SEP meetings in Australia

The war in Afghanistan: the socialist perspective

Part 1

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This is the first part of a report delivered by Nick Beams to Socialist Equality Party public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne on November 4 and 8 respectively. Part 2 was published on November 12. Beams is the national secretary of the SEP, Australia and a member of the World Socialist Web Site *Editorial Board.*

Our meeting today is being held on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the conference convened by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in Berlin in November 1991 to oppose imperialist war and colonialism. The immediate impetus for that conference was the US-led war against Iraq, and the complete incapacity and unwillingness of any of the so-called leaderships of the labour movement around the world—the trade unions and the social democratic and labour parties—to raise a finger in opposition.

In convening the conference, the ICFI explained that the launching of the war against Iraq was not an isolated or conjunctural event. While the immediate pretext was the move by Iraqi forces into Kuwait, it was not aimed at restoring the status quo, but had far-reaching historical implications.

Let me read a portion of the manifesto produced for that conference:

"All the great historical and political tasks that confronted the working class and oppressed masses at the beginning of the 20th century are now posed in their starkest form. The savage bombing of Iraq and the virtual destruction of its industrial infrastructure marks the beginning of a new eruption of imperialist barbarism. Capitalism cannot survive without enslaving and destroying millions. Twice in this century, in 1914 and 1939, imperialism plunged mankind into world wars whose toll in human lives numbered in the tens of millions. The Persian Gulf war, whose dead have yet to be counted, has served notice than an even greater world conflagration is now being prepared. 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."

How has this analysis stood the test of events? Let us first of all contrast the analysis of the Fourth International with that of the political representatives and ideologues of the capitalist ruling classes.

The war against Iraq, in the words of the first President Bush, was to establish a New World Order. This theme was eagerly seized upon in the days and months to come and with the final collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, the thesis was advanced that the long struggle of the 20th century was over. The conflict between capitalism and socialism had ended in the victory of capitalism, based on the free market and parliamentary democracy.

Our opponents always tell us, the Marxists, that our analysis is unreal—that it bears no relation to what is actually taking place, that it is based on the dogmatic imposition of some kind of worked out schema, to which the objective reality must be made to fit.

What does an examination of the history of the past decade reveal? Have we entered a new era of peace and prosperity—as our opponents claimed we would—or rather do we face a repeat, at a higher level, of all the bloody events of the 20th century?

Let us briefly review some key figures.

The operation of the "free market" agenda has produced a deepening social crisis, not only in the poorest countries, but in the major capitalist countries as well. Inequality has widened on a global scale. In 1980, the median income in the richest 10 percent of countries was 77 times greater than the poorest 10 percent. By 1999 that gap had widened to 122 times.

Within the major capitalist countries there is an increasing polarisation of income and wealth. In the US, for example, since the mid 1970s the top 1 percent has doubled its wealth from under 20 percent to almost 39 percent. The combined net worth of these layers is greater than the total wealth of the remaining 95 percent.

While the figures in other countries are not quite as stark, the same trends are evident. In the decade from 1986 to 1996, the number of high-income households in Australia rose by 30 percent, while the number of low-income households increased by 80 percent. The past decade—10 years of economic growth—has brought no expansion in the number of full-time jobs.

The era of the "free market" has seen a series of mounting storms in the international economy and the global financial system. The currency crisis of 1992-93, which saw the collapse of the European exchange rate mechanism and the crisis in the banking systems of the Scandinavian countries, was followed in short order by the Mexican financial crisis of 1994-95, requiring a $50 billion bailout organised by the Clinton administration. Its purpose was not to aid Mexico but to prop up the American banking system.

In 1993, the World Bank proclaimed that the "Asian economic miracle" demonstrated the historical superiority of the "free market" system. Here, it was argued, was the living proof. The victory was rather short-lived. The 1997-98 Asian financial meltdown laid those claims to waste, imposing the most severe economic downturn on this region since the 1930s Depression and setting off a global financial crisis, about which the IMF remained, in the words of one recent analysis, quite literally clueless.

According to the US magazine *BusinessWeek*, a recent book on the events of 1997-98 shows how "despite its confident, all-knowing façade, the IMF and its army of classically trained economists were clueless about the workings of modern capital markets and the shady complexities of Asian politics and corporate finance" ["Clueless at the IMF",

BusinessWeek, November 5, 2001].

None of the deep-seated problems within the world capitalist economy that gave rise to the financial storms of the 1990s have been resolved. In fact, they have all been compounded by the emergence of the most serious global economic downturn of the postwar era.

In the past 11 months we have seen US financial authorities carry out 10 interest rate cuts in an effort to boost the economy—to no avail. The hope is that a combination of interest rate cuts and fiscal measures will boost the US and world economy. However, those who place their faith in such measures would do well to look at Japan. Here the largest government spending boost in the history of world capitalism and a zero interest rate policy have failed to prevent the development of the fourth recession in 10 years.

Third war in a decade

One could go on listing the economic and social indices that point to the mounting crisis of the global capitalist system. But in many ways the most significant political development of all is that we have now entered the third war launched by the imperialist powers, under the leadership of the United States, in the past decade.

These wars share a number of common features. First of all they have followed a now familiar pattern so far as their presentation to the public is concerned. In all three cases we find that a previous ally or asset of the United States is suddenly presented as something akin to Hitler, a terrible scourge which must be wiped out.

In the case of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein, who had been backed by the United States in the war against Iran during the 1980s and who assumed, on this basis, that the US would turn a blind eye if he moved against Kuwait, suddenly found that he had made a miscalculation. Hussein was demonised as the new Hitler as US forces moved into the Gulf.

In the war against Yugoslavia the pattern was repeated. Slobodan Milosevic, who had been regarded as something of an asset in the 1980s because of his support for the "free market" policies being imposed on Yugoslavia via the IMF, became another "new Hitler" when the aims of US foreign policy changed.

The US was initially opposed to the break-up of Yugoslavia. After all, support for the Yugoslav state in the Cold War had been a means of applying pressure to the Soviet Union. But when Germany, recently reunified with the incorporation of the East, began to push for the break-up of the state as part of its bid to reassert its influence, the US made a change. But even as it did so, it still continued to rely on Milosevic, and he was the key signatory to the so-called Dayton Accords, which established a UN-administered protectorate in Bosnia. However, when the dispute over Kosovo erupted, as had been predicted, the US intervened and Milosevic became a war criminal, whose activities could only be compared with those of Adolf Hitler.

Now we have a war against Afghanistan launched against the new "evildoer", Osama bin Laden, and his protectors, the Taliban regime. 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. Moreover, the Al Qaeda network, which the US is dedicated to wiping out, was established as a result of actions by the US.

In 1986 the US made a number of decisions with regard to the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. These were to supply the mujaheddin with US Stinger missiles, to start operations in the Islamic-populated Soviet republics of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and to give US backing to a long-standing initiative of the Pakistan intelligence services, the ISI, to recruit and train radical Muslims from around the world to come and fight in the war against the Soviet Union.

According to the author Ahmed Rashid: "Between 1982 and 1992 some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 43 Islamic countries in the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and the Far East would pass their baptism under fire with the Afghan Mujaheddin. Tens of thousands more foreign Muslim radicals came to study in the hundreds of new *madrassas* [schools] that Zia's military government began to fund in Pakistan and along the Afghan border. Eventually more than 100,000 Muslim radicals were to have direct contact with Pakistan and Afghanistan and be influenced by the jihad.

"In the camps near Peshawar and in Afghanistan, these radicals met each other for the first time and studied, trained and fought together. It was the first opportunity for most of them to learn about Islamic movements in other countries and they forged tactical and ideological links that would serve them well in the future. The camps became virtual universities for future Islamic radicalism. None of the intelligence agencies involved wanted to consider the consequences of bringing together thousands of Islamic radicals from all over the world. 'What was more important in the world view of history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet Empire? A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?' said Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former US National Security Adviser. American citizens only woke up to the consequences when Afghanistan-trained Islamic militants blew up the World Trade Center in New York in 1993, killing six people and injuring 1,000" [*Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, Ahmed Rashid, p. 130].

The process of demonisation seen here is not accidental but essential. 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.

Recall that last century opened with the Boer War. Does anyone know today the reasons invoked to justify it? It was presented by the British government of the day as a war to protect the electoral rights of English-speaking settlers, and even the rights of the black South Africans. The real reason for the war was the discovery of vast gold reserves in the Transvaal. Now the 21st century opens with the global war against terrorism.

Economic and political factors

So what are the real reasons for this war? Let us begin to answer this question by examining the statements of the major powers with regard to the two previous wars in the past decade.

The Gulf War was launched, it was claimed, to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. Ten years on, Iraqi forces have long departed and the Kuwaiti Sheiks have been reinstated, but US forces continue to operate in the Gulf where they conduct military operations on a daily basis, while Iraq remains in the grip of a sanctions regime.

The war against Yugoslavia was launched to protect the Kosovars from Milosevic. He has gone, but NATO forces remain. Now we have the war against Afghanistan and the penetration of US forces into the heart of Central Asia. Does anyone seriously believe that if Osama bin Laden were captured tomorrow, the Al Qaeda network destroyed and the Taliban regime overturned, that US forces would be moved out? Of course not. Rather, the conquest of Afghanistan would be followed by a renewed war against Iraq.

The real reasons for this war can only be ascertained through an examination of the international and historical context within which it is taking place. We have to consider not just the latest events, and the pronouncements by the imperialist politicians upon them, but the whole

sweep of the historical experiences of the 20th century.

In recent days there have appeared several comments in the American press and other media likening Bush's "war on terrorism" to the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This analogy, as we noted in a recent article on the *WSWS*, is flawed on many fronts. The present conflict resembles not so much the Cold War but the decades which led up to the opening of World War I in 1914 and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The last decades of the 19th century saw a vast transformation in the world capitalist order. The first part of the century had been marked by the rise of Great Britain as the world's first industrial power, with economic interests which straddled the world. But the last 30 years of the 19th century saw new powers arriving on the scene as the capitalist industrial economy took root. By the end of the century, Great Britain was already being challenged—by Germany and to a lesser extent France—while in the West a new power was in the ascendant, the United States of America.

These changes resulted in increasing tensions among the major powers. In the 1890s, Germany, which had hitherto concentrated its attention on Europe, following the formation of the German state in 1871, proclaimed that it too would seek its place in the sun. Up to that time, colonialism had been on the wane. But in the latter part of the 19th century, it underwent an explosive revival as Germany and France joined Britain in the struggle for colonies, markets and resources. At the end of the century, the latecomers, the US and Japan, embarked on their own imperialist expansion.

This struggle led eventually to the outbreak of war in 1914. The imperialist powers fought each other to a bloody standstill on the continent of Europe, resulting in millions of deaths. The balance was only turned with the entry of the US into the war in 1917, which led to the defeat of Germany. But the defeat of Germany, and the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles, resolved nothing. All the conflicts between the major powers remained, and erupted once again, just 25 years after the first conflagration.

The outcome of the second imperialist war was different from the first. The United States, on the basis of its economic and military superiority, was able to impose a new economic and political order. A certain equilibrium was restored to the global capitalist system. Economically, this stability depended upon the extension to the rest of the advanced capitalist countries of the vastly more productive methods developed in the first part of the century in the United States. Politically, the Cold War with the Soviet Union provided the means through which the US was able to exert its hegemony over the major capitalist powers, preventing the eruption of the conflicts that had torn the world apart in the first half of the century.

The economic expansion of the 1950s and 1960s was the most sustained period of growth in the history of world capitalism. It appeared as if all the problems that had erupted in the first part of the century—and which had exploded in the form of two world wars and economic depression—had somehow been overcome.

But the period of capitalist growth—and the expansion of living standards to which it gave rise—did not resolve the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist order. Those contradictions were to erupt in the economic turbulence of the 1970s. The decade opened with the collapse of the post-war monetary system in 1971, when Nixon withdrew the gold backing from the US dollar. Then came the recession of 1974-75, the most serious since the Depression of the 1930s, followed by the period of high unemployment and high inflation—the so-called stagflation—of the late 1970s.

The end of post-war expansion

The mechanisms which had ensured the expansion of the capitalist economy as a whole were exhausting themselves. Moreover, the US was losing its overall economic superiority over its rivals. The response was a vast economic and political re-organisation.

There were many aspects to this shift in orientation. Beginning in the dying days of the Carter regime, finance capital initiated a high interest rate regime which was to lead to a vast restructuring of American industry, including the loss of millions of jobs, the introduction of new technologies and the globalisation of production activities to take advantage of cheaper labour. This was coupled with an offensive against the working class, which saw the smashing of the air traffic controllers union, PATCO, by the Reagan administration in 1981. It was the start of what was to be an unbroken offensive against the American working class throughout the 1980s.

Another key aspect was the pursuit of a far more aggressive policy toward the Soviet Union. This was to see its full expansion under the Reagan administration with the escalation of military pressure on the USSR and the development of new weapons systems. One of the first effects of the policy shift took place in Afghanistan, where the US began backing the mujaheddin forces fighting the pro-Soviet government.

A rather revealing interview, shedding light on the origins of the US intervention, conducted with Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser in the Carter administration, was published in January 1998 in the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

"Question: The former director of the CIA, Robert Gates, stated in his memoirs ... that the American intelligence services began aid to the mujaheddin in Afghanistan six months before the Soviet intervention. In this period you were the national security adviser to President Carter. You therefore played a role in this affair. Is that correct?

"Brzezinski: Yes. According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the mujaheddin began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention."

The interviewer asked whether perhaps he might have cause to regret the actions he carried out.

Brzezinski replied: "Regret what? The secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralisation and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire."

Brzezinski would like to attribute the collapse of the Soviet Union to the consequences of his masterstroke of 1979. Ultimately, the collapse was the outcome of the inviability of the nationalist program of socialism in one country, which led, as Trotsky had warned back in the 1920s and 1930s, to the breakdown of the Soviet economy and the restoration of capitalism. Having said that, however, it would be wrong to discount the impact of the measures undertaken in the Carter and Reagan eras in accelerating the processes of disintegration already underway.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991-92 marked a major historical turning point. Vast areas of the world, which had never come under the sway of the major capitalist powers, were now opened up. This transformation in economic geography had major political implications.

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