

Britain: Labour Party conference endorses occupation of Iraq

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The debate and vote on Iraq held on the last day of the Labour conference should finally disabuse any one of the belief that the party—or its supposedly “left” representatives—offers any means of fighting for the elementary demands and aspirations of working people.

The last 12 months have thoroughly exposed the government’s case for war against Iraq, and how it misled the British people into a criminal act of neo-colonial aggression that continues to claim the lives of innocent men, women and children.

On the day the Labour conference conducted its debate—one forced on it by a number of Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs)—a series of bombings in Baghdad killed more than 41 people, 34 of them children.

The September 30 bombings were claimed by an Islamic opposition group, but they were only one of many bloody incidents throughout the country. The BBC reports in that one day:

- * A US soldier killed by a rocket fired at a US base near Baghdad,

- * A senior policeman shot dead in the northern city of Mosul,

- * Also in the north, the Kirkuk mayor’s chief bodyguard shot dead,

- * Four people killed in a car bombing in Talafar that also injured about 16 others,

- * At least four children among six or seven people killed in Falluja after US forces allegedly fired on their car, and

- * At least three civilians killed in a US air strike on Falluja overnight.

The media, as usual, focuses on the barbaric actions of the fundamentalist groups and ignores the painful truth that it is the brutality of the occupation forces that is claiming most lives and fuelling resistance.

That same evening, the US began a ferocious assault on the town of Samarra, a predominantly Sunni Muslim city, north of Baghdad. Using warplanes and armoured vehicles, US forces claimed to have killed 94 “insurgents,” but local sources say many civilians have been killed and wounded.

The contrast between the extent of US and British atrocities and the mealy-mouthed response of what passes for opposition within the Labour Party could not be starker. With most of the population opposed to war and many in support of a troop withdrawal; with the Liberal Democrats seeking to make political capital out of falling support for the government; and even Conservative Party leader Michael Howard openly accusing Blair of lying about Iraq, the cowed, impotent and unprincipled character of the prime minister’s nominal opponents within the Labour Party was laid bare.

Barely a peep was heard from delegates regarding the prime minister’s lies over weapons of mass destruction, or the falsification of intelligence dossiers to support a predetermined agenda agreed between Blair and President George W. Bush to go to war.

In truth, the vote at conference had been won by the leadership even before it was held.

The debate on Britain’s role in Iraq had only just scraped onto the agenda as the fifth and final contemporary motion. Just 7,000 of more than 3 million block votes had endorsed the proposal to place Iraq onto the agenda at conference.

In the end, the opposition motion was composited from those submitted by 13 CLPs and did not even call for an immediate withdrawal of British troops, urging only an “early pull-out.”

If this was not enough, the party leadership had been in urgent talks before conference began to secure the backing of the four biggest trade unions—Transport & General Workers Union, General Municipal Boilermakers Union, Unison and Amicus—for a counter-resolution saying troops should remain in Iraq as long as required.

Due to the union block vote, where each general secretary wields a mandate equal to the size of his union’s membership, the government would have carried the day no matter what happened in the conference hall.

As it turned out, however, this safeguard was unnecessary. In a debate bookended by contributions from Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, one

opponent of the Iraq war after another lined up to defend the occupation. They echoed Prime Minister Tony Blair's claim during his conference address that whatever one thought about the original reasons for war, all must be united in supporting the birth of "democracy" in Iraq and against the growth of "global terrorism."

National Executive Council member Shahid Malik said he had previously opposed the war before continuing, "But we did go to war and now is not the time to desert the people of Iraq. They would not forgive us."

Yvonne Ritchie of the GMB had also opposed the war but argued, "The consequences of leaving prematurely will be to plunge Iraq into civil war. We have an obligation to put right the wrong a Labour government created."

To cap it all, a mover of one of the 13 composited motions, one Clair Wilcox from Streatham CLP, withdrew her motion in favour of a call for unity. "We have to move forward together: conference, party and government. It shouldn't be this conference that sets a timetable for withdrawal. We want the Iraqi people to set the agenda," she proclaimed.

As well as the born-again defenders of colonialism, the party leadership wheeled out some of its stooges from within the pro-US interim Iraqi administration to make an appeal on behalf of "ordinary" Iraqis.

First to the rostrum was Shanaz Rashid, who delivered a near-hysterical appeal for troops to remain in the country. As a supposed representative of liberated Iraqi womanhood, Rashid begged, "Please, please do not desert us in our hour of need."

She singled out Blair for having "stood up to Saddam and freed my people."

Ms. Rashid, who has lived in London for 30 years, is in fact the wife of Iraq's Minister of Waterways, Abdul Latif Rashid, a member of the pro-western Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which was presiding over US-enforced "no-fly" zone in Iraq even before the war.

According to reports, Abdul Rashid had originally come to Britain on a Baathist government scholarship and subsequently secured a bachelor of engineering, a master of science and a PhD at Manchester University. He has now negotiated his position in the puppet administration into a series of lucrative consultancies for companies seeking contracts in Iraq, including Kingsmere Consulting Limited UK, Washington Investment Limited UK, Sir William Hal Crow & Partners irrigation and draining engineering association UK, as well as posts in the United Nations and the World Bank.

The other "ordinary" Iraqi to stump up for Blair was Abdullah Mushin, the London-based representative of the Iraqi Federation of Workers' Trade Unions (IFTU), who left Iraq in 1978.

The IFTU is the interim administration's house federation, which has been the subject of a formal complaint to the UN's International Labor Organisation that its official status prevents the development of genuinely independent workers' organisations—a pedigree that takes the shine off Mushin's appeal at the conference that withdrawing troops would be a "terrible blow for free trade unionism."

When it came to the vote, the government won the day even on a show of hands. But the card vote showed the full-scale of the anti-war opposition's collapse, with 80 percent of local parties and 90 percent of trade unions voting against the early withdrawal motion.

The other notable collapse was made by the BBC, which had agreed not to broadcast the debate. Its excuse was a complaint by the Conservatives that a broadcast would break the corporation's pledge of impartiality because of the by-election taking place that day in Hartlepool as a result of Labour's appointment of Peter Mandelson as a European Union Commissioner.

Blair was able to walk away from conference knowing that he had whipped the vast majority of his internal critics back into line and was better placed to continue opposing popular demands for an end to the occupation.

The extent of the gulf that now exists between the entire Labour and trade union bureaucracy and the broad mass of the population was emphasised by the vote in Hartlepool. Labour only narrowly retained what had been one of its safest seats. Its majority slumped by 18.49 percent to leave it just 2,000 votes clear of the Liberal Democrats, who had campaigned based on their opposition to the Iraq war and sought to place themselves slightly to the left of Labour on domestic issues. Overall turnout also fell to just over 45 percent, down more than 10 percent on the 2001 general election.



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