

Hundreds of thousands protest US war drive vs. Iraq

Demonstrations in Washington, San Francisco and cities worldwide

By **Kate Randall**
20 January 2003

Hundreds of thousands of people turned out for demonstrations in Washington DC, San Francisco and other cities across the US and Canada on Saturday to protest the Bush administration's impending war against Iraq.

The protests, which drew substantially more people than those held last October, were the largest anti-war demonstrations in North America since the Vietnam War era, with an estimated half-million protesters participating. More than 200,000 protested in the nation's capital, traveling by bus and car from as far away as Florida and Iowa.

Simultaneous demonstrations took place in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Honolulu, Albuquerque, Des Moines, Ann Arbor, Lansing, Tampa, and many other US cities.

Protesters also took to the streets in New Zealand, Japan, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Sweden, Egypt and Syria. In both their size and international reach, the demonstrations were indicative of rapidly growing anti-war sentiment in the US and around the world.

The protests in the US shattered the myth promoted by the media of political consensus and mass support for the Bush administration and its war policies. The large turnout occurred despite the fact that the media gave virtually no advance publicity to the protests, and has systematically suppressed reports of domestic opposition to the government's war plans.

The disparity between the official portrayal of Bush's "popularity" and the reality revealed in Saturday's protests underscores the chasm that separates the entire media and political establishment and the broad mass of the American people.

In San Francisco, more than 100,000 rallied downtown and marched from the Justin Herman Plaza to a rally at the Civic Center, more than a mile away. Among the speakers were actors Martin Sheen and Ed Begley Jr., and Democratic congresswomen Barbara Lee of Oakland and Lynn Woolsey of Santa Rosa.

In Washington, more than 200,000 people rallied on the Mall. Demonstrators braved sub-freezing temperatures of 24 degrees Fahrenheit to express their opposition to the government's war plans. Both young and old were represented, with contingents from high schools and universities making up a large proportion of the participants.

Amy, from Hoboken, New Jersey, articulated the feelings of many who were present. "Basically, I feel that the Bush administration is working with an agenda," she said, "The inspectors report on January 27, and no matter what they say and find, Bush is going to start a war after that.

"That is only one week from now. I figured that I better get out before the bombs start dropping and let it be known that I and many other people are not for this war. They want oil and they want to build an oil pipeline. They just want to keep grabbing more and more of the world and don't care who they have to bomb to get it." (See accompanying article for more interviews with protesters in Washington).

Prior to the DC demonstration, police reported they planned to use video cameras for "crowd management and public safety." They utilized 14 closed-circuit television cameras mounted on downtown buildings and on a helicopter to shoot video of public areas around the Mall, the Capitol, the White House and other areas.

Despite police claims that individuals would not be targeted, this photographic record can be used by authorities to form a permanent record of individuals participating in the demonstration. The extensive surveillance was clearly designed to intimidate and suppress dissent, and constitutes a violation of constitutional guarantees concerning freedom of assembly and speech.

The demonstration was organized by International ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism). The speakers list included a number of prominent figures in the Democratic Party, the same party that voted overwhelmingly to grant war powers to Bush. Also on the speakers platform were a number of long-time peace activists, prominent

actors, several union leaders and members of the clergy.

Ramsey Clark, former US attorney general, won an enthusiastic response from the assembled demonstrators when he made the case for the impeachment of President Bush. He said, "The Constitution says the president, the vice president and civil officers of the United States shall be removed from office on impeachment for, and conviction of, bribery and other high crimes and misdemeanors.

"What George Bush is doing now is usurping the power of the Constitution and the people, being above the law. Treating anybody any way he wants to—no civil rights, no civil liberties, nothing... Has George Bush committed impeachable offenses?... The answer is a resounding yes."

Actress Jessica Lange told the rally, "This is an immoral war that is beginning, and we must not be silenced. We have to be able to stand up and say 'No! We are the people, you are not speaking for us...'

"All this talk of war, all this rhetoric has been an excellent cover and camouflage to turn back the clock on civil rights, on women's rights and social justice and on environmental policy. We have to ask: How far are they willing to go to silence the voice of dissent? Because every time someone comes forth and speaks out, we are demonized, we are reviled and we must not stand for this."

Democratic politicians on the platform included Congressman John Conyers, former congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. Their prominent participation above all reflects growing concern within the political establishment and the Democratic Party that opposition to war will grow and merge with the social anger and discontent that are simmering just below the surface of American life. The faction of the Democratic Party represented by these speakers is seeking to co-opt the social and political opposition and channel it in a politically harmless direction, first and foremost, by keeping the working class tied to the Democratic Party.

Their comments were largely confined to appeals to Bush and Congressional Republicans, overladen with bits of radical-sounding rhetoric. Al Sharpton said, "We cannot put world business over the interest of the people," while saying nothing about the Democratic Party's endorsement of Bush's war for oil in the Middle East.

Jesse Jackson gave a demagogic speech peppered with the usual rhymes and platitudes. He called for "a war on poverty, not a war on the poor," and called for "minds over missiles and negotiation over confrontation." He appealed to Bush to choose "brains over bombs and to use brains and not brute force to resolve conflict; to stop terrorism and not to spread it."

In his remarks, Conyers promoted the illusion that the Bush administration could be pressured to pull back from its

war preparations. "But I come to tell you," he said, "there is still time for the president to change his destructive course. There is time for our allies—in England, Blair—and others to declare a truce."

The promotion of these Democratic politicians on the platform is an attempt on the part of the protest organizers to restore credibility to a capitalist party that for generations presented itself as a party of "the working man," but has badly discredited itself in the eyes of working people by its turn to the right and its prostration before Bush and the Republicans.

There is a long history in the US of utilizing the Democratic Party to divert and derail popular opposition to the American ruling elite. The Workers World Party, one of the main forces behind International ANSWER, has a consistent record over decades of promoting race-based politics and allying itself with black Democratic officials, particularly members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

In opposition to this policy, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in the rallies in Washington, San Francisco and elsewhere, calling for the independent mobilization of the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist system as a whole.

Thousands of copies of the WSWWS Editorial Board statement "The political issues in the fight against war" were distributed. Many people said they were regular readers of the WSWWS, and took copies of the leaflet to distribute. More than \$200 in Marxist literature was sold at the Washington rally.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>