

Socialist principles and the war in the Balkans

May Day meetings in London and Berlin oppose war on Yugoslavia

Our own reporter
8 May 1999

May Day meetings opposing the US-NATO war in the Balkans were held over the weekend of May 2-3 in London and Berlin. The meetings were sponsored by the European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Equality Party of Britain and the Party for Social Equality of Germany.

David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board, was the featured speaker at both meetings. He explained the attitude of the Fourth International to the war against Yugoslavia, condemning the policies of the Clinton administration in the United States and of the European governments, most of them today administered by social democratic parties.

North said that the use of atrocity stories to justify military intervention by the great powers against a small but recalcitrant nation was hardly a new phenomenon. Virtually every war of the twentieth century has begun with claims of atrocities and brutalities committed by those who were being targeted for military violence.

Nor was there anything surprising in the role of social democrats like Blair in Britain, Schröder in Germany, Jospin in France or D'Alema in Italy. Their evolution from antiwar and anti-nuclear activists in the 1960s and 1970s to zealous defenders of the bombing of Belgrade was in a sense a return to the old--the historical role of social democracy, established in 1914 when the German, French and other reformist leaders supported their ruling classes in World War I.

The war against Yugoslavia revealed the aggressive nature of American imperialism in particular, North said. It demonstrated what the world would have looked like after 1945 if the Soviet Union had not existed, if the United States had been able to enjoy a nuclear monopoly for an extended period of time. "What we are seeing now," he said, "is the manner in which US imperialism would have dealt with the anti-colonial movement had it not had to take into account the possibility that it would itself come under attack."

One of the key tasks in combating the propaganda campaign by the American government and media about the

alleged "humanitarian" purpose of the war in the Balkans was to uncover the real material interests, both commercial and strategic, which were at stake in the US-NATO intervention. North cited writings in US foreign policy journals on the significance of the Caspian Sea region, the largest reservoir of untapped oil and gas reserves in the world, and a significant source of gold as well. The mounting struggle for control of these resources has focused the attention of imperialist strategists on the whole southern and southwestern periphery of the former Soviet Union: the Balkans, the Caucasus and trans-Caspian Central Asia.

The war in the Balkans was a dress rehearsal for bigger conflicts to come--with Russia, with China, with India and between the United States and Europe and among the European powers themselves.

Moreover, the transformation of NATO from a defensive pact into an aggressive military alliance which repudiates the principle of national sovereignty and asserts the right to intervene in the internal affairs of non-member countries was of enormous significance. It amounted to the revival of colonialism and the abandonment of the pretence of equality among nations.

The war in the Balkans was placing on the historical agenda all of the unresolved issues of the twentieth century, posed in World War I and World War II.

"War is an accelerator of the historical process," North concluded. "We can be certain that this war is setting into motion, once again, a new process of political differentiation. There was an article in the German press recently, which was rather perceptive. It noted the apparent absence of opposition to the war. The almost deathly silence as bombs are raining on Yugoslavia. How could this be explained, the article asked. Have all the people who protested war in the 70s and 80s and even in the Gulf War, simply disappeared? And the conclusion was a correct one. It said no. The reality is that the political representatives to whom they turned have themselves become pro-war. The opposition is there but it is mute. The opposition has been politically orphaned...."

"That opposition will emerge again.... In the political regroupment that is bound to take place, in the new crystallisation of the basic forces of socialism, the *World Socialist Web Site* is going to play a decisive role."

Chairing the London meeting, Julie Hyland, a member of the WSWs Editorial Board, said, "The *World Socialist Web Site* has won such a response because it is international in scope, because it enables a truly interactive relationship with its readers, and, most importantly, because the critical reawakening it seeks to generate is fulfilling a deep-seated need: the search for a progressive alternative amongst the best elements within the working class, intellectuals and young people.

"If this war has revealed the absolute necessity of a socialist internationalist perspective in combating the terrible social, economic and political catastrophe which imperialism is now creating--not only in the Balkans but internationally--the WSWs is providing the means through which this can be realised."

Chris Marsden, Socialist Equality Party national secretary, also addressed the significance of the war being waged by the social democratic governments that presently rule the majority of European countries: "Now we see the real content of Blair's 'ethics' being played out in the skies over Belgrade. His doctrine of 'international community' and humanitarianism is nothing less than a modern reworking of the 'white man's burden', the rationale used to justify colonial enslavement during the nineteenth century". Moreover, "broad layers of radicals and liberals all over the world have marched step for step with Blair, and even surpassed him in their warlike rhetoric.... It is these forces that are being used to sanctify and sanitise NATO's criminal adventure and sow confusion amongst the public."

Regarding this lurch to the right by those such as Vanessa Redgrave and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Marsden said, "The collapse of the Stalinist states, and the right-wing evolution of the social democratic parties and trade unions, have served to convince them that there is no longer a viable alternative to the status-quo. These individuals are the representatives of a stratum that have been materially prepared to accept the proclaimed 'triumph of the market'....

"The ability of the ruling class to recruit substantial layers of the generation of '68 to its war drive points to something fundamental in the nature of the petty bourgeoisie as a social and political force," Marsden concluded. "What the past years have demonstrated conclusively, is the conjunctural and limited character of the petty-bourgeois opposition to the rule of capital. The only consistently revolutionary class is the proletariat. It alone is the guardian of humanity's future, because only it must seek its emancipation through the abolition of all class and national oppression and the

creation of a truly egalitarian world. There is no substitute for the building of an independent world party of the working people. Only such a movement can win the best, most self-sacrificing and indeed farsighted elements within all sections of society."

At the Berlin May Day meeting Peter Schwarz drew attention to the enormous destruction that had so far taken place in the war against Serbia. Over half of the country's productive capacity has been destroyed and a large part of the economic infrastructure has been devastated. In the past few days, it has been announced that the US is planning to send an extra 10 B-52 bombers as part of the intensification of the war. Every B-52 can drop up to 12 tons of explosive. The 250-kilo bombs are designed for the sort of carpet-bombing or scorched earth tactics employed against the civilian population of German towns such as Dresden at the end of the Second World War, and by the American airforce in Vietnam. Schwarz warned that the present war could very quickly develop into a confrontation on a world scale, and drew attention to a number of arch-conservative politicians in Germany who had come to similar conclusions.

Ulrich Rippert, the chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in Germany, denounced the war propaganda of the Social Democratic Party-Green government. He quoted a document from the time of the First World War that justified it in terms of the struggle for "human rights" and "liberty". The result was the biggest bloodbath in human history.

Rippert spoke on the consequences the war would have for domestic politics in Germany, and above all the fate of the ruling coalition of the SPD and the Greens. It would intensify the assault on the social conditions of the German working class.

Both meetings concluded with a lively discussion and exchange of ideas with the audience.



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