



## 1 million could join grassroots protest

Groundswell of public opinion across country surprises most hardened campaigners

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From the outside it is hard to believe that the former brewery on Brick Lane, in the heart of east London's Bangladeshi community, is the nerve centre of perhaps the most remarkable political coalition for a generation. Inside, it is a scene of organised chaos: in the tiny office upstairs the phones are ringing off the hook, while downstairs a team of eight volunteers are frantically constructing placards from wooden poles and posters.

Leaflets and stickers are piled high in the corners, while the walls are covered in lists of coaches and trains departing from all four corners of the country and due to arrive in London on Saturday morning for what organisers of the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) rally are predicting will be the broadest grassroots "mobilisation" in history, dwarfing the anti-Vietnam opposition in the 1960s and the peace movement of the 1980s.

More than 450 organisations, including such disparate groups as Greenpeace, Americans Against the War and Britons versus Bush - a group of Bedford cabdrivers - have joined 11 political parties including the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, and affiliated themselves to the STWC. A healthy number of celebrities have also signed up, from Blur's Damon Albarn to the architect Lord Rogers.

"Our best recruiting agents have been Bush and Blair," says Andrew Murray, chair of the national coalition. "The only people who we are not attracting are high Tories and new Labour cheerleaders." "It's a new movement, out of anyone's control. It's like a tidal wave. The people organising it are not in control. It has its own momentum," says Andrew Burgin, of Housman's bookshop in London and a member of the steering committee. For weeks organisers have been confidently predicting that attendance at the rally on Saturday will top 500,000, easily outstripping the autumn's Countryside Alliance march. But now they are daring to believe that the turnout may even outstrip their own original estimate, and the talk is that there could be a million people or more descending on Hyde Park.

National organisers sense that support may have doubled in the past six weeks and has not yet peaked, a feeling confirmed by local groups. "We had two people in our group before our first meeting and 100 after," says Jane Mayes of the Carlisle coalition. "We have now booked four coaches and will probably book another two. We have more than 3,000 signatories and last week the local art college students had a sit-in. It's really snowballed. "I've been involved in protest stuff since I first went on the Aldermaston march as a child and I've never known such strong public opposition to any government policy, such anger and such determination from people to have their views heard. People are not at all equivocal about it - they don't care much about UN resolutions and "proof" - they just seem to think it's a crazy and dangerous idea and can't really believe that Blair could be serious about it."

### **Shoestring**

Back at the STWC headquarters the coalition's organisation is, by its own admission "fairly chaotic", with only two paid employees and a handful of volunteers. "It's pretty ad hoc. No instructions go out to groups. We just say the days and the rest is up to locals," Mr Murray says. "It's run on a shoestring. The national coalition acts as the main focus but there's lots of other anti-war things going on without us at all."

According to Lindsey German, another member of the steering committee, the STWC receives funding from two main sources: small individual donations, the largest being in the region of £5,000, and gifts from unions, including the FBU, the firefighters' union, and NATFHE, the university and college lecturers' union. In January the coalition also launched a national membership scheme with a £20 fee (£12 for the unemployed). So far they estimate that between 3,000 and 4,000 people have signed up. Ms German says she has no idea how much money has passed through the STWC coffers since the campaign was launched, although she estimates it is probably in the region of hundreds of thousands of pounds.

"At the moment we are getting quite a lot of money in, but there have been quiet times when we have barely been able to afford the rent on the office. Now it is substantially more, but we have still not got a large income, and with the outgoings for the rally we are certainly not going to make a profit." Hiring the stage for Hyde Park is costing £6,000, while the bill for the wooden handles of the 15,000 placards that will be handed out to protesters is £5,000.

The Daily Mirror, the unofficial media sponsor of the STWC, is paying the £10,000 cost of hiring a big screen for the day as well as making thousands of branded leaflets. Meanwhile, the cost of hiring coaches and special trains to bring the hundreds of thousands of protesters to the capital is being met on the whole by local organising groups.

By yesterday afternoon Ghada Razuki, a volunteer at Brick Lane, had only counted as far as the letter I for Ipswich on her alphabetical list of towns and cities sending coaches. "I've already reached 500," she says in a tone of slight bemusement. "Devon sent six coaches for the last march but 35 are coming this time...every group that has phoned up seems to be bringing at least three times the amount of people they brought last time." The national Stop the War Coalition was set up on September 21 2001, 10 days after the terror attacks on the US.

There had already been a dozen small anti-war meetings around the country, but at a public meeting in London, 2,000 people heard Tony Benn, Bruce Kent, Will Self, Tariq Ali, George Monbiot and others call for "the broadest possible alliance" against a probable war in Afghanistan. The next day 6,000 people demonstrated across Britain and a week later, 500 people, including trade unionists from Aslef and the RMT, CND members and Muslim parliamentarians, went to the coalition's first organising meeting in London. "The whole thing was a surprise," Mr Burgin says. "I had been on the left a long time but you could see that here was something completely new." In the next 10 days there were 50 small peace marches and vigils and the core of the grassroots war opposition emerged: the traditional left, drawn strongly from the Socialist Workers party and peace groups, joined by anti-globalisation and green campaigners and elements of the Muslim community. "It was very important for us to get the Muslim community on board at an early stage," Ms German says. "We could have had a Muslim anti-war movement, a trade union and leftie anti-war movement and a pacifist movement. That would have weakened all of them."

The Muslim community protested for the first time in great numbers at a CND-organised rally

backed by the coalition on October 13, when an estimated 50,000 people marched in London. Five weeks later the coalition's own march attracted an estimated 75,000-100,000 people. By then there had been protests in more than 50 cities and the seeds of a mass movement were sprouting. By March last year almost every city and many small towns had set up local coalitions. Many of their meetings, they reported, were the largest political gatherings in their communities for years. The national coalition then surged ahead as the large Muslim Association of Britain affiliated, along with several political parties and trade unions. Tony Benn and anti-war MPs including Alice Mahon, George Galloway, Jeremy Corbyn and Alan Simpson and coalition members addressed public meetings the UK. As the US turned attention to Iraq, the scale of the grassroots opposition mushroomed.

On September 28 400,000 people - twice as many as expected - marched in London. Three days later 300 direct action protests were held around the country. Small towns such as Beccles, Barnstaple and Lymington experienced what were quite probably their first demonstrations ever. Last month the national coalition held its second annual conference and the organisation was given a more democratic footing, with every local group sending one delegate, and national trade unions six.

A 55-strong core steering committee was elected. It includes Arthur Scargill, the editors of several leftwing publications, trade unionists, Socialist Workers party members, the Council of Mosques, and the Committee for Palestinian Rights, Globalise Resistance and traditional peace groups. But the hard left make-up of the steering committee has led to the emergence of another anti-war group called Our World Our Say. Over the past few weeks it has been placing full-page advertisements in a number of national newspapers, including the Guardian, offering people the chance to vote against war with Iraq by filling in a coupon that will be delivered to Tony Blair and urging people to send a "very generous" donation.

### **Enriching**

The campaign is the creation of Tim Walker, who cut his teeth in the anti-apartheid movement and CND during the 70s and 80s. He began his latest campaign with £5,000 of his own money that he used to place a full-page advert in the Independent. The money generated by the ad brought in enough cash to place other ads, and the campaign has so far raised more than £75,000. "What we are doing is complementary to the Stop the War Coalition," Mr Walker said. "We felt there was a gap in the market for people who are passionately against the war but don't know how or where to do anything about it." Although he does not want to say it, the target for the campaign would appear to be the broad spectrum of people, from the centre left to the right, who would not feel comfortable or able to pin their colours to a mast erected by the hard left. Meanwhile, the STWC is happy to work with anybody as long as their aims are the same. "It has been mutually enriching," Mr Murray says. "The longer it goes on, the more people can see this is not just about war in Iraq. It's bringing a different understanding of the world and it may bring a lasting change in British politics."

### **March to Hyde Park: times and routes**

The Don't Attack Iraq demonstration will begin at 12.30pm on Saturday

- There are two assembly points, one in Gower Street for those travelling from the north, and Embankment for London and everywhere else
- The marches will unite at Piccadilly and continue to Hyde Park, where speakers will include Jesse Jackson, Bianca Jagger, Tony Benn and Charles Kennedy
- The rally is due to end at 5.30pm
- For information about coaches, drop-off points, tubes and trains go to the Stop the War Coalition website at [stopwar.org.uk](http://stopwar.org.uk)

