

The fate of Ken Bigley and the struggle against the occupation of Iraq

By Socialist Equality Party of Britain
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The fate of British hostage Kenneth Bigley has come to encapsulate the unbridgeable division between the political establishment and the democratic hopes and concerns of working people.

From the moment the 62-year-old engineer was seized by the Tawhid and Jihad Group headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, alongside Americans Jack Hensley and Eugene Armstrong, there was widespread sentiment for everything possible to be done to ensure their safe release—especially since the demands of the hijackers appeared to be somewhat modest and realisable.

The Tawhid and Jihad group were demanding the release of female Iraqi prisoners. Washington admits to imprisoning only two women, scientists Rihab Taha and Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash. Both are accused of participation in Iraq's weapons programme and have been held for more than a year without being charged. Given that the claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and was developing a nuclear capability have been so thoroughly discredited, there were already moves towards releasing them.

But when Iraq's interim government let it be known that it was considering such a step, it was immediately slapped down by the United States—with the support of the Blair government.

The price for this act of sabotage was paid by Hensley and Armstrong, who were brutally executed within hours of one another.

The Blair government has sought to justify its stance as a matter of principle, over how best to respond to terror threats. Prime Minister Tony Blair, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and others lined up to explain that there could be no negotiations with hostage takers as this would only demonstrate weakness, embolden the enemy and threaten more lives in future.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, as well as the editorial staff of every major newspaper, joined in the chorus. If Bigley dies, then this would be tragic but unavoidable because of the evil nature of the Tawhid and Jihad Group, they claimed.

This is pure sophistry and deception.

Blair has described Iraq as the “crucible” of the struggle against global terrorism. And in his comments to the press following his meeting with Iraqi interim Prime Minister Allawi, he insisted, “Our response has not got to be to weaken. Our

response has got to be to stand firm.

“Whatever the differences over the Iraq conflict, there is a clear right and wrong on these issues, and that is to be with the democrats and against the terrorists.”

But facts are stubborn things. It is Blair and Bush's illegal war, the destruction of the country's infrastructure, the loss of tens of thousands of Iraqi lives and the imposition of a hated stooge regime that has forged the “crucible” in which reactionary fundamentalist groups can operate.

For London and Washington, invocations of the “struggle against terrorism” have replaced the discredited lie of weapons of mass destruction as justification for an occupation whose true purpose is to secure control of the oil supplies of Iraq and the entire Middle East. And it is precisely because resistance to the occupation is deepening that Blair now alludes to the need to prosecute a “second war”, i.e., the ever more brutal subjugation of the Iraqi people to colonial-style domination.

Such a course means not only taking on the Iraqi resistance, but also facing down all domestic popular opposition to this pro-imperialist agenda.

Behind Blair's intransigence over Bigley's fate lies his insistence that, just as with the invasion of Iraq, his government will not be bound by the democratic will of the British people. Instead they are to be served up as mere pawns in its efforts to secure the ruling elite's geo-political interests in whatever corner of the globe it chooses.

It is to the credit of the Bigley family that they have refused to toe this line and have appealed over the heads of the government for help in saving their loved one.

Following Bigley's capture his distraught family was immediately swamped by Foreign Office officials who advised that they remain silent and allow the government to handle the situation. The overriding aim of the Foreign Office was to minimise any political fallout and to ensure that the government's line of no compromise was not challenged. In the US this strategy had been somewhat successful, with little coverage of the plight faced by Hensley and Armstrong's families in the media.

But when Hensley was beheaded on Monday, September 20, the Bigleys decided to make a public appeal for the government to intercede on Ken's behalf.

Bigley's cousin, Ken Jones, denounced Washington for having prevented the release of Rihab Taha and having effectively signed a death warrant on the captured engineer.

Philip Bigley made a live statement in which he criticised Blair for not doing enough to secure his brother's release. Subsequently Ken's mother Lil, wife Sombat and son Craig also made appeals for Ken's safety.

Ken's brother Paul established an indirect line of communication with hostage takers through the Al Jazeera television network. According to the *Guardian*, Paul Bigley "believes it was the family's decision to wrest control from the Foreign Office which secured his brother an extension of the deadline for his execution."

The Bigley family has made a series of observations that expose the myth that the occupation of Iraq has created a democratic government. Indeed the blocking of Taha's release and the interim administration's acceding to Washington's injunction has demonstrated its character as a US puppet. On BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme, Paul Bigley insisted that the US and UK should keep out of what should be an internal Iraqi affair.

"Mr. Blair can go fishing as far as I'm concerned. He hasn't got to call or do anything," he said. "All the powers have to do now is allow the Iraqis to conduct their own internal affairs the way they should be doing. They have been handed over sovereignty to conduct their business on a day-to-day basis".

Bigley asked: "Is this a puppet government or the Americans moving the goalposts to suit their own aims again? What is going on here?"

"Leave the Iraqis to do their own Iraqi business."

On September 22 al-Zarqawi's group took the extraordinary step of releasing a video appeal by Ken Bigley that has proved equally politically damaging for the Blair government.

In it Ken Bigley makes an impassioned appeal for efforts to secure his release and for an end to the occupation of Iraq.

He insisted, "Iraq is suffering, and has been suffering too long ... the Iraqis don't like foreign troops on their soil, walking down the street with guns. It's not right. And it's not fair. We need to pull the troops out and let the Iraqis run their own country, their own destiny.

"People of Britain and people of Liverpool particularly, you are very special people, you are people who can open your mouths and speak and say, 'Enough is enough. Enough is enough of playing with Iraq like a toy. Pack your bags and get out.' And let's hope we can come back and visit the country as a guest, as a guest of the Iraqis."

The appeals made by Ken Bigley and his family are powerful because they are true. As with a number of statements made by the families of both military personnel and civilians who have died in Iraq, they underscore the true scale of opposition to the occupation and the terrible price that is being paid as a result.

This is a message which a pliant and servile media is anxious to conceal. Across the political spectrum, the British press

concentrated on the supposed sophistication of the Tawhid and Jihad group and warned against efforts to interfere with the official political process in Britain.

The *Guardian* said that the video plea put out by Ken Bigley's captors was aimed at "demonstrating their power—and the impotence of the government." The *Times* warned, "If Ken Bigley dies, it will be Blair who has killed him, by sticking to the line that Britain does not negotiate with terrorists. That is the perverted view the kidnappers are trying to instil in everyone who watched Bigley's tortured pleas."

It called such a conclusion a "grotesque perversion," complaining that it was now "hard for Blair to retain complete sympathy at the most emotional level, even if he holds onto the respect that he is due for his steadiness."

Working people in Britain should themselves be steadfast—in rejecting all appeals by pro-business politicians and newspapers to accept the need for any sacrifice in order to preserve the occupation of Iraq.

The tragic fate of Hensley and Armstrong, and the plight of Ken Bigley, raise once again the incompatibility of the interests of the working class and those of the corrupt financial oligarchy that presently dictates world affairs.

It is only six months since the same forces now demanding no compromise with terrorists were denouncing the Spanish people as "appeasers" for throwing out the right-wing government of Jose Maria Aznar—and supposedly allowing terrorists to influence Spanish affairs.

The British ruling class fear the same type of development. The Popular Party's downfall following the March 11 terror bombing in Madrid came because millions of Spaniards had concluded that Aznar's deeply unpopular support for the Iraq war had made them a target for reprisals. And Blair's criminal actions in Iraq have had the same consequences for British people.

The only correct political response to Bigley's capture is to link calls for his release with a demand for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq and for Bush and Blair to be tried for war crimes. Taking a stand in defence of the democratic rights of the Iraqi people is an essential step in forging the international unity of the working class in a struggle against colonialism and militarism. Far from lending succour to terrorism, this will send out a powerful message of solidarity to the Iraqi masses and thereby cut the ground from beneath the feet of fundamentalist terror groups.



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