Iraq: why are the demonstrations dwindling?
AWL on 22 March, 2006

By Martin Thomas

About 20,000 marched in London on 18 March against US/ UK troops in Iraq, and against war on Iran. Workers’ Liberty activists and others distributed leaflets for the Iraq Union Solidarity campaign, and did a bucket collection for the Iraqi unions which raised £289, about the same as on the bigger demonstration of March 2005 and much more than on the last “Stop The War” demonstration, September 2005.

The “Stop The War” organisers, however, did not share the desire of many demonstrators to hear and support the voice of Iraq’s organised workers. Dashty Jamal, a British representative of the Federation of Workers’ Councils and Unions of Iraq and the Worker-communist Party of Iraq, told Solidarity:

“I went to Parliament Square [the demonstration’s assembly point] with our banner saying ‘US/UK forces out of Iraq, no to America, no to political Islam’ in English and Arabic. Our comrades brought a bookstall, and we put it up near the Churchill statue.

“John Rees and other ‘Stop The War’ people came and told us to move. They said it was their demonstration and they did not want us there. When we refused, they brought an SWP [Socialist Workers’ Party] stall and put it in front of us, to obstruct our stall.

“I asked them to move their stall and let people get to our stall, but they refused. When I pushed their stall with my hand, they called the police, but the police refused to intervene.

“Then they demanded that we move our banner, which we had put up on the crash barriers surrounding the square, saying that space was needed for an entry to the square.

“When our comrade Nadia Mahmood was being interviewed by Kuwaiti TV, SWP members gathered round and shouted to try to disrupt the interview.

“Later on, in Trafalgar Square [at the end-of-march rally], someone from the Muslim Association of Britain came, together with the platform speaker from the Islamic Party of Iraq, to complain about our banner. They said: ‘We are political Islam. You must remove that banner. You must go out of Trafalgar Square’. We refused”.

The Muslim Association of Britain, a formal co-sponsor of the demonstration (though it appeared to have mobilised little for it), is the British offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and richest Islamic-fundamentalist political movement in the Arab world. The Iraq Islamic Party is its Iraqi offshoot.

As it happens, the Iraq Islamic Party, which represents the “softest” strand of Sunni Islamism in Iraq, now says that it wants the US forces not to leave Iraq but to first “fix what they have destroyed”. The IIP are worried that if the smouldering civil war in Iraq bursts into full flame, they will be slaughtered either by the Sunni “ultras” (who have already killed some IIP leaders), or by the Shia sectarians, or by both.
The “Stop The War” leaders condemn the Iraqi Workers’ Federation (led by the Communist Party of Iraq) as “Vichyists” or “Quislings” because they too want to negotiate and try to end the occupation through the political processes set up under US overlordship. But for the STW leaders, apparently, being political-Islamist gives the IIP “anti-imperialist” virtue regardless.

Two days after the demonstration, “Stop The War” also staged a public meeting for a representative of the Shia ultra-Islamist Sadr movement. Again, the fact that the Sadr movement is part of the Shia-Islamist coalition which leads Iraq’s government, the government hand-in-glove with the USA, does not bother them.

In an implicit or explicit hard-cop/ soft-cop division of roles within the Shia-Islamist coalition, the Sadrists do agitate in Iraq for “troops out” (while also giving the decisive vote to pro-troops Ibrahim Jaafari to remain prime minister). And they do have a rhetoric of Shia-Sunni unity.

An index of the reality of the Sadrists is, however, given in a recent Boston Review article by journalist Nir Rosen. “One article [in the main Sadrist paper] discussed the role of Islam in the Iraqi constitution and concluded that Islam could not be applied truly unless the Mahdi returned or his assistant appeared, suggesting the possibility that Muqtada [al-Sadr, the movement’s leader] was the Mahdi’s assistant”.

This is not only theocracy, but specifically Shia theocracy. (The return of the Mahdi, the “Twelfth Imam”, from the supernatural place where he has been hidden for 1132 years, to rule humankind, is a specifically Shia theme).

On the Sydney (Australia) demonstration of 18 March, too, there was a voice for the Iraqi labour movement. Supporters of “Aus-Iraq” distributed a leaflet headed: “No to occupation, no to ethnic and sectarian division, yes to the civilising, unifying power of Iraq’s trade unions”.

The Sydney demonstration, however, was small - fewer than a thousand. Worldwide, demonstrations were not large: 800 in Dublin, four to five hundred in Warsaw, and (according to the Los Angeles Times) 1000 in New York, 7000 in Chicago, 200 in Washington, 1000 in Stockholm, 2000 in Copenhagen.

The London demonstration was estimated by its organisers at 80,000 to 100,000. But then they estimated the September 2005 demonstration at 100,000, and the March 2005 one at 200,000. Police estimates were 15,000 on 18 March 2006; 10,000 in September 2005; and 45,000 in March 2005. The demonstrations are dwindling.

Why, when Amnesty International has just revealed that the US are holding 14,000 Iraqis in jail without charge or trial? When the US has recently launched its biggest air offensive in Iraq since 2003? When the surreal corruption, waste, and mis-spending by the US occupation authorities - using not US money, but Iraqi money which had been held by the UN - has recently been exposed on TV?

When everyone can see that the situation in Iraq is getting worse month by month - more violence, more sectarianism, further collapse of basic services like water and electricity, unremitting unemployment? When opinion polls show fewer and fewer people believing Bush’s and Blair’s lies about Iraq? When Iyad Allawi, prime minister of Iraq’s 2004-5 Interim Government, says: “We are
in civil war. We are losing each day as an average 50 to 60 people throughout the country... If this is not civil war, then God knows what civil war is... [we are moving towards the] point of no return”?

The politics of Iraq, in Western countries, are becoming like the politics of Ireland in Britain in the 1970s and 80s. During that time, there was mass, even majority, support in Britain for the call “troops out of Ireland”. Yet the demonstrations on the issue, and their ability to restrain British brutality in Northern Ireland, remained very small.

Trouble was, what activists called the “Daily Mirror” “troops out” sentiment was more British-nationalist, even anti-Irish - “get our boys out and let them kill each other” - than pro-Irish. Short of huge British troop casualties, that sentiment was never going to create real political pressure on the government. It was disconnected from any positive answers.

Activists then saw the need to offer some positive answers - only, what many of them offered was fantasy, and came down to applauding the Provisional IRA/ Sinn Fein and hoping that it would magically dissolve the obdurate Protestant north-east into a socialist united Ireland. It easily collapsed into support for the British government’s Good Friday Agreement (institutionalising “balanced” sectarianism from above) when the Provisionals backed that Agreement.

On Iraq now, however, the leaders of “Stop The War” offer nothing as positive answers, not even fantasies. They try to surf on British-nationalist “leave them to kill each other” sentiment. Their implicit answer is: “support political Islam”.

The only possible positive answer - not an easy one, not an instant one, but the only one - is support for the Iraqi labour movement, and support for freedom and democracy for the peoples of Iraq, against both the US/UK and the sectarian militias.