

Thousands in cities across US demand an end to the Iraq war

A reporting team
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Demonstrations marking the second anniversary of the Iraq war were held in cities and towns across the US over the past weekend. Although far smaller than those held on the eve of the war in February 2003, hundreds of protests took place, according to event organizers.

Protesters included students, families of the US military, workers, retirees and others who came out to express their opposition to the Bush administration's illegal war and occupation of Iraq. Noticeable at many of the protests was a large police presence aimed at intimidating protesters who assembled peacefully at marches and rallies.

In New York City, several thousand demonstrators marched from Harlem to Central Park's East Meadow Saturday. Meanwhile, dozens of arrests took place at smaller protests held outside recruiting centers in Manhattan's Times Square and across the river in Brooklyn.

Police arrested 27 people in Times Square after they lay down in the middle of Broadway, blocking traffic. In Brooklyn, another eight people were arrested for refusing police orders to move away from the entrance to the recruiting station.

The larger march and rally uptown was met with a massive police deployment. New York City cops ringed the East Meadow with metal crowd-control barricades, preventing people from entering the protest site except through two heavily controlled entrances. After their 20-block march from Harlem, the bulk of the protesters were funneled through a narrow barricade-lined corridor flanked by mounted police.

Among the speakers at the Central Park rally was Lynne Stewart, the civil rights lawyer who was framed up and convicted on charges of aiding terrorism in connection with her representation of the jailed Egyptian cleric, Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman.

Stewart denounced the US intervention in Iraq as "an evil, dirty, self-aggrandizing war made by little men in high places." The authorities want "to put me away for 30 years," she told the crowd. "But it has more to do with what I have been doing for the last 30 years, organizing and defending people who need to be defended, and nothing to do with the 'T' word."

Also speaking was Javier Couso, the brother of Spanish journalist José Couso, who was killed by US forces in an attack on the Palestine hotel in Baghdad on April 8, 2003. He accused the US military of deliberately targeting independent journalists and said that there has yet to be an independent investigation into his brother's death.

Between chanting radical slogans, organizers of the demonstration brought several Democratic politicians to the platform, including New York City Congressman Charles Rangel.

While the crowd was far smaller than the demonstrations seen in New York at the Republican convention last August or on the first anniversary of the war a year ago, a number of students and youth joined the protest.

Hadas Thier, one of the three people arrested last week at City College of New York for protesting military recruiters, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at the start of the march in Harlem. "There are many witnesses," Hadas stated. "Although we were not blocking students from

getting to any tables, security was ready as soon as we started chanting, and pushed us out of the room and then assaulted us in the hall." Gregory Williams, the president of City College, who was once a deputy sheriff, issued a statement the next day citing charges that the students and a college secretary had assaulted campus security officers and took disciplinary action without due process or even meeting with the students. In what was supposed to be her last semester, the diminutive 27-year-old has been suspended and barred from setting foot on the campus.

Hadas said the fight against recruiters at City College was linked to both the war and the larger social problems faced by students. "Higher tuition forces more students to drop out of schools where they face fewer options," she said.

Hadas said that a thousand people have signed a letter of protest to the college administration and there have been many more emails of support. The Professional Staff Congress, the union representing CUNY faculty, and the Faculty Senate have also spoken out in defense of the protesters.

Sheila, a high school worker, and her two daughters spoke to the WSWW at the Central Park rally. "I came to this rally to oppose military recruitment at high schools," she said. "In my school they close the library so that they can do military testing. They get about 25 kids in there. Four or five kids have gone to Texas already to be shipped to Iraq.

"We know a family in Brentwood who lost their son in Tora Bora, in Afghanistan. The family is devastated and feels that it was an awful waste of his life.

"The war is a waste of resources. Instead the government needs to spend more money on schools. Head Start was a big help for my daughters. Now Bush wants to seriously cut the program. Most people can't afford to pay tuition at a good college. Ten years from now, how many scholarships will there be for colleges?

"We have no right to be the police of the world. We have no right to tell the Iraqis how to live," Her daughter Emily added, "The war is wrong. The only reason Bush went in there was for the oil."

Amanda and Ina, students at LaGuardia High School in the Bronx, also attended the rally. "We are opposed to Bush's policies because we feel that young people are going to get hit hard," said Amanda. "Both of my parents are computer programmers, and both got laid off. How dare Bush look at the camera and tell me lies about the economy?"

"Even though we couldn't vote, we were humiliated by this election. Kerry did as much as he could to let Bush win. I went to pro-Kerry rallies, but now I think that the Democrats are starting to blend with the Republicans."

Ina said, "I was not in favor of Kerry or Bush. The people who decided to go to this war are billionaires. When we go to war, they make money."

The WSWW also spoke with Horst, age 25, who lives in Germany, where he works as a translator. He was in New York City on vacation and decided to attend the rally when he saw a report about it on the local television news that morning.

"It's great to see so many American people who feel the same way we

feel in Europe,” he said. “When we demonstrate in Europe against the war, we are not opposed to the American people. We are opposed to Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney and their cronies.”

He spoke about the 2004 elections: “People here are still so shocked because of September 11. They may be wrong, but many voted for Bush because they thought he may be better able to fight terrorism than Kerry would have. Kerry was seen as a liberal, which in America is very difficult. In Europe, Kerry would have been a conservative.”

Horst described the political situation in Germany: “The Green Party started out very good, but starting with the intervention in Kosovo, they gave up their opposition to war. Having power in the government corrupted them. If they had opposed the US using its military bases in Germany for its Iraq operations, the coalition with the Social Democrats would have broken apart, and they would have been voted out of power.”

Elsewhere on the East Coast, several hundred people gathered on the snow-covered campus of the Maine capitol building in Augusta to commemorate the second anniversary of “Shock and Awe.” The moderator introduced Carl Cooley, the Socialist Equality Party’s 2004 candidate for congress in Maine’s second district.

“Socialists agree with the positions being expressed here, particularly the call for the immediate withdrawal of all troops from Iraq,” Cooley said. “However, there is no way we can rely on the Democratic Party leadership to honestly struggle for this result. Our experience during the Democratic primary campaign, and later at the Democratic convention, has shown that the loyalty of the Democratic Party leadership is firmly on the side of the corporate leaders of our government. The Democratic leaders wanted first of all to put down the antiwar demonstrators that threatened to become a massive working class mobilization.

“We do not have a two-party system. We have a one-party system whose several factions must toe the basic corporatist line. The candidates of the various factions of this one party system rely on vast sums of money to prevail.

“In contrast, a working class party, such as the Socialist Equality Party, will not accept corporate money nor will it accept corporate representatives as members. A working class party depends on its membership for everything—its financing, its communications, its campaigning. Its strength lies in its socialist and internationalist orientation, and in its membership.

“Our socialist orientation is that the world’s productive forces must be organized in such a way as to meet the needs of the working people, not the obscene profits of a tiny capitalist elite. Our membership includes garbage and sanitation workers, scientists, industrial workers, agricultural workers, editors, reporters, teachers, doctors, planners, bank workers, organizers—everyone who works for a paycheck. The working class does everything. What do we need the capitalists for?”

Much of the crowd responded with enthusiastic agreement with these remarks. A speaker following Carl Cooley spoke as a representative of the Democratic Party, and was repeatedly heckled from sections of the audience. His insistence on blaming the Democrats in the audience for not making the party be what they wanted it to be was not favorably received, at one point provoking laughter from the crowd.

Close to 2000 people took part in the “Global Day of Protest” march in Pittsburgh. The march, organized by the Thomas Merton Center, began in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of the city’s east end and made its way to the University of Pittsburgh’s Student Union Building. The majority of the demonstrators were high school and college students.

At the rally, keynote speaker Diane Davis Santoriello explained her opposition to the war. Her son, First Lt. Neil Anthony Santoriello, was killed last August when a bomb exploded near his vehicle in western Iraq. “The only antidote to my complete despair became the desire to keep other families from going through my experience and speaking out against the war and the mistakes that continue to be made,” she said, “I fear for

the future of my country.”

A contingent of five students attended from Keystone Oaks High School in Dormont. Billy Reiche, 16, said that he came to take a stand against a pointless war. His friend Jonanthan Gondelman, 16, added that it was a mistake and there never were any weapons of mass destruction. Mike Ryan, also 16, pointed out that the administration changed their justification for going to war after it started.

Dana Dobson, 14, told the WSWS that it was a mistake from the beginning. “It was wrong all along. They have no way out of Iraq. There was no evidence for going there. Now hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed for no good reason.” Katee Newhaus, 12, explained that her cousin Shane was the 27th person to die in Iraq. “It’s been really hard for my family to get over it. I wish he were alive so that he could tell me all that happened.”

Jean Kashiwsky, a longtime Kaufmann’s Department store worker, also spoke to the WSWS, “They were all lies from the beginning. I knew that there were no weapons of mass destruction. The war was planned at least by 1994 by Wolfowitz and Bill Kristol. They wanted to finish the first Gulf War as revenge for not getting Saddam out in 1991.”

Her friend Viola Weigle told the WSWS, “There are so many young ones that will never come home. It’s very, very sad. There are other dictatorships. So, we have to ask why Iraq? They knew they were going there four years before the war started. 9/11 was a gift for Bush. He used that as the reason to go to war. Think of all of this money being used for war. Everyone could have health care. I don’t believe in this war. The American Revolution was justified, the Civil War was justified. This war is not.”

A day earlier, on Friday afternoon, 300 protesters marched through downtown Detroit to express their opposition to the war in Iraq. Sgt. Camilo Mejia, 29, born in Nicaragua and now living in Miami, explained why he is now against the war and chose to go to jail rather than be redeployed a second time to Iraq.

“I have to admit,” stated Mejia, “initially I did not oppose the war.” Mejia said he was in the regular army for four years, joined the National Guard and went to college when his guard unit was called up. “I was living comfortably and that was all that mattered. Even then I began to have my doubts about the weapons of mass destruction story and the statement by Bush that Iraq was tied to Al Qaeda.”

After his first tour in Iraq, he came back but decided not to go back for a second tour. “The things I saw, no one should have to see. Many innocent civilians were killed. When I looked at all of those things I decided I could not go back to the war.”

Mejia filed as a conscientious objector but his application was rejected by a military judge. He was then charged with desertion and sentenced to a year in prison. In February he was released.

“It was hard but I knew I had a lot of support,” he told the WSWS.

About 1,000 protesters attempting to March from Chicago’s Gold Coast area to Daley plaza were confronted by hundreds of police in full riot gear. The demonstrators were prevented from marching down Michigan Avenue. After a standoff, police agree to let the demonstration proceed down Dearborn Avenue.

The Democratic administration of Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley had refused a permit for the march and had ordered the mass police mobilization. The march ended at a rally at Daley plaza, for which there was a permit. The rally area was sealed off by hundreds of police outfitted with shields helmets, clubs and flak vests, along with mounted units.

Some participants commented that no police mobilization of such a scope had been carried out since the notorious 1968 Democratic convention. At least two protesters were arrested.

Over fifteen thousand rallied in San Francisco, with the 15-block-long demonstration ending in San Francisco’s Civic Center, across from City Hall. Among the demonstrators were students from colleges and high

schools, many of whom had never protested before, as well as school bus drivers, nurses, health workers and longshore workers.

“We want to do something important to stop the war,” said Christine, a sophomore from El Molino High School, in Sonoma County. Christine indicated that El Molino is cutting back the high school day by one period, eliminating art and music classes and extracurricular activities.

“Students compare that to what’s being spent on the war. During the war in Vietnam there were no cuts to the school budgets,” said Catie, a senior. “Another big issue that has come up is how recruiters operate at El Molino. Information about students that are not doing well gets sent to the Army. They target the kids with lower grades.”

Peter, a junior and member of the high school jazz band, described how during one rehearsal Marine recruiters showed up. “One of their selling points was that the student could play in the Marine band; it is disgusting that they recruit in that way.” A recent poll among students at El Molino revealed that over 70 percent of the student body opposes the war.



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