

How close did we come to stopping the war?

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Note: what follows is a critical review of the notion that the anti-war movement came close to forcing the government to retreat from war alongside the USA. It also critically reviews the leadership role played by the national Stop the War Coalition (STWC) in the months leading up to the first air attack.

Within the STWC, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has filled the role vacated by the Communist Party, implementing a policy of alliances with left union officials and anti-war Labour MPs, with CND and other pacifists, and with the Muslim Association of Britain. This article focuses particularly on the alliance between STWC, the trade unions, and the Parliamentary peace camp.

We don't necessarily learn from our experiences. Sometimes we create myths. One such myth is "*the anti-war movement... came within a hair's breadth of stopping a major imperialist war*". This is how John Rees, a leader of the SWP and of the national STWC, expressed the STWC leadership's view in an article in the SWP journal **Socialist Review**. SR's editor, Lindsay German, is convenor of the STWC national steering committee.

Rees continued

"the critical moment came around the time of the second vote on the war in the House of Commons on Tuesday 18 March... Had Clare Short resigned alongside Robin Cook, thus ensuring the back-bench rebellion was even larger than it was, Britain might well have been forced out of the war."

An STWC press release on May 12th said the same:

"While the Stop the War Coalition welcomes Ms Short's resignation [which finally came on May 11th], we feel that she should have stood by her principles. If she had resigned at the same time as Robin Cook before the start of the war, there is a real possibility that Tony Blair would have been forced to abandon his war plans."

Blaming the war on Claire Short's failure to vote for the rebel amendment is a good example of what Lenin called "Parliamentary cretinism". But is there a kernel of truth? Or, when we chew it over, does it just leave a bad taste in the mouth?

What did the 139 rebel Labour MPs actually vote for on March 18th? Their amendment said, in full, that Parliament

'believes that the case for war against Iraq has not yet been established, especially given the absence of specific UN authorisation, but in the event hostilities do commence, pledges its total support for

Why did Britain go to war?

Part of the collective wisdom of STWC and the broader anti-war movement is that President Bush acts in the interests of big oil and big business. On the other hand, Britain's motives are the source of great confusion.

Understanding the motives of the British government and speaking the truth about its crimes, is, for the anti-war movement in Britain, our most important challenge. How can we calculate how close we came to stopping the war if we don't know why the Labour government was so keen to go to war?

So, why did Britain go to war?

Through centuries of colonialism and imperialism, and especially since World War 2, Britain's ruling families have amassed a huge empire of wealth in other peoples' countries, especially in the Middle East. This allows them to extract a large share of the super-profits arising from extremely low wages in oppressed nations across the world. Some of these super-profits are used to pay for the bombs and bullets used to put down rebellions; some are used to pacify the working class in the UK, helping pay for our pensions and social security.

This is, incidentally, why "welfare not warfare" can be a misleading slogan. It makes a popular point about the government's priorities... but war – against challenges to their rule and against rival imperialist powers – is not an irrational use of public money, it is the only way the imperialists can exercise their sacred right to feed off the natural resources and living labour of the oppressed peoples of the world.

If the UK's rulers retreated from waging wars to protect and enlarge their access to super-profits, they would have to attack our social wage even more aggressively. The more we force them to retreat from places like Iraq, the more they will attack us! We can only "stop" the war by bringing it home!

Since World War 2, most of UK imperialists' wealth has been protected not by the British but by the US Army – this is the essence of the "special relationship". Blair realised that if Britain backed out of war on Iraq this relationship would have been terminated. This is why the Labour government decided it had no choice but to go along with the audacious and extremely violent US strategy. Tony Blair did what Labour's politicians have consistently done for the last hundred years – supporting or themselves despatching troops around the world to whenever they are required to defend the interests of Britain's ruling families.

the British forces engaged in the Middle East, expresses its admiration for their courage, skill and devotion to duty, and hopes that their tasks will be swiftly concluded with minimal casualties on all sides'.

As if imperialist wars are stopped by words like these! This was, in fact, a pro-war amendment, misrepresented by the mass media and also by spokespersons for the Stop the War Coalition as an anti-war amendment. In a spectacular example of political opportunism, the “anti-war” amendment attempted to win the votes of pro-war MPs by offering only the most minor tactical differences with government policy.

We are told it failed “by a hair’s breadth” to stop the war – but this fake anti-war amendment, and the unprincipled, capitulationist politics it reflected, was highly successful in helping the government to disarm public opinion.

This weasel-worded amendment was an incredibly meagre result for all our lobbying and public pressure. It would have been far more useful to our cause if Parliament had been presented with an honest and principled motion and we had found out exactly which MPs would vote for it



The “great debate” in Parliament on March 18 – full of passion and riveting speeches, hyped by the BBC as a vindication of our great Parliamentary democracy – culminated months of public discussion between the “war camp”, led by PM Blair, and the “peace camp”, led by dissident labour MPs, union leaders, celebrities and members of the clergy. Both sides said war on Iraq was O.K. – the “war camp” was ready to go in straight away, while followers of the “peace camp” made their support for war conditional on a new UN resolution and proof that the Saddam regime possessed WMD.

At the close of the debate, Parliament divided between those who supported Bush and Blair’s unilateral war and those who preferred a more multi-lateral approach. The division reflected, at root, the two rival factions within British imperialism: those who wish to preserve the “special relationship” between US and British imperialism and those who support a closer alliance with European imperialist powers.

The famous back-bench rebellion would have needed to be twice as large to deprive Blair of his majority in the Parliamentary Labour Party and shake his government. As it turned out, Labour MPs’ fear of bringing down their government and losing their seats, and of plunging Britain into an unprecedented crisis, was more than enough to turn the “rebellion” into a ritual protest, a chance to let off steam.

Twenty-five supporters of the amendment were called to speak during the ten-hour debate. Not one of them denounced the genocidal sanctions or the destruction of 1991, or for that matter any of the crimes committed against the people of Iraq during the last century by the very Parliament they were standing up in. The most radical speeches attacked the US but not one antiwar MP even hinted that there is such a thing as British imperialism or discussed why there is a strategic alliance between Britain and the USA. Nearly all emphasised the need for the UN to endorse any war and promised to fall into line behind “our troops” as soon as the firing commenced.

30 hours after the House divided, before dawn on 20th March, a pre-dawn cruise missile attack on Baghdad signalled the beginning of the invasion of Iraq.

The main lesson we should draw from March 18th is not how close we came to stopping the war. It is that, on this question of questions, we can’t trust “our representatives in Parliament” to even debate the issue, let alone decide it. Decision over whether to go to war cannot be left in the hands of Parliament!

Who decides? Who rules?

The power to wage war is the most fundamental of all powers of state. This power was being objectively challenged by demonstrations of millions of people opposed to war on Iraq.

Subjectively, however, the mass demonstrations were ambiguous. For many, they were a giant lobby of Parliament, a last effort to make the government listen to us. They were either radicalised or demoralised by the experience. – the government is not ours to persuade! For those who already understood this, the huge demonstrations had a different meaning. They were a crucial part

of an effort to win and to mobilise a majority against the war; they challenged the legitimacy of any Parliamentary vote for war and pointed towards the creation of a new source of legitimacy, a new source of power, arising out of mass protests in the streets and out of popular committees in workplaces, campuses and neighbourhoods.

The anti-war movement has to deny the legitimacy of any Parliamentary decision to go to war! We don't accept that British imperialist troops have any right to attack and invade other nations, whatever the concocted pretext!

When the weapons inspectors' return to Iraq signalled that the countdown for war had begun, the STWC missed a great opportunity to campaign for a referendum on Britain's entry into the war. Tactics and circumstances may never again give us this possibility. But the referendum proposal is an example of the sort of political initiative which an anti-imperialist anti-war movement could take to reach out to the majority, who believe that *the will of the majority must prevail more than they believe in Parliament's right to defy it*.

The call for a referendum on the war is powerful because it directly addresses a central strategic question. How do we ensure that the will of the majority prevails? Even if division over war forced the government to resign and call an election, we can have no confidence that a new government would be any better than the old one.

In our Parliamentary system, the people cede sovereignty to elected representatives. Some people think that is a good thing, some think it a necessary evil, and some think it an unnecessary evil.

But we can all agree that on this: that the question of whether Britain should attack another sovereign nation, especially a weak and poor country with coveted natural resources, is too important to leave to the MPs. We therefore demand that Parliament returns our sovereignty to us on this issue so that we can decide. The politicians can try to persuade us that we should go to war, but they would have one vote like the rest of us.

The million-strong demonstrations could have served as a springboard for a campaign to get a majority of all voters in the country to sign a petition demanding a referendum and defining its wording: "Should Britain go to war on _____, Yes or No." The campaign could have extended the enfranchise to children and young people who want to register their opposition to the government's war policy.

Simultaneously, the STWC should have asked MPs who support the STWC to sponsor a resolution in Parliament calling for the withdrawal of military forces, an end to the occupation, massive and unconditional humanitarian aid, and whatever else

the situation called for. In other words, an anti-war resolution.

We should campaign for a referendum because we are serious that we really want one. I have no illusions. It will take a titanic struggle to force the imperialists to surrender their most important power of state – the power to declare war – to the people.

On the other hand, if we believe we came within a Rizla paper of stopping the war in the famous March 18 rebellion against the government's war policy, next time the government wants to go to war we will be more inclined to once again put our faith and our fate into the hands of the Labour left, liberals and a few Tory mavericks.

Parliament and the STWC

STWC statements and press releases, from the return of the UN weapons inspectors to the outbreak of war, were careful not to contradict or in any way antagonise those who were arguing that evidence of WMD or a new UN resolution would be grounds for a just war.

You can study the STWC's statements and press releases yourselves – they're all there on the website <http://stopwar.org.uk/> – or you can take my word for it that the following quotes are not taken out of context and are quite representative of all the STWC has had to say.

A representative example of how STWC leaders and their friends in Parliament were trying to focus our anti-war pressure was provided in a letter, signed by various MPs, CND chair Carol Naughton, and by Lindsay German on behalf of the STWC, which was sent to Tony Blair in December 2002 to mark UN Human Rights Day:

'We call upon you as Prime Minister to give a clear undertaking not to engage in military action against Iraq without the explicit authority of the United Nations and without an explicit decision of the House of Commons to do so'.

This was the unwavering political line pursued by the STWC leadership throughout the crisis. On 28 January, an STWC press release declared:

"Stop the War Convenor Lindsey German [responding to Weapons Inspectors' Report presented by Hans Blix to the UN Security Council] said today: "There is no justification from these reports for the US and Britain to go to war. The reports confirm that no weapons have been found and there is no evidence of any nuclear weapons programmes. Furthermore, Hans Blix has said that Iraq has, at least partially co-operated."

Like the December letter, this statement implies that, were WMD to be found, the US and Britain would be justified in going to war. It also quotes, approvingly, UN chief weapons inspector Hans

Blix saying Iraq was “at least partially cooperating” with his sovereignty-trampling attempts to disarm a country facing imminent imperialist attack. The press statement implied that the STWC endorsed the UN weapons inspectors, thought that they should be allowed to do their job, and that Iraq should co-operate with them. Defenders of this type of opportunist politics might argue that Lindsay German didn’t mean to imply such things, that she was being deliberately ambiguous. But, on these crucial questions – the very ones on which the imperialists, including those in the “peace camp”, were successfully confusing public opinion – we need clarity!

STWC press releases addressed this false debate – whether there were already sufficient grounds for war, or whether more evidence of WMD was necessary – just once more before the outbreak of war and once again in the five months since. During this period, no leaflet or other publication of the STWC stated any view on this contrived question, which was at the heart of the government’s attempts to neutralise opposition to the war.

On 6th February an unsigned statement responded to US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation to the United Nations:

“The evidence presented was flimsy at best ...but even if every word was true it would not provide a justification for war. Any genuine evidence of Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction could easily be handed over to UN inspectors for verification.”

The STWC press office was by now getting very adept at speaking to two audiences at once! This one was written very carefully, so as not to alienate anyone who thinks that Colin Powell’s evidence, if handed over to UN inspectors and verified by them, would justify war.

On 26th February 2003, the House of Commons peace camp presented the following amendment (122 Labour MPs alongside 77 other Lib/Dems and Conservative MPs voted for it):

This House ... reaffirms its endorsement of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441... supports the Government's continuing efforts in the United Nations to disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction; but finds the case for military action against Iraq as yet unproven ...

The 26 February so-called revolt was really a display of cowardice, of unprincipled and opportunist politics, in which most of the Labour rebels who spoke helped Blair hammer the idea into everyone’s skulls that “we” have the right to attack and invade Iraq, even if we may disagree on the circumstances that must pertain.

The STWC lent credibility to this charade in a national press statement issued two days later:

The largest revolt against any government ... 122 Labour MPs voted against the government's plans to attack Iraq. This is a substantial development in the anti-war movement and comes on the back of the demonstration on the 15th of February

It continued:

MPs from all sides are beginning to feel the pressure of public opinion, which is firmly against the war. Below is a list of MPs who voted against the government. If you do not see your MP's name on the list please write/fax/phone or e-mail them with your opinions on this unjust war.

So long as your MP voted for this pusillanimous amendment, they’re on our side, the pressure’s off.

The STWC’s next significant statement on the issue of WMD came in an unsigned press release issued on 15th April:

“Without the discovery of WMD, there can be no possible legal justification for attacking Iraq. ... Apologists for war are already trying to play down the significance of this issue. But it remains of vital importance, both morally and politically.”

Again, the implication is that, were WMD to be discovered, the war would have been justified. The STWC statement says this issue is of “vital importance” – yet it is actually a complete irrelevance, a red herring, since whether or not Iraq possessed or possesses WMD, the US-UK war on Iraq would remain an imperialist war of aggression.

Nowhere did the STWC argue that Iraq had a right to defend itself, that the UN weapons inspections were a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty, that their purpose was not so much to disarm the Iraqi regime as to disarm worldwide opposition to the war. Nowhere did any statement by the STWC explain that no UN resolution could legitimise war on Iraq; no-one pointed out that “anti-war” MPs who said otherwise were also saying, by implication, that the 1991 destruction and the sanctions slaughter since (which were authorised by UN Security Council resolutions, and which have killed 1.5 million Iraqis) were legitimate.

How does this capitulation to social democracy and imperialism square with the STWC leaders’ radical, fiery anti-American speeches to anti-war crowds? The answer, I’m afraid, is that with sufficient cynicism, anything can be squared.

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Opinion polls between the February 15th demonstration and the beginning of the war on 20th March showed a majority opposed Blair’s policy of joining with the US come-what-may. However, a clear majority said that they would support a war if proof of WMD were found or if a UN resolution authorising war was obtained. And who can blame them, when every time they listened to the news

or opened a newspaper, this pro-war stance was being legitimised as the voice of the anti-war movement?

Pretending that faint-hearts in the pro-war camp, or those who defend the death by sanctions of 1.5 million Iraqis since 1991 but who have tactical disagreements with Blair's war strategy were part of the anti-war movement, STWC leaders were also able to pretend that there already was an anti-war majority, that we had already won the argument. Lindsay German even stated, to the January 2003 STWC, that the majority of the Blair's cabinet were anti-war!



The reality was that there was an anti-war minority and also a pro-war minority; a large section of the population were in between, trying to make sense of the contrived media debate.

We were experiencing a tide of support but were still a long way from winning a majority to oppose the imperialist war. Enormous peaceful demonstrations, national and in every locality, are of irreplaceable importance in our battle to win a majority. If we gather one million people together in London, we have the ear of twenty million people. They gave us the chance to speak directly to the unconvinced majority, to go to the heart of the government's lies, to tell the truth, to wrestle with the liberal opinion-formers and wage a battle to change the terms of the debate in which the peace camp is represented by people saying "I'll vote for war if you give me a UN fig-leaf to hide behind".

However, instead of sending a clear message, the platform of our anti-war rally was turned into a catwalk where wolves flaunted the latest fashions in sheep's clothing, chief among them Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy, whose reactionary, pro-imperialist speech was given much prominence in media reports. Kennedy's presence on the February 15th anti-war platform was symbolic of the enormous political pressure and influence that pro-imperialist politicians exert on the anti-war movement.

But we should not get hung up on Charles Kennedy. Most "anti-war" Labour MPs and union

leaders were saying the same things. I'm not even arguing that they should necessarily be excluded from anti-war platforms. I am arguing that instead of capitulating to these fakers, the STWC have our own very clear policy. Instead of giving them free reign to spread their pro-war poison, we should not hesitate to contradict them and criticise them. If the STWC had followed this course, we would have seen how keen the likes of Charles Kennedy would have been to associate themselves with the anti-war movement.

The STWC and the unions

Characteristically, opportunism walks hand-in-hand with ultra-leftism. The self-deluding estimate of where we were in the battle for public opinion fed into ultra-left policies and proposals. If we already had the majority behind us, then it was possible to move beyond mass peaceful protests to "direct action", by "stopping the city", blocking motorways and over-running military bases.

It also led to a wildly optimistic assessment of the possibility of widespread industrial action against the war.

Since the beginning the crisis, the one sector of the people with the social power to stop the war, the working class, has stood largely on the sidelines. Many individual workers have taken part in anti-war protests, but the unions have barely moved. Of course, those small-scale actions that did take place were very significant. The refusal of the Motherwell railworkers to move ordnance bound for Iraq was inspirational, but it was also exceptional.

Left union leaders made fiery speeches and passed resolutions, but they did little to stimulate debate among the ranks, let alone throw their union's weight behind the struggle. When the war broke out, they ran for cover. The left leaders of the Fire Brigades Union even called off their industrial action over pay because they didn't want to tie up troops on strike-breaking duty when they should be away killing Iraqis.

Given their prominence on demo platforms, we are entitled to examine how hard these left union leaderships are pulling, and in exactly what direction. One of these left union leaders is Billy Hayes, General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union. He has spoken on the platforms of many anti-war demonstrations and rallies. What he says is quite representative of the rest. I will focus on Billy Hayes and the CWU because the CWU is my union. I hope that members of other unions will undertake a similar review of their union's record.

Since the beginning of the war crisis, members of the CWU have received numerous letters through our doors from the union leadership concerning

industrial issues, but nothing about the war. The CWU leadership has sent speakers to address branch meetings around the country, but not about the war. Keynote speeches are made from anti-war platforms... but, within the union, the impending war remained strictly 'any other business'.

From September 2002, when the return of weapons inspectors signalled that the countdown to war on Iraq had begun, until March 2003, its eve-of-war issue, the monthly CWU journal the *Voice* carried just one article on the war. Its November 2002 issue said:

Billy Hayes was one of the main speakers at the huge anti Iraq war demonstration held in London on September 28th, the eve of the Labour Party Conference. Speaking to over 150,000 people gathered in Hyde Park, Billy reiterated the union's policy over the threat of war.

"We are totally opposed to any unilateral attack on Iraq," he insisted. "No action should be taken without the full backing of the United Nations and even then it must be a final resort."

He urged all the parties to do everything in their power to find another solution than military intervention. "Wars do not solve problems," he said.

Pure pro-war poison, with a pacifist sugar-coating. Along with a reference to Iraq's humanitarian crisis, that was all... until the March issue, which ran a report on the giant February 15th demonstration. It said:

February 15 will live on in people's minds ... the sheer scale of the marches in London and Glasgow left the Government in no doubt about the public's deep opposition to war...

The protesters expressed their collective loathing of war; their rejection of America adopting the role of world policeman and their distaste at being part of the military wing of the US oil lobby.

Billy Hayes told the protestors: "We cannot accept that it is right to turn Iraq, or other states, into puppet regimes of the United States, Britain or any other country."

"People throughout the world have experienced colonialism and imperialism. Today they see two of the richest countries in the world preparing one-way slaughter against an already impoverished country."...

Billy, along with the leaders of other unions, also highlighted TUC rules which state a special congress must be called to enable the movement to do "everything in its power" to prevent the outbreak of war.

The CWU's antiwar stance had clearly hardened since autumn 2002. Or had Billy Hayes just stepped up the rhetoric for the occasion? I don't

want to be accused of nit picking, but why does he only talk about the "US oil lobby"? What's happened to the fact that two of the four largest oil companies in the world are UK-owned? How many of the 1.5 million on the February 15th demo knew this? Why didn't Billy Hayes or someone tell them?

By now, a pattern was emerging. The radical rhetoric is turned up when addressing anti-war protests, but turned way down when addressing members of his union. In his keynote speech to the CWU's June 2003 Annual Conference Billy Hayes said:

"The victims in Iraq, and among the Armed Services, are going to suffer for a long time yet and the world looks evermore insecure. We can't buy into a Bush led crusade against whoever the US business lobby next targets: Iran, North Korea."

He continued, *"We expect the British government to play the part of peacemakers."* Unfortunately, this is not sarcasm. He really meant it.

This is not taken out of context, because there was no context. That's all he had to say about the war. He made no mention of the imperialist occupation. And again, what about Britain's 'business lobby'? Why aren't they part of the picture?

Despite the excellence and accuracy of Galloway's denunciation of the war and occupation of Iraq, and his unconditional defence of the right of Iraqis to resist, he also falters on this crucial question. In a speech to a packed theatre in Sheffield on July 1st, Galloway stated (I paraphrase) *"Blair sent British troops to war in order to win big profits for US corporations"*. Tony Benn repeats the same falsehood – and it is a falsehood. Britain's generals and politicians are concerned in the first, second and third place with their own profits. The idea that they are selflessly waging war on behalf of US capitalists mutilates reality and renders it incomprehensible.

These are the best, what about the rest?

Social democracy, on the PLP left and in the union HQs, will do anything to avert attention from Britain's imperialist oil companies, banks and other corporations whose interests are being served by the British Army in Iraq. This is curious, because these same politicians and union leaders are not slow to criticise Labour's subservience to big business when it comes to privatisation, union rights and other domestic issues. What is the explanation for this curious contrast? It's simple. Telling the truth about British imperialism, explaining the connections between the war abroad and the war at home, would rock the boat too much.

The SWP and the anti-war movement

After listening to another eloquent and well-received denunciation of the US by John Rees at a Sheffield rally, I asked a local SWP leader why he hadn't said a word about British imperialism. "He's speaking on behalf of the coalition" was the response.

Indeed. But who in the coalition does not want this question to be addressed? It's true, there are many individuals who want to oppose war but do not want to oppose imperialism, but they can be rapidly won over if the issues are honestly debated and not covered up. The main social force that is hostile to anti-imperialism, that wants no mention of British imperialism but wants instead to divert the movement into anti-Americanism, is social democracy, here in the form of Labour MPs and union officials.



I am not opposed to the presence of liberals or social democrats in the STWC! I just don't think we should pander to them, and I think that's what has been happening.

I'm not discussing tactics in this article, because there's too many principles which need standing back on their feet. I'm not against alliances, just opportunist alliances.

It's not just that Billy Hayes and his friends are allowed to get up and make their pro-imperialist speeches, but – as we have illustrated with our analysis of STWC statements – the STWC doesn't say anything which might contradict them.

The STWC must speak with its own voice. Because the war is imperialist, the anti-war must be anti-imperialist; this means drawing a line right through the middle of the Parliamentary peace camp, although I'm convinced there will only be a tiny few of them that will break with imperialism.

The leadership of the national STWC is formed by a bloc between the SWP and the leaderships of a number of left-led trade unions. At my distance from it, I am not able to perceive the no doubt important contributions made by individuals and smaller groups.

This article examines the political basis of the SWP – left social democrat alliance. It does not look at other alliances making up the broader anti-war movement. The role of CND and the peace movement needs to be added to the picture. The Muslim Association of Britain is a strategic ally of the STWC within the broader anti-war movement than it is an integral part of the STWC. The MAB plays a co-ordinating role within the Asian and Middle Eastern communities. On key questions – the imperialist occupation of Iraq and the right of Iraqis to resist, Palestine, the presence of imperialist troops in any Arab country, the genocidal character of UN sanctions on Iraq, the lies and deceit surrounding "weapons of mass destruction", the necessity for national sovereignty to be respected – the MAB is pulling the anti-war movement forward. On each of these questions, the left union leaders have acted as if it is not their job to challenge the foreign policy of the Labour government.

The SWP is often charged with trying to impose its own politics on the coalition. I think this is wide of the mark. More accurate would be to say that, in return for adapting the political message of the STWC to what is acceptable to left social democracy, the SWP has been assigned a large measure control over the political direction and running of the national coalition.

The result of the SWP's leadership of the STWC is that we have a double problem: extreme flexibility of principles on the one hand, and a permanent institution, the "Stop the War Coalition" on the other. Things should be the other way around. We should firmly and openly stand by our principles, while being prepared to abandon organisational schemas, to re-invent and re-launch the movement as often as necessary so as to really include new sectors of the population.

John Rees, in the SR article quoted at the beginning of this article, went on to say:

"when the war began, and this is obviously going to be the case in a belligerent country, the size of the organised core is critical to being able to withstand the pressure of chauvinistic propaganda. So how can the Stop the War Coalition strengthen its core? One obvious solution is that the supporters of the organised left grow in numbers. The more the socialist organisations grow the greater the clarity and mobilising capacity of the whole movement grows."

In other words, the SWP must go on a recruiting drive. Fair enough. They are entitled to their re-

cruciating drives. But what are they recruiting to? If I thought the SWP was a revolutionary party, I would ask to join it, but their response to the charade of opposition to the war in Parliament shows how far they are from Karl Liebknecht.¹

Rees says *“the size of the organised core is critical to [the anti-war movement] being able to withstand the pressure of chauvinistic propaganda”*. He is wrong – even more important than the size of the organised left is its political clarity. When the “organised left” is all over the place about imperialism, as it is, then the bigger the organised left, the bigger the obstacle in the way of the anti-war movement becoming what it must become – a conscious, uncompromising struggle against imperialism and its inevitable wars, an ally worthy of the fighting peoples of Iraq, Cuba, Palestine, Colombia, and everywhere else where people are resisting the brutal exploitation and barbaric violence which makes “western democracy” possible.

Imperialism and the anti-war movement

We do not decide the basis for our unity; it is the real world and the struggle itself that determines what we must do. Because the war is an imperialist war, the anti-war movement must be, or must become, anti-imperialist. Not just objectively, but consciously.

In this war, language and the meaning of words are also fields of battle. Marx said “the ruling ideas in society are the ideas of the ruling class”; through their academia, politicians, media, clergy – what we could call “official opinion” – our capitalist rulers control the definitions of words like “democracy”, “peace”, “terrorism”; while other words – like “imperialism” and “exploitation” – are left blank.

There are two problems with the term “anti-imperialism”. First, the anti-war movement has only just been born, and extremely partial and superficial definitions of imperialism hold sway, and these crucially fail to include British imperialism in their definition. The second problem is that “anti-imperialist” is a negative term, a negation. This is unfortunate, because anti-imperialism has an extremely positive and concrete content:

First, we recognise that the governments which wield power in the US and UK are not “our” gov-

ernments; they are the source of the problem. It is their determination to continue exploiting, subverting and dominating the oppressed nations of the Middle East and elsewhere which is the root cause of poverty, terrorism, war. We don’t advise them to be “patient”, as Peter Kilfoyle MP did when proposing speech for the so-called rebel amendment on March 18th. We denounce their violations of national sovereignty, their ruthless violence in the cause of plunder. We apply “an injury to one is an injury to all” to all our sisters and brothers. To all who desire peace, we explain, “end the philosophy of plunder and the philosophy of war will be ended as well”.¹

Second, we identify with the peoples of Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq and all the other nations that are being destroyed by imperialism. They are the “we” that we are part of. They are our sisters and brothers. Before we are a peace movement, we are a solidarity movement.

“Anti-war” is also a negative term. It, too, has problems. First, it is inaccurate, since only the pacifists are against all wars. And unlike “anti-imperialist”, “anti-war” does not contain concrete political content but instead a desire for peace. However, “peace is not the absence of war but the presence of justice”, said Martin Luther King. And if there ain’t no justice, I don’t want peace.

“The anti-war movement must be anti-imperialist” ... this must be interpreted in a dialectical way and not in a formal and dogmatic way. Many people want to oppose the UK government’s war policy but have yet to draw conclusions about the nature of the UK government. Many sympathise with the victims of war and oppression, but have yet to become conscious of our common interests in waging a common fight against our common oppressor. We should not erect barriers to working with people who have yet to come to agree with us. But we have to discover the truth and we have to tell the truth, in particular about why Britain has gone to war. Only this will, in the end, win respect and win the argument.

We are united not by our lowest common denominator, but by our common interests in opposing imperialism and its inevitable and ever-more destructive wars. We will only stop war when we are strong enough and smart enough to disarm the imperialists. To move forward, we must strive to achieve an ever deeper and more conscious unity, as we learn from experiences and as the movement is transformed by the arrival of youth and working people of all nationalities.

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¹ On the eve of World War One Karl Liebknecht famously led a real rebellion in the Reichstag, Germany’s Parliament, challenging his “own” imperialist government’s war policy and the leaders of social democracy who loyally protected it. The murder of Liebknecht and fellow revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg was ordered by social democrat leaders in 1919.