

Peace in the Gulf Western forces out

The anti-war movement is united by the desire to achieve peace in the Gulf. But it is divided over how to achieve that peace. For us, peace can only come about through the defeat of Western imperialism at the hands of the Iraqi people. That is why we take sides with Iraq in the Gulf war. The official peace movement, led by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, argues that it is 'unrealistic' to expect people to take sides with Iraq. For CND peace is best achieved through the imposition of an immediate ceasefire and the maintenance of 'non-military' sanctions against Iraq until it withdraws from Kuwait.

What separates anti-imperialists from the pacifists is what we mean by 'peace'. We may both raise the same slogan—'peace in the Gulf'—but the content of that slogan is very different for the two sides. Our different conceptions of peace underlie our different approaches to fighting for it. To understand better this distinction, we need to look at how either side would answer two crucial questions. First, what is the cause of the war in the Gulf? And second, what is the condition for peace?

What is the cause of war?

The peace movement argues that Saddam Hussein is the cause of the war. We recognise however that it was the West's invasion of the Gulf, not Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, that sparked the Gulf war. Many small-scale military actions—such as Israel's invasion and occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and Lebanon, Syria's invasion of Lebanon, Turkey's invasion and partition of Cyprus, etc—have taken place in the region without sparking a confrontation on the scale of the Gulf war. What turned a local affair into a global conflict was America's decision to militarise and internationalise the crisis in an attempt to assert its global leadership. In his state of the union speech this week president George Bush made explicit America's aim that the new world order should be defined by US leadership in the war against Iraq. Bush told his audience to prepare for 'the next

American century', because the Gulf war had shown that America was 'the nation that can shape the future'.

The West is responsible for the Gulf war as it is for every conflict in the region. For more than a century Western control over the region and Western interference in the affairs of the people of the Middle East have created the conditions in which conflict has become almost endemic. Now the West is about to launch a new era of war by embarking on the recolonisation of the Middle East.

What is the condition for peace?

For CND the condition for peace is an immediate ceasefire, followed by non-military action to evict Iraq from Kuwait. A ceasefire, even in the unlikely event of the West agreeing to such an outcome, may stop the current military conflict but it cannot bring peace to the region. Such a ceasefire would leave the West in control of the area, militarily, politically and economically. Moreover, any economic blockade or other sanction applied against Iraq could only bolster Western interference in the region.

For peace to have any meaning for the Arab people they must be in a position to determine their own future. The precondition for that is an end to Western interference in their affairs. That is why we argue not for a ceasefire but for the defeat of the West at the hands of the Iraqi people.

The aspiration for peace is positive. But the call for 'peace' means different things to different people. For CND it means an end to current hostilities but without an end to Western domination. For us only an end to Western domination can bring about peace.

We need to put the call for peace at the forefront of our propaganda. But we also need to ensure that we distinguish what we mean by peace from the arguments put forward by 'peacemongers' like Bruce Kent and Marjorie Thompson. We must show people that if they want peace they must fight for it—by fighting to get Western forces out of the Middle East.

AVOIDING THE ISSUES WON'T STOP THE WAR

For the past six months the left has tailed the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in a vain effort to benefit from the populist anti-war mood which many thought would follow the start of war. The left refused to challenge CND's pacifism and its failure to take sides against Western militarism in the belief that by hanging in there it could gain from any support CND managed to mobilise. The effect of the Western assault, however, has been to swing public opinion in Britain behind the war drive. The small size of recent anti-war protests has shocked many left-wing activists. The effect has been to reinforce the search for easy ways to build a mass anti-war movement.

Some on the left hope to build opposition to the conflict by pointing out the cost of the war on everyday life in Britain. Already some left-wing groups have in practice dropped their slogan 'Britain and USA out of the Gulf' in favour of ones like 'Welfare not warfare'. Others argue that the best way to mobilise anti-war sentiment is by linking the anti-war campaign with 'bread and butter' struggles such as those against the poll tax, against cuts in the National Health Service, for higher wages, etc. Such attempts to find short-cuts to a mass anti-war movement are doomed to failure.

It is impossible to build a movement against the war by avoiding the issue at the heart of the conflict—Western militarism. The key question in the Gulf war is: whose side are you on? Do you back the people of Iraq or do you support Western intervention? Only by posing that question—and by winning people to the Iraqi cause can we build an effective anti-war movement.

Avoiding that issue might look superficially attractive—after all, it is not the easiest thing in the world today to persuade people in Britain to back Iraq. But dodging the key issue in the debate will pay no political dividends. People may grumble about the domestic cost of the war, they may object to having to pay higher taxes or to face a lower standard of living, but so long as they accept that Saddam Hussein is the problem and that Western intervention is necessary, they will not oppose the war drive. Thus the *Guardian*, which had long proclaimed its opposition to war, declared it to be a 'just cause' once the West had launched its military assault. The vast majority of the British population swung behind the government after 17 January—despite the fact that up to 40 per cent had opposed war just a few days earlier. So long as people are politically convinced by the Western cause, discontent about the cost or the method of prosecution of that cause will not help create an effective anti-war movement.

Nor is it possible to build an anti-war movement simply by 'linking' the fight against war with 'economic' struggles. Avoiding taking sides in the war will not only fail to win support for peace, it will also make it more difficult to prosecute those other struggles.

Through the promotion of nationalism, war allows the ruling class to obscure class divisions and engender a 'we're all in it together' spirit. So long as people accept that their interests are the same as those of the 'nation' they will find it difficult to challenge the capitalist class in any sphere—economic, political or military. Thus the British establishment used the nationalist fervour engendered by the First and Second World Wars to smash working class resistance in the workplace and to get people to tighten their belts in the 'national interest'. Similarly the Tories used the Falklands War to crush union resistance at home, targeting strikers as 'the enemy within'. 'Call off the rail strike, or we'll call an air strike', read a banner on a ship returning from the Falklands in response to an Aslef dispute in Britain. The left's failure to take sides with Argentina and combat chauvinism at home allowed the Tories to go on the offensive against their opponents and win a crushing victory in the general election.

'KRAUT BASHING' AND THE GULF WAR

As Britain passes round the tin for international contributions to its war effort, the chorus of condemnation aimed at the European Community, and against Germany in particular, has become very shrill. A cause that was once the preserve of Tory backwoodsmen, hardline Thatcherite ministers and right-wing pressure groups has now been taken up by more mainstream circles. The heated atmosphere created by the war has given the debate new impetus. Defence minister Alan Clarke remains in his post despite last week's anti-European outburst. Nicholas Ridley, the former cabinet minister forced to resign after making not too dissimilar comments last year, seems to have been rehabilitated. Television interviewers seem happy to heap abuse on European politicians. The 'quality' papers echo the gutter press. Indeed the debate seems to be slipping out of control, and is in danger of becoming an embarrassment for the government. Foreign secretary Douglas Hurd has been forced to make efforts this week to calm things down and adopt a more measured approach to the issue.

Three months ago, in the run-up to German reunification, press and politicians raised the spectre of German militarism dominating Europe. Today the complaint is the Germans' lack of enthusiasm for militarism in the Gulf. What is common to both charges is the recognition that Britain is losing its ability to influence world events.

Britain's Gulf policy has further eroded Britain's global influence while increasing its

isolation within Europe. French diplomacy over the past few months has ensured that it will adopt a high profile in any post-war Middle East settlement. The more self-assured and assertive Germany will play an even more pivotal role both in Europe and on the wider world stage in the coming period. Bonn's ambivalent stance towards the Gulf war is reminiscent of US isolationism at the start of both the First and Second World Wars—an aspiring global power standing aloof from the conflict in order to keep all its options open. Britain's economic and political leverage however has become still weaker.

There is no quick and easy way to build an anti-war movement. By avoiding the issue of Western militarism the left is making it harder, not easier, to build opposition to war. On the other hand by polarising opinion and getting people to take sides against Britain we can not only begin to create a movement against war, but we can create a political climate in which class divisions become clearer and in which our everyday struggles become that much more effective.

Britain supported the US policy of militarising the Gulf conflict as a way of bolstering its reduced stature in the post-Cold War era. But the effect of the war has been to make clearer still Britain's problems. Thus while America has managed to squeeze some £23 billion worth of war contributions from allies such as Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, no one has felt obliged to heed Britain's demands for cash—foreign donations to Britain's war chest stand at just £347m. It is an accurate reflection of how little clout Britain possesses in the world today.

Today, the intensity of the anti-German rhetoric is embarrassing for the government. But while the British establishment may seek to calm inflamed passions now, the current wave of anti-German outbursts is a harbinger of what may become much more mainstream in British politics in the not-too distant future, as Britain becomes a byword for decline.

The consensus for war

Of all the Western nations taking part in the Gulf war, Britain stands out as the one with the greatest promotion of the war drive, the most intense propaganda war and the most sycophantic media. What is striking, however, is that despite this there has been little of the tub-thumping chauvinism that characterised the Tory government's handling of the Falklands War. The gutter press might have gone over the top about the Gulf war, but the government has adopted a relatively restrained public stance. Most revealing is the contrast between John Major and Margaret Thatcher. Major today is as self-effacing as Thatcher then was crusading.

The key to government strategy is its understanding that its most precious political asset is the consensus that has been forged across the political spectrum behind Tory aims and values. In the Gulf war there has been widespread acceptance at Westminster of the Tories' arguments. Even the peace movement by and large agrees with the government's aim in the Gulf—the 'liberation' of Kuwait and the containment if not elimination of Saddam Hussein—while disputing its methods. As a result the Tories have been able to promote their war drive without recourse to the rabid jingoism of the past.

The new political consensus is the legacy of the Thatcher decade. In his desperation to appear patriotic and respectable Neil Kinnock divested Labour of its Labourist heritage and adopted Thatcherite policies. But so long as Margaret Thatcher remained in power, her very presence and style provided for friction between the government and opposition. With her departure even such personal rancour disappeared. John Major's low-key style helped underpin Labour support for government policy. The Gulf war has revealed the degree of agreement between Labour and Tory.

From the start of the Gulf crisis Labour has backed the government strategy almost to the letter. Labour supported the imposition of economic sanctions and the deployment of the Western task force in the Gulf. Indeed at times shadow foreign secretary Gerald Kaufman seemed to be more bellicose than Margaret Thatcher herself.

Labour has accepted the escalation of the crisis at every point. It backed the 15 January United Nations deadline for the use of force in the Gulf. In the run-up to the deadline, Labour suggested that the time might not yet be right for war. But once the West had launched its assault on Iraq two days after the deadline, Labour gave it its full backing, colluding with the government to ensure that no vote on the war took place in parliament. This week Kinnock backed the extension of the war aims to include the toppling of Saddam and the destruction of Iraq. The Labour leader carpeted his shadow transport spokesman John Prescott for 'speaking out of line' after Prescott questioned the extension of the West's war aims.

The Labour leader has not only given unswerving support to the war effort, he has also in effect fronted many of the Tory propaganda campaigns at home. Kinnock attacked European

leaders for their failure to prosecute the war as wholeheartedly as Britain even before Tory backwoodsmen took up the issue. He appeared to be more outraged about the Iraqi treatment of Western prisoners of war than was the government frontbench. He sprang to the defence of prisoners' families, admonishing the press for harassing them.

So complete has been Labour's identification with the government's Gulf strategy that the Tories have been quite happy for Neil Kinnock to appear on television far more than even John Major. Kinnock is no longer the leader of the opposition. He is simply a government spokesman in opposition clothes.

The collapse of the Labour rebellion against war clearly illustrates the party's desperation to appear respectable. Prior to the Western assault 55 Labour MPs voted against the government. Once war had started the figure fell to 34. Even Joan Ruddock, for a decade the chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, has refused to oppose war. The Labour left is so frightened of not seeming to support 'our boys' that it is forced to toe the government line.

The Tories recognise that Labour's unconditional support for government policy is their most valuable political asset at the moment. It not only provides them with a free hand in pursuing their Gulf strategy. It has also allowed them to depoliticise other issues which might otherwise pose major problems—in particular the effects of the recession. In order to preserve the Westminster consensus, Major has not politicised the war in the way that Thatcher threw down the gauntlet to Labour during the Falklands War. Rather he has encouraged Labour to portray itself as being 'on side'.

It is not just the Labour Party that has given succour to the government. Many sections of the peace movement, implicitly or explicitly, have accepted the government's aims in the Gulf, if not its methods. The benefits to the government of a marginalised but housetrained peace movement have meant that the Tories have been unwilling to move in too hard against official anti-war organisations like the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Most peace campaigners remain resolutely opposed to war. But their starting point is the same as that of the warmongers: the need to evict Saddam from Kuwait. As a consequence their arguments against war often have the effect of adding weight to the demands of the warmongers for a military onslaught:

'Maintain sanctions' Most peace campaigners backed the imposition of economic sanctions as an alternative to war; in fact it paved the way to military conflict. Anti-war campaigners were forced to agree to the imposition of a military blockade to render sanctions 'effective'. When the West decided that sanctions were not having their desired effect—the surrender of Saddam to Western dictates—and that only a military attack would be successful, the peace movement had already lost the argument.

'Stick to UN resolutions' The anti-war movement backed the UN as a force for peace in the region and pleaded with the West to abide by UN resolutions. What could it argue then when the UN agreed to the use of force?

'Stop nuclear proliferation' The main concern of the peace movement over the past six months has been to prevent Saddam Hussein from obtaining nuclear weapons. This played right into the hands of military strategists who argued that the only way to destroy Saddam's nuclear capability was to bomb it out of existence.

'War will be an environmental catastrophe' Peace campaigners' preoccupation with the environmental effects of war has provided the most grotesque illustration of how arguments for 'peace' become a justification for war. It is still unclear whether the oil slick in the Gulf is the product of Western bombing or Iraqi action. But by making an issue of its ecological consequences, the peace movement has allowed the media to get away with their obscene preoccupation with the fate of a handful of dead birds while ignoring the plight of tens of thousands of Iraqi people killed as a result of the Western carpet-bombing of their country. It has allowed George Bush to dub Saddam an 'environmental terrorist' and has thus legitimised new Western attacks on oil installations in Iraqi hands. It has also legitimised the Anglo-American extension of the war aims which now include the bringing of Saddam to trial for 'war crimes'.

Since the start of the Gulf crisis, the warmongers have successively adopted every one of the 'arguments for peace'—and used them to justify war. The mainstream has clothed its pro-war rhetoric in the language popularised by the official anti-war movement. The effect has been to legitimise the West's war aims and to bolster the consensus behind war.

Not only has the official peace movement paved the way for the warmongers, it has also started fingering the more intransigent anti-war campaigners. CND seems to regard left-wing opponents of war as a greater threat than the war itself. In a series of recent interviews, CND chair Marjorie Thompson has targeted the far left as the real problem, claiming that it has 'hijacked' the peace movement. Former CND leader Bruce Kent has repeatedly attacked the Revolutionary Communist Party on television and in the press as 'lunatics' for backing the Iraqi people.

CND's red-baiting has legitimised mainstream attacks on anti-war campaigners. For example when the *Independent* launched a bitter diatribe against the 'lunacies' of left-wing anti-war campaigners, it used Kent's attack on the RCP to give weight to the charge. This can only help legitimise the consensus behind government policy and pave the way for state attacks on anti-war protesters. CND would rather split the anti-war movement and invite state repression than see the creation of a genuine, effective movement against the war.

In any case the CND charge that anti-imperialists have 'hijacked' the peace movement is specious. In reality no such movement exists. As the pathetic size of recent anti-war

protests in London and elsewhere has shown, CND is incapable of mobilising large numbers of anti-war protesters. The demonstrations have been increasingly made up of the hardcore of the left and old-style peace campaigners, the veterans of Aldermaston and Greenham.

CND's failure to mobilise a mass anti-war movement is not surprising. For a start its desire to appear respectable has meant that it has deliberately set out to disorganise the anti-war movement. It has preferred to mount regional protests rather than hold national demonstrations. Last Sunday's London march was supposed to have finished with a rally at Hyde Park. Instead, on CND's orders and without letting anyone else know, organisers abruptly ended the march in Trafalgar Square—400 yards from the start. Why? So that it would not meet up with the Bloody Sunday demonstration which was also marching to Hyde Park. For CND it was far preferable to halve the size of the march and ensure that it ended in total chaos than be associated with the struggle for Irish liberation.

At the same time CND's support for the warmongers' aims ensures that it could never mobilise a large audience. Once you accept that the West needs to deal with Saddam, then why demonstrate against the most effective way of doing that? Given the slippage of the argument against war to the argument for war, CND is unable to appeal to many beyond those already opposed to war. CND's approach has ensured that the peace movement is reduced to the hardcore of the left on the one hand and religious pacifists on the other—and CND has given notice that it wants to rid itself of the left too.

The only way to win a new audience for the anti-war movement is by breaking with the consensus for war, challenging the arguments of the warmongers (and of their apologists in the peace movement) and putting the case for taking sides with the Iraqi people against the West. The only realistic strategy for bringing peace to the Middle East is the withdrawal of Western forces and the end of imperialist intervention in the region.

The success of the RCP and the Hands Off the Middle East Committee has shown that it is possible to reach a new audience with arguments against war. Our recent demonstrations, pickets and conferences have enabled us to take the case for an anti-imperialist anti-war movement to new layers of people. Last Sunday's RCP conference on the Gulf war—'The Gulf war: made in the West'—attracted 500 people and showed how it is possible to convince a new audience of the need to adopt an anti-imperialist position.

It is important to remember that while the government has created a consensus behind the war it nevertheless remains a relatively fragile consensus. It is true that 80 per cent of the population now supports the Gulf war, double the figure of a fortnight ago. However support for war remains passive. There is little of the gung-ho enthusiasm that characterised the Falklands conflict.

The potential exists for us to polarise opinion. That is why our most important task is to meet people's aspirations for peace and show that the only way to achieve it is by taking sides with the Iraqi people.

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