

The politics of the January 27 rally in Washington

# Organizers channel antiwar protest behind Democrats

Barry Grey in Washington DC  
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Tens of thousands rallied in Washington DC on Saturday to protest the Bush administration's military escalation in Iraq and demand an end to the war and withdrawal of US troops. Students and youth from many parts of the country attended. There was also a significant representation of Iraq war veterans as well as families of soldiers who have been killed or wounded in Iraq and of men and women presently deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Several dozen active duty soldiers participated.

However, all those who came to Washington out of a sincere desire to bring an end to the war were deprived of any serious or honest political perspective by the organizers of the demonstration, who deliberately subordinated it to the maneuvers of the Democrats in Congress and the electoral ambitions of the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential race.

United for Peace and Justice, the coalition that organized the Washington rally as well as smaller protests in Los Angeles, San Francisco and other cities, brought an array of Democratic politicians onto the stage at the National Mall, including Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who is running for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Representatives Maxine Waters and Lynn Woolsey of California, Rep. John Conyers of Michigan and Jesse Jackson.

A statement issued Saturday by United for Peace and Justice, entitled "Why We Are Marching," made clear the political alliance between the rally organizers and the Democratic Party. It praised a bill introduced by congresswomen Woolsey, Waters and Barbara Lee to withdraw US troops from Iraq within six months and declared, "We stand with this growing Congressional group. Now is the time for Congress to take the actions within its legal power, to make history, use the power of the purse to stop the funding of the war."

In fact, this bill and a similar measure to be introduced in the Senate by Russ Feingold have no chance of being passed or even winning significant support from legislators. The Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives—Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Majority Leader Steny Hoyer—and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid have made it clear they are opposed to blocking funding for Bush's "surge" of 21,500 additional troops, let alone moving to cut off

funding for the war as a whole.

Instead they are cynically attempting, by means of nonbinding resolutions against Bush's military escalation, to appease and defuse mass antiwar sentiment, while fashioning a new bipartisan strategy to salvage the US colonial adventure in Iraq.

The purpose of legislative gestures such as those introduced by Waters and company in the House and Feingold in the Senate is to give the Democrats a measure of credibility and boost illusions that this imperialist party can be pressured to adopt a pacifist foreign policy.

With the Bush administration brazenly flouting public opinion on Iraq, and losing support in Congress even among Republicans for its reckless policy of escalation in Iraq and war threats against Iran, the entire political establishment is careening toward a political and constitutional crisis of potentially historic proportions. Both parties are terrified at the prospect of the mass opposition to the war linking up with other social concerns of working people and sparking a social movement outside of the control of either party or any institution of the US ruling elite.

That fear is shared by those who organized the January 27 demonstrations. The United for Peace and Justice coalition includes the liberal Democratic MoveOn.org and is headed by such "left" defenders of the Democratic Party as the Communist Party Stalinist leader Judith LeBlanc and veteran protest organizer Leslie Cagan.

They quite consciously set out to present the Democratic Party as the only legitimate focus for antiwar activity and block the emergence of a movement against imperialist war from the left, i.e., one that is independent of the two-party system and advances a socialist program articulating the interests of the American and international working class.

Speakers at the January 27 rally repeatedly told the crowd that the way to bring an end to the war was to lobby the new, Democratic Congress. The call to pressure the Democratic Congress was combined with thinly veiled calls to elect a Democrat as president in 2008. (Little mention was made of the absence from the demonstration of any of the leading

contenders for the Democratic nomination: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards or Joseph Biden.)

Eleanor Smeal, head of Feminist Majority, proclaimed, “We will return even bigger majorities in 2008 ... Keep your lobbying shoes on.”

Susan Schaer of Women’s Action for New Directions declared, referring to the Democratic Congress, “They are the deciders, not [Bush]. They are the commanders. Now, it is up to them to make the change... We have to be there behind them, every step of the way. Some nonbinding resolution is good, but it’s not enough.... We can do it. We did it in November, we can do it next year.”

The demonstration was in large part organized as a backdrop to a new effort to lobby Congress, entitled Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, which was recently launched by a coalition of unions and MoveOn.org.

The complicity of the Democrats in the war, from its origin to the present, was largely ignored, and there was no explanation of the root causes of the eruption of US militarism in the crisis of American and world capitalism.

The Washington demonstration had, in fact, a semi-official character. In the days leading up to the rally, the *Washington Post* published articles predicting a mass turnout, providing a map of the rally site, and advertising the scheduled appearance, complete with head shots, of such Hollywood celebrities as Jane Fonda, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins and Danny Glover. The Friday edition went so far as to report a relatively balmy and sunny weather forecast for the next day’s march. Sunday’s *Post* featured a front-page report on the demonstration with a large photo of the marchers—a marked departure from the newspaper’s negligible coverage of previous antiwar marches.

A certain indication of the quasi-official character of the demonstration and the coordination between the organizers and the Democratic Party leadership was the stamp of approval given by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The union federation, which initially supported the war and remained silent for months on end as the carnage increased, sent Fred Mason, the president of the Maryland-DC AFL-CIO, to present greetings to the rally in behalf of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

An event organized on the basis of such a bankrupt perspective could not possibly give serious expression to the intense hatred of working people and youth for the war and the Bush administration, and the deep social and economic concerns of the broad masses of the population.

Among the more odious aspects of the event was a demagogic rant from Dennis Kucinich, a political imposter and scoundrel of the first order. The Ohio congressman is seeking to reprise his role in the 2004 presidential race, when he ran for the Democratic nomination as supposedly the most resolute antiwar candidate, only to throw his support at the Democratic convention to the party’s pro-war nominee, John Kerry.

Prior to subjecting the crowd to yet one more “keep hope

alive” sermon from Jesse Jackson, United for Peace and Justice National Coordinator Cagan reverently introduced the veteran political dissembler as “someone who has been a part of this movement and every movement for social and economic justice.”

When this reporter interviewed Jackson prior to his speech, however, the unprincipled and two-faced character of his position became clear. Asked whether he favored a cutoff of funding for the war, Jackson replied, “Yes. You can’t have it both ways.”

When I then asked, “All funding, or just for the escalation?” Jackson evaded the question, replying: “A, stop the escalation and B, begin to put together an authentic coalition of the willing to begin to transition us out of there...”

When I asked whether he favored the impeachment of Bush, he similarly hedged, saying, “I favor hearings and investigations. Let’s at least begin to engage in the process to determine what went wrong and who did what when.”

Behind such evasions and doubletalk stand the politics of a party which, whatever its criticisms of Bush’s policy in Iraq, fully defends the interests of the US corporate-financial elite both at home and abroad, and has no principled opposition either to continuing the bloodbath in Iraq or launching new imperialist wars.

Definite political lessons must be drawn from the complicity of the Democratic Party in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention last summer’s US-backed Israeli war against Lebanon. Lessons must similarly be drawn about the politics of nominally left, opportunist allies of the Democratic Party, such as those who organized last Saturday’s demonstrations.

The only genuine basis for developing a mass movement against militarism and war is the mobilization of working people on an international scale independently of and against the parties of the capitalist ruling elite. This means an irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and the building of a mass, independent socialist movement.



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