

Protests demand immediate withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan

A WSWWS reporting team
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On Saturday, October 28, demonstrations were held in 37 communities across Canada to demand the immediate withdrawal of all Canadian troops from Afghanistan.

Twenty-three hundred Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) personnel are currently deployed in southern Afghanistan, where they are waging a brutal counter-insurgency campaign with other NATO forces. Last May, parliament approved a minority Conservative government motion to extend the Canadian deployment in southern Afghanistan for two more years, until at least February 2008.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party intervened in the demonstrations in at least five cities. They distributed hundreds of copies of a statement which welcomed the protests and explained that the only way in which the fight against imperialism can be taken forward is through the independent political mobilization of the working class on an internationalist and socialist program. (See "Protests demand Canadian troops out of Afghanistan: The political issues in the fight against war")

In Toronto, more than 1,000 people rallied in front of the US consulate on University Avenue, then marched through the downtown to Moss Park. Adjacent to the CAF's Moss Park Armoury, Moss Park was chosen for the end of the demonstration because a year ago a CAF reservist fresh from war games beat a homeless man, Stanley Crutch, to death there.

The organizers of the Toronto event chose to give pride of place to Jack Layton, the leader of the federal New Democratic Party (NDP). In late August, the NDP rescinded its support for the deployment of Canadian troops in southern Afghanistan and issued a call for the troops to be withdrawn. The NDP's stance has nothing in common with a principled opposition to Canadian imperialism. Rather it is aimed at capitalizing on the growing anti-war sentiment and anger over the Conservative government's embrace of the Bush administration at the next federal election.

That the NDP's fundamental orientation is towards the Canadian ruling class was very much on display in Layton's

remarks. His speech began with criticism of the "combat role" assigned to Canadian troops—as if there was another role for a military. Layton concluded by saying that withdrawing the troops would be "an important step toward building a truly independent foreign policy—not imported from Washington."

In essence, the NDP and the unions—the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) endorsed the anti-war protests—are calling for the resurrection of the "independent foreign policy" pursued by Liberal governments of the 1960s and 1970s.

But as the SEP statement distributed at the demonstrations explained: "The reality is that throughout the Cold War Canada was a partner of NATO and NORAD. 'Peacekeeping' was a way the Canadian ruling class could gain some leverage on the world stage, in pursuit of the interests of Canadian capital, and just as importantly was a means of refashioning Canadian nationalism to make it a more effective instrument for harnessing working people to the objectives of the Canadian ruling class."

After Layton, the podium was given over to figures associated with the campaign to support US military personnel who have fled to Canada because they oppose the US invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Lee Zaslofsky from the War Resisters Support Group said the focus of the war resisters' campaign is an appeal to the Canadian government to make "special provision" for the US war resisters as was done "in the Vietnam era".

The first Canadian soldier to refuse deployment to Afghanistan, Francisco Juarez, also spoke briefly at the event. "We are told to stay the course, in a dubious nautical metaphor, when it would be better to take the boat home and repair its rudder," said Juarez. He demanded a "fuller debate" on the CAF mission in Afghanistan in the House of Commons.

In Montréal approximately three hundred people braved pouring rain in order to take part in a demonstration organized by the Collectif Échec à la guerre (Stop War Coalition). While supporters of the pressure groups that form the Collectif constituted the greater part of those

demonstrating, the WSWWS reporting team nonetheless also encountered many workers and young people who had come to the demonstration on their own initiative, because of their disgust at the crimes committed by the occupying troops against the Afghan people.

The demonstration's organizers underlined the presence of *Québec solidaire*. Formed earlier this year as a "left-wing" alternative to the *indépendantiste* Parti Québécois, *Québec solidaire* calls for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan, while at the same time calling for a new foreign intervention in Afghanistan under the auspices of that pliant instrument of imperialism called the United Nations.

The Bloc Québécois, the PQ's sister party at the federal level, was notable for its absence. The BQ has sought to cater to anti-war sentiment by criticizing the way in which the Canadian military intervention has been conducted. But it has also condemned the NDP's call for the aborting of the current CAF mission as "irresponsible."

In a brief speech at the end of the demonstration, Raymond Legault, a spokesperson for the Collectif Échec à la guerre, denounced the war in Afghanistan, comparing it to the war in Iraq and describing it as a "war for strategic and economic interests entirely foreign to the interests of the majority of the population and entirely foreign to the interests of the Québec and Canadian populations." Legault denounced the atrocities committed in name of hunting terrorists and Taliban and the utilization of Afghan adolescents as human shields for Canadian soldiers.

In Montreal, as in Toronto, there were virtually no trade unionists present at the anti-war protest. Although the CLC and other unions ostensibly support the demand for the CAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan, they clearly lifted not a finger to mobilize their members.

In Kingston a group of approximately 60 people congregated at the corner of Union and University, to voice opposition to the imperialist activities of Canada in Afghanistan.

In a town housing Queen's University and approximately 14,000 university students, it is significant that there few students were in attendance. Many university students reported seeing no flyers for the protest in the days leading up to the event. Prominent at the demonstration instead were supporters of the Canadian Action Party (CAP), a Canadian nationalist party founded by former Liberal Defence Minister Paul Hellyer.

In a speech before a march to City Hall, a CAP supporter bemoaned the loss of Canada's "peacekeeping" tradition, saying that "we are losing our moral high ground" relative to the US. In a speech at the end of the march a CLC spokesperson argued that Canada needs to develop an

independent identity in international affairs, i.e. independent of that of the United States. Conspicuously absent in their remarks was any reference to the issues facing workers as a result of the war. In every case, opposition was directed solely against the Conservative government, with no mention of the pro-war policies of the Liberals and the NDP. (The NDP openly supported the Afghan mission until this summer and continues to advocate Canadian military intervention in the Darfur region of Sudan).

Many of those in attendance at the Kingston demonstration eagerly took the SEP's leaflets and our reporting team had discussions with some about the history of the Fourth International and about the environmental implications of Marxism.

Between 2500 and 3000 people participated in the Vancouver demonstration. As in Toronto, the rally's organizers chose to give a prominent place to an NDP representative, in this case Libby Davis, the NDP Member of Parliament for Vancouver East.

Slogans on placards displayed at the rally included "Money for healthcare not for war", "Is this really peacekeeping?", "Stop attacks at home and abroad", "Drop tuition fees, not bombs", "NATO led aggression is doomed to failure", "Stop the Canadian war drive", and "Each dead soldier is a down payment on Harper's ticket to the big boys club".

When asked about the Afghan conflict and Canada's involvement therein, one young march attendee, Alica, offered the following comment,

"What I don't appreciate is our troops being in there. Our money is being used for something that it shouldn't be used for. There are other people who need it. There are people living on the streets today, this very day in Vancouver and the money should be used for that purpose. So I want our government to smarten up and start donating that money to those in need, open up more housing and help people get off the street. And get our troops out of Afghanistan and don't deploy them to Korea."

The SEP statement was also distributed at the antiwar protest in Fredericton, New Brunswick.



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