

Rallies in Australia, New Zealand and Asia demand troops out of Iraq

Our correspondents
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Demonstrations were held in major cities in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere in Asia over the weekend to mark the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq and demand an end to the US-led occupation of the country.

In Melbourne, 1,000 people rallied on Friday evening outside the State Library and marched through the city centre. Some 3,000 took part in a rally and march in Sydney's Hyde Park yesterday. Rallies of between 500 and 1,000 took place the same day in Brisbane, Adelaide, Fremantle and other centres.

Banners and placards at the rallies focused on opposing the recent announcement by the conservative Howard government that a further 450 Australian troops will be deployed to Iraq to take part in the occupation. The Australian troops will be departing for the Middle East in May, to take up positions in the southern province of Al Muthanna alongside Japanese and British forces. Last week, Howard refused to rule out further Australian troop deployments.

Other banners at the rallies condemned the atrocities committed by the US military against the Iraqi people, such as the torture at Abu Ghraib prison and the destruction of Fallujah. As people marched, they chanted: "End the occupation. Troops out now!"

The Sydney rally was addressed briefly by released Guantánamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib, who made an appeal for an ongoing campaign to win the release from US custody of the other Australian Guantánamo prisoner, David Hicks.

In New Zealand, demonstrations of 150 people took place in Auckland and Wellington. Approximately 4,500 people marched in Tokyo demanding the withdrawal of Japanese troops from Iraq. In Malaysia, an antiwar demonstration of approximately 400 people outside the US embassy in Kuala Lumpur was attacked by police, who fired tear gas into the demonstrators.

The rallies in Australia were organised by a network made up of the Australian Greens, pacifist groups and the Socialist Alliance—the electoral coalition of middle class protest

parties headed by the Democratic Socialist Perspective and the International Socialists.

The speeches made by representatives of the Greens and Socialist Alliance were marked by their refusal to make any concrete examination of the driving forces behind US militarism and the experiences of the antiwar movement over the past two years. Instead, speaker after speaker promoted the same illusions in protest politics that have dominated the global antiwar demonstrations since 2003.

None of the official speakers placed the invasion of Iraq in the context of the intensifying competition between the major powers over markets and resources, or the economic and social crisis wracking US capitalism in particular.

The deployment of more Australian troops was largely put down to Howard's personal stupidity and inexplicable subservience to the Bush White House. Greens' senator Kerry Nettle repeated several times in Sydney the inane explanation that "Howard just doesn't get it". Howard's decisions were, in fact, based on the conscious calculation that he needed to dispatch Australian troops to Iraq in order to gain Washington's backing for a more aggressive pursuit of Australian strategic and economic interests in the Asia Pacific region.

The address of radical journalist John Pilger, the keynote speaker in Sydney, was characteristic of the general approach.

Pilger—as he has done repeatedly since 2003—labelled the invasion of Iraq a "paramount war crime". He indicted the Australian Labor Party (ALP) for its refusal to expose the criminality and lies of the Howard government, and condemned the Australian media for its complicity in promoting the propaganda that has been used to justify both the war and the occupation. He called for journalists, academics, lawyers and others to "break their silence" and speak up against the destruction of civil liberties taking place under the cover of the "war on terror".

Australia, Pilger stated, was "a corrupt democracy that offers no more choice than between a McDonalds and a Hungry Jacks".

Pilger's political perspective, however, was summed up in his concluding statements. "Had it not been for you and your movement," he declared, "I believe Iran and North Korea would have been attacked by now, and, in the case of North Korea, nuclear weapons might have been used. Be proud of these achievements. Be proud that the violent, seedy power of Bush and Blair and Howard has been exposed by you and that behind their bravado they are afraid of you and of the millions like you."

Pilger's claim that protests have stopped US attacks on Iran and North Korea is aimed at preventing a serious examination of the obvious limitations of the antiwar protest movement. He failed to answer the most obvious questions: why was the opposition in 2003 unable to prevent the Iraq invasion, and how is it that Bush and Howard were both re-elected in the 2004 elections?

The demonstrations in 2003 were rendered politically impotent due to illusions that the presence of millions of people in the streets, or bodies such as the United Nations, or even the governments of France and Germany, would compel the Bush White House to back down from invading Iraq. In Australia, the illusion was promoted by the Greens and Socialist Alliance that large demonstrations would pressure the Howard government into retreating from the war out of fear of a massive backlash at the next elections.

In the aftermath of the March 2003 invasion, the mass antiwar movement in the US was subordinated to the Democratic Party, on the basis that this was the only "realistic" means of opposing the Bush administration's militarism. John Kerry's right-wing, pro-war campaign became the vehicle for suppressing any genuine opposition to the White House agenda, with the result that Bush was re-elected.

In the Australian elections, the Greens and Socialist Alliance argued that the Labor Party was a "lesser evil" to Howard and that a Labor government could be pressured to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq. The subordination of antiwar sentiment to Labor was a major factor in Howard's re-election. The ALP, which fundamentally agreed with the foreign policy of the government, refused to make the war an election issue. The conservatives were able to take advantage of the lack of any alternative and galvanise votes with a fear campaign that a Labor victory would lead to higher interest rates.

The organisers of the weekend rallies are among those politically responsible for channelling antiwar sentiment behind the Labor Party. The Greens, Socialist Alliance and Pilger oppose the emergence of an antiwar movement that takes as its starting point the need for a conscious global struggle against the source of war, the capitalist profit system, and that fights for the political independence of the

working class from the Labor Party.

In contrast to the organisers, a layer of those who attended the rallies are beginning to draw conclusions about the need for a new perspective. A number of people approached Socialist Equality Party stalls for discussion about the international situation and purchased literature. SEP members distributed *World Socialist Web Site* statements in Melbourne, Sydney, Fremantle and Wellington, New Zealand.

Meg, a volunteer worker, told the WSWS in Fremantle: "America preaches peace and freedom but how can you free a country by oppressing it. They are there for their own gains—obviously for the oil. We need to pull our troops out as it's creating more violence."

Veronica, a local Fremantle resident, said: "I've been against the war all along. The mass media needs to get their act together. They just go along with what the government says. I don't agree with the troop extension. There shouldn't be any troops there. They are all hypocrites."

Tania Baptist, a legal secretary, said: "I don't know whether protests will do anything. Voting doesn't seem to mean anything these days or do anything either. I joined the Greens last year because I thought they were the most visible alternative but I now think that was a mistake. I have been reading the WSWS and that has changed what I think."

"I think Howard is a criminal and a murderer. I don't agree with more Australian troops going to Iraq. Nothing is said about the murder of the Iraqi people."

"I was pretty devastated after the re-election of Howard. I thought 'I can't believe how stupid people could be'. I thought people would have at least voted Labor. But it isn't an alternative."

Adam, a safety inspector in Melbourne, said: "People need to be educated about the world we live in. Without knowledge there isn't any effective action. I get upset when right-wing politicians and commentators do not get challenged over what they say. All along the US has been after oil. The war in the Balkans was because they wanted the oil from the Caspian Sea. That's part of the big picture. That's what I realise now, it's part of the big game."



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