

# ***Stop the War: The Story of Britain's Biggest Mass Movement***

by Andrew Murray and Lindsey German, Bookmarks, 2005, 280 pp.

## **Abdullah Muhsin and Gary Kent**

I am sorry. If you think I am going to sit back and agree with beheadings, kidnappings, torture and brutality, and outright terrorization of ordinary Iraqi and others, then you can forget it. I will not be involved whatsoever, to me it is akin to supporting the same brutality and oppression inflicted on Iraq by Saddam, and the invading and occupying forces of the USA.

Mick Rix, former left-wing leader of the train drivers' union, ASLEF, writing to Andrew Murray to resign from the Stop the War Coalition.

Andrew Murray and Lindsey German are, respectively, the Chair and Convenor of the Stop the War Coalition. Their book tells a story about a 'remarkable mass movement' which the authors hope 'can change the face of politics for a generation.' It tracks the Coalition from its origins with no office, no bank account, just one full time volunteer, through the 'chaos of its early meetings' to the million-strong demonstration of February 2003. The book seeks to explain the Coalition's success in bringing together the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and 'the Muslim Community' to create 'the broadest basis ever seen for a left-led movement.' The authors attack the 'imperialist' doctrines of George Bush and Tony Blair, criticise the arguments of the 'pro-war left,' and finish with a chapter opposing the occupation and demanding immediate troop withdrawal. In addition, the book includes a broad range of snapshot contributions – mini essays, poetry, and so on – from some of those who contributed to the 'movement of millions.' Murray and German hope that 'at a time when apathy and cynicism envelop the formal democratic process, the story in these pages is of a potential for political renewal based on peace and democracy.'

Notwithstanding the decency of most who participated in anti-war activities, this book is sectarian and slipshod towards those who dared to differ with the Coalition's leaders on how to respond to new political realities that emerged after the fall of Saddam. While 'Don't let them rewrite history' is the title of a brief essay in this book, it would be a reasonable response to the book itself.

## Democratiya 2 | Autumn 2005

Take, for example, the particularly striking photograph on p. 41-2. It shows several young Iraqi women in Baghdad protesting against the war. They are angry, photogenic and the caption tells us that 'joining millions across the world protesting on 15 February 2003, communities from a multitude of Arab nations resident in Iraq demonstrated in Baghdad against the war of attrition imposed on the Iraqi people.' So these women were just like all those who marched through central London. But, if you look carefully at the picture, and can read Arabic, you will see that the placard says 'Long live the great leader, Saddam Hussein.' So, in fact, it was a pro-Saddam rather than an anti-war demonstration.

People in the rest of the world campaigned genuinely against the war using their freedom of speech to broadcast point of views different to those of Mr Blair and Mr Bush. But it's certain that the protestors in this particular photograph were forced onto Baghdad's streets under Saddam's direct orders. In Iraq, there was no free speech. People could not march against Saddam demanding that he should leave (although the majority of Iraqis wanted this) to avoid Iraq being sucked into yet another disastrous war. There is no genuine link between those who marched in London against the war and the women in this photo marching for 'the great leader.' They say a picture can be worth a thousand words. Sometimes a caption can be too.

We had different views ourselves on the war. One of us, Abdullah Muhsin, marched with the peace movement, warning that the war would bring misery, and arguing for Iraqis themselves to isolate and overthrow the fascist-type regime of Saddam Hussein, with external political and diplomatic support, including military sanctions. The other, Gary Kent, reluctantly accepted that internal change was unlikely and didn't oppose the intervention. Historians of a better calibre than Murray and German will judge this debate as the years go on.

But we have come together in recognition of the new realities created by the war and to seize the opportunities created by the fall of Saddam. Given that Saddam had brutally repressed free trade unions for decades, one of the most positive outcomes of his fall was the re-emergence of a free labour movement which had been kept alive as the Workers Democratic Trade Union Movement (WDTUM) by clandestine activities inside Iraq and by exile-activists forced to leave Iraq.

## MUSHIN & KENT | After 'Stop the War,' what?

And here is the great failure of the Stop the War coalition. Able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people to try to prevent war, its leaders have proved far less adept in understanding the consequences of the fall of Saddam.

The Iraqi labour movement opposed the invasion but once it happened a new reality was created. Activists rightly seized the chance to remake a movement that was once powerful and could again become a bulwark of non-sectarianism.

Three years ago there was a small clandestine trade union movement with a few hundred activists but today there is a major trade union centre working for genuine democracy. This small miracle is ignored by Murray and German.

Why? Because seizing the chance to remake the Iraqi labour movement and build Iraqi democracy meant participating in the political process. Not just progressives but nearly all sectors of Iraqi society joined the Governing Council, the Interim Government and the Transitional Assembly. The UN endorsed the presence of foreign troops, and the political timetable which would see national elections in January 2005, a national referendum on a new constitution in October 2005 (the referendum saw a turnout of 66 percent and support from 16 of Iraq's 18 governorates) and further national elections, to elect an Iraqi government under the terms of the new constitution, in December 2005.

Ranged against this UN-backed political process has been a disparate alliance of those seeking to stop it with the hope, in the case of Saddam loyalists, of reinstating Ba'athist rule in as large an area of Iraq as possible, or, in the case of foreign fundamentalists, creating a theocratic nightmare comparable to the Taliban.

In this situation, we had to be very clear about the Hobson's choices on offer. Iraqis didn't invite the troops in but knew that their premature withdrawal would, in the absence of Iraqi security capacity, create a security vacuum which would leave Iraqis exposed.

So, one of the reviewers, in his role as the IFTU International Representative, made plain to the 2004 Labour Party conference – where he was a guest of the Unison union – that '... an early date for the unilateral withdrawal of troops which would be bad for my country, bad for the emerging progressive forces, a terrible blow for free trade unionism, and would play into the hands of extremists and terrorists.'

## Democratiya 2 | Autumn 2005

The IFTU sought endorsement by the Labour conference of UN Resolution 1546 which clearly set a timetable for the removal of foreign troops.

German's and Murray's sneering response? 'These are scarcely new arguments in the history of empire and neo-colonialism. They have been rehearsed by the colonisers and their stooges every time there has been pressure to withdraw from an occupied country.'

German and Murray portray the Iraqi trade union movement as someone else's puppet, a stooge, rather than an actor in its own right, making the best out of an excruciatingly difficult situation. It's outrageous that the movement suffers such insults because Stop the War leaders failed to win their demand for 'troops out now' at the Labour Party conference. It is the height of a cultural imperialist arrogance for the authors to act as armchair revolutionaries and lecture Iraqis on how to deal with the new political situation.

The authors also look at another controversial period in the Stop the War Coalition's history and are less than honest about it. The authors say that the Coalition assessed the impact of the IFTU's work at the Labour Party conference and issued a statement which condemned the IFTU and reaffirmed 'its call for an end to the occupation, the return of all British troops in Iraq to this country and recognises once more the legitimacy of the struggle of Iraqis to secure such ends.'

The truth is a little more complex. The original statement agreed by Murray and German included the phrase 'by whatever means they find necessary,' a blank cheque, in anyone's book, to the so-called resistance. Murray and German agreed this line and then circulated it to other members of the Coalition leadership. This form of the statement appeared on websites across the world. How they organise their democratic procedures is a matter for them, although one leading member was less than thrilled at how it worked, as we outline below. The whole statement was published in various places some of which were sympathetic to the Coalition.

However, the particular phrase – 'by whatever means they find necessary' – didn't appear in the published version of this statement in the British Communist Party daily newspaper, *The Morning Star*. Several people smelled a rat including Harry Barnes, then a Labour MP who had voted against the war on every single occasion and had become a good friend of the Iraqi trade union movement. He tabled a Commons motion on the issue, having decided that the anti-war leaders had gone too far.

## MUSHIN & KENT | After 'Stop the War,' what?

Again, take a look at the sneering tone of how this is described by German and Murray. 'Under cover of parliamentary privilege, pro-occupation Labour MP Harry Barnes... earned himself a parliamentary pat on the head from Tony Blair.' In fact Harry Barnes MP was one of 'Blair's bastards' and his 16 years on the parliamentary left had inured him to compliments from Tony Blair. Murray and German then boast that Harry Barnes's attack had no impact and that 'the Coalition's trade union connection remained solid.' It takes a herculean effort to airbrush out of history the resignation of the former railway drivers union leader Mick Rix from the Stop the War Coalition Executive because of the attacks on the IFTU and Abdullah Muhsin.

The reasons for his resignation were spelled out in substantial correspondence between himself and Murray. The flavour is captured in these passages.

I do not agree with assertions made over the conduct of union delegations at the Labour party in the recent statement, and indeed the attacks made on Abdullah.

Abdullah should receive an apology for some of the stupid and wild accusations made about him. I also believe that the vast majority of union delegates at the Labour Party who hold strong views on the war, and the vast majority are anti-war, should also receive an apology for the vitriol that has been whipped up against them. At least they debated and discussed the position before doing what they did, likewise the statements that have been made, by representatives and close associates of STW, have not been debated prior to their publication, nor were their views sought as well.

Rix writes of the Murray/German anti-IFTU statement:

The language that was used was deliberate, archaic, violent, and plain downright stupid and dangerous if you happen to be an Iraqi at this present time. Then again you are not...I don't think you also realise the danger that your actions and those of the Respect colleagues in the STW have placed Abdullah and perhaps others in the IFTU against attacks from extremists. Some people talk about life and death situations, some unfortunately have to live it and so do their families in Iraq and I don't see why you, Respect or the coalition have a right to think you can place them in that situation, when they are living daily with those consequences, because they are not the 'new'

## Democratiya 2 | Autumn 2005

friends of yourself, George [Galloway], STW or Respect such as extreme nationalists, or religious fundamentalists.

Trade unionists were placed in danger. Sixteen trade unionists, including Hadi Saleh, International Secretary of the IFTU, were brutally murdered. The leaders of the Stop the War Coalition formally condemned his murder but notably failed miserably to give this the same prominence as very many other anti-war and labour movement organisations.

Other questions and issues are ignored by German and Murray. Why has George Galloway been allowed so much prominence as a leader of an anti-war movement – he is eulogised as a modern-day Lawrence of Arabia in the book – when he supports the so-called ‘resistance,’ calls Iraqi trade unionists ‘quislings,’ and praises Arab tyrants?

The Coalition’s sectarian attitude towards the Iraqi unions means that it does nothing to support them whilst other anti-war groups such as US Labour Against the War (USLAW) manage to combine a ‘troops out’ stance with practical support for the Iraq unions. The Coalition has never invited the large Iraqi trade unions onto its platforms.

A decent anti-war leadership would recognise the new realities and participate in providing solidarity to Iraqi democrats, socialists and trade unionists in their fight to secure a democratic Iraq. But that would mean opposing a vicious enemy that has no regards for humanity and uses the most destructive and barbaric violence to stop the march towards democracy.

This book should include a health warning. It embraces authoritarian language with little space for dialogue or even fair debate. It is glossy, visually busy and bitty in the modern style, with coffee table production values, attractive photographs, and appalling politics. One day a decent history of the Stop the War Coalition will be written. This isn’t it.

---

Abdullah Muhsin is the international representative of the Iraqi Workers Federation (formerly the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions) and an advisory editor of *Democratiya*. Gary Kent is the Director of Labour Friends of Iraq.

# DISSENT

a journal of politics and ideas

islam in the west

the end of history and its discontents

labor's agenda

debt education

political theory in beijing

is socialism liberal?

high stakes in iran

feminism and the family

after genocide

exporting democracy

colson whitehead's new york

michnik on the iraq war

zagajewski's anti-utopianism

is the left vanishing?

french crisis, left crisis

rethinking the vital center

houellebecq, stranger and stranger

nyc calling

the politics of soccer

execution in an age of despotism

isaac babel's secrets

seeing evil, doing nothing



[www.dissentmagazine.org](http://www.dissentmagazine.org)