

Australia:

Public meeting draws lessons of Balkans war

Our reporter
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A public meeting opposing the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia and drawing its political implications was held in Sydney on June 20. Entitled “Socialist principles and the war in the Balkans,” the meeting was called by the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. About 100 people participated, including students and young workers, some from the Balkans.

Chairing the meeting, Linda Tenenbaum, the assistant national secretary of the SEP, examined the myths and propaganda behind the US-NATO bombing and the full-scale military occupation of Kosovo. She demonstrated that, far from being “collateral damage”, the killing of civilians and destruction of Yugoslavia's infrastructure was a deliberate campaign to intimidate the entire Yugoslav population.

This itself exposed the lie that NATO's intervention was carried out to prevent a humanitarian disaster. In fact, by intervening into what was a civil war between the ethnic separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Yugoslav army, NATO had *caused* a humanitarian disaster. One fact was barely mentioned in the lurid media blitz underway on the reported discovery of mass graves throughout Kosovo. All the alleged atrocities occurred *after* the NATO onslaught began.

Tenenbaum reviewed the common theme of the Rambouillet Accord, which provided the pretext for the NATO bombing by demanding that the Milosevic regime relinquish all claims to sovereignty over its entire territory, and last Saturday's G8 meeting, which decided to block reconstruction aid to the people of Yugoslavia unless they ousted Milosevic. This ultimatum revealed the war's true agenda: “The installation of a regime totally compliant with the interests of US imperialism.”

Tenenbaum said that despite the NATO-media propaganda campaign, these events were creating grave concerns among broad sections of the world's population. Many of the more thoughtful had begun to turn to the *World Socialist Web Site* for a truthful account. Since March 24, when the bombing began, the WSWs had posted 151 articles on the many aspects of the war, providing a daily counterweight to the mass media.

Peter Symonds, a member of the WSWs international editorial board, showed how the complex origins of the Balkans conflict had been distorted and covered-up by the Western powers and media. For all the demonisation of Milosevic, it was the United States, US-dominated agencies such as the International Monetary Fund, and the other major powers that had encouraged nationalist and secessionist forces in each of the Yugoslav republics, including at certain points Milosevic himself, to further their own interests.

These powers had deliberately exploited the social and political unrest generated by Yugoslavia's sharp economic decline in the 1980s,

caused largely by the austerity measures and economic restructuring imposed by the IMF as part of its debt repayment program. A crucial turning point came with Germany's recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in late 1991. It guaranteed the rapid disintegration of Yugoslavia and a descent into civil war as minorities suddenly found themselves isolated and often persecuted in newly-formed states constructed on ethnic and religious lines.

Symonds traced the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Particularly after the US-brokered Dayton Accord of 1995, which partitioned Bosnia into ethnic enclaves and expelled the Bosnian Serbs, the KLA set out to win the backing of the US and other major powers by provoking reprisals by the Yugoslav army against the Albanian population of Kosovo. “Far from defending the ethnic Albanians from repression, the KLA encouraged it,” he noted.

Middle class radical organisations around the world had aided the US-NATO campaign by depicting the KLA as a legitimate champion of an “independent Kosovo”. In Australia, the Democratic Socialist Party had even insisted that the chief target of the war was not Yugoslavia but rather the KLA—with the supposed aim of preventing the KLA from liberating Kosovo from Serbian rule.

Now that the bombing had stopped, the real meaning of so-called Kosovar national self-determination would become apparent. “As a tiny, economically backward province, smaller in size than Tasmania, the NATO-protectorate of Kosovo will be economically, politically and militarily dependent on the major powers. Whatever administration is finally set up will be nothing other than a puppet government at the beck and call of the US and NATO.”

Symonds emphasised that the events in the Balkans had exposed not only the position of the radical milieu but the fraud of “national self-determination” in this period. In the Balkans it had led to one disaster after another—the loss of tens of thousands of lives, continuing inter-communal conflicts and the subordination of the region to the major powers.

The main speaker, Nick Beams, the national secretary of the SEP, probed the real economic driving forces and strategic interests behind the war. He made clear the ludicrous character of the claim made by the major powers that this was a war for purely humanitarian purposes.

“To anyone with any knowledge of history the NATO justifications are merely the repackaging, in the appropriate late 20th century garb, of the propaganda employed for more than a century. As the British historian Robert Skidelsky noted, the doctrine of ‘ethical imperialism,’ as he termed it, was a re-run of the doctrine of the ‘white man's burden’ under which the scramble for Africa was carried out at the end of last century.”

One consideration was the resources of Kosovo itself—in particular

the mines in the north of the province. Notably, one of the first actions of the KLA had been to expel Serbian miners at gunpoint. But these resources, important as they were, amounted to small change compared to the reserves of oil, natural gas and strategic interests at stake throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US National Security chief in the Carter administration, "Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent".

After World War I, the US had become the leading economic and financial power, but its rise to pre-eminence coincided with the greatest event of the 20th century—the Russian Revolution of 1917. Even after the US emerged from World War II as the undisputed hegemon of world imperialism, the existence of the Soviet Union had closed off vast areas to penetration by US capitalism. Now, in the wake of the liquidation of the USSR, US militarism had escalated—from Panama to Iraq and the Balkans—accompanied by an intensive discussion in US ruling circles about the necessity for military might to reinforce America's domination of the global economy.

Beams pointed out that these developments contained the seeds of wider conflicts. He referred to the far-reaching implications of the clash between NATO and Russia over Pristina airport. Sections of the Russian bourgeoisie and the military were well aware that the US military drive would not stop at the Balkans, itself a region of vital strategic significance for Russia, but would extend east towards the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea region and beyond. "They know that countries such as Azerbaijan are already deeply involved with NATO, that US interests are moving to acquire the resources of the Caspian and that the US regards this region as no longer within the Russian sphere of influence."

As for the European powers, "the public displays of NATO unity cannot disguise the fact that there are deep divisions within its ranks and deep disquiet within Europe over where the US will strike next. After Milosevic, who is going to be next 'Hitler'? Significantly on the very day of Serbia's capitulation the European Union announced that it would establish itself as an independent military power."

Beams warned of the essential meaning of these conflicts. "A new struggle has erupted between the imperialist powers for the redivision of the world. This new division will be determined by the struggle between the major capitalist powers with high-tech weaponry and all possessing nuclear weapons. As the 21st century dawns the prospect is raised of a third imperialist conflict—a new world war."

Turning to the politics of the war, Beams observed the transformation of former anti-war figures such as US President Clinton, British Prime Minister Blair, NATO Secretary General Solana and German Foreign Minister Fischer into the prosecutors of the NATO war. Like the leaders of the social democratic and labour parties at the outbreak of World War I, who for a decade had warned of the dangers of imperialist war but then aligned themselves with their own ruling classes in the war, this transformation was rooted in deep-going social and economic processes.

Beams referred to two interconnected developments since the start of the 1980s: the globalisation of production and finance and the rise of speculative or fictitious capital on stock markets. The rise in sharemarket values in the 1990s, and particularly since 1995, had lifted a small section of the middle class into regions of wealth they could not possibly have imagined. This social layer lived in a different world to the rest of the population, a world where budgetary restraints were of no concern. It was a social layer with a definite material

interest in the program of imperialist conquest.

The Balkans war had once again underscored one of the central features of politics in the 1990s—the apparent disappearance of the working class as an organised factor in world politics.

"This is a highly contradictory phenomenon because it is taking place under conditions of an intensification of class contradictions. Never in the history of capitalism has there been such a sustained transfer of wealth up the income scale. Enormous tensions are building up beneath the surface, but in the political sphere these are yet to find organised expression. This war was conducted without vocal opposition. That is not to say that it was actively supported, it was not. But in no country was there an organised political opposition."

Beams related this political paralysis to the crisis of the trade unions, social democratic parties and Stalinist regimes. "The working class movement today is characterised by profound confusion and disorientation produced by the collapse of the old organisations... This is rooted in the disintegration of the nationalist programs on which they are based."

Paradoxically, however, the very developments in world economy that had brought about the crisis of the old organisations pointed to the viability of an international socialist perspective. "The development of the transnational corporation, of global production and global finance, has not only posed before the international working class the necessity for its unification, it has created the material means to achieve this."

In recognition of these vast changes, the International Committee of the Fourth International had launched the *World Socialist Web Site* last year, in order to consciously introduce a new perspective and orientation into the international workers movement, through the clarification of the confusion created by decades of domination by all forms of national opportunism.

A period of questions and discussion followed, with several questions relating to the possibility of conflict between NATO and Russia in the coming period. A collection for the SEP's monthly fund raised more than \$1,100. A further public meeting will be held in Melbourne this coming Sunday.

After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of the Balkan War

[14 June 1999]

Socialist principles and the war in the Balkans

May Day meetings in London and Berlin oppose war on Yugoslavia

[8 May 1999]



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