US antiwar demonstrations mark four years since Iraq invasion

A WSWS reporting team
19 March 2007

Tens of thousands of people took part in marches and rallies in Washington, D.C., and in cities across the country over the weekend to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq, demanding an end to the war in Iraq and the withdrawal of US troops.

In Washington on Saturday, marchers came from as far away as Maine, Iowa and California, despite the near-freezing temperatures and snow storms the night before.

Veterans of the Iraq war and family members of soldiers killed there joined the march from the Lincoln Memorial across the Potomac River to a rally at the Pentagon. Organizers placed the crowd at between 20,000 and 30,000, while police, who no longer give official estimates, said the crowd ranged from 10,000 to 20,000. A few hundred right-wing counter-demonstrators lined the route near the Lincoln Memorial, some of them shouting obscenities at the marchers.

A massive security mobilization greeted the march, with police on motorcycles, bicycles, and horseback and in vans and patrol cars lining the route and present at both the assembly point and rally. Several helicopters circled low over the crowd, making it difficult for people to hear the speakers.

Arlo Gesner, who came from Cornell College in Iowa, expressed his frustration with the Democratic Party. “I came today not just for the war, but because the government is not listening to the people. You can put all the pressure you want on the Democratic Party, but they are backing this war. Time and time again, it has been shown that the Democrats support this war.”

Jessica Smith, also from Cornell College, said that she came because her brother is being sent to Afghanistan. “I just found out that he is proud of me coming here,” she said. “I had the chance to see him this weekend, but I felt that I needed to come here and take a stand against this war.”

Ann Weisheipi from Maine said she came to the rally because “this war is based on lies. So many people, Iraqis and Americans, are dying because of lies. All this money could be used for other things that people need. I feel the Democrats are not much better than the Republicans, there needs to be new political parties. The two-party system has failed.”

Aimee said, “I have two friends that have been sent to Iraq, one is being sent in July. We have to end this war. It is an unjust war that is being fought just for oil and power. Now they are talking about going into Iran, when is this going to end?”

On Friday night, a group of 100 protesters who staged a sit-down on the sidewalk by the White House were arrested and then released.

This was the second large antiwar rally in Washington so far this year. On January 27, more then 50,000 took part in a rally organized by the United for Peace and Justice Coalition. That rally took on a near-official status with several Democratic members of Congress, AFL-CIO representatives and Hollywood stars speaking.

Saturday’s rally had a somewhat different character: there were no representatives from the Democratic Party, the AFL-CIO or Hollywood. However, the political perspective of the rally’s organizers was largely the same. The essential message from the speakers’ platform was that those present needed to put more pressure on the Democratic Party to give it the backbone to stand up to the Bush Administration and end the war.

The ANSWER coalition (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), which organized the March 17 demonstration, is loosely associated with the Party of

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Socialism and Liberation, a split-off from the Workers World party. Despite the seemingly more radical character of the rally's organizers, none of the speakers addressed the fundamental source of the eruption of US militarism within the crisis of American capitalism or the need for an international mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.

In the press statement leading up to the protest, Brian Becker, national coordinator for ANSWER, outlined the group's goal of building a protest movement. "It is obvious that the US Congress has refused to hold the White House accountable for its criminal conduct. That is why it is incumbent on the people of the United States themselves to assume an historic responsibility and launch a grassroots political movement to bring this carnage to an end."

What exactly this grassroots movement is to be was outlined by speaker after speaker at the rally, all of whom called merely for more and bigger protests with the aim of pressuring the government to end the war. Many of the speakers criticized the Bush administration and declared the war illegal, but most were careful to make no mention of the Democratic Party.

One of the main speakers at the rally was former US Attorney General under the Johnson administration Ramsey Clark. His speech centered on the criminal nature of the war in Iraq and the call for Congress to impeach President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. Clark ended his remarks urging those in the crowd to send a message to Congress that "you want your representative to impeach Bush."

Under conditions in which many workers and students are beginning to draw political lessons about the war and the role of the Democrats, the role of left protest outfits like ANSWER is to channel such a movement back into the Democratic Party and confine it to avenues that pose no challenge to the capitalist system.

In Los Angeles on Saturday, a spirited crowd of about 2,500 people marched through downtown Hollywood. Young people—high school and college students and workers—formed a significant percentage of the marchers.

A father of two sons currently in the military said he was "hoping to convince [Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy] Pelosi to listen to the people who voted for the Democrats in the last election, to change course and accelerate the process" of withdrawal. When asked what people could do if the Democrats fail to respond, he expressed the view that "a third party would be the way, but it can't seem to work in America, because money is so important."

Another marcher, a Los Angeles writer of children's books, observed that "the Democrats are great at helping the Republicans. They're just helping each other get elected as far as I'm concerned. They are doing nothing, really, to stop the war. I'm very disappointed in them. I actually have no candidate to vote for, and as for Hillary, she's not going to get my vote. I don't believe in war, but I swear, I sometimes believe this system is made just for that. It's all about the greed of the oil corporations, about the utter disregard for life in the whole region."

In New York City, several thousand demonstrators marched through the east side of Manhattan on Sunday, ending up in at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza across from the United Nations building. The march was organized to pass by the offices of the New York's Democratic Senators Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer, and the orientation of the organizers and speakers there as well was that pressure on the Democrats to take action in Congress is the route to ending the war.

Campaigners for the International Students for Social Equality received a strong response at the demonstrations in all three cities in campaigning for the emergency conference against the war that it and the Socialist Equality Party are holding in Ann Arbor Michigan, March 31 to April 1. The perspective upon which this conference is being held stands in stark opposition to that of the protest organizers. It is directed to the building of a genuine movement against militarism and war based on the international mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. This requires a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a mass, independent socialist movement.

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