

Whatever Happened to the Anti-War Movement?

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Chicago – As the U.S. war in Afghanistan enters its third month, discussion and activity around the war and Islamic fundamentalism continues in the Chicago area. At the same time, there has been a marked decline in the size and number of anti-war demonstrations. The reasons for this are worth considering.

Anti-war activism seemed to get off to a promising start in September and early October, when several rallies were held, involving as many as 500 at a time. However, the protests were hobbled by a tendency to focus exclusively on opposing the U.S.'s war on Afghanistan, without making any serious effort to speak to the threat posed by the Sept. 11 attacks. The main anti-war coalition decided not to condemn Sept. 11 or extend solidarity with its victims, on the grounds that this would detract from the need to oppose U.S. imperialist actions.

This view was promoted by members of left “vanguard” parties (like the International Socialist Organization [ISO]), who dominated the coalition after it was formed by activists from the anti-globalization movement. However, the narrow focus of the protests cannot be blamed on the ISO alone, since a number of independent and anti-vanguardist activists agreed to limit them to opposing U.S. actions in Afghanistan and at home.

The basic argument went as follows: To build a large and broad-based movement we need to unite around as few issues as possible, centering on a critique of U.S. government policies. Just as the anti-Vietnam War movement succeeded by uniting around simple demands like “Out Now,” it was argued, so we can win today if we avoid getting dragged into “contentious” debates about the nature of Islamic fundamentalism or the Taliban.

In fact, armed with this political perspective the anti-war rallies have become progressively smaller. They have reached the point where only 50 came out to the most recent one. The main anti-war coalition is now in tatters and on the verge of falling apart.

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The problems facing the protests in Chicago are hardly the fault of misrepresentation by the media. The CHICAGO TRIBUNE and SUN-TIMES, as well as local TV news, have given considerable coverage to the anti-war rallies, often OVERSTATING the numbers present in them. Nor is the problem due to the fact that the war has just begun and it takes time to build a movement. After all, far more attended the protests at the beginning of the war than today.

The real problem was reflected in a recent rally sponsored by another anti-war coalition, consisting mainly of pacifist and religious-based organizations. To its credit, this coalition has included a condemnation of Sept. 11 in its statement of principles. However, it has not gone further than that in terms of integrating anti-war activism with opposition to Islamic fundamentalism. At one rally the main chant heard was “one, two, three, four, we don’t want your racist war!” Several Black workers who were passing by came over, with a puzzled look on their faces, and asked if the demonstrators were supporters of the Taliban.

The experiences in Chicago indicate that the crisis afflicting the anti-war movement goes deeper than the dominance of one or another “vanguard” party, though they have done plenty of damage. Rather, the problem is POLITICAL and CONCEPTUAL: a failure to recognize that the present moment calls for a TOTAL view, in which opposition to U.S. imperialism is made absolutely inseparable from a critique of reactionary Islamic fundamentalism AND a projection of the kind of new, human society we are FOR.

In many respects today’s protests are repeating the mistakes of the anti-Gulf War movement of 1991. Many leftists then argued that the protests should focus on a critique of the U.S., without explicitly condemning Saddam Hussein or solidarizing with the victims of his rule. The anti-war movement of 1991-92 started with large demonstrations, only to quickly peter out. By the time the Kurds revolted against Hussein at the end of the war, and the U.S. allowed him to slaughter them for the sake of “maintaining regional stability,” the anti-war movement was left empty-handed, with little to say.

By focusing exclusively on U.S. actions in the aftermath of Sept. 11, today’s anti-war movement risks falling into a similar trap. The mantras against “U.S. imperialism” (as if there aren’t other forms of oppressive capitalism in the world) has prevented it from either anticipating the refusal of the Afghan people to fight for the Taliban or solidarizing with the women, workers, and national minorities there opposing it. The movement comes off looking insensitive to the victims of fundamentalism, whether in Afghanistan or in the U.S. Ironically or not, the more the protests focus only on opposition to U.S. imperialist policies, the less effective they prove to be in combating them.

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Despite this, widespread opposition to Bush's war continues. Community forums against Bush's attacks on civil liberties and the resurgence of racial profiling are being held every week. As the 700 who turned out for a talk by the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan showed, there is widespread support for aiding the victims of Islamic fundamentalism and the U.S. imperialist bombing of Afghanistan. It remains to be seen whether the crisis afflicting the anti-war movement will lead to the kind of rethinking that will enable it to connect up with such forces.

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