

Iraq war veterans, military families hold protest in North Carolina

A reporting team
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Nearly 3,000 antiwar demonstrators, including Iraq war veterans, families of soldiers killed in the war and high school and college-aged youth, held a march and rally Saturday in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to mark the second anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq and demand an end to the war.

Organizers selected the city of 125,000 because it is home to Ft. Bragg, the base of the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division and the US Special Operations Command. Some 10,000 soldiers from Ft. Bragg have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and some 80 service personnel with ties to the region or its bases have been killed since 2002, according to the *Fayetteville Observer*.

The protest expressed the growing disillusionment and anger against the Bush administration and the war among military personnel and their families. An effort by right-wing elements to organize a counterdemonstration failed to bring out more than a few dozen pro-war advocates.

Several speakers at the rally argued that the best way to "support the troops" was to end the illegal occupation of Iraq and bring the soldiers safely home. Kara Hollingsworth, the wife of a soldier serving in Iraq with the 18th Airborne Corps, received a standing ovation when she told the crowd, "I cannot remain silent ... I can't slap a yellow sticker on my car and call it supporting my troops. It's time for us to bring our troops home."

Kelly Dougherty, a young military police sergeant who served in Nasiriyah, Iraq, denounced the Bush administration, saying, "Soldiers are being abandoned by the same government that says it supports the troops. Many are waiting more than a month to get the physical and mental care they need because of what they did in Iraq.

"The violence is escalating but the American people are not shown the more than 1,500 coffins that are carrying the bodies of dead US soldiers, or the suffering of the Iraqi people. The occupation is the problem, not the solution."

Marchers carried mock coffins draped with US flags to commemorate the US soldiers who have died in the war and embroidered banners hung around the rally venue in Rowan

Park that included the names and personal profiles of dozens of soldiers from North Carolina, Florida, Georgia and other Southern states who have been killed.

The protest took place despite heavy police intimidation. Dozens of Fayetteville police officers, along with cops from across the state and from South Carolina, encircled Rowan Park and watched the protest from rooftops and mounted horses. The march was delayed and backed up for several blocks as police searched every demonstrator with metal detectors before entering the park.

Speakers at the rally included representatives from Iraq Veterans Against the War and Military Families Speak Out, as well as the brother of José Couso, the Spanish TV cameraman killed in Baghdad when a US tank fired on the Palestine Hotel. In line with several other demonstrations organized by United for Peace and Justice, the rally was also addressed by a Democratic Party politician, California Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, who said nothing about her party's support for the war and urged those in attendance to support her efforts to pass a resolution to replace US occupation force with UN troops.

Cindy Sheehan's son Casey was killed in Sadr City in April 2004. She is a co-founder of the Gold Star Families for Peace. She said, "I didn't lose my son. I know where he is. He is buried here. He was put in a grave by George Bush and the neo-conservatives, a government of psychopathic killers.

"In 16 days we are going to mark the one year anniversary of our son's death. He was a bright, sensitive young man, who needlessly and senselessly died for lies. If Congress gives Bush the \$81 billion he is asking for war their hands will be soaked in blood, not the purple ink of the sham elections in Iraq. If Bush believes in the march for democracy why doesn't he march his two daughters off to Iraq? If not, he should bring our kids home now."

After the rally several participants spoke with the WSWS. There is also widespread opposition among the troops currently deployed in Iraq.”

Shanell Thomas is a 29-year-old soldier who trained Iraqi policeman in Abu Ghraib right after the invasion. She said, “When Saddam Hussein was captured we thought we were going home. Privates went up to their sergeants and asked, ‘Why are we still here?’ Our lieutenant sat us down and said, ‘Don’t keep asking that question. We don’t know why we’re here.’”

“I lost a friend, a 19-year-old female soldier just out of basic training. The day she was killed she had taken over my place because I sprained my wrist. The officers told me, ‘Just get over it, this is war.’”

“I never used to watch the news and think about politics. During the elections soldiers used to debate over Kerry and Bush. Many said if Kerry was elected we’d still be in Iraq, anyway, so maybe if Bush was elected we’d get a raise.”

Alex Ryabov is a Marine veteran and cofounder of Iraq Veterans Against the War who took part in combat operations during the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003. He said, “I joined the Marine Corps in 2000 just after a recruiter appeared at our high school. He used to call me repeatedly to urge me to join the corps. He gave me the usual sales pitch of how wonderful the Marine life would be with a chance for traveling all over the world. In addition I could also get help for college.”

“In January 2003, we were informed that we would be deployed to Kuwait for the invasion of Iraq. I was never for the war exactly but I had to do my duty as a soldier. During the invasion, I saw an Iraqi military vehicle that was completely incinerated by our artillery. Normally we fire from miles away and we don’t get to see the destruction immediately. When I saw this vehicle it not only shocked me but also made me realize what would happen to me if we were at the receiving end.”

“My unit came back in May 2003 and already I was sick of the Marines from what we had done in Iraq. I had to hold myself from quitting outright, which would have subjected me to sanctions from the corps. After I got out, I went to a peace rally in June 2004. I was impressed at the fact that the opposition to the war extended to all age groups. I was already against this war, but what I saw at the peace rally had a big impact.”

“After getting out of the Marine Corps I met up with Michael Hoffman (one of the main founders of Iraq Veterans Against the War) and discussed about our opposition to the war. I was also in touch with other veterans and we all then

decided to state our opposition openly. We formed the IVAW and went public with our opposition during a Veterans Day march in July 2004. Since then we have attracted scores of members and supporters. We have visited wounded veterans at Walter Reed Hospital, where I estimate at least 70 percent are against the war.”

Several others who spoke with the WSWS debunked the claim that the Bush administration enjoyed widespread support in the so-called “Red States,” including North Carolina, which Bush carried because Kerry offered no solution to the deepening social problems of the region.

The closing of Good Hope Hospital’s psychiatric unit in Fayetteville was announced the day of the demonstration, for example. The facility is the only hospital in a two-county area that has beds for psychiatric patients. Last year, the unit served 500 psychiatric patients. The local newspaper reported a 90 percent increase last year in the number of people who had to be committed involuntarily.

One of the marchers, Carolyn Mott, a Fayetteville resident who is familiar with the psychological problems of returning soldiers, told the WSWS, “We’re seeing an overload of the Veterans Administration system. There are more and more young men who have seen atrocities and who have carried out atrocities. I don’t think the vets from the first Gulf War saw as many horrible things as these people have.”

“There are not really provisions to take care of these people after they are released from the military. There are fewer and fewer jobs around here. I have noticed the growth of the homeless community in Fayetteville. Many of them are younger men, veterans from the Iraq war.”

“My feeling is the Democratic Party has gone very far to the right and I am very disappointed. I think young people really need to pay attention, to read and learn everything about what is going on.”



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