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**Britain**

# **We are the majority**

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### **Terry Conway analyses some of the reasons why the anti-war movement in Britain has been one of the largest campaigns against Bush's unending 'war on terror' anywhere in the world.**

*She argues that there were a number of key factors that enabled Stop The War (STW) to build a movement which organized some of the biggest mobilisations that have ever taken place in British history, and certainly the biggest ever movement in opposition to war. A new generation has come into political activity, and others have been rejuvenated by a vibrant and diverse movement. Over one million marched against the war in February and, even after the US occupation of Baghdad, some 40,000 marched in April against the occupation of Iraq.*

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/19nimn.jpg>]

*The key reasons for this success were:*

- The movement was organized around a restricted number of demands: Stop the war - Oppose the racist backlash - Defend civil liberties
- There was a conscious and successful attempt to involve significant sections of the Muslim community.
- A number of new trade union leaders had recently been elected who were critical of the government generally including over its war drive.

The strength of the antiwar movement on a world scale since 9/11 has been built on the back of the global justice movement which mainly focuses on challenging the economic and (anti) social policies of neo-liberal capitalism. The anti-globalization movement in Britain had begun to develop support, particularly amongst young people who saw no difference between the traditional political parties, as New Labour hitched its wagon ever more to the horse of neo-liberalism.

Two thousand activists met together in London just days after the September 11 attack on the Twin Towers. The meeting was called by activists in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), in the broader Socialist Alliance and by a number of individuals on the left more generally. Veteran Pakistani activist Tariq Ali made a powerful speech which captured the mood of the meeting. People understood the need to act quickly to launch a broad anti-war movement.

Even this far back, there was a strong awareness that what was almost certainly going to happen in Afghanistan could be repeated in Iraq. Everyone involved knew that the Taliban were not the greatest democrats in the world, any more than those other US creations in Iraq were. But the majority view was that we should focus on preventing the war rather than making a detailed analysis of the Taliban which would reduce the numbers willing to get involved.

500 people attended an organising meeting the following week. It was decided to stick to three simple goals: stop the war, oppose the racist backlash and defend civil liberties. Some people wanted to add other demands such as opposition to imperialism. Most felt that the three demands would enable the building of a broadly-based alliance which would have the best chance of uniting the left with sections of the Muslim and Asian communities and with large numbers of trades unionists. And that is what was achieved to an extent that no-one dreamed was possible in those early days.

There was another debate going on in these first weeks with the SWP. Their initial position on 9/11 itself had been obviously not to support what happened, but also not to condemn it. Of course, it was very difficult to get this right in a situation where there was so much hysteria in the media. But the consensus was that it was important to use the phrase 'condemn' if we were to reach out to the biggest base of support. And after a lot of discussion, the SWP accepted this should be in the founding declaration.

At this point, the SWP were by far the largest single force involved in the campaign. The Socialist Alliance was broader but had only existed as a real national force for a short time. It certainly didn't (and doesn't) have the same material resources that the SWP has. More importantly, the two major forces that had launched such initiatives around previous wars and previous international solidarity campaigns - the Labour Left and the Communist Party - were much weaker than they had been: for example, at the time of the last Gulf War.

That isn't to say they have been absent. There have been a number of left Labour MPs at the centre of the Coalition from the beginning. Many local Labour parties have also supported the Coalition and brought their banners on the demonstrations. But there is no way that today the Labour left, which has been decimated more and more as Blair moves New Labour to the right, could be a key organising force on the ground in most localities. Similarly with the Communist Party of Britain, the key organisation involved in producing the daily newspaper, the Morning Star. Today, more than 10 years after the fall of the wall, this organization is a shadow of its former self.

However, it does still have influence particularly in a number of important trade unions and also in the leadership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) - which although it has been relatively quiescent over the last decade, still has the capacity to mobilise significant numbers. And the SWP understood this all this, which is why they were happy to have CPB member Andrew Murray as Chair of the coalition.

But the relationship of forces on the left in Britain had shifted significantly to one where neither the CP, nor the Labour Left, nor even the two together, had the political weight to dominate such a movement in the way they would automatically have done ten years earlier. There was a massive opening, a huge necessity to act - and revolutionary socialists were in the driving seat.

Everyone knew that Bush would use 9/11 to drive forward his project for the new American Century: that when he talked about an unending war on terror, this was his cover for an unending war against progressive forces across the globe. The stakes were enormous.

At this time there was a growing desire to discuss and work together on the left. Key to this was the fact that the SWP, who for a whole period had been really absent from united front work, had made a major positive shift in approach.

This was demonstrated by their decision to come into the Socialist Alliance in 1999. This was extremely significant because by this time the SWP were by far the largest group on the far left, outstripping the Socialist Party [\[1\]](#) - who a few years earlier had probably been of similar size - by a considerable amount.

And it has to be said that overall the balance sheet of the role of the SWP, as the lynchpin of the coalition, has to be an overwhelmingly positive one. That is not to say there are not things that could have been done differently: that is always true.

There was a problem about whether the Socialist Alliance was built along with the anti-war movement. Obviously, the major focus of activity for the Socialist Alliance, as for the whole left, has since 9/11 been to build opposition to the war drive. But there has sometimes been a tendency to counterpose this to building the Alliance. This was reflected

particularly in the fact that in the later national demonstrations, there was no speaker from the Socialist Alliance.

The Socialist Alliance as an organisation was important in developing the coalition to the success it became. It was militants of the Alliance who were running stalls, organising public meetings, booking coaches and so on, in many parts of the country. Some of these were people who also wore a different hat - that of a particular far-left group - and some were not. In many localities, Socialist Alliance speakers spoke on platforms with people from the Labour left, Communist Party, Greens and, in Wales, Plaid Cymru, without any difficulty. (While the Liberal Democrats participated in some of national marches, in most local areas they didn't do much).

But the SWP were not ready to have this argument. The fundamental problem is that the SWP sees the Socialist Alliance as one of a series of 'united front' campaigns - which also include STW and organisations like the Anti-Nazi League. They do not fully accept the Alliance as a political alternative to New Labour, which needs therefore to be developed into a political party in the way that the Scottish Socialist Party has done.

However, a number of things are changing that will mean that the next time the discussion arises, the context will be different. The Socialist Alliance has an elected councillor for the first time, who won on a strong anti-war ticket and drew in forces from the coalition and the Muslim community into his campaign. At the same time, the Alliance itself recently decided [see next article] to launch a new initiative for broader unity on the left. So we shall have to see how all this plays out.

But despite the frustrations on this issue, it is important to take cognisance of what has happened. The revolutionary left in general, and the SWP in particular, have been at the core of the most successful campaign against the central project of imperialism ever. Of course some of the successes of the campaign are a result of favourable conditions outside the control of its leadership, such as the relationship of forces in the trade unions. But overall, the SWP have been impressive leaders of this powerful campaign.

## Growing mobilization

As the threat against Afghanistan grew in the autumn of 2001, lots of militants were reactivated. The renaissance of the movement was reflected in the 60,000 strong demonstration of October 13. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament had called the demonstration against Bush's 'Star Wars' project, but the march was adapted to oppose the impending invasion of Afghanistan.

Since then there have been much larger marches, but at that time it was a huge turn out. By comparison, it was felt to be a huge achievement when the demo after the Srebrenica massacre had as many as 5,000 marchers. During the first Gulf War, the largest march was 10-15,000. So even then, it was obvious that something new was happening.

The development of the movement hasn't always been ever-upwards. The demonstration on November 18, 2001 was after the US had destroyed the Taliban regime, when the US and its allies had secured 'victory'. There were between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand people there, but they were difficult times.

For the first time here we saw the mobilization of a significant part of the Asian community. We made a conscious effort to include Muslims, particularly because these events were taking place during the holy month of Ramadan. So part of Trafalgar Square, [\[2\]](#) where the march ended, was set aside for prayer. An imam was on the platform for the first time. Dates were handed around at dusk, which is when people break their fast.

It felt strange because it was completely outside the traditions of the British Left. On the other hand, it has long been common for members of various Christian churches including priests and vicars to be involved in radical causes. So while some of the unease was a genuine concern that the movement remained inclusive and secular, some of it was undoubtedly islamophobic and racist. When we had rabbis and bishops on platforms, virtually no one on the left complained; but when there were imams, it was different.

So the coalition continued to make a conscious orientation both to the Muslim and Asian communities, and also the trade union and labour left. This united mobilisation was repeated in April and May 2002 after Israel's massacre of Palestinians in Jenin. It was important that activists could feel the new sense of community growing. People at the head of the coalition saw that it was time to build a new level of understanding. Teach-ins were organised to discuss topics like the new imperialism.

## Involving the Muslim community

The coalition's openness to Muslims was possible because its politics were centred on the main question: the resurgence of imperialism and colonialism, rather than the relationship between Islam and fundamentalists. Some people wanted us to say "Against Bush, Against Bin Laden" and some of them left the coalition's steering committee because they wanted to draw an equal sign between the dangers posed by imperialism and those posed by Bin Laden. These were people around the Workers' Communist Party of Iran, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the Weekly Worker newspaper: but they reflected a wider concern.

What was really at issue here was not whether anyone at the heart of the coalition wanted to work with fundamentalists, but other issues. Those who withdrew have in general an analysis of fundamentalism as a backward, feudal ideology. They do not understand that Al Qaeda derives its appeal today precisely from the development of neo-liberal globalization - and from the failure of the left, particularly in those parts of the world where it is strongest, to demonstrate that another world is possible.

Secondly, in terms of challenging fundamentalism, they thought the important thing was to write something on paper. Other people believed that the way to undercut the strength of fundamentalism was to build a movement with roots in the Muslim community, so that reactionary imams were less able to argue that the anti-war movement had nothing to say to or offer Muslims.

The same is approach is also true of challenging any conflation between opposition to Zionism and anti-Semitism. In some of the early mobilisations, especially those specifically on the question of Palestine, there were many placards showing an equals sign between the swastika and the Star of David. These were doubtless intended to imply that the Israeli State is fascist: yet given that the swastika is the symbol which Jews wore in the gas chambers, there is clearly a serious problem with such an equation. The highly visible participation of groups such as Jews for Justice for Palestine and the Jewish Socialist Group in the anti-war movement has opened up discussion on such issues - which anyway are an area that need challenging, not only with some sectors of the Muslim community, but more broadly.

The development of a strong and diverse anti-war movement has done more to radicalize young women and men from the Muslim community than all the slogans in the world. It has made socialist ideas accessible to young Muslims in a way they never were before. And it has done something to change the balance of forces within that community against the Islamists.

The most visible - and contentious - part of the relationship with the Muslim community has been the relationship with

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the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). This relationship developed because they were the people mobilising in response to Jenin. They called a demonstration after the massacre, which was twice as big as that called by the Palestinian Solidarity Committee. They were welcoming of the participation of the Coalition, and so things developed from there.

Other Muslim groups and individuals were confident to participate in a way they haven't previously - including in groups like the Palestine Solidarity Campaign organising around issues that are important to them - because we had sought a visible Muslim presence.

But there was no decision to say of MAB these are the people we were closest to politically in the Muslim community. They are also not the only Muslim organisation or current involved. For example, there is Dr Siddiqui from the Muslim Parliament, who has different politics; and the London Council of Mosques: both of these have been affiliated from the beginning. There is Salma Yakoob, the driving force behind the coalition in Birmingham - probably the place where the mobilization of the Muslim community has been greatest - who has different ideas again. Certainly the participation of many young Muslim women, some of them wearing the hijab and others not, emerging as strong leaders as the movement has developed has been inspiring.

There have been other figures from the Asian community as well. As mentioned earlier, Tariq Ali spoke at the first meeting in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Suresh Grover, another well known activist from the anti-racist group the National Civil Rights Movement, with a long record of activism in West London, appeared on many platforms. Asad Rehman, a long-time anti-racist activist with a history of involvement in the East London Bengali community, has been a central figure in the coalition nationally from the beginning and calls himself a Muslim Marxist.

So it wasn't a case of saying "let's go and leaflet the mosques" in coalition meetings made up only of the white left. In some places, the key figures from the mosque were at the meetings, and would take leaflets away to mobilize their own forces. In other places they organised their own meetings and transport, but phoned to let us know what they were doing. Elsewhere, Muslim activists in the coalition asked for support from other activists to leaflet the mosques.

So the Asian community wasn't passive: it was a central part of the coalition. Of course the fact that the community is today organised on largely religious lines is not in itself a positive development at all, but represents the defeat of the previous secular leadership in the Asian communities. This leadership was not at all above criticism, given that significant sections of it tended to concentrate increasingly on personal advancement rather than challenging state racism. At the same time the growth of racism specifically directed at Muslims has resulted in the creation of a political identity as British Muslims which did not exist during the last Gulf War. This growth of islamaphobia pre-dates 9/11, but has increased rapidly since then. Given this material reality, it is absolutely right for socialists to positively welcome and encourage the involvement of Muslims organised as such while at the same time:

– Retaining absolute hostility to fundamentalism

– Arguing for separation of church and state

– Retaining the right to criticise any particular actions/slogans by a particular Muslim organisation or individual as warranted - in exactly the same way as we would do any other political forces involved in the movement.

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The whole climate was exceptional, especially for many activists who are used to being a small minority in society.

The attitude of the press had an enormous impact. The Daily Mirror, Britain's second biggest selling newspaper, was the most strident supporter of the movement: day after day it carried damning banner headlines, and devoted half the paper to sharp criticism of Bush's and Blair's war drive. One front page in December 2002 read: "There is a lunatic with weapons of mass destruction 'ramping up' for a war that will imperil the whole world - STOP HIM". This was next to a picture of George Bush, which had been crossed out in the same style that anti-war badges cross out pictures of weapons. The message couldn't be clearer.

The Mirror went on to produce many more covers and stories, and clearly called on its readers to march against war on February 15, printing a map of the route among other things. For the demonstration itself, they produced placards and sponsored part of the equipment for the rally. While their contribution was exceptional it wasn't unique on this issue. What was exceptional was for the left to have the majority of the media behind it. This was apparent campaigning on the streets. A huge proportion of people stopped and took leaflets from activists on stalls. Many took material away to give to others and others signed up to get involved in more formal organising too.

## Trade union involvement key

There has been an important change taking place in the trade unions, which has been going on at around the same time as the war on terrorism. During the whole period since the defeat of the miners' strike by Thatcher in 1985, there had been a real lack of perspective: trade union organization had been crushed and morale sapped.

But slowly new shoots of militancy started to emerge. More radical leaders were elected in a series of important unions, which reflected the fact that the membership was increasingly fed up with the class collaboration of their predecessors. This also coincided with the fact that the honeymoon of the Blair Labour government, elected in 1997, was rapidly coming to an end. Many trade unionists had expected that New Labour would deliver at least some of its promises in terms of defence of welfare provision, and also expected a change in the anti-trade union climate at work.

As a result of these developments twelve national unions have been won to affiliate to the coalition. [3] Trades union leaders like Mick Rix, Bob Crow, Mark Serwotka and Paul Mackney [4] have been personally supportive, and NATFHE also provided the coalition with office space. The T&G and Unison [5] also speak at our demonstrations.

The support doesn't just exist at the top. Hundreds of local branches of unions are involved, not just in supporting the big marches, but also in what's going on in their city, town, or even village. Trades unions are essential and integral to the coalition, unlike the movement against the Vietnam War which was not able to get the same level of support because of the relationship of forces in the unions at that time.

But even so, this is a continual struggle. After the US occupation of Baghdad, there was a proposal from the right on the PCS executive to disaffiliate from the campaign. In Amicus, Roger Lyons [6] leads a campaign against the Stop the War coalition. It is only in a very few of the smaller unions that there is no right wing attempting to claw back our gains. And the crisis of workplace organization that the trade union movement faces has not been overcome. In this context it was not surprising that there was less industrial action on the day war broke out than some had hoped - although it was frustrating that some of the most high profile General Secretaries did not take stronger initiatives to call out their members.

But overall, it is remarkable that there was any at all, when overall numbers of days of strike action remain incredibly low. If people don't have the organizational capacity to fight the war against neo-liberalism at home, it is unlikely that they will do so over the war in Iraq. The fact that the anti-war movement was a majority in the country had a significant impact on people's confidence - and also in preventing management taking disciplinary action afterwards.

## A new generation

A lot of the industrial action that did take place happened in colleges and schools where young people were also taking part in marches. In many cases it was the ebullience of the youth that gave trade unionists the confidence to participate. That was anyway the most extraordinary development in those last few weeks before the war against Iraq started. Young people had been supportive of and involved in the movement from the beginning, but the increase at this point was dramatic. School walkouts were organised in different cities by school students themselves. Marches, die-ins, blockades, were organised in no time at all - by email and word of mouth.

The demonstration the day war broke out was completely extraordinary. People started arriving at Parliament Square in the early morning. But until around 5pm, people over 16 were in a tiny minority. The average age was probably somewhere around 14. Clearly this means something for the future of the anti-war movement - but also for the left.

## International co-operation

The international network and coordination built against the war is completely unprecedented. Never in international history have 30 million people in every part of the globe taken action on one single day over one common cause. It is still hard to comprehend the enormity of what we achieved. The coalition sent speakers to meetings in Barcelona and Germany and to the first conference of the No Platform for War group in Turkey. The movement in Turkey had deep problems due to the left's isolation from the Muslim community. That's now overcome - and that's a massive development.

The first real steps towards formal co-ordination came from the anti-globalization movement. There is a co-ordinating group, which grew out of the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. This was where the call for February 15 came from initially - and then it broadened out. John Rees [\[7\]](#) and the US anti-war group ANSWER went in November to Egypt to agree the Cairo Declaration, which shows that the sentiment has spread in the Middle East. Fifty Russian MPs have signed it. We met in London after the February 15 demonstration. People from very different organisations have now developed close working relations. There are 30 countries involved including ANSWER. The international coordination will continue and, at heart, it is an international movement.

## The future

At the time of writing, the US occupation of Iraq is unravelling. There is still no clean water, no medicines in Baghdad or Basra, one month into the new colonialism. Suicide bombers are wreaking havoc across the region; the Israeli state continues its crackdown on the Palestinian resistance and those who support it.

There is certainly plenty for the anti-war movement to do, even though there is unlikely to be a major military campaign in the next few months. It is possible as well as necessary to keep the core of the coalition together in



campaigning for an end to the occupation of Iraq. Obviously we also need to campaign against the witch-hunt launched by both the Tory press and the Labour Party on George Galloway MP [8] because he was such a prominent figure in the movement. We must also use the relative lull to deepen the political discussion on the strategic options open both to our side but also to our opponents.

If we are successful in doing that, next time round we will be even better prepared to meet the new challenge. If a mass anti-war movement with ever-deeper trade union roots can combine with a serious political alternative to Blairism then perhaps the super-power of public opinion that Bush and Blair rightly fear can at last turn the tide of neo-liberal foreign policy. The war against terrorism is in reality a war against humanity.

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[1] The English organization which is part of the Committee for a Workers' International.

[2] Trafalgar Square: central London's main square.

[3] Including ASLEF, a rail workers' union, NATFHE, the lecturers' union, the PCS civil servants' union, the RMT transport workers' union and UNISON, the local-government workers union

[4] Socialists in the top leaderships of, respectively, ASLEF, the RMT, the PCS and NATFHE.

[5] The two largest unions in Britain, organising general and local-government workers

[6] Joint general secretary of Amicus, the largest private sector union

[7] A leader of the coalition and of the SWP

[8] A prominent figure in the anti-war movement, Galloway has been accused by the right wing Daily Telegraph newspaper of having been in the pay of the Saddam Hussein regime.