AWL conference 1-2 March 2003

Policy passed: war

Solidarity with the peoples of Iraq!
No to war! No to Saddam! Freedom for the Kurds! Democracy for Iraq!

1. US strategists evidently believe that they are "on a roll", and should seize the chance to tidy up another problem. With enough "smart bombs", they can crush Saddam's regime quickly, set up an alternative, and then withdraw. At small cost they will have secured the end of the malodorous and ineffective UN sanctions against Iraq, established a reliable government over one of the world's major oil powers, and stabilised a crucial region. Even if we thought that the gung-ho US strategists were calculating correctly, socialists could not support such plans. The overthrow of Saddam is for the people of Iraq to do, not for the US to impose on Iraq at inescapably large cost of Iraqi civilian and conscript life.

2. War, in the famous adage of Clausewitz much repeated by Marxists, is the continuation of policy by other means. We judge wars not by "who fired first" or "who attacked", but by the character of the established state policy which the war "continues" on either side. However criminal the USA's plans, on the Iraqi side the record makes it impossible to see the "policy" which Iraq's course towards war "continues" as essentially one of defence of its political independence and rights. Since the 1970s, at least, Iraq's state policy has been essentially about trying to establish itself as a regional big power—a "sub-imperialist" centre. To do so it has repeatedly repressed smaller peoples—the Kurds, the population of Kuwait—and made war against its neighbours. Its policy towards Israel represents the worst Arab chauvinism, mitigated only by distance. The state's rule of fear against its own people goes hand in hand with its reactionary external policy.

3. When we [are] campaigning against the threat of US war on Iraq, therefore, we should not do so in any way that implies credence to or support for Saddam Hussein's "anti-imperialist" claims. Cheap agitation such as that which declares Bush and Sharon to be "the real axis of evil" and the "real terrorists" should be rejected. Whatever about Bush's hypocrisy, Saddam's regime is "really" as evil and as terrorist as any on earth. This position would not change in the event of a US invasion or conquest. Saddam's resistance to the US would not be motivated by a defence of the Iraqi peoples' rights to self-determination, but by the rationale of the self-preservation of his regime, including its repression of the Kurds and other minorities. We oppose the US war plans, not in the name of support for the Iraqi regime, but in the name of international democracy and working-class solidarity.

4. Out of this US/Iraq war could develop a political quagmire which would open up a whole new chapter in the history of imperialism. After an initial success against Saddam Hussein, the USA could get drawn into trying to impose effective (if not formal) colonial rule on Iraq, by way of heavy involvement by the US military to suppress mass popular resistance to a replacement regime which lacks a domestic political base and becomes in effect just a puppet government. In that possible future situation, we would give support to genuine popular resistance in the name of self-determination. We would express our opposition to a colonial policy or puppet government by making slogans such as 'self-determination', 'no imposed regime in Iraq' and 'democratic rights for the Iraqi peoples' prominent in our agitation, in addition to our previous slogans such as 'no to war', 'stop the war'. Given that this war certainly involves, one way or another, a US conquest of Iraq, we are for troops out of Iraq in pretty much any likely immediate situation; "troops out" would become a prominent slogan in the event of mass popular resistance.

Other scenarios are possible. For example, at the other end of the range of possibilities, there might be an uprising against Saddam—prompted by, or seizing opportunities created by, US military intervention—which to one degree or another supports, or at any rate does not oppose, the US military presence. By "uprising" here we mean a real mass movement, not a military schism or palace coup.

We should build solidarity with such an uprising. We should say that the priority is solidarity with the uprising; the anti-war movement's priorities should be the same—i.e., put crudely, solidarity first, opposition to America second.

We would continue to oppose the US war and to preach no trust in or support for US militarism. Any genuine movement will threaten to go beyond what the US is prepared to accept. If it develops, at a certain point, even if starting off "pro-American", it will come into conflict with those troops, and our solidarity will entail agitating for troops out.

Specifically, now, both main forces in Iraqi Kurdistan, PUK and KDP, support the US war drive. We criticise that support. We point to the Turkish government's statement that it will tolerate no Kurdish separation from Iraq, and its smug assurance that "the Americans understand our position". The US would oppose, probably suppress, any militant Kurdish movement for self-determination. Yet we continue to support the Iraqi Kurds, even under PUK and KDP leadership, in their self-assertion against Baghdad.

No alliance with Islamic fundamentalism!

Joining up with fascists? No socialist would ever want to do that. Yet on 28 September the Stop The War Coalition, a coalition led by socialists, did something very close to that.

Stop The War co-organised the 28 September anti-war march with the Muslim Association of Britain. The MAB was given equal billing as demonstration organiser. The march, which would otherwise have said simply, to the US and UK governments, Don't Attack Iraq, had tacked onto it the MAB's Freedom For Palestine.

What is the Muslim Association of Britain? It is a particular political faction among Muslims in Britain. In its paper *Inspire* it openly identifies itself as a British offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, a big "Islamic fundamentalist" political movement in Arab countries. The Muslim Brotherhood are the moderate, reformist end of the Islamic fundamentalist spectrum. Their upfront public profile is built around welfare and religious education. They shun the brashness of the revolutionary Islamic fundamentalists (on the 28 September demonstration, MAB stewards restrained, or tried to keep inconspicuous, marchers from some of the shriller fundamentalist groups).

Yet the political aim is there: a state run under Islamic law, the population subjected to drastic rules based on the almost 1300-years-old Koran and reinvented traditions from over a thousand years ago.

Fascism is not the exact term for such politics, but there is a great deal in them that is similar to fascism. Where Islamic states have been installed, as in Iran, they suppress working-class organisation, socialist politics and civil rights as efficiently as fascism, and women's rights even more so.

Despite what the Anti-Nazi League says, not all fascists are Nazis. Mussolini's Italy was never as murderous as Hitler's Germany. Some fascist, or fascistic, parties in Europe today wear a moderate, peaceful face. The MAB are both "moderate"—and quasi-fascistic.

For sure most of the people mobilised by the MAB for the 28 September demonstration would have seen little more of it than its welfare-and-religion face. Many interpreted the MAB's vague slogan "Freedom for Palestine" as meaning a free Palestinian state alongside Israel, not the full MAB anti-Israel message, "Zionists out of Palestine", which was symbolised on the demonstration by a sticker saying "Keep Palestine Tidy" and showing a Star of David being binned.

To object to the MAB co-sponsorship is not to be hostile to ordinary Muslims who joined the march. Indeed, one reason for objecting to MAB co-sponsorship of anti-war activities is that it

will make those activities unwelcoming to anti-fundamentalist or secular Muslims who know who the MAB are, and to unreligious ex-Muslims.

Already on 28 September it looked as if there were fewer anti-fundamentalist Muslims there than on the demonstrations against the Afghan war. There were certainly fewer Jews and fewer socialists from Muslim countries. To say that those socialists, Jews, and anti-fundamentalist Muslims are smaller numbers than those MAB brought, and that maximum numbers are all-important, is short-sighted.

To fight the war effectively, by working-class mobilisation, we must campaign on clear principles of democracy and international solidarity. We cannot do that hand-in-hand with the Muslim Brotherhood or its co-thinkers.

The fundamental argument is one of principle. We reject "popular fronts"—extended, substantial political alliances of socialist or working-class forces with bourgeois parties. We are in politics in order to encourage and mobilise the working class to carve out and develop its own independent political and social identity. We are against tying the campaigns of socialists and working-class forces, on any question, to alliances which let bourgeois parties dictate and limit the agenda.

If the Liberal Democrats or the Scottish National Party were opposing the war, we would be against socialists co-organising the anti-war campaign with those parties. The far-right politics of the MAB only dramatise the general principle, which applies also to liberal and un-fascist bourgeois parties: no popular front.

The Stalinised Communist Parties of the mid-1930s originated the "Popular Front", saying that the working class should ally with "anti-fascist" bourgeois parties in order to beat the fascist mobilisations in countries like France and Spain. Its utter ineffectiveness as anti-fascism was demonstrated a few years later when CP leader Maurice Thorez recycled it as a call for an alliance with "patriotic" (i.e., anti-German, anti-Nazi) fascists against the German occupation of France!

In 1932 the German Stalinists had allied with the Nazis in a referendum campaign to overthrow the state government of Prussia. That was before the "Popular Front" was proclaimed as a slogan, but the logic was the same: seek whatever apparently powerful ally you can to combat the "main enemy" (in Germany, the imperialist system of the Treaty of Versailles).

We have argued the case in measured and "moderate" terms. But in fact the alliance on 28 September was an outrage against socialist principle and a betrayal of the socialists, democrats, workers and women in Muslim countries who are the victims of those with whose co-thinkers the pseudo-left in Britain chose to hold hands. It should not happen again. The German Stalinists in the "red-brown referendum" of 1932, or the French Stalinists in World War 2, are no model for socialists to follow.

Campaigning against the war

From AWL National Committee 16/02/03
It was an excellent mobilisation against the war on 15 February. The job now is to consolidate and build the movement.

We should answer the pro-war arguments made on the basis of solidarity with the Iraqi opposition by proposing solidarity with the peoples of Iraq against both war and Saddam and self-determination for all the peoples of the Middle East.

We must argue for the movement to be taken into the trade unions, and for trade-union against the war. We support walk-outs and other forms of industrial protest action in the event of war starting.

We call on all AWL activists to step up activity in the anti-war movement, and all branches to organise AWL meetings around the war. All AWL branches should discuss a strategy for their intervention into anti-war activity locally, and report to the EC. This should include taking No Sweat into the anti-war movement.

We will campaign for the unions to demand a recall TUC and a special conference of the Labour Party on the war question, and to convene an unofficial conference if the New Labour machine blocks them. We will campaign similarly through the unions for a

Labour Party leadership election, and for the Labour Left to stand a candidate.

We agitate for democracy; against Blair's drive to take Britain to war without even a parliamentary debate; for a referendum on war; for independent working-class political representation.

We should link up with the Campaign for Peace and Democracy in the US in order to launch a high profile international campaign to promote their statement "No to War, No to Saddam", and the politics behind it. This is an unprecedented chance to realign large parts of the left (particularly in academia and the new social movements) behind "third camp" politics. It should also be promoted more locally in trade unions, Socialist Alliances and anti-war groups.

Domestically, the focus of our campaign should be to try and encourage strikes, and other forms of direct action, in order to stop the war. We should agitate for a referendum, as this demand could give us more of a hearing amongst those who are new to politics and less confident about the power of the labour movement. But the main point that we should stress is that this multi-million strong, international movement has the power to stop the war by its own, self-organised activity if it roots itself in the labour movement.

[Text in italics was an "add" amendment "International campaign/strikes" from DN.]