

# After September 24 protest: What way forward in the struggle against war?

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The massive march in Washington on September 24 for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq was followed two days later by a smaller civil disobedience protest in front of the White House where scores were arrested.

The first of the 370 taken into police custody Monday was Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a fallen US soldier who gained national attention last month by camping out near Bush's Texas ranch to call for an end to the war and demand the president explain to her why her son was killed.

Sheehan played a prominent role in the weekend's demonstrations, in large part because she embodies the sentiments shared by the hundreds of thousands who marched. Her tragedy—the sudden, violent death of her son Casey—is as profound as her anger against those responsible for sending him to Iraq to die.

The demonstration was the largest seen in the US capital since the war began two-and-a-half years ago. But beyond sheer numbers, a somewhat changed political mood among the marchers was evident.

While many were participating for the first time in such a protest, there seemed a more sober approach than in the past, less willingness to accept facile explanations attributing the war to a conspiracy on the part of George Bush and a handful of “neo-cons,” a greater recognition that the tragedy inflicted upon the peoples of both Iraq and the US is the product of deep-going social and political contradictions.

This is due in part to the protracted character of the war—with US fatalities now pushing toward the 2,000 mark and the Iraqi dead numbering at least 50 times that. It is also bound up with the failure of the anybody-but-Bush perspective advanced by much of the antiwar movement before the 2004 election, and the undeniable complicity of the Democratic Party in continuing the war.

Without question, the demonstration was also deeply affected by the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its stunning exposure of the rotten foundations of the entire social and political system—the vast inequality and stark class divisions, the incompetence, corruption and indifference of the ruling elite. The sense that the war is a product of a crisis-ridden social system poses difficult political questions that find no ready answers in the politics of protest.

While a changed mood may have been perceptible among the marchers, there was little to distinguish the message that came from the speakers' platforms from those offered in previous

protests. While Hurricane Katrina was referred to by many speakers, it was almost invariably from the standpoint of “linking” it to the war issue in order to better promote a perspective of pressuring Congress and supporting the Democratic Party against Bush.

That not a single prominent Democratic office-holder or official would even send a message of support to the march, much less participate, did not faze its organizers and such speakers as Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Ralph Nader and Ramsey Clark. They either openly advocated a vote for the Democrats in the coming 2006 and 2008 elections—as in Jackson's case—or called for Bush's impeachment, a political perspective that promotes the conception that the Democrats in Congress will wage a struggle against the very policy they have supported.

It was not without political significance that the bulk of the marchers appeared to bypass the rallies called to open and close the protest and simply took to the streets to express their outrage. Yet this sense that the speakers had no real answers coexists with persistent political illusions.

Alongside the civil disobedience in front of the White House, the protest's organizers coordinated a lobbying effort targeting primarily Democrats on Capitol Hill.

This raises a fundamental political issue that cannot be evaded by those seeking to end the war in Iraq and the ever more virulent growth of US militarism. There can be no viable antiwar movement so long as it remains in the thrall of the Democratic Party.

Historically, subordination to the Democratic Party, and thereby to the American two-party system, has been the political graveyard of every mass movement against war and for social progress, democratic rights and equality. This was the case with the Populist agrarian revolt at the end of the 19th century, the mass upsurge for industrial unions in the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the antiwar movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

A political orientation to pressuring the Democratic Party is incompatible with the development of a strategy to defend the independent interests of the working class, because the Democratic Party, whatever its tactical differences with the Republicans, is a party of American big business and defends the same fundamental economic and social interests as the Republican Party. They are two parties of American capitalism, and both the Iraq war and the Katrina disaster have exposed, in different ways, the failure of the

capitalist system itself.

## Cindy Sheehan and Hillary Clinton

This political truth was demonstrated in Cindy Sheehan's meetings with Senate Democratic Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, considered a likely contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008. Both voted to authorize the use of military force against Iraq in 2002 and both have repeatedly voted to fund the continuing war.

According to an account published by the New York weekly the *Village Voice*, Sheehan came out of the meetings and declared, "I know their offices are going to be working with us; all we have to do is keep up the pressure on them."

This is, however, a combination of wishful thinking and political naivete. As the report spelled out, Clinton had gone out of her way to schedule a meeting earlier the same day with 20 members of American Gold Star Mothers, a group that has sharply criticized Sheehan and other families of slain soldiers seeking an end to the war. Clinton stressed that these mothers held "different positions" on Iraq.

Her statement echoed the attempts of the White House and the media to equate the mass demonstration Saturday against the war with the rally held by a group of right-wing Bush supporters Sunday that attracted only a few hundred people. Speaking to the *Voice*, Clinton made it clear that she supported the war's continuation and that the principal lesson she drew from the death of Cindy Sheehan's son was that even more working class youth in uniform should be sent to their deaths.

"My bottom line is that I don't want their sons to die in vain," she said, adding, "I don't believe it's smart to set a date for withdrawal... I don't think it's the right time to withdraw." She went on to describe the Iraq war as a "noble cause." Asked if she still supported sending even more US troops to Iraq, she responded, "We'll see."

In a moving speech at the September 24 demonstration, Sheehan directly indicted the US Congress. "How many more of other people's children are you willing to sacrifice for the lies?" she asked. "Shame on you for giving [Bush] the authority to invade Iraq."

There is plenty of shame to go around in the US Congress, but those like Clinton and other leading Democrats will not be shamed by their records nor pressured by protest to abandon their support for the war. This support is firmly rooted in definite social interests.

The Democrats' support for the war, along with the media's echoing of the administration's lies (and its virtual silence on the massive demonstration demanding immediate US withdrawal) demonstrate that the war in Iraq is not merely an aberration foisted on the American people by a handful of right-wingers who hijacked the White House. Nor is the Democrats' collaboration a matter of a political mistake or cowardice.

The war is a policy supported by and conducted in the interests

of a ruling oligarchy that both major parties represent and defend. The US ruling elite has turned to war because it has no other answers either to the decline of the US position on the world market or the social and economic crises that are tearing apart American society.

The social gulf separating this financial elite from the broad mass of working people is without precedent in American history. Yet this stark class divide finds no expression in official politics.

Sheehan's protest struck such a powerful chord precisely because it voiced the sentiments of millions—according to one recent poll fully 52 percent back a withdrawal "as soon as possible," regardless of whether stability has been established in Iraq—that finds no representation either in Congress or in the media.

Moreover, it exposed the criminal sacrifice of young working class lives in Iraq by a government that holds those without great wealth in contempt—a political reality underscored by the criminal abandonment of Katrina's victims in New Orleans.

The struggle against war can be waged only on the basis of a program that proceeds from these underlying social contradictions, which are themselves the fundamental source of war.

This means mobilizing the working population, whose interests are in direct contradiction to the profit system and are suffering the effects of its crisis—from falling living standards, to unemployment, social cutbacks, attacks on democratic rights and the steady rise in the number of sons and daughters killed and maimed while serving as soldiers in Iraq.

Opposition to the war must be joined with a program that speaks to all of the burning questions of living standards, jobs, health care, education, housing, the defense of democratic rights and the struggle for social equality. Such a program can emerge only out of a wholly new movement based on a complete and irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and the independent political mobilization of working people in their own interests.

A new mass socialist party must be built. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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