

A contribution to the Labour Representation Committee's Anti-war Commission seminar on the need for a military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN: ENDING THE UNWINNABLE WAR

1. The invasion and occupation

The U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan –“Operation Enduring Freedom” – began on 7th October 2001. Launched by George Bush and supported by Tony Blair, it was the knee-jerk response to the September 11 attacks barely a month earlier – and the beginning of the “War on Terror”. The stated purposes of the invasion were to capture Osama bin Laden, to destroy al-Qaeda and to remove the Taliban regime which had provided support to al-Qaeda. Although the initial invasion removed the Taliban from office, recent years have seen a resurgent Taliban regrouping and making territorial gains. Despite many US claims of small scale victories along the way, al-Qaeda has not been destroyed and, of course, Osama bin Laden has not been captured.

Far from achieving its stated aims, the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan has made matters worse. Since 2006, Afghanistan has seen increased Taliban-led insurgent activity and record-high levels of opium production. The puppet Karzai government has been shown to be powerless outside the capital of Kabul, and all efforts to bring stability and defeat a fierce insurgency have so far failed. The Taliban are increasingly successful against the Karzai government: they are edging closer to Kabul and now virtually surrounding the beleaguered capital. While US and NATO forces remain in the country, the Taliban are unlikely to take the capital, but they have begun to show their strength by individual acts of terror inside the capital. The response of the US and NATO forces has been an increase in air strikes, resulting in a steep rise in the death toll of innocent Afghan civilians.

The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon's own assessment is that the humanitarian situation is worsening. He draws attention to the increase in attacks by anti-Government elements and their use of asymmetric tactics and he emphasizes the seriousness of food insecurity in Afghanistan. (UN report on Afghanistan, 23/09/08).

As the first flakes of snow settle in the high passes along Afghanistan's eastern border, only a few weeks remain before the routes from Pakistan are blocked to the Taliban and the upland areas of Afghanistan become unsuited to guerrilla warfare until the spring thaw – when the whole bloody cycle will begin again.

How are we to bring this spiral of death and destruction to an end? The Labour government is committed to the ongoing occupation and the Tories (the only other party likely to form a UK government in the foreseeable future) have no alternative policy. Public opinion on its own is, again for the foreseeable future, unlikely to shake either Party from its course. The best hope we have is to mobilise the labour movement in a campaign to make the Labour Government's policy untenable and to force a UK troop withdrawal. How do we do this?

First, we do need to get the issue of Afghanistan – and the horrors of the ongoing occupation – back into public view. Within that, there are many areas in which we can interest the trade unions in mounting specific campaigns (worker international solidarity, UK civil liberties) which stop short of calling for immediate withdrawal of troops but which will help to educate the public generally and trade union members specifically on the occupation of Afghanistan. Where the failed “war aims” are indefensible, we can bring together anti-war demands into a set of “peace aims”. These interim campaigns can help establish a momentum against the occupation itself. Third, we need to take the issue of Afghanistan into the Labour Party: in this, the trade unions are vital, but there is much for

ordinary members to do, as there is for Labour supporters and all community and peace campaigns.

2. Mapping out some “Peace Aims”

Stop killing innocent civilians.

Between 7th October and 10th December 2001 US war planes dropped 14,000 tonnes of bombs, resulting in 2,569-2,949 dead Afghan civilians (or 18-21 civilians killed per 100 tonnes of US bombs). However from 2006 to mid-2008, US aerial attacks have killed 1,488 Afghan civilians with 1,458 tonnes of bombs (or 100+ civilians killed per 100 tonnes of US bombs). This appalling rise in civilian casualties is a calculated risk that the occupation forces are prepared to take – but every innocent civilian death pushes more Afghans into the arms of the resistance. We must highlight the steep rise in civilian casualties and question the ongoing military actions in occupied Afghanistan.

Stop wasting money on war.

In January 2006 British occupying forces were boosted to 3,300 and deployed to Helmand. Numbers have since more than doubled to 7,300, 2,000 extra UK troops set to bolster existing forces in the New Year (total foreign forces amount to over 50,000 troops). This has helped boost the cost of the occupation, according to MOD figures, from £46m (2003-04) to £738m (2006-07) and costs are continuing to rise. Development projects to bring fresh water, sewage and electricity are patchy at best. Meanwhile the US is insisting upon “market solutions” and is busy issuing private contracts and privatising Afghanistan’s natural resources. We should work up examples of what this expenditure could have bought in terms of public resources in the UK. We can tailor lists to particular unions: funded pay rises for civil servants to be circulated in PCS; hospitals funded to be circulated in the health unions, schools funded to be circulated in teacher unions, etc. Lists of pension rises the war expenditure could have paid for can be circulated to retired members’ sections of most unions.

License opium production and use it for diamorphine.

Opium production is higher now than before the war. The warmongers point to this as a reason for continuing the occupation saying that this is the root of the heroin that is found on the streets of Britain. Yet as has been pointed out by Paul Flynn, Labour MP for Newport, (and many others) it would be better to license opium production in order to make diamorphine of which there is a world shortage (anyone dying in a third world country has only a 6% chance of getting diamorphine because 70% of world supply is taken by just seven rich countries). Diverting production to diamorphine would seem a more stable solution helping to meet the world shortage and would also protect the livelihoods of poppy farmers and would help to divert them from alliance with the Taliban. This is a policy which any union could support, but which would probably be of most interest to health unions.

Osama bin Laden’s still free: are you?

Osama bin Laden, of course, is the big bogeyman in all of this mess. No one knows where he is: he’s probably not in Afghanistan, but possibly in Pakistan (a country which the US is now prepared to include in its aerial bombardments). Al-Qaeda have not been defeated, nor destroyed, and have probably grown. However, the “war on terror” continues to erode civil liberties at home: armed police shoot innocent people; detention without charge is more common and prolonged; minorities and protesters are harassed; asylum seekers are persecuted; surveillance has intensified. Several campaigns can be run under this heading, drawing on the strengths of the civil liberties movement in the UK. This area can be of interest to several trade unions, but perhaps particularly to the NUJ. The campaign can also be developed to look at human rights in Afghanistan. The invasion did not bring about women’s liberation, for example, much though certain Labour women MPs spoke of

how women would cast off their burkhas as the invading forces took over. There may be work which trade union women's groups could do here.

Reparations

The Afghanistan war and occupation is a failure and a humanitarian disaster. Full reparations should be made to help pull this country out of the misery inflicted upon it for the last 30 years.

For Trade Union rights in Afghanistan

As an afterthought to their other war aims, the US and UK governments claimed that the occupation would bring basic human rights to Afghanistan. This has been as much of a failure as all the other war aims, but it should in particular be noted that the occupying forces have not helped an independent trade union movement to develop in the country. A basic first step could be to call for President Karzai's government to ratify the ILO conventions; the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (1948) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (1949) - these are demands which the TUC may wish to support. Recent strikes in Afghanistan have involved truck drivers, doctors, nurses and factory workers. As the trade union organisation of these workers is minimal solidarity twinning with British trade unions could bring real, practical help to the fledgling Afghan trade union movement.

War isn't working.

The US and UK justifications for continued occupation of Afghanistan are weak and riddled with contradictions, and we can publicise and exploit these, using examples such as the following.

- When Britain deployed 3,300 troops to Helmand province in June 2006, then Defence Secretary John Reid said, "*We hope we will leave Afghanistan without firing a single shot.*" The total of British Forces personnel or MOD civilian deaths since the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 has risen dramatically to 123 (as of 16 November 2008).
- Britain has around 8,000 troops based in Afghanistan, most of them in the volatile southern province of Helmand, where they face daily battles with a growing insurgency. Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, who commanded British forces in Helmand this summer, said: "*There is no exclusively military solution to the nature of the insurgency in Afghanistan.*"
- Earlier this year US General Dan McNeill said that "*if proper US military counterinsurgency doctrine were followed; the US would need 400,000 troops to defeat Pashtun tribal resistance in Afghanistan.*" Currently, the US and NATO have 70,000 troops on the ground and allies are refusing to send more. On a purely logistical level; victory is impossible. But President George Bush hasn't given up and has announced that a draw-down of troops from Iraq will enable the US to send an extra combat brigade to Afghanistan early next year.
- Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British ambassador to Kabul, is alleged to have said - according to a leak in a French newspaper - that: "*the American strategy is destined to fail*" and that foreign troops were "*part of the problem, not the solution*" (*Telegraph*, 06/10/08).
- Although there is now massive expectation for change following Obama's victory in the USA and his policy of wanting to bring US troops home from Iraq soon - he is planning an escalation of the war in Afghanistan.

Therefore we need to dramatically step up our activities. (During the US presidential election campaign Senator John McCain promised three extra brigades if elected while Senator Barack Obama promised two). The stage is set for an open-ended war.

In particular, we can highlight the deaths of UK soldiers and also the growing casualty rate. Often we are told that the NHS has limited resources and health spending has to be rationed: yet the NHS is treating thousands of totally avoidable war injuries each year.

Talking to the Taliban

If a military victory is impossible to achieve it would be sensible to find a negotiated settlement – this means talking to the Taliban. Both Northern Ireland and South Africa provide examples of where negotiations have worked. Even in Iraq, the US struck a deal with Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province drawing them away from al-Qaeda and thereby reducing the violence there. What have we got to lose by talking?

A genuine ethical foreign policy.

New Labour came to office promising to conduct an ethical foreign policy. But today Britain's foreign policy has completely abandoned any pretence to an ethical dimension making it practically indistinguishable from that of the neo-conservatives around George Bush. We must campaign for a genuine ethical foreign policy that would help to restore Britain's reputation at home and abroad, counter-posing this to the human cost of the neo-conservatives' policy of imperialist aggression. We can point out that invasion and occupation are counter-productive as they always trigger resistance, sooner or later.

An ethical foreign policy is incompatible with a thriving arms industry. The UK is second only to the US in its arms exports, with business worth more than £5bn a year. Nearly one quarter of the global arms trade originates in the UK. Here we have ample opportunity to combine with other campaigners already active like CAAT.

3. Trade Unions

Labour Against the War and the Labour Representation Committee could work together on devising a set of peace aims and then spreading these out to relevant trade union bodies and activists. In some trade unions, it may be best to organise meetings with international officers or committees, or to make presentations to NECs. In others, it may be more useful to involve branches in campaigning for policy development within the union. It may be possible to provide articles for trade union journals.

4. Labour Party

The Labour Party can be influenced through its policy-making process and through its elected representatives.

The "peace aims" could be drafted up as a charter and circulated to Labour Party members, who could try to get the charter adopted by their constituencies. Preparatory work may be necessary to do this. In particular, it may help to provide short information sheets on each "peace aim", which could together form a little pack. Perhaps a DVD could be prepared and copied, with key speakers talking about each aim: this could be played at meetings to kick off a discussion.

Labour Party members, Labour voters and also community groups are able to send policy comments to the Labour Party National Policy Commissions. There is no need to wait for

Annual Conference or a National Policy Forum meeting. We could run a campaign to send in submissions on Afghanistan to the "Britain in the World" policy commission convenors, track submissions sent in and press release the results.

EDMs can be tabled in Westminster so that Labour Party members and trade unionists and constituents can lobby their MPs. Discussions can be had with activists in Scotland and Wales to find companion measures to raise in the Scottish Parliament / Welsh Assembly, and maybe something can be found for MEPs to do. This provides several opportunities for lobbying elected representatives: a trade union branch can lobby an MP's surgery or send a delegation to the MP's surgery (easier to organise than a mass lobby), as can Co-operative Party branches and local peace groups (or organise a joint delegation). Labour Party members can lobby their elected representatives in internal meetings. Trade unions and Labour Party branches can work together on lobbying elected representatives or on holding street stalls, petitions, vigils, pickets and boycotts.

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NOTES

UK CASUALTIES IN AFGHANISTAN

For the period 7 October 2001 to 31 December 2005:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 6 | UK Military Personnel were categorised as Very Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease |
| 4 | UK Military Personnel were categorised as Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease |
| Source: Ministry of Defence website | |

For the period 1 January 2006 to 15 October 2008:

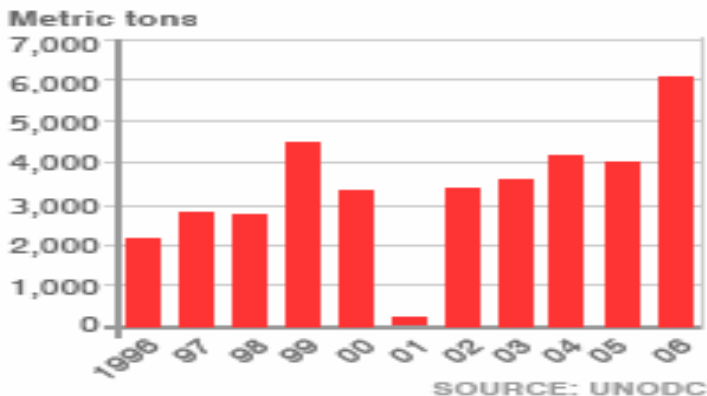
| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 492 | UK military and civilian personnel were admitted to UK Field Hospitals and categorised as Wounded in Action, including as a result of hostile action. |
| 1,372 | UK military and civilian personnel were admitted to UK Field Hospitals for disease or non-battle injuries. |
| 58 | UK personnel were categorised as Very Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease. |
| 86 | UK personnel were categorised as Seriously Injured from all causes excluding disease. |
| 1,434 | UK personnel were aeromedically evacuated from Afghanistan on medical grounds, whatever the reason |
| Source: Ministry of Defence website | |

COST OF UK MILITARY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

The Ministry of Defence identifies the costs of military operations in terms of the net additional costs it has incurred, over and above planned expenditure on defence. The costs of operations in Afghanistan come from the Treasury Special Reserve.

| YEAR | COST £ |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 2002-2003 | £311,000,000 |
| 2003-2004 | £46,000,000 |
| 2004-2005 | £67,000,000 |
| 2005-2006 | £199,000,000 |
| 2006-2007 | approx £738,000,000 |
| Source: Ministry of Defence website | |

OPIUM PRODUCTION IN AFGHANISTAN 1996 - 2006



World's largest producer of opium; poppy cultivation **increased 17% to a near-record 202,000 hectares in 2007**; good growing conditions pushed potential opium production to a record **8,000 metric tons**, up 42% from last year; if the entire opium crop were processed, 947 metric tons of heroin potentially could be produced; drug trade is a source of instability and the Taliban and other antigovernment groups participate in and profit from the drug trade; widespread corruption impedes counter-drug efforts; most of the heroin consumed in Europe and Eurasia is derived from Afghan opium; vulnerable to drug money laundering through informal financial networks; regional source of hashish.

CIA, 23 October 2008.

See: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

AFGHANISTAN : NATURAL RESOURCES

Despite a lengthy history of small-scale mining of gems, gold, copper, and coal, systematic exploration of Afghanistan's mineral resources did not begin until the 1960s. In the 1970s Afghanistan was discovered to have a wide variety of mineral resources, but only coal, iron ore, copper ore, and gemstones were targeted for development. Natural gas fields are scattered throughout much of Afghanistan. Recent analysis by the United States Geological Survey has indicated significant unexploited oil reserves in the north as well. After their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviets endeavoured to export some of the country's resources to the USSR. Natural gas, for example, was exported by pipeline across the Amu Darya into the USSR in the 1980s. Ongoing hostilities, however, severely hampered this effort and finally cut off the natural gas export. By the mid-1990s there was little mineral or oil and gas extraction.

<http://www.afghanistans.com/Information/NResources.htm>

The CIA report that Afghanistan's natural resources include: natural gas, petroleum, coal, copper, chromite, talc, barites, sulphur, lead, zinc, iron ore, salt, precious and semi-precious stones.

CIA, 23 October 2008.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/af.html>

CIVILIAN DEATHS

Truth as collateral damage

Civilian deaths from US/Nato air strikes in Afghanistan are not accidents or mistakes – they are calculated and predicted.

"By relying upon aerial close air support (CAS) attacks, US/Nato forces spare their pilots and ground troops but kill lots of innocent Afghan civilians."

Marc Herold, guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 22 October 2008.

See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/22/afghanistan-nato>

Marc Herold is founder of the Afghan Victim Memorial Project

Aid agencies say almost half the population live on less than the equivalent of \$2 a day, while the World Food Programme is trying to feed about eight million Afghans.

BBC, Friday 07 November 2008.

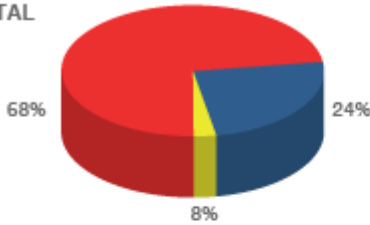
See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7714735.stm

BRITISH PUBLIC OPINION / AFGHANISTAN OCCUPATION

A BBC poll has found of 1,013 people polled, 68% - 59% men and 75% women - said troops should withdraw within 12 months.

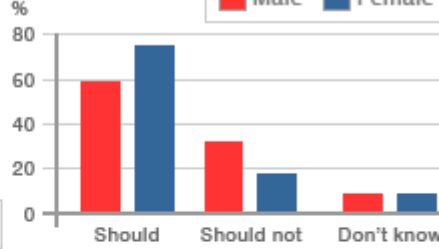
SHOULD UK WITHDRAW TROOPS FROM AFGHANISTAN WITHIN A YEAR?

TOTAL

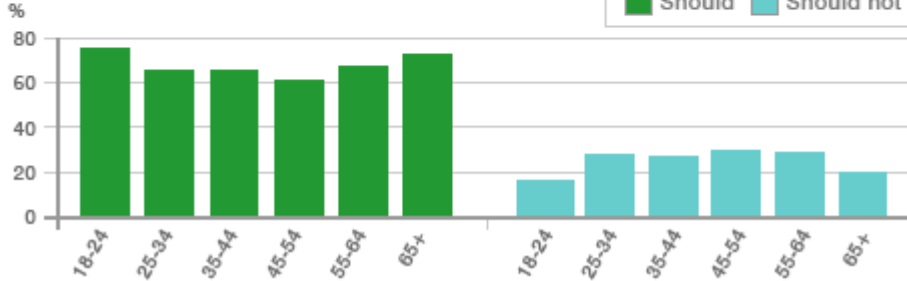


Should Should not Don't know

GENDER



AGE GROUP



SOURCE: BBC/ICM

BBC News website, Thursday 13 November 2008
 See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7725228.stm>

END / November 2008