

The war in Afghanistan, world politics and the perspective for socialism

Part 3

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The following is the third and final part of a report delivered to a public meeting held in Sydney on May 12, 2002, organised by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia. Parts 1 and 2 were published on Wednesday May 22 and Thursday May 24 respectively.

Our brief historical review has brought us to the following point: the great issues that confronted the international working class movement at the beginning of last century have returned, but at a higher level. To ensure the survival of civilisation itself, the working class must free the productive forces, which it has created, from the grip of the profit system, and open the way for the higher development of the whole of humanity.

The issue remains, as Rosa Luxemburg put it at the outbreak of World War I: either socialism is established on a global scale, with the world's productive forces democratically controlled by the producers themselves, or there will be a relapse into the most terrible forms of barbarism, of which we have seen, in the recent period, only the beginning. There is no third alternative.

The burning political issue at the beginning of the 21st century is how to organise this struggle. We can identify two great pillars upon which it must be based: first, the program of internationalism, based on the recognition of the historical bankruptcy of the nation-state system; second, the political independence of the working class, the world's producers, based on the recognition that it is only this social class which, by its very role in the capitalist economy, can construct a new and higher social system.

To illustrate and elaborate what these principles entail, I would like to refer to two decisive political experiences—the recent conflict in the Middle East and the presidential election crisis in France.

In the Middle East, one could say, brought together, as if in a tangled knot, are all the unresolved problems of the 20th century. Mr Mallaby, whom I quoted earlier, held up the system of mandates instituted following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as his model for the “new imperialism”. A rather unfortunate example, one would have thought, given that all the Middle East states, including Israel, are, in one way or another, a product of that system.

The founding of the state of Israel—the culmination of the Zionist project—is intrinsically linked to the history of the international workers movement. The rise of capitalism at the end of the 19th century brought with it the growth of modern anti-Semitism—the reaction of layers of the petty-bourgeoisie and peasantry to the capitalist transformation of the economy that was undermining the old societies. But this did not, of itself, bring the formation of Zionism—the movement claiming that the only solution to Jewish oppression was to establish a separate Jewish state.

Rather, the development of Zionism was a class response by sections of the Jewish bourgeoisie, and, above all, the petty bourgeoisie, to the development of the socialist movement among Jewish workers and

intellectuals. The latter saw that the emancipation of the Jews was intrinsically bound up with the emancipation of humanity as a whole, through a socialist revolution carried out by the international working class. While Zionism attempted to give itself a socialist colouration, its differences with socialism were of a fundamental character. For the Zionist, anti-Semitism was a permanent condition, arising from human nature. This meant the only possible solution was the separation of Jews from Gentiles.

The socialists, however, understood that anti-Semitism was a product of the historical evolution of society, which could only be overcome through its further development. For a whole period, Zionism was a relatively isolated right-wing movement. It took the historic defeat of the working class in Germany, followed by the nightmare of fascism and the Holocaust—the destruction of European Jewry—for Zionism to acquire a mass following.

In an atmosphere of despair, Jews turned to the Zionist project in the aftermath of World War II, backing the drive to establish their own state. They believed it would uphold the principles of democracy and social equality. But the project was doomed from the very outset. It was an attempt to found a new state under conditions where the nation-state had already exhausted its progressive character. At the end of the 18th century, the formation of national states had been associated with the development of political and social equality. But in the 19th, the program of nationalism increasingly took on a reactionary character—associated no longer with progressive political ideals, but with race and ethnicity, based on *exclusion* rather than *inclusion*.

Today, the Zionist state's democratic pretensions are belied by its origins in the expulsion of the Palestinian population. Moreover, as a religious state, it is torn by an irreconcilable contradiction. One of the key issues on which attempts to finalise a peace agreement have foundered has been the “right of return”. The Israeli state accepts as citizens Jews from all over the world. They have the right of return, even though they have never lived there. However Palestinians, who did live there, are not allowed back. There is a fear that if Palestinians do return they will outnumber the Jewish population. Democracy is incompatible with the religious foundations of the state.

Now, as they prepare attacks on Palestinian refugee camps and towns, Zionist military leaders, in a tragic historical irony, have openly discussed the need to study the methods used by the Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto. The Likud Party has decided it will never accept the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank. The Palestinians must be driven out altogether.

Writing more than 40 years ago, the socialist historian and political writer Isaac Deutscher summed up what he saw as the crux of the Jewish tragedy and its paradoxical consummation in the embrace by the Jews of

the nation-state.

"It is paradoxical," he wrote, "because we live in an age when the nation-state is fast becoming an archaism—not only the nation-state of Israel, but the nation-states of Russia, the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and others. They are all anachronisms. Do you not see it yet? Do you not see that when atomic energy daily reduces the globe in size, when man starts out on his own interplanetary journey, when a sputnik flies over the territory of a great nation-state in a minute or in seconds, that at such a time technology renders the nation-state as ridiculous and outlived as medieval little princedoms were in the age of the steam engine?"

Four decades on, in the era of globalised production and communications, his analysis has even more force.

The decay of bourgeois Europe pushed the Jews into the embrace of the nation state. But, as Deutscher explained: "They did not benefit from the advantages of the nation-state when it was a medium of mankind's advance and a great revolutionary and unifying factory in history. They have taken possession of it only after it had become a factor of disunity and social disintegration."

The same issues emerge in regard to the Palestinians. At the conclusion of World War II, the prospect was held out to the peoples in the former imperialist colonies that they could advance through the medium of the nation-state. This has turned out to be a cruel joke. Everywhere, we see the decay of the post-colonial project of nation building.

Herein lies the heart of the issues confronting the Palestinians and the Arab masses. The perspective of the PLO was based on the belief that the Palestinians could establish their own nation-state. Now Arafat begs and cringes for favours from the imperialist powers—from the EU or the United States. The whole historical experience of the past 50 years in the Middle East has demonstrated one lesson: 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.

There are decisive global lessons here, as we witness capitalist politicians of all stripes rallying to the call of neo-fascists that immigrants and refugees be excluded in the defence of "our borders". In Australia, that bloodless bureaucrat, the Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, brings to mind Hannah Arendt's famous phrase about the "banality of evil" as he explains how the Howard government's policy of mandatory detention of refugees has prevented the emergence of a Le Pen type movement. Such wisdom! To prevent the emergence of a right-wing neo-fascist movement, he tells us, one must carry out its policies.

But those who rightly react in horror at the policies of the Australian government must think through the issue to the end. Like the barbarism of Sharon, the brutality of Howard and Ruddock, supported to the hilt by the Labor Party, flows from a definite program—the defence of the nation-state and its borders and barriers. One must either accept the framework of the nation-state, and the horrors that flow from its defence, or strive for a new global framework for the development of humanity.

At every point in history, the socialist internationalists have always been opposed by the proponents of practical politics, who insist that programs and perspectives must be grounded in the existing reality of the nation-state. But, as Hegel put it, that reality has become irrational, it conflicts with the logic of economic and social development. Consequently, the practical politicians and their realistic programs can create nothing but a disaster. That, above all, is the lesson of the Middle East.

I would like to make a few comments, in conclusion, about the presidential election crisis in France and the policy advanced by the WSW and the International Committee. For, in this experience, we have demonstrated in practice what is meant by the struggle for the political independence of the working class.

The first point is that the crisis in France was a particularly acute expression of what is becoming a global phenomenon—the decay and disintegration of the framework of official bourgeois politics. In 2000, the most boring US presidential election on record erupted in a major political crisis when it was hi-jacked by the Republican party, whose actions were given the rubber-stamp by the US Supreme Court as it awarded the election to Bush. Then, last year, we had the peculiar Australian election, where the ruling party put forward no policies but manufactured a crisis over so-called boat people, spending hundreds of millions of dollars to bring in the Navy, and issuing false reports and photographs to the media. Now the Dutch elections have been thrown into turmoil by a political assassination.

France was generally regarded to be heading for a presidential run-off between the right-wing Gaullist candidate Chirac and the Socialist Party prime minister Lionel Jospin. But the crisis and decay of the old order—the alienation of millions of people from the entire apparatus—expressed itself in the shock result of April 21, when Jospin failed to make the second round, running third behind Chirac and Le Pen, the candidate of the right-wing anti-immigrant and neo-fascist National Front.

Such was the collapse in support for the official parties of the bourgeois state that the run-off was conducted between Chirac, with some 19 per cent of the vote, and le Pen, with 17 per cent. In other words some 60 per cent of the electorate was effectively disenfranchised, left with a choice between the representative of corrupt bourgeois reaction in the shape of Chirac and right-wing anti-immigrant and neo-fascist demagoguery in the shape of Le Pen. But there was another significant factor. Some 10 per cent of the electorate, more than 3 million voters, cast their ballots for parties that claimed, in some sense, to be Trotskyist—the Lutte Ouvrière, the LCR and the PT.

Above all, the concern of the French political establishment was not so much with the emergence of Le Pen, but with the collapse of support for the official apparatus. As one commentator put it: "It is necessary to avoid a situation where the youth have to choose between Le Pen ... and Trotsky, who inspired so many of the candidates." Another lamented the emergence of "three Trotskyist parties in France at the beginning of the twenty-first century" and deplored the growth of a "Bolshevik and Trotskyist far left."

The value of every political crisis is that it reveals the real 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, under conditions of a deepening crisis of the bourgeois state, reflected in the loss of legitimacy of the parties that had formed its central props throughout the post-war period, and where a significant section of the population, comprising some three million voters, had made a sharp move to the left.

The International Committee advanced a clear tactic. We proposed a boycott of the election. That is to say, not a passive abstention from the poll, but an active boycott by the working class. The workers' movement could not give any legitimacy to Chirac on the basis that it was necessary to ensure the electoral defeat of Le Pen. Rather than supporting the decaying Fifth Republic, the only way of advancing the struggle against whatever regime came to power after the election, was the mobilisation of the working class on an independent basis. The Stalinist Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Greens lined up with the bourgeois establishment to call for a vote for Chirac.

But they were not the only factor in the situation. Accordingly, we issued an open letter to the three so-called Trotskyist parties, calling on them to take up this policy. I urge that all of you here take the time to closely study our analysis of the election and our correspondence with the members of Lutte Ouvrière. This material constitutes a living handbook of the centrality of the struggle against all forms of opportunism in the development of the independent movement of the working class.

Many people, when approaching socialist politics and confronted with a range of parties and organisations, often ask: but why don't you combine? Surely, the historical issues that have led to your separate development are not so significant. The experiences of the French election, like so many others before it, have demonstrated that they are, in fact, the most decisive issues of all.

When we characterise these tendencies as centrist and opportunist, this is not some kind of epithet or swear word. It is, above all, a class characterisation, as can be seen from the record of the three "Trotskyist" parties.

The Parti des Travailleurs, whose candidate received 130,000 votes in the first round, completely abandoned any political responsibility. It issued no statements on its web site after April 20 and its paper virtually disappeared from view. Then, on the eve of the election, its candidate declared: "Workers and youth are now entering an incontestably difficult period. But we trust in their ability, on their own part, by means of their own mobilisation, to find all the means which permit them to find solutions." In another words, the PT refused to take any responsibility.

The LCR called for a vote for Chirac. Its candidate declared "We suggest all voters wash their hands on Sunday evening [that is, after voting for Chirac], and organise a third social round, by going into the streets in substantial numbers." Another leading member of the party declared: "On Sunday, we chase out Le Pen, and starting on Monday, we chase out Chirac."

Lutte Ouvrière spent the two weeks between the two rounds in a series of manoeuvres. Initially the candidate Arlette Laguiller made a statement that one could not combat Le Pen by voting for Chirac. This was interpreted as favoring an abstention and brought a furious reaction from the Stalinists, who equated the party with the fascists. Then a statement was issued the following day in which Laguiller insisted that she did not call for abstention in the second round. But she declined to give a concrete recommendation as to what should be done. The final statement issued by the party called for a blank paper in the ballot box. In other words, its attitude to the election was not a matter for the working class, developing its own independent attitude, but was really a private affair, decided in the privacy of the polling booth.

The only organisation that called on the working class to undertake an independent policy towards the election through the organisation of an active boycott was the International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWs.

The lessons of the French elections must form part of an important discussion in the coming period. Firstly, the crisis itself revealed what has become a universal process: the decay and disintegration of the official parties and organisations. But this has brought to the surface a deep-going problem in the development of the working class that must be overcome. The decades-long domination of the workers' movement by the social democratic, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies has led to a decline in political consciousness. That is the significance of the emergence of Le Pen. It is not so much that Le Pen heads a mass fascist movement—he does not. Rather, his emergence is the result of the long period in which an independent socialist movement of the working class has been absent from the political scene. Under those conditions, the anger, frustration and alienation of vast sections of the population can find no progressive outlet. It can even start to develop in a right-wing direction.

The key to the situation 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. We urge you to give it the most serious consideration: to undertake a study of our program and history and participate in the building of the party of world socialism.

Concluded



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