

Antiwar coalition attempts to prop up Democratic Party: United for Peace and Justice holds conference in Chicago

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The US antiwar coalition United For Peace and Justice held its third National Assembly over the weekend of June 22-24. Attending the delegated conference were some 250 to 300 individuals representing a selection of the organization's member groups.

UFPJ is best known for its organization of antiwar demonstrations in the United States. Included within the coalition are the Communist Party, which plays a major role; sections of the trade union bureaucracy; several self-described socialist organizations; the Green Party; national antiwar groups such as Iraq Veterans Against War and Military Families Speak Out; and a myriad of local and regional peace groups.

The group makes much of its supposedly apolitical nature as a coalition. In the opening comments Friday night, UFPJ national co-chair and steering committee member George Friday, representing the Independent Progressive Politics Network, told the assembled delegates that the conference was not about the separate "agendas" of everyone in the room. "We don't have time for that," she said. In other words, there would be no discussion about politics. Instead, the conference would discuss only the organizational and tactical issues that the group considers primary in building an antiwar movement.

This supposed absence of politics *is itself* a political perspective—one that serves to forestall discussion on the basic issues confronting the population in the US and internationally. Nevertheless, the organization does little to hide the fact that it is guided by a perspective: doing everything in its power to channel growing opposition to war and social inequality in the US behind the Democratic Party and prevent this opposition from finding an independent political expression.

This perspective was underscored by the choice of Tom Hayden, a Democratic Party politician and former California state senator, as the opening speaker at last weekend's meeting. Hayden attempts to make use of his brief tenure as a leading figure in the Vietnam antiwar movement 40 years ago to provide himself with credentials as an opposition figure today.

In his remarks, Hayden noted that opposition to the Iraq war was growing in the United States. He commented, "We are now in sync with the majority of the population." In fact, however, Hayden's response, and the response of the UFPJ, is something quite distinct—indeed quite opposed—to the response of growing numbers of people in the US.

The majority of Americans are increasingly disgusted with *both* political parties, and support for the Democratic-controlled congress is as low as 23 percent, lower even than that for George W. Bush. Popular illusions that the Democratic Party would move rapidly to end the war after taking control of Congress in January have been seriously undermined by the Democrats' conduct over the past half-year, particularly their collaboration in passing the \$100 billion war-funding bill in May.

The inevitable response of Hayden and the UFPJ to this development is

a renewed effort to bolster the Democratic Party. Hayden praised former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who made an appeal to antiwar sentiment in the 2004 elections before being sidelined by the Democratic Party leadership (with the aid of the media) in favor of John Kerry, who ran a pro-war campaign.

Hayden also praised the Out of Iraq caucus in Congress, whose function is to put an oppositional, "left" gloss on the Democratic Party, even as the Democrats vote for more funding for war. During the question and answer period, Hayden insisted that presidential candidates Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama were moving to the left and beginning to respond to popular pressure.

The main hope that Hayden held out was that with enough pressure on both the Democrats and Republicans, the government would eventually conclude that "the cost of staying becomes so great that they have to leave" Iraq. "If we have people pressure against the pillars of the war," he said, "and we keep the focus there and not get caught up with all the differences and all the arguments about when and how [the troops should withdraw], satisfaction will come." He argued, for example, that the "moral standing" of the US internationally would eventually become so compromised that the political establishment would decide that it had to pull out.

In effect, Hayden argues that opponents of the war must focus their attention on the tactical divisions within the ruling elite over Iraq policy. But these divisions have nothing to do with opposition to militarism or US domination of the Middle East, but are rather policy differences over how best to *pursue* these interests. The goal of the UFPJ leadership is to corral antiwar sentiment and keep it contained within this narrow framework, while also looking for openings itself within the political establishment.

It is taboo within the left-liberal layers represented by Hayden to deal with the recent resignation from the Democratic Party of Cindy Sheehan, who had been a prominent figure within the antiwar protest movement since 2005. During his remarks, Hayden called Sheehan the "Rosa Parks of this movement," and intoned, "God bless Cindy Sheehan." He did not mention that Sheehan had left the Democratic Party and declared that it had "blood on its hands" for its complicity over the war.

Following Hayden's remarks, a reporter from the WSWWS asked him for a reaction to Sheehan's public condemnation of the Democrats. After first attempting to sidestep the question, Hayden said that Sheehan, whose son died in Iraq, had gone through the "unique problem" of "publicly processing the suffering in her own life." "I just think the infighting in Washington sort of wiped her out," he continued. "I don't take her as a political ideologue."

This attempt at belittlement is hardly unique among tendencies oriented to the Democratic Party. It is intended to leave the impression that Sheehan's sharp political conclusions—which reflect broader trends in the

American population as a whole—should not be taken seriously.

The second day of the conference proceeded along the same lines. Judith LeBlanc, UFPJ national co-chair and representative of the Communist Party, spoke of the need to “compel the government to end the war on terror, obey international law, and end militarism.”

A panel discussion featured, among others, John Cameron, political director for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in Illinois and an executive committee member of US Action. Cameron called Illinois Democratic Senator Richard Durbin a “stalwart opponent of the war,” which he insisted was a “partisan war”, i.e., the responsibility of the Republicans and not the Democrats. Cameron omitted to mention that Durbin, who as majority whip occupies the second-highest position among Senate Democrats, voted for the war-funding bill in May.

The first priority in the program proposal adopted by the conference was “ending congressional support for the war.” This was to be done by “meeting with [Congressional] Members, going to hearings, petitions, call-in days, protests at Members’ home district offices, activities in their offices, nonviolent civil disobedience and other creative ways to keep the pressure on Congress to use its power to end the war.”

Not everyone at the conference shared these sentiments, and several participants appeared taken aback by the overt support for the Democrats advocated by Hayden and others. Several people who spoke to the WWSW voiced disgust with the Democratic Party.

Adam, a delegate from Missouri Students United, said that he agreed with Sheehan, and that “pressuring the Democrats is useless.” Marge Haracz, a member of Military Families Speak Out, said, “You can’t tell me you are against the war and vote for money.” Haracz has a son who is due to deploy to Iraq in four months. She said that politicians of both parties may say many things, but “they will do what they do based on where they get funding.”

Another conference participant said during a separate small group discussion that he was “ashamed” to have worked for Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004, and that he would never vote for a Democrat again. Many of those who belong to the more grassroots organizations are no doubt genuinely opposed to the war and appalled by the Democratic Party’s role.

The leadership of UFPJ sees its task as keeping such sentiments in check, either by derailing them or suppressing them, while it deepens its own relations with the Democratic Party.

The principal topics of debate on the second day were organizational and tactical in character. There was an extensive debate over whether the group would concentrate its resources on building a series of large regional demonstrations on a single date in the fall, or whether it would spread out its resources over a number of smaller, local demonstrations.

Divisions that emerged reflected different interests and orientations of member groups, with several of the smaller groups supporting more local mobilizations where they would have more influence, while the national leadership favored larger demonstrations.

One of the few political issues that was subject to some discussion was the relative emphasis that UFPJ would place on the question of Palestine, with several groups campaigning for a more vocal denunciation of Israeli aggression. This position, which might threaten the organization’s relationship with the Democratic Party, was repeatedly voted down, generally on the grounds that it would be too “divisive.”

Behind many of these discussions a central dilemma confronted the delegates. While public opposition is shifting and antiwar sentiment growing, several of the delegates voiced concern that the ability of UFPJ to mobilize this opposition was diminishing. The decline in support for the UFPJ is reflected not only in dwindling numbers at its demonstrations, but also in its income, which fell by nearly one half from 2005 to 2006 (\$1.1 million to \$575,000)—due in large part to a sharp fall in donations.

No one suggested, however, that this might have something to do with the political perspective of the UFPJ itself—that is, that growing numbers of people had lost faith, with varying degrees of political understanding, in the attempt to pressure the Democratic Party.

Representative of the opportunist politics of many of the supposedly socialist organizations within UFPJ was the reaction to this problem by Socialist Action, which is aligned with the pseudo-Trotskyist United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI).

Speaking from the floor, Socialist Action national secretary Jeffrey Mackler urged UFPJ to “try to bridge the massive contradiction between the public opposition to the war and our ability to mobilize this opposition.” He did not raise any criticisms of the group’s orientation to the Democratic Party, however, and simply called on the delegates to redouble efforts to build large demonstrations.

Mackler has a long history of opportunist politics in Socialist Action and, before that, as a member the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) during the Vietnam War period. At that time, the SWP played a role similar to that of Socialist Action and other groups do today—attempting to prevent the development of an independent political movement of the working class against the capitalist system by keeping antiwar sentiment confined to organizations like UFPJ.

Socialist Action was formed out of the SWP after several of its leading members were expelled, but it continues to advance the same political conceptions. In the end, Socialist Action, the International Socialist Organization and the other fake-socialist tendencies in UFPJ, whatever their phraseology, are just as incapable of breaking with the Democratic Party as Hayden, Cameron or LeBlanc.

The various groups that comprise UFPJ, combining varying degrees of cynicism, opportunism or simple naïveté, share the view that the development of a movement against war is not a political question. They argue that it’s possible to oppose the conflict in Iraq without analyzing its origins or driving forces in capitalist society and elaborating a political perspective based on that analysis.

For this reason, there was no attempt during the conference to provide a political analysis or relate the tactical debates being discussed to developments in the broader national and international political situation. Noticeably absent was any discussion of social relations in the United States and the impact of growing social inequality.

The tendency represented by UFPJ has its equivalents in other countries, a fact that was highlighted during a session at the end of the second day. A number of figures were brought forward to rally the audience. Among these was Hashmeya Hussein, the president of the Iraqi Electrical Utility Workers Union, which is affiliated with the Communist Party-dominated General Federation of Iraqi Workers. The Iraqi CP is part of the Iraqi parliament, has collaborated with the occupation and has run for elections on the same slate as former prime minister and CIA asset Iyad Allawi.

Also speaking was Jeremy Corbyn, a MP in the British Parliament and a “left” member of the Labour Party, which, under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair, has been the principal ally of the Bush administration in Iraq. Corbyn, a perennial figure at such affairs, denounced Blair for supporting the war, but did not consider it relevant to explain why he nevertheless remained in the Labour Party.

Organizations such as the UFPJ underscore the unanimity within the broad array of left-liberal groups in the United States. All of them are tied—whether there be one, two, or three degrees of separation—to the coat-tails of the existing two-party political set-up. Some employ socialist phraseology on occasions, but only to give a certain degree of credibility to their maneuvers around and within the political establishment.

As the population begins to come into increasing conflict with the war and the policies of the American ruling class, the UFPJ attempts to act as a safety valve for the political establishment. It has no solution to any of the issues confronting millions of people seeking a political answer to

unending war and barbarism. A serious movement against militarism and inequality must be rooted in a political critique of and break with this whole milieu.



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