

Australia: SEP meetings discuss Afghanistan war and the perspective for socialism

Our own correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held public meetings in Melbourne and Sydney last week entitled “The war in Afghanistan, world politics and the perspective for socialism.” The meetings were attended by university and high school students, building workers, teachers and pensioners, some of whom had purchased tickets at recent demonstrations against the Australian government’s attacks on refugees. Also in the audiences were regular readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* who came after reading advertisements on the WSWs.

SEP assistant national secretary Linda Tenenbaum opened the Sydney meeting on May 12 by explaining that while US President Bush claimed the military assault on Afghanistan was part of a “war against terrorism” in response to the September 11 bombings in the US, the real aim of the intervention was to establish US domination over the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia—the second most valuable in the world. Tenenbaum said that the SEP and WSWs unequivocally opposed the military assault and characterised it as an imperialist war.

No evidence, she said, had ever been produced to show that anyone in Afghanistan had any direct connection with the September 11 attacks. Instead, in the eight months since then, the US, assisted by Britain, the European Union, Australia and other military forces, had killed thousands of innocent Afghan men, women and children.

She referred to the brutal massacre of 800 Taliban prisoners at Mazar-e-Sharif in late November and more recent killings in eastern Afghanistan by US-led forces. Tenenbaum also pointed to the recent CIA attempt to assassinate Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former Afghan prime minister, because he opposed the US-backed interim Afghan administration of Hamid Karzai. US policy in Afghanistan, she said, could only be compared to that of the most ruthless dictatorships in world history.

Tenenbaum quoted from a London *Times* article which described the recent shooting of two Afghans by Australian Special Air Service forces in the eastern part of the country. As the newspaper admitted: “[I]f you carry a weapon in the wrong part of Afghanistan, and point it at coalition special forces, you will inevitably die quickly.... Seldom in a modern conflict has ‘fact’ been so manipulated as it is by the Western media and the coalition forces in Afghanistan.”

Turning to the Middle East, Tenenbaum said that the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon took its cue from the Bush administration’s “war against terror” to launch a massacre in the occupied territories of the West Bank against the Palestinian population.

“At the beginning of the 20th century,” Tenenbaum said, “capitalist contradictions erupted onto the surface in World War I, ushering in more than 30 years of war, depression, revolution and counter-revolution. We are now entering a no-less explosive period where once again the alternatives, as Rosa Luxemburg put it, are starkly posed: socialism or barbarism.”

SEP national secretary Nick Beams, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board, provided a detailed examination of the Afghanistan intervention, its roots in the scramble for domination of oil and gas rich Central Asia, and the global implications of the deepening political and economic conflict developing between the US and other imperialist powers.

He opened his report by explaining that the so-called “war on terrorism” was “the political banner under which US imperialism is undertaking a military offensive to assert its interests on a global scale” with the theatre of operations widening everyday.

Beams said that the September 11 terrorist attack on the US was a “convenient trigger mechanism” for those sections of the US ruling elite demanding a more aggressive US foreign policy. “First Afghanistan was the target. Then plans were brought forward for a war against Iraq,” he said. “Last January Bush targeted a so-called ‘axis of evil’ in his State of the Union address. Now in the last week the axis has been widened to include Syria, Libya and Cuba.”

In the last eight months the US had established a network of military bases across Central Asia and was pressing ahead in Southeast Asia with troops in the Philippines and preparing to establish even closer ties with the Indonesian military. Six weeks after Bush’s “axis of evil” speech, the US leaked the Nuclear Posture Review, which indicated Pentagon plans for the use of nuclear weapons in future wars against Russia and China, Iraq, Iran and North Korea and Libya and Syria, irrespective of whether these countries or any others used or possessed nuclear weapons.

This sharp growth of militarism was being accompanied by an attack on democratic rights in the US, Beams said, including the establishment of a secret government, military tribunals and other measures. Similar policies were being adopted by other governments, with new laws being planned in Australia that would define political activity and protest as acts of terror and give wider powers to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation to detain people without charge or access to legal representation.

Beams explained that the doctrine of imperialism was now being openly discussed within ruling circles. He referred to *Reordering the World: the long term implications of September 11* by Robert Cooper, a foreign policy advisor to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Sebastian Mallaby’s “The Reluctant Imperialist: Failed State, and the Case for American Empire”, in the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

“At the beginning of the 21st century we find that far from belonging to some distant past, or being consigned to a by-gone age, imperialism is the central defining and determining feature of world politics,” Beams said.

It was necessary, he continued, to understand that “imperialism is not the product of policy decisions of this or that government, or capitalist politicians. Rather, the political decisions made by governments to commit troops, to launch wars, to overthrow governments etc., are themselves the outcome, in the final analysis, of processes rooted deep within the capitalist global economy. This meant, he said, that the struggle

against imperialism could not be waged as a protest to pressure this or that government, or the United Nations, but had to be aimed at the root of the problem, the capitalist profit system itself.

Beams reviewed the emergence of imperialism with the vast growth of capitalist production in the latter part of the 19th century and the intensification of political and economic conflict between competing national economies on the world arena. This conflict inevitably led to the outbreak of World War I and the objective conditions for the socialist revolution.

Lenin's analysis of these developments not only demonstrated that there could no longer be a peaceful development of capitalism—that truces were simply interludes before the outbreak of the next inter-imperialist conflict—but established the objective historical necessity for the socialist revolution and the Russian Revolution of 1917 as the opening shot in the global struggle against the profit system.

The speaker detailed international political and economic events following the failure of the working class in Europe to follow the Soviet example; the rise of fascism; the emergence of new imperialist rivalries; and the outbreak of WWII.

In the aftermath of WWII, US imperialism—on the basis of its economic strength and the betrayal by Stalinism of revolutionary opportunities for the European and international working class—was able to undertake a certain reorganisation of capitalist economy, Beams said. This provided for some expansion of the world economy and three decades of relative stability within the framework of the Bretton Woods monetary agreements and the Cold War. But the very development of the world economy and the inability of capital to overcome the tendency of the rate of profit to fall undermined these arrangements. The 70s and 80s saw the rise of the neo-liberal “free market” agenda and a more aggressive policy by the US and other imperialist powers towards the Soviet Union, which eventually collapsed in 1991.

Beams posed the question: Did the transformation in the global economy following the liquidation of the USSR produce a new capitalist equilibrium in the same way that the post-WWII order had established a basis for capitalist expansion? The speaker cited various economic and social indices demonstrating that it had not. Intense pressure on profit rates was giving rise to a ferocious struggle of each against all. This, Beams continued, was the source of the growth of militarism.

“In the struggle for markets and profits, American imperialism is using its military capacity to attempt to maintain its economic security.” This brought it into conflict with the other major capitalist powers, he said. The international working class was now confronted with a return of the great issues that preoccupied the workers' movement at the beginning of last century. In order to ensure the survival of civilization, it had to free the productive forces from the grip of the profit system and open the way for socialism and a higher social development for all of humanity.

Beams explained that such a movement could only develop on two basic foundations—the program of internationalism and the political independence of the working class. He used the example of the Israeli military assault on the Palestinians in the occupied territories and the current political crisis in France to explain the vital significance of these principles.

The Middle East, he said, constituted a “tangled knot” of all the unresolved problems of the 20th century. Nowhere was the bankruptcy of nationalism more powerfully and tragically exposed. “The whole historical experience of the past 50 years has demonstrated one lesson in the Middle East: that the emancipation of the Jewish people, the Palestinians and the Arab masses as a whole cannot be achieved on the foundation of the nation state, carved out of one or another corner of the world, but only through the perspective of international socialism which understands that human emancipation must encompass the entire globe.”

Beams pointed out that the barbarism of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel

Sharon, the rise of racist demagogues in Europe and elsewhere, and the brutal incarceration of asylum seekers by the Howard government in Australia emerged from the defence of the nation-state. One must either accept this framework, he declared, and all the horrors that flowed from it, or strive for a new global framework for the development of all humanity.

Beams concluded by detailing the crisis surrounding the French presidential elections, demonstrating what Marxists meant by the political independence of the working class.

Contrary to news commentary prior to the presidential first round vote, the elections revealed an acute political crisis in official politics in France, with a dramatic collapse in support for the traditional ruling parties. Socialist Party candidate and French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was eliminated from the second round of the vote, coming in third behind Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac and National Front leader and neo-fascist demagogue, Jean-Marie Le Pen. While large numbers refused to vote for these candidates some three million voters supported candidates from *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO), *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR), and the *Parti des Travailleurs* (PT), parties claiming to be Trotskyist.

“The value of every political crisis,” Beams said, “is that it reveals the real political situation and serves to clarify the differences between political tendencies. The great issue in the second round of the election was how to advance the independent interests of the working class.” The central question, he continued, was not the rise of Le Pen but how to educate and take forward the working class under conditions where the Stalinist Communist Party, the Greens and other parties, lined up with the bourgeois establishment to urge a vote for Chirac.

Beams explained how and why the WSWs and the International Committee of the Fourth International called for the *Lutte Ouvrière*, LCR and *Parti des Travailleurs* leadership to organise French workers to boycott the second round of the election. This demand, he said, provided the only way for workers to assert their own independent interests and prepare for struggle against whoever won the vote. None of the organisations claiming to be Trotskyist took up this demand or challenged the official “left” parties, which insisted that the only alternative for French workers was to vote for Chirac.

Beams urged those in attendance to closely study the WSWs analysis of the election, because it provided a living handbook of the strategic importance of the struggle against centrism and all forms of opportunism. The political situation in France, he said, had revealed the decay and disintegration of the official parties and organisations and the deep on-going problem in the political development of the working class.

“The key to the situation,” Beams concluded, “is the political re-education and rearming of the international workers' movement. There will be no shortages of opportunities. But the task must be tackled through the construction of a genuine socialist and international party. This is the task to which the ICFI and the WSWs is directed.”

Both meetings concluded with discussion on a range of issues and collections for the SEP's monthly fund, which raised a combined total of over \$1,800 in donations. In Melbourne, Beams answered questions on the attitude of the SEP to elections and to the perspective of suicide bombings and Israel's attack on the West Bank. He also explained recent developments in India and Africa and the factors behind the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Sydney, Beams provided a detailed analysis of the economic and political parallels between capitalist development in the years 1875 to 1914 and the recent period, policy conflicts between the US and Germany over Eastern Europe in the 1980s. He also elaborated further on US economic aims in Central Asia.

The WSWs is publishing today interviews with members of the audience at the two meetings. The full text of Nick Beams' comprehensive report will be published next week.



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