

# US Congress votes to withdraw troops

BY MARTIN THOMAS

FOR the first time since the US/UK invasion of Iraq in 2003, US withdrawal from the country looks like a short-term prospect.

On 12 July the US House of Representatives voted to set a deadline of April 2008 for the withdrawal of almost all American troops from Iraq. The next day two senior Republican Senators, John Warner and Richard Lugar, tabled a bill that would reduce the role of American forces in Iraq to the protection of Iraq's borders and of American bases.

Andrew Sullivan, who, though he is a hard-line neo-con and a supporter of the 2003 invasion, has long advocated that the US "scuttle", wrote in the *Sunday Times* on 15 July: "Some time in the next six months there will be a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq".

Iyad Allawi, who was prime minister (effectively by US appointment) in the Transitional Government of 2004-5 and who tried and failed earlier this year to assemble a majority in Iraq's parliament to oust current prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and install Allawi himself, more or less as a dictator, says he "fears" US troops will start to withdraw next year.

The moves in the US Congress were triggered by an official US report on progress under the "surge" of extra US troops to Iraq since early 2007. The surge was supposed to put at least some lid on the simmering sectarian civil war and the guerrilla war by Islamist Sunni Arab groups against the US forces and the Shia-dominated Baghdad government, and thus allow for progress in political and civil reconstruction.

Although US President George W Bush blustered about it, the report showed essentially no progress on anything important.

The "surge" has failed, as we predicted in *Solidarity* that it would. It has not, or not yet, tipped Iraq head-first into the lowest depths in either of the two ways it threatened to — by opening a two-front war which would pit the US forces in direct battle against the most obstreperous Shia Islamists, the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr, as well as the Sunni Islamists, or by triggering the collapse of the Maliki government — but it has failed.

The Maliki government has even less grip on the country than it had six months ago. Such is the everydayness of death and terror in Baghdad that the US State Department has now instructed its employees in the Green Zone — the one area in Baghdad supposed to be kept fully safe by the huge US military forces — not to venture outdoors, even in the Zone, without body armour.

Maliki has declared blandly that the Iraqi army is capable of controlling the country



Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki

and the US can withdraw any time it likes.

As US academic Juan Cole commented: "What gives a person pause is that al-Maliki's Da'wa Party has no militia. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council [SCIRI], has a paramilitary [force] of some 15,000 or more Badr Corps militiamen.

"Al-Hakim, who is the one who should be confident of his troops, has repeatedly called for US soldiers to remain in Iraq. If the Badr Corps, the most disciplined and well trained Arab force in Iraq, cannot do the job in al-Hakim's view, then the green and feckless Iraqi military certainly cannot.... Maliki is engaging in wishful thinking".

Right-wingers like Sullivan do not base their advocacy of withdrawal on the idea that the Maliki government could hold on without US scaffolding. The idea, once popular among some US politicians, that the threat of US withdrawal could be an effective tool to get the Maliki government to "shape up", has few takers now. As Sullivan writes: "Even worse horrors will probably unfold. In areas of sectarian conflict the violence could be dreadful even by Iraqi standards... Many innocents will die".

Bush, and any of the likely candidates to succeed him as President, don't care too much about innocents dying. What they do care about is that no-one can suggest a plan to extricate them from their folly that does not almost certainly mean a surge for political Islam; the collapse of Iraq; serious destabilisation of governments allied to the USA in this strategically-vital, oil-rich region, such as those of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt; and a boost for Iran.

Such facts suggest that US withdrawal may well not come as soon as Sullivan thinks. Pretty well all the official US "withdrawal" schemes amount to something rather less than withdrawal: some US forces would remain, to police Iraq's borders, to protect US interests, or to pursue ultra-Islamist groups like al-Qaeda, and it is difficult to see how those forces could avoid being dragged into battles beyond their remit.

Still, the failure of the "surge" has made withdrawal more likely.

From a socialist point of view, there is one plus to this: the risk of the USA invading other countries will be seriously reduced, and for several years to come, by an official US admission of catastrophe in Iraq.

But that gain is pretty much something already acquired. To see no other factors but that, and therefore to applaud the signals of withdrawal without reservation, would be to ignore important other factors.

Possibly Iraqi Kurdistan, if it managed to come out of the civil war as a functioning unit, without suffering invasion from Turkey, would retain some space for democratic political life; but, outside that, full-scale civil war in Iraq, almost certainly leading to the victories for Islamist clerical-fascist formations in the various segments of a dismembered Iraq, would bring the crushing of the much-harassed, but still living, Iraqi labour movement. It would close off the possibility of democratic self-determination for the peoples of Iraq for a long time to come.

It is not our place, as socialists, irreconcilable opponents of US imperialism, and militant opponents of the 2003 invasion, to call for the US to stay longer; nor could it conceivably have any useful effect if we did call for that. The US administration is unlikely to come up with any new scheme in Iraq less counterproductive than the "surge".

Our priority in all circumstances must be solidarity with and support for the Iraqi labour movement which has emerged since 2003, and which, hard-pressed though it is, represents Iraq's best hope for non-sectarianism and for democracy. Our priority must be to work to maximise whatever small chance there still is that the labour movement can live through the disaster, and emerge as a force to remake Iraq in the future.

# Smoking ban: New Labour doesn't care about workers!

BY SOFIE BUCKLAND

SUNDAY 1 July saw the introduction of the controversial "smoking ban", outlawing smoking in "enclosed public spaces" (train station platforms as well as buildings, for example) and workplaces. As a smoker it's a little irritating to no longer be able to enjoy a smoke with a pint, but there's little justification socialists can give for not supporting a ban — passive smoking is really quite obviously harmful, whatever the tobacco company sponsored research might say, and workers shouldn't be subject to it on the job.

The "liberal" left view, characterised by Christopher Hitchens in the *Guardian*, seems to be that bar and restaurant workers should just get another job if they don't like it — ignoring the fact these workers are often the most vulnerable; where do they suggest unskilled bar workers go if all bars allow smoking? Forcing workers to choose between their health and their job is just wrong, with a logic that could be applied to any health and



Smoking in enclosed public spaces is illegal

safety demand — although health and safety is hardly the government's rationale for bringing in the ban.

Whilst I'm not in favour of agitating against this ban, there are problems with it. The government claims that 600,000 smokers will give up because of it, which is no bad thing. However, they back this up with figures on how much the NHS will save treating smoking-related diseases — not so much "give up, it's bad for you" and "give up, we're not prepared to fund the NHS properly". Like the requirement to lose weight before being treated for some conditions, linking availability of treatment to certain lifestyle changes somewhat undermines the idea of a universal health service, not to mention exposing the government's concern with reducing the cost of the NHS.

There's also an issue of workers' control — why ban smoking rooms from offices when they could be organised so no non-smoker had to clean them? In reality, bosses are probably more concerned with accommodating smoking habits into the working day (and the amount of time not working that implies) than with their employees' health. Not smoking in workplaces like offices appears to have been much less controversial than not smoking in pubs — probably because most people don't think of pubs as workplaces, but places to go to get away from work.

So what's the next step? It looks like outlawing smoking in cars may follow the public spaces ban, with suggestions by some of the press that banning tobacco entirely might be on the cards. Although if the government was genuinely serious about protecting public health it would make sense (from a nanny state point of view, anyway), a ban on tobacco is extremely unlikely — it's neither in the interests of government, in terms of tax revenue from cigarettes, or the interests of the huge tobacco industry. And clearly, these things are far more important to the Labour government, when you really get down to it, than public health, no matter what their press releases say.

## Roy Webb

(6 October 1949 – 15 June 2007)

FORMER AWL member and long-standing sympathiser, Roy Webb, has died following a short illness.

Roy had lived with multiple sclerosis and had been very seriously disabled by the condition for many years. But he never allowed the physical problems MS caused him to stop his campaigning activity. I remember seeing him outside a Sinn Fein meeting at the Friends Meeting House, Euston, having driven himself to the rally. He had real difficulty getting out of the car, never mind getting along the road and into the venue, but was determined to continue political activity.

Roy's funeral, in Honor Oak, south east London, was attended by around 100 people including Southwark Labour Party members and a large number of disability rights activists. Roy had devoted much of his time in recent years to the fight for equality and adequate provision for those with disabilities.

Roy joined our organisation around 1987. I remember regular discussions in the Grove pub in Camberwell arguing about the Labour Party. We won him over to our Labour Party perspective and he signed up. He was a member of a large Socialist Organiser group in south London and helped produce a workplace bulletin for council workers in Southwark. He was particularly active during the poll tax battles among tenants on his estate on Dog Kennel Hill in Dulwich.

Although his activity in the AWL dwindled in the 90s he continued to turn up to our events, usually making sure he came to some of our annual summer school.



Roy Webb

The notice handed out at his funeral included these words — comments made by those who knew him and comrades in various struggles. They seem to me strikingly true: "Roy never said no to anyone who needed help."

"Roy once told me that there was so much he wanted to do in his life. He couldn't possibly do everything, but he wanted to be able to look back on his life knowing he had done everything he possibly could."

"Roy was a gentle, principled and thoroughly good man."

"He was a committed socialist and trade unionist."

"Roy never left anyone out on our journey for equal rights."

Mark Osborn