

SEP holds meetings in Australia against the war in Afghanistan

Our reporter

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held the first of two meetings to outline a socialist perspective on the US-led war against Afghanistan in Sydney on Sunday. It was attended by 100 workers, students, professionals, housewives and pensioners from Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and as far afield as Adelaide.

In opening the meeting, assistant national secretary Linda Tenenbaum explained that the SEP unequivocally opposed the US-led war in Afghanistan. “The real purpose of the war is not to fight terrorism, defend freedom and democracy, or protect the lives and well-being of ordinary people,” she said. “This is not a ‘war against terrorism’, but, if things are to be called by their right names, an imperialist war.” The US was seeking to realise its long-held agenda of dominating the huge oil and gas reserves of Central Asia.

Tenenbaum pointed out that the conduct of the war itself exposed claims by the US that it was not targeting the Afghan people. She detailed the impact of the steadily escalating bombing attacks, which included carpet-bombing by B-52s and the use of cluster bombs, and the mounting toll of civilian casualties. The US had refused to halt the bombing to allow aid to reach isolated families prior to winter, endangering the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghans who lacked adequate food, medicine and clothing.

Many people still believed, Tenenbaum said, that the US was conducting the war in retaliation for the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. But the general public had been given no genuine information about either the war or the terror attacks, or any evidence of the involvement of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. “There is no question but that the terror attacks of September 11 constituted a heinous crime against innocent civilians,” she explained, but they were cynically being used to justify the long-planned US intervention into Central Asia.

The events of September 11 had merely accelerated a whole series of processes that were already maturing beneath the surface, Tenenbaum explained, in relation to both foreign and domestic policy. This included a fundamental assault within the US itself on basic democratic and civil rights.

Similar processes were underway in Australia, she said. No discussion or debate—not even a parliamentary vote—had taken place on the war, or Australia’s involvement in it. In the cases of boxer Anthony Mundine and Labor MP Peter Knott, even the most limited criticism had been leapt upon by the media and political establishment. Knott, who supported the war, simply stated that

US policy in the Middle East was coming back to bite it, yet the Labor hierarchy insisted he recant. The fact that not even a fraction of the truth could be raised, revealed the fragility of the official position, she declared, and the fears of the ruling establishment that the apparent overwhelming support for the war could rapidly evaporate.

Tenenbaum pointed to the bizarre character of the election campaign, which was dominated—with the full support of the media and the Labor opposition—by the war and the vilification of refugees. “It is worthwhile to pose the question: what would have been the focus of the campaign were it not for these two issues?” She pointed to a number of recent state elections, which had revealed growing popular animosity, not only to the Coalition government, but to the entire official political framework.

“The war card and the race card may have succeeded in diverting masses of people temporarily away from escalating social inequality, the growing divide between rich and poor, the destruction of social facilities, the lack of a future for young people, but these issues have not disappeared.” In the coming period, she concluded, they would give rise to major social upheavals.

SEP national secretary Nick Beams, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, delivered the main report to the meeting, placing the war in Afghanistan in its broader historical and international framework.

Beams began by recalling the warnings made by the International Committee of the Fourth International at its conference to oppose imperialist war and colonialism in Berlin in November 1991. He quoted the ICFI’s manifesto which pointed out that the US-led war against Iraq marked “the beginning of a new eruption of imperialist barbarism... It is almost as if some master dramatist had decided to restage, with mankind as his audience, the bloodiest events of the first half of the 20th century.”

Beams posed the question: How has this analysis stood the test of events? He pointed out that the first President Bush had seized on the war and the collapse of the Soviet Union to proclaim a New World Order, in which capitalism, based on the free market and parliamentary democracy, had triumphed over socialism. But events of the last decade demonstrate that the world had not entered a new era of peace and prosperity.

Beams reviewed the indices of growing international economic instability, concluding that “none of the deep-seated problems within the world capitalist economy that gave rise to the financial

storms of the 1990s has been resolved.” In many ways, he said, the most significant political development was that we have now entered the third US-led war in the past decade—the Gulf War, the war in the Balkans and now against Afghanistan.

Beams explained that all three shared a number of common features. In the first place, a previous ally or political asset of the US was suddenly presented as “something akin to Hitler, a terrible scourge which must be wiped out... Like Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, Osama bin Laden was once an asset, even an ally of US imperialism in the wars waged by the Mujaheddin against the Soviet Union in the 1980s—wars which were financed by the Saudi regime and the US to the tune of anything between \$6 billion and \$10 billion.

He explained that the process of demonisation was not accidental. “Under conditions of the development of mass society, modern warfare requires a pretext, an immediate event, that can be presented to the public as the reason for the resort to arms. However, when an historical examination of the war is carried out, it can be seen that the real reasons—the essential driving forces—bear no relation to public pronouncements. That has been the case for at least the past 100 years.”

In explaining the real origins and reasons for the war, Beams reviewed the role of US imperialism in the course of the 20th century and placed the events in Afghanistan in the context of the post-war period. He pointed out that the exhaustion of the capitalist expansion of the 1950s and 1960s had led to a political shift in the US ruling elite by the end of the 1970s. Along with a vast restructuring of American industry and a sustained attack on the social position of the working class, the US adopted a far more aggressive policy towards the Soviet Union.

Beams cited former Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former US National Security Adviser to the Carter administration, to show that the US consciously sought to undermine the Soviet Union by embroiling it in a costly and debilitating war in Afghanistan. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was rooted in the final analysis in the unviability of the Stalinist program of socialism in one country, opened new opportunities in resource-rich Central Asia. Again quoting Brzezinski, Beams demonstrated that hegemony over this region had been central to US strategy for the last decade.

Beams also reviewed another key aspect of the analysis presented by the ICFI at its Berlin conference—the reemergence of colonialism. He cited a series of editorials and articles in the US and Europe, all of which openly called for the reestablishment of colonial forms of rule, and drew out the parallels with the justifications offered by the imperial powers in the 19th century. In concluding, Beams warned that the present struggle for resources and spheres of influence would, as it had at the beginning of last century, inevitably bring the major powers into conflict. The working class had to advance its own independent socialist perspective and that required an examination of the historical experiences through which it had passed in the 20th century.

The meeting concluded with a lively 75-minute discussion. Questions were raised on the economic shifts in the US, the position of Iran within the present conflict, the significance of Central Asian oil reserves and the political perspective of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Several questions raised directly or

indirectly the key issue of the viability of a socialist perspective in Afghanistan and the broader region.

Asked about the attitude of the socialist movement to Islamic movements, Beams explained that the rise of fundamentalist groups such as the Taliban was related to the crisis of perspective in the working class. The enormous political damage done by Stalinism could be seen very directly in the case of Afghanistan, he said. While it was certainly true that the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and others had financed the Mujaheddin groups, it was the crimes of Stalinism that had created the fertile ground for their emergence.

With the development of industry in Afghanistan, Beams explained, a small but significant bourgeois class emerged that was hostile to what it saw as the backward feudal relations of the past. Unable to get support from the Western powers, it turned in the 1950s and 1960s to the Soviet Union and was particularly attracted by the Stalinist dogma of socialism in one country. This nationalist perspective, which has nothing to do with socialism, appealed to the rising bourgeois elements in backward capitalist countries because they saw it as a fast track to economic development and a means for uprooting existing relations in the countryside, including the suppression of religion.

Beams pointed out that, while implacably hostile to all forms of religion, Marxists have always understood that religious superstition arises out of material conditions. Religion cannot be abolished by dictat or fiat but can only be overcome by economic, cultural and political development over a protracted period. The opposite took place in Afghanistan where the Soviet-backed regime brutally suppressed religion and the mullahs. Every attempt to stamp out Islam simply created more recruits for the rightwing Mujaheddin. Parallel political processes took place throughout the Middle East where, in the absence of a genuine socialist alternative, the failure of Stalinism and bourgeois nationalist organisations such as the PLO led to the emergence of various reactionary Islamic organisations.

Following the questions and answers, a collection of nearly \$7,000 was raised for the SEP’s Monthly Fund and some \$300 worth of Marxist literature sold.

The WSWS will publish the full text of Nick Beams’ report to the Sydney and Melbourne meetings later in the week.



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