



Unionists, Canada and the Afghan War (Herman Rosenfeld and Greg Albo)

On this Saturday October 28, tens of thousands of people across Canada will demonstrate in support of the demand to bring Canadian troops home from Afghanistan. This pan-Canadian day of action is being led by four major organizations: the Canadian Peace Alliance, le Collectif Echec a la guerre, the Canadian Labour Congress and the Canadian Islamic Congress. Hundreds of more organizations, including the Toronto Coalition to Stop the War, are also supporting the call and will be mobilizing to bring their members out for October 28. These protests are against Canadian involvement in Afghanistan, but they are also part of a deepening criticism of Canadian foreign policy in the Middle East as a whole, including the blind Canadian government defence of Israel and the morally reprehensible Canadian embargo on the Hamas government and blockage of Gaza.

The Middle East has been the key testing ground for Canada's new imperialist foreign policy. Canada has long back US military interventions, but usually with some effort to do so through multilateral institutions and with some effort to distance itself from the worst aspects of American policies by an emphasis on 'peacekeeping roles'. This was Canada's response to the American 'war on terror' since 2001 under Prime Minister Jean Chretien: offering specific logistical supports to the American military mobilization, setting up a 'peacekeeping' operation in Kabul soon after the launch of the Afghan war against the Taliban, and staying out the 'coalition of the willing' entering into the war in

Iraq. The previous Liberal government of Paul Martin had begun moving Canada even closer to American policies in the region (and also pro-Israeli positions). This could be seen in the Martin government endorsing Canadian military deployment into a combat role in southern Afghanistan, breaking with the Chretien policy of 'peacekeeping' in Kabul.

But the new Conservative government of Stephen Harper has adopted the American narrative of the Bush Administration that the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York was also an attack on Canada: Canadian (and US) interventions in the Middle East are necessary measures to prevent further terrorist acts on Canada. Indeed, this has become the government's principal justification for the extension of the Canadian mission mandate in southern Afghanistan moving Canadian troops into a direct combat role. And it was also invoked as the reason for the September 2006 decision to increase Canadian combat troops and to deploy a new level of arms in the form of additional fighter jets and tanks with long-range firing capacities. The Harper government inherited the Afghanistan mission but they have defined it as a centre-piece of their government, partly on its own terms and partly in embracing the American geo-political vision of American primacy in the world order and the right to take unilateral pre-emptive military interventions where it determines a threat to exist.

The Canadian foreign policy stance has raised key concerns for trade unionists in Canada. In the wake of the American bombing and attacks on Afghanistan in October 2001, a group of trade union activists initially came together to survey worker opinions and draft a response to the growing pro-war hysteria. Out of those meetings came a pamphlet called, *Terrorism, War and Workers* and a network called Trade Unionists Against the War (TUAW). A few years later, as Canadians debated possible support for the US war in Iraq, TUAW produced a broadsheet explaining why working people need to oppose the US intervention.

Now that Canadians are debating the Harper government's morally outrageous and failing mission in Afghanistan, TUAW has produced a new broadsheet (available in both PDF and HTML versions for distribution at: <http://www.tuaw.ca> that we reproduce

below. It challenges the justification for Canada's failing and totally unjustified war in support of US aggression in Afghanistan, and explains why trade unionists need to call for immediate withdrawal of Canadian and all foreign troops from that country.

Please use this broadsheet as a tool in our efforts to organize inside the trade union movement, and to help to build a base for the anti-war movement amongst the working classes and more widely in popular organizations. And please come out and demonstrate on October 28.

Herman Rosenfeld is a retired member of the CAW and an activist in TUAW. Greg Albo teaches political economy at York University.

Questions That Workers Ask About Canada's Involvement In Afghanistan

Trade Unionists Against the War

Canada is at war in Afghanistan. Many Canadian soldiers have been killed - the highest percentage of lives lost of any of the foreign armies that are engaged there. Canada currently has 2,300 troops in Afghanistan and it seems that almost every day the Harper government is escalating our country's commitment to the "mission" by providing new tanks, more troops, fighter planes, billions of dollars and an open-ended war that could last decades.

We are told that the intervention is helping the people of Afghanistan rebuild their country and prevent the return of the hated Taliban that our soldiers are there to bring democracy, equality and economic well-being for the Afghan people. Even more, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Foreign Affairs Minister Peter McKay tell us that fighting in Afghanistan is necessary to stop terrorism and that it is part of a world-wide struggle for freedom, echoing US President George W. Bush. Leading Liberal leadership candidate Michael Ignatieff calls our involvement there a question of morality.

Yet, in spite of all of these claims, the majority of Canadians either oppose or have grave concerns about Canadian participation in the war in Afghanistan. Many working people share these concerns and are increasingly opposed to the government's policies. Lately, our unions are speaking out against the war, as well. Ordinary Canadians have raised a number of questions about Canadian intervention in Afghanistan. We attempt to address some of them below.

Isn't the current government of Afghanistan concerned about democracy and equal rights?

The current Afghan government was installed as a result of the US intervention in 2001. That government is neither democratic or nor stable and, protected by the American-led occupation force, rules today over an extremely unequal society.

Human Rights Watch estimates that today 60 percent of Afghanistan's legislators have links to the country's warlords. One European diplomat reckoned that about 20 legislators have active private militias and that at least 20 more have been involved in drug smuggling.

In other words, the Afghan government is corrupt, repressive and weak. It is dependent on the occupying armies of the United States, Canada and the other NATO countries. Recently, the most senior British military commander in Afghanistan described the situation in the country as "close to anarchy", with feuding foreign agencies and privately controlled security companies compounding problems caused by local corruption.

What is life like for the Afghan people under the Karzai government?

Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world. According to a young Afghan woman legislator, Malalai Joya, in Afghanistan:

- 700 children and 50 to 70 women die each day for lack of adequate healthcare.
- 1,600 to 1,900 per 100,000 women die in childbirth.
- Life expectancy is less than 45 years.

- 40 percent of the population is unemployed.
- Afghanistan stands 175th out of 177 countries on the UN Human Development Index

Won't the American, British, Canadian and NATO intervention make things better there?

No. The principal goal of the intervention force is to seek out and destroy those who are fighting against the puppet Afghan government. This overwhelming focus on a military solution to the country's problems will not bring economic development or improvement in the lives of the people.

Everyone talks about the opium industry in Afghanistan - what is the issue?

Afghanistan is the world's largest supplier of opium, supplying 92% of the world heroin market. This remarkable statistic reflects the desperate situation facing Afghan farmers. The years of invasion, occupation and war have destroyed the country's fruit, vegetable and industrial production and trade. Farmers are forced to cultivate opium poppies in order to survive. Instead of providing Afghans with legal ways to use opium products (opium is the key ingredient in morphine, codeine and other opiate-based pharmaceuticals) or developing alternative crops, the American occupiers have concentrated their efforts on eradicating the poppy. This has, in turn, has made it more difficult for Afghani's to feed themselves. Meanwhile, the warlords in the Karzai government play a major role in running and benefiting from the opium trade.

Isn't there a danger of religious fundamentalists and terrorists coming back to power, if we leave?

The Taliban government was overthrown by the American-led bombing and military intervention in 2001. But it was replaced by a puppet government, friendly to American interests. The rebels fighting the current government include some of the former Taliban and Al-Q'aida, as well as nationalistic members of different ethnic groups, religious conservatives and others who are disgusted with the continuing occupation of their country by the US and NATO forces and the continuing corruption of the government.

Today, the Karzai government includes many of the same repressive religious extremists that terrorized the Afghan people in the early 1990s. The current constitution and courts make Islamic law supreme. The Americans' allies also threaten the lives of any potential opposition as well as those who dare to argue for equality and political rights. In other words, the current government that we are defending includes both fundamentalists and terrorists.

As journalist Eric Margolis has recently commented: "Western troops are not fighting 'terrorism' in Afghanistan, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper claims. They are fighting the Afghan people. Every new civilian killed, and every village bombed, breeds new enemies for the West."

What about the condition of women and girls in Afghanistan today? Isn't this mission supposed to protect women and girls to get back their rights?

As Afghan woman's activist and legislator Malalai Joya recently noted, "Contrary to the propaganda in certain Western media, Afghan women and men are not 'liberated' at all", because the present government has continued many of the repressive policies towards women and girls. She noted at the Federal NDP convention in September 2006: "I think that no nation can donate liberation to another nation. Liberation should be achieved in a country by the people themselves. The ongoing developments in Afghanistan and Iraq prove this claim."

Amnesty International noted in 2005 that: "Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan is pervasive; few women are exempt from the reality or threat of violence. Afghan women and girls live with the risk of abduction and rape by armed individuals; forced marriage; being traded for settling disputes and debts; and face daily discrimination from all segments of society as well as by state officials....Strict societal codes, invoked in the name of tradition and religion, are used as justification for denying women the ability to enjoy their fundamental rights, and have led to the imprisonment of some women, and even to killings. Should they protest by running away, the authorities may imprison them." (From Afghanistan: Women still under attack - a

systematic failure to protect, May 30, 2005).

Why is Canada in the war?

For all the talk about freedom and democracy, the Canadian mission in Afghanistan is primarily about supporting the United States and redefining Canada's role in the world. Canadian troops were originally sent to Afghanistan to ease the pressure on US troops in Iraq and to curry favour with Bush in order to "make up" for Canada's refusal to participate in the Iraq invasion and the Bush's "Star Wars" anti-missile program.

Many businesspeople and politicians argued that helping the American war effort would help offset US threats to limit investment and trade with Canada. Canadian Chief of Staff Rick Hillier has also pushed for closer integration with the US military.

When all is said and done, the Canadian establishment shares a number of common interests with the American ruling elite: in protecting the interests of large corporations and banks around the world; in helping the US to use its power to guarantee that no country challenges private enterprise; and controlling important sources of raw materials.

This is the motivation for Canadian intervention in Haiti (where we helped to overthrow a democratically elected government that threatened business), our support of Israeli aggression in the Middle East and the protection of corporate rights at home.

Paul Martin's Liberal government supported this mission and Stephen Harper's Conservatives have continued it. Has anything changed?

Like many previous Canadian governments, the Martin Liberals talked publicly about pursuing independent Canadian interests through peacekeeping initiatives while they actually lent aid and support to the Americans. The big difference is that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives have dropped the pretence of independence. They openly support George Bush and identify themselves with the US.

The Harper government, backed by right-wing elements in the military establishment,

also wants Canada to drop its pretence of independence and neutrality and is working to create a foreign policy more openly aligned with American interests. This means that the Canadian military would concentrate on aggressive missions, geared towards fighting ground wars in support of US campaigns against “terrorism” - the role that the military is increasingly playing in Afghanistan.

Canadian Chief of Staff Rick Hillier is a major spokesperson for this point of view, which involves massive investments in armaments and soldiers and a redirection of social resources away from humanitarian aid towards offensive weaponry. In order to succeed, this effort requires a massive propaganda campaign, designed to convince the Canadian people that there is an “enemy” - and that the enemy must be destroyed. This is why Hillier commented that the rebels in Afghanistan are, “detestable murderers and scumbags” who should be killed.

But aren't Canadian forces bringing development and reconstruction, as well as fighting the Taliban?

Most of Canada's politicians and many of our media outlets would have us believe that it is possible to combine reconstruction and humanitarian aid, along with efforts to “pacify” the opposition through military action. This is not true. Issues of development, education, economic growth and social justice must be handled differently. They require fundamental changes in society. The puppet Karzai government is not about to embark on such changes and this is clearly not what the Canadian mission is all about.

Looking at the actual spending of the Canadian mission, we can see that successive Canadian governments don't even believe their own propaganda. Between 2001 and 2006 Canada spent over CDN\$ 4 billion (US\$3.6 billion) on its military deployments, but has spent and pledged less than US\$1 billion for humanitarian and development aid.

A Canadian vet from an earlier war, interviewed in a major newspaper, put the issue clearly: “If they can't get a resolution to it, then bring them home or pull them back and put them on peacekeeping. We don't have a big enough force to be peacemakers. I don't

believe you go into a man's country and shoot him to bring him democracy. It's a funny way of doing it."

We are told that the Afghan people support the US-backed government there. Is this true?

Even though TV accounts show pictures of Canadian troops giving candy to Afghan children, the Canadian army is waging an aggressive war against Afghan rebels, many of whom are fully integrated with the civilian population. This inevitably leads to the death of innocent people. As a result, many Afghans see little difference between the Canadians and the Americans there. Why would they?

After resigning his post, a former aide-de-camp to the commander of the British taskforce in southern Afghanistan commented that: "All those people whose homes have been destroyed and sons killed are going to turn against the British.... It's a pretty clear equation if people are losing homes and poppy fields, they will go and fight. I certainly would."

After the most recent, Canadian-led NATO offensive, supposedly against the Taliban, a Globe and Mail reporter noted that: "Many of the fighters killed - perhaps half of them, by one estimate - were not Taliban stalwarts, but local farmers who reportedly revolted against corrupt policing and tribal persecution. It appears the Taliban did not choose the Panjwai district as a battleground merely because the irrigation trenches and dry canals provided good hiding places, but because many villagers were willing to give them food, shelter - even sons for the fight - in exchange for freedom from the local authorities." What does this tell us about the will of the Afghan people and the reasons they are fighting?

Isn't this a UN and NATO-sponsored mission? Does that matter?

The original US bombing and invasion - Operation Enduring Freedom - was supported by the United Nations, after intense American pressure in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Regardless of this endorsement, it was wrong. The current Canadian mission is

part of NATO. It too is wrong.

Canada is a member of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), a 26-country alliance originally formed at the height of the cold war to “protect the west against a Soviet attack” and to promote American and Western European economic interests in the third world. After the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO continued to tie Western, Eastern and Central European countries, as well as Canada, to the American project of maximizing its global power. The US has used NATO to support its occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are times when the international community of nations should unite to stop a real threat to the world’s peoples. In this case, the Afghan resistance is not a threat. The reality is that NATO is helping to extend American power there, acts as an extension of American power.

Should Canada be concerned about “maintaining its commitment” to NATO? Should we be lecturing other countries to increase their commitment to the war?

No! We should be questioning the very existence of NATO and prepare to get Canada out of the organization. Canada could play a leadership role here, as people in other NATO countries are raising the very same questions and concerns.

What is the likelihood of winning the war?

Stephen Harper says, “We will be there as long as it takes”. But there is no end in sight and even military strategists know this.

In a candid comment, Canadian Defence Minister O’Connor - a former arms company lobbyist - recently said, “We cannot eliminate the Taliban, not militarily anyway. We’ve got to get them back to some kind of acceptable level so they don’t threaten other areas.” Even the American Senate Majority Leader, Bill Frist, recently admitted that the war cannot be won militarily.

In any event, what does “winning” mean? If it means keeping the present Afghan

government of corrupt, fundamentalist warlords and their allies in power, do we want to win?

Are we undermining our troops by calling for them to withdraw?

No! When our country sends its military into combat, we have a moral responsibility to be absolutely sure that we are doing so for the right reasons. If the overall mission is wrong - if it is supporting oppression and results in the needless deaths of innocent people, as well as those of our soldiers, and is doomed to failure - our soldiers are needlessly risking their lives for the wrong reasons and need to be brought home.

This is the best way to support our men and women who are fighting there. It is also the way a democratic society makes decisions about military interventions.

What should we do?

Canada's "mission" in Afghanistan must end and our troops be pulled out. We must also pressure the US and other NATO troops to do the same.

Supporters of the war claim that pulling out would allow the "terrorists and extremists" to take over the country, but as we have seen, the government itself includes both.

As well, half of Afghanistan is already controlled by rebel forces. NATO cannot stop this. Continuing the mission will only postpone the time when Afghans can begin controlling their own destiny. Our presence there needlessly increases the toll of civilian and military deaths, making it more difficult for real reconstruction and development to begin.

Withdrawal can and should be part of a negotiated settlement. But the Harper government refuses to consider negotiations. Regardless, foreign occupation forces need to be removed. The people of Afghanistan must be free to determine their future without outside interference.

The Soviets tried to impose their vision of society in Afghanistan in the 1980s and they failed. The US has also tried to impose its vision and it is failing as well. Democracy, equality and social justice can only take root from within a society because they must be the work of the people themselves. They cannot be brought from the outside, through an occupying army. As Malalai Joya has bravely noted “No nation can donate liberation to another nation.”

How did this war start?

This conflict has its roots in the American intervention in Afghanistan that began during the cold war.

What do we need to know about the history of this conflict?

The US has a long history of intervention in Afghanistan, which resulted in instability, inequality, poverty, many deaths and injuries and hardship for the people of that country.

In the late 1970s, a regime came to power in Afghanistan that sought to modernize the country and bring in social reforms. It also had close ties to the Soviet Union. In response, the American government sponsored and armed a group of fundamentalist fighters, called mujihadeen, to oppose the government.

The US also hoped to draw the Soviets more directly into Afghanistan, seeking to tie their cold war adversaries down in an unwinnable war. The mujihadeen included some of the most brutal and corrupt warlords in the country as well as the wealthy Saudi Arabian, Osama Bin Laden. The US lavished aid and resources on these movements. The mujihadeen were involved in the opium trade and persecuted Afghans who argued for democracy and social equality. In this way, the Americans built-up the very same fundamentalist forces that they oppose today and undermined the possibility of creating a democratic society, one that was not dominated by religion.

The Soviets did invade in 1979 and after waging a long and brutal war their occupation armies were unable to defeat the mujihadeen. When the Soviets pulled out of

Afghanistan in 1990, the various warlord groups engaged in a bloody four year war among themselves for control of the country. Thousands of Afghans were killed, injured or forced to become refugees. Agriculture and trade were destroyed. These fundamentalist warlords closed women's schools and attacked the real rights of women and girls that had previously existed in Afghanistan.

In 1996 a new group of religious zealots called the Taliban, defeated the other warlords, came to power and succeeded in extending their control over most of Afghanistan, by promising stability and protection from the warlords. Once in power, the Taliban deepened the ruthless and repressive control over women and enforced a strict medieval form of Islamic law. The US refused to oppose them, citing the need for stability (and protection of a proposed oil/natural gas pipeline). But with the growing influence of Bin Laden's Al-Q'aida group inside the country, the Americans began to challenge the Taliban.

The 9/11 attack in New York (by Al-Q'aida operatives), brought a swift and brutal response from the Bush Administration. "Operation Enduring Freedom" unleashed a massive bombing campaign against Afghanistan, using Cruise missiles with cluster bombs, and resulted in the deaths of between 3000 and 3400 civilians. Another 20,000 Afghans reportedly lost their lives due to disease and starvation as a result of the invasion.

This bombing campaign was unnecessary. The Taliban made a number of offers to negotiate the surrender of Bin Laden and the expulsion of Al-Q'aida fighters, but Bush refused to talk. The US was more interested in sending a message about its power, than seeking justice for the 9/11 attacks.

Ultimately, the Taliban were driven out by a group of warlords called the Northern Alliance, allied with Washington. These warlord groupings included many of the same corrupt and repressive factions that the Americans had originally bankrolled in the 1980s. In the process, the American authorities arrested hundreds of "suspected terrorists" and subject them to torture and humiliation in Guantanamo and elsewhere, in violation of the Geneva Accords.

Trade Unionists Against the War (TUAW) is an organization of Canadian trade union members. It has produced this pamphlet to build support for a growing movement in opposition to the war in Afghanistan and Canadian participation in that war. As Canadian working people learn more about the realities of this intervention and occupation, we have a special contribution to make to the anti-war movement. As individuals, as well as in our capacities as members of unions and other organizations, we can convince our co-workers, friends, family and neighbours of the need to pressure our government to bring the troops home. TUAW can be contacted at the website <http://www.tuaw.ca>

LABOUR PEACE BRUNCH STEELWORKERS HALL 25 Cecil St., Toronto 11 am
Saturday, October 28.

BRING THE TROOPS HOME NOW! Rally and march 1:00pm United States Consulate
360 University Avenue(between Dundas and Queen; nearest subways: St. Patrick and Osgoode)

“Support our troops and bring them home now!”

Toronto rally and march organized by Toronto Coalition to Stop the War. TCSW is Toronto’s city-wide anti-war coalition, comprised of more than fifty labour, faith and community organisations, and a member of the Canadian Peace Alliance. See: <http://www.nowar.ca> or contact at stopthewar@sympatico.ca.

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