Tens of thousands march in US cities

Antiwar protest organizers promote Democratic Party

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Tens of thousands marched in cities throughout the US Saturday to demand an end to the war in Iraq and oppose the growing threat of a new eruption of American militarism against Iran.

The largest of these protests took place in San Francisco, New York City and Chicago. Demonstrations were also held in Boston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Seattle as well as in dozens of smaller cities and towns across the country.

While many workers, students and others participated in these protests, some taking to the streets for the first time, it was obvious that the events drew a significantly reduced turnout compared to previous nationwide protests.

In New York City, demonstrators assembled in Union Square for the march downtown to Foley Square under a steady rain. But more than the weather was involved in making this the smallest major antiwar demonstration held in the city since before the war began four-and-a-half years ago.

Fundamentally, the problem posed by these protests is the bankrupt political perspective of their organizers, which is oriented entirely towards influencing and pressuring the Democrats in Congress to take action to end the war.

With the approach of the first anniversary of the 2006 midterm elections that handed the Democrats the leadership of both the House of Representatives and the Senate, it has become readily apparent that this party is not only unwilling to do anything to put an end to the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but is complicit in the preparations for yet another war, in Iran.

Under these conditions, the outlook promoted by the organizing coalition, United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), serves only to promote illusions in a party that has proven itself a reliable supporter of militarism and the strategic aims of US imperialism.

In advance of the demonstration in Chicago, the UFPJ organizers touted their invitation to Senator Barack Obama, a leading candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley to share the platform.

That Obama refused in a debate last month to commit himself, if elected president, to a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by 2013, and that Durbin was among those in the Senate voting in favor of a resolution demanding that the Bush administration brand Iran's Revolutionary Guard a "terrorist organization," thereby establishing a pretext for a US attack, did not stop the organizers from referring to them as part of the "antiwar majority."

Daley, for his part, faces growing popular outrage over his defense and cover-up of police brutality in Chicago.

As it turned out, none of the three made an appearance on Saturday. Their places were filled by three lesser lights in the Democratic Party—House of Representatives members from Illinois Danny Davis, Jan Schakowsky and Luis Gutierrez.

In New York City, a pair of Democratic city council members were brought onto the platform, but no major Democratic politician deigned to participate.

This political void was filled largely by left-talking union bureaucrats. Barbara Bowen, president of the Professional Staff Congress, which represents faculty and staff at the City University of New York, told the crowd: "We've got to stop working to elect Democrats to end the war. They won't do it. We have to end the war."

Similarly, Roger Toussaint, president of Transport Workers Union Local 100, which represents the city's bus and subway workers, criticized the Democrats for "waffling and wavering" and said that the only way to fight the war was for "workers to organize."

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While these rhetorical condemnations of the Democrats garnered the loudest applause from the crowd waiting to march, they provided no genuine perspective on how an independent movement could be organized against the war, nor any hint of a political alternative to the Democratic Party and the two-party system.

Moreover, they were quickly followed by a speech from Leslie Cagan, the national coordinator for United for Peace and Justice, who stressed that those involved in the protest had to "make sure that Congress does what it has the power to do—to make sure that money does not go into this war."

This outlook was spelled out in a leaflet issued by UFPJ for the demonstration entitled "Target Congress." It stated: "The White House is determined to keep US troops in Iraq and is pursuing a dangerous course towards war with Iran. Strong congressional action can bring the troops home from Iraq and push back on the White House march toward war with Iran. Very few members of Congress will do what is right on their own. They have to hear from us, from our neighbors, our co-workers and our friends."

As supposed proof of the impact of mass pressure, the leaflet cited a letter circulated by Representative Barbara Lee of California and signed by 90 members of the House of Representatives pledging not to vote any more money for the Iraq war, outside of funding for a withdrawal of US troops.

In fact, this measure has little chance of even making it to the House floor, with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer having repeatedly made it clear that they are opposed to cutting off funding for the war or even eliminating the funding for the Bush administration's "surge" that sent some 30,000 additional troops into Iraq.

Neither the leaflet nor Cagan made any reference to the fact that the Democrats in Congress have repeatedly voted to continue to fund the war and are preparing to do so once again.

In the final analysis, this duplicitous approach serves not to pressure the Democrats, but rather to promote illusions in this imperialist party, and to pressure those millions who are opposed to the war and are coming into conflict with the entire political, social and economic setup in America to subordinate themselves to the Democratic Party and its electoral ambitions in the 2008 presidential race.

Another telling indication of the increasing turn by the protest organizers to the right came a week and a half before the demonstration, when UFPJ issued a statement from Cagan applauding a speech delivered a few days earlier by General Ricardo Sanchez, the former top US commander in Iraq. "General Sanchez is articulating what the antiwar movement has been saying for several years now," said Cagan. "This is a war that never should have happened and has led our nation into disaster."

In fact, Sanchez's speech was an extreme right-wing diatribe against the media and "partisan politics" for "destroying our country and killing our service members who are at war." The thrust of the speech, which referred to the war as "a nightmare with no end in sight," was the demand that political dissent be suppressed and the country as a whole subordinated to the demands of war. Implicit in his remarks was the threat that the military would take matters in its own hands if the politicians failed to fall into line.

That Cagan and the UFPJ would embrace such remarks as "antiwar" sentiment, is a manifestation of the official protest organization's utter subordination to the existing political establishment and its complete lack of any independent political perspective.

The apparent contradiction between the growing popular opposition to the war and the declining attendance at the protest demonstrations can be explained only by the fact that increasing numbers of people have drawn their own conclusions from the political developments of the past year and, with varying degrees of political understanding, have become disillusioned with the perspective of appealing to the Democrats to stop the war.

A genuine struggle against imperialism and militarism can be waged only in irreconcilable opposition to this entire perspective. It requires the political mobilization of working people and their unification in a common struggle internationally against war, social inequality and the capitalist system that creates them. The first step in the fight to build such a movement is an uncompromising break with the Democratic Party and its apologists in the protest milieu and the building of an independent mass socialist movement.

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