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USA

Anti-war movement emerges

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In the wake of the terror attack on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, the US government and mass media have been working overtime to arouse a patriotic war fervour. Threats and vigilante attacks were widespread against Muslim and Arab residents in the days immediately following the tragedy. But anti-war and anti-racist forces have begun organizing a serious opposition.

On Friday, September 14, the U.S. Congress passed, with one dissenting voice, a resolution authorizing President Bush "to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, or harboured such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons." The one courageous vote against was by Democratic congresswoman Barbara Lee of California, who explained: "I am convinced that military action will not prevent further acts of international terrorism against the United States."

Congress is also considering legislation which would supposedly tighten domestic security by curtailing civil liberties. But here there is at least some resistance in Congress. The Bush administration wanted a provision which would allow the detention of foreign nationals indefinitely without trial. In the legislation which is likely to pass, however, this is being scaled back to permit such detention only for a specified period. At the same time there is complete agreement to expand wiretap and other eavesdropping powers, including the indiscriminate monitoring of internet communications by government agencies. Bush is also asking for authority to resume economic and military aid to nations which had previously been cut off due to their record of human rights violations, provided only that they now enlist in the "war on terrorism."

Clearly the rulers of the USA want to use the events of September 11 as an excuse for expanding domestic repression even when the actions taken have no relationship whatsoever to any "legitimate" security concerns.

Murderous policies

The international intelligence apparatus also wants to use this crisis to begin reimplementing murderous policies that have been responsible for thousands of deaths around the world in previous decades. For the last 26 years it has been the official policy of the USA not to engage in assassination plots against the leaders of foreign states. There is now a move afoot to drop that policy, and to reinstitute other CIA covert operations which had been curtailed due to rampant and well-documented abuses.

The average citizen responded with humanity and compassion for the victims of the September 11 attack. The city of New York received so many contributions of food and supplies, and so many volunteers to help with the rescue effort, that Mayor Giuliani had to announce no more was needed.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the majority of the US population has also responded positively to the patriotic calls. U.S. citizens of all ethnic backgrounds can be seen carrying American flags as they walk down the street, or else displaying them from cars, or homes, or offices. (Of course, a desire to make a statement of solidarity with the victims is involved here, probably as much as support for war). Polls consistently show 80 to 90 percent in favour of a military campaign against "terrorism," though the figures decline considerably when the question includes the idea of

a long-term effort that causes substantial civilian casualties in other nations. It seems remarkable, and a positive sign, that even 10-20 percent of the US population is still not buying the war propaganda under the present circumstances.

Every major sporting event and many cultural activities were cancelled for almost a week after the attack, including Major League Baseball and the National Football League. Political demonstrations were called off as well, though the reasons varied. When the AFL-CIO pulled out of a planned demonstration in Washington at the end of September to protest meetings of the IMF and World Bank, its president, John Sweeny, issued a statement which declared that this was a time for "bringing people together to begin the process of healing and renewing our sense of community and confidence." He called on the IMF and World Bank to cancel their meeting as well (which was subsequently done), but announced that the AFL-CIO would withdraw from the demonstrations no matter what.

By contrast, the organizers of a major protest in the case of former Black Panther and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, scheduled for Philadelphia on Saturday, September 15, planned to go ahead until the last minute. They were forced to cancel, reluctantly, on Friday, however, when it became clear that the safety of demonstrators could not be guaranteed given the prevailing atmosphere. Among other problems, organizers cited "numerous attacks on both Arab and Muslim people and their businesses in the city."

Fervour

This kind of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic fervour was widespread in the immediate aftermath of September 11, representing one of the more sinister aspects of the popular response. Much of the establishment press and many politicians became so alarmed that statements were issued calling for a halt to such activity, stressing that Islam itself is not the enemy. No doubt this, too, was a factor prompting Bush's remarks to the same effect in his September 20 speech. Nevertheless, threats of attacks, and actual attacks, took place from coast to coast.

By contrast, and on the positive side of the ledger, traditional left forces from the Green Party to explicitly revolutionary organizations, while universally expressing their shock, outrage, and condemnation of the human tragedy, have also rejected the calls for war and begun organizing a movement to combat both the war fervour and racist attacks against Muslim and Arab people. And antiwar sentiment extends well beyond the left. The National Council of Churches, for example, declared: "We must not, out of anger and vengeance, indiscriminately retaliate in ways that bring on even more loss of innocent life."

Not in my name

On Friday September 14, a contingent organized by "Not In My Name" (NIMN), a coalition which includes Arabs and Jews among others, participated in a large vigil sponsored by the city of Chicago. NIMN's signs read, "Arabs and Jews, We Refuse to be Enemies" in English, Arabic, and Hebrew. Participants reported an enthusiastic welcome from others present. On September 16 an antiwar rally, reportedly attended by 2500 people, was held in Portland, Oregon. In Detroit, the city whose metropolitan area has the largest Arab population outside the Middle East, hundreds marched on Monday, September 17, pausing at an Islamic Student Center where windows had been smashed. Their banner said: "Arab Peoples Are Our Brothers and Sisters-No War!"

In New York a vigil took place in Union Square on Saturday, September 15, around the theme, "Islam is not the enemy. War is not the answer." The following Friday a march from the same site to midtown Manhattan attracted

thousands, and forces close to the Direct Action Network (one of the main groups behind the anti-globalisation protests in the US) has called for a weekly vigil every Friday evening. Another New York City coalition, made up of more traditional left organizations as well as unaffiliated activists, has been holding planning meetings of up to 400 people.

Students around the country organized a day of action on September 20, with more than 130 colleges and universities participating. At the University of California, Berkeley campus, a rally was reportedly attended by 4,000. The themes of the action were: opposition to any military response, to racist attacks, and to attempts to roll back civil liberties.

In general these same calls have constituted the political basis for unity expressed by antiwar forces, along with the idea of seeking peace and counteracting terrorism through economic and social justice on a global scale. There have been some attempts to discuss more specific alternatives, including the idea of bringing the terrorists to "justice" through the application of international law rather than a military response. But some raise objections to this, not wanting to make it seem as if the legal institutions of global imperialism, which also help to sustain imperialist domination, are any kind of legitimate alternative. This political discussion is still in the process of working itself out.

The first nationally coordinated protests took place in Washington D.C. and San Francisco on Saturday September 29, with marches in both locations attracting 5,000 to 10,000 participants. Students from campuses across the country were again prominent. There were also smaller protests in other cities, including Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Madison, Wisconsin; Durham, North Carolina; Columbus, Ohio; Chicago; New York, and elsewhere.

Unions raise voice

Labour activists and even official union bodies have begun to raise their voices. The San Francisco Labor Council (AFL-CIO) adopted a resolution which declared, "The tragic attacks of September 11 should be treated as a heinous crime rather than an act of war. As we mourn this tremendous loss of life, we declare our resistance to efforts to use this tragedy to engage in military actions that can lead only to more carnage and senseless loss of life. We reject the idea that entire nations should be punished for the actions of a few. Bombing raids and military strikes will only fuel an endless cycle of revenge that can only bring the deaths of more innocent civilians, both here and around the world." The council endorsed the September 29 protest actions in San Francisco.

In New York a letter that has been signed by more than 100 labour officials and activists from various unions declared: "war will inevitably harm countless innocent civilians, strengthen American alliances with brutal dictatorships, and deepen global poverty-just as the United States and its allies have already inflicted widespread suffering on innocent people in such places as Iraq, Sudan, Israel and the Occupied Territories, the former Yugoslavia and Latin America."

It demands: "NO WAR. It is wrong to punish any nation or people for the crimes of individuals-peace requires global social and economic justice. JUSTICE, NOT VENGEANCE. An independent international tribunal to impartially investigate, apprehend, and try those responsible for the September 11 attack. OPPOSITION TO RACISM-DEFENSE OF CIVIL LIBERTIES. Stop terror, racial profiling and legal restrictions against people of color and immigrants, and defend democratic rights. AID FOR THE NEEDY, NOT THE GREEDY. Government aid for the victims' families and displaced workers-not the wealthy. Rebuild New York City with union labor, union pay, and with special concern for new threats to worker health and safety."

Dennis Rivera, the President of Local 1199 (Service Employees International Union), who went to jail as part of the

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protests against the US Navy's use of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques as a bombing range, announced that the union's delegate assembly had voted to oppose "launching a war against any nation because of the actions of a few." He also condemned terrorism and demanded that those guilty of the WTC attack be brought to justice. Robin Alexander, United Electrical Workers Director of International Labor Affairs issued a statement which read, in part, "As we mourn and as we rage, we also declare our resistance to efforts to use this tragedy to curtail our civil liberties or to engage in military adventures that can lead only to more carnage and senseless loss of life."

While all of the Democratic and Republican Party politicians (with the notable exception of Barbara Lee) have eagerly lined up behind Bush's pro-war campaign, Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate in the last presidential election, declared at a rally: "we must have the freedom of our minds to comment, reflect, and feed back because our government can make some serious mistakes, as they have in the past... We have to begin putting ourselves in the shoes of the innocent, brutalized people in the Third World and ask ourselves, why do they dislike our foreign policy?"

Ongoing protests are being projected from many quarters, with some effort to establish coordination and a coalition approach on a local and national scale. Even before the bombs have begun to fall it is clear that while there may be unanimity in the halls of Congress on the war, there remains considerable questioning and some outright opposition among the broader American public.