

Katrina, the Iraq war and the struggle for socialism

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party
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As thousands march this weekend against the Iraq war, the dramatic and tragic events in New Orleans have starkly posed the need for a new, socialist political strategy to guide the struggle against militarism and social reaction.

The massive loss of life and human suffering on the US Gulf Coast are not so much the product of a sudden natural disaster as of a protracted societal disintegration, of which the Iraq war is itself a manifestation.

The abandonment of tens of thousands of poor and working class citizens in the flooded streets of New Orleans without food, water or medicine has laid bare the political, social and moral bankruptcy of American capitalism.

The glorification of the capitalist market, the ruthless subordination of all social interests to the private accumulation of wealth, the rejection of even the most elementary forms of social planning in favor of the unfettered drive for corporate profit—all of this set the stage for the Katrina catastrophe.

So too has the effective ban placed by the ruling establishment and the media on any genuine debate over political alternatives to this system. The relentless vilification of socialism has itself contributed to the horrible price paid in New Orleans.

Nearly two decades ago, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster was proclaimed by the media in the US and Western Europe as decisive proof of the failure of the Soviet system, heralding its downfall—and no doubt it did express the incompetence and indifference of the ruling bureaucracy. Can it not be said with even greater justification that Hurricane Katrina has exposed the failure of American capitalism?

The hurricane brought to the surface some of the most essential features of this system's profound crisis: the social deprivation faced by tens of millions in America and the vast gulf that divides the overwhelming majority of the people—those who work for a wage—from a fabulously wealthy oligarchy that controls both major political parties.

It exposed as well the objective decline of US capitalism, expressed in the disintegration of its infrastructure as well as the incompetence and disarray at all levels of government. The entire world looked on in horror and amazement as the response of the “indispensable superpower” resembled that

of the most impoverished Third World regime.

The criminal negligence and indifference shown by the Bush administration toward the people of New Orleans mirrors the criminality and sadism of the US war in Iraq, which has now claimed the lives of over a hundred thousand Iraqis and more than 1,900 US troops.

Just as the devastation on the Gulf Coast was not merely the product of a natural disaster, the war itself is not some aberration—a conspiracy by a handful of right-wing ideologues. Rather, it is the inevitable product of an American capitalist society in deep crisis.

The war in Iraq was launched in the interests of America's ruling elite. Its principal strategic aim from its origins has been to assert the dominance of US capitalism over the Persian Gulf region and its huge oil reserves, and to deny control of those reserves to Washington's economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

Armed aggression has been employed in Iraq as part of a broader US global strategy of utilizing American imperialism's military supremacy as a lever for offsetting its protracted decline in the world economy—a decline recorded in the unrelenting growth of US debt and trade deficits.

The use of force to lay hold of vital resources and markets has gone hand in hand with the destruction within the US of social programs and attacks on real wages to fund massive tax cuts for the rich. It is a policy of plunder at home and plunder abroad.

The policy of military aggression has been accompanied by the militarization of society. For two-and-a-half years, Washington has falsely claimed the war in Iraq is being waged to “keep Americans safe” from a supposed terrorist threat. Yet, as the abject failure of the government's response to the disaster in New Orleans demonstrated, the safety and well-being of America's working people are its least concerns.

The supposed preoccupation with “homeland security” and the pursuit of a “global war on terrorism” have merely served as pretexts for wars of aggression and attacks on democratic rights. When real disaster struck, Washington's response was martial law.

A new socialist movement is required

The outrage over the Katrina debacle combined with

deepening opposition to the war in Iraq are creating the conditions for a powerful movement of political opposition by working people in the US. If this movement is to succeed in bringing an end to the war and eradicating the conditions of social inequality and poverty exposed by Katrina, it must have an entirely new point of departure—a struggle for the socialist reorganization of society.

Such a movement must be based on the struggle of working people to conquer political power, not the politics of protest and pressure.

There is no doubt that the many thousands of students, youth and working people who march in the streets of Washington this weekend do so out of genuine anger and a burning desire to put an end to a criminal war launched in their name.

But calls by the protest organizers to “bring our demands directly to the policymakers” and “send a clear message to the White House and Congress” serve a definite political purpose. It is to subordinate mass opposition to the war to the Democratic Party and divert the outrage over New Orleans back into the confines of a two-party system that created the conditions for the catastrophe in the first place.

It is high time to learn the lessons of more than two-and-a-half years of protest against the war in Iraq. In the month preceding the 2003 invasion, millions of people marched on every continent to oppose it. This massive, internationally coordinated outpouring revealed the basis for a new political movement, independent of the existing political parties and institutions. Yet protest failed to stop the war, and in the absence of an independent political perspective this mass movement was dissipated.

In the US, opposition to the war was channeled into the Democratic Party based on the illusion that this party could serve as a vehicle to challenge Bush’s policy in the 2004 presidential election. However, the party’s candidate, John Kerry, ran on a platform that claimed the Democrats could wage the war more effectively.

Since its 2004 defeat, the Democratic Party has shifted even further to the right. Those considered likely contenders for the party’s presidential nomination in 2008—Hillary Clinton, Joseph Biden, John Edwards and others—

have accused the White House of lacking a “strategy to win,” or advocated the expansion of the war with the deployment of even more US troops against the Iraqi people.

There is not a single prominent Democrat who is today calling for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq—a demand polls now show is supported by the majority of the American people.

The social gulf that divides the American oligarchy from the masses of people living from paycheck to paycheck finds its political reflection in a two-party system that disenfranchises the great majority of society. These social and political divides are unbridgeable. The system can neither be pressured nor reformed.

The struggle against war, social inequality and the assault on democratic rights can advance only on the path of an irrevocable break with the Democratic Party and the building of a fundamentally new political movement.

This means building a mass political party of working people based on a socialist program for reordering society on the basis of equality and social needs, rather than the piling up of corporate profits and personal fortunes.

This party must advance a program of irreconcilable opposition to imperialism, demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, Afghanistan and wherever else they are deployed to further US corporate interests. It must also fight for holding criminally responsible all those who dragged the American people into an illegal war based on lies.

The vast resources devoted to war and militarism, on the one hand, and tax giveaways to the rich, on the other, must be utilized to provide well-paying jobs, decent housing, education and health care both to the stricken population of the US Gulf Coast and the millions of others who have seen their living standards steadily ground down by the policies of the Democrats and Republicans.

The twin debacles for American capitalism in Iraq and New Orleans make clear that this historic task can be postponed no longer. We urge all those seeking a genuine means of putting an end to war, social inequality and political reaction to read and support the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the Socialist Equality Party.

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