

Massive Washington march demands end to war in Iraq

By a WSWW reporting team
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Hundreds of thousands of people poured through the streets of Washington on Saturday in a march called to demand the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. The march, the largest seen in the US capital since the invasion in March 2003, was swelled by both mounting opposition to the illegal war and outrage over the Bush administration's gross neglect and indifference toward the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Organizers of the demonstration put the crowd at 300,000, while Washington's chief of police—which routinely underestimates numbers in anti-government protests—freely acknowledged that more than 100,000 had participated.

Thousands began marching on their own, filing past the White House, before what was supposed to be the leading delegation set out from an opening rally at the Ellipse. While the march began at about 12:30 p.m., demonstrators were still clogging the city's streets after 5 o'clock, hours after a concluding rally opposite the Washington Monument had begun.

Cindy Sheehan, whose 24-year-old son Casey was killed in Iraq last year, received the warmest response of any of those who addressed the rallies. Her month-long vigil at "Camp Casey," set up near Bush's ranch last month to demand an end to the war and press the US president to meet with her, was widely seen as emblematic of the growth of mass popular opposition to the war.

"We need a people's movement to end this war," she told the crowd. "My good friends in the media aren't doing their job. Most of our friends in Congress aren't doing their jobs, and George Bush certainly isn't doing his job. So you know what? We have to do our job.... We'll be the checks and balances on this out-of-control criminal government."



Demonstrator walking past the White House

She said she intended to challenge Congress: "How many more of other people's kids are you willing to sacrifice for the lies.... Shame on you for giving him the authority to invade."

While a few of the other speakers referred briefly to the failure of the Democratic Party to oppose the war, the main message from the platform was to pressure Congress and the Democrats and look to the party's future electoral victories as a solution to the war and social crisis.

Most explicit in this regard was Jesse Jackson, who twice sought the

Democratic presidential nomination. "When we march, things change," he told the crowd. "We'll change Congress in 2006. We'll take back the White House in 2008."

How the success of a party that has voted some \$200 billion for the war—and many of whose principal leaders have advocated sending even more troops—would spell an end to the carnage in Iraq was not explained.

Not a single prominent figure from the Democratic Party made an appearance at the rally. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, who was previously hounded out of her House seat with the tacit support of the Democratic leadership, was the only elected official to address the march.

Among the marchers, hostility to both big-business parties was widely expressed. Many said that this was their first demonstration. They were moved to act by the horrors in Iraq and New Orleans as well as the failure of any section of the political establishment to oppose war abroad and social reaction at home.

A group of New Orleans evacuees participated in the demonstration, one carrying a sign reading "Katrina survivor, FEMA victim."

Many other marchers carried homemade signs drawing the connection between the Iraq war and the government's policy in New Orleans. Their messages included: "Make levees, not humvees," "Relief, not war," "Baghdad burns, New Orleans sinks, Halliburton profits," and "Stop the hurricane of poverty & war."

Families of slain, veterans speak out

Also participating in the march were significant contingents of families of soldiers killed in Iraq or deployed there, as well as veterans of the war.



Elaine Johnson, mother of Darius Jennings, killed in Iraq in November 2003

One of the mothers of slain US soldiers participating in the demonstration was Elaine Johnson, whose son, Specialist Darius Jennings, was killed in Iraq on November 2, 2003. He was one of 16 who died when their Chinook helicopter was shot down near Fallujah. Most of those killed were soldiers being flown out of Iraq for rest and recreation.

"There were four soldiers from the same area as my hometown killed in a short time, and Darius was one of them," she said. "This has been a great loss for the community and has hit hard, because a lot of young men go into the military." Three graduates of Orangeburg-Wilkinson High

School (South Carolina), where Darius went to school, were killed in Iraq in the space of just three months.

Ms. Johnson, who works at an industrial plant in the Orangeburg area, spoke out immediately after her son's death, questioning why US troops remained in Iraq. She publicly challenged Bush a week after he was killed, questioning why he could come to South Carolina for a \$2,000-a-plate Republican fundraiser, but could not bother to contact her and offer his condolences.

"I forced the president to meet with us," she said. But when the meeting finally did come, it provided no solace.

"I asked him why soldiers like my son were still dying in Iraq, and he said 'to finish the mission,' " she recalled. "I asked what the mission was, but he was already leaving the room."

One thing about the meeting with the president offended her deeply. Bush had given each of the bereaved families a presidential coin, she said. As he walked out the door he made the sarcastic comment, "Now don't go selling those on eBay."

"That was not the right thing to say to families who had just lost their children," she said. "As far as I am concerned, he can have that coin back, because I don't want it."



Harvey Tharpe, former Navy Lieutenant returned from Iraq

Darius had joined the military with the aim of using his benefits to get a college education. "My son was all right with the military," Ms. Johnson said. "He didn't understand why they went to war in Iraq. But he will always be a bigger man than the president and those around him, because he served and didn't run and hide like they did."

Joining the contingent of Iraq war veterans, many wearing their desert combat fatigues, was Harvey Tharp, from Cincinnati, who resigned from the US Navy last November after nine years in the military.

"I got out because of my opposition to the war in Iraq," he said. "Basically, I reached the point where I understood that there was no real possibility of positive change coming from our military presence there."

Tharp, who was a Navy lieutenant and had worked as a judge advocate, was sent to Kirkuk as an advisor to local reconstruction projects. He described the situation as marred by chaos and corruption, with the main objective that of establishing US domination.

"A lot of the US personnel there were absolutely in above their heads," he said. "They were grabbing anyone who had ever studied Arabic and sending them over to take charge of things that they knew little or nothing about."

"They had no plan of any kind as to what they were going to do once the war was over," Tharp added. "One thing became clear to me though—they had no real intention of ever leaving Iraq, of ever allowing the Iraqis real sovereignty and self determination."

Those participating in the march had come from the entire East Coast, from Maine to Florida, along with sizeable delegations from the Mid-Atlantic states and even the Midwest.

Anger over Katrina response

Dauwd and Jinaki Hasan had come from Greensboro, North Carolina.



Dauwd and Jinaki Hasan from Greensboro, North Carolina

"We came up here because it's time for the American people to exercise their First Amendment right and stand up against everything that is going on, especially after the Katrina disaster," Jinaki said. "If homeland security was their priority as they claimed, we should have seen a well-oiled machine during the hurricane. We didn't see that. We saw incompetence and failure, and that tells me that there is something really wrong.

"I fear for American democracy," she added. "The Democrats are equally involved here—silence equals consent. The Democratic Party has failed the people for their responsibility to keep the government in check. We have no checks and balances. They feed the flames of ignorance and poverty just as the Republicans do.

"They are all really creating the conditions of poverty and then blaming the impoverished for their problems. The war and the rebuilding of New Orleans are not coming from their pockets. I say, how much more can they cut? What other programs can they cut? There's nothing left."

Speaking of the growing divide between rich and poor in America," Dauwd added, "I can't understand why they want to accumulate so much wealth. The way I like to put it is they get all they can, they put it in the can, and they sit on the can. Then they say that it will all trickle down. How much is going to trickle really? And anyway, it shouldn't trickle, it should flow."

Jerry Riverston from Florida works as a geographer in land rights issues for indigenous people in Central America.

"My conscience brought me here today," he said. "I want to see the US pulled out of Iraq. The war and Hurricane Katrina have fulfilled things that I have been anticipating for a long time. With the hurricane, a nexus of things came together—global warming, a government that doesn't care about the poor, dependence on oil and so on. Katrina brought to light what the government's priorities are and also that there are so many people living on the edge of a precipice in this country.

"I feel that my views are evolving—I've been coming around since the last election as it now seems that the Democrats are completely bogus. They defend the same corporate capitalist system. I really feel angry and betrayed. I would really like to see people get angrier and stop being fooled by the corporate media and to start thinking critically.

"The war in Iraq is fundamentally about oil. It reflects civilization's dependence on fossil fuels and a country that is fighting to control it. It's genocidal and hideous. I was not surprised about September 11th—it was impressive, but not a shock. The policies of the American government in the Middle East have stirred and angered so many people that it was almost inevitable. And I won't be surprised about more wars launched competing for dwindling resources. But I think that we have the power to shape things in the future by building a movement and analyzing the situation properly."

Pam, from southern Maine, lived in New Orleans for several years. She said that her "consciousness has been split" recently between the tragedy in New Orleans and the war in Iraq. It is the "most vulnerable people who pay the price for this administration's version of democracy, in which very few people profit except for the very top of the food chain. This is a false democracy, for large corporations and wealthy," she said.

The West Coast of the US also saw some of the biggest demonstrations since the war began. In San Francisco, an estimated 50,000 marched from Dolores Park to Jefferson Square Park.

More than 15,000 marched through downtown Los Angeles on Sunday,

beginning in the garment sweatshop district south of downtown, passing City Hall and ending at a rally in front of the federal building. Among the protesters were actors and musicians, and students from Los Angeles area community colleges, California State University campuses and UCLA. There were also contingents of city and municipal workers, nurses and teachers, as well as veterans against the war.

In Seattle, Washington, as many as 7,000 marched to the Henry M. Jackson Federal Building and then back to Westlake Park.

At the rallies on both coasts, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed thousands of copies of a statement of the SEP entitled “Katrina, the Iraq war and the struggle for socialism” and sold a large number of copies of a new WSWS pamphlet, “Hurricane Katrina: social consequences & political lessons.” They found a positive response to this intervention, which posed the necessity of building a new mass socialist movement.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>