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Obama resists pressure to attack Syria

By Susan Webb



Two recent developments sharply ratcheted up pressure for direct U.S. military intervention in Syria: Israeli airstrikes hit sites near Damascus, and accusations intensified that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons. So far, it appears President Obama is resisting the pressure, but that could change if moves for a political solution to the war in Syria do not succeed.

On Tuesday of last week in Moscow, Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced they will work to convene an international diplomatic conference in the coming weeks to negotiate an end to the war. They said they will seek to get representatives of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and opposition leaders to attend. If that happens, and an agreement is reached to end the war, it would halt a two-year-old conflict that has become a magnet for sectarian extremists and threatens to engulf the entire region. If a political settlement is achieved it would also be a big foreign policy success for Obama. But that's a big "if."

Last weekend, U.S. ally Israel launched two missile attacks against reported Syrian government military installations close to Damascus. The airstrikes set off huge explosions. Israeli of-

ficials portrayed the attacks as defensive, saying they targeted missiles being shipped from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, to be used against Israel. Others saw the airstrikes on Syria as a lead-up to an Israeli attack on Iran.

But they could also have been intended to test Syria's defenses and responses, serving as a stalking horse for wider military action, by the U.S. or others.

T H I S W E E K :

- **Obama resists pressure to attack Syria**
- **No U.S. bases in Afghanistan!**
- **Ohio GOP back off "right-to-work"**
- **¡Se unen estudiantes y trabajadores de pizzerías!**
- **San Jose calls for immigration reform**

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The Israeli actions were certainly used that way by U.S. warhawks like Sen. John McCain. McCain, speaking Sunday on FOXNews, said the Israeli airstrikes showed that Syria's defenses were not that strong. "The Israelis seem to be able to penetrate it fairly easily," he said. McCain said the

The crisis would not have become so bloody and dangerous if the U.S. had not over the past year helped funnel money to Syrian rebels.

U.S. could disable Syrian air defenses “with cruise missiles” and by using Patriot missile batteries to set up a “safe zone” for rebels. Michigan Republican Rep. Mike Rogers said the U.S. could enforce a no-fly zone over part of Syria without putting American pilots at risk by using “better technology” - which implies using surface-to-air missiles.

U.S. military leaders and analysts, however, said any such action would require massive U.S. military involvement.

Meanwhile, charges that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons against opponents, first raised last year, reached a new height in recent weeks, with Syrian rebels producing testimony and evidence to bolster the accusations. The chemical weapons issue has been all over the U.S. media. However the evidence is in dispute.

The White House said on April 25 it believed “with some degree of varying confidence” that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons - specifically the nerve agent sarin - against its own people. Prominent figures such as British Prime Minister David Cameron declared it is “very likely” the Syrian government has used chemical weapons. However United Nations commissioner

Carla Del Ponte drew headlines last week when she said testimony from victims of the conflict in Syria suggested that rebels may have used sarin.

“This is not the first time rebel forces in Syria have come under suspicion for using chemical weapons,” said BBC correspondent Bridget Kendall. “But allegations ... coming from a senior UN official is a different matter. Carla del Ponte is a former war crimes prosecutor and serves on a UN commission looking into human rights abuses in Syria. So any comments from her carry weight.”

Del Ponte is a former Swiss attorney-general and prosecutor with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. “I was a little bit stupefied by the first indications we got” from interviews with victims, doctors and others, “they were about the use of nerve gas by the opposition,” she told Swiss TV. She said government troops might also have used chemical weapons, but more investigation was needed.

UN officials later stated there was thus far “no conclusive proof” that either side in the Syria conflict had used chemical weapons.



Sue Webb is co-editor of Peoplesworld.org

No U.S. bases in Afghanistan!

By PW Editorial

In this week's news has come a sobering wake-up call for anyone hoping the end of 2014 will really mark the end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai on May 8 proclaimed that his country “can agree” to give the U.S. nine bases he said Washington seeks.

The White House was quick to back away from Karzai's statement. Answering a reporter's question, Press Secretary Jay Carney asserted that “the United States does not seek permanent military bases in Afghanistan, and any U.S. presence after 2014 would only be at the invitation of the Afghan government and aimed at training Afghanistan forces and targeting the remnants of Al Qaeda.” Carney declined to answer a question about how close President Obama is to deciding U.S. troop levels there after 2014.

Despite the denials, it sounds like Karzai has let a very big cat out of the bag.

Much of what is happening in the ongoing talks remains unclear. But what is clear is that

despite more than 11 years of war and occupation and attempts to train Afghan armed forces, the military situation in Afghanistan remains highly unstable. Taliban forces can mount actions in supposedly secure areas, while the situation of the civilian population remains dire.

And Al Qaeda, the pretext for continuing U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, is virtually nonexistent. As international affairs commentator Conn Hallinan pointed out earlier this year that the only sane course is for the U.S. “to get out, and as quickly as possible.”

U.S. Representative Barbara Lee, D-Calif., earlier this year reintroduced her “Responsible End to the War in Afghanistan Act,” which would restrict Afghanistan war funding. The measure has 40 co-sponsors.

The bill, H.R. 200, is currently before the House Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Affairs. Helping to build support for this measure is one very positive way to respond to the latest news.

It sounds like Karzai has let a very big cat out of the bag.

Ohio GOP back off “right-to-work”

By Bruce Bostick

On May 1 right-wing Republicans introduced in the state legislature three versions of anti-labor “right-to work” legislation - one directed at private industry, another directed at public workers, and a third that would immediately place that legislation on the ballot for referendum. The Ohio AFL-CIO immediately swung into action on the first bill with a huge lobbying effort, involving hundreds of workers at the Capitol for the federation’s legislative conference. The union members buttonholed their lawmakers, demanding “No” votes from them.

“Over 170 workers organized 54 meetings with their legislators and came away with 25 signed statements from them that they would vote ‘No’ on any ‘right to work’ legislation,” according to AFL-CIO Legislative Director Matt Smith.

A quickly called militant rally against the bills sprang up by noon at the Capitol, with hundreds of union workers and supporters chanting “NO on right to work, YES on workers’ rights!” By the end of the workday, hundreds more workers were marching around the Capitol, as part of this year’s May Day mobilization. They also demanded an end to attacks on workers. The labor federation announced that that it, and We Are Ohio, the huge alliance which led the fight that overwhelmingly defeated last year’s attempt to disenfranchise public union workers in Ohio, had set up dozens of meeting across Ohio to mobilize workers, families and supporters against the right-to-work legislation.



“Those backing so-called right-to-work say it’s about individual freedom, but passing legislation that gives more power to corporations to ship our jobs overseas, takes away protections for whistleblowers, reduces pay, benefits and retiree security from all doesn’t sound like ‘freedom’ for workers. This is nothing but a corporate power grab!”

Republican Gov. John Kasich and leading GOP forces at the Statehouse moved rapidly to kill all three RTW bills “for now,” Rep. Ron Maag (R-Lebanon) announced on May 3. Clearly they are showing that they want no part of another huge fight for workers’ rights in Ohio, at least this year. However Ohio union activists generally feel that the Republican majority is only postponing this battle until next year’s lame-duck session, when it will be re-introduced.

“We need to be on our guard,” said Smith, “Republican governors in both Michigan and Indiana publicly stated that they wouldn’t support right-to-work legislation, right before they did support it, and jammed it through in those states.”

Gov. John Kasich and leading GOP forces at the Statehouse moved rapidly to kill all three bills.

San Jose calls for immigration reform

By Henry Millstein

Calls for justice for immigrants and rights for workers rang out all across San Jose as around 20,000 people, according to police estimates, marched three miles from predominantly Latino east San Jose to a rally at San Jose City Hall. The march drew a broad spectrum of supporters from community, religious, and labor groups; among the unions represented were UFCW, AFSCME, SEIU, UNITEHERE, Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA), Painters and Tapers, and United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters.

Union members on the march clearly saw just immigration policy as vital to labor's interest. Sal, a representative of LIUNA local 270, pointed out that 85% of his union members are immigrants. "It's the right thing to do," he said of immigration reform. "We understand that immigration is not the cause of unemployment—it's the policy of the government's 'free trade' agreements that force people to emigrate in search of a better life."

Celica Rodriguez of the Services, Immigrant Rights & Education Network (SIREN), one of the organizers of the march, insisted on the link between current progress on immigration reform and the growth in political activity in the immigrant community: "It's taken us decades to get here, and now is the time. With record-breaking numbers of immigrants that went to the polls we really energized Congress to act. It's the politicians' job to negotiate and compromise—it's our job to tell them what we want!"

¡Se unen estudiantes y trabajadores de pizzerías!

Por Joseph Zimmermann Traducido por Jacques LaPere

Hace tiempo que la Universidad de Wisconsin en Madison se ha encontrado en medio de una disputa entre los activistas para los derechos de los trabajadores y Palermo, una compañía productora de pizza congelada. La Universidad tiene un acuerdo de licencia con dicha compañía productora, con sede en Milwaukee, el cual le permite a Palermo emplear el logotipo famoso de la UW, "Bucky Badger".

La única dificultad es el récord alarmante de Palermo en cuanto a relaciones laborales. Es un récord tan deplorable—y dirigido específicamente a los inmigrantes—que claramente viola las reglas del código de comportamiento de la misma Universidad con respecto a licencias, y tanto es así que el Comité de Licencias Laborales (Labor-Licensing Committee) de la misma Universidad lo ha denunciado. La compañía Palermo ha estado enmarañada en una serie de quejas desde que los trabajadores allí buscaban organizar un sindicato para proteger sus derechos en el lugar del empleo y sus salarios. La compañía productora de pizza despidió de golpe a los que encabezaban los esfuerzos por organizar, mientras que a otros que eran inmigrantes, la compañía los amenazó por su condición migratoria de una manera que el Consejo Nacional de Relaciones Laborales (National Labor Relations Board, NLRB) denunció por su ilegalidad.

Debido a todo ello, las familias

de trabajadores junto con la facultad ha pedido que se termine la relación entre Palermo y la Universidad. En la última reunión de la facultad, le preguntaron directamente al Sr. Ward, Canciller interino de la facultad, por qué no se ha terminado todavía dicha relación de licencia. El Sr. Ward respondió que él iba a esperar hasta que el NLRB emitiera su fallo definitivo antes de tomar medidas sobre la situación. Luego, cuando la compañía salió triunfante, el Sr. Ward dio por resuelto el asunto.

Entonces, sin poder contar ni con los burócratas de Washington, D.C. ni con los administradores de su propia universidad para hacer lo debido, los estudiantes activistas se agruparon y entraron en la oficina del Sr. Ward a fin de obligarle a encararse con el asunto. Como consecuencia de esto, se formó una "ocupación" espontánea de la oficina del Canciller.

El mes que entra, el Sr. Ward, actual Canciller interino, será reemplazado por la Sra. Rebecca Blank, quien más recientemente ha servido como Secretaria de Comercio bajo el Presidente Obama. Sin duda, estos estudiantes otra vez van a levantar su voz en apoyo de la justicia y el buen juicio cuando se trata de prestar el nombre de su Universidad a esa índole de patrones que se aprovechan ilegalmente de los inmigrantes y frustran los esfuerzos de los trabajadores que buscan asegurar el derecho más fundamental de la negociación de los convenios laborales.

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