

SEP election campaign: Welsh Labour denounces antiwar opposition

Local residents respond

Our correspondent
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Last week, Welsh Labour Party leader Rhodri Morgan made a desperate appeal for local voters not to “punish” his party over its participation in the illegal invasion of Iraq. The comments came after an opinion poll suggested that Labour, which has ruled the Welsh Assembly since its formation in 1999, could face major losses in the May 3 regional election.

“People have to be clear that they should not penalise Labour in Wales.... [T]he time to extract any retribution for what they don’t like in terms of Iraq is at the next General Election,” the Labour leader told the BBC’s “Good Morning Wales” programme.

Rhodri followed this pathetic attempt to distance himself from the Labourites in Whitehall by claiming that the deep-seated antiwar sentiment would have little effect on the election outcome. Those concerned about the war in Iraq, he continued, were “probably *Guardian*-reading, chattering-class Labour supporters” whose impact would only be “slight.”

These ignorant and self-contradictory comments are yet another indication of the gulf that separates masses of ordinary people from the Blair Labour government and its counterpart in Welsh Assembly.

Broad layers of workers, students and middle class people in Wales and throughout Britain are profoundly hostile to the Labourites and their participation in the US-led military aggression in the Middle East. So deep is the antiwar sentiment that a recent survey conducted by the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that only 7 percent supported any future attack on Iran. More than 90 percent of the British population oppose the war in Iraq.

Concern over Iraq was a constant topic of discussion with Socialist Equality Party campaign workers last week in Cardiff, where it is running a slate of four candidates for South Wales Central in the Assembly elections.

Hundreds of young people, workers and pensioners who purchased the SEP’s election manifesto angrily denounced the Labour government and endorsed the SEP’s call for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from the Iraq and Afghanistan.

Comments by Ahmed Yousuf, a 23-year-old part-time bank worker, were representative: “I’m really disturbed by what the Labour government has done in Iraq. Everything Tony Blair told us was false. He said there were weapons of mass destruction and that Iraq was a danger to the world, but these were lies. And once the US and British military got there, they turned the country upside down.

“I was really shocked, first of all by the level of destruction, and secondly because we had been deliberately deceived. They fabricated everything. There were no weapons of mass destruction, and I’m quite amazed that British and American troops are still there. I find the whole thing astonishing and think all the troops should be withdrawn immediately.

“We class ourselves as a democracy, and yet our government takes no notice of what we say. Instead of listening to the people, they say that they know what’s best for us.

“I don’t like Blair, but it’s also wrong for the American people to have a president like Bush. My five-year-old nephew has a bigger vocabulary than the American president, and yet Bush is leading a country with the biggest military in the world.

“I’m also amazed by the United Nations. I’d always believed that it would stop war crimes. Instead of that, it endorsed the invasion. I don’t know what is going on, but this is diabolical and looks like they’ve been bought off in some way.

“It doesn’t seem to think about the aftermath of its decisions, which are taking us backwards. Take the case of Israel. It has weapons of mass destruction, even nuclear weapons, but nothing is done to restrict its attacks on the Palestinian people who are never given a chance. Why can’t the money used for war be put into resources that help restore the economy of places like Iraq?”

Yousuf said the invasion of Iraq “has nothing to do with freedom, justice or democracy” but is “all about American corporations, oil and money”.

“I don’t agree with terrorism, but when you add up all the things that are going on the Middle East—the Palestinian people have had decades of misery, there is the war in Iraq and what is going on against Iran—then it is not surprising that people do desperate things.”

Asked about the attacks on democratic rights in Britain, he replied: “I try to be optimistic, but it’s difficult. Democracy has been turned around in such a way that it doesn’t really mean anything any more. The word has been totally degraded.

“The American government is a real danger. China and India are becoming stronger economic powers, and I worry that the US will start threatening them. What will happen to the people of those

countries? And if there is war, China will not take things lying down. There will be a terrible waste of human life. I fear for the future of my children and the future of ordinary people in the world.”

Yousuf, who previously voted Labour, said he would not vote for the party again. “It is obvious to everyone with a brain that Labour doesn’t represent the working class and something has to be done about it,” he said.

Labour Party leader Rhodri Morgan has claimed throughout the election that his government has created more than 130,000 additional jobs in Wales since 1997. According to one survey, however, more than 360,000 manufacturing jobs have been wiped out in Wales since the late 1980s. The textile industry, for example, which employed more than 14,000 in 1991 now has only 3,000 workers. The jobs Labour claims to have created are predominantly low-paid, part-time or casual work that cannot provide a decent living standard or any real future for young workers and families.

According to a recent national survey, those in part-time work are almost three times more likely as those in full-time work to be paid below the national minimum wage. The official wage levels for young people in particular are a pittance. Those aged between 16 and 17 receive £3.00 per hour, those between 18 and 21, £4.25, and those 22 years and over, only £5.05.

Notwithstanding Morgan’s claims of new jobs and prosperity in Wales, there are currently 20,000 homeless people, with 7,000 of these being dependent children. Shelter Cymru revealed last year that 43 percent of young working families (20-39-year age group) cannot afford to buy a house. The ratio of housing prices to income for this age group is 4.22:1, making Wales the least affordable area for housing outside London and the South East.

Youth trapped in low-paying jobs constituted a healthy proportion of those purchasing copies of the SEP’s election manifesto last week. This group included shop assistants, call-centre workers, cleaners, kitchen hands and other casual and part-time workers. These young people, many of them first-time voters, have no confidence in Labour or the trade unions.

Many of those who left their contact details with the SEP were on poverty wages, including large numbers of young people with university degrees unable to find work in their field. One girl in her early 20s had a degree in archaeology, but was working as a casual cleaner. She told the SEP that she hoped to save enough money to return to university and complete a master’s degree, but her cleaning job barely paid her living expenses.

Twenty-two-year-old Adey Jewkes works in a call centre. He said that he hated his job:

“The wages are terrible, but the main thing is that I want to make a contribution to society. Call centres are completely unproductive and serve no useful social function. I want to become a teacher, so at least I know that I’m helping someone,” he said.

Jewkes rejected Morgan’s attacks on those opposing the war in Iraq.

“Well, I guess I’m a member of the chattering classes,” he said. “This is an everyday issue, not just something for government and military officials. It affects everyday people, and they are very worried about where this is heading because it has huge consequences, not just for the Middle East but worldwide.

“The war in Iraq has changed everything because it has established a new situation where the most powerful military countries in the world can dictate policy to all the rest. Bush and Blair have established a situation of domination, and it is real political arrogance.

“If the leader of the Labour Party in Wales claims that nobody’s

concerned about Iraq it’s because he’s trying to save himself. He can say it’s old news or something like, but his comments are a diversionary tactic. He knows it’s a major question and that people everywhere are very concerned.

“While we have the democratic right to protest, the powers-that-be have decided that these demonstrations won’t be listened to, but ignored.

“I’ve never been a strong Labour supporter, or at least not New Labour. I did history at university and know that New Labour had little to do with what the workers fought for in the past.

“If the government wants to say that I’m a member of the chattering classes, then that’s alright. But I have my own opinions and refuse to follow blindly whoever is in power. Labour has changed dramatically, and it certainly doesn’t represent workers and the poor.”

Jewkes said that Labour’s refusal to defend working people was creating the conditions for the growth of racist and right-wing organisations, such as the British National Party (BNP).

“The BNP appeal to the poorest people and try to get them scared. It plays on their concerns about unemployment and then blames immigrants. People want and need jobs, pure and simple, and yet the government can’t really provide any decent future.”

Jewkes was disturbed by the growth of social inequality and the growth of consumer debt: “The banks prey upon the poor. There are massive credit card debts and mortgages that people can’t afford. It’s a spiral that is obscene, and the push for profits is getting out of control. Take water, for example. We have a situation where there are companies selling people water when ready access to water should be a basic human right. How can the government allow companies to millions of pounds in profit from something that is a basic requirement of life?

“The working class is the majority class in this country, and yet they don’t know what to do about the situation they face. That’s a big question, and I suppose that’s what you’re trying to change.”



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