, "It's incredibly important to democracy to have more choices. Bush and Kerry represent no choice at all. In Holland, we now have fifteen parties that are meaningful, including four or five bigger ones."

"Because of Bush, you see more and more anti-Americanism in Europe. Friends and colleagues in Holland see everything American as black. Of course, this is not just because of Bush, but because of US policy in Iraq and especially in Israel."

John, who said he had been reading the WSWs for more than three years, came to the march with a placard calling for support for the SEP's

election campaign and spelling out the party's policies for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US troops, and for war crimes trials against those who conspired to launch the war.

"I think the Democrats represent the same financial and corporate elite as the Republicans, with a slightly different spin," he said. "On Iraq alone, it is clear that there is no alternative. If the US doesn't withdraw immediately, there will be continued resistance by the Iraqis and continued isolation of Allawi. There will be a steady stream of dying US soldiers and increasing losses on the Iraqi side."

Since protests began in the city on Friday, over 400 people have been arrested, some of them taken to a makeshift detention center set up by the NYPD at a pier on the Hudson River. Most of the arrests took place during a ride-by protest by bicyclists on Friday night, which saw unprovoked arrests and excessive force by city cops. Police officials have said that they are prepared to make 1,000 arrests a day during the convention.



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