

# Social Justice or War

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THE WORLD-SHATTERING TERRORIST crime of September 11; three weeks of military buildup; then came, inevitably, the United States bombing of Afghanistan, the beginning of an open-ended campaign with unknown and incalculable consequences.

This war is one of spectacle as much as of crimes against humanity: When hijacked civilian airliners were flown as ersatz Cruise missiles into the World Trade Center, the murderers' intent was clearly to make the deaths of thousands of human beings the most-watched live television event in history. And when George W. Bush took the airwaves October 7 to announce the bombing, the timing was symbolic media perfection, ten minutes before kickoff of the early Sunday afternoon games of the National Football League.

There are many reasons to oppose the U.S. war. There is the fact that this war will kill, by bombing or starvation, many more innocent civilians than died in the September 11 attack. There is the fact that the Bush administration already claims the "right" to expand the war to any other country it chooses to target. There is the entire proven hideous result of twenty years of U.S. meddling in Afghanistan, to say nothing of the Gulf War. Is there any reason why the peoples of the Middle East should trust Washington's intentions this time? And why should we?

Since that appalling morning of September 11 there has been very little good news. But there was one striking positive note: Almost immediately, an anti-war movement began growing in many cities and dozens of campuses in response to the Bush administration's military preparation.

The first national anti-war mobilizations on September 29, in Washington D.C., San Francisco and Los Angeles, drew a combined turnout in the neighborhood of 30,000. Hundreds of peace vigils took place on campuses and in communities across the country, spontaneously crystallizing around the themes of sorrow and solidarity with the victims of the monstrous crime of September 11, combined with opposition to reprisals for the sake of revenge. "Our Grief Is Not a War Cry," was a sign that captured an important mood.

Internationally, the response was much greater: 100,000 anti-war demonstrators in Rome, large actions in many cities of Europe. And of course, throughout the Middle East the opposition to a U.S. war runs very strong, including among tens of millions of people who loathe Osama bin Laden and the Taliban—and that opposition has played a major part in forcing the U.S. administration to limit the scope of its war ambitions, at least in the short run. Make no mistake, this is and will remain a popular war, given the enormity of the September 11 crime and the horrible character of the Taliban regime. Even so, early attempts in some of the more rabid sectors of the mass media (e.g. the New York Post) to promote popular war fever fell surprisingly flat. Despite great support for the government's military preparations, the sentiment has also been diffusing through the public that something, somehow must be done to address Palestinian, Arab and Muslim grievances, even if these are only vaguely understood.

## A Critically Important Movement

There was reason to fear that September 11 might blow away the growing global justice movement, at least for a time. The movement did suffer a sharp setback, obviously, when the labor movement

withdrew from the Mobilization for Global Justice's planned protest against the International Monetary Fund/World Bank (even before the IMF/WB end-of-September meetings were canceled).

Yet far from collapsing, many of those same forces opposing sweatshops, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the destructive rampages of the International Monetary Fund have gone into action around the threefold demand: No War; Stop Attacks on Muslim and Arab Americans; No Surrender of Democratic Rights at Home.

We at Against the Current warmly welcome the rapid appearance of this new anti-war movement. We consider ourselves part of this struggle and are committed to building it. It reflects not only an impressive solidity of consciousness among social justice activists, but also the encouraging absence of a mass war psychosis or chauvinistic frenzy among broad layers of the U.S. population, compared to what might have been feared.

This is not to minimize the ugliness of the assaults or death threats perpetrated against Arab, Muslim, Sikh or other immigrants within less than two weeks. (See "List of Racist Attacks Across the Country Since 9/11," compiled by Anura Idupuganti, <http://nyc.indymedia.org/front.php3>, September 20, for an initial listing of 50 incidents. Hundreds are reported by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.)

But with only a few exceptions these hate crimes are unorganized, carried out by individuals rather than mobs, and universally condemned. Whether the perpetrators will be energetically sought and prosecuted, of course, remains to be seen.

### **Mass Murders Here and There**

The September 11 death toll at the World Trade Center alone represents the rough equivalent of three dozen Oklahoma City Federal Building bombings all at once—and like Timothy McVeigh's work of home-grown fascist-inspired terror, the September 11 attacks were designed to kill the maximum number of people as much as for spectacular effect.

Yet from the first day the anti-war movement has also grasped the reality that in the name of justice and rooting out terrorism, the United States government is fully capable of perpetrating destruction on a scale many times greater still—and that the vast majority of victims in Afghanistan or Iraq or other targeted countries will be just as innocent as the thousands of office and restaurant workers, rescue personnel and other ordinary people crushed or incinerated in New York.

And it is not only an unimaginable number of lives that are at stake. Also at risk is historical and political memory: our society's ability to understand how and why a network of totalitarian-religious fanatical groupings, which almost certainly lies behind the September 11 crime, grew from a core recruited and assembled by the Central Intelligence Agency for the anti-Soviet Afghanistan war in the 1980s.

There's more: How this externally-based-and-funded fanaticism took over a ruined Afghanistan with the sponsorship of pro-American governments in Pakistan. How the social base of these forces has grown, from Algeria to Egypt to Palestine to the subcontinent all the way to Indonesia, out of the economic ruin and humiliation wrought by the institutions of global capitalism.

How many other issues have been buried? As Rudolph Giuliani is crowned the grand healer of New York, blocked only by term limits from achieving mayor-for-life status, who now speaks of his cynical and racist advocacy of the cops who murdered Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond? What organ of elite opinion will now be so divisive as to recall that the president about to lead America's "crusade" (sic) against international terror was actually elected by no one?

The new anti-war movement, which must be linked inextricably with issues of international and domestic social justice, is a force to keep memory as well as hope alive. Further, from its very inception it must be an anti-racist movement in action as well as sentiment.

It is important to emphasize the defense of vulnerable communities as a crucial activity for this grassroots movement. To be sure, Bush, Giuliani and the media elites are themselves denouncing violence or harassment directed against Muslim and Middle Eastern communities. But the establishment's message is at the very best mixed.

Private vigilante violence is officially discouraged, while simultaneously the systematic stop-and-search of dark-skinned or Arab or turban-wearing people at airports, train stations and other venues is defended as official security policy. The signal will inevitably penetrate into a deeply racist culture that tolerance and diversity are to be taken as simply politically-correct phrases, but that harassment, intimidation and violence are in fact condoned.

Under these conditions, the new anti-war movement must attempt at the local level to respond with vigils and solidarity actions, including defense guards where necessary, whenever individuals, homes, businesses or religious institutions come under assault or threat.

It is also essential for the movement, both as a matter of principle and to win the fight for popular opinion, to sharply distinguish between technical security and violations of civil and democratic rights.

Searches of luggage at airports, or even of coolers at sports events, are undoubtedly a drag and may even be excessive, but are not inherently anti-democratic. Picking out people of an ethnic or racial profile to be arbitrarily thrown off airplanes, or subjected to intense humiliating interrogation or detention, is a vile abuse of state authority that, if tolerated by the public, will inevitably lead not to better safety but rather to even greater abuses. Even worse is the threat to deport people on the basis of secret or non-existent "evidence" of suspicious associations.

## **An Agenda for Justice**

Apart from this, a complex agenda confronts the movement, within which two issues in particular stand out.

First, quickly, the movement must not only assemble opposition to military attacks on Afghanistan, but clearly demonstrate that the U.S. government's potential second-stage war objectives—such as a final full-scale confrontation with Iraq, or allowing the Israeli military to unleash its full might to crush the Palestinian population—are unacceptable to the majority of the U.S. population.

Popular opinion does matter, particularly at a moment when the elites themselves are having so much trouble working out precise political and military objectives. The war is popular given its image as an act of legitimate self-defense. But while a very large majority of people support military action to "uproot the terrorist network" or "punish the protectors of bin Laden," such action carries a potential for a major regional war involving not only terror networks but an attempt to reshape the entire configuration of the Middle East.

There is no support for such an adventure.

Second, the movement must confront the question, "how to defeat terrorism?"

We must address this issue, not because we accept the U.S. government's claim to be "fighting terrorism," but because it is the question on the public's mind. "Something does have to be done,"

people say, and of course they are right.

Fundamentally the movement must insist there is one and only one answer: social justice. That is not because in itself, redressing injustices will cause terrorist cults to disappear—and it would be naive and self-defeating to make such an argument—but rather because they can never be decisively defeated and smashed in societies that are themselves reduced to ruin.

The sanctions against Iraq—which kill almost as many Iraqi children, every single month, as the numbers killed in the World Trade Center—are a crime against humanity which must immediately end.

The 34-year Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—which has made the lives of the Palestinian population physically, economically, socially and emotionally unbearable—must be stopped.

More broadly, the social misery in which religious fanaticism gains a hearing is inexorably the product of a neoliberal capitalist world order. It is impossible to defeat the first without confronting the second.

The debts that crush Third World nations; so-called “free trade” arrangements that enrich corporate agribusiness while ruining peasant producers; the Structural Adjustment programs that enable and indeed compel governments to impose starvation on their own people; all these must be swept away as a matter of global human survival.

When the United States and world capitalism succeed in imposing economic structures and dictatorships that destroy secular options, labor movements, left-wing parties, nationalist and even liberal forces, it is only to be expected that wiping out one Osama bin Laden will only end up creating ten more of the same.

Finally, we must insist that the United States has no right to appoint itself the world policeman. What appears as an act of self- defense against a terrorist crime on U.S. soil, in fact is inevitably a continuation of a never-ending imperial campaign to control the peoples of the world.

In this context, the point must be reiterated that it was in the name of another great “crusade” against an Evil Empire that the United States aided, abetted and enabled Osama bin Laden—yes, and also Jonas Savimbi in Angola, Pinochet in Chile, Suharto in Indonesia and even Saddam Hussein in Iraq, an array of official and unofficial death squads and drug runners from Lebanon to Central America, and the likes of Orlando Bosch, the mastermind of the in- flight explosion of a Cuban passenger airliner (October, 1976) and probably other still-unrevealed atrocities.

To end international terrorism, in short, it would be an excellent first step for the United States to stop sponsoring it.

**The Editors, ATC**

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