

The “left” and the US military offensive in Afghanistan

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The American military is in the midst of a major offensive in Afghanistan, aimed at wiping out opposition to the US occupation in the country’s southern Helmand province.

Some 4,000 US Marines, along with 600 members of the Afghan Army, are participating in the drive to gain control of areas with populations deeply hostile to the American occupation.

As the *New York Times* reported last Friday, Helmand Province has become the center of popular resistance to US-NATO forces and their puppet government in Kabul. The newspaper noted that the “mood of the Afghan people has tipped into a popular revolt in some parts of southern Afghanistan,” where people have “taken up arms against the foreign troops to protect their homes or in anger at losing relatives in airstrikes.”

This makes it clear that the large-scale US offensive, the first major ground operation to be launched as part of the Obama administration’s escalation of the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, is aimed not simply at killing Taliban fighters, but at terrorizing and repressing the civilian population.

Coincident with the US operation in Afghanistan, the Pakistani government is stepping up attacks along its border with the country. On Sunday, Pakistani fighter jets killed at least six in an attack in North Waziristan, which followed a US drone attack late last week that killed 15.

Employing Orwellian language, a British military spokesman said over the weekend, “The main aims of the operations are to extend security throughout the areas so as to allow the local population to enjoy a normal life and take part in the forthcoming elections free from intimidation and violence.” Similarly, US military officials have claimed that the purpose of the offensive, which will see US forces remain in areas that have been “cleared,” is to “protect” the Afghan population.

These are euphemisms for an intensification of counter-insurgency tactics that will include targeted assassinations, greater military violence against civilians, checkpoints, identity checks and searches, and widespread arrests of anyone suspected of involvement in resistance.

The Marines in Helmand will utilize the methods employed by the US military in Iraq. Most of the units and many of the officers and soldiers were involved in US operations in Anbar, a center of Sunni Arab resistance to the US invasion of Iraq.

The Obama administration is carrying out a new war crime in Afghanistan.

The offensive has underscored the role of the so-called “left” in the US. The Obama administration has become a vehicle for a wide variety of middle-class organizations that opposed the war in Iraq to swing behind the foreign policy of the American government.

Neither of the principal organizations involved in planning US protests against the Iraq war—United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) and ANSWER—are planning any demonstrations to denounce the Obama administration’s escalation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nor, for that matter, are they preparing any opposition to the continuation of the Iraq occupation.

These organizations and the ex-radical and liberal groups that comprise them have largely transformed themselves into advisory agencies for Obama—counseling certain policies that would preserve US interests or help sell continued war and occupation to the American people.

UFPJ has written nothing on the current offensive. Its latest entry on Afghanistan, some two weeks old, calls on supporters to “Demand an Exit Plan for Afghanistan.” It supported a measure (which eventually failed) in the US House of Representatives that would have provided billions more in funding for Iraq and Afghanistan in exchange for an “exit strategy” to be submitted to

Congress. Not only would the measure have allowed for the escalation, it would not have required the fig leaf of an exit “plan” for another six months.

Since the election of Obama, the “left” web site Moveon.org has completely ignored US foreign policy, lending tacit support to the continued occupation of Iraq and the escalation in Afghanistan.

For its part, the *Nation* magazine has been silent on the offensive in southern Afghanistan. There is not a single article related to Afghanistan linked on the front page of its web site. The same is true of the *Huffington Post*. From these publications, one would have no idea that the US is engaged in a brutal military offensive.

To the extent that one finds criticisms among these layers, they are entirely of a tactical character. In an earlier editorial published in the *Nation* (“Don’t Escalate in Afghanistan,” February 4, 2009), the magazine cautioned that more US troops would only increase popular hostility. “Adding 30,000 troops might be enough to keep the government from falling in the short term, but it will not be nearly enough to wage the kind of counter-insurgency some Obama advisers advocate,” it wrote. “For that, some military experts estimate, we may need as many as 600,000.”

“It is doubtful that even a major counterinsurgency could succeed,” the *Nation* cautioned. Making clear the standpoint of its criticisms, the magazine concluded, “Afghanistan is called ‘the burial ground of empires’ for good reason”—i.e., a new quagmire in the country could prove disastrous for US imperialist interests.

Iraq as well has largely dropped out of the pages of the *Nation*. What commentary there is presents Obama’s partial withdrawal of troops from the cities as a great step forward for the anti-war movement—even though 130,000 US troops remain and the administration has made clear that it intends to keep tens of thousands of troops in the country for years to come.

None of these groups or publications say anything about the real interests behind the Afghanistan occupation. For them, this is the “good war.” The claim that it is intended to defeat the Taliban and defend the Afghan people is accepted without question.

Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda—the original rationale for the war—have largely been dropped as an issue by the media and the political establishment. The real interests involved—preserving US interests in the oil and gas rich Central Asian region—are ignored.

There is a parallel between the reaction of the self-styled progressives and “left” organizations to

Afghanistan and their universal support for the US-backed destabilization campaign in Iran. These groups immediately fell into line behind the US-backed “green revolution” and the sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie that are at its head.

The winding up of anti-war protests by these groups is the logical outcome of their political perspective. From the beginning of the US war in Iraq, they sought to channel popular opposition behind the Democratic Party, opposing any independent mobilization of workers and youth against the war. When the Democrats took control of Congress in the 2006 election and proceeded to back Bush’s war policy, they largely ended their protest efforts.

The coming to power of the Obama administration—which in all its policies, domestic and foreign, is carrying out the basic interests of the corporate and financial elite—has completed the process. It has helped reveal the fundamental social divide between middle-class politics and a socialist movement based on the independent interests of the working class. It has underscored the fact that much of the “left” criticism of Bush centered on tactical issues or superficial characteristics of the administration. With the new president in office, this social layer has made its peace with imperialism.

Opposition to imperialism can come only through the independent mobilization of the working class against the American ruling elite and all of its political parties and representatives. The perspective of the working class must begin with the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops and an end to all US military operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

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