

New York protest revealed mass opposition to Bush war policies

Where were the Democrats on August 29?

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The anti-Bush demonstration held in New York City August 29 was the largest outpouring of public opposition to the war in Iraq since Bush ordered the invasion and conquest of that tortured country nearly 18 months ago.

As many as 500,000 people took part in the march past Madison Square Garden, site of the Republican National Convention. It was the largest demonstration in New York in at least 20 years. The protest march showed the growing popular hostility to the war and to the Bush administration as a whole, and underscored the isolation of a government that rests on a very narrow social base.

All the more significant was the attitude of the Democratic Party officialdom to the march. The Kerry campaign and the Democratic establishment responded to the protest with a combination of dismay, hostility and fear. Meanwhile, Republican Party operatives denounced the march and sought to tie Kerry to it.

Kerry himself did not participate, nor did any prominent national leaders of the Democratic Party. On the contrary, they sought to disassociate themselves from the antiwar march and from any form of popular mobilization against the Bush administration.

The two US senators from New York, Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer, are fervent supporters of the war in Iraq, diametrically opposed to the sentiments of the vast majority of their constituents. Both Clinton and Schumer voted for the October 2002 resolution authorizing Bush to wage war on Iraq, and both approved the subsequent appropriations bill to fund the US occupation.

None of the so-called “peace” candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination participated in the protest. Former Vermont governor Howard Dean, whose once front-running campaign was fueled by

antiwar sentiment, now devotes himself to heading off defections from Kerry to independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader or other third-party campaigns. Dean participated in a debate with Nader, adopting a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger tone, and portraying himself as Nader’s erstwhile ally and political co-thinker—even as Democratic Party operatives conduct a thoroughly anti-democratic campaign to keep Nader off the ballot.

Dennis Kucinich was also nowhere to be seen on August 29. In his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, he postured as the most intransigent opponent of the war in Iraq and made impassioned speeches for the establishment of a new federal “Department of Peace.” This, however, did not prevent him from pledging full support for Kerry, for which he was rewarded with a speaking role at the Democratic National Convention, alongside the roster of retired generals, admirals and Swift boat veterans assembled to boost Kerry’s credentials as a leader of the “war on terror.”

Kucinich folded up his campaign organization into a newly formed pressure group, Progressive Democrats of America (PDA), which did participate in the August 29 demonstration. This group’s perspective is summed up on its web site as an “effort to transform the Democratic Party into a political force for social justice, ecological sanity and true democracy.” Such an effort ignores both the essential class character of the Democratic Party as one of the two main political organizations of big business, and its steady movement further and further to right over the past three decades.

The bankruptcy of this strategy is shown in a statement posted on the PDA’s web site, deploring Kerry’s recent declaration that even knowing what he knows today, that Iraq had no weapons of mass

destruction, he would still vote as he did in October 2002 to authorize Bush to wage war. The PDA complains: “This curious statement infuriates progressives and others who opposed the war, dismays about 80 percent of Democrats who now oppose the war, and surely encourages some to consider supporting Ralph Nader or the Greens.” But it does not deter Kucinich’s former supporters from devoting themselves to Kerry’s election.

The fact that the mass opposition to the Iraq war and the Bush administration takes place outside the official precincts of the Democratic Party has enormous historical and political significance. It demonstrates the sclerotic and politically insular character of both major parties, and their inability to respond to or address the real concerns of the broad masses of people.

There is a significant contrast between the response of the Democratic Party to the antiwar movement of today and that of the 1960s against the Vietnam War. The Democratic Party administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson initiated and then escalated the war in Vietnam, and the Democratic Party establishment backed the war until 1967. But by the time the antiwar protests of the Vietnam era became as large as last Sunday’s demonstration in New York—beginning with the huge marches of 1967—sections of the Democratic Party leadership began to criticize Johnson’s conduct of the war, and he was eventually challenged for renomination in 1968 by Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, who ran as antiwar candidates.

The main purpose of McCarthy and Kennedy’s intervention, and of the 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern, was to coopt the antiwar movement and prevent it from developing into a mass social struggle for a broader and more fundamental transformation of American society. Nevertheless, in that period, the Democratic Party still had significant connections to the masses, particularly through the trade unions and civil rights organizations, and could offer some reformist palliatives for the social injustices of American capitalism. Johnson waged a ferocious and reactionary war in Vietnam, but he also signed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, and spoke of a “war on poverty.”

The Democratic Party of 2004 is incapable of offering either significant social reforms or serious

dissent against the war policies of the Bush administration, as demonstrated by Kerry’s right-wing campaign. Kerry has, in fact, no real mass constituency. The majority of those who will vote for Kerry will do so without enthusiasm, feeling they have no choice and no other alternative to Bush. No wonder, since Kerry is preoccupied with reassuring the American ruling elite that he can be relied on to continue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to launch new acts of aggression as required, even though 80 percent or more of Democratic voters want a speedy, if not immediate, withdrawal of American troops from the Middle East.

The mass opposition to the Bush administration’s policies, and particularly to the war in Iraq, must ultimately find political expression. The gulf between the Democratic Party establishment and the real sentiments of tens of millions of working people means that the next great political development in America will take place outside the stultifying and reactionary framework of the two-party system.



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