

Nine years after the invasion of Iraq

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Nine years ago this week, on March 20, 2003, the US and its allies, including Britain and Australia, launched the illegal invasion of Iraq. All of the pretexts used to justify the war were lies. There were no weapons of mass destruction and no links between Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. The protracted American-led occupation resulted in an autocratic, pro-US regime, the deaths of a million Iraqis, and an enormous social and economic regression.

The invasion sparked internationally coordinated anti-war protests on an unprecedented scale. Millions of people animated by a sense of the profound criminality of the US enterprise took to the streets in cities around the world to oppose the drive to war. The broad understanding that this was a “war for oil” pointed to the underlying interests of US imperialism in securing its dominance over oil-rich Iraq and the broader Middle East.

Despite their scale and passion, however, those protests did not stop the war. Nine years later, the world is on the brink of even greater disasters as the Obama administration, pursuing the same imperialist ambitions, recklessly intensifies its threats and preparations for war against Iran. The absence of a mass anti-war movement today raises critical questions about the failure of the 2003 protests and how to renew the struggle against militarism and war.

There is no lack of opposition in the working class, especially among young people, to the relentless militarism of the past two decades. But the development of a genuine anti-war movement directed at the root of war—the profit system—has been systematically blocked by the left liberals, Greens and, above all, the various pseudo-left organisations. All of these individuals and organisations are deeply hostile to

the working class and its independent mobilisation. Their social base is a narrow layer of the affluent middle class that has shifted sharply to the right under the impact of the worsening capitalist crisis. This layer increasingly identifies its interests with those of its own imperialist power.

The middle-class lefts who opposed the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s have step by step become advocates for imperialist war. The process was already evident during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, when a considerable section of former anti-war protest leaders directly supported NATO’s intervention and its phoney humanitarian claim to be protecting first the Bosnian Muslims and later the Kosovars. What was behind the attack on Serbia was Washington’s determination to exploit the opportunities opened up by the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Not a few of those who backed the Balkan interventions employed similar humanitarian pretexts to support the US invasion of Iraq in the name of removing the “dictator Hussein.” More insidious, however, was the political role of the liberals and “lefts” who dominated the mass anti-war protests of 2003 and promoted the illusion that the invasion could be stopped by appealing to the United Nations, or to France and Germany. The latter had opposed the war in the UN to protect their imperialist interests in the Middle East and quickly fell into line once the US occupation became an established fact.

These forces—Stalinists, state capitalists, Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism—played the critical role in subordinating mass opposition to war to one or another wing of the bourgeoisie. In the United States, they used their influence over the protest movement to channel

the anti-war sentiment of broad layers of the population behind the Democrats and the election campaigns of John Kerry in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008. That was the prelude, with the election of Obama, to the shutting down of the anti-war movement altogether.

Throughout the 2003 protests, the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted that the only social force capable of putting an end to war was the working class, through the development of a revolutionary movement against capitalism. The WSWS was the only voice that systematically warned of the danger of the illusions peddled by the pseudo-lefts that big protests alone could pressure the Bush administration and other governments to change course.

At the time, young people who had no experience of any mass movement and were swept up in the euphoria of participating in the largest-ever international protests may have had difficulty grasping the importance of the exposures by the WSWS of the various pseudo-radical groups. The subsequent evolution of this social stratum directly into the camp of imperialism, especially under the Obama administration, provides a salutary political lesson.

All of the various ex-left outfits came together last year to shamelessly back the NATO war on Libya, using the same banal humanitarian pretext: all means were justified to oust the “dictator Gaddafi.” Those who nominally “opposed” the NATO bombing supported NATO’s ground forces—the various Islamists, ex-Gaddafi loyalists, tribal leaders and bourgeois liberals gathered under the banner of the NATO-backed National Transitional Council. The result is an anti-democratic regime in Tripoli even more subservient to Washington that will act in the interests of American and European imperialism, combined with the fracturing of the country along tribal and regional lines that threatens to explode into uncontrolled civil war.

Behind the eruption of American militarism over the past two decades lies the attempt by successive administrations to exploit the military predominance of US imperialism to offset its historic decline, at the expense of its European and Asian rivals. Those

processes have only been accelerated under the Obama administration by the deepening global economic crisis. The current drive to war against Iran and Syria threatens to embroil not only the entire Middle East, but to drag in other countries including China and Russia.

A new international movement against war and militarism must be based on the understanding that the fundamental cause of imperialist conflict is not the subjective characteristics of political leaders or mistaken policies. Behind the criminality and recklessness of leaders in the US, Europe and elsewhere are the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—between world economy and the outmoded nation state system, and between socialised production and the private ownership of the means of production. A viable movement against war requires a decisive turn to the working class and its independent mobilisation as a revolutionary force to abolish the profit system and establish socialism. Such a movement can be built only in a political fight against the ex-lefts who bitterly oppose this perspective and function ever more openly as the propagandists and apologists for imperialism.

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