Socialist Equality Party public meeting in Britain:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the dead-end of Zionism

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The Socialist Equality Party of Britain held a public meeting in Central London, entitled, "The perspective for socialism in the 21st Century". David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the United States and chairman of the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site *, was unable to attend and Chris Marsden, the national secretary of the SEP in Britain, delivered the report on the political situation in the Middle East.*

Marsden's report was followed by a presentation by Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International, on the political lessons of the French presidential elections.

Both reports brought forward a number of questions from those in attendance, prompting a lively discussion on the programme and history of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Below, we publish the text of Marsden's speech, which was delivered prior to Israel's ruling Likud Party later that day adopting a resolution never to accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In that party's central committee meeting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had urged that the resolution, which was tabled by supporters of his rival Binyamin Netanyahu, not be put forward. But the CC massively supported the resolution.

A human tragedy is unfolding in the Occupied Territories. The Israeli government has subjected the Palestinian people to months of sustained military attack that has cost hundreds of lives. They had planned for this weekend an invasion of the Gaza Strip, where the refugee camps are three times the size of Jenin, but were forced to delay it, they say, due to the extensive leaking of their targets to the press.

The Palestinian militant groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, had therefore been given days to prepare their defences and the army feared unacceptable levels of Israeli casualties. The desperate situation facing the Palestinians is epitomised by their defence operation being led by squadrons of suicide bombers loaded down with enough high explosives to disable or even destroy a tank.

These young men, who should be thinking about their own future and their families, see no alternative than to lay down their lives in a fight for the very survival of their people.

Another important factor in delaying the Gaza operation, which the government is less willing to acknowledge, is the substantial behind-the-scenes pressure from Washington. More will be said on this. But still the military action has only been delayed, not abandoned.

Once again the Israeli government seeks to justify its efforts to smash up the infrastructure—economic, social and political—of the Palestinian Authority as a purely retaliatory measure in response to the actions of suicide bombers.

The lie is given to such propaganda by a meeting scheduled to take place today. The central committee of Likud, Israel's ruling party, is to convene in order to discuss a resolution seeking to commit the party openly to opposing the creation of a Palestinian state as a binding and permanent principle.

Naturally Prime Minister Ariel Sharon himself would wish that such a resolution had never been submitted. He does not feel it politic to make such an open declaration of policy when he and his Labour allies—such as the venal Shimon Peres—are engaged in frantic and ever more transparent attempts to convince the world that it is Israel who seeks peace while Arafat and the PA [Palestinian Authority] seek the destruction of the Zionist state.

Indeed the propaganda of the government centres on the claim that Arafat did not accept the absurdly generous offer of Sharon's predecessor, Edhud Barak, that would have established a Palestinian state on fully 90 percent of the Occupied Territories, preferring instead a war of attrition.

The truth is that Sharon's favoured outcome, his overriding goal, is for the expulsion of every single Palestinian from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the integration of the Occupied Territories into a Greater Israel.

Failing this, the next best alternative is the creation of a handful of Palestinian ghettos surrounded on all sides by the Israeli army, cut off from each other and run by a puppet regime answerable directly to the authority of Israel's sponsor, the US.

It is the world's worst kept secret that Sharon's aim is the destruction of the Palestinian Authority. It would not be kept at all were it not for the undue influence of a pro-Zionist US media that is more than ready to spew out whatever lies are called for to legitimise Israel's war.

Sharon has mounted a campaign of repeated provocations with the aim of derailing the Oslo Agreement, signed in 1993 and pledging the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, ever since his visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000. Since coming to power he has insisted that Arafat should be treated as a Palestinian Osama bin Laden—in his own words—a "terrorist and a murderer".

The National Union Party leader Rehavam Ze'evi, who has since been assassinated, told the media that Sharon had promised him that he would "use iron fisted tactics to wipe out Palestinian terrorism, and that he will not dismantle a single Jewish settlement in the territories."

Sharon himself promised, "The Jordan Valley will remain forever under Israeli sovereignty. When I talk about the Valley, I don't just mean a narrow strip but the eastern security strip whose western border is the ridge of hills west of the Allon Road." Put more simply, Sharon is here proclaiming eternal Israeli control over the entire West Bank. He has, one might add, refused to countenance any Palestinian control over East Jerusalem.

In an editorial on the upcoming Likud meeting, the major liberal Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* makes the following apocalyptic warning: "If Ariel Sharon does not manage to prevent the debate and vote on the resolution, the members of the Likud CC will be responsible for a disastrous policy. National history will remember them as bringing calamity to the state,

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endangering its development, if not its actual existence."

Haaretz goes on to explain that the Palestinian demand for political independence and sovereignty "is accepted by the entire international community, and is anchored in moral imperative, norms of behaviour between nations and decisions of past Israeli governments."

Yet the newspaper can offer no reason for such a perspective possibly becoming official policy of the ruling party, other than to describe it as an "expression of emotional outrage, outdated ideological zealotry, and a worrisome failure in the ability to perceive reality and foresee events."

This explains nothing. It simply means that *Haaretz* has failed to perceive reality, or more correctly does not wish to explain political realities to its readership.

No explanation for what is taking place, let alone an alternative provided, will emerge from liberal or left Zionist circles. *Haaretz* speaks of Likud being judged negatively by what it calls "national history". One would not imagine even the ideologically corrupted liberal press in a country such as Britain speaking in such terms. Movements are judged by history pure and simple, in Israeli as elsewhere. But there the Jewish nation is the point of departure and arrival of all the major shades of political thought.

The fear of what passes for Israel's liberal intelligentsia is that Sharon, by his actions is endangering the Zionist national project—that is the very existence of a Jewish state.

There are many reasons for such concern. The most obvious is a fear that Sharon's brutality will arouse the political indignation of the Arab masses and make it impossible for the various corrupt cliques who head the Arab states to maintain control.

But another concern is clearly for the international standing and, indeed, moral authority and legitimacy once enjoyed by Israel.

On a daily basis almost, articles appear and public speeches are made by pro-Zionist sources complaining of the emergence of a new anti-Semitism.

Many widely different phenomena are portrayed as mere facets of an over-arching anti-Jewish sentiment on a scale not seen since the defeat of the Nazis. The entire Arab world and often all Muslims are branded as anti-Semitic. Far right parties and politicians in Europe are linked in an amalgam with anyone who dares to criticise Sharon's war against the Palestinians.

In Zionist circles there can be no justification for opposing what they define as a legitimate military campaign against a terrorist threat—similar in every major respect to Washington's own "war on terror"—other than a barely concealed hatred of the Jewish people. They speak of the post-war period as one when guilt over the Holocaust had temporarily dampened the "natural" anti-Semitism of Europe.

Such statements only serve to illustrate the terrible political impasse into which Zionism has led the Jewish people. No one would wish to deny the very real danger of the growth of anti-Semitism. No matter what ideological modifications are made by the far right and neofascist parties, beneath the surface there is always a filthy current of hostility to the Jews. But this cannot be simply equated with the growing hostility to the state of Israel and its brutalisation of the Palestinian people amongst millions of people, including many workers and progressive-minded intellectuals.

In the absence of a clear political perspective, one may feed on other—the far-right has on occasion feigned sympathy with the Palestinians, but more often than not their favoured course is to concentrate on stirring up anti-Muslim bile. Nevertheless the main political responsibility for the rise in hostility to the Jewish people lies with the political advocates of Zionism, which have insisted on the identification of the Jews with the state of Israel.

The Zionists at least in one respect, present a distorted picture of a genuine political phenomenon. The enormous political good will enjoyed by Israel as a result of the tragedy that befell European Jewry is indeed being dissipated.

But the reason for this is to be found primarily not in the racist demagogy of a Le Pen or a Haider, but in the pictures of Jenin—of houses bulldozed, of women and children shot, of bodies crushed beneath the rubble by Israeli tanks.

Many people, including those entirely sympathetic to the historical founding of Israel, are appalled at the sight of Jewish forces oppressing another peoples. To be appalled is not enough, however. One must understand why this situation has come about and elaborate a viable political perspective on which to oppose a descent into barbarism. In short a political reckoning must be made with Zionism.

It is not possible here to do justice to a presentation of the origins of Zionism, or its subsequent evolution. One can find such articles on the *World Socialist Web Site*. But a few essential points must be made. The founders of the state of Israel, such as David Ben Gurion, professed as their aim the creation of a liberal, democratic and even socialist state. They made a distorted appeal to the enlightened and progressive traditions of Jewish intellectual thought.

Sharon and his party, Likud, come from the dissenting tradition within official Zionism, known as the revisionists, whose ideological mentor was Vladimir Jabotinsky. He had argued that it was not possible to maintain the pretence that a Jewish state could be built on land occupied by another people—the Palestinians—other than through force.

He called for a ruthless struggle to forcibly assert Jewish control and declared a "voluntary reconciliation with the Arabs is out of the question." Heavily influenced by Italian fascism, in 1935 he told a journalist quite baldly, "We want a Jewish empire."

For the first two decades of Israel's history the orthodox Zionists of the Labour Party and its forerunners were the dominant force within Israeli society. Their professions to democracy never stopped them from working with their rightists opponents to expel the Palestinians and suppress their democratic rights, but there was still an attempt to paint Zionism in the colours of democracy.

It is now possible to say without fear of contradiction that the so-called revisionist position has proved to be the correct historical estimation of the character and the necessary methodology for the realisation of the Zionist project.

Ever since the 1967 war, Israel has existed both as a regime built on the brutal subjugation of oppressed peoples and as one that is openly expansionist and militaristic. The social layers that dominate Israeli politics are the fanatically right-wing settlers and religious zealots. In contrast the more progressive minded and secular Jewish workers have found their preferred parties—Labour and Meretz for example—to be incapable of offering any alternative to the far right.

The promise of peace held out by Labour has ended in abject failure. The life of Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin, one of the main architects of the Oslo Accord, was brought to an end by a fascistic student assassin's bullet. His co-prize winner, Shimon Peres, now sits on Sharon's right hand as the apologist-in-chief for a government whose aim is to destroy any chance of a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. The man elected on a popular mandate to bring Oslo to fruition—Ehud Barak—today fully supports Sharon.

This is no accident. Barak and Sharon—and by extension Labour and Likud—always had more in common than they had differences. Or rather they shared a common strategy but differed on tactics. Noam Chomsky makes a correct observation in an article in Saturday's *Guardian* on the real character of the Oslo Accords.

He writes, "The Oslo 'peace process', begun in 1993, changed the modality's of the occupation, but not the basic concept. Shortly before joining the Ehud Barak government, historian Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote that, 'the Oslo Agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other for ever'. He soon became an

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architect of the US-Israel proposals at Camp David in 2000, which kept to this condition. At the time, West Bank Palestinians were confined to 200 scattered areas. Bill Clinton and Israeli Prime Minister Barak did propose an improvement: consolidation into three cantons, under Israeli control, virtually separated from one another and from the fourth enclave, a small area of East Jerusalem, the centre of Palestinian communications. The fifth canton was Gaza."

Later Chomsky quotes Labour's Moshe Dayan, whom three decades ago told Israel's cabinet they should make it clear to Palestinian refugees that "we have no solution, you shall continue to live like dogs, and who ever wishes may leave". Chomsky notes "when challenged, he responded by citing Ben-Gurion, who said that 'who ever approaches the Zionist problem from a moral aspect is not a Zionist'".

One could add far more on what Oslo gave to the Palestinians—which was more poverty, more brutality, a doubling of Zionist settlements. Barak's supposed offer of 90 percent of the Occupied Territories is a myth. Greater Jerusalem was extended to include new Jewish suburbs in what was almost exclusively Arab East Jerusalem, and constitutes fully 30 percent of the West Bank and its most important part. This was excluded from Barak's calculations.

Jewish settlements make up a further 15 percent of the West Bank. Then there are the military roads that criss-cross the Palestinian territories making no part of the proposed state—if one can use such a term—contiguous and therefore rendering the entire thing unviable. Ninety percent, then, of not very much.

There are lessons to be learnt regarding the specific character of Zionism.

It is not possible to build a democratic state based on an ideology of religious exclusivism and through the forcible suppression of the democratic rights of another people. Those who try to reconcile Zionism with democracy or seek to oppose the military campaign in the Occupied Territories whilst professing their loyalty to the state of Israel are on a hiding to nothing. This circle cannot be squared. A choice must be made between a commitment to democracy and a belief in nationalism.

One of the more appalling manifestations of the ideological disorientation produced by Zionism is that progressive anti-war sentiment in Israel is more often than not corralled behind an argument for the apartheid style separation of Arabs and Jews.

This weekend over a 100,000 people protested against Sharon's war on the West Bank and Gaza and for the creation of "two states for two peoples". Such protests are an indication of the growing disquiet and opposition amongst Jewish people to Sharon's brutalisation of the Palestinians and a belief that a democratic solution is possible. But the starting point of Israel's official peace movement has always been the need to maintain the Zionist state.

The party that embodies this program, Meretz, which came out of Peace Now, and the Labour lefts who they work with, argue that this is only possible if the Palestinians are allowed some form of state of their own. They insist, however, that the borders of any Palestinian state will be determined solely by Israel's security needs, and even view Palestinians working in Israel as a security risk to be kept to an absolute minimum. In short the "two-states" position accepts the *sine qua non* of Zionism, which is the impossibility of coexistence between Jew and Arab.

There is also a universal within the particular. The failure of Zionism—a tragedy for both the Jewish and Palestinian workers and peasants—is only an expression of the inability to resolve any of the essential democratic and social issues of our time on a basis of nationalist ideology.

One of the main reasons for Zionism's enduring hold on the Israeli working class has been the ability of Israel's leaders to portray their country as a progressive, democratic haven when compared with their Arab neighbours.

There is not a single regime in the Middle East that is worthy of being called a democracy. All are characterised by a yawning gulf between a tiny and fabulously wealthy elite and a generally impoverished population. Politics is dominated by a handful of families who run their states along semi-feudal lines.

The tragedy of the Palestinians, moreover, is not solely the result of Zionist oppression. The Palestinians could not by themselves defeat Israel and it was never their perspective to do so. The PLO looked to the Arab regimes for assistance and support, but has been met with one betrayal after another.

When world politics was dominated by the Cold War conflict between the West and the Soviet Union, it was possible for various Arab regimes to project a radical anti-imperialist façade. Pan-Arabism was advanced as a popular ideological alternative to socialism, which could offer a nationalist basis for liberating the Arab masses from imperialist oppression. Egypt's Nasser and others proclaimed the achieving of Palestinian self-determination as the spearhead of this struggle. The plight of the Palestinians therefore represents the final failure of the Arab national project.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has brought with it an end to any radical pretensions on the part of the Arab states—a fact that found its fullest expression in the line-up of Arab states behind the US war against Iraq in 1991. The Arab bourgeoisie's room for manoeuvre has disappeared and their fundamental relationship to imperialism has been revealed.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his theory of Permanent Revolution, in a country with a belated capitalist development the bourgeoisie is incapable of achieving genuine economic and political independence from imperialism. The Arab regimes, even those that emerged as a product of mass popular movements and seem enormously powerful due to their control of oil riches, function within a world economy that is dominated by the United States, Europe and Japan. They function essentially therefore as fabulously wealthy servants of the major powers.

Their own wealth is dependent upon the economic exploitation of the working class and it is their fear of a challenge to their rule emerging within the working class that is the main factor in ensuring their loyalty to the imperialist world order.

The Arab bourgeoisie has abandoned the espousal of pan-Arabism in favour of preserving their own peculiar interests. They have made their peace with Israel and with the United States and view the Palestinian question as a dangerous source of radical anti-imperialist sentiment and therefore a threat to their own power and privileges.

Marxists have historically advanced the perspective of a united struggle of the Arab and Jewish working class, the aim of which is the creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East. Only this can create the basis for the rational development of the region's resources for the benefit of all its peoples and, for that matter, for the peoples of the entire world. Every alternative to that perspective—alternatives that would proclaim to be more concrete and realistic—has failed.

This is not a question that is simply of relevance to Jewish and Arab workers. What happens in the Middle East must become a central concern of the international working class. There are many conflicts in the world that are bloodier and have claimed more lives than that taking place on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But there are perhaps none whose outcome has greater implications.

In our coverage of Middle Eastern events, the *World Socialist Web Site* has been forced to devote considerable attention to a painstaking refutation of the claims made by the Bush administration to be seeking a just settlement between the Palestinians and Israelis.

It is not possible to detail all the twists and turns that have unfolded, but it should be remembered that Bush came to power after ridiculing his predecessor, Bill Clinton, for over interference in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet now the Israeli-Palestinian question exercises the Bush

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White House like no other. Missions have been sent including Secretary of State Colin Powell and Vice-President Dick Cheney. Bush has met with numerous Arab heads of state as well as with Sharon. He and his advisors have made hundreds of phone calls and Bush has even proclaimed his support for the creation of a Palestinian state.

Yet despite an elaborate pretence to the contrary, the Bush White House has remained true to its Israeli ally in all fundamentals. The US could have stopped Sharon's military offensive anytime it wanted to. Israel is completely dependent on the US for its survival and everyone but the more lunatic right-wing settlers knows this. Instead the Bush presidency has played an elaborate double game of making formal calls for restraint on the part of Israel, while making sure that the Palestinians are portrayed as the guilty party.

Differences between the two governments are nevertheless real, at least from the standpoint of tactics and of priorities.

Sharon wanted his plan to destroy the Palestinian Authority to be adopted as priority number one in Bush's "war against terror". But Bush's priorities lie elsewhere. The first stage of the "war against terror" was the bombing of Afghanistan. Its aim was to establish a significant US military presence in Central Asia in order to establish hegemony over the extraction and distribution of largely untapped oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea basin.

The next stage is America's plans to declare war against Iraq and to transform that country and, by extension the entire Middle East, into an American military protectorate. These two actions would give the US control of the vast bulk of the world's known oil reserves. It would make America the unchallenged world hegemon; capable of strangling the economies of its European and Japanese rivals.

With their eyes fixed on this prize, the Bush administration has felt it necessary to impose certain limits on Sharon or at least to be seen to do so. In all their discussions together, the Arab rulers warn Bush that "the street"—the popular euphemism for the Arab working class—may erupt if the bombing of Baghdad begins while Palestinians are still being maimed and killed.

Therefore, in order to pave the way for a war that could claim tens of thousands of lives, the White House is urging Sharon to accept a second best alternative for the time being—a much reduced Palestinian entity firmly under imperialist control.

It has to be said that there are powerful voices within the Bush administration that consider this tactical manoeuvre an unpardonable retreat and would like nothing more than to give a green light for the destruction of the Palestinians. In any case, there is no guarantee that Sharon will be for long in a position to rein in the fascistic layers that have been cultivated and raised to the highest levels of Israeli society over the past years, and which have their counterparts as allies in the US lobbying for a firmer stand in favour of a military solution.

Supporters of Sharon's major rival, Binyamin Netenyahu, have instigated the resolution to the Likud CC rejecting the creation of a Palestinian state. They view Sharon as a vacillator whose tactical shifts in the face of US pressure have been unpardonable. Netenyahu's main slogan, by way of illustration, is "Palestinian State equals suicide".

When we speak of the Palestinian question, or indeed the Jewish question, we can do so only from the standpoint of the need to develop an internationalist and socialist perspective for the mobilisation of the working class the world over against the drive of imperialism towards war.

The fate of the Middle East will, in the final analysis, be decided in the United States and Europe, either by the political representatives of big business implementing their plans for its military and economic subjugation, or by the major battalions of the international working class doing what is politically necessary to prevent this.

The International Committee of the Fourth International seeks to construct the leadership required to overcome the present ideological confusion and political disorientation that prevents the working class from formulating an independent response to the depredations of capitalism.

This is the fundamental issue connecting our attitude to the events in the Middle East and the report Comrade Peter Schwartz will make on the political significance of the French events.

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