

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE FIRST YEAR OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO END THE IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN WARS AND OCCUPATIONS

Address given by **Marilyn Levin**, member, National Assembly Administrative Body,
and

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to the National Antiwar Conference held July 10-12, 2009 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

July 10-12, 2009, 255 people representing diverse organizations and constituencies from all over the country came together in Pittsburgh:

- 1) To look at where we are today,
- 2) To articulate our long range goals to rejuvenate the antiwar movement towards building a massive movement capable of forcing an end to their wars and occupations, to take our money back from the war machine to meet pressing social needs, and to save our planet for our children, and
- 3) To develop and vote for action plans as steps to realize these objectives.

All of our major objectives were accomplished and we leave today with a comprehensive action agenda to carry us through to next spring. Everyone had a chance to speak and differences were aired without rancor or splits to achieve unity in action.

Friday night's speakers, along with many conference participants, grappled with how to unify and broaden the movement. Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, we presented a great roster of workshops covering the major issues we face today. Saturday night's rally was dynamic and inspiring.

There were two highlights of the conference for me. First was the international component where activist comrades joined us from Canada and courageous labor leaders of powerful mass movements in Haiti and Guadeloupe reminded us that imperialism and the struggle against it are global. There was a statement by members of the Viva Palestina aid convoy detained in Egypt. We passed motions in solidarity with the struggles of the people of Haiti, Honduras, and Palestine.

The second highlight was the discussion on Iran, where, in spite of strong passions stirred up by the rapidly evolving events there, we were able to illuminate the issues and debate our differences. Finally, we were able to agree on a unity position that all could embrace, as well as meeting the foremost call of the Iranians - US Hands off! No Sanctions! No interventions! Self-determination for the Iranian people! A wonderful example of a united front -- as inclusive as possible and taking principled positions that most will accept and act on.

So what is the National Assembly? What you saw this weekend explains who we are and how we function.

Democracy. All were invited and all perspectives welcomed. There was acceptance of the will of the conference even when it diverged from the proposals put forward by the leadership body. We were especially gratified that representatives from all the major antiwar coalitions came and addressed our conference.

Our willingness to struggle for unity and compromise when needed in order to move forward, as evidenced by a leadership that did not impose personal political views on others in service to unity.

An organization that admits to and learns from its mistakes and accepts its limitations when the unity we seek can't yet be achieved.

An organization that has built a growing cadre of leaders that has developed trust, a structure that works, and a strong working relationship.

And finally, confidence, vision, and optimism. Confidence that we can provide leadership in rebooting our movement. A vision regarding how to accomplish that and an understanding of the necessity for these kinds of conferences leading to action. Optimism that masses of people will move in opposition to these horrendous policies that bring death and destruction and that they will have the power to change the world.

I've been asked to give an assessment of the first year since our initiation as an ongoing network with a mission, from our first conference in June, 2008 until today. Last year, we weren't sure anyone would come and lo and behold 400 people came together in Cleveland to inaugurate a year of activities and set up a structure to maintain our work. A lot has transpired in that year and the National Assembly is well on its way as an established organization recognized throughout the movement as providing leadership and promoting a direction towards growth.

I need to start a little earlier and go back to why the National Assembly was called into existence in the first place.

What we saw, in the spring of 2008, was a movement at a low ebb - one that was shrinking rather than growing in spite of the war dragging on -- this while the antiwar sentiment couldn't be higher, and the disapproval rating for the Bush Administration couldn't have been lower. From the high point of the largest action against the Iraq War in September, 2005 which drew 700,000 people, there was a pulling away from mass action by significant sections of the movement which supported electoral politics as the central strategy, in spite of a recurring pattern of disappointment when Democratic "antiwar" candidates voted again and again for war and war funding, and a split between the two major national coalitions, UFPJ and ANSWER, one that continues to this day. For the first time in five years, there was not enough unity or mass action perspective for any national demonstrations to take place marking the 5th year of the occupation of Iraq. Fundamentally, there was a vacuum of leadership.

Some far-sighted people like Jerry Gordon and Jeff Mackler, with experience gained from leadership in the last powerful antiwar movement that ended the Vietnam War, felt impelled to act. They began to organize a base of diverse but like-minded activists committed to building and expanding an effective antiwar movement in this country. The vehicle to accomplish this was the first national assembly, a national conference to pull activists together, to analyze the present state of the movement, to discuss where we needed to go and the actions that were needed to get us there.

We developed a unity statement with five basic principles that we hold today as the basis for where we stand:

- 1) Unity - all sections of the movement working together for common goals and actions;

- 2) Political Independence - no affiliations or support to any political party;
- 3) Democracy - decision-making at conferences with one person, one vote;
- 4) Mass Action - as the central strategy for organizing while embracing other forms of outreach and protest; and
- 5) Out Now - the central demand to withdraw all military forces, contractors, and bases from the countries where the U.S. was waging war on the people.

It seems simple but no one else saw it that way. Our conference was unique in the history of the present movement.

The organizers didn't know what the mood and composition or strength of the conference would be, so we were cautious and minimal in the program we posed to the conference. We focused on Out Now from Iraq and modest action proposals, not being strong enough to initiate national actions on our own. The conference participants were ahead of us and ready to tackle the larger issues. Proposals were passed to add "Out Now from Afghanistan", "End U.S. Support for the Occupation of Palestine", and "Hands off Iran" to our set of demands, and given what has transpired in these areas, we were well prepared to take on a major role.

October 10th actions held in 20 cities were endorsed as well as a call for December actions building towards what we hoped would be unified, nationally coordinated bicoastal mass actions in the spring of 2009, the 6th year of the Iraq occupation. When Gaza was brutally assaulted, we joined with ANSWER and others to march in Washington and to demonstrate in the streets all over the country, and we're still working under Palestinian leadership to bring justice and relief to a beleaguered population.

We made a concerted effort to find a common date for spring bi-coastal mobilizations. As you know, ANSWER chose March 21st as a day of united protests which we endorsed, while UFPJ called for a national march on Wall St. on April 4th. A number of National Assembly supporters who were also delegates to the UFPJ conference in December formed a mass action unity caucus and went to the conference with a resolution to allow delegates to vote for one or both actions but this was rejected. We'll keep trying for 2010. The National Assembly endorsed and built both actions and marched behind our signs with our demands. The demonstrations were small (but spirited) and still of major importance.

For us, it's quality, not quantity, as we position ourselves to be in the forefront as the pendulum swings in our direction once again.

Some take the position that mass demonstrations are not effective, unless we can pull 100,000 protestors into the streets. This is short-sighted and does not address how we get from small to large. Any successful movement for change doesn't start with 100,000 people, and there has never been significant social change without mass actions. I remember my first anti-Vietnam war demonstration was in 1963 in Detroit and we had 15 people. In 1965, SDS called the first national march against the war in Washington. 25,000 people turned out and we thought it was huge!

Everyone talks about reaching out to the thousands of young people who mobilized to elect Obama. We agree, but we say the way to do this is by offering education and

action. Action beyond calling, and emailing, and faxing the politicians they placed in office.

Why are mass demonstrations so important to building a powerful movement? It is because they accomplish so much in the process of building them. They provide:

Continuity. You can't build anything by starting anew each time. Each action should lead to the next action or open national conference, with success building upon success. We need a continuity of leadership that builds trust and a reputation for integrity, and that learns lessons to improve. We need a continuity of organization and structure that can implement the tasks before us.

Visibility. Actions in the street give heart to the people the U.S. is attacking and occupying, letting them know that they are not alone. Mass actions create solidarity, offering support to anti-war soldiers, vets and their families, and a counter-force to the economic draft facing our youth, and they strengthen and deepen the antiwar sentiment of the people.

Inspiration. New people are brought into the movement, especially the youth, through activism. Have you ever talked to young people coming to a mass demonstration for the first time? They are inspired and thrilled to hear powerful speakers who are leaders of social justice movements and soldiers resisting the wars. They see they are not alone and get a taste of the power of large numbers of people marching together. They are energized to go home and join with others to continue to organize opposition to brutal U.S. wars and occupations. This is the way to reach out to the Obama supporters.

Explanation. An analysis of what is going on is offered along with tying together what seem at first to be disparate elements, i.e., war is tied to the economy, the war budget, bail-outs of the rich, the lack of basic needs being met, justice denied, and the impoverishment of the people.

Pressure on Government. People in this country are taught to be quiet. We're told that our job is to elect officials whom we agree with periodically and then go home and wait while they fix things. This conveniently maintains the status quo but it sure doesn't put pressure on them, or scare them, or force social change. Mass actions provide the most effective way to make significant change happen.

Let's look at the present period. Obama's election was based in large part on the hopes and aspirations of Americans for peace and a better life based on the promises and assumed promises that were made of peace, justice, and prosperity, which have not and will not be met.

Contrary to expectations, the previous administration's policies are continued with a more handsome and articulate face. We all know that rather than winding down, wars and interventions are escalating and the rapacious greed of this immoral system knows no bounds.

Simultaneously, the economic crisis is causing terrible hardship for working people and for people who are no longer able to find work and their families. They are using this self-created financial disaster to further cut the standard of living and eliminate a secure future for older people and the young.

It was very moving and yet appalling to see this visually demonstrated when Robin Alexander of the United Electrical Workers Union asked people in the audience to stand who were unemployed, personally knew of soldier casualties, lived in communities where services were being cut, or who were otherwise negatively impacted by the wars and the failing economy. Nearly the entire room, a microcosm of the wider society, was standing by the end of that exercise.

It is inevitable that the present period of quiescence and hanging on to the hope that Obama and the new Congress will save us will come to a crashing end. People will not sit idly by forever while the world around them collapses. We are already seeing the beginnings of stirring. There is a greater willingness to go out in the streets to protest. There is more organizing taking place on campuses, more young people joining the movement. The many proposals for October actions are an indication that there is a widespread awareness of the need for actions this fall and the conviction that the movement must find common dates.

Brian Becker, National Coordinator of ANSWER, urged that we all work together to mount nationally coordinated actions next spring. Michael McPhearson, Co-Chair of UFPJ and Executive Director of Veterans for Peace, announced his support for October 17 and his willingness to do what he could to spur unified actions in the spring of 2010. We must have the faith and confidence that the people have the power to end the atrocities resulting from U.S. wars and occupations, and that they will recognize and utilize this power. As this happens, we must build a stronger antiwar movement that is able to provide leadership and the optimism to forge ahead no matter what the opposition throws at us.

The National Assembly to End the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars and Occupations is helping to provide that leadership and the vision that is needed. Although young and small, in one short year, we are now a force to be taken seriously and negotiated with, and by our persistent call for unity and mass action, our demonstrated ability to organize, and our coordinated strategy for revitalizing the movement, we are having an impact larger than our forces would indicate. In some ways, we too are a product of (and some say an antidote to) the 2008 election. To counter the malaise of the movement, we have quietly been building a solid core of activists and leaders around the country that understand the importance of a united front organized around principled demands and mass actions, not just calling Washington politicians when bills come up and crises happen.

At this conference, we have laid out an ambitious program of action that will take us through the spring of 2010. We are proud that we could provide the kick off for national organizing to bring a massive turnout to Pittsburgh for the G-20 protests September 25. Homeland Security is already making preparations to keep protesters hidden and stifle our right to speak out, but we won't be silenced.

Following that, are a series of October building actions, culminating in large local and regional demonstrations on October 17 marking dates of significance related to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and occupations and remembering the legacy of the anti-Vietnam war movement. Throughout the year, we will organize educational programs, support various forms of protest and organize around the inevitable emergencies caused by our government's unholy interventions and threats to other nations.

We have initiated a Free Palestine Working Committee to ensure this work, which includes the growing boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaigns and the efforts to break the siege of Gaza, continues to be in the forefront and fully integrated in our work until justice and self-determination and return is in the hands of the Palestinians.

And lastly, we will continue to advocate for unity of the movement and once again bring thousands to Washington and the West Coast in the spring, to let our government and the world know that the U.S. movement against wars and occupations is alive and will not be quiet.

We will march and continue to march until all U.S. forces come home, bases are dismantled, and the sovereign people of the world have the right to control their own resources and determine their own futures, and the war budget becomes the peace budget.

Don't sit on the sidelines and watch history being made. We urge all organizations to join the National Assembly and to play your part in building and shaping the powerful movement that is coming.

All out for the September 25 G-20 march in Pittsburgh! All out for the actions in early October! All out October 17!

To join the National Assembly to End the Iraq And Afghanistan Wars And Occupations, an organization must subscribe to the five points in the National Assembly's structure memo -- immediate withdrawal, mass demonstrations, unity, democratic decision making, independence from political parties - submit an application form, and select a representative to the Continuations Body, the highest decision-making and action implementation body of the National Assembly between conferences. Go to the website www.natassembly.org for information and an application or email natassembly@aol.com or call 216-736-4704.