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The War and the Working Class

by MICHAEL ZWEIG

[from the March 31, 2008 issue]

Click [here](#) to see the trade-offs the war has imposed on one working-class city alongside the bounty the war has bestowed on the CEOs of the top military contracting companies.

The government treats its soldiers the way most corporations treat their workforce--as an invisible, disrespected, disposable means to an end that is contrary to workers' interests. Members of the armed forces come mainly and disproportionately from the working class and from small-town and rural America, where opportunities are hard to come by. The "economic draft" operates, in effect, to recruit young people from these communities as they sign up to gain job skills, experience and educational opportunities absent from their civilian lives.

A number of parallel experiences link the lives of soldiers with those of working-class civilians, going well beyond their common discipline of following orders. Consider "stop-loss" as an example. The military reserves the right to extend the deployment time and active-duty status of every soldier beyond the service dates prescribed in their enlistment contracts and mobilization papers. Most soldiers were unaware of this as the Iraq War intensified, but by the start of 2006 the military had enforced its stop-loss provision on 50,000 of them. Outraged soldiers and their families challenged these extensions in court, but they were upheld.

Meanwhile, in the civilian economy, one out of every five full-time hourly

employees worked mandatory overtime--the requirement by management that the worker stay on the job beyond the normal quitting time. Many workers want overtime for the money, but they generally resent being forced into it, especially when it disrupts family plans or taxes their physical or mental strength. While the consequences of stop-loss are more far-reaching, the principle is the same. Both disregard the needs of the workforce and abrogate the expectations working people have of a life outside the control of their employers.

Counter-recruitment activity, an important element of the anti-Iraq War movement, responds to the many ways recruiters imply commitments to prospective enlistees that the military is under no obligation to keep and promise benefits that in the end do not materialize--a pattern with many parallels in working-class civilian life. Common among the misleading enticements are offers of training that will lead to civilian employment in good jobs; education benefits to pay for college costs and even the signing bonuses, \$10,000 or more, that can seem like a fortune to the kids at the desk. The most outrageous reason for yanking back the signing benefits comes when a soldier leaves the military before the full commitment is over because of severe combat injuries. The military, insisting that the benefits are contingent on honorable discharge after completing the full term of service, has moved to take back the signing bonuses that injured servicemembers, unable to complete their tours, have already collected. To combat these practices, young people, often accompanied by veterans with their own stories to tell, are challenging military recruiters in high schools, shopping malls and other places where recruiters seek out volunteers to fill their quotas. Congressional attempts to stop these abuses have so far been unsuccessful.

These bait-and-switch practices are reminiscent of the way corporations demand local and state government subsidies to locate offices and factories in depressed communities desperate for jobs. Such corporations typically promise good jobs and long-term economic stability if local communities underwrite roads and other infrastructure, give tax exemptions for the company's property and profits, and sometimes even give it direct cash subsidies. All too often the company collects the subsidies but fails to live up to its end of the bargain. It fails to create the promised new jobs and moves out of the community when the subsidies end, leaving the local working people and their government depleted and often mad enough to sue, but almost never successfully.

When jobs disappear, workers are supposed to be able to collect unemployment compensation, a program begun in the New Deal era and a critical part of the social safety net. But over the last thirty-five years, unemployment

compensation programs have been cut back and made more inaccessible. At this point, only 35 percent of unemployed workers actually collect these benefits.

In the military we also see problems in the amount and quality of benefits provided to discharged soldiers. Last year's scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center shocked the nation, but veterans' organizations across the country are regularly forced to fend off proposed cuts. Just as corporate employers fight against claims for workers' compensation by injured employees, the military resists treatment for service-related disabilities, such as the psychological damage from post-traumatic stress disorder or the physical aftereffects of Agent Orange from the Vietnam era.

In the United States we rightly have a tradition of civilian control of the military. Our armed services are not independent entities; they are deployed to defend and advance the interests of greatest importance to the civilian leadership that guides the country overall. So it is unsurprising that the basic priorities guiding our military operations overseas should correspond to those that dominate our society at home. That's not good news for working people, here or "over there."

In Iraq the occupation authority under Paul Bremer wiped the slate clean in terms of economic policy, with one exception--it kept in force the 1987 Saddam Hussein decree that stripped all legal protection from unions representing public-sector workers--a large portion of the workforce. Despite formal acknowledgment of union rights in the new Iraqi Constitution, the Parliament has passed no law to protect unions or workers trying to organize them. But then public sector unions are also illegal in North Carolina and many other states. Upon taking office after their election in 2006, the Republican governors of Missouri and Indiana immediately suspended all collective bargaining agreements their states had negotiated with state employees and declared the end of their collective bargaining rights. When Congress and the Bush Administration formed the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, they stripped collective bargaining rights from all DHS workers, even those who'd had those rights in their former agencies, declaring that union protections ran counter to national security. After more than five years of determined opposition and court challenges, the National Treasury Employees Union, which represents 22,000 of these workers, recently forced the DHS to give up its unionbusting power and agree to respect collective bargaining and civil service protections for all its workers.

The Bush Administration has made it clear that it expects the Iraqi Parliament to

pass a hydrocarbon law that opens Iraq's oil reserves to US corporate exploitation, in addition to a law to distribute oil revenues among regions. Congress has made the hydrocarbon law a "benchmark" in all its attempts to tie continued funding of the war to "political progress" in Iraq. But it requires no such benchmark for women's rights (the Iraqi Constitution imposes Islamic law in all family matters) or, of course, for labor rights. US policy in Iraq reflects the same drive toward privatization and increasing corporate power that workers face here in the dismantling of our public sector and its services.

Emphasizing such parallels--and the fact that the best way to show solidarity with US soldiers is to bring them home--a movement to end the war has been growing in American unions. The state federations of labor in Connecticut, Maryland/DC, South Carolina, Vermont and Wisconsin have joined US Labor Against the War (USLAW; uslaboragainstawar.org), this country's first broadly based antiwar organization among workers and their unions (full disclosure: I am on its national steering committee). A coalition of more than 150 union locals, central labor councils, state federations and other labor organizations, USLAW coordinates its activities with Military Families Speak Out, Iraq Veterans Against the War and other veterans' organizations that support the troops with calls for their immediate return. The AFL-CIO, for its part, has called for the rapid withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq. And the ILWU Longshore Caucus is continuing its tradition of political interruptions of work with a call to shut all West Coast ports on May 1 to protest the war, a work stoppage it hopes will spread to other industries.

Labor opposition to the war stems in part from the war's economic cost, counted not just in dollars but in what else that money could buy. So far the war has cost more than \$522 billion (not counting interest payments on the borrowing that has paid the bills and long-term costs for veterans' care). Taxpayers in Louisiana alone have paid about \$4 billion, which could have created more than 47,000 units of affordable housing there, and the jobs that go with their construction. (The National Priorities Project has a thorough accounting on its website, nationalpriorities.org, of the real costs of the war to states and communities across the country. See the [chart](#) in this issue for a visual representation of these trade-offs.)

The movement that working people and their unions have organized supports the troops with calls for their immediate return with full veterans' benefits. It seeks the redirection of funds to serve human needs. And it expresses solidarity with Iraqi workers and their labor movement. Should a new Democratic Administration continue the Iraq occupation while offering to satisfy some of labor's interests as part of its domestic agenda, sustaining this movement will

require additional analysis and new resolve.