

Do You Remember The First Time?

Resistance To The 1991 Gulf Massacre

No War But The Class War

2003

I can't remember a worse time... On 16 January 1991, the United States, with support from Britain and the other Coalition powers, launched a massive military attack on Iraq. The so-called "Gulf War" was in actual fact a one sided slaughter. By the time it officially finished on 28 February 1991, an estimated quarter of a million people had been killed, most of them Iraqi civilians and conscripts.

For most people in the West, the war was just a TV spectacle. As some graffiti in Sheffield put it "Hi-Tec War kills and maims, but the media gives us video games". The depressing lack of a movement able to seriously confront, let alone stop the massacre has to be acknowledged.

The limited anti-war movement that did emerge failed to sustain itself. With a few exceptions, most of those active in it implicitly accepted the spectacle's definition of the war. Once the bombs stopped falling and CNN stopped broadcasting from Baghdad, the war was declared to be over. Troops returned home, and radicals moved on to the next campaign. But the war was far from over.

The imposition of UN sanctions, backed up by the threat of military force, has killed more people than Operation Desert Storm. Much of the bombed out civilian infrastructure remains unrepaired as sanctions block the equipment necessary to repair it. Water-borne diseases are endemic, malnutrition common, and medical treatments scarce, some of them subject to sanctions. In 1996, aid agencies reported that one third of children suffered from stunted growth or impaired intelligence due to lack of protein. Truly as Brecht put it "their peace finishes off what their war has left over."

Despite the failures of the anti-war movement, we cannot allow it to be erased from history, especially now that airborne slaughter is back on the agenda and a new movement is needed. Across the world, millions of people took part in demonstrations, strikes, sabotage, desertion and other acts of resistance. This is not a comprehensive list of all opposition last time around. It doesn't include the massive movement of resistance in Iraq itself, which needs its own pamphlet. Nor does it include any critical analysis of the politics of the different movements opposing the war.

The aim here is simply to give a flavour of the range of different tactics that were used in order to inform attempts at resistance to Bill and Tony's new military adventure in the Gulf.

Strikes

In several countries workers went on strike against the war, or against attacks on their working conditions resulting from the war.

In Bangladesh there was a one day general strike in September 1990 protesting against the despatch of Bangladeshi troops to the Gulf. At least 50 people were injured when police used steel-tipped batons against demonstrators. In Pakistan there was a general strike in February against the US bombing of Iraq. Palestinians in the city of Jericho held a three day strike in mourning for the 300 killed in the US attack on the Baghdad bomb shelter. Militants defied the Israeli imposed curfew to call for action through their megaphones.

In the first week of the war, more than 2 million Spanish workers stopped work for two hours demanding an end to the war and the recall of three Spanish warships. In Germany draft resisters forced to work as hospital orderlies went on strike for three days in opposition to the war, and in Italy, 100,000 workers and 30,000 students stopped work on 22 February.

Students took action in many places. In Turkey, 70% of universities were hit by anti-war boycotts in November 1990. At a school in suburban Berkley (near Detroit), 30 high school students were suspended after staging a sit-in. On 22 January there was an anti-war strike at School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Students there organised against intimidatory security measures and racism against Arab students. One Egyptian student told of how "On the tube a guy looked at me and said 'Iraqi bastard'. And you get 'bloody Arab'"

Dockers and seafarers were often at the forefront of action, perhaps not surprisingly given the key role of ships in moving troops and supplies to the Gulf. The departure of French ground forces for Saudi Arabia was delayed when seafarers on a car-ferry requisitioned to carry troops demanded danger money before agreeing to sail. The ferry left Corsica after this dispute was resolved, but it was held up for another 12 hours on 21 September on the dockside at Toulon, by workers opposed to the war. In February, dockers in Marseilles refused to load containers full of military materials destined for the Gulf.

In Japan, the shipment of supplies to US troops was delayed when seafarers refused to leave port without an additional 30% on base salaries to compensate for the military nature of the voyage. Spanish seafarers stopped a passenger ship from sailing to pick up French troops and take them to the Gulf; they refused to let it sail unless its crew had volunteered and were getting increased wages for sailing into a danger zone. The Spanish government had chartered the ship as part of its support for the war.

Even where strike action was not explicitly against the war, it often threatened the war effort. Early in August 4000 Turkish maintenance workers on US-run bases, including 1600 at Inchirlik, the main US air base, went on strike over pay. This threatened to hamper any plans for an air strike against Iraq- a military source stated "It is difficult to see how any major operation could be launched in current circumstances". The strikers were ordered back to work by the government who declared that the strike was "harmful to national security".

In December a strike wave spread through Turkey, starting with 50,000 miners in Zonguldak. Along with wives and supporters they set off in January to march on the capital Ankara demanding a 600% wage rise. 200 were arrested when riot police stopped the march. In Bursa, 30,000 in different industries went on strike, and 105,000 engineers went on strike from 26 December. 10,000 workers in the paper industry came out on strike in January. The strike wave even spread to east London where 200 Turkish and Kurdish workers went on strike in support of an illegal one day general strike at home. 55 people were arrested in clashes with the Metropolitan Police.

The Turkish government responded with a two-month ban on strikes, imposed on the grounds of the war effort. Despite this ban there were anti-war stoppages and go-slows.

September also saw a virtual general strike in Greece, lasting three weeks, over plans to abolish public sector pensions- strikers were threatened with being drafted into the army. The country's only weapons factory was occupied by nearly 3000 armaments workers. In December 1990 almost every Greek college and 2500 high schools were occupied by students. They were opposing cuts, tighter discipline and re-organisation of exams and entry requirements, but anti-war sentiments were also expressed. On marches slogans such as "Money for books not warships" and "send the education minister to the Gulf" were shouted.

There were also strikes against austerity measures related to the Gulf crisis. In January there was a general strike in Bolivia against a 33% petrol price increase.

In Britain there was no strike action, but there was some workplace anti-war activity. 120 attended a London-wide meeting of Health Workers against the War and anti-war groups were set up in at least six London hospitals. At the London Hospital in Whitechapel and North Manchester Hospital there were small demonstrations linking the war to cuts in the NHS.

At Great Ormond Street childrens hospital in London, wards were closed because fewer private patients were coming from the middle east (the hospital relies on private sector income to help finance free health care on the site). On 10 October hospital workers staged their second demonstration against the cuts, demanding that the government provide funds to prevent them. A leaflet put out by G.O.S. Health workers Group says: "This war must end. It threatens the lives of millions in the middle east and it is now endangering our health and our jobs".

Anti-war groups were also set up amongst media workers, civil servants and British Telecom workers.

At arms manufacturer GEC Marconi (makers of navigation, radar and missile guidance systems), the war coincided with the sacking of 800 workers. Workers opposed to the war organised an unofficial overtime ban and go slow on equipment headed for the Gulf, slowing down production and stopping some equipment from getting there.

On the streets

Across the world, millions of people took to the streets to protest against the war.

On the weekend before war broke out 100,000 marched against war in London, 15,000 in Manchester, 10,000 in Glasgow, 3,000 in Bristol. There were also protests in many smaller towns.

On the same weekend a quarter of a million marched in 120 German cities. Well over 200,000 marched in 150 towns and cities across France. 100,000 marched in Rome, 40,000 in Brussels and 60,000 in Istanbul. More than 75,000 attended rallies in Madrid and Barcelona, which ended in clashes with police. There were demos in Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, in over 30 cities and towns in Canada, and all across the USA.

Thing hotted up as the threat of war became reality on 16 January. 100,000 marched in San Francisco; in the same city 1000 people were arrested in a single day of protests. In Washington, 250,000 marched. Bank windows were brick- ed and a fence torn down outside the FBI building. In Los Angeles, blood and oil was poured on the steps of a federal building.

In Germany roads and railway lines were blocked and department stores set on fire. In Berlin petrol bombs were thrown in clashes outside the US diplomatic mission. Education came to a virtual standstill as teachers and pupils joined demos.

In Paris police were stoned, shop windows smashed, rubbish bins set on fire after a demo. In Amsterdam, street fires were started outside the US consulate. There were large protests in

Australia, where the government sent two frigates and a supply ship to the Gulf. 30,000 marched in Sydney, including Vietnam veterans. 15,000 marched in Tokyo.

400,000 took part in a march in Algiers, where youths stormed the UN headquarters, ripping down the flag and burning it. There was a massive demonstration in the city of Kassala in Sudan, while in Morocco 300,000 were on the streets of Rabat to oppose the war. As well as sending troops to support the Coalition, the Moroccan government used the army against the working class at home. Troops killed at least 100 people during riots in December following a one-day general strike for higher wages after subsidies on basic foodstuffs were cut on the orders of the IMF.

In some countries just the act of taking to the streets was dangerous. In Turkey, police opened fire on anti-war demonstrators and Birtan Altumbas died under torture after being arrested on a demo at Ankara University. Six people were seriously injured when police open fire on demonstrators in Batman, 65 miles from the Iraqi border. The town is near a US airbase from where bombing raids against Iraq were launched.

Police banned anti-war demonstrations outside embassies in New Delhi, claiming protests could strain India's ties with countries involved in the war. Police shot dead three protestors in Pakistan. On 6 February, 500 police smashed a 50 strong anti-war demonstration in Egypt. Four days later riot police swamped Cairo after rumours of another march.

Blockade the bases

In Germany there were frequent attempts to block military depots and barracks. At the end of November US military transport was held up for four hours by a blockade of Mannheim harbour in southern Germany. In January, 10,000 blocked the entrance to the US Rhine-Main Air Base outside Frankfurt. Hundreds held up an army train in the alpine city of Chambery. Military vehicles were set on fire at the armed forces barracks in Haan, near Hilden.

In Holland, before the war started, protestors were active against the transport of US arms through the country en route to the Gulf. Many groups joined to try and block the movement by trains, lorries and boats, with people getting arrested for sitting in front of trains. Incendiary devices were used to sabotage railways.

In Turkey there were bomb attacks on a NATO office, a US Army building and the American Consulate.

In Italy there were attempts to blockade Malpense airport near Milan to prevent it being used to refuel US B52s. Months after the war officially finished, there were bomb attacks on the homes of two Italian air force pilots proclaimed as national heroes for their part in the slaughter.

Army recruiting offices were picketed. In January 1000 high school pupils demonstrated outside a military recruiting office on Broadway. 19 were arrested. one 11-year old said: "I'm angry. My uncle's probably going to die... Who care's about oil?" In Detroit, riot police broke up a demonstration outside the Military Entrance Processing Station. Leicester Direct Action Movement picketed their local army recruitment office, and the office in Brighton was also blockaded. A combined forces recruiting office in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, was damaged in an arson attack.

There were demonstrations outside several naval bases in the US and outside Westover USAF base, MA. At the send off for the one Greek warship being sent to the Gulf, relatives of Greek citizens in Iraq and Kuwait staged their own demonstration to voice their opposition. In England there was a demo at USAF base at Alconbury. The police limited the number of demonstrators to 60 for "security" reasons. 1500 demonstrated at Fairford in Gloucestershire, from where B-52s made flying bombing raids.

In September 1990 a group called Gulf War Resisters staged a protest at the Farnborough Air Show, the UK's main annual public display of military aircraft and weapons systems. Slogans were painted on a British Aerospace Tornado jet, and two people climbed on top of the jet with a "No War in the Gulf" banner.

Stop business as usual

The BP refinery in Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania was picketed, as was the Chevron Oil HQ in San Francisco (28/8/90). No War but Class War picketed the London headquarters of the oil company BP. Their leaflet we declared "We won't die for oil profits- Class War not Oil War", and supported strikers on the North Sea oil rigs as well as opposing war in the oilfields of the middle east.

Financial interests were also targeted. In October 1990, 350 took part in demo in San Francisco's financial district. Called to protest against the "destruction of the planet and its people by the corporate and financial cartels" it focused on corporate links with the Gulf War. The world headquarters of Chevron Oil were blockaded, and a US and Chevron flag burned. Traffic was blocked in Market Street (San Francisco's main street).

On 21 January anti-war protestors blockaded the entrance to the Frankfurt Stock Exchange and pelted the dealers with eggs and paint bombs. In August a live TV show was disrupted with a banner reading "There's always German money in weapons when there's any slaughter in the world".

A spontaneous demo in San Francisco blocked the golden Gate bridge. Police cars were set on fire and a TV station disrupted. In Chicago roads were blocked for four hours. In London 31 were arrested in a sit-down protest blocking traffic near Parliament. The toll booths on the Severn Bridge were occupied.

AIDS direct action group ACT UP staged a "Day of Desperation" in New York on January 23. Protestors forced the CBS national evening news off the air when they invaded the set shouting "Fight AIDS, not Arabs". 500 activists shut down Grand Central Station for an hour during the evening rush hour, floating a large banner reading "Money for AIDS not war" to the ceiling with helium-filled balloons.

Resistance in the military

The most effective action against war is of course the refusal by soldiers to fight. The Iraqi war effort was destroyed by the mass desertions of soldiers, and it was this that caused the war to come to an end so quickly.

Unfortunately in the Coalition forces there was no mass resistance of this kind, but there was significant opposition to the war. By the end of November over 50 US service people or reservists had declared their refusal to go. In New York, the War Resisters League had received more than 400 phone calls from soldiers, including 12 members of one company of 150 Marine reservists. Paul Dotson, a US Marine Corps reservist stated: "I emphatically refuse to kill for oil in the Persian Gulf".

The US army issued new regulations preventing soldiers from filing for conscientious objector status until they were in Saudi Arabia. Some soldiers tried other ways of avoiding the front: there were reports of 300 cases of self-mutilation among US troops in Germany who didn't want to go to the Gulf.

US Marine Jeff Patterson sat down on the runway in Hawaii and refused to board the plane due to take him to the Gulf saying that he refused to fight for "American profits and cheap oil".

In the UK, 410 compulsory call-out notices were issued to reservists (mostly medical personnel), but only 314 turned up as ordered on 5 January. At least 25 reservists publicly refused to serve in the war. These included Tim Brassil an ex-army nurse who went into hiding. He said: “as a nurse, I am disgusted that massive funding has become immediately available to fight a war when for years we have seen the National Health Service starved of funding”. Another reservist and Falklands veteran declared: ““There’s no way I’ll fight to fill their petrol tankers”.

Also in the UK Lance Bombadier Vic Williams deserted from his regiment and spent the war on the run, turning up at anti-war rallies to denounce the war for oil.

Terry Jones, an Australian sailor, was put on trial for going absent without leave from HMAS Adelaide- a warship destined for the Gulf. He said that he was not prepared to die “to protect US oil lines”.

As with every other aspect of the war, resistance in the military was censored. The father of a British RAF pilot noted: “They interviewed our lad for the telly out there. He said it was all for a bit of oil and it wasn’t really right. They spoke to his mate after that, and his mate was a bit more proper. He said they were there to do a job of work and would get on with it the best they could. It was his mate they eventually broadcast”.

The families of military personnel also spoke out against the war. Relatives of US servicemen and women set up the anti-war Military Families Support Network. The parent of one Marine wrote “now you have ordered my son to the Middle East. For what? Cheap gas?”. In the UK, the mother of a 19-year old soldier wrote in a letter to a national paper: “My son is very precious to me and I do not want to see him risk his life for oil”.

Repression

The war was used as an opportunity to step up repression across the world. A bogus ‘anti-terrorist campaign’ saw 62,000 troops and police deployed in Italy. In France, 200,000 troops were deployed and police leave was cancelled.

In the United States Cheryl Lessin, of Cleveland, Ohio, was jailed for a year for setting alight to the US flag.

35 Iraqi servicemen who were students in Britain were held as POWs at Rolleston military prison camp on Salisbury Plain. 53 Arab detainees were put in jail, and a further 167 were deported. These included anti-Saddam Arabs. For instance Abbas Shiblak, a Palestinian who had publicly criticised Saddam as a member of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights, was held for several weeks before being released after a well-publicised campaign in his support.

In February 91 there were 11 arrests outside Home Office in London at a protest in support against the war and in particular the detention of Arab nationals.

And finally...

A special mention to whoever provoked the following patriotic letter to the Sun in 1991:

“Your Page One flag will stay in my window until Our Boys come home in glory- even though someone smashed my window” (the Sun had put out a full page Union Jack on its front cover with the caption ‘support our boys and put this flag in your window’).

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Retrieved on March 17, 2016 from web.archive.org
Published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* Issue #6.5 Special Anti-War Supplement.

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