

Britain: London antiwar demonstration downplays threat of war against Iran

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In 2003, one million people took to the streets of London to protest against the war in Iraq. Four years later, amidst Bush's "surge" in Iraq and the advanced preparations for a military assault on Iran, the capital saw somewhat less than 30,000 march on Saturday under the slogan, "No Trident—Troops out of Iraq."

What can account for this dramatic decline in numbers? Have the antiwar sentiments that mobilised broad layers of people in London and around the world drastically subsided? The answer is clearly no.

Internationally, poll after poll has recorded a growing majority opposing the brutal occupation of Iraq. In Britain, the Blair government is riven by crisis and the prime minister's own approval rating is at an all-time low. Labour faces being dislodged from government in the devolved Scottish Parliament and could lose hundreds of council seats in the May local elections, primarily as a result of the rejection by the electorate of its pro-war policies.

In the November 2006 mid-term elections in the United States, the Bush administration suffered a significant defeat when American voters rebuffed the warmongering of the right-wing clique that controls the White House.

But whereas opposition to the war has grown, the political bankruptcy of those who would lead the antiwar movement has become ever clearer.

The speeches in Trafalgar Square were best characterised by what they did not say. Although some voiced perfunctory opposition to the launching of a war against Iran, not a single person on the platform devoted any real attention to the terrible consequences of US (or Israeli) strikes against Tehran.

There was no analysis of the significant build-up of US military forces in the Gulf in preparation for such a war, nor of the sinister propaganda campaign launched

by the White House to demonise Iran and "soften up" public opinion in readiness for the bombing operations.

Rather than base the struggle against militarism on a fight for a socialist programme to put an end to the profit system that fuels the drive to war, the Stop the War Coalition (STWC), in which the Socialist Workers Party plays a leading role, focuses on efforts to build up dissenting elements within the political establishment who oppose the war in Iraq for purely tactical reasons—including politicians from various parties such as the Greens and Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru, and religious leaders, but centring on what remains of the Labour Party "left."

The central message it puts forward is that protests and demonstrations will strengthen the hand of those calling for a shift in foreign policy and in this way force the government to change course. Naturally this perspective, based on securing political alliances with Labourites while building up the influence in official political circles of the SWP, its new political vehicle Respect and various Muslim leaders, excludes any genuine mobilisation of working people to build a political alternative to the Labour government.

Everything must instead be kept at the level of a vague pacifist opposition to war that is acceptable to the parade of Labour politicians that was given centre stage at Trafalgar Square—MP's John McDonnell, Jeremy Corbyn and Jon Trickett, London Mayor Ken Livingstone and former MP Tony Benn—alongside Respect's own MP George Galloway.

Speaking for the protest organisers, leading SWP member Lindsey German went so far as to claim that the Stop the War Coalition had succeeded in forcing Prime Minister Tony Blair to back down by announcing the withdrawal of 1,500 troops from Basra, claiming, "We are responsible for those troops

withdrawing from Iraq. Blair didn't want to do it and George Bush did not want him to do it. And it is our movement that has made him withdraw even that small number of troops from Iraq."

Such claims, like the constant inflation of the numbers involved in the antiwar protests—the SWP said that 100,000 had taken part on Saturday—are designed to cover up the political dead end into which those seeking to oppose the war danger are being led. For this reason, German had little to say about why Blair followed his reluctant scale-down of troops in Iraq with a declaration that they could be increased at any time and that Britain was sending an additional 1,000 troops to Afghanistan as has been demanded by the Army top brass.

Instead, German stated that "we have one message for Tony Blair: Don't renew Trident, get the troops out and don't even think of attacking Iran. Because if you do, we are going to be on the streets in even bigger numbers."

Galloway pathetically used his speech to call for a spoof cover-version of Edwin Starr's "War," featuring Tony Blair's image manipulated to look like he is singing, to be made a chart-topper through downloads. "This," he said, offered the "mighty demonstration ... a chance to make history today."

The extent to which the organisers have sought to transform the antiwar movement into an adjunct of official politics was given fullest expression by the platform accorded to John McDonnell MP, who is challenging for the leadership of the Labour Party when Tony Blair resigns. Voicing the fears of a section of the ruling elite that too close a relation with Washington is threatening Britain's national interests, he centred his criticism of Blair on the claim that "We want a British prime minister that speaks independently for Britain and does not parade around the world like some virtual vice president of the USA."



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