

Seminar on Afghanistan: Time for military withdrawal

An Introduction to the papers by Mike Phipps, Chair of the Anti-War Committee of the Labour Representation Commission.

On November 11th, the Labour Representation Committee Anti-war Commission organised a seminar in Parliament on Afghanistan. It sought to address what might be the essential conditions to allow the people of that country to regain sovereignty over their country.

As Labour Against the War Secretary Stephen Beckett reminds us in his paper, the number of British soldiers deployed in Afghanistan has more than doubled in the last three years to 7,300. Over 120 of them have been killed since June 2006, when the then Defence Secretary John Reid said, “We hope we will leave Afghanistan without firing a single shot.”

There are currently over 70,000 NATO troops in the country and all the signs are that the new US President Barack Obama plans to increase that number by a further 15-20,000. Few believe that this ‘surge’ will help the US-led invasion achieve its aims: Bin Laden remains at large, the Taliban now have a permanent presence in three-quarters of the country and they mount on average one hundred attacks a week. Furthermore, with US incursions across the border into Pakistan now routine, there is a real danger of heightened tension and instability across the region.

Civilian casualties have risen steeply due to the increased US reliance on air power. Meanwhile the country remains one of the most impoverished in the world: a report for the US Congress notes that for every \$100 spent on military effort, only \$4.5 is allocated to reconstructing Afghanistan – and much of this is swallowed by corruption.

A recent BBC poll indicated that 68% of people in Britain favour troop withdrawal. The task ahead is to help that political majority find an expression in Parliament and at all levels of the labour movement, so that it is listened to and acted upon by the Government. These papers address the central issues in more detail and feedback is welcomed on their contents.