

Democrat Congressman calls for reinstating the draft

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Only two weeks after the US midterm elections, in which the overriding sentiment was public opposition to the war in Iraq, political debate in Washington has shifted markedly. Gone is any discussion of even a partial troop withdrawal in the near future. The main question within the political establishment is whether or not the US should send *more* troops to Iraq, and if so, how many and for how long.

One of the principal problems that have come up in debate on this question is the lack of sufficient US soldiers in the military to send more troops to Iraq for an extended period of time. This was the principal objection raised by John Abizaid, the commander of US forces in the Middle East, to proposals to increase the number of troops in Iraq during questioning before the Senate Armed Services Committee last week.

Within this context, Democratic Congressman Charles Rangel, the incoming chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, has prominently renewed his call for a military draft.

Rangel's call for a draft is not new—he first introduced a draft bill in 2003. However, his position is receiving much more media attention than in the past. Rangel's statements were covered heavily in the corporate media on Monday. He was interviewed on CNN's "Situation Room", and his position was reported prominently on the evening news as well as the print media.

On CBS' "Face the Nation" Sunday, Rangel told Bob Schieffer, "You bet your life," that he is serious about calling for the draft. "I will be introducing that bill as soon as we start the new session," he said. Rangel has submitted two versions of a draft bill over the past three and a half years. One would apply to men and women aged 18 to 26, and the other to men and women aged 18 to 42.

"There's no question in my mind that this president and this administration would never have invaded Iraq, especially on the flimsy evidence that was presented to the Congress, if indeed we had a draft," Rangel declared on "Face the Nation". There would never have been an invasion if "members of Congress and the administration

thought that their kids from their communities would be placed in harm's way."

Thus, Rangel's call for a reinstatement of the draft is based on two inter-related propositions: 1) that the existence of the draft would make war less likely because public opposition would be more easily aroused; and 2) that congressmen would be less likely to support a war that might affect the lives of their own children.

In response to the first proposition, it is not public opposition that is lacking. The invasion of Iraq was never popular, and at this point a substantial majority of the American people favors the withdrawal of US troops from that country. This is the state of public opinion without the draft. However, this opposition finds no serious reflection within the political establishment.

If it were in fact necessary to have a draft to get the two parties to oppose the war, this is not an argument for the draft. Rather, it would demonstrate the urgent necessity of building a political movement in opposition to both political parties.

In reality, Rangel's argument is as demagogic as it is simplistic. There are deeper issues involved in the eruption of imperialist militarism than the subjective fears and concerns of individual politicians. Their decisions, as representatives of the ruling corporate elite, are in the final analysis determined by *class* interests. Congress is an institution utterly subservient to the interests of the ruling corporate and financial elite. In the event of a draft, the latter would find the political personnel that are prepared to take the measures deemed necessary to achieve the global ambitions of US imperialism. Those individuals who were seen as excessively squeamish about the lives of their own children, not to mention those of their constituents, would be replaced with politicians with stiffer backbones. And there is no shortage of such tough-minded individuals in the present congress. One need only point to the example of John McCain, who is the most outspoken advocate of sending more troops to Iraq, and who has two sons in the military.

The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan expressed the

fundamental interests of the American ruling elite to establish control over the Middle East and Central Asia, along with the critical natural resources of these regions. At stake is the geo-strategic position of American capitalism, and to suppose that these interests would somehow be overridden if Congressmen were concerned about their own children or the children of their neighbors is politically naïve.

Moreover, Rangel's argument is contradicted by historical experience. In World War I and on the eve of World War II, the draft was introduced by Congress in the face of substantial popular opposition. Once conscription was introduced, it provided a legal pretext for the ruthless suppression of all popular opposition to war. Rangel seems to be unaware of the fact that it was opposition to the introduction of conscription in World War I that set the stage for the most ferocious assault on free speech in the history of the United States. That experience was repeated in World War II as well as during the Vietnam era, when the government prosecuted opponents of the war for obstructing the draft. One of the most famous targets of such prosecution was Mohammed Ali.

Much of Rangel's argument is couched in pseudo-democratic and populist terms: i.e., that the existence of the draft would create some sort of "equality of sacrifice." But this argument is really beside the point: the existence of universal conscription would not make the occupation of Iraq any less criminal than it presently is. Forcing the sons and daughters of the wealthy to kill and be killed in Iraq would not change the barbaric and illegal nature of the war itself. No one should be forced to fight in these wars of plunder for the seizure of oil resources.

Nor would universal conscription change to any significant degree the class character of American capitalism. The United States needs equality in life, not in death.

Much of Rangel's argument on the draft is set up to avoid discussing the basic fact that the *Democratic Party supports the occupation of Iraq*. Rangel himself does not call for an end to the occupation, and has explicitly ruled out supporting a cut-off of funds for US military operations.

If Rangel really opposed the war, there would be a much more direct way to end it than by implementing the draft—namely to campaign for an end to the war. The appropriate response to defend the interests of working class people in the military is not to call for more people to be dragooned into the military, but to demand the immediate withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. This is not Rangel's position, and it is a position that has been completely rejected by his party.

In fact, Rangel's pseudo-populist arguments are, from an objective standpoint, in bad faith. The congressman's

position serves as cover for the basic purpose of the draft, which would be to increase the size of the military in order to bolster the Iraq occupation and future wars.

As he said on "Face the Nation" Sunday, "If we're going to challenge Iran and challenge North Korea and then, as some people have asked, to send more troops to Iraq, we can't do that without a draft . . . I don't see how anyone can support the war and not support the draft," he said.

In a statement he issued in May 2005, Rangel declared, "Everyone knows that we went into this war with an insufficient number of troops, but the problem now is filling the ranks of those units that are already on the ground . . . We are only able to keep troops in field by extending deployments, calling back veterans who have previously served in combat and placing an unsustainable burden on the Reserves . . ."

It is generally accepted within the political establishment that a larger military is necessary. Rangel's comments have been prominently discussed in the media because they serve to legitimize discussion of the draft under conditions in which the US military is already overstretched, while at the same time there is ongoing discussion within the ruling elite on the need to increase the number of troops in Iraq and prepare for possible action against Iran. Rangel's position is a trial balloon to gauge public reaction and condition public opinion for a move in this direction.

While the Democratic leadership immediately announced their opposition to Rangel's proposal, there was been a lengthy discussion within the Democratic Party over the need for some form of universal service. Several books by Democratic strategists that came out before the election raised this need. Rangel made his statement as a deliberate and highly conscious introduction of this issue into political debate.

Class conscious workers and antiwar students and youth should see through Rangel's demagoguery and remain unyielding in their opposition to both the war and all plans to reintroduce conscription.



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