

British ex-radical berates antiwar protestors for failing to back Iraqi “democrats”

By Peter Symonds
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Clearly shocked by the size and scope of the February 14-16 global antiwar rallies, a barrage of attacks has now appeared in the media berating protestors for their naiveté, denouncing them for giving succour to Saddam Hussein and repeating the well-worn lies about the dangers posed by Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction.

One of the more vitriolic was published in the British-based *Observer* newspaper. Entitled “The Left isn’t listening,” the article condemned the Stop the War movement as “the greatest danger to any hope for a democratic Iraq”. Its author, Nick Cohen, who considers himself part of the British “left,” bemoaned the fact that the protestors were paying no heed to the appeals of Iraqi “democrats” to support a US invasion.

His arguments dovetail neatly with the latest line from British Prime Minister Tony Blair who, desperate to stem overwhelming public opposition, is trying to promote the US-led war as a means for bringing democracy to Iraq and peace to the region. Neither Cohen nor Blair stop to ask, let alone answer, how “democracy” can be established by raining hundreds of cruise missiles and bombs on Iraqi cities. Or why the Iraqi people should welcome as “liberators” those whose economic sanctions have been responsible for hundreds of thousands of needless deaths.

At any rate, the Bush administration has no intention of establishing even the façade of democracy in Iraq. The latest US plans envisage a military occupation and administration for at least two years, involving hundreds of thousands of troops. With cosmetic changes, Washington intends to rule through the same state apparatus that Hussein and the Ba’athist party have used to exercise their dictatorship over the last three decades. Even the various factions of the Iraqi opposition have been relegated to the political sidelines.

Washington’s plans for a post-Hussein regime make clear that the rhetoric about “liberating Iraq” is just another threadbare ruse to justify a war to secure control of Iraq’s oil as part of broader US ambitions for hegemony in the Middle East. Far from bringing peace to the region, a US invasion of Iraq will be a prelude to further military adventures and growing conflict with its European and Asian rivals as Washington’s plans cut across their vital interests.

The claim by Bush and Blair that the war is about bringing “democracy” to the Iraqi people is already seen by many as a transparent lie. It is here that Cohen adds his own twist to the argument. He does not directly call for support for Washington

and London as such, but for the Iraqi oppositionists who are waging “the political battle of their lives” for democracy. It is disgraceful, he states, that “they will have to fight for democracy without the support of the British Left”.

As Cohen goes on to make clear, the “political battle” is being waged, not in Iraq, but in the corridors of power in the US and Britain. The various Iraqi opposition groups are seeking to convince Washington to include them in any future administration—and they have allies. “The British and American governments aren’t monoliths,” Cohen explains. “The State Department and the CIA have always been the foes of Iraqi freedom. But they are countered by the Pentagon and a US Congress which passed the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998—a law which instructs the American government to support democracy.”

This is an extraordinary argument. As the “democratic” alternative to the CIA and State Department, Cohen proposes the Pentagon and the extreme rightwing of the Republican Party. Among the chief sponsors of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act were US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Assistant Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Defence Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle. The Act enshrined “regime change” in Iraq as part of US law and compelled the Clinton administration to provide military aid to selected Iraqi oppositionists as a means for toppling Hussein.

Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Perle are no more interested in establishing democracy in Iraq than the CIA and the State Department. In the 1990s, they were among the chief architects of far-reaching strategic plans aimed at establishing US military predominance, particularly in the key oil rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. Their only aim in promoting the Iraqi opposition groups has been as a convenient façade for US rule in Baghdad and its broader ambitions in the region.

Cohen’s “democrats” comprise the various rightwing groups that have been on the US payroll since 1998 or even earlier. They include US-organised front organisations, Kurdish and Shiite militias, and cliques of defectors along with a smattering of monarchists, academics and businessmen. Their plans for a post-Hussein regime have been hatched under the auspices of the US State Department’s “Future for Iraq” project and their meetings are presided over by US special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, the same man who inserted Hamid Karzai as Washington’s puppet president in Afghanistan last year.

It is farcical to suggest that closed-door discussions among this

small, servile and grasping elite will usher in democracy in Iraq. At the most fundamental level, these bourgeois leaders, like Hussein himself, are organically hostile to any struggle by ordinary working people for democratic rights as it inevitably raises social demands that they are incapable of meeting. When confronted with a mass movement, such “democrats” invariably side with reaction in containing or crushing it. All the Iraqi opposition wants is a share, no matter how small, of the power and profits that will accrue to any US-installed regime in Baghdad and of the lucrative oil deals it signs.

Apart from a pittance in humanitarian aid, neither Washington nor the oppositionists has any plan to deal with the poverty and suffering created by two decades of war and economic sanctions. If one wants a vision of what is being prepared for Iraq it is only necessary to look at Afghanistan, where poverty, hunger and disease continue to dominate the lives of most Afghans. The only concession to “democracy” has been a stage-managed *loya jirga* or tribal assembly convened to rubberstamp Washington’s choice for president.

Cohen tries to justify his support for the Iraqi “democrats”, by hailing what he describes as the “fair imitation of a democratic state” presided over by the Kurdish groups “in liberated northern Iraq”. To call the autonomous Kurdish area “democratic” and “liberated” is absurd. It owes its existence to the “no-fly” zone, unilaterally imposed by the US and Britain in 1991 as a means of maintaining their military presence and weakening Baghdad. Economically, the area is completely dependent on receiving a substantial slice of the oil-for-aid program under the modified UN sanctions as well as the profits from lucrative smuggling operations between Baghdad and its northern neighbours.

For much of the last decade, the two largest groups—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—have been fighting each other. The entire region has been a hotbed of intrigue as each militia connived with the CIA, the regional powers and with Baghdad to gain the upper hand over its rivals. They rule over their territories like private fiefdoms with scant regard for the rights of ordinary Kurds. This is the type of “liberation” and “democracy” that Cohen has in mind for the Iraqi people as a whole.

The lack of any serious argument in Cohen’s article stems from the fact that his only real interest in the Iraqi oppositionists is as a debating point for justifying a war on Iraq. Cohen is one of a layer of “lefts” who, over the last decade or so, have steadily shifted to the right. Having made something of a name for himself as a critic of the Labour government’s domestic policies, Cohen now slavishly defends Blair’s war plans.

Like others from the radical milieu, both for and against the war, Cohen explicitly denies the capacity of the working class to overthrow Hussein using its own means. As far as he is concerned, the only alternative to the Ba’ath dictatorship is the military might of US imperialism. Cohen, along with the Iraqi oppositionists, concludes that “there is no way other than war to remove a tyrant whose five secret police forces make a palace coup or popular uprising impossible. As the only military force on offer is provided by America, they will accept an American invasion.”

In fact, the Iraqi secret police have played a relatively minor role

in sustaining Hussein. He was able to cling onto power in the 1980s primarily because he enjoyed the political support of the US and its military assistance in Iraq’s war with Iran. Similarly, Hussein survived the Kurdish and Shiite revolts in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War with the aid of Washington. Having initially encouraged the rebellions, Bush senior decided that a Hussein dictatorship in Baghdad was preferable to the disintegration of Iraq, and stood by while Iraqi tanks crushed the rebels.

The failure of the Iraqi oppositionists to oust a weakened Hussein regime over the last decade testifies more to their own political weakness than to the strength of the Iraqi secret police. They represent the same narrow class interests as does Hussein—a thoroughly venal capitalist class, which has proven itself completely incapable of meeting the aspirations of working people for democratic rights and decent living standards. In the seven decades since Iraq was formally granted independence in 1932, the country has been dominated by one autocratic clique after another. None of them has hesitated to use the most brutal forms of repression to preserve their privileged position, particularly when challenged by mass popular opposition.

The only social force which has a genuine interest in establishing democracy and meeting the social needs of the masses is the Iraqi working class. Its failure to do so has been, in large measure, due to the pernicious role of Stalinism—in the form of the Moscow bureaucracy and its local satellite, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP)—which fostered illusions in the progressive character of one or other wing of the capitalist class. Following the reactionary logic of the Stalinist two-stage theory, the ICP repudiated any independent role for the working class, and promoted various bourgeois nationalists, including Hussein, as anti-imperialist fighters, democrats and even socialists, invariably with disastrous consequences.

This history is a long and complex one, which Cohen ignores entirely. But if the working class is to effectively oppose a US war of plunder while at the same time mounting a political struggle against the dictatorship in Baghdad, it must begin to undertake a thoroughgoing examination of these historical experiences. The essential lesson is that the working class can only establish its political independence and assert its own class interests if it makes a decisive break from all factions of the Iraqi bourgeoisie. This requires turning to their class brothers and sisters throughout the region and internationally in the struggle for a Socialist United States of the Middle East.

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